

## EXOTIC AND PRIMITIVE LAPLAND— OTHERING IN *THE EARTH IS A SINFUL SONG* (1973)

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**Abstract:** *This article contributes to postcolonial cultural criticism by analyzing how since the 1920s, Lapland and its residents have been portrayed as exotic Others in Finnish feature films that are set in Lapland. The roots of the othering of Lapland go back to the nationalist aspirations of the Finns. The geographical distance of the northern region has bred mental distance, because of which Lapland has remained a source of exoticism for filmmakers, who almost invariably come from the South. Lapland can be seen as Finland's spatial and cultural Other, an "internal Other" (Jansson 2003). This article asks what kind of strategies of othering are used in Rauni Mollberg's film *The Earth Is a Sinful Song* (1973), which is the extreme example of othering among films that are set in Lapland. The film is based on Timo K. Mukka's novel of the same name and it caused a sensation to contemporary audiences because of its harsh and naturalistic way of depicting life in a poor northern village in the late 1940s. The article analyzes the cinematic techniques and style that are used to represent the characters as primitive, over-sexed and uncivilized. It also places *The Earth Is a Sinful Song* in a continuum of 'Lapland films', showing that othering has taken many forms both before and after it.*

**Keywords:** *Finnish cinema; Lapland; Lapland films; the Other; othering; exoticism; *The Earth Is a Sinful Song* (1973).*

### Introduction

Since the 1920s, Lapland and its residents have been exoticized and portrayed as Others in Finnish feature films (Lehtola 2000; Toiviainen 2000; Hiltunen 2014). Several of the films that are set in Lapland suggest that there is something different, uncontrollable, or unexplained about Lapland and its inhabitants. In feature films, Lapland, the northernmost province of Finland, has served as a setting for events that could not take place anywhere else in the country.<sup>1</sup> While earlier films conjured up romantic and mythical visions of Lapland, recent films have been more humorous in their portrayal of the region, which, viewed from the Helsinki metropolitan area, where most of the filmmakers come from, is quite peripheral. It seems that for Finnish filmmakers Lapland has been the most fascinating source of exoticism and adventure inside the country's borders.

This article asks how Finnish feature films that take place in Lapland, 'Lapland films', represent the region and its inhabitants as exotic Others. Rauni Mollberg's film *Maa on syntinen laulu* (*The Earth Is a Sinful Song*, 1973) is analyzed as the main example. Mollberg adapted Timo K. Mukka's novel of the same name into a gritty portrayal of poor people living in a secluded village in southwestern Lapland in the years after the Second World War. The film was criticized for its cruel, naturalistic

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<sup>1</sup> Lapland is defined here broadly as encompassing areas both north and south of the Arctic Circle, belonging to the province of Lapland.

style, but was at the same time praised for its authenticity (Koivunen 1999). The article argues against this claim to authenticity and asks what strategies of cinematic expression contribute to the sense of othering in *The Earth Is a Sinful Song* (hereafter *The Sinful Song*). Sexuality and religiousness emerge as the main areas where the characters are portrayed as Others. The article argues that the film concentrates on those aspects of the novel that were experienced as the most sensational, disregarding its poetic elements.

Mollberg's film is not the only Lapland film that portrays the local characters as primitive and as behaving in an excessive manner, and it is not the only film that links such behavior to sexuality and a perceived enthusiasm for religion and spirituality. These themes and similar representations have come up in several other films since 1920s. This article gives a concise overview of other such films in order to show that *The Sinful Song* is not the only film where such practices of othering can be found, although, as I will argue, it is the most extreme one.

By critically analyzing how differences are constructed in Lapland films the article contributes to what might be called postcolonial cultural criticism in a Finnish context (c.f. Ridanpää 2005: 27–37). This criticism draws attention to inequalities in power structures and to the way these structures are reflected and reproduced in cultural discourses. Analysis of representations of Lapland means analyzing representations of otherness constructed mainly by artists coming from the South. As Ridanpää (2005: 27–28) points out, postcolonial research always needs to be located in a specific context. Therefore, there is no single theory of othering that this research draws from, but a few important contributions need to be highlighted.

Othering, understood as a process of differentiation, devaluation, exoticization and exclusion and discussed by Edward W. Said especially in his study of 'Orientalism' (2003 [1978]; 1994 [1993]: xxviii), has taken various forms in the course of Finnish film history. It reflects the power inequalities and tensions between the North and the South of Finland, and it is underpinned by postcolonial attitudes especially as far as the Sami, the indigenous population of Finland, are concerned (Koivunen 1999; Kuokkanen 2007; Pietikäinen/Leppänen 2007; Saarinen 2011). This article argues that even the non-Sami inhabitants of Lapland are often portrayed as not being quite equal to the people of the South. In this context, the Other emerges as either a Finn or a Sami living in Lapland, with the main focus being on the non-Sami part of the population.

