

WiderScreen.fi 2/2007

8.10.2007

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The Politics of National Identity in Aki Kaurismäki's Leningrad Cowboys Trilogy

Aki Kaurismäki's *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (1989), was the first of several films following *The Leningrad Cowboys*, a band performing an eclectic fusion of rock and folk music. This article will focus on the three feature-length films by Aki Kaurismäki, *Leningrad Cowboys Go America*, *Total Balalaika Show* (1994) and *Leningrad Cowboys Meet Moses* (1994). The *Leningrad Cowboys* films chronicle a state where changes in the cultural contexts of the protagonists necessitate adaptation and attempts at integration. It is these multi-cultural identity negotiations that form the analytical core of this article. This trilogy will be read against the metamorphosis of Finnish identity in the light of the fall of the Soviet Union and Finland's subsequent EU accession, an approach designed to tease out the sometimes extremely antagonistic, sometimes highly sarcastic political content of this trilogy.

Leningrad Cowboys Go America – negotiating a geo-political Finnish identity

The geo-political spectre of the Soviet Union is one of the primary determining factors in the self-conception of Finland and Finnish identity. Kaurismäki's *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* is the first of his films to explicitly tackle this delicate relationship. The film was produced at a time when this relationship was going through fundamental changes resulting from the Soviet Union's official acknowledgment of Finland's neutrality and Finland's membership of the EEC, both in 1989. It is this geo-political liberalisation that allows Kaurismäki to create his humorous depictions of the intertwined nature of the Finnish and the Soviet cultural imaginaries, where nothing in the film should be taken at face value. In effect, the film ought to not be interpreted as a realistic depiction of Finnish-Soviet relations, but as a multi-levelled text providing us a glimpse of the complexities involved in negotiating contemporary Finnish identity at the end of the 1980s.

Leningrad Cowboys Go America opens with a caption setting the scene – "*Somewhere in Tundra...in no man's land*" – with the starkness of the text underscored by the sound of howling wind. The first shot is of a forbidding, empty landscape of frozen, abandoned fields, punctuated only by collapsed barns and abandoned tractors. While this suggests the Siberian tundras, the use of the landscape can also be read as alluding to the 'ethno-symbolic' landscape depictions seen in the more traditional Finnish films (1) – the scenes were, indeed, shot in Finland. Peter Von Bagh has interpreted the faux-Siberian landscape as a more or less "*atmospherically accurate and movingly correct*" depiction of Finland, emphasising a "*downbeat, backwards combination of misery drenched in national self-pity*" (Von Bagh, 2006, 103). But whereas in the more traditional Finnish films, the landscape would be captured in either summery hues or deep winter, the landscape of the film inhabits a sort of liminal visuality between these poles.

Having provided a decidedly different interpretation of traditional Finnish landscape iconography, the film introduces us to world's worst rock'n'roll band, the Leningrad Cowboys. We first see them performing the traditional Russian melody *The Cossack Song* in a barn. The Cowboys' appearance is a bizarre combination of fur-clad hermeticism and eccentric, over-accentuated rockabilly style, highlighted by the excessively lengthy shoe-tips and extended quiffs. The presence of these musicians in the 'Finnish-Siberian' landscape draws our attention to Finland's complicated past with the Soviet Union, but also connotes a cultural symbiosis that would be seen as somewhat disturbing in the Finland at the end of the 1980s due to its implications of Soviet dominance over the geo-political space of Finland. These are early examples in which the film's representation should not be taken at face value as either Siberian or Finnish, but as a more complex metaphor for Finland's historical relationship with the Soviet Union. Throughout the film, Kaurismäki can be seen as playing with 'proximity and distance', as Anu Koivunen has termed the approach:

"On the other hand, historical references and nostalgic music invite a Finnish viewer into a feeling of familiarity and closeness. On the other hand, the comic, ironic and violent tones of the narration create a distance, blocking or hindering rather than encouraging national sentiments and nostalgic pleasures" (Koivunen, 2005, 134, 144).

