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Cultural Populism in the Uuno Turhapuro Films of the 1990s

Introduction

In this article I focus on two films, *Uuno Turhapuro herra Helsingin herra* ("Uuno Turhapuro, Mr. Bigwig of Helsinki")¹ (Kokkonen, 1991) and *Uuno Turhapuro Suomen tasavallan herra presidentti* ("Uuno Turhapuro, Mr. President of the Republic of Finland") (Kokkonen, 1992). Both films are written and directed by Ere Kokkonen and produced by Pertti "Spede" Pasanen. These films relate the ongoing story of how Uuno Turhapuro, Finland's most iconic malingerer, becomes the political ruler of Finland. Both films were popular with Finnish audiences, topping the box office for domestic films in 1991 and 1992. According to the Finnish Film Foundation's audience statistics (www.ses.fi/katsojaluvut) *Uuno Turhapuro herra Helsingin herra* was the most watched film in Finland in 1991 (383,706 viewers), leaving behind such films as *The Naked Gun 2½: The Smell of Fear* (Zucker, 1991, 329,057 viewers), *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (Cameron 1991, 292,605 viewers) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991, 214,512 viewers). In 1992, *Uuno Turhapuro, Suomen tasavallan herra presidentti* was the second most watched film in Finland (283,118 viewers). The most watched of all was the Disney animation *Aladdin* (Musker, 1992, 313,990 viewers) and the third was *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* (Columbus, 1992, 250,719 viewers). In both years, Uuno films were clearly the most popular domestic films followed by another comedy, *Väapeli Körmy ja vetenalaiset vehkeet* (Kokkonen, 1991, 202 034 viewers) and *Väapeli Körmy ja etelän hetelmät* (Kokkonen, 1992, 109 162 viewers). These films were also written, directed and produced by Ere Kokkonen. The viewership for the other most successful domestic films each year is clearly lower, at around 60,000 viewers for both years. Measured by viewership, Kokkonen's and Spede's comedy films were a significant phenomenon in Finnish popular culture in the 1990s.

¹ Film titles translated by the author. Uuno Turhapuro is "officially" translated to Numbskull Uselessbrook or Bébert Bocal.

Film critic Reijo Tuikka writes of the film *Uuno Turhapuro herra Helsingin herra*: "The beginning of the autumn season in cinemas can be seen at the latest in the fact that the new Uuno Turhapuro film will be included in the program. It invariably gathers full crowds and is usually by far the most watched domestic film of the year." Tuikka also states in his critique that Uuno is something truly Finnish that people from elsewhere cannot understand (ESS 28.8.1991). Indeed, Finland has a strong tradition of folk comedy where one recurring character type is an unemployed – or more specifically – idle male, who most often appears in an all-male group of friends wasting his time and avoiding work by any means possible. As a comedy character, Uuno Turhapuro (played by Vesa-Matti Loiri) is part of a long Finnish tradition of folk culture and, more precisely, folk comedy, which the character at the same time both represents and has contributed to. Uuno's social rise to a position among the powerful elite occurred at a time when the rest of Finland was suffering from a deep recession and was troubled by the growing unemployment rates. The films depict the essential conflict that Uuno's anarchistic character creates within the economic and political upper class.

The character of Uuno Turhapuro was created in the early 1970s, which in Finland was a time of social and structural change. Industrial jobs had already increased in the previous decade, but in the 1960s Finland was still largely an agrarian society and urbanization was slow. In the 1970s urbanization meant major social and societal changes. For many, the result was an experience of rootlessness that manifested itself as social problems including alcoholism and prolonged unemployment especially amongst young men. Uuno Turhapuro represented these work-shy young men and served as a comedic channel to deal with the social crisis. According to cultural historians Hannu Salmi and Kari Kallioniemi, the 'official' Finnish culture is characterized by a high work ethic. Already in the 19th century Johan Ludwig Runeberg, considered the national poet of Finland, presented an ideal picture of a hard-working Finnish peasant in his poem *Saarijärven Paavo* (1830, originally in Swedish *Bonden Paavo*, in English "Paavo the Peasant"). Paavo diligently cultivates the fields threatened by frost, even though he is on the verge of starvation. In all his suffering, he praises God for not abandoning him. The poem emphasizes the importance of hard work and its pious impact on the Finnish people. This imagery has since moved from high culture to popular culture. These hard-working characters, perhaps best embodied by Väinö Linna's war hero Antti Rokka from the novel *Tuntematon sotilas* (*The Unknown Soldier*, 1954), contribute to Finnish popular culture through collectively accepted national narratives. They are counterbalanced with another cultural narrative of counter- or folk culture, which has produced characters who are

reluctant to work, such as Uuno Turhapuro (Salmi & Kallioniemi 2000, 9). Together, these narratives emphasize the importance of work in Finnish popular culture.