This article considers the Lapland films as discourses that construct an imaginary, exoticizing, image of northern Finland (Naskali 2003: 27). Exoticization is understood as the aspect of othering that emphasizes fascinating differences in the Other. Said's (2003 [1978]) analysis of the way Western writers contributed to the creation of the Orient, an exotic version of the East, is the paradigmatic example of this kind of approach. Literature scholars Juha Ridanpää (2003; 2005) and Anne Heith (2016) have drawn inspiration from Said's method, Ridanpää in his analysis of the construction of the North (as opposed to the South) in Finnish literature, for example in the short stories of Rosa Liksom; and Heith in her research on Laestadianism's role in contemporary Sami and Tornedalian cultural texts. Referring to Said, Ridanpää (2003: 108) points out that when criticizing representations of the Other, there is always the danger of repeating "the same models of totalizing structures and theories which the work was eventually supposed to be criticizing". Indeed, this article emphasizes that not all

Lapland films exoticize in equal measure. It also emphasizes that these films do not constitute a genre: the films are diverse in terms of content and style. The term ‘Lapland films’ is used as a thematically guided shorthand to refer to this heterogeneous group of films.

‘Lapland films’ have received little scholarly attention, although Lapland has been a conspicuous presence in Finnish cinema. Previous research merely mentions some relevant films (Naskali 2003) or concentrates on analyzing individual films (Hiltunen 2014; Koivunen 1999; Saarinen 2011). Jorma Lehtola’s (2000) research on the role of the Sami in Finnish cinema is an exception, but many Lapland films have been produced since then. A comprehensive analysis is not possible here, either, but this study intends to pave the way for future research on Lapland films.<sup>2</sup>

The article first characterizes the relationship of Finland to Lapland and then presents an overview of the ways of othering in key films made before the premiere of *The Sinful Song*. It then analyzes Mollberg’s film in terms of style, depiction of sexuality, religiousness and colonialist attitude, and looks at the film’s reception. Finally, the conclusion points out how similar practices have continued in later films and sums up the findings.

### Lapland as an ‘Internal Other’

The relationship of Lapland to the rest of Finland, or the South, is fraught with tensions. This relationship can on the one hand be approached as the negotiation of the self-identity of people living in the North and the South. This means that definitions of the North and the South are many and the categories are symbolic and subjective rather than objective and clearly defined (Suopajärvi 1999: 18–19). The same can be said about the cultural discourses, which are largely symbolic and imaginary. On the other hand, the relationship needs to be considered on the national level. It has been argued that the othering of Lapland, and of the Sami in particular, has been connected to the self-definition of Finns. In this process, Lapland has been in the position of an underdog (Hautala-Hirvioja 2011: 184, 192; Saarinen 2011: 74–164). The condescending attitude of Finns towards the Sami, which is reflected in films as well as in other cultural products, dates back to previous centuries and Finland’s determination to become a civilized European nation: Finns wanted to distance themselves from the Sami, whom they considered a backward, physically inferior people (Lehtonen/Löytty 2007: 109–110; Saarinen 2011: 36–44).

In Finland, the colonization of the areas belonging to the Sami, the Sápmi, is a controversial issue, in the first place because not all historians agree that colonization has indeed occurred (Kuokkanen 2007: 146). According to Tuija Hautala-Hirvioja (2011: 184), “Finnish pioneers settled Lapland as early as the sixteenth century” (about the colonization of the Sami, see also Kuokkanen 2007). Ulla Vuorela (2009: 21) argues that “we [Finland as a nation] have slowly come to accept the view that we have practiced ‘internal colonisation’ through the ways in which we gradually made the Sámi people retreat towards Lapland from their earlier abodes in the South”. Lapland and its inhabitants have never posed a threat, except perhaps an imaginary one, to the nation or to Finns as an ethnic group. This means that the cinematic representations of

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<sup>2</sup> Sami films, that is to say films made by the Sami, are not included in the analysis, because the focus is on differences constructed by filmmakers that come mainly from outside Lapland.

Laplanders<sup>3</sup> and of the Sami cannot be described as enemy images. While it may also be an exaggeration to talk about *monsterization*, it is undisputable that processes of othering have been, and continue to be, at work here.

Geographically speaking, Lapland has been vital to the nation. Its fells and rivers were considered part of the Finnish national landscape and used in the construction of the nation and its self-image (Hautala-Hirvioja 2011; Saarinen 2011: 113–115), and its beauty has been used to attract tourists to the country. The northern lights and the midnight sun have been presented as a part of Finland's national heritage (Hautala-Hirvioja 2011: 195). Since the early 20th century, the relationship between Lapland and the rest of the country has been one of mutual gain, because Lapland has benefited economically from tourism. In cultural products, othering has persisted even though Lapland is no longer uncharted. Together with other cultural products, films have contributed to the creation of Lapland as a culturally specific and fascinating place. Those aspects of Lapland that set it apart from the rest of the country have been emphasized, and this has usually meant concentrating on selected characteristics such as fell landscapes and colorful Sami costumes.

Geography is one aspect in the process of othering, although films are not always very specific about the geographic limits of Lapland. Films have contributed to the construction of a mythical Lapland by, for example, omitting place names, as happens in *The Sinful Song*, or by mixing local cultures, as is the case in *The White Reindeer*, where the filmmakers picked the most exotic elements of different Sami groups in order to produce an impressive representation of the indigenous population (Lehtola 2000: 139–140). Of later films, Jalmari Helander's *Rare Exports* (2010) and Jussi Hiltunen's *Armoton maa (Law of the Land, 2017)* were shot in Norway, partly for economic reasons and also, in the case of *Rare Exports*, because of the more impressive landscape (Kinnunen 2010). According to Tommi Römpötti (2019), in several Finnish films in the 2000s, Finland is divided into two parts in a way that implies a class division: in this geographical and economic polarization, the poor, working-class North is considered subordinate to the wealthy South, usually meaning the relatively small capital city area of Helsinki.