The surreal tone of the film is maintained as we are introduced to the band's manager Vladimir, staring directly at the camera. Vladimir's unusual introduction calls attention to itself and breaks the already fragile illusion of cinematic realism, calling us to question the representational aims of the film. This type of playful self-awareness permeates the whole film both in terms of the typically caricatured dialogue of Kaurismäki's films and the constant use of out-of-place devices designed to rupture the historical and cultural continuity of the film (2). Continuing along these playful lines, the local promoter comments on the band's performance in dismissive terms – 'it is shit, no commercial potential' – and recommends the

band move to America as 'they will swallow anything there'. As the promoter drives off, Vladimir is seen making a call from a phone booth attached to a barn wall. Vladimir convinces the American promoter on the other end of the line to book the Cowboys for a tour of America as 'they are good American boys, only their name is Russian'. Vladimir's heavily emphasised, overtly caricatured Fenno-Russian accent, the telephone's location and the American manager's unquestioning acceptance of the band's merits confirms the surreal tone of the film, where none of the cultural connotations of the film should be taken at face value, but understood as the complex, ambivalent ideas they are.

The surreal tone continues as the Cowboys travel on tractors and on foot across the frozen plain accompanied by nostalgic accordion music. The contrast between the frozen agrarian landscape, the connotations of Siberia, the Cowboys' peculiar mode of travel and their discordant appearance creates an ironic impression of Finnish society, negotiating between a disappearing traditional culture and its modernising image as a 'global Finland'. The band pull into a traditional rural village, inhabited by an all-male population of Cowboys, where even babies come equipped with boots and quiffs. The traditional village setting contrasts with some of the visual signifiers of modernity such as the above-mentioned phone booth, the tractors, and the Cowboys' appearance. The Cowboys' transnational appearance, combining elements of Soviet and American culture, gains a new layer of meaning as it transpires that Abraham Lincoln was the grandfather of the Cowboy-clan – his picture, complete with a quiff, hangs on the wall of the house of one of the Cowboys.

The juxtaposition of these numerous ordinarily out-of-place elements in singular narrative collages gestures towards a multi-levelled impression of a globalising Finland. The film's imagery needs to be understood in 'transvergent' terms. Architectural theorist Marcos Novak describes transvergence in opposition to convergence and divergence, which, in his view indicate "*epistemologies of continuity and consistency*" (Novak, 2002). Transvergence, on the other hand, implies 'incompleteness' and the formation of something we cannot yet decipher. Following Novak, I use the concept of 'transvergence' to imply a sense of the as-yet-formed, where cultures and identities are in a constant process of change and reformation. These instances hint at a number of different ironic cultural conceptions of Finland's transnational connectivity, both in their assertion of Finland as a major influence on American culture through the rockabilly Abraham Lincoln and the evocations of Finland's delicate ties with the Soviet Union.

In creating these conceptually multi-faceted ideas, the film suggests the ways in which the Finnish cultural imaginary is shaped in relation to transnational cultural flow and geo-political influence of these two countries. Even on the eve of Finland's accession to the European Union in 1994, Peter Von Bagh saw this as one of the key factors of *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* as it "*seems like a journey through the Finnish soulscape: it mixes the iconography, signs and mythology of two superpowers in a virtuoso manner, and in between these two we live our lives, whether we want it or not*" (Von Bagh, 1994). While the film identifies the Cowboys as residents of Siberia and attributes them with some clearly delineated Russian characteristics, it is more productive to interpret these characters as embodying a conception of Finland as caught between the geo-political and cultural spheres of the East and the West – truly a melding of the connotations of 'Leningrad' and 'cowboy'.

Whilst this examination of the Finnish mindscape is a significant part of the film, the narrative of the film also gestures towards more complex trans- and post-national conceptions of identity as the Cowboys travel to America in hopes of finding cultural acceptance for their constantly out of sync identities (3). The optimistic ease with which the Cowboys depart from their pseudo-Finland reflects contemporary debates about Finnish national identity emerging out of the shadow of Soviet Union-dictated control and the feelings of confidence prevalent in Finnish politics in the wake of Gorbachev's Glasnost policies. The Cowboys learn the English language and American cultural customs on the plane in order to disguise themselves as an American band, but their cultural appearance remains remarkably distinctive in the American cultural landscape.

