

THE TALE OF FINLAND'S EASTERN BORDER

Review on the movie *Raja 1918*

“Societies in fact reconstruct their pasts rather than faithfully record them, and that they do so with the needs of contemporary culture clearly in mind – manipulating the past in order to mold the present,” American historian Michael Kammen claims in his Mystic Chords of Memory (Kammen 1991: 51).

The Declaration of Independence adopted by the Parliament of Finland on 6 December 1917 disrupted 108 years of the Russian sovereign rule in Finland and birthed a new nation. Tragically, less than two months later, the armed struggle between the forces of the Social Democrats, the Reds, and the forces of the non-socialist, the Whites, erupted. To make matters worse, both sides accepted military support from foreign powers: the Reds from Soviet Russia and the Whites from Germany. The armed struggle escalated into a short, vicious civil war which claimed over 36,000 lives (Upton 1980: 123). When the war ended, a newborn nation, Finland, started to construct its first state border in Karelian Isthmus.

Finland, like all nations, has found out that history is a living process, an unfinished business that cannot be but pondered, disputed, and hopefully cherished. The Finnish Civil War has been pondered and disputed for years but to cherish this most traumatic, controversial, and dehumanizing event in the Finnish history is impossible. Over a hundred years ago, Ernst Renan suggested that if nation building had been successfully conducted, the histories around it would disappear, and consequently, were even forgotten in popular consciousness. Perhaps Renan's suggestion offers at least a partial reason why the Civil War still continues to resonate in today's Finland. It appears over and over again as a main or related theme in contemporary fiction, drama, comic books, and films of which the movie, *The Border 1918 (Raja 1918, 2006)*, is one of the most recent examples. The need to repeatedly revert to this tragic event shows that the Finnish Civil War is far from being a completed or catalogued event in the Finnish history.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse how the state border and its constructing function in the movie. The film approaches the border through three distinguished border narratives. The omniscient border narrative is represented by the border, border processes, repercussions of the turmoil and trauma of the civil war, and a pervasive, avenging civil-war-related spirit. The second border narrative is represented by the two protagonists of the movie: Captain von Munch, an acting post-war commandant of



the frontier station and a local, but non-Karelian, village school teacher Miss Maaria Lintu. Their border narratives are intersected by the ones of the supporting characters. Finally, there is the antagonist's point of view represented by Mr. Heikki Kiljunen, now an outlaw, who during the war was one of the most notorious leaders of the Reds. Each one of these points of view is challenged or even destroyed by the 'others' who are either considered to stand in direct opposition to the laws and values of the new Finnish state, such as the members of the Red Guards, the people suspected to be Red sympathizers, or the people who simply do not fulfil the requirements of the Finnish citizenship. The latter group consists of Soviet-Russians, Russians living on the Finnish side of the border, the Jews, and toward the end of the movie, also the Germans. These points of view may first appear very sharply divided ideologically, nationally, socially, linguistically, and culturally but as the film proceeds, they begin to overlap. This overlapping both deconstructs many existing borders and also constructs new ones.

The Border 1918, directed by Lauri Töhrönen, is not exactly a civil war movie, but the elements of the war are constantly present. The film begins with grisly fighting scenes and executions and continues to detail the Civil War's painful aftermath of the cultural, social, economic, and political turmoil at Finland's eastern frontier in Karelia. Although the Civil War is officially ended and a settlement has been reached, the volatility of an immediate post-civil war context strongly divides Finland along the political and ethnic lines. When the shooting stops, it does not mean that the first step away from hatred, hostility, and bitterness follows automatically. In addition, diverging visions of how to build the country after becoming independent cripples the nation even further. It is this historically real-life situation that serves as a backdrop to the film's main theme: the establishment of the first Finnish state border between Finland and Soviet Russia in post-civil war period.

The Border 1918 emphasizes the fundamental role of Finland's first state border. For the nation emerging from the trauma of the brutal civil war, the border serves as a focus point of collective consciousness during the transition from violence to peace. For the Finns the state border is an ancient wish that seems to materialize in 1918. The border does not only reassert Finland's legitimacy as a sovereign nation, but also serves as a symbol that helps Finns to imagine their republican nation with national solidarity and identity. While the border serves as a unifying agent, it at the same time divides Finland from Soviet Russia. The Captain sincerely believes that building up the border "will keep the peace", while Miss Lintu is a nation-blind who feels that people all over the world have become tired of the borders and the suffering they cause. Consequently, she strongly believes in that we are moving toward the borderless world and, therefore, in the decline of the nation-state. "Do you believe in your border?" Miss Lintu asks Captain von Munch. The Captain's answer, "I believe in Finland", solidifies an inescapable fact that building the state border is essentially bound up with nation-building. The protagonists' truly opposite viewpoints illustrate two ever-elusive "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983): universal solidarity transcending national borders and nation-state bounded by cohesive state borders.