The othering that takes place in cinematic representations can be seen as a case of 'internal Orientalism', a term that David R. Jansson (2003) uses to theorize the relationship of the United States and its South on the basis of W. J. Cash's book *The Mind of the South* (1941). According to Jansson, the South is represented as an internal spatial Other and he argues that these representations play a part in the construction of a privileged national identity in the US. The term 'Orientalism' originates with Said (2003 [1978]), who argued that Europe used the Orient to define itself by constructing the Orient as different and in opposition to itself. Said (2003 [1978]: xii) emphasized that "neither the term Orient nor the concept West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other". He thereby argues that the 'Orient' is a result of imagination, just like every other attempt to define others. The case of Lapland and the rest of Finland may be a slightly milder version of 'internal Orientalism', but it is recognizable nevertheless.<sup>4</sup> However, it needs

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<sup>3</sup> This term refers to the non-Sami Finns living in Lapland.

<sup>4</sup> Australia may offer another, somewhat similar case. Jane Stadler, Peta Mitchell and Stephen Carleton (2016: 77–80) have taken inspiration from Jansson's term and characterized the role of the Australian

to be remembered that in Finnish films set in Lapland, the Sami have played a lesser role than the Finns. The Sami have rarely been seen as main characters.

Another borderland and a fringe of civilization familiar from cinema is the American West. Lapland has played a somewhat similar role in a couple of Finnish films as the Wild West in American films: both are depicted as regions apart, where different rules apply, and in both types of film a prominent role is given to majestic landscapes. Even a few Westerns have been set in Lapland. The *Villi pohjola (The Wild North)* trilogy (1955, 1963, 1963) by Aarne Tarkas presents a utopian vision of a pristine indigenous people who look like a mixture of the Sami and American Indians (Salmi 1994: 149–150). The influence of the Western can also be seen in Mika Kaurismäki's apocalyptic *The Last Border* (1993) and the masculine revenge story *Law of the Land*.

What Jansson (2003: 295) says about the role of positive aspects in the othering of the American South applies to representations of Lapland, too: “While I would suggest that overall, the negative representations have outweighed the positive, even positive representations reinforce the idea that the South is different and to that extent strengthen the role of the South as an internal Other”. Emphasizing the beauty of the North can likewise be seen as an example of positive exoticism, but the way the habits and gestures of the local people are portrayed often falls under the category of negative exoticism. *Umur* (Lehtinen 2002), in which the northern people are weird and strangely inarticulate, is a case in point (Hiltunen 2014: 72–73). When Lapland is represented in films, the representation is never neutral. The fact that the story takes place in Lapland is always highly significant and the expectation is that something out of the ordinary is going to happen. Why this might be the case and what such extraordinary events are, will be considered in the next section.

### **The Mythic and Romantic Lapland of the Early Films**

The weight of history and the tradition of cultural expression together with the fact that film production is South-centered and filmmakers bring an outsider's perspective to the task help continue the practices of othering in Lapland films. There are not many filmmakers with roots in the North and who would be inherently interested in the area. That may explain why the stories are usually only loosely connected to local contexts and why people are portrayed as funny, strange or quirky. In the story-world, too, the point of view in many films belongs to a character who is a stranger to the community (for example, *Umur* and *Kaikella rakkaudella [Things We Do for Love, Ijäs 2013]*). This sense of looking at Lapland from an outsider's perspective seems to be one of the defining features of these films.

During the first half of the 20th century, the region was still physically separated from the rest of the country: the lines of communication between the North and the rest of Finland were poor and under-developed. Lapland was out of reach for most people and therefore it continued to be an object of wonder. It was not until the late 1960s and after the increase in private car ownership that travel gradually became possible for ordinary people (about the beginning of tourism in Lapland, see Mäkinen 1983). The romantic, exotic representations provided by films also began to attract people to the region (Lehtola 2000: 9). Many of the Lapland films took part in the construction of Finnish

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Tropical North as “a marginalized internal Other”, an anxiety-inducing borderland in Australian cinematic, literary and theatrical narratives (Stadler/Mitchell/Carleton 2016: 77).

national identity by producing imagery considered appropriate for that purpose. The films featured beautiful, untouched landscapes (Toiviainen 2000: 82) and Sami culture, suggesting that Lapland is worth a visit.

In cinematic representations, Lapland continues to be looked at with a superficial tourist gaze and certain stereotypical views persist. Päivi Naskali (2003: 27) observed that “[b]ecause Lapland is far away, for those living in Helsinki it is mentally further than the cities of Europe, it exists as an imaginary image that can be filled with mythical stories”.<sup>5</sup> Although some of the filmmakers were interested in Lapland and even conducted research on Lapland and the Sami, as the makers of *The White Reindeer*—Erik Blomberg and Mirjami Kuosmanen—did, most of the early films display naïve exoticism (Lehtola 2000). All the Sami characters, for example, were played by Finns (Salmi 1994: 150), which suggests that the films were not so much an insider’s as an outsider’s vision of Lapland.