We first witness the Cowboys walking down the streets of New York, but instead of focusing on well-known New York locations, the Cowboys journey through a city filled with banal buildings and unglamorous shop-fronts. In line with the Kaurismäkian transvergent audio-visual collages, the sound of the howling wind from the 'Fenno-Siberian' plains accompanies the Cowboys wherever they go, signifying a lack of connection with whatever cultural context they inhabit. The presence of The Cowboys in the frame creates a set of metonymic associations connected to their culturally multi-faceted appearance and their cultural origins. The metonymic assertions are here connected precisely with the idea of the Cowboys as a reflection of the roughly characterised Finnish mindscape, where they stand for the cultural puzzlement facing such identities in the face of the actuality of the American way of life. When they first play a 1960s pop-style version of *Säkijärven Polkka* for an American agent, they are told to go to Mexico to play in a wedding since, according to the agent, 'here in America we have something different – it's called rock'n'roll'. The Cowboys' optimism is deflated as they are unable to transcend the cultural ties that still bind them and are met with either puzzlement or hostility.

Upon taking to the road, the Cowboys find themselves having to negotiate a series of complex cultural problems, of diluting their nationally specific cultural expression in favour of commercialised performances appropriate for whatever cultural location they may be visiting at the time. Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli suggest that "*in terms of belonging to any culture, they are neither real cowboys nor real Americans, neither 'here nor there', they are model vagabonds*" (Mazierska and Rascaroli, 2006, 24). The above captures the Cowboys'



liminal cultural status quite succinctly, but the Cowboys also metonymically embody the changing Finnish identity of the late 1980s. Despite the Cowboys' change of location in the pursuit of the American dream, their original identities still haunt them.

For example, they perform a version of *Rock'n'Roll is Here to Stay* in a downtrodden bar in Memphis, where they attempt to play up their heightened rockabilly identities and their bizarre approximation of Elvis' performance style, but the audience can't get past their appearance and admittedly bizarre fusion of rock and folk. Even though they are willing to negate their original identity through immersion in American forms of culture, beginning with taking up English and continuing with their attempts to emulate local forms of rock music, they remain too attached to both their original cultural identities and cultural conceptions of what American life is and in turn are associated with a decidedly incompatible forms of foreignness by the host culture.

Even when they attempt to acknowledge their marginalisation, the result is a ridiculous out of plateness. One of the Cowboys even spends most of their money in buying a ridiculously accentuated orange cowboy outfit, which meets the scorn of the rest of the band. In a revealing collage of cultural influences, the orange clothes of the fallen cowboy contrast with the Jack Daniels-drinking rest of the band, their Cadillac and the backdrop of small-town America littered with mediated images of the American dream such as Marlboro advertisements. The transvergent image captures the multi-levelled discourses that the Cowboys take part in – we can see the irresponsible striving for commercialism in the Cowboy who spent all the money, the rest of the Cowboys struggling-to-adapt, persistently holding on to their original identities, the hopelessly unsuited Cadillac signifying the unsuitable American way of life and the backdrop of a disillusioned American dream. Everywhere they go, they find only momentary identification and acceptance, before they are rejected by their host cultures for being too alien.

The Cowboys have a further problem in their constantly exploitative manager Vladimir. There is an obvious sense of class criticism taking place here, with Vladimir equated with the exploitative bourgeois who live off the work of the proletariat. According to Aki Kaurismäki, Vladimir is "*the Gulag, the orchestra are peasants and [Igor]...is a land slave*" (Connah, 1991). With the inclusion of class criticism into the film's examination of cultural difference, the film's approach extends not only to the difficulties of cultural interaction between people from different national backgrounds, but also to the ways in which class structures instigate such divisions. This criticism becomes particularly explicit when the Cowboys have a funeral procession in New Orleans for their dead band member. The scene becomes an ironic reflection of a typical New Orleans 'jazz funeral' with the Cowboys parading down the middle of the streets of a visibly poor neighbourhood. Eventually, a number of local people join the Cowboys in their procession, bringing a further dimension of irony to the proceedings and equating the Cowboys with the underclasses of these shanty-towns. A number of contrasting aural and visual elements coalesce in the scene: Vladimir, the exploitative bourgeois leading the procession, the proletarian under-class Cowboys performing as a brass band, the Cadillac symbolising American wealth and the background of urban poverty. To make the desperate nature of the Cowboys' desire to integrate even more concrete, they are soon arrested by the local police.

