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[\[takaisin\]](#)Soup, soap and national  
reawakening

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Tulostettavat versiot

- [htm](#)- [pdf](#)

## Soup, soap and national reawakening: the ambiguous role of the salvation army in *The Man without Past* (2002)

### Introduction

The Salvation Army plays an important part in Aki Kaurismäki's *The Man Without A Past* (*Mies vailla menneisyyttä*, 2002). The organisation provides a welcoming social space for the protagonist M, and it also offers employment and understanding to the marginalised community in the nameless shanty town on the outskirts of Helsinki. Due to Kaurismäki's sympathetic depiction of the work of the Salvation Army, on first viewing the film might appear to have a religious message at its core.

However, further consideration reveals that the religious elements in the film are refunctioned, rendering them secular and finally national. This article will first outline the ambiguity of the Salvation Army in Finnish society, before demonstrating that the religious elements of the Salvation Army's musical performances are used to emphasise secular and national motifs in the film.

### The Salvation Army in Finland

As an organisation the Salvation Army occupies both a spiritual and a secular space in Finnish society. Despite the fact that the Salvation Army is an evangelical group in its own right, the vast majority of Finnish Salvation Army officers are also members of the Finnish Lutheran Church (Heino 2002, 82), demonstrating that Salvation Army membership is not seen as a competing religious identification to Finnish Lutheranism.

Instead, the organisation is seen as a charity. During the 1990s in particular, when Finland experienced an economic depression, the media attention on the Salvation Army's bread queues lead to an increase in the organisation's approval rates (Heino 2002, 28). The publicity both branded charity as a Salvation Army activity, and the Salvation Army as a charity. Indeed, the organisation itself recognises that "*the hungry, homeless, ill and unemployed [need] material relief before their spiritual pangs [can] be addressed*" (Winston 1999, 8). This order of priorities is succinctly expressed in the organisation's motto: "soup, soap and salvation".

In *The Man Without A Past*, however, the promise of the third element, religious awakening, is not fulfilled. Religious elements in the Salvation Army's musical performances are questioned and undermined throughout the film, and the organisation is never portrayed as actually proselytising or even providing religious guidance.

### Soup: material needs

In *The Man Without A Past* the protagonist, M, is beaten on arrival in Helsinki. He wakes up in hospital having lost his memory. Since he has no proof of his identity, M has to live in a container village on the fringe of society, where he eventually finds friendship and love. The Salvation Army first appears in the film when M has had some time to recover from being beaten. His new friend Nieminen suggests they should dine out on Fridays, and takes M to the weekly Salvation Army soup kitchen. The hymn sung by the Salvation Army choir begins to play non-diegetically while M and Nieminen leave the container village:

*I found a friend, oh joy!  
I am cleansed of my sins  
I'm always blessed by my friend,  
He brings (me) amazing peace  
He comforts me when the road is rough,  
my Saviour is close by  
I don't feel misery or sorrow  
because I follow only Jesus  
He is faithful, He is faithful  
The (love) of Jesus stays the same;  
it's an endless love [...]  
My friend does not care about appearances,  
He does not see the way people do. (Booth)*

Kaurismäki tends to use music to express characters' emotions (Soila 2002, 199-200), or to describe the action on screen. Before the scene changes to feature the singers of the hymn, the lyrics are already being used to emphasise the connection between M and Nieminen. As M leaves the screen and the camera momentarily lingers on the Nieminen's container home, the words "I found a friend, oh joy!" from the following scene's diegesis underscore the men's new friendship. From the beginning the religious song is used to highlight a secular theme, and it continues to be used so throughout the scene. Later, after M and Nieminen have both received their soup, the two find a place to sit. They do not need to talk to each other: the choir singing "my friend does not care about appearances, He does not see the way people do" emphasises their common understanding and unsentimental bond. The reference to a friend seeing past one's appearance also contrasts with the reactions of passers-by when an assaulted M first stumbled into the central train station in Helsinki.



The Salvation Army choir consists of three middle-aged women singing from the organisation's song book, with four younger men providing the musical accompaniment. The musicians stand behind the singers, and the face of the man who later becomes the lead singer in the 'rhythm music' performances is partly covered. The positioning of the singers in front of the band highlights the importance of the lyrics, and the formulaic nature of the performance is evident in the singers' reliance on the book of hymns. The choir sings the lines "He comforts me when the road is rough, my Saviour is close by" while Irma ladles soup for the customers of the mobile kitchen.