Between 1973 and 2004, a total of 19 Turhapuro films were produced. Almost every year they were the most successful domestic films in Finland. In addition to these, Uuno appeared in the films *Koeputkiakuinen ja Simon enkelit* (Pasanen, 1979), *Tup-akka-lakko* (Pasanen, 1980) ja *Vääpeli Körmy ja vetenalaiset vehkeet* (Kokkonen, 1991). Uuno also appeared in the television series *Spede Show* (1971–1984), *Uuno Turhapuro armeijan leivissä* (1986, an extended television series based on the film of the same name), *Uuno Turhapuro* (1996), *Johtaja Uuno Turhapuro – pisnismies* (1999, an extended television series based on the film of the same name), *Uuno Turhapuro – This is My Life* (2006, an extended television series based on the film of the same name). An autobiography of Uuno was published with the title *Uuno Turhapuro: Elämä* (Aitio 2014), written as if it had been made by Uuno himself. Uuno has also been the star of a pseudo-documentary television program *Kansalainen Turhapuro* ("Citizen Turhapuro") (Nurkse, 2017), where he was treated as if he were a genuine historical figure. In the pseudo-documentary, Uuno recalls his past and the events of the Uuno films are tied to changes in Finnish society over the decades. In 2021, a popular-fiction book was published about Uuno called *Uuno on numero yksi — Turhapuron koko tarina 1971–2021* (Marjamäki, 2021). Uuno Turhapuro lives on in Finnish media products where he crosses the boundaries between truth and fiction.

Underlying this article is my interest in the relationship between popular culture and populism. The connection can already be found on a conceptual level, and the connection becomes even more interesting when we think of popular culture as the culture of *the people*, that is, as different from the culture of the elite or those in power. In this article I analyze the two case studies noted above in the context of Uuno's populist leadership. At the beginning of my article, I present in more detail the methods and key concepts I have used. After that, I draw Uuno Turhapuro into the broader tradition of Finnish *folk comedy*. I then go deeper into the question-relevant examples of the films I analyze and study Uuno Turhapuro as a populist leader. In the last chapter, I examine Uuno Turhapuro's parody of Finland's presidential institution. I read these films as a response to the changes in the role and constitution of the presidential institution in post-Urho Kekkonen Finland as his rule culminated in 1982 and led to fundamental societal and political transformations which were, ultimately, echoed in popular culture.

Theoretical Background

In Finnish academia, enthusiasm for the study of popular culture increased in the 1990s. Previously seen as trivial folk culture, Uuno Turhapuro was elevated into both an object of academic research and valorised as a central building block of the Finnish self-image in cultural discussions. The first comprehensive academic study of Uuno Turhapuro was published in the early 1990s by a research group from Turku University, centralizing on the concept of *Uunoland* (Hietala et al. 1992, 127), which they define “as an imaginary space in relation to which people in Finland try to make sense of their cultural ambivalence”. It exemplifies in-between spaces where the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated. The concept includes the idea that Uuno Turhapuro and the world built around the character is something that all Finns recognize. Instead of this *internalized Finnishness* (Hietala et al. 1992, 127), in this article I examine Uunoland and the related cultural-populist narrative as a conceptual structure produced by the film series and its makers. Thus, Uunoland is not a concept that reveals something essential about Finnishness, but a narrative that actively builds an imaginary Finnish self-image. Central to this self-image are the concepts of masculinity and work that the character of Uuno disassembles and rebuilds. In addition to the concept of Uunoland, the twin concepts of ‘cultural populism’ and ‘critical populism’ serve as an aid in my analysis.

Jim McGuigan (1992: 4–6) uses the term *cultural populism* as follows: “Cultural populism is the intellectual assumption, made by some students of popular culture, that the symbolic experiences and practices of ordinary people are more important analytically and politically than Culture with a capital C.” In particular, he uses the concept to criticize the fact that the focus of cultural research of the 1990s was on the viewer’s use of media and interpretations. Instead, he argues, social, political and economic structures should also be taken into account while analyzing media. According to McGuigan *critical populism* simply accounts for ordinary people’s everyday culture *and* its material construction by powerful forces beyond the immediate comprehension and control of ordinary people. However, in contrast to this I understand cultural populism as the attitude of *filmmakers* in relation to the society around them, the production structures of film, and the reception of films. I argue that Finnish popular comedy positions itself in populist opposition to the “elite” and this is also reflected in the inner world of the films.

While McGuigan’s idea of cultural populism is, in particular, a reaction to the internal tensions of popular cultural research in the 1990s, populism in the 2020s is by no means an out-of-date

concept. According to Mora and Littler (2020: 864), populism has been elevated to a strong political force in the debates of the 2020s, yet academic analysis of the relationship between culture and populism has been relatively small-scale to date. As the populist strategy seeks to divide society into factions and encourage the mobilization of the ‘powerless’ against ‘those in power,’ it is important to ask who claims to be the ‘voice of the people’ and what are the cultural changes that make this way of speaking possible. Underlying this is the question of what the economic and political forces behind the populist voice are and what their motivations may be (Moran & Littler, 2020: 865). Populism on the whole is a difficult concept to define, but the structure put forward by Kazan (1998), used also by Moran and Littler (2020: 863), captures its essence: "populism is a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter".

