



European Cinema Education  
for the Youth

# The Man Without a Past

AKI KAURISMÄKI

PEDAGOGICAL PACKAGE



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## CINED: A COLLECTION OF FILMS FOR CINEMA EDUCATION

CinEd's mission is to promote cinema art as a cultural entity and to give tools to aid understanding the world. For this purpose, CinEd has developed a common teaching method based on a collection of films produced in the European countries that are partners in the project. The approach adapts to our present-day world, in which the ways images are seen changes rapidly and increasingly. Everyday we use a vast range of screens where images are received, spread and produced: from giant cinema screens to tiny smartphones, and of course televisions, computers and tablets. The cinema is a relatively new art, and although its death has been predicted more than once, it is obvious that it is very much alive.

These changes impact on the cinema. To distribute cinema as a form of art, we have to acknowledge the several different screens movies are viewed from. CinEd publications offer a sensitive and inductive teaching method, which is both interactive and intuitive, and provides information, analytical tools and offers the possibility of a dialogue between the images and the films. The films are analyzed on different levels and in their entirety, as well as in smaller sections in which the analysis is concentrated on individual aspects: frames, shots, and sequences.

The pedagogical materials (booklets) enable a free and flexible approach to the films. One major challenge is to get in contact with the images on different levels. Describing the image is the essential basis for any kind of analytical approach. The ability to extract and select the images to classify and compare – both from the film in question and from other films and art forms, involving all the representational and narrative arts (photography, literature, painting, theatre, comics...). The aim is that the image won't pass its viewer as insignificant, but to show all the ways the images can have a meaning. In this way, cinema is a particularly synthesizing valuable form of art that can build up and strengthen the views and media literacy among the young generations.

#### The author :

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## SELECTION CRITERIA

Aki Kaurismäki is unquestionably the internationally best-known Finnish film director. His films have been screened at festivals and in cinemas on every continent. Critics have praised the particular nature of the world he has created, its strength and originality. Of all Kaurismäki's films, the 2002 Cannes Grand Prix winner *The Man Without a Past* (*Mies vailla menneisyyttä*) has been the most successful in reaching wide audience. Due to success of this particular film, his previous works have also received international visibility and the audiences everywhere eagerly wait for his new films.

The first encounter with the story and the fate of the film's protagonist M (the man momentarily loses his identity and all his former reference points to the society), or all the times viewer meets the protagonist when watching the film again, present the viewer direct and once again sorely topical questions. What is an individual's place in the society, what is the foundation of human identity and what is the fate of the most underprivileged ones...? Kaurismäki's film has fairy-tale like qualities, highlighting partly forgotten values such as solidarity and humanism. They alone can protect the downtrodden, who in today's world are attempted to push aside by the redistribution of the global economy.

By the film's narration and by its cinematic form, this versatile film gives the viewer a chance to discover and recognize associations with some of the most significant works in cinema's history – the director enriches his own world with many direct and indirect references. It also makes the viewer familiar with the different techniques of narration that have their roots in the history of cinema. Meanwhile, the experience of watching the film binds us to our own memories of the films we've seen and to our personal history of cinema. At the same time the film provides us the pleasure learning new fields we've maybe never seen before. The exceptional rhythm of this film gives the viewer time and space to experience and enjoy its uniqueness, beauty and originality.



Finnish poster



Spanish poster



French poster

## TECHNICAL INFORMATION

English title: *The Man Without a Past*

Original title: *Mies vailla menneisyyttä*

Country: Finland

Running time: 1 h 37 min

Format: colour, 1.85:1, 35 mm

Budget: approximately 1.206.000 euros

World premiere: 1 March 2002

Directed by: Aki Kaurismäki

Script by: Aki Kaurismäki

Produced by: Aki Kaurismäki

Production company: Sputnik Oy

Music: Antero Jakoila, The Renegades, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Tapio Rautavaara, Marko Haavisto ja Pouta-haukat, Markus Allan, Taisto Wesslin, Crazy Ken Band, Leevi Madetoja, Masao Onose, Annikki Tähti

