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The Cinema of Aki  
Kaurismäki

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## The Cinema of Aki Kaurismäki – The Politics of Contradiction

During almost three decades as the *enfant terrible* of the Finnish film industry, Aki Kaurismäki's films have been heavily debated in both cinephile and academic circles. Many concepts have been evoked in association with the name Kaurismäki – Finnish cinema, art-house cinema, class politics, Marxism, gender depictions, transnationalism, the post-national, just to name a few.

Since the early projects produced in collaboration with his brother Mika [e.g. *The Worthless* (*Arvottomat*, 1982)], Aki Kaurismäki's films have become synonymous with an antagonistic stance against the stilted forms of mainstream cinema – whether this is understood as Finnish or contemporary Hollywood cinema. From his 1983 adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* to the Leningrad Cowboys films; from the 'underground' cinema of *Calamari Union* (1985) to the prestige connotations of the Cannes Grand Prix – winner *The Man Without a Past* (*Mies vailla menneisyyttä*, 2002), Kaurismäki's films gesture towards multiple directions: they are simultaneously national and international; they deal with Finnish national myths alongside the globalisation of national culture; the films blur the distinctions between high culture and low culture both in terms of thematics and aesthetics; they circulate the globe both in commercial and festival releases, gaining widely discrepant critical and commercial reception.

As the concept of national culture is facing increasing challenges in the face of the complex processes of increasing transnational flow of culture and people and the economic and geo-political effects of globalisation, it would be problematic to persist with strict, traditional definitions of national identity and culture. As many cultural historians have suggested, Kaurismäki's films deal with Finnish cultural history in a way that complicates the understanding of them as the products of a traditional homogeneous national culture. Instead, they gesture towards the multiple directions in which national cultural history is conceived 'intranationally' (Koivunen, 2005) or they deal with the transnational interconnectivity of cultural Finnishness (Nestingen, 2002).

Underlying these views is the understanding that Kaurismäki's films are part of the complex negotiation and metamorphosis of national cultures and identities in the wake of globalisation. But it would also be clearly counter-productive to argue that the 'national' is facing total extinction. As several recent studies have shown (for example, Hedetoft and Hjort, 2003, Nestingen and Elkington, 2005), the national remains an essential facet of contemporary identity formations, though the content and cultural status of national identities are undoubtedly going through constant metamorphosis. Kaurismäki's films function in both ways – as a set of challenges to traditional conceptions of national identity; and as instances of this metamorphosis.

This collection of articles provides five critical perspectives on Kaurismäki's cinematic work. The articles are organised in a loosely chronological order to get a sense of not only the procession of Kaurismäki's career, but also how his films deal with the socio-economic and geo-political changes affecting Finnish culture and identity. By and large, the contributors see Kaurismäki's films as dealing with a set of cultural elements conventionally accepted as Finnish, but none of the contributors takes the cultural constitution of these elements for granted. Instead, they situate these elements into Kaurismäki's complex, multi-levelled plays with cultural meanings, where the analytical focus moves beyond the reproduction of national identity to questioning this very process.

Andrew Nestingen examines the discontinuities and contradictions of the films as well as the public discourses that surround Kaurismäki's auteurist persona. He suggests Kaurismäki's films create what he terms 'contrarian cinema' – that is, cinema that cannot be clearly or comfortably equated into any tradition, but which instead consists of ambivalent structures and contradictory meanings. Nestingen's approach provides a key intervention into 'Kaurismäki-studies' by providing a model and a set of incisive terminology that can allow us to think beyond strict dichotomies and categorisations and attempt to navigate through the multivalent structures of these films. The article establishes the critical basis and impetus for the articles in this collection in many ways.

Paul Newland examines the spatial representation of London in Kaurismäki's *I Hired a Contract Killer*. He sees the film as exhibiting a liminal sensibility, which reflects the metamorphosis of society in the face of the challenges brought on by the multi-faceted effects of late capitalism and globalisation. The film's depiction of London functions, according to Newland, simultaneously in terms of 'place and displacement' – an approach which gestures towards the uncertain and fluctuating life-styles of people situated at the margins of contemporary society and at the heart of social change. In creating this contradictory liminality, the film plays with a wide range of cultural issues (including cinematic intertextuality), which provides the film with a means to negotiate for socio-cultural stability.



Pietari Kääpä's article examines the relationship between Aki Kaurismäki's Leningrad Cowboys trilogy and Finland's geo-political metamorphosis during the late 1980s and early 90s. The nation's geo-political and cultural history and especially her relationship with the neighbouring Soviet Union are metaphorically and even directly explored in these films. Kääpä suggests that these films illuminate the complexities involved in the geo-political negotiations of Finland during this uncertain era. The narrative and aesthetic choices of the films instigate a politicised re-negotiation of Finland's cultural constitution under the changing geo-political situation of Europe and gesture towards new ways of understanding the role of national identity in contemporary Europe.

*Drifting Clouds* (*Kauas pilvet karkaavat*, 1996) and *The Man Without a Past* (*Mies vailla menneisyyttä*, 2002) are the focus of Kaisa Toivonen's article. She examines the issues that arise out of Kaurismäki's depictions of working class Finnish males and the ways their bodies act as sites of contestation for the films' class and identity politics. The intersections of Finnish masculinity and working class communality function, suggests Toivonen, as sites of re-negotiation of individual self-worth and identity, even in the face of the social flux generated by neo-liberalist processes of socio-economic reformation. Through these re-negotiations, Kaurismäki is able to give a glimmer of hope that penetrates the gloom of the cinematic world.

Sanna Peden examines the intertwined discourses of identity and the nation in her article on *The Man Without a Past*. The contrasts between the roles of the Salvation Army and religion, on one hand, and the secular society and national history on the other, awakens a set of negotiations that sees the role of the nation improve from a marginal concern to a primary role. This, she suggests, functions as an instance of 'national convalescence'. This is in sharp contrast to the antagonism of many of Kaurismäki's previous films – which often famously conclude with the protagonists leaving the confines of Finland. This suggests fundamental changes in the imaginaries of the socially marginalized protagonists (and by extension Kaurismäki). The reaffirmed role of the secular nation, effectively, indicates the need to adapt to the changing socio-historical conditions in the face of the challenges of globalisation.

Through such critical perspectives, the contributors indicate a wide variety of ways in which Kaurismäki's cinema is symptomatic of post-modern, globalising culture. From this perspective, it is thoroughly impossible to conceive of the process of cultural production as a reflection of traditional or homogeneous national culture. Rather, the focus becomes the films' politics of contradiction – the multiple, contradictory directions in which Kaurismäki's cinema gestures.

Pietari Kääpä

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