Although in the English translation the lyrics appear unproblematic from a religious point of view, in Finnish the lyrics of the song diminish the religious relevance of the hymn. As the Finnish language has only one third person singular pronoun used for people – the non-gendered *hän* – the translation could just as easily read "*she* comforts me". Therefore the combination of the lyrics and the focus on the organisation's social work introduce Irma's, and the Salvation Army's, function as providing secular and material comfort to the city's fringe-dwellers. The head of the Salvation Army flea market and a younger officer are briefly featured giving away bread while the choir sings "I don't feel misery or sorrow", introducing a sentiment familiar from previous Kaurismäki films: though the characters may experience misfortune, they will not succumb to self-pity.

The camera conspicuously emphasises the secular possibilities of the lyrics, for example by connecting references to "friend", "*Hän*" and "saviour" to specific characters in the film. However, when the choir sings "I follow only Jesus" the film cuts to a long shot of the whole soup kitchen, showing the men progressing in line. The fact that the explicit mention of Jesus is not visually linked to any particular character further supports the interpretation that the hymn is not used to emphasise anyone's personal religious identification. Rather the lyrics are appropriated for a secular and specifically narrative purpose, introducing key characters of the film and foreshadowing plot developments.

After introducing the officers tending to the soup kitchen, Kaurismäki focuses on the homeless men progressing in the queue while the choir repeats the line "He is faithful". The song describes the men as good and honest people, who have not deserved their unfortunate situation. When it is M's turn to receive soup from Irma, their eye contact coincides with the choir singing the words "endless love". Although the hymn itself refers to a religious love, the phrase is quite explicitly used to foreshadow M and Irma's relationship and the film's eventual happy ending.

In essence, in the first musical performance the overt religious meaning of the hymn is destabilised through the song's function in emphasising the internal cohesion of Kaurismäki's filmic universe and in foreshadowing plot developments. The song also corresponds with M's physical need for nourishment being fulfilled: the first part of "soup, soap and salvation" is achieved.

### Soap: social networking

The second musical scene occurs after M and Irma have begun their relationship. M is clearly inspired by the romance, as he subsequently tells Irma, and on hearing the Salvation Army band practicing a hymn decides to suggest a broadening of the group's repertoire. Before heading downstairs to talk to the musicians, M tries on a Salvation Army officer's cap for a moment. However M does not feel the hat – and with it the role of an officer – suits him, and he takes it off. There is a similar scene in *Ariel*, where Irmeli casts aside the headgear of her uniform at the moment she leaves the job altogether. Andrew Nestingen has identified Irmeli's decision to no longer wear her cap as a sign of her identification as a "temporary worker in a flexible economy" (Nestingen 2004, 105), not bound to a particular profession. Likewise M's choice to not wear the officer's hat signifies his decision to not commit to the Salvation Army for the long term.

As the band rehearses the hymn, the singer looks listlessly into the distance, a stark contrast to the intensity of the group's later performance when they first play their original material. They interrupt their rehearsal after M enters. When M suggests the group might want to listen to his jukebox to gain more modern influences, the lead singer states they would be pleased to: "on [their] own time, though, as [the organisation] has fairly strict rules on what to play". M responds that he would be able to raise the matter "upstairs". As 'upstairs' can colloquially be used to refer to Heaven, M's promise infuses his character with surreal or even Messianic self-

assurance. The band is finally convinced when M proposes that a wider range of people would be drawn to the music, and could as a consequence become interested in the movement itself. However as M himself has only moments earlier rejected the officer's hat, his own motivation for recommending a more secular style of music probably differs from what he suggests the organisation's should be.

The third musical scene of the Salvation Army band takes place after the head of the flea market has given her blessing to the new direction in the band's performances. Her statement "I used to do a bit of singing myself when I was younger" is an ironic understatement typical of Kaurismäki films, as the manager of the flea market is played by Annikki Tähti, one of the most popular post-war musical performers in Finland.

An officer announces that it is Midsummer's Eve, "a traditionally pagan celebration" and one of the most popular holidays in Finland. As celebrations are decidedly secular and tend to feature "*heavy drinking, unrestricted copulation and manslaughter*" (Ahlstrand 1984, 108), the officer's assertion that the song "*Small Heart*" can provide an idea as to the emptiness of life without Christ is a humorous and futile attempt to inject religious relevance into a secular celebration. The fact that the announcement of supposed religious significance is offset by a deadpan visual gag – a short, completely silent officer stands solemnly next to the much taller one making the serious announcement – renders the message ridiculous. The band begins to play, and Annikki Tähti performs her 1950s hit, "*Small Heart*":

*So small is the heart of man,  
yet vast and bottomless  
It conceals the greatest dreams  
and the worlds of hate and love  
The wealth of joy and the sum of sorrows,  
fortuitous love and even the darkest of pain  
can all be found in a small heart  
– happiness, joy, oh!  
Noble thoughts and base ideas,  
the fire of emotions and coldness too,  
they can be found in a small heart;  
All those things that fate allowed (Pekkarinen 1955)*