In this article, I combine these media research concepts with a cultural-historical, material-based, and context-building research approach. As is typical of cultural history this study includes three voices: the voice of contemporary sources, interpretations of the material by researchers, and a discussion of previous research literature. According to cultural historian Maiju Kannisto (2018: 22–24), it is important to understand the separation of the research context when studying recent history. Although the 1980s and 1990s are still decades that exist in living memory for many, the meanings, concepts, and ways of seemingly familiar concepts have changed. Therefore, the role of contemporary material is important for understanding the temporal context and way of speaking, as contemporary material comments on the research subject at the same time. In cultural historical research, contexts contribute to the research result, as they construct meanings around the research object and the researched activity (See also Kaartinen 2005: 198–200, Salmi 2010: 341–347). Accordingly, the main source material of my study consists of audiovisual performances, i.e. the two Uno Turhapuro films from 1991 and 1992. Another source group is the contemporary discussion in the press about Uno films and Pertti “Spede” Pasanen’s public image which serves as a conduit to the research context to outline the boundaries and possibilities that existed in the media reality of the 1990s.

Uno as populist culture

Uuno Turhapuro appeared on the big screen during the economic recession and high unemployment of the 1970s, when his attitude to avoid work and his consumption-oriented lifestyle were seen as immoral in the eyes of contemporary critics. The peak years of Uuno's popularity coincide with the 1980s, when Finland experienced an economic boom and a period of consensus policy. Uuno's humor was then able to focus on broader themes than the family, such as the army or tourism. Humor was not only derived from Uuno's unemployment and everyday marital disputes (Kallioniemi & Karvo 2017, Laine 1999). According to media researcher Kimmo Laine, Uuno's character is a collection of recognizable traits such as a large appetite and work avoidance, but the character also exhibits a fluent identity that enables his different careers from a hardware salesman to the president. The character has been seen both as an image of a Finnish man and as a parody of it. According to Laine, Uuno has become a phenomenon and a concept that has at times received more publicity than its creators, producer-screenwriter Spede Pasanen, actor Vesa-Matti Loiri and director Ere Kokkonen. Fiction is sometimes more real than real people, Laine writes.

Uuno was initially an anonymous character who appeared on the Spede-Show in 1973 and became a reoccurring character. After the first film *Uuno Turhapuro* (1973), the character and his inner world, 'Uunoland', began to take shape. The consolidation of the character can be traced back to the 1980s, when the personality gallery of the franchise found its final form and the basic tension of the narrative was established: Uuno's father-in-law Vuorineuvos ('mountain councilor') Tuura is trying to get his daughter to divorce Uuno and Uuno is trying to ascertain Tuura's inheritance. In the mid-1980s, Uuno's life circle expands beyond the family and Uuno goes on an adventure in the army and goes on a tourist trip to Spain and meddles in spy adventures. In the early 1990s, Uuno drifted into politics and rose straight to the top. Laine traces the reasons for Uuno's decades-long popularity to the character's ambivalent identity, including his immediately recognizable appearance and enduring character traits such as an endless appetite, tendency to avoid work, and ability to explain things so they work for his own good. According to Laine, Uuno differs from other comedy characters, however, in his ability to change and adapt to any situation. That is why Uuno at the same time represents both extremes of the opposition: he is both a proletarian and a bourgeois (and thus, according to Laine, classless), a man and a woman (in one film Uuno loses his memory and believes he is a woman), ugly and charmingly seductive. Uuno even crosses the boundaries of the animal and human by attending dog school for a while because of his incredible sense of smell. So, the world of Uuno does not work with either-or-logic, but with both-and-logic. Thus, Uuno at the same time both supports and opposes the phenomena that the films deal with.



Uuno is shocked by the appearance of Tömisevä. Screenshot from *Uuno Turhapuro herra Helsingin herra*, 1991 (Courtesy of Spede-Team Oy)

Finland entered a deep economic recession in the early 1990s. This was the result of the economic politics of the 1980s, which were based on a strong Finnish currency (*markka*) and a too rapid liberalization of the money market (Kiander & Vartia 1998). The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s also marked a change in the economy, as bilateral trade had been a significant part of Finland's foreign trade. The economic crisis of 1990–1993 was one of the most serious economic crises in Finnish history, even worse than the recession of the 1930s (Blom 1999.) Rising unemployment brought to the public debate a strong economic discourse in which unemployment was defined by the alleged characteristics of the unemployed; these being that they did not contribute strongly enough to self-development in the name of economic growth and state competitiveness (Blomberg & al. 2002: 9–11). Thus, the idleness of the unemployed becomes a social problem as social policy in the 1990s emphasized activation.

Mona Mannevuola (2020: 247–248) has studied the emotional history of Finnish efficiency thinking. According to Mannevuola, in a culture that glorifies efficiency, *being human* is seen as a performance that can be measured. Inefficiency must be avoided at all costs, and since threats are all around us, the project of self-development of the "human machine" is endless. The result is a personal feeling of losing control, even though the pressures are actually social and cultural. In Finnish culture, characters with a high work ethic are common, but heroes of counter- or folk culture are reluctant to

work. Similar to other characters in Finnish folk comedy, such as Lapatossu or Pekka and Pätkä², Uuno makes a great effort to avoid working altogether, or tries to get rich by winning the lottery or through other gimmicks (Salmi & Kallioniemi 2000: 9; Kallioniemi & Karvo 2017: 35). Uuno does not even know the word "work" [*työ*], but calls it "rork" [*ryö*]. When Uuno's character is so closely associated with work avoidance and idleness, it is interesting to study his social rise precisely in the context of the 1990s recession.

