

Kansallinen audiovisuaalinen arkisto: Finlandia Newsreels



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Finlandia-Katsaus newsreels produced between 1943 and 1964. When they came into being with WW II dragging on, the popular “from the front” newsreels produced by the Defence Forces began to lose credibility. As a counterweight to militaristic descriptions of the fighting, they focused on civilian subjects and on raising morale on the home front. As the austerity of the immediate post-war years receded, leisure and private consumption surfaced as themes in the newsreels. The story of the blue-and-white Finlandia Newsreels came to an end in 1964, when the old law supporting documentary shorts before feature films was scrapped, and Finnish television cemented its position as the national channel for news.

Detailed description provided by the archive:

Television in Finland began regular broadcasts in 1958. Before that time, the newsreels screened before the big feature in the country’s cinemas were the main channel for visual news, alongside the illustrated weeklies and other magazines.

A total of 700 *Finlandia-Katsaus* newsreels were made during the period between 1943 and 1964. They came into being in wartime, when the popular “from the front” newsreels produced by the Defence Forces began to lose credibility as the war dragged on. As a counterweight to more militaristic descriptions of the fighting, the focus was on civilian subjects and on raising morale on the home front.

Production was initially in the hands of a company named Finlandia-Kuva. This was a separate unit of the Finlandia News Agency, set up in 1943 in part on the initiative of *Propaganda-Aseveljet* (“Propaganda Brothers-in-Arms”), which was in turn responsible for wartime entertainment and subsequently became known as *Finlandia-Liitto*.

Finlandia-Kuva had at its disposal all the film and stills material deemed suitable for public distribution by the then *Valtion Tiedotuslaitos* (VTL, the state's information - and censorship - organ during the Winter War of 1939-40 and the Continuation War of 1941-1944). In addition, following an agreement on picture operations drafted in late 1942, Finlandia-Kuva took care of the acquisition and distribution of all stills and motion picture material from state offices and establishments. These establishments were requested to notify Finlandia-Kuva of suitable interesting subjects as newsreel inserts.

Finlandia-Kuva was sold, along with its archives, to *Suomi-Filmi* in 1945. Suomi-Filmi was a Finnish film production and distribution company dating back to 1919. The production of newsreels was temporarily interrupted in 1947, owing jointly to shortages of film stock and the strict censorship regulations in force while the terms of the Paris Peace Treaty were being negotiated, but it picked up again in the following year. From February 1950 onwards, production of the Finlandia Newsreels was passed in its entirety to Suomi-Filmi's documentary short film department, while the Finlandia-Kuva subsidiary concentrated instead on advertising clips. Suomi-Filmi produced and distributed the newsreels and also screened them in its own cinemas up and down the country.

Newsreels of this type were given an early boost by a favourable tax arrangement concluded back in 1933. Under the terms of this agreement, the screening of a documentary short (approved by the Finnish Board of Film Classification) together with a standard feature film brought a 5% tax rebate to the cinema, and this benefit could be enjoyed over several years. In terms of content, the short was required to be educational or in other respects conducive to fostering "the right values". It had to be at least 200 metres in length (approximately 8 minutes), and had to meet certain technical quality standards. One newsreel could contain an average of four to five news items.

The compiling of the newsreels for screening was started by Holger Harrivirta, who had gained some renown as a director of footage from the front, and he was assisted by two documentary film veterans, Heikki Aho and Björn Soldan. In the early years there was a shortage of materials in the film business, there were few hands to do the work, and the pace was hectic. Under the ownership of Suomi-Filmi, the team grew in size. Through the 1950s and up to 1964, the directors and

reporters included Harry Lewing, Reino Hirviseppä, Olavi Puusaari, and Kari Uusitalo. Among the cinematographers behind the camera were Unto Kumpulainen, Niilo Heino, Aimo Jäderholm, and Allan Pyykkö.

At the end of the 1940s, international news exchange deals were signed, and thereafter the material that these made available played a significant part in the content of the newsreels shown in Finland. It was at this point that the model for newsreels finally became more relaxed and entertainment-oriented, and the most blatantly propagandist features that had marked the wartime offerings faded away. Material from abroad was more often than not slotted in at the end of the reel as a closer – “on a lighter note”. Material produced at home and distributed abroad sought to modernise the image of Finland as a country of advanced industry, sporting prowess, and high culture.

“The movie camera is the ideal means of providing a correct and truthful image of what has happened. The news camera does not distort or exaggerate, for it portrays only what its sharp eye has seen” (FK 200, 19.3.1953).

Even though much emphasis is made in the Finlandia Newsreel commentaries of the camera’s powers as a scrupulously objective and neutral observer, the films themselves nevertheless reflect the attitudes, the political climate, and general world-picture of their time. The newsreels emerged while Finland was still fighting the Continuation War against the Soviet Union, and they continued throughout the post-war reconstruction period, up to and beyond the time when the last trainload of Finnish war reparations goods was delivered across the eastern border. Atoms and orbiting Sputniks filled the screens during the hottest phase of the Cold War; Finland walked its tightrope between East and West under the leadership of Presidents J.K. Paasikivi (1946–1956) and Urho Kekkonen (1956–1981). Any critical views on the superpowers and on Finland’s own actions were conspicuous by their absence from the newsreel footage.

As the austerity of the immediate post-war years receded, leisure and private consumption surfaced as themes in the newsreels. Bell skirts and poodle skirts were seen twirling on the catwalk at fashion shows, the old wooden quarters of the urban landscape were pushed aside by modern concrete buildings, and clever new appliances speeded up household chores and agricultural work alike. Trade fairs were presented, showing off the latest industrial advances from all corners of the

world, and foreign visitors were taken to admire factories in the emerging dynamic new Finland. Visiting movie-star royalty, the Helsinki Olympics of 1952, and the coronation of girl-next-door Armi Kuusela at the Miss Universe pageant in the same year all prompted much excitement among the Finns. Youngsters strutted their stuff in jitterbug and jive competitions, and finally the arrival in Helsinki of teen heartthrob Paul Anka in 1959 caused screams and mayhem amongst “the stiff and dour Finnish public”. Sport – particularly Finnish sporting heroes – remained the people’s entertainment of choice through the decades, and also arts-related items enjoyed a solid position. The newsreels’ educational & public service obligations were met by news items that dealt with fire prevention and road safety.

Through news from abroad, the Finns had a chance to wonder at the folk traditions of other nations, their technological gadgetry, daredevil competitions, and children and animals performing strange and wonderful feats of skill. Celebrity figures appeared on the big screen, from the Dionne quintuplets to blonde bombshell Jayne Mansfield and the dashing new man in the White House, John F. Kennedy. As a counterweight to lighter entertainment items there were despatches from international conflicts and reports of natural disasters. The newsreels featured for instance footage of the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, the construction of the Berlin Wall, and catastrophic flooding in the United States. In domestic news items, subjects from abroad were given a local twist. Some of the stranger hobbies, such as winter ice swimming, were presented in an exotic light, and water-skiing – an import from Florida – also found its way to Finnish lakes.

In most cases there was no narrative thread, with a voiceover linking the individual pieces together, but the newsreel segments would rather be shown as separate self-contained items. Continuity was created by recognisable musical segues and camera sweeps. In the early days, classical music and Finnish light music tunes were the standard musical accompaniment, but later the accent was more on foreign numbers from TV, movies, or the current hit parade. By modern standards, the newsreel commentaries could be very “enthusiastic” and rich in pathos.

Domestic news was made up for the most part of events taking place in Helsinki and the neighbouring area in the south. Certain locations seemed to be practically compulsory, turning up almost from one newsreel to the next: the Presidential Palace, Parliament, the Olympic Stadium, the old Trade Fair Hall, the Helsinki School of Economics, and the Senate Square were all standard newsreel fare. On national

occasions such as Independence Day, the cameras witnessed wreath-laying ceremonies at the graves of the fallen in Hietaniemi Cemetery. Famous faces coming and going were filmed with bouquets at airports and Helsinki's main railway station.

Lapland, which suffered cruelly in the last months of the war, was the first "provincial" location to be featured on the newsreels. In other respects, the news threshold for non-Helsinki coverage was crossed for instance in the case of large camps or Scout jamborees, sports events, or trips by statesmen. The gradual transformation of old market towns into built-up cities and the development of regional centres were also recorded on film. Whenever the camera crews headed out of Helsinki, more often than not they would shoot film of other subjects en route to the main event, and these would find their way into later newsreels as filler items.

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