Among the first Finnish feature films to portray Lapland is the horror drama *Noidan kirot* (*The Curse of the Witch*, 1927; translated by the author); directed by Teuvo Puro. It deals with a curse that a male Sami witch put on the area occupied by Finnish settlers after they first blinded and then killed him. Later, when the film’s male protagonist asks his bride to come and settle with him in the North, his blind sister warns the bride of the curse. The bride’s misfortune soon begins, when she is raped by a logger. The film is an adaptation of the northern writer Väinö Kataja’s novel from 1914, in which a witch tries to protect the land against Finnish colonists. However, in the film the situation has been reversed: the Sami witch becomes the bad guy and the Finns finally manage to take over the lands belonging to the Sami (Lehtola 2000: 43–45).

Witchcraft is the key story element also in *The White Reindeer*, a visually outstanding film that set the pattern for later films. According to Heli Saarinen (2011: 114), the film’s mythic Lapland is based on a long tradition of Lapland imageries. It is this mythic quality of Lapland that later films have mimicked, not the story or the film’s style, which are quite unique. *The White Reindeer* was made for an international audience and its release was calculated to occur during the Olympic Games that took place in Helsinki in 1952. In the story, a spell cast by a shaman makes a young woman take the shape of a white reindeer that lures men on and leads them to their death. The Sami, and particularly the enchanted woman, are represented in *The White Reindeer* as commanding mystical forces, as being close to nature and as possessing sexual power. This is not the only case where a female character crystallizes what is different and exotic about Lapland. The tradition continues in *Umur*, where the female character is associated with a white owl; she too is a tragic figure, whom the male protagonist desperately pursues (Hiltunen 2014). Sexuality, in romantic and more carnal versions, but also in connection with wrongdoings, is a recurring theme in the early films.

Romantic encounters between northern women and southern men, as well as darker elements such as mystical rituals and death, were already present in Jack Witikka’s film *Aila—Pohjolan tytär* (*Arctic Fury*, 1951) and in *Maaret, tunturien tyttö* (*Maaret, the Mountain Maid*, 1947) directed by Valentin Vaala (Saarinen 2011: 51). The exotic elements and sinister occurrences resurface in later films, sometimes in a markedly

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<sup>5</sup> As translated by the author. Original text in Finnish: “Koska Lappi on kaukana, helsinkiläiselle henkisesti kauempana kuin Euroopan kaupungit, on se olemassa imaginaarisena kuvana, jota on helppo täyttää myyttisillä tarinoilla” (Naskali 2003: 27).

different register. Teuvo Tulio's last, intentionally tasteless, *Sensuela* (*Sensuella*, 1973) is a campy story of one Sami woman's moral ruin at the hands of a German soldier. In *Sensuella*, excessive behavior is linked to sexuality, as is the case also in *The Sinful Song*, which will be analyzed in detail in the following section.

### **The Wretched Others in *The Earth Is a Sinful Song* (1973)**

*The Sinful Song* offers a completely different view of Lapland than the earlier films, particularly in terms of film style, but also in terms of content. At the time of its production, in the early 1970s, the hard years of the post-war reconstruction were over and the country's economy was developing fast. The basis of the welfare state was being built and differences in income were growing smaller. A lot of people had already moved into cities as part of the urbanization process (Roos 1999: 17). *The Sinful Song* takes the viewer back to the immediate post-war years. The film does not explicitly situate the story in the late 1940s and the reconstruction time, but this is the period that Mukka's novel, on which the film is based, depicts. The reconstruction of Lapland began later and proceeded more slowly than in the rest of Finland (Tuominen 2015: 64–70), and therefore Lapland was particularly vulnerable during this historical period. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a lot of people emigrated from northern Finland to Sweden in search of work.

This article analyzes *The Sinful Song* in the context of Lapland films, although in terms of style a more likely context might be socially conscious films, such as Risto Jarva's *Työmiehen päiväkirja* (*A Worker's Diary*, 1967) and Mikko Niskanen's *Kahdeksan surmanluotia* (*Eight Deadly Shots*, 1972). *The Sinful Song* breaks the image of Lapland as beautiful postcard scenery, but it offers a different kind of exoticism through its naturalistic depictions of people and landscapes. It portrays its characters as uncivilized and primitive, animal-like in their instinctual behavior—a vision that shocked many contemporary viewers, standing as it did in such stark contrast to the atmosphere of progress prevailing elsewhere in the country (Koivunen 1999).

The film's setting is an unnamed village in Lapland. As far as the storyline is concerned, the film adapts quite faithfully Timo K. Mukka's (1944–1973) first novel, which was published in 1964. Mukka lived most of his short life in the municipality of Pello, in the valley of the River Torniojoki. According to literary critic Olavi Jama, Mukka was the first northern writer who, albeit with great difficulty, gained recognition as one of the foremost Finnish writers of his time. Jama points out that in literature, Lapland was tied to exoticism until the 1950s and that Mukka was one of those who managed to detach himself from that tradition (Jama 2010: 154). Mukka, whose life was marked by poverty, illness and existential and religious crises, found the inspiration for his first novel, which he finished at the age of nineteen, in his immediate surroundings. The novel is set in a fictitious village called Siskonranta, which appears to be like one of the villages in the area of Pello.