Instead of finding the Promised Land, what the Cowboys find instead is a place not much different from the place which they departed – a bleak, backwater locale teeming with class divisions and social inequalities. Multiple scenes of the band travelling through a flat landscape filled with factories, incongruous buildings, empty shops and sordid roadside cafes reveal the American dream as unattainable for these post-national liminals (4). In a similar manner to the way in which Aki Kaurismäki's Finnish-set films unravelled the discourses and imagery of the cultural nation, *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* deconstructs the idea of America as a melting pot and shows the nation in all its social divisions and exclusions. Several myths constantly recycled by the culture industry are shattered through this marginal view: a mediated image of a vibrant Wild West culture is revealed as a fabrication or a thing of the past as all that is left are either empty, dry landscapes or dilapidated or barely functioning industrialised farms. The contemporary American heartlands are revealed as enclosed cultural spheres with little room for open-mindedness.

It is only after the Cowboys meet their long-lost cousin, who had fallen into the Gulf Stream and was carried off to America, that they establish a connection with local forms of culture. Cousin Cowboy volunteers to be the singer of the band and leads them in a rousing performance of *Born to be Wild* in a biker bar, after the Cowboys' Finnish song *Kuka Mitä Häh* (Who What Huh) fails to engage the audience. It is only a cultural 'insider-outsider' that can cross the cultural barrier, as he both remains identifiably a Cowboy, and transcends their strict appearance through the bandanna he wears around his quiff. During the performance of *Born to be Wild*, another transvergent image is created as the mundane décor of a typical drinking establishment and the biker audience is contrasted with the accentuated rockabilly appearance of the cowboys, their unusual instruments (including an accordion) and Cousin Cowboy's melding of the over-the-top rockabilly aesthetics with the more appropriate biker image.

The Cowboys find another space of stability as they reach a village on the border between America and Mexico where they are welcomed to perform at a wedding. The cultural displacement is less evident here as the dominant idioms of American rock music have changed into local 'folk' customs similar to the Cowboys' original escapades in Siberia. The cultural exchange in this context involves the Cowboys backing a Mexican singer in the song *Desconsolado* and is so successful that it manages to revive the Cowboys' dead bassist with



the help of some tequila. The balance of cultural interaction is even enough to persuade Vladimir to abandon his tyranny over the 'working classes', and leave for the desert. But before leaving, he engages in one last surreal instance of cultural stereotyping – he pours a shot of tequila straight from a Jägermeister tap in a cactus tree. This short gag brings into focus the extent to which the cultural harmony found in Mexico is a matter of cultural simplification. Instead of any detailed or realistic examination of the socio-economic conditions prevalent in Mexico, the film plays with stereotyped cultural associations. The Cowboys – an amalgamation of a variety of stereotypes – find solace in a local village populated by stereotypes of Mexicaness and, of course, tequila.

Through this stereotyping, the Mexican village becomes a Kaurismäkian 'dis-place', similar to the Helsinki of Aki Kaurismäki's Finnish-set films. In short, what is relevant about the depiction is not an adherence to portraying these cultural spaces in realistic terms, but the ways this portrayal plays with cultural ambivalence. The film suggests that the only way to find stability for such marginal identities as the Cowboys is to find a marginal stereotypia befitting their problematic status, a suitably fantasised place where they can live out their liminal condition.. The complexities of multi-cultural interaction still remain a mystery for the Cowboys and they can only sink back to the oblivion they left.