Spede's Cultural Populism

In order to understand Uuno, we also need to look at the creative context underpinning the films, specifically the role and public image of Spede Pasanen. Although the films I analyse here are directed by Ere Kokkonen, they are still part of the same *Spede universe* as other Uuno films, which is why I study their authorship specifically through Spede's public role. Spede's film production is characterized by an accentuated ideal of entrepreneurship which is probably the result of him being forced to work outside the system. Between 1964 and 1999, Spede scripted, directed, produced, or acted in at least one film per year. From the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s a "second production" was also completed every year. These films are not very ambitious in their cinematic quality, but already their huge volume is enough to make Spede an institution in Finnish cinema.

While the Finnish Film Foundation supports domestic film production, for example, by channeling part of the ticket sales revenue to production, in Spede's decades-long career he has almost never received funding from them. Instead, he has produced his films independently, and over decades, Spede created an almost mythical story in which he contrasts himself with the Foundation. In this narrative, the Foundation represented the art world while Spede represented the people and their tastes. Such discourses were well suited to his populist public image which was based on maintaining a dichotomy between art and entertainment, although Spede's later films did receive funding from the Foundation. Spede's criticism is directed primarily at the Foundation and the

² Lapatossu is a character in Finnish storytelling who toured railway construction sites with his friend Vinski. In the stories, he mainly avoids work and tells anecdotes to amuse people. The oral story tradition was first compiled into a book in the early 20th century. In the 1930s and 1940s, Lapatossu appeared in three films and later the character appeared on the radio. Pekka Puupää is a cartoon character originally developed in the 1920s. A total of 13 Pekka Puupää films were made in 1953–1960 and three more in the 1980s. Pekka and his friend Pätkä are kind-hearted but simple which is why they always fail in the odd jobs, which Pekka's wife Justina forces them to.

artistically ambitious films it supports: "The Foundation's work is based on the idea that a film that interests viewers is a bad film. And thus it has supported films that don't interest anyone." According to Spede, the Foundation has been silent about the fact that his films could account for as much as 70% of viewers in some years. When a Turhapuro film was not released in 1989, the number of viewers for Finnish film collapsed. Spede himself suggested in the *Apu* magazine (24.8.1990) that it was now clear that his films kept the Finnish film industry alive, as Turhapuro films could reach up to 800,000 viewers.

Spede finally received production support from the Foundation in 1990. His public attitude to the Foundation was also noticed in the news when it was reported that the chasm between the Foundation and Pasanen had been closed, and Spede did not come up with a single joke after hearing about the decision: "He was utterly astonished." *Apu* also suggests grounds for the positive funding decision: Spede 's relaxing films cater to millions of viewers, at least when they are broadcast on television - and they have made the ordinary folk forget the boredom of everyday life, goes the argument (ESS 01.14.1990). The difficulty in obtaining funding made Spede and his Uuno films a form of counter-culture: they set out to challenge cultural hegemony, and critics from both the left and the right despised Uuno's grotesque humor. In many ways, this criticism of film critics and cultural people had been the essence for Uuno's popularity. Without such repeated criticism, their counter-cultural status would not have been possible (Hietala et al. 1992: 127).

Without a doubt the Uuno films have been hugely popular. The list of twenty most watched films in Finland in 2018 still had five Uuno-films on it (Katsojaluvut - Suomen elokuväsäätiö). In addition, television broadcasts and video distribution have extended the life cycle of Turhapuro films. At the same time, Uuno has strongly divided opinions. Critics were fairly unanimously against these films, viewing them as tasteless and schematic. Their cinematic qualities were also considered shabby. Critics emphasized their own position by distinguishing themselves from the people who viewed Uuno films, while Spede himself emphasized the confrontation with his populist approach and the critics' elitism. According to Spede, the films must have the support of the people behind them and should not be made for the financiers: "If no one is watching movies, they shouldn't be made." He firmly believed that 80% of the viewers of domestic films are located in rural areas and the rest in the metropolitan area. Indeed, he claims his own films have saved dozens of small movie theaters

(Länsi-Savo 15.7.1991). This notion is supported by, for example, the adjacent advertisement for the cinema Kuvapalatsi in a small Finnish town, Lahti, in August 1992. The film *Uuno Turhapuro Suomen Tasavallan herra presidentti* was screened in the cinema 9 times during one week. There were as many as four screenings on Sundays, which was unusually frequent for small Finnish towns in 1992.

Uuno Turhapuro as a populist leader

Populist movements arose in Europe in the second half of the 20th century due to the feeling among voters that political parties had begun to converge ideologically and that politics became technocratic. The Uuno films reflect this as they portray the character as a 'country boy' who, in his own way, reacts to the problems of urbanization and industrialization. The films do not deal with unemployment per se, nor directly with other social problems. However, they follow the agrarian populist worldview of the late 20th century, where the people knew best and the most suitable leader for the country was an ordinary person (Herkman 2019: 48–49). As such, Uuno's behavior represents this rural populism, in which criticism arises from the disappearance of traditional rural livelihoods and is, accordingly, not directly proportional to current populist movements such as Trumpism. However, it is possible to see the comedy of Turhapuro films as a way of channeling the same social anxiety that underlies other populist movements.