In the film, the actors—most of whom were amateurs from the region—speak the local dialect. The scenery suggests that the setting is further north, and as the National Audiovisual Institute announces on its website (KAVI 2013), the film was shot in the village of Kittilä, about one hundred kilometers north of Pello. The film portrays sickly, wretched people, whose lives revolve around trying to meet their most basic needs. Birth, death, desire, sickness, and violence are the main elements of the narrative, at the

center of which is the 18-year-old protagonist Martta and her awakening sexuality. She lives with her parents and grandfather in a small house in an isolated community, where life is cruel, filled with endless toil and hardship. With the exception of the love-struck Martta, everyone looks tired and unkempt; quite indifferent to their overall appearance.

The tale of awakening sexuality is framed with ever-present death. Early in the film, a migrant worker is stabbed to death at an open air dance. It is the first in a series of six deaths that the film includes. Next to die is a calf, which Martta's father chops to pieces in its mother's womb because it was in the wrong position. The film shows events in close-ups as the father puts his hand inside the cow and draws out a piece of the calf's leg. Thirdly, a single mother, Aino Liinukorpi, bleeds to death after a miscarriage while her four children, who sleep in the same room, watch and cry. Later, the grandfather dies of poor health, Martta's lover dies by drowning in the icy water after having been chased there by Martta's father, and close to the film's end the father hangs himself behind a shed. The film's last scene, which follows immediately after the father's suicide, and in which Martta, who has given birth to a baby, walks across the yard carrying the child, leaves the impression that life in the village will continue as it has done until then: children will be born and they will continue to grow up and live here as previous generations have done, struggling to stay alive. The film evokes the impression that Martta resigns to this fate.

### **Poor Laplanders Under a Magnifying Glass**

The lack of contextualization in the film contributes to the impression that the film is about Lapland in general and consolidates an image of the region as a mythic place, somehow outside of time. Because the film is vague about the geographical and temporal location of the story, the narrative has the feeling of a timeless struggle for survival. Jama (2010: 154) observes that, historically, in Finnish fiction Lapland has stood in for a past, lost world, and this is also the impression that Mollberg's film creates. The lack of spatial coordinates as well as of an outsider's point of view within the story world enhance the feeling of oppressive inwardness and seclusion. Mollberg does not make the point that the depicted poverty is a consequence of the war. As a result, the events lack historical contextualization and the film seems to state that primitive conditions are a natural state of things in these areas. The connection must have been obvious to a contemporary audience, but some of the negative criticism suggests that, nevertheless, his vision was considered racist and essentializing. This is also the reason why Mollberg's project appeared ethically questionable to some critics at its time (see, for example, Toiviainen 1973; Tuuli 1973).

The feeling of exclusion dominates *The Sinful Song* as a cinematic experience for another reason too: to this feeling contributes, somewhat paradoxically, the voyeuristic camerawork. The intruding camera does in fact represent an outsider's point of view, but this outsider remains outside the story world and thereby only enhances the feeling that something exotic and distant is being observed here. The poor villagers are placed under a harsh light and the cold, arrogant eye of the camera. The actors often utter their lines with too much pathos, creating the impression that the filmmaker feels no empathy with the protagonists.

It appears that Mollberg was not interested in recreating Mukka's poetic expression, and some critics saw this both as the main difference between the novel and the film and



as the film's major flaw (see, for example, Toiviainen 1973: 10). The film's set designer, Ensio Suominen, has made the same observation (as can be seen in an interview that was included in the film's later DVD release). Jama points out that Mukka described existential pain not according to the tradition of realism but by venturing outside the rational world, and that the writer's tortuous relationship to religion was an essential part of this style. According to Jama (2010: 150–153), Finnish modernism and Arctic Laestadianism meet in Mukka's style, which he terms 'Laestadian existentialism'. This existentialistic aspect of Mukka's worldview present in the novel is virtually nonexistent in the film.

The film's naturalistic style is exemplified in the way the camera invades private spaces and zooms in on unpleasant details such as the characters' ragged clothes, greasy hair and bad teeth. One scene begins with a close-up of Martta's sickly mother with a weary look on her face and continues with a panning shot that reveals the miserable interior of the family's house: cheap utensils containing disgusting looking leftovers lying on the rickety tables. This is an example of how the voyeuristic gaze operates in Mollberg's film (see figures 1a–1b).



**Figures 1a–1b.** Voyeuristic camera reveals miserable details of life at Martta's home, where life is constant struggle for her sickly mother [0:15:21–0:15:40]. Screenshots taken by the author.

The narrative shifts swiftly from one scene to another, and the lines spoken by the characters are short. Especially during the first third of the film, the narrative shows the characters' daily toil in short scenes without an apparent plot structure. The corporal acting style and the haptic quality of the images add a sense of exaggeration and poignancy to the cinematic expression. It is almost as if the actors were performing on a theatre stage. The film's first scene illustrates this abrupt style. Martta is on a foggy lake in a rowing boat with her grandfather when they meet another vessel with men on board. The parties comment on their poor catch and start to laugh excessively, for no apparent reason. The boisterous laughter is emphasized by fast cuts into close-ups of the laughing faces. Such excessive and apparently unmotivated reactions recur throughout the film (see figures 2a–2b).