The camera focuses on her weathered face as she sings of the little heart "concealing great dreams" – again highlighting the hope among the community, and even more directly suggesting the manager herself had once had dreams of becoming a famous singer. Almost immediately after the song starts men begin to ask women to dance, and people set aside their plates of food to enjoy the music. M asks Irma out while the band plays. Although she initially avoids giving him a direct answer, eventually she agrees to his request. Just as the dancing couples are most likely not contemplating "the futility of life without Christ", so too does M's and Irma's flirting to the beat of "*Small Heart*" suggest that despite the intentions of the Salvation Army musicians the song has not stirred the audience's religious sentiments.

The fourth performance sees the band come into its own. Their first original song "*The Devil Lies in Wait*" has a faster tempo, the band has new instruments and the lead singer has assumed a pose and an electric guitar worthy of a rock star. He is even differentiated from the rest of the band by his decision to not wear his uniform jacket for the performance. Initially the people who have gathered to listen to the performance look more as if they could be attending church – no-one is dancing, and the Nieminsens have even brought their children along. However, as the audience steadily tap their feet to the beat of the music and pass around bottles of beer, it becomes clear that the audience's focus is still not on the religious lyrics. The focus on the rhythm of the music is also evident in the positioning of the band itself: as the lead singer is behind his guitar, the music is even physically closer to the audience than the singer as the source of the lyrics is.

During the performance M and Irma arrive, only to be accosted by the security guard Anttila, who runs a small racketeering business among the shanty town community. Anttila demands payment to allow the couple to see the show, and at first does not believe M's assertion that since he in fact organised the event, if anyone was to be collecting a profit from the performance it should be him. M's defiance of the shanty town's ostensible authority figure marks the fulfilment of his self-determination. M may not have his memory, but he has been able to create a meaningful role in society, and one that is worth defending. The thrill of the fourth performance, then, marks the development of M's and Irma's relationship and M's sense of personal achievement instead of the enforcement of religious identification within the community.

The three performances, from the rehearsal in the Salvation Army basement through "*Small Heart*" to "*The Devil Lies in Wait*", correspond with the "soap" element of the Salvation Army motto. While "soup" refers to a person's most urgent physical needs, "soap" represents the need for social connectedness. During these three performances M has begun to forge a role in society for himself: first through his involvement with the band, then in developing his relationship with Irma, and finally in asserting himself against an authority figure.

### Salvation: national reawakening

The protagonist is never addressed by name in the film, and although he discovers his name,



Jaakko Antero Lujanen, towards the end of the film, in the credits he is referred to as M. In the script the director states he chose the letter M, because it is the same letter with which most Finnish interrogative words begin (Kaurismäki 2003, 17). Identifying M with words such as *mikä* (what), *minne* (where to) and *milloin* (when) connects his experiences with Finnish self-expression, and also underscores the negotiation and uncertainty inherent to his identity. However, one interrogative word in Finnish that does not begin with the letter M is *kuka* (who). The fact that M is not connected with the one word indicating uncertainty of individual identity, but is rather identified with questions of locality and time, emphasises the sense of his search for identity as representing national self-discovery.

The notion of M as symbolising the nation or the Finnish people is evident also in the fact that his experiences arise from a specifically Finnish societal context. Sakari Toiviainen points out that although Kaurismäki's characters live in the margins outside society, they are not separated from society itself, and "*many of the societal processes and value conflicts are concentrated in them*" (Toiviainen 2004, 22). In addition, as Finland is considered to exist in the liminal space between the East and the West (Joenniemi 1993, 34-35), M's marginal social status is directly representative of Finland itself. While the film has been seen as an elegy to the nation (Timonen 2006, 300), M's new life, despite his unrecovered memories, suggests a new beginning rather than a melancholy end.

M's final acts of self-fulfilment coincide with both music and imagery that recall a sense of national recovery. Having found out his real name, M decides to return to Helsinki to be with Irma. On arrival he meets Anttila, who now considers M an equal and escorts him to the Salvation Army canteen for a soirée.