The transvergent realism of *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* manages to capture something of the aura of cultural uncertainty in Finland at the end of the 1980s. The prevalence of American cultural and political influence in the Finnish cultural imaginary via the circulation of popular media forms sharp contrasts with the waning political influence of the Soviet Union not only through the image of the Leningrad Cowboys but also in their expectations of America. But as the Cowboys discover, the reality of the American way of life is quite different from the projected images of prosperity and glamour. This is a part of the larger modus operandi adopted by Aki Kaurismäki to explain the effects of globalisation and the transnational movements of national subjects. The film continues to explore the theme of leaving featured prominently in the conclusions of Kaurismäki's Finnish-set films. But crucially, transnational travel and multi-cultural adaptation are portrayed in a very pessimistic light, suggesting that the socio-economic conditions contributing to the marginalisation of the protagonists are not merely relegated to Finland but are found in other national contexts as well.

***Total Balalaika Show* – negotiating the (inter)national past**

Total Balalaika Show, the historic concert by the Leningrad Cowboys and The Aleksandrov Red Army Ensemble, took place in June 1993 at the Senate Square in Helsinki. While Kaurismäki's film of the event is a straight-forward music documentary, it provides an important historical link between the first and the last of the Leningrad Cowboys films – specifically the changing geo-political relationship with the former Soviet Union and the recent developments between Finland and the European Union. While *Total Balalaika Show* – the film and the event – do not strictly coincide with the worlds of the fictional films, they still function as an important stepping stone in Aki Kaurismäki's continued depiction of these changes.

Total Balalaika Show, as *Leningrad Cowboys Go America*, chronicles a contemporary conception of the Finnish mindscape coming to terms with its liminal position between the cultural influences of American and Soviet culture. In Aki Kaurismäki's words, "*The Winter War and The Continuation War came to a resolution in Senate Square*" (Kaurismäki in Von Bagh, 2006, 117). There is the sense in *Total Balalaika Show* that what was once a delicate political balance can now be treated as ironic spectacle as rock-versions of *The Volga Boatmen* and *The Cossack Song* intermingle with *Gimme All Your Lovin'* and *Sweet Home Alabama*, albeit now with choral and brass accompaniment.

Whilst the juxtaposition of the crude stereotypes of the East and the West in what had been a liminal space between them during the Cold War – Finland – has international resonance as a sign of the metamorphosis of the old balances of power, it is also worth considering the specific role of Finland in these cultural collages. While the concert does take place in Finland and features Finnish performers and an audience comprised mostly of Finns, it is worth asking what type of Finnishness are witnessing on screen? Whilst the show starts off with a choral version of Jean Sibelius' *Finlandia*, the rest of the songs consist of re-workings of Soviet, French and American classics. The appearance of the Leningrad Cowboys, more than ever, gestures towards multiple directions. Contrasted against the Red Army Choir, the Cowboys' mixture of uniforms decorated with excessive amounts of medals and the quiffs and boots, creates a collage that moves beyond simple indications of cultural and political harmony – even the majority of their instruments are shaped like farm tools and tractors, gesturing both towards centralised agrarian planning of the communist era and Finland's rural past.

When taken in tandem with the fake palm trees suggestive of California decorating the edges of the stage, it is necessary to interpret these cultural collages in transvergent terms, where these collages tell us of the metamorphosing relations between America and the Soviet Union from a specifically Finnish perspective. This is not, of course, an actual convergence of the two historical superpowers, but rather a utopian interpretation of it from a Finnish perspective. It is the end to the Cold War as interpreted from the position of Finland, a transcendence of Finland's role as the battleground between these two entities. It suggests the conclusion to the process started in 1975 with the historic OCSE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) meeting in Helsinki. While the idea of *Total Balalaika Show* as the conclusion to the



political animosity between these two powers is hopelessly optimistic, it is nevertheless a major indicator of the changes in geo-political conceptions of Finland.