**Figures 2a–2b.** By making the characters react excessively, the film emphasizes their primitiveness [0:00:49–0:00:58]. Screenshots taken by the author.

The film gives the impression that in these severe conditions, people behave cruelly to one another. Their talk is crass and their gestures abrupt, in some scenes obscene. Without considering his son's feelings, the grandfather accuses him of having chosen a sick, worthless wife. The mother scolds Martta for sleeping naked and says she will turn out like Aino Liinukorpi, who 'sells her ass'. The grandfather kicks the dog and chases it with an axe in a manner that looks painfully real on the film. The landscape remains in the background for most of the time and when the camera does pick out and linger on something beautiful in the landscape, the human presence clashes with its beauty. When Martta's father returns from a visit to Liinukorpi, the autumn landscape is at its most colorful, but the mood of the scene is as black as the father's mind: he has had a dreadful night trying to save the calf and his father has spoken cruel words about his wife.

According to Helena Mäkelä-Marttinen, ballad and naturalism are the two dominant genres intersecting in Mukka's works. In his narratives, sublime and grotesque styles of narration repeatedly alternate. The sublime is reserved for expressing the sensitive inner world of the characters, while the grotesque style is used for descriptions of the external social world. Naturalism also shows in the deterministic structure of Mukka's narrative, in its inevitable progression towards a tragic end, while the ballad form emerges occasionally as an individual's cry for help (Mäkelä-Marttinen 2008: 13–14, 20–24, 95). Mäkelä-Marttinen describes the ballad as a moment of beauty and relief from the ugly reality expressed through the characters' voices. According to Mäkelä-Marttinen, Mukka uses these two stylistic devices to express the characters' liminal situation; the demarcation between the spiritual and the corporal (Mäkelä-Marttinen 2008: 24).

Unlike the novel, the film has only the external narrator and its objectified point of view. In the film, elements of the ballad have been suppressed and only the naturalistic, at times grotesque, style remains. The beauty of moments that the characters could experience is not foregrounded in any way. In Mukka's works, morbid sexuality and sadism are an allegory of the evil world (Mäkelä-Marttinen 2008: 387), while in Mollberg's film these are naturalistic aspects of the life of the secluded community.

### **Over-Sexualization as an Act of Othering**

The film represents its characters' sexual activity in a very unpleasant way. The figure of Martta continues the tradition of dark, sensuous northern women, but she is more down-to-earth than the women in the earlier films. In the course of the narrative, she develops into a force of nature, craving more experiences; it is as if she could not help herself once she has started (c.f. Lehtola 2000: 138). Everything that happens to Martta is very straightforward: no aura of mysticism is created around her. She gets pregnant after her first sexual experience, but keeps it a secret. According to Toni Lahtinen, in Mukka's novel, Martta is likened to nature, but this does not mean that she is subjugated: she is represented as an independent sexual agent, whom men cannot control (Lahtinen 2008: 176–177). In the film, she is a relatively independent sexual agent too, but she is also a victim of circumstances in the sense that she is exposed to the power of men in her everyday life. Old men grope her and even her grandfather behaves intimidatingly. When Martta cries during the night after her first sexual experience, her grandfather, who sleeps in the same room, comments that it is cold in the house and comes closer to her. Martta asks him to come and sleep by her side to make it warmer, to which he grunts: 'What would happen if I came? I screwed a lot of women when I was young. You need to know that'.

Sexuality is one of the main areas where the characters are marked as Others. The characters are depicted as over-sexualized, as is often the case in representations of strange cultures (see Hall 1997). The villagers are presented as having double standards. Martta is scolded for promiscuity and for sleeping without any clothes on, and her mother accuses her of sleeping with Kurki-Pertti, the man who made her pregnant. Her sexual behavior is monitored, but most of the time this appears to be a lame attempt at control in a community where sexual morals and mores otherwise are loose. The fact that the villagers are religious does not prevent them from indulging in drink and sex. Alcohol takes away their inhibitions and they are content to make out with the person closest to them; old or young. Sex frequently comes up in talk. When Martta asks her friend Elina what she should do when she desires a man, Elina answers that she should read the Bible. Later, Elina confesses her sins to the preacher who has come to the village to arrange a religious gathering.

Human intimacy is depicted as an act limited to the satisfaction of primal desires: there is hardly any tenderness in the encounters between men and women. When Kurki-Pertti starts to persuade Martta to have sex with him, she is brushing a cow. In order to excite her he tells her about the breeding of Martta's cow, describing how their bull 'put some good into her [the cow's] ass'. Soon after this, Martta experiences her first sexual act, among hay stacks, with the heavy man panting on top of her. In another scene, Aino Liinukorpi offers sex as payment for help with the cow, and when she goes to bed with one of the village's young men, the bloody water beside the bed reminds us of what happened a moment earlier with the cow.