Politically, according to Laine (1999), Uuno seems to be closest to the Finnish Center Party (Keskusta) and the populist Finnish Rural Party (Suomen Maaseudun Puolue, SMP). This correlates with the fact that Uuno's support was most stable outside the big cities: an Uuno film every autumn kept the cinemas of small and medium-sized localities alive. Both Spede and SMP, especially its former leader Veikko Vennamo, appealed to people through populist rhetoric, which often rallied against what they presented as the treacherous monetary and cultural elite. The connections of the Uuno films to populist parties were also evident to contemporaries. Critic Jukka Penttinen writes in



the newspaper *Länsi-Savo* that the popularity of *Uuno Turhapuro herra Helsingin herra* is probably based on the suggestion that Uuno as a character successfully mirrors the feelings of the people: "Uuno rebukes both gentlemen and fools. A bit like Veikko Vennamo in the golden years of the SMP: a lot of talk and little content" (*Länsi-Savo* 27.8.1991).

A populist narrative that questions the power of the elite also appears in the two films I analyze in this article. In the 1991 film *Uuno Turhapuro, herra Helsingin herra*, Uuno works as the campaign manager for the presidential candidate Pentti Tömisevä (Pirkka-Pekka Petelius) of the Finnish political party *Vihreä liitto* (Green Alliance). Uuno's father-in-law, Mr Tuura (Tapio Hämäläinen), who is part of the country's monetary elite³, has plotted to obtain the posting for Uuno hoping he will sabotage the campaign. Tuura himself serves as the campaign manager for the prime minister (Matti Tuomi) who is also seeking the presidency. Ultimately, however, Uuno succeeds so well that after Tömisevä resigns Uuno himself is elected the President of the Republic of Finland. The next film *Uuno Turhapuro, herra tasavallan herra presidentti* continues this story and presents Uuno as the acting president. At the request of the Finnish economic elite, Tuura, who is serving as the prime minister, is working to remove Uuno from office. Their aim is to force a decision on an additional nuclear power plant and at the same time make Uuno mismanage the situation.

In *Uuno Turhapuro herra Helsingin herra* supreme power is corrupt with the inner world of the films often resembling a dystopia, where all those in power plot for their own good and money can be used to buy power. Vuorineuvos Tuura works as the political secretary of the Prime Minister, a position he has been able to achieve thanks to his considerable financial resources, which are useful in the campaign. Tuura and the Prime Minister consider it clear that the PM will become the next president, as the opposing candidate of the Green Alliance, Pentti Tömisevä, is politically inexperienced. To ensure their victory, however, Uuno is sent to work as Tömisevä's campaign manager, as they bet on him to destroy the campaign with his stupidity. Instead of failing, Uuno organizes an election tour for Tömisevä where he attends inaugurations and other similar events in which citizens also take part. His campaign slogan is Trump-like "Pentti puts politics back to normal"⁴, which contains the assumption that there is something abnormal in the conventional exercise of power. Thanks to Uuno's campaign, Tömisevä's support reaches 99% in the opinion

³ These men are addressed by Finnish honorary titles, *vuorineuvos* and *kauppaneuvos*, which are granted by the president to leading figures in industry and commerce. All Finnish titles are non-hereditary. Finland does not really have a nobility or an old power elite, and in the Uuno films, the Chamber of Commerce symbolizes evil, intrigue, and abuse of power.

⁴ "Pentti laittaa politiikan reilaan"

poll. However, he decides to give up his candidacy and the last scene of the film has Uno himself assuming the role of the president of Finland.



The Tömisevä election campaign takes place among the people. Screenshot from *Uno Turhapuro herra Helsingin herra*, 1991 (Courtesy of Spede-Team Oy)



The Tömisevä election campaign takes place among the people. Screenshot from *Uno Turhapuro herra Helsingin herra*, 1991 (Courtesy of Spede-Team Oy)

The satirical character of Tömisevä targets the Green Alliance, which was a new environmental party in the early 1990s, built on the basis of an environmental movement that opposed the drying

of the Kojjärvi bird swamp. The party won its first major election victories in the early 1990s and sparked much debate, as it did not fit into the existing right-left division and put environmental issues first. In *Uuno Turhapuro herra Helsingin herra*, even Uuno is horrified by Pentti Tömisevä's appearance which consists of the unprofessional combination of a well-worn sweater and baggy pants. He instructs Tömisevä: "A good candidate must stand out. It works best when you say yes when others say no and no when others say yes. And be funny when those others try to be important." He continues: "It is important to look decent, as only wealthy voters can afford to trust poor-looking representatives. Poor voters believe that a wealthy-looking candidate will also raise their standard of living." By using the symbols of power in his own way Uuno diminishes their significance, and thus indicates that power is essentially performative and largely based on cultural agreements.