Cinematography: Timo Salminen

Editing: Timo Linnasalo

Sound: Jouko Lumme, Tero Malmberg

Set design: Markku Pätilä, Jukka Salmi

Casting: Outi Harjupatana

Actors and characters: Markku Peltola (M/Jaakko Antero Lujanen), Kati Outinen (Irma), Juhani Niemelä (Niemenen), Kaija Pakarinen (Kaisa Nieminen), Sakari Kuosmanen (Anttila), Annikki Tähti (fleamarket manager), Anneli Sauli (café owner), Elina Salo (shipyard clerk), Outi Mäenpää (bank clerk), Esko Nikkari (bank robber), Pertti Sveholm (police interrogator), Matti Wuori (lawyer), Aino Seppo (ex-wife), Janne Hyttiäinen (Ovaskainen), Antti Reini (electrician).

Memory  
and oblivion

Transitional  
spaces

Realism  
and poetry



Music and  
objects

Identity

"Everything is mercy."

"I believe we have an unfortunate person there. Perhaps we should help him."

## THEMES

### MEMORY AND OBLIVION

M becomes a victim of a random act of violence and loses his memory as well as his connection with his past. The film is a story of the battle the protagonist has to wage in order to rebuild his identity and to repair the broken connection between himself and the world that has moulded him. The white bandage wrapped around M's head belongs to a warrior and a wounded (angel). With this film, Aki Kaurismäki also talks about memory loss on a much more general level. The director focuses the viewer's attention to those forgotten by the capitalist society: the unemployed and the poor, the homeless and the lonely ones. Like M, the viewer recovers from this memory loss to wake up and notice the people who do not get to enjoy the promises of nice and comfortable life made by the market economy.

### TRANSITIONAL SPACES

It is difficult to say whether the image we observe presents a garbage dump or a partially abandoned industrial area. It is not an urban environment, but it is neither a country scenery despite the forest we glimpse in the background. This space is in a transitional ground, in progress of change, incomplete, in pieces – just like M, hovering between life and death, trying to pick up the pieces of his life. The sky is cloudy and slightly threatening, not pretty or stormy. There are also many other transitional spaces and images of transition in the film. They work as signs of a world in upheaval or perhaps of a society on the brink of collapse. These signs include the railway station, hospital, canteen, recycling centre, container village, and the port area.

### MUSIC AND OBJECTS

A jukebox placed in the middle of the frame is a symbol for music that plays a central role in Kaurismäki's films. Popular music and its representatives occupy an exceptionally visible spot in the director's works: musicians systematically appear in his films as actors or interpreting their own

songs, while radios, record players and jukeboxes churn out wild rock'n'roll and wistful tangos. In *The Man Without a Past*, music often replaces the dialogue. It conveys feelings, but it also provides the community which has gathered around the Salvation Army a way to discover its lost self-esteem. In this way, music acts as a force in the fight against oblivion and displacement..

### IDENTITY

M is driven out of the employment agency as he has forgotten the information that forms our official identity: his first name and his surname, address, place of birth, and social security number. With his film, Kaurismäki seems to be saying that the human identity can also be understood in a way that differs from the official data. Our identity is perceived in the way we treat our fellow beings. It can also be discerned in the music we listen to, the objects important to us, and the ideals we defend. The visible and the tangible can sometimes mislead us. Under the stern uniform of the Salvation Army, a heart beats to rock'n'roll (Irma). The mean and greedy features of the guard (Anttila, whose name inevitably brings to mind Attila, King of the Huns) hides a sensitive soul. Therefore we are not surprised to learn that his "bloodhound" Hannibal is really a most docile doggy.

