

Fallen Leaves: Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki's latest film—Cinema history versus social history

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30 July 2024

Aki Kaurismäki is a well-known Finnish director, who began making feature films in 1983. One of his first efforts was an adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. He achieved considerable prominence with the absurdist comedy *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (1989), about a fictional, eccentric Russian band making its way across the American south.

Kaurismäki, who now lives in Portugal, is known for his so-called Proletariat Trilogy (called that by others)—*Shadows in Paradise* (1986), *Ariel* (1988) and *The Match Factory Girl* (1990). He has jokingly described his new work, *Fallen Leaves*, as the fourth part of the trilogy.

His most recent film bears some resemblance to his others, in its relative brevity and understated acting and general approach. Middle-aged Ansa (Alma Pöysti) works in a supermarket, on a part-time, temporary basis, and lives alone. Alcoholic Holappa (played by Jussi Vatanen—we never learn the character's first name) works at sand-blasting, he is also lonely.

They first encounter one another at a karaoke bar, where each is drinking with a friend. Ansa later finds Holappa at a streetcar stop, passed out drunk. She soon gets fired from the supermarket for taking food past its expiry date. This exchange with her boss takes place:

-Certain suspicions have been raised, you have been under watch. You should be grateful we're not taking this to the police.
-That's past its date, you can't sell it.
-It doesn't matter. It belongs in the waste bin.
-I suppose I do, too.
-You are fired, without notice.
-We don't have a notice period. We're on a zero-hour contract.
-Your wisecracking will only make things worse.

Ansa goes to work for even lower pay at a bar whose owner is soon arrested for selling drugs, leading to the place's closing down and Ansa's losing the possibility of getting paid. Hungry and broke, she runs into Holappa, and they go on a date to the cinema. She gives him her number, though not her name, but he promptly loses the piece of paper. She waits for him to call, while he searches for her. Holappa is fired due to drinking on the job and gets kicked out of the workers' dormitory.

Eventually, Ansa and Holappa meet again, and she invites him to dinner at her house. When she sees him sipping from a flask he keeps in his coat pocket, she says:

My father died of drink. So did my brother. My mother died of

grief. I like you a lot, but I won't take a drunk.

He replies, "And I don't take orders," and walks out.

Later, Holappa decides to give up alcohol and try his luck with Ansa again. Near tragedy intervenes, but they may have the possibility of being together by the end.

Kaurismäki is famed for his deadpan, minimalist drollery.

For example, Holappa and his mate Huotari (Janne Hyytiäinen) sit outside their workshop in front of a large "No smoking" sign. When Holappa lights up a cigarette, his friend says:

-That will be the death of you.
-No. The black lung will get me first.
-I see. You know best.
-The number of vices is constant. For instance, you are a babbler.
-I'll think about that at your grave.
-A sympathy card will do.
-That costs money.

Ansa and her friend Liisa (Nuppu Koivu) have similar mordant conversations. Speaking of Holappa, when he doesn't call her, Ansa comments:

-I thought he would've been... different.
-In what way?
-In some way, at least.
-They are all cast in the same mold. Sadly, it was broken.
-That was well said. All men are swine!
-They're not. Swine are intelligent and sympathetic.
-You're right.
-Let's drink to them.

On numerous occasions, the radio broadcasts news of the Russian-Ukraine war, emphasizing Russian aggression and brutality. This provides one key to Kaurismäki's outlook.

Fallen Leaves has humorous and moving moments, but they are too few in number. In general, the self-consciously restrained style is irritating, not illuminating. It closes the film off to life, rather than opening it up. The actors are fine, but they are asked to do too little.

Kaurismäki has described himself as part existentialist, part communist,

part ecologist, part anarchist and the rest “ordinary social democracy.” That seems a fairly honest self-assessment.

The filmmaker has said and done various honorable things. He has protested against US policies in Iraq and elsewhere. He has stood up for the unemployed, for immigrants and refugees, for the Palestinian people against Israeli criminality.

While expressing admiration for “the old Hollywood,” Kaurismäki has quite rightly said that “the modern one is just a dead rattlesnake ... I am like a dog always barking about Hollywood because with its power, it could make some really good films. Instead, sixty-year-old men are creating boy-scout level—and boring—violence; crass commercialisation is killing the cinema.” Further, nowadays “there’s no sense in mixing up Hollywood and cinema. They’re two different things. Hollywood is business, the entertainment business.”

Kaurismäki undeniably interests himself, not always, but consistently, with the downtrodden, the marginalized. Hence his “proletarian” films. However, the period in which he came to maturity and began making films, the 1980s and beyond, was dominated, certainly in a country such as Finland, by the decay of the labor and social-democratic movements, and the dissolution of the USSR and accompanying events.

For Kaurismäki, the working class is largely stepped on, victimized, preyed upon. In *The Cinema of Aki Kaurismäki: Contrarian Stories*, Andrew Nestingen quite legitimately refers to his “loser films” and “loser melodramas”:

The loser films are built around quotidian traumas: the death of a friend in *Shadows in Paradise*, unemployment in *Ariel* and *Drifting Clouds*, parental abuse and unplanned pregnancy in *The Match Factory Girl*, assault in *The Man Without a Past*, and workplace bullying in *Lights in the Dusk*.