Whilst the show is focused on playing out its version of the end to the animosities of the Cold War, Finnishness is relegated to a bystander position – Finnishness is only an auxiliary reminder in this multi-cultural collage. Even Kirsi Tykkyläinen, the head of international distribution of the Finnish Film Foundation, performs *Padam Padam* in French. Finns are relegated to the position of spectators, witnessing this spectacle but being able to have very little influence within these wider geo-political manoeuvrings. Sociologist Timo Cantell has suggested that had the Finnish audience been willing, it could have treated the event as *"a 'victory' over the great neighbour in a much more negative sense"* (Cantell, 1995, 196). But in Kaurismäki's depiction this idea barely, if at all, comes through. The only Finns that can partake in the proceedings have transcended the linguistic and cultural confines of traditional Finnishness and now model themselves after an amalgamation of Soviet and American culture and communicate in French or English.

The show's suggestions of the dilution of Finnish culture and identity are also connected to a more contemporary argument regarding Finland's geopolitical position in Europe. Kaurismäki at times cuts to wide shots of the concert place, revealing us the full visual spectacle of the setting in the Senate Square. To transform a place associated with the political functions of the Finnish state into a carnivalesque meeting place for a symbol of the now-extinct Soviet Union and the pastiche appearance of the Leningrad Cowboys signifies the constantly changing ideological context of post-communist Europe. In Peter Von Bagh's words: *"The concert told of the real Europe beyond parody and sincerity at a moment, when official rhetorics had reached the point of zero. 'Shared Europeaness' meant banality, spiritual migration work and official bureaucratic language, and the paradoxes and facts of the Cold War were still instinctively near"* (Von Bagh, 2006, 117).

The space of the concert becomes a heterotopic space that still exists within the confines of the contemporary Finnish nation, but has in this instance become a space to enunciate a critical concern over the compromised role of contemporary Finland in the midst of the geo-political re-arrangement of Europe, in the midst of fears over shared European 'banality'. In the world of the film, the Cold War may have been resolved, but in the transvergent collages of the film, the film seems to be suggesting that unification with EU could mean a new threat to the idea of a politically and culturally sovereign Finland. Finns themselves can only take part in this performance as spectators in the supra-national theatre of the EU.

The concert provided *"the possibility to inspect the past, assess the contemporary moment, and simultaneously generate a picture of how to deal with the future"* (Cantell, 1995, 197). While Cantell suggests a more ambivalent conception of Finland negotiating for its position within a globalising world, Kaurismäki's statements and the Cowboys sequel to follow indicate that there is some truth in these suggestions of political animosity towards the upcoming EU accession. The film ends with a close-up of a statue of Lenin's head, a reminder of Finland's convoluted past and the discourses involved in depicting contemporary Finland's relationship with her past, and her current negotiations for an identity that both acknowledges this past and transcends it to find a way to express it in contemporary Europe without becoming lost in the perceived supranationalism of the EU. Ultimately, *Total Balalaika Show* depicts a metaphoric approximation of the nation coming to terms with its past with the Soviet Union, only to find a new set of challenges in the EU.

***Leningrad Cowboys Meet Moses* – a prophecy of marginalisation in the European Union**

During the years preceding the Finnish public referendum on EU-unification in October 1994 and the actual unification in January 1995, the issue was the topic of heated debate both in the parliament and in public circles. The fears over the European Union were often based on relinquishing control of the socio-economic and political functions of the state to a supranational body. The Finnish welfare state, though not in a perfect condition by any means, would also be integrated into the wider political structures, in the process raising debates over the loss of national identity and socio-economic sovereignty.

Whereas the socio-politics of the Finnish nation were a pertinent target for Aki Kaurismäki's films during the 1980s, in the context of a Europe moving ever more closer to a supranational constellation based on open markets and supranational governance, a new critical approach is needed. This argument takes the form of a vehemently ironic critical depiction of unifying Europe as a neo-liberalist conglomerate entity impeding on the welfare of the peoples on the margins of barely surviving nations. *Leningrad Cowboys Meet Moses* was Kaurismäki's *"personal farewell to Europe"* (Kaurismäki in Von Bagh, 2006, 111). As with Kaurismäki's conception of the Lost Finland, the conception of 'Europe' is a similarly subjective one – a fantasised, over-emphasised cultural space constructed for the purposes of conveying a specific argument.