### REALISM AND POETRY

*The Man Without a Past* describes in detail the effects of the economic crisis in Finland in the 1990s: mass unemployment, the bankruptcies of small businesses, the housing shortage, the return of homelessness and breadline – while the banks grew rich. By placing a bed frame, a red chair, and a fridge in the foreground of the frame Aki Kaurismäki reminds us that housing and a decent living are fundamental rights on which an individual's dignity and self-esteem are built. But the gaze through which Kaurismäki observes Finland is tinted with poetry. The light in *The Man Without a Past* is soft, the hues of the surfaces warm, and the objects old-fashioned or outdated. One can recognize the present-day Finland through historical

events while the set design and the relations between people represent a fantasy of what Finland could be like.

## SYNOPSIS

A man arrives in Helsinki in search of work, gets beaten up and loses his memory. Unable to remember his name or anything from his past life, he starts living on the outskirts of the city and slowly starts putting his life back on track. He discovers love...

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### THE 1990S

The film's story is set in the Finland of the early 1990s in the throes of a severe depression. People had to move from the countryside to towns and cities to find jobs. However they did not always succeed in making a living. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 seriously damaged Finnish economy. The Soviet Union used to be the most important trading partner for Finland, and the breakdown of the big neighbor shook the whole production chain. The Finnish industrial companies and their subcontractors suffered as the Finnish export business declined. After the economic boom of the 1980s, the banks found themselves in trouble because of their neglectful loan policies and market speculation. Within three years unemployment rate jumped from 3.5% to 18.9% and the gross domestic product shrunk by 13 percents.

The events of the film that are set in the 1990s, like the Kaurismäki-esque universe in general, also point towards another era in the history of Finland.

### POST-WAR ERA

The 1944 peace treaty governed Finland to give away large areas in Eastern Finland to the Soviet Union. Finland also had to pay heavy war reparations. The years 1945-1955 were marked by a phenomenal growth in economy and productivity as the country struggled to get back on its feet. Heavy industry and the construction industry, the latter responsible for producing housing for both the 400,000 citizens evacuated from the ceded areas as well as for the large generations born after the war, formed the engine for the economic growth and increasing employment. In 1952 the war reparations had been paid, the Olympic Games were held in Helsinki, and Armi Kuusela was crowned as Miss Universum. However as the war reparations were dealt with, exports diminished and the industry found itself in big trouble. In 1960-1970 the country was in the grip of a severe economic crisis that drove people from the countryside into towns and cities, or even abroad. Several hundreds of thousands of the 4.5 million population moved to Sweden. The neighbor in the west became the most important target of Finnish economic refugees.



*The students' demonstration in front of the parliament house in 1990.*

*Photo: Tuija Salovaara / Kansan Arkisto*

### THE FILM'S INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

The world in Aki Kaurismäki's films tell about Finland's recent history with a longing that culminates in the choice of music, objects, clothes, colors, attitudes (helpfulness and solidarity), and people's behavior. The post-war Finland in 1950s is full of hope and the joy of the reclaimed peace. People were anticipating for a better life. At the same time one can sense a deep mourning and an increasing pain of loss that is hidden in the hearts of people after the wars.

The characters of Kaurismäki's films create a general idea of the post-war Finn: a tough war veteran, a strong worker man who bravely faces difficulties and seeks happiness in small everyday things. He refuses to let the misfortunes discourage him and he refuses to sink into the dale of grief. As life keeps throwing him around and more misfortunes comes in his way he tries to find a solution in respectful manners. Implicitly the character's darker sides are noted: sometimes they find the consolation from alcohol that makes them mean towards themselves and their close ones. These examples can be found both in *The Man Without a Past* and in other films by the same director, as well as in those by other Finnish filmmakers such as Mikko Niskanen, Risto Jarva, Matti Kassila, Matti Ijäs, etc.