When Uuno in *Uuno Turhapuro Suomen tasavallan herra presidentti* begins to form a new government, the list of ministers is accidentally replaced with the guest list of Uuno's birthday party. As a result, the government consists of Uuno's father, his former teacher with his wife, Uuno's hometown police officer, Tuura's former secretary, and Uuno's friends Sörsselssön and Härski-Hartikainen. Voters are very pleased, because finally the country has a government that looks like the people. A mockery is made of how ordinary people would adapt to leadership roles by showing them dressed in ordinary clothes without a "political uniform" and defending the interests of each in their own reference group. The most important means of politics, the ability to compromise, is forgotten by this crowd. In doing so, the film highlights a critique of populist politics: in the end, everyone defends the interests of their own reference group, and decisions cannot be made.



Härski-Hartikainen (Spede Pasanen) declares Uuno suitable to take on the role of king. The government is amazed. Screenshot from *Uuno Turhapuro Suomen tasavallan herra presidentti*, 1992 (Courtesy of Spede-Studio Oy)

According to media researcher Torgeir Uberg Nærland (2020: 7–10, Nærland 2016), the link between *populism* and *popular* reveals the nature of popular culture as a tool for social identification which feeds the idea of confrontation between the elite and the people that is central to populism. Nærland (2020: 7) draws from his interpretation of Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital and states that “culture is inscribed with social hierarchies and constitutes arguably the most important site for social distinction and for social boundary-making”. He continues that in Norway, for example, the right-wing populist Progressive Party (FRP) has associated itself in public with forms of culture that are considered to be of “low status”, e.g., dance-bands and caravan parks. At the heart of populism are the ‘politics of resentment’ that build on collective experiences of misrecognition. This signifies the experience of a group of people being unjustifiably highlighted as being different from the surrounding social environment. From this perspective, populism serves the basic human needs of belonging to a group. In his populist comedies, Spede takes advantage of this observation while constructing an image of himself as the creator of folk films. In particular, modern art and the alleged inability of the people to understand it act as a weapon for Spede's populist rhetoric.

In the film *Uuno Turhapuro herra Helsingin herra* Uuno and his friends notice that two million Finnish marks are missing from the state treasury. Tuura has scammed the money so that Uuno would have to resign due to the scandal. As a solution to the problem, Uuno and his friends make

contemporary art from old car scraps, bicycles, and toilet seats and sell these at a high price. The scene mocks the idea that contemporary art made from rubbish costs millions of euros and that everyone can do them. Interestingly contemporary art has been similarly represented in Finnish folk comedy from one decade to the next. As early as the film *Hei, Rillumarei!* (Lohikoski, 1954), written by Reino Helismaa, a similar scene mocks the contemporary theater and art world and has become a recurring sketch that is taken up in the film *Pekko ja poika* (Koivusalo, 1994), as well as in the 1992 Turhapuro film. The template for the scene features the protagonist and his friends turning everyday materials into works of art, which are then celebrated on the art scene – the point is to showcase these haphazard creative practices as evidence of the ridiculousness of contemporary art. Spede has maintained this confrontation by stating that Uuno films do not include anything that attempts to cater to the approval of critics and that all such sycophantic behavior is taken out of the films at the script stage. According to him, the “difference between *art* and *artsy* is that the former is born naturally, the latter is done by force” (Sihvonen 1991: 27–28). Scenes where contemporary art is commented on are clearly targeted at dada, surrealism, conceptual art, and ready-made art, such as Marcel Duchamp’s works. Such scenes include the idea that a populist or a popular cultural filmmaker enters into an agreement with viewers whereby it is okay not to like and understand ‘contemporary art’. Furthermore, as popular culture products become the building blocks of identity, viewers will be committed to buying a ticket to the next Spede movie as well. At the same time, the filmmakers maintain a visible confrontation with film critics to distinguish themselves in the ‘battles’ between high and low culture. Thus, issues related to taste are instruments of cultural power and can cause conflicts between different identity groups.

In Uuno films, this collision of tastes is emphasized by Uuno's own shaggy appearance, which stays the same despite his changing roles in society. At the same time the films repeatedly show that Uuno can follow any dress code if he wants to. The comic impression arises when Uuno’s exaggerated character appears in the midst of ‘normal’ people, who in this case are usually upper class, in leadership positions, or in otherwise recognizable job roles, such as military personnel. Uuno normally appears in the same scruffy clothes, but whenever he gains a new social status, he adds signs of that position to his attire. As president, Uuno is, of course, constantly wearing a tailcoat, because in his mind that is how high-class people behave. Uuno’s actions are based on contradictions and the exploitation of social norms. He is truly dedicated to the norms, values, and perceptions of money, sexuality, and marriage that sustain the bourgeois world, but at the same time, Uuno tests the limits of these roles by making them visible (Hietala et al. 1992: 133). Uuno shows that appearance and behavior are performative and that anyone can adopt them.

Turhapuro as a presidential parody

Uuno Turhapuro Suomen tasavallan herra presidentti continues the story of the 1991 film. Its plot is largely centred around the simple joke that Uuno *is* the president. The beginning of the film is a satire on the Finnish presidential institution, which equates Uuno Turhapuro's career with both Urho Kekkonen's long presidency (1956–1982) and Mauno Koivisto's modest and popular presidency (1982–1994). The film begins with a collage on the history of Uuno Turhapuro and his rise to president. The narrator and author of the fictional documentary is film director Jörn Donner in a cameo as "Jörkka Donner". He describes that from an early age, the president showed determination: "He spent his childhood in the countryside and thus gained permanent contact with the part of the population from where this leader would eventually rise."