Earlier in the film M has rejected the headgear of and therefore the identification as a member of the Salvation Army, and the singer of the organisation's band has performed without his uniform jacket. In the final musical performance at the canteen even the manager has forsaken symbols of religious belonging: she performs in a white dress rather than her Salvation Army uniform. She sings another iconic song of hers from the 1950s: "*Do You Remember Mon Répos?*":

*I remember the most beautiful park,  
the most wonderful Mon Répos  
Often in my dreams I go to that leafy dreamland  
The most beautiful arched bridges,  
the most wonderful moonlit nights  
I have seen in the park of Mon Répos  
My mind finds its way beyond long-passed times  
I can still reach those olden days  
(and) that wondrous story  
The memories of the most beautiful park,  
the most wonderful Mon Répos  
In my heart I have forever hidden  
Mon Répos (Runne 1955)*

Although M has been told what his bureaucratic identity is, by the end of the film his memory has still not returned. The only elements of his past which he has really remembered are the ability to weld and his taste in music. The song's laments of a lost past apply to M on a superficial level insofar as he cannot remember much of his past. However, at the same time M is able to fulfil the desire expressed in the lyrics to revisit that "wondrous story" by returning to Irma.

Although *The Man Without A Past* differs from many other Kaurismäki films in that the protagonist does not escape Finland, M's conscious decision to return to the shanty town in Helsinki marks a new beginning nonetheless. He may not have his memory, but he does have a sense of self and the bureaucratic tools necessary to integrate into society: a name, a social security number and a date of birth. M's ability to now take part in society moves his future experiences out of the realm of the container village. M and Irma cross the rail track together just before a freight train drives past, the train acting as a final curtain for the couple.

As well as providing a happy ending for Irma's and M's relationship, "*Do You Remember Mon Répos?*" also has nationally significant meaning. The song describes the singer's longing for a park in Vyborg, a city in the region of Karelia. Parts of Karelia were ceded to the Soviet Union at the end of the Second World War, a loss that had considerable national impact. Karelia was the area where the poems for the Finnish national epic *Kalevala* were collected in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The *Kalevala* symbolised the "*creativity of the nation*" (Paasi 1997, 45), and through it Karelia came to be thought of as the original, spiritual home of the Finns. The loss of Karelia, then, was a challenge to Finnish national identity. In addition to the psychological damage caused by the loss, there were also great economic implications, such as the loss of agricultural land and the resettlement of 400 000 Karelian refugees (Klinge 1986, 58). The set war reparations also forced a dramatic restructuring of Finnish industry: payments were demanded mainly in metal products, while the Finnish economy was based on agriculture and forestry (Karisto et al 1997, 57).

The lament for Mon Répos expresses the desire to cope with the challenge to national identity brought on by the loss of such a culturally significant territory and the associated economic pressures. The sight of Tähti as the manager of the Salvation Army singing her own nostalgic post-war hit bestows the scene with a sense of national convalescence. If M does indeed represent Finland, then it is significant that he should return to Irma to the accompaniment of



a song so laden with national memory.

In one sense the appearance of the freight train at the end of the film recalls M's arrival in Helsinki, also by train. However, the earlier trains in the film carried passengers instead of cargo, linking them with internal migrations and urbanisation (Koivunen 2006, 135). The freight train has a different significance altogether: it recalls the trains which carried war reparations to the Soviet Union in the 1940s and 1950s. The connection is emphasised with the final bars of "Do You Remember Mon Répos?" playing over the image.

The final war reparations train crossed the border to the Soviet Union in 1952 (Karisto et al 1997, 57), relieving Finland of its duty for further financial compensation. The year is seen as signalling "emancipation from the shadow of war" (von Bagh 2000, 55) and the start of a reconstructed national identity. The train at the end of *The Man Without A Past*, then, replicates the nationally liberating function of the border-crossing freight train of the 1950s. "Do You Remember Mon Répos?" was released in 1955 (Pälli, 2007), three years after the final war reparations were paid. As such the image of the returning train restores the song not as a lament for a lost past, but as an acceptance of the need to move on, and the ability to do so.

The final musical performance in *The Man Without A Past* does not have any religious connotations, and as such fails to fulfil the promise of "salvation" in the sense of religious awakening. Sakari Toiviainen sees salvation being replaced in the film by the inherently secular expression of small mercies in everyday life (Toiviainen 2002, 94-95). However, the fact that the final performance's religious void is filled with nationally significant imagery and music suggests that a need for some spiritual identification remains in Kaurismäki's shanty town, and that that identification is achieved through national rather than religious sentiment.

### Conclusion

The secularising and cinematic uses of religious elements in *The Man Without A Past* erase religious identification from the community depicted in the film. This secular focus on the Salvation Army's work and M's increasing social connectedness allow for the "soup and soap" elements of the Salvation Army's motto to be realised.

The eradication of religion is completed in the final performance, when the organisation itself forsakes symbols of religious belonging. The promise of religious salvation is not fulfilled, and national reconstruction replaces religious sentiment. The marginal community becomes the locus of the re-imagining of a nation— where even an incomplete past and a flawed present can lead to a positive future.

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