Leningrad Cowboys Meet Moses begins where we last left the Cowboys in Mexico. Having found artistic success locally, the Cowboys have succumbed to the destructive vice of tequila. Whilst the majority of the Cowboys have perished, the five ones left have become thoroughly localised, albeit in very stereotypical conception of Mexicaness – they speak only Spanish (or a variation of English that is littered with Spanish), have grown humongous moustaches to accompany their quiffs which have now been integrated into their overtly-colourful cowboy outfits. As with the previous film's play on heightened cultural stereotypes, the cultural



negotiations presented in these early faux-Mexican scenes do not strive for cultural authenticity, instead depicting a rather simplified idea of the cultural negotiations involved in immigration and cultural adaptation. But the Cowboys' ridiculous faux-Mexicaness suggests that attempts at cultural adaptation relying on stereotypes can never completely successful and ends up only being a surface-based similarity.

This simplistic form of cultural adaptation also functions as a means of alienation. Having been summoned by Vladimir, now reincarnated as Moses, the Cowboys journey to Coney Island, where they perform a Latin version of *Rosita* for a group of Russian immigrants. The audience remains non-plussed over the performance as the ill-fitting harmonies and the Cowboys' disjunctive appearance negates both the Latin and the Fenno-Russian cultural elements resulting only in cultural mush. In attempting to adapt to the different cultural contexts their identities have lost their cultural specificity and they have become thoroughly liminal. Already here in the opening moments of the film, statements about the effects of supra-nationalised culture are being made. Whereas *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* focused on the negotiation of Finnish identity in a post-communist Europe, and the optimism of emigration, *Moses* is about disillusionment and the return journey. Whereas the first film was about optimism in a Europe opening its political borders, the follow-up is precisely about pessimism of the same event. After discovering the cultural prejudices that dominate world-wide, the Cowboys are filled with deflation.

Vladimir/Moses promises to take the Cowboys to the Promised Land to meet the Golden Calf and rescue them from the cultural flux surrounding them. As is the case with many of Kaurismäki's films, physical laws are suspended as the Cowboys sail to Europe in a small sailboat. On the beaches of Normandy, they meet a band of their cousins who are dressed in military uniforms, but whose boots and quiffs identify them as Cowboys. As the Cowboys travel through integrating Europe, they find that place after place looks identical in composure, and ultimately not very different from the bars they were rejected from on American soil.

The film gives us a snapshot tour of several of the founding nations of the European Union, primarily France and Germany. But as was the case with America, instead of witnessing famous cultural landmarks, the Cowboys only seem to find nameless roadside cafes and gas stations. In this persistent absence of identifiable places, the film is providing us with a picture of Europe as a homogenised bland space where hostility or indifference dominate. The Cowboys try to earn a living by performing in these cafes, but everywhere their difference is a hindrance. To further complicate matters, the original Cowboys are still in their Mexican outfits and unable to even try to accommodate their musical stylings to the local customs – everything they try to play comes out in a discordant fashion. The transvergent imagery of the film captures this liminality as, for example, the Cowboys perform outside Warsaw station in pouring rain in order to survive acts as a poignant reminder of their hopeless outsidership – a prophecy of the emergent condition of the liminals of unifying Europe.

In a similar way as Kaurismäki's Finnish-set films criticised the socio-economic conditions of 1980s Finland, *Moses* takes aim at the Finland opening both its economic and cultural spheres to the supranational influences of EU. Peter Von Bagh saw the film as reflecting Aki Kaurismäki's personal antagonism to what was taking place in Europe – as "*a severe depiction of the margins and peripheries of unifying Europe*" (Von Bagh, 2006, 112). The film's use of English as its predominant language is a part of this negative depiction, imagining the EU as a homogeneous entity, where everyone is forced to adapt its lingua franca. The Cowboys are also metonymically connected to the larger anti-EU debates in Finland preceding the referendum vote in the fall of 1994. Their presence gestures towards the wider issues revolving around the prospect of the supranational demolition of the welfare functions of the Finnish state and especially the endangerment of the state's crucial support for the rural areas and agrarian farming. The Cowboys' only means of survival is from their meagre lives as farmers and the state support as they certainly cannot find any means of sustenance in the film's interpretation of a homogeneous, unifying Western Europe. The Europe the Cowboys travel through is truly a "*spiritual desert*" (Ylänen, 1994) – to which mainstream Finland now belongs.