The national border is going to be established in the area where people had adopted a collective fluid identity. Before the establishing of Finland's first state border, local people's collective consensus of political, economic, social, and cultural cooperation as well as civic tolerance had led to the forming of real cross-community relationships and

multilevel cross-cultural exchanges. Until Finland's independence, these people from different ethnic and language groups had been crossing the alleged border for over 600 years. The film portrays how the transnational regional culture with its fundamental principles of understanding, compromising, and transforming people comes to an end, and the fluid movement of people, capital, and information has to stand aside in favour of the border of the new nation state.

The national border creates a new social and cultural environment as well as a new political geography. The old community had been well established and real, while the new border demands people to accept an alien and abstract idea of the border and its region. It is very difficult for the local people to understand what the border is and how it is supposed to function. As Sergeant-Major Muranen informs the Captain, "a real border has never existed here...not for a thousand years". Therefore, it is incomprehensible why suddenly uncles are not able to cross the bridge and help their nieces with firewood; an elderly eastern orthodox lady is not allowed to enter and visit her family and friends; or cross-border traders cannot go back and forth to conduct their business. The bridge, a simple structure, providing a convenient crossing for people and goods, is suddenly converted into a border checkpoint, and a small muddy river running underneath it is now a national border.

The Captain tries to make the national border more concrete by barring the bridge. New posts, gates and blue paint serve as visible indicators of the official, Finnish national border. The bridge is divided down in the middle, and both sides are guarded by soldiers preventing people from crossing the bridge freely. The Captain also tries to make the border area more Finnish by abolishing bilingual names for streets and places and by replacing bilingual signs in Finnish only. The people's world is suddenly shrinking, and the edge of their new world is the new state border. The peculiar sense of baffling otherness descends on the region, intensifying even further the sense of a diminishing home region and the old way of life. The local people must learn to perceive themselves as members of a nation which is different from the 'other' nation across the bridge. The movie could have addressed more clearly to what extent the Finnish national identity formation, based on oppositional modelling, erodes the local interests, a local sense of place, and a local identity. What the movie portrays very strongly is that the border becomes an adversarial force in the midst of people's lives, interrupting and obstructing violently their daily activities. The border becomes a foul monument which brutally cuts people off from their families and relatives living on different sides of the new state border. The border is feared.

The Captain tries to convince people that the border acts in the interest of the whole nation and population. It guarantees that Finland is able to fulfil its potential, to reach its "greatest achievements – freedom, justice, and fairness". To make this possible, Finland has to protect herself "against barbarians". Therefore, the primary function of the border is to provide security to the nation. To guarantee security, the border must execute control, and this is only possible if border crossings are either heavily controlled or stopped altogether. At this point, the Captain's perception on the border as a protector and its 'clean-cut' function to ensure that "the Russians live on the other side and the Finns on this side" concurs with the War Office and the state's perception. The fear of 'barbarians' justifies the closure of the border as well as the exclusion of

certain groups. It is this perception that translates into stern but confusing and inefficient border policing measures.

When the official state narrative of border security is created and implemented, the rest of the movie concentrates on how it is challenged by other border narratives. These other border narratives focus on the question of identity which is posed by the flow of people who, due to the bloody Bolshevik Revolution in Soviet Russia, try to escape to Finland. Hundreds of people with no identification documents make it impossible for the Captain to enforce the strict state border security requirements. In a sense, Finland has created a system that categorizes people as ‘wanted’, ‘unwanted’, or ‘enemy’. Wanted can enter; unwanted are to be deported; the enemy must be killed on sight. Yet, the Captain learns that the ‘clean-cut’ narrative of border security turns into a nightmarish identity of chimera. No matter what policing measures are implemented, they are not able to pinpoint elusive identities which multiply, diversify, negate and assert simultaneously in a single individual. Who are these masses of people who under their hardship try to find a refuge outside the rigidly defined ideologies, unyielding political loyalties, or actions of governments? Who are the Russians living in Finland? Are they Finns or the enemy? Who are the Finns who pass the border control by speaking perfect Finnish? Are they ideologically correct Finns or are they red defectors returning to Finland to start another war? What to do with the bilingual families? What ‘infectious diseases’ do innocent Jewish children spread? A diverse group of individuals with their mixture of identities presses against the state border with an increasing strength, blurring the lines between friend and foe.

The most heartbreaking cases are the people with no identity, people who are denied their identity, people whose actions define their identity in front of the law. The people with no identity are represented by a man who is hovering in the midst of people, has been deported several times, but who for one reason or another reappears on the Finnish side of the border. He has no name, no identification; nobody claims him or knows him. He cannot speak or write. He just ‘hops’ around, disturbs no one, and is happy. How he has been able to elude the border patrol repeatedly is a mystery. He is most callously killed for a dare when Lieutenant Suutari proves to his Captain that he has a will and skill to follow through all border security measures. This nameless man’s border narrative shows how vulnerable the people with special needs are in political discourse of immigration, and undermines the hopelessness of the people who do not have a state.