The revivalist version of Lutheranism, Laestadianism, represented in Mollberg's film is an integral part of Mukka's novel. According to Ilpo Pursiainen, Mukka was critical of Laestadian preacher institution, but this criticism was pushed aside by some commentators who were close to the religious movement. They suggested that Mukka might in fact be referring to Korpelianism (named after the preacher Toivo Korpela), a radical religious movement which detached itself from Laestadianism and which was

active for a short period in the 1930s in the Tornio valley, particularly on the Swedish side of the border. It is well known that in this movement, religious hysteria was channeled into sexual behavior and that several members of the movement were sentenced to prison for sexual harassment of minors (Pursiainen 1999: 76; Pursiainen 2001: 80). This is in fact what happens in the film during the religious gathering. The preacher talks at great length about the sins of the villagers, saying that the sins of their long gone predecessors are still upon them. When he tells them to ask for forgiveness, the congregation becomes visibly stirred. Awe turns into sexual desire and even the devout Elina is lured into a sexual act with the preacher himself. Pursiainen (1999: 76) commented that the aggressive, manipulative sexuality of the preacher is something that could happen within Laestadianism as well, and that Mukka was not portraying Korpelianism.

Whatever the name of the specific sect, the film can be said to portray religious hysteria. Literature scholars count Mukka among those writers who have expressed what is called Arctic hysteria, characteristic of which are, on the one hand, exaggerated physical expressiveness and, on the other, withdrawal and depression. Such dichotomies are typical of northern literature, as Pirkko Puoskari explains, citing Markku Itonen (1999; cit. in Puoskari 2016: 8–13). It is no exaggeration to state that this applies to many Lapland films, too. In *The Sinful Song*, ecstasy and misery alternate in everyday life.

Within this community of Others, the Sami are portrayed as doubly Other. They are eye-catchingly attractive in their traditional outfits in the film's otherwise gloomy world. Martta falls in love with Oula Nahkamaa, who has come to the reindeer round-up, which is depicted as an exciting spectacle.<sup>6</sup> The butchering of the reindeer is shown in graphic detail and a lot of time is devoted to it, as if in an ethnographic film. The heroes of the sequence are men dressed in gákti, the bright blue Sami costume, but it appears that not all of them are Sami but men from the village can also be seen among them. In his gákti, Oula, whose skills the sequence stresses, looks like a good alternative to the shabby local men, but there are obstacles to Martta's happiness. Her family considers Oula a bad choice, claiming that he has fathered children with several different women, and her father determines to kill the man. This is an example of depicting someone who is different as over-sexualized. Within the story this negative opinion is represented as belonging to Martta's grandfather and father. Close to the end of the film, the father chases Oula to a frozen lake, where Oula falls through the thin ice and drowns. The role of the Sami and their culture in the film illustrates the claims of Lehtola (2000: 9–17) and Salmi (1994: 150) that in cinema, Sami people have been used as exotic attractions or curiosities rather than as full human beings. Lehtola points out that reindeer herding is used in cinema to typify the Sami, even though only one fourth of the Sami own any reindeer (Lehtola 2000: 262–263) (see figures 3a–3b).

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<sup>6</sup> According to Lehtola (2000: 204), this is the first time in Finnish film that a Sami man is desired by a non-Sami woman.



**Figures 3a–3b.** Martta’s lover Oula is portrayed as a stereotypical Sami, skillful at handling the reindeer, and as an over-sexualized Other [0:41:27–0:41:50]. Screenshots taken by the author.

### Colonialist Viewpoints and the Film’s Reception

The film’s reception makes clear the ideology according to which Lapland is a world apart, different from the rest of Finland. In the public response to the film, there were many examples of colonialist and racist attitudes, ignorance and naiveté—that is to say, practices of othering on many different levels (Koivunen 1999). To the film’s director, Rauni Mollberg, who was born and lived most of his life in southern Finland, it was “the first true film about Lapland”. He considered that Lapland and its people were closer to nature than people in the South and not as estranged from their emotions as southerners were (Lehtola 2000: 201–202). Many critics shared his opinion that the film was an authentic depiction of life in the North (Savo 1973; Talaskivi 1973). According to one critic, the film enlightened viewers about the conditions of life in Lapland, indicating the belief that not much had changed since the post-war years (Talaskivi 1973). Bengt Pihlstöm (1973) supposed that for people in the South, the film’s events might seem scary and gloomy but that viewers in Lapland would see them as everyday reality. He emphasized the otherness of Lapland by arguing that there is a bigger difference between Helsinki and Lapland than between Helsinki and Paris.

At the time of its release the film appeared to some as fresh, powerful and different from contemporary films. It was praised by many for its naturalistic style (Savo 1973; Talaskivi 1973). Other voices were more critical, arguing that the film demeaned northern people by representing them as primitive and brutal (Suominen 1973; Tuuli 1973). Some critics commented that the film did not help generate proper discussions about Lapland and its problems. At least two critics compared it adversely with Niskanen’s *Eight Deadly Shots*, arguing that Mollberg’s film had no social relevance because it concentrated on exhibiting the misery of just one family. (Toiviainen 1973: 10; Tuuli 1973.) Some were worried that such a hopeless vision would only do harm to Lapland. Despite the divided opinions, of all Finnish feature films, *The Sinful Song* had the biggest audience during the period 1971–1980 (Uusitalo 1999: 26).