<sup>1</sup> Mikko Niskanen (1929-1990), a filmmaker who trained in Russia; Risto Jarva (1934-1977), the most quoted director of the "Finnish New Wave"; Matti Kassila (born 1924), who had a long career in both the new wave and more contemporary cinema; Matti Ijäs (born 1950) whose films and TV films travel outside the country and who continues to shoot

## THE AUTHOR

### COWORKERS, CHARACTERS

Aki Kaurismäki consistently works with the same coworkers, whether the group of actors or the film crew. But not only with them... The viewer can find familiar recurring characters played both by professional actors and real-life characters in all of his films. Part of the viewer's pleasure is to spot and recognize these characters and the people who portray them and also follow their development and aging on the screen. For example in *The Man Without a Past* the careers and roles both of Elina Salo (shipyard clerk) as a "bourgeois woman" and of Esko Nikkari (bank robber) as a goodhearted man weighed down by worries continue. The characters portrayed by Juhani Niemelä (Nieminen) and Kaija Pakarinen (Kaisa Nieminen) can be seen already in another Finnish film; Veikko Aaltonen's *The Final Arrangement* (Tilinteko, 1987). Aaltonen was a close colleague of Kaurismäki in the 1980s.

*The Man Without a Past* also offers a chance to recognize familiar characters from Kaurismäki's films whose actors come outside of the film world. For example the singer-actor Sakari Kuosmanen (Anttila), singer Annikki Tähti (Salvation Army fleamarket manager) and Anneli Sauli (café owner). The latter one has even paid a visit into politics from her singer-actress career. A quick Internet search



The author Aki Kaurismäki

will provide you with a lot of information on them. On the screen one can also spot Atte Blom, the owner of a legendary Finnish record company (Love Records) at the soup kitchen in the company of real-life homeless people, the film historian Peter von Bagh as a Salvation Army officer, and the renowned attorney Matti Wuori rescuing M from the police station. Other mentionable people on the screen are editor and sound designer Timo Linna-salo, set designer Markku Pätilä, actor and bass-player of the band the Leningrad Cowboys Silu Seppälä, and in a photograph on the wall of a bar Matti Pellonpää, Aki Kaurismäki's trusted actor who died in 1995.

### IMAGE, EDITING, RHYTHM

Aki Kaurismäki still shoots on 35mm film which has been a filmmaker's most important instrument for decades before the triumph of digital techniques. Kaurismäki justifies his reluctance to move to digital technology by saying that for him cinema is (and it must be) about the light, whereas digital picture is mere electricity. The use of a film camera sets certain limitations to the work. The camera is big and heavy and film as material, post-production included, expensive to use. One must be more careful with lighting and colors as film is more light sensitive than the digital image.

Kaurismäki puts a lot of work to the details of his films and his expression is minimalistic. The camera remains mainly fixed – a stylistic choice that reminds us of the aesthetics of classic cinema (the equipment was heavy back in the days and therefore camera movements were challenging to perform). Because of the still camera everything must happen in front of the camera, in the shots and the editing between them. "[Tracking shots] always reveal a director uncertain of his narrative. It's the easiest way of hiding the fact that one doesn't really know how the scene should be solved, and on the other hand it creates an illusion that at least something in the story moves – for example, the camera, if nothing else." (PvB, p. 31)

The peaceful rhythm of the Kaurismäki films arises, not only from the camera's immobility, but also from the way of editing. The takes are usually long, respecting the rhythm of human action. Events are given the time they require and the viewers are served with enough time to experience the events. Sound design and musical choices also play an important role in the creation of the film.

### THE MAN WITHOUT A PAST IN AKI KAURIMÄKI'S FILMOGRAPHY

Aki Kaurismäki visited his big brother Mika in Germany while Mika was studying film there. After returning to Finland in the early 1980s the brothers started to make films together. They wrote, produced and were responsible for almost every area of the production. So Aki was seen on the screen for the first time in 1981 in Mika Kaurismäki's film *The Liar* (*Valehtelija*). The brothers also jointly owned a production company called Villealfa (the name refers to Jean-Luc Godard's film *Alphaville*, 1965).

Aki Kaurismäki's catalogue of films contains several genres. He has directed two music documentaries: *The Saimaa Gesture* (*Saimaa-ilmiö*, 1981) which tracks the tour of bands that later grew into the giants of Finnish Rock, and *Total Balalaika Show* (1994) which records the concert of the Leningrad Cowboys and The Red