The people who are denied their identity are represented by a Finn, Irmeli Ylipää. She has been working as a maid in St. Petersburg but had to escape from the Bolsheviks to Finland. As a Finnish citizen, she should have been able to pass without any problems, but because she “had been with soldiers” and “behaved in objectionable ways”, Lieutenant Suutari wants to deny her the right to enter Finland. The Captain dismisses the accusations and orders her release. However, Lieutenant Suutari disobeys the order and puts Miss Ylipää in quarantine. She is later killed in a senseless massacre with hundreds of other people. Her border narrative illustrates how morals and double standards embedded in culture reveal the asymmetries of power between genders, and how the imbalance of power affects the processes of social class and gender identity formation on the national level.

Miss Lintu and Doctor Perret represent the border narratives of people who go against all odds when trying to help other people and bring some sense to the raging

madness. Empathy or any kind of compassion is disappearing from the border region. These two are revisionist characters: a 'colourless humanist' and a physician who has taken the Hippocratic Oath. Their philosophical stance conveys both their outrage at social and political injustices as well as their belief in the possibility of transcending them. To accomplish this they must blur the lines between the lawfulness and lawlessness. The laws violate people's basic rights by denying them representation and voice. Therefore, deception is justified. Needless to say that these views get them both killed. Their border narratives bring forth resiliency of the human spirit in the midst of mistrust, violence, and fear. They are loyal to themselves thus defying coercive policies which are increasingly deviating from what is universally accepted as ethical. They share the Captain's vision of Finland's "greatest achievements" for its future – "freedom, justice, and fairness", but they approach this vision by crossing gender, ideological, and national borders instead of enforcing them like the Captain. Accepting the charges against them and seeing them sacrificed in mindless killings forces the Captain to realize that establishing the state border is not enough to nurture his dreams of freedom, justice, and fairness and materialize them in practice. His efforts to represent them in a tangible way by strengthening the border, and by obeying and implementing coercive border policing measures generate a completely opposite situation where no one is safe, and which finally leads to a massacre of unarmed people.

The Captain is a protagonist whose border narrative intervenes with other narratives. His narrative is not cohesive but fragmented. It vacillates between his identity of being a Finnish officer in the White Finland's army and his identity of being a scientist, an explorer who naturally must cross borders. He is an idealist but he is not blinded by it. He knows that Lieutenant Suutari is a pathological killer who wants to use any pretext to degrade or stereotype people according to his own ideological and social standards. The Captain becomes more and more aware of a vivid sense of the degradation of human life when people are reduced to a state of brutal struggle for survival in the quarantine. He recognizes that enemies are not found only amongst the people who are ruthlessly categorized according to their language, ethnicity, and religion, but are also found amongst the faceless, complacent, and ignorant bureaucrats of faraway Helsinki. He fears the German's imperialist ambitions and their increasing influence on Finnish politics. This in turn makes him question the borderline between Finland's independence and Finland's sovereignty. He becomes increasingly suspicious of the principles he serves, but he cannot renounce his duty. Reality does not make sense. The border has created a horrific, incomprehensible otherworldly reality where the stories of human cost and suffering and the multiple realities of the Civil War memory deconstruct the faith in the notion of a homogenous ethnic-nation. A widening gap between his ability to carry out his duty in a principled manner and his willingness to finish what he has started causes him to fall ill.

The last border narrative belongs to an antagonist, Heikki Kiljunen, the Captain's nemesis. He is an epitome of a born survivor; a figure of raw male energy and aggression. Half dead and wanted by the law he still carries his hate, mistrust, and utter contempt for the Finnish government. He has his own form of justice based on the will to survive. His world is a borderless land of the 'grey' where there are no distinctive borders between right and wrong if his personal situation so requires. His border narrative illustrates the opportunity that the border or absence of it offers to an individual who has burnt all

the bridges, literally, behind him. If he wants to survive, he must relinquish his country and his identity. He finds a dead man whose passport he steals and, therefore, is able to start a new life in Soviet Russia.

The film closes with a coda. Ten years after the massacre on the border, the Captain, now a Professor von Munck, and Heikki Kiljunen alias Alexander Muranen meet again in an annual celebration of the Finnish Independence Day. For a second, the years vanish between them and their old identities emerge. It is hard to evaluate what happens during those few seconds, but reflecting on their new identities, the viewer is able to draw some conclusions. The old class and social divisions between them have vanished. Both the Captain and Mr. Kiljunen are successful, affluent, and respected members of their communities. They are both Finns who have come to the same party celebrating the same occasion, so the ideological and national division has disappeared. Instead of border narratives, could they now tell a borderless narrative to the audience? Because there is no apparent shock in their sudden meeting at the party but they rather show indifference towards each other, this could mean that in their new reality everything and nothing has become to mean the same. Both experienced and survived the Civil War and the life on the border that denied them their ability to believe in the value of their own actions and their faith in ideologies they so loyally fought for. Neither of them was able to overturn the forces of evil as they defined them. Whatever they achieved, they achieved it with great cost. Are they now as eager as they still were ten years ago to erect borders between classes, ideologies, nationalities, and individuals? Just when they are about to shake hands, Finland's national anthem begins solemnly to commemorate Finland's tenth birthday. Suddenly, old memories come alive, hands are withdrawn, and both men move back to their own sides of the border.

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References

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