Anu Koivunen has analyzed the film and its reception, detecting a colonial gaze both in the film and in the criticism. A widely shared opinion was that the film portrayed the people of Lapland as ‘authentic’ and living close to nature; they were considered to

have something that other Finns had lost. She lists expressions in which colonialist attitudes were implicit or that referred to the film's problematic nature: 'authenticity', 'realism', 'naturalism', 'primitive', 'exoticism' and 'ethics'. Koivunen considers it racist to represent the way of life of the northern people as idealistically natural and essentially different. (Koivunen 1999: 189–190.) She concludes: "*Sinful Song* was also regarded as a kind of an anthropological peep-hole opening into another world, where there was no lack of exoticism" (191).<sup>7</sup>

Part of the audience seemed to watch the film as a documentary and take it for granted that the South and the North are two separate realities. Northern commentators who were more familiar with the actual situation in Lapland were slightly more critical. However, the dominant view that comes through in the reception of the film was that it was the South looking at the North in the film and that it saw something that was at the same time both fascinating and repulsive. Now it seems clearer that it was the style of the film that made the characters seem to be like creatures in a laboratory—a human laboratory: the people living in Lapland were observed from close range like they were exotic creatures. This same idea can also be read between the lines in many of the critiques. By not situating the events anywhere in particular the film strengthens the impression that Lapland is a great unknown—a terra incognita. In this 'wherever' where everything has come to a standstill, northern people can be portrayed as primitive, reduced almost to the level of animals.

### **Conclusion—The Continuation of Exoticization**

This article has analyzed how processes of othering operate in *The Earth Is a Sinful Song*, on the level of film style and on the level of content. As far as film style is concerned, a central finding is that an intruding voyeuristic gaze that emphasizes misery and ugliness together with an exaggerated acting style serve to other and exoticize the film's characters. In the film several categories of othering intersect: the othering occurs on the basis of race, class and gender. Female characters represent in many of the Lapland films, also in the case of *The Sinful Song*, what is different and exotic about Lapland. The same can be said of the Sami characters.

*The Sinful Song* exemplifies several of the strategies used in colonialist discourses that Pietikäinen and Leppänen (2007: 181) list in their article discussing the power of language to construct the imagery of the Sami, who are Others in Finnish culture. Their list is a summary of the ways that various colonized people have been portrayed all over the world. Although the non-Sami inhabitants of Lapland have not been colonized in the strict sense of the word, the list can be applied to the film's representations of them as well. The characters are used as 'objects of melodramatic entertainment', they are 'ruined' and 'dirty', 'lacking culture', 'followers of the rules of nature instead of the rules of culture', and they are 'irrational' and 'eroticized' hypocrites. Just like language, cinema constructs otherness by using conventions and expressions that may on the surface seem natural.

The article has also sought to place the film in the context of other Finnish 'Lapland films' in order to show that othering and exoticization have taken place in both earlier

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<sup>7</sup> As translated by the author. Original text in Finnish: "Syntistä laulua katsottiin myös eräänlaisena antropologisena tirkistysaukkona toiseen maailmaan, josta ei eksotiikkaa puuttunut [...]" (Koivunen 1999: 191).

and later films. Although exoticism never quite reaches the same pitch as in Mollberg's film, it is present in different forms. The aim has been to show how earlier films, most importantly *The White Reindeer*, have set up models for later films to follow. Arguably, *The Sinful Song* too has been such a model. Therefore films such as *Umur, Mosku—lajinsa viimeinen* (*Mosku—The Last of His Kind*, Suominen 2003) and *Kättilö* (*The Midwife*, Jokinen 2015) continue to represent Lapland as mystical, wild and excessive. Marja Pyykkö's *Kekkonen tulee!* (*Kekkonen Is Coming!*, 2013; translated by the author), which is based on the northern writer Pia Pesonen's collection of short stories *Urho Kekkonen Strasse* (2011), is a recent, humorous variation on the theme of Arctic hysteria. In this farce, a small town is fanatically preparing for the expected visit of the president, Urho Kekkonen, in the early 1970s. Some people go out of their way to welcome Kekkonen, believing that a meeting with the president will change their lives for the better. Eventually the president's motorcade arrives, but it drives straight through the village without stopping. As an example of Laplanders' primitive sexuality, a pregnant woman has had herself tied to a cross because she is not sure she could resist 'Kekkonen's flesh'. The humorous trend continues in *The Lapland Odyssey* trilogy (*Napapiirin sankarit*) directed respectively by Dome Karukoski (2010), Teppo Airaksinen (2015) and Tiina Lymi (2017), in which manic activity alternates with melancholic, even suicidal feelings.

Throughout its history, Lapland and its inhabitants have been represented as exotic, strange, mystic, uncivilized, primitive, crazy and comical in Finnish cinema. In Lapland films, filmmakers coming from southern Finland have defined and characterized Lapland according to their own needs, creating imaginary versions of Lapland. These films are examples of how the collective imagination repeats itself. *The Sinful Song* is the only Lapland film that has aroused heated discussion among Finnish audiences, and this is partly because it was based on a well-known novel that was already a sensation. The article's discussion of the film's reception shows that despite the divided opinions the various critiques agree on one thing: the film represents the North as markedly different from the South. The fact that little attention has been paid to the processes of othering in the other Lapland films may indicate that such representations have become habitual and invisible. It is therefore important to continue to question the ideological underpinnings of the representations of Lapland in Finnish cinema.

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