Uuno Turhapuro as president, discussed by director Jörkka Donner. Screenshot from *Uuno Turhapuro Suomen tasavallan herra presidentti*, 1992 (Courtesy of Spede-Studio Oy)

The pseudo-documentary links the events of Uuno's life to the development of Finland in the 20th century: in the 1970s, like other young people, Uuno moved from his hometown to the city and had to start from scratch, with only his own wit as accompaniment. The narrator describes how Uuno prepared for his great task as a servant of the nation, and in order to get acquainted with the living conditions of the citizens, the future leader tried a wide variety of professions, from scarecrows to demanding expert tasks, chronicled with clips from earlier films. The narrator continues: "In

addition to bourgeois professions, Turhapuro practiced a few exotic professions, performing as a bullfighter, sports coach and travel guide to further expand his own worldview, as well as the radio symphony orchestra's first violinist, where he achieved world fame by performing three times at Covent Garden and twice in the Metropolitan which is a sanctuary of art."

At the same time, the pseudo-documentary presents Turhapuro as an incredibly talented athlete who has won the world championship in tennis and competed in cross-country skiing, mountain biking, and decathlon. He is described as "skillful, durable, versatile", but at the same time, an intelligent and modest leader who sacrifices himself for his people. After the end of the pseudo-documentary, the film shows Jörkka commenting on it to President Turhapuro, saying that "it is easy to produce quality when the target is good. Previous presidents have been a bit poor in a cultural sense." This is not quite true, as the real presidents of Finland have also been great cultural figures. What changed in the early 1990s, however, was the way in which presidents could be mocked in a comedy film.

There was a change in the Finnish presidential institution during Mauno Koivisto's presidency (1982–1994). Prior to that, during Urho Kekkonen's presidency (1956–1982), the media had learned to be careful. President Kekkonen had dementia and its symptoms had been covered up in public for some time. When Kekkonen finally had to go on sick leave, Koivisto became acting president. In Finland, the transformation of political entertainment coincided with President Kekkonen's sick leave in 1981. A new form of political publicity was built into television entertainment programs, the press and literature as politicians began to be seen as public figures (Pernaa & Railo 2006: 25–26). Kekkonen had served as the President of Finland for several decades, and in the early 1990s, Koivisto was only the first person to lead the country after Kekkonen. It was therefore a relatively short time since the change of power, and the presidential parody of the *Uuno* films can be viewed against this context.

Media researchers Johanna Sumiala and Lotta Lounasmeri (2016: 31–33) argue that in addition to his work, the presidency was also a role for Kekkonen, which he skillfully played. He mastered the signs of power from appearance to language and moved smoothly between different registers. Kekkonen and his supporters emphasized in the media the image of him as an outdoorsman fishing and skiing, who had kept in touch with the people. According to Sumiala and Lounasmeri, the reverse side of the power of such an authoritarian leader is that his orders should not be defied, or this would result in rage and the repressive exercise of power. The sovereignty and virtuosity of Kekkonen's media image also came through in the publicity concerning his funeral in 1985. In the

press, he was promoted to the forefront of European statesmen and his achievements in the world of culture, science, sports, and business were listed. According to Sumiala and Lounasmeri, the obituary of the leading Finnish daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* described Kekkonen's dominance as a natural, downright “psychological monarchy”. According to them, this recalls the thoughts of a king whose personality symbolizes the nation.

It is noticeable that Uuno Turhapuro's presidential parody also ends with Turhapuro crowning himself king, as the features associated with his political body have frequently been identified as descriptions of Finnishness. Therefore, on a symbolic level, the Finnish people get the kind of leader they deserve. Sumiala and Lounasmeri (2016) suggest that the post-war period dominated by Kekkonen in close proximity to the Soviet Union represented a state of emergency in Finland, a constant crisis that was boiling beneath the surface. Uuno Turhapuro's presidency and coronation as king, like Kekkonen's funeral, represents a great, ceremonial farewell. When comedy about the presidency was finally possible in the early 1990s, it was a sign of the country's changed power relations and the president's diminished symbolic power. At the same time, the satire aimed at the institutions of power, for its part, reduced that power.



Unaware of what he is about to do, Uuno performs a coronation in his castle so that the curtain acts as a cloak, the filter as a crown and the brush as a sword with wife Elizabeth as an archbishop. Here Uuno's behaviour resembles that of a playing child. Screenshots from *Uuno Turhapuro Suomen tasavallan herra presidentti*, 1992 (Courtesy of Spede-Studio Oy)

Yet, power in comedy is never permanent and the sovereign power of Turhapuro is also given away at the end of the film. When Uuno is crowned king but wants to relinquish power, he discusses this with President Manu (Ismo Kallio), a caricature of Mauno Koivisto. Manu does not agree to be king but can return as president. In reality, President Koivisto reformed the presidential institution and

gradually reduced the president's domestic political powers in the early 1990s, perhaps precisely because of Kekkonen's long reign. The pseudo-documentary featured in the 1992 *Uuno* film dispels the key myths of Kekkonen's leadership, such as the story of him as a poor man who rose from modest circumstances to become a popular leader in his country. The parody also deals with the sportiness and masculinity that has been an integral part of Kekkonen's public image. It is noteworthy that the evaluation of President Kekkonen's public image and cultural significance has only taken place in humanities research in the 21st century. Here, the Turhapuro films of the 1990s can be seen to have acted as early instances to reflect critically on it.