The loser melodramas include *Shadows in Paradise*, *I Hired a Contract Killer*, *The Match Factory Girl*, *Drifting Clouds*, *The Man Without a Past*, and *Lights in the Dusk*.

Responding to the use by critics of the phrase “proletarian” films, Nestingen observes, Kaurismäki has pointed out,

that the term worker or proletarian is a mistake, for it constructs the films’ protagonists as class subjects, which they are not in his view. Their alienation tends to make them either unaware of their class status or indifferent to the politics of class.

In other words, they are simply fodder for exploitation of various kinds.

At its best, Kaurismäki’s cinema can generate power. Certainly, *The Match Factory Girl* has definite strengths. As Nestingen describes it:

Iiris (Kati Outinen) is alienated from her alcoholic parents, her indifferent employer, and her bleak city. She fantasises about love as an escape, reading romance novels, buying a dress, and going dancing by herself. She meets a man at a discotheque, who impregnates her in a one-night stand. He rejects her and humiliates her. She attempts suicide, but survives. In vengeance, she poisons her parents, her lover, and an anonymous man in a bar. The film ends with her apparent arrest.

Kaurismäki and Outinen combine to provide genuine sympathy and

anger.

In other films, the writer-director is merely unconventional for its own sake, and tiring, as in *Leningrad Cowboys Go America*, for instance.

At times, he strays into condescending to or even semi-mocking his apparently paralyzed “proletarian” characters. *Fallen Leaves* walks a fine line. Alma Pöysti as Ansa has some spirit, an occasional spark. But too much of the film and too much of the acting is glum, catatonic. Characters ride the streetcar or sit in bars in sullen, even self-pitying silence. That’s not working class life in Finland or anywhere else. That’s a middle-class conception of working class life. If workers are this destroyed, incapable of resistance, we may as well give up. But it isn’t the case at all.

There are elements, possibilities of real life in *Fallen Leaves*, in the dark humor mostly, also in the interest the characters take in one another, but Kaurismäki stifles too much of all that with his own defeatist social point of view. Unfortunately, the mistaken, superficial schema smothers a good deal of the life out of the film. It is a shame, because the director has genuine wit, talent.

The great problem here is history. *Fallen Leaves* is irritatingly replete with cinema references (Bresson, Godard, Chaplin, etc.), and Kaurismäki is considered an expert on *film history*. But he is woefully weak on *social and political history*. Hence his shallow, impressionistic response to the US-provoked Russian invasion of Ukraine, a response he shares with much of the European middle class “left.”

As noted above, Kaurismäki specializes in the “loser melodrama,” writes Nestingen, which emphasizes “the events that ‘traumatise’ their protagonists, while this trauma is easy to overlook because of the minimalist way in which it is represented.” The “loser” is attacked, in other words, and hardly responds (or does so individually, psychotically, like the Match Factory girl). Passivity, apathy, indifference, unresponsiveness, docility—that sums up the Finnish working class in Kaurismäki’s eyes. Almost as dead as the zombies in *The Dead Don’t Die*, the 2019 film by Jim Jarmusch (one of Kaurismäki’s great admirers) that Ansa and Holappa go to see on their night out.

But this is a false and shallow picture. It takes the rotten social-democratic and union organizations for the sentiments and desires of broad layers of the population. The history of the Finnish working class, past and present, is full of fierce struggles, including revolutionary ones, betrayed by centrist, social-democratic and Stalinist leaders.

In 2023 and 2024 alone, there have been general strikes and other mass industrial actions against a right-wing government and its attacks on the right to strike and cuts to social benefits. The Finnish trade unions of course have done everything in their power to restrict and suppress those struggles, which continue.

There is also the small matter of the objectively revolutionary conditions of 1917-18, which would have led to a Soviet Finland but for the opportunist Finnish social democrats, led by Otto Kuusinen, later a leading figure in the Stalinized Communist International.

As Leon Trotsky explained in *Lessons of October* (1924), the Finnish revolution might well have been “triumphant” in 1917-18, because

the revolutionary movement developed under exceptionally favorable circumstances, under the wing of revolutionary Russia and with its direct military assistance. But the majority of the leaders in the Finnish party proved to be social democrats, and they ruined the revolution.

Or, as Victor Serge outlined the situation in more detail in 1930:

The October Revolution provoked an echo in Finland; a great

general strike, in mid-November, brought on by a serious famine, which affected only the poorer classes, and by the reactionary policies of the Finnish Senate...

The workers quit work everywhere. The railways stopped. Workers' Red Guards, supported by Soviet Russian troops in places, occupied all public buildings. Bloody encounters occurred between the Whites and the Reds. The deputies argued. The frightened bourgeoisie consented to the application of the eight-hour law and to the enactment of a new program of social legislation, as well as to the democratization of power, which passed from the Senate to the Diet.

And the victorious general strike of the workers ended in the constitution of a bourgeois cabinet ... It was the abortion of a revolution. Finnish revolutionists are of the opinion that the seizure of power was possible at that time; it would even have been easy; the support of the Bolsheviks would have been decisive. ("Mannerheim and Kuusinen Destroyed the Socialist Revolution Once Before, in 1918")

The various clever "cinéastes" know a good many things, but they are literally helpless on other matters, and this has artistic, intellectual consequences.



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