In a final antagonistic sting, the film concludes with the band finally reaching their beloved homeland, 'Fenno-Russia'. The idea of Russia has two functions here, both which function antagonistically against the idea of European unification. First, the Russia of the film can be seen as a continuation of the *Leningrad Cowboys* trilogy's conflation of Finland and Russia into a reflection of the idyllic Lost Finland of Aki Kaurismäki's films. Second, Russia here functions as a wider metaphor for what is seemingly a turn to the nation. Accordingly, the depiction of Fenno-Russia relies extensively on glamorised ethno-symbolic images of wide landscapes and deep forests, truly the Promised Land. This abrupt statement takes a doubly antagonistic meaning when one considers the extent to which Finland's unification with the EU was a direct result of a defence mechanism against the geo-political threat still posed by Russia – indeed, Vilho Harle and Sami Moisio suggest that this was the main reason behind Finland's unification (Moisio and Harle, 2000). Vladimir, the capitalist exploiter, remains behind in the European Community as, according to him, "*The holy book says that Moses never made it to the promised land, That's why I have to go back to the European Community*".

The conclusion of the film is seeped in irony. The Cowboys end up travelling back to a Russia on the brink of catastrophe, whilst Vladimir the capitalist deceptively joins the European Union to reap the benefits of its neo-liberalist open-market policies. He has no passport and is free to manoeuvre as he wills, whereas the Cowboys fool-heartedly give their last possessions to the 'golden calf'. But as is the case with Aki Kaurismäki's films, this turn can not be taken at face value. Whilst the conclusion seemingly celebrates national harmony over the supra-



national flux, it is a thoroughly fantasised image, a promise of a utopia that has never existed and probably never will. Both the fake deity and the promise of ethno-symbolic harmony envisioned in the final shots of the film indicate deep scepticism towards economic or cultural survival in the midst of the EU.

Conclusion

On the eve of Finland's EU-accession, President Martti Ahtisaari clearly demonstrated his preference for the EU against the 'unsuitable' East: "*To what group do we want to belong? Which values do we want to promote? How do we want Europe to develop? In what kind of Finland do we want to live in the upcoming few decades?*" (Ahtisaari quoted in *ibid*, 168). Aki Kaurismäki's sardonic answers are clear – anywhere but in the present conception of the EU. Accordingly, Kaurismäki's nostalgia for the Lost Finland still embroidered under the geo-political veil of the Soviet Union continues his theme of animosity against mainstream directions in Finnish politics, which, at least on the surface, seem to be in favour of neo-liberalist, individualistic ideas.

The Leningrad Cowboys trilogy, then, examines the geo-political negotiations necessary in maintaining a sense of Finland and Finnish identity. Instead of offering a simplistic 'turn to the nation' as the preferable answer, these films try to negotiate between the impulses of nationalism and supranationalism and come to a hopelessly dystopian set of predictions for the possibility of survival for the marginalised protagonists of the films. Neither the melting pot of America or the supranationalism of the EU offer any hope of integration, the option available is a return to the ethno-symbolic nation. But what if that entity has long since evaporated or actually never existed in these geo-political negotiations, and all that is left are fantasised memories?

Pietari Kääpä

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Notes

1. For more on the relationship between ethno-symbolic cultural production and cinema, see Smith, 2000. [\[back\]](#)

2. See Nestingen, 2007, for more on Kaurismäki's contradictory and multi-levelled cinematic games. [\[back\]](#)

3. Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort's introduction to their edited collection, *The Postnational Self*, 2003, deals with many of these debates in a riveting manner. [\[back\]](#)

4. See Kääpä, 2006, for more on the 'post-national' cinema of Aki and Mika Kaurismäki. [\[back\]](#)

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ISSN 1795-6161

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