Conclusion

Comedy is characterized by a two-pronged system of meaning, as it always refers first to itself, that is, to comedy. At the same time, it refers outside itself, to the serious or non-comedic. According to cultural historian Rami Mähkä, comedy is a conservative type of drama, as it reinforces existing attitudes. At the same time, the short duration and freedom from realism - or the possibility of absurdism - allows comedy to take an alternative approach to things, even if it is not the final state of affairs (Mähkä 2016, 241–242). According to Laine, Uuno's undulating identity arises from the fact that he knows how to change his appearance to match his environment. When he arrives in Helsinki, goes to the opera or the army, he immediately assumes the position of a leader or a virtuoso. Therefore, it is natural that in the world of politics, Uuno immediately becomes president. Uuno's adaptation is, of course, illustrative, as he is always the same sparsely toothed, untidy Uuno - this serves as a reminder of the basic setup of Uunoland, where key attributes are work avoidance and anti-authority.

Contrary to the analyses of the 1990s, I see Uunoland as a tool for building Finland's own identity, and not so much as a manifestation of an internal Finnishness. With the help of comedy, the definitions of Finnishness were expanded and national myths related to work and, in contrast, to unemployment were addressed. Through Uuno's character, it was also possible to examine issues related to power and Kekkonen's long presidency in a way that did not threaten the balance of power in the new political situation in which Finland was situated in after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of European integration in the early 1990s. In the process of recognizing the value of popular culture as an important part of culture, the role of Uuno's character as an active character in producing Finnishness, not as passively representing or channeling it, was often

overlooked. When, according to the theory of critical populism, the analysis of a media product is combined with an examination of economic and production conditions, perhaps a more realistic picture of the character's cultural significance can be achieved. Spede aimed for financial gain with his films, because for an entrepreneur, it was a prerequisite to facilitate the production of the next film. In this, he succeeded very well, as the viewership figures at the beginning of the article show.

Uuno's rise to become a central figure in Finnish culture coincided with a change in the status of popular culture and a relaxation of the hierarchical power structure between high and low culture. This facilitated a reassessment of the importance of the populist and masculine comedy character in Finnish self-understanding. Here, national self-understanding is built on a male-dominated and male-centered popular culture that excludes many different interpretations of Finnishness and even diverse forms of masculinity. In both Finnish society and popular culture, unemployment has been seen mainly as a phenomenon affecting men. Thus it is interesting that the deep economic recession is not directly reflected in the content of the Uuno films analysed here. Only a few sketches contain direct references to the recession and the large number of unemployed. This is due to the fact that idleness permeates Uuno's character so thoroughly that emphasizing unemployment as the theme of an Uuno film would not have been appropriate.

The world of Spede and *Uunoland* are inextricably linked to the idea that the *people know better*. At the same time, they exemplify an economic model of filmmaking by a populist businessman who is interested in increasing ticket sales, and the popularity of these films is also based on the same argument. For who wouldn't want to hear they're right? Uuno is a contradictory and ambivalent figure whose collisions with the actual world reveal the features of that real world. Uuno absorbs the diverse elements of the surrounding reality and Uuno films recycle these filtered cultural elements for the use of viewers. At the same time, it is clear that Spede's commercial comedy could not take significant social issues too seriously, as that would have repelled viewers. Here we return to the idea that comedy is essentially a conservative art form, because while a comedy film can present viewers with a utopia of what a populist change of power would be, comedy cannot overturn existing power structures.

Uuno Turhapuro's imaginary presidency took place at a time when the position of popular culture in society was changing. At the same time, change was also taking place in the political environment. During the 1990s, politics became entertainment in Finland, and the 1994 presidential election has even allegedly been decided by the performance of Martti Ahtisaari (presidency 1994–2000) and

his wife Eeva Ahtisaari on the *Tuttu Juttu* (1992–2002) program, where couples competed in how well they know each other. Presidential candidate Elisabeth Rehn competed against the Ahtisaari couple with her husband Ove Rehn. In the program, Ahtisaari appeared as a jovial ordinary man who even knew how to ‘wrinkle’ Karelian pies. Since then, it has been the custom in Finland for presidential candidates to appear on political entertainment programs as part of the presidential election campaign. However, it was not until the early 1990s that Finland as a country was ready for satire directed at the presidential institution. The lengthy period of appeasement with the neighboring Soviet Union also affected the Finnish media environment, as President Kekkonen used his power to oversee what could be covered in the media, and there was international talk of ‘Finlandization’ to describe the intervention of a stronger power in the affairs of a weaker state. When the use of power in a neighboring country is abstract, the means of dismantling it are also different from, for example, the Baltic countries, which regained their independence in 1991. In Finland, the liberalization of the media is one sign of a change in era, and Uuno Turhapuro occupies a central role in these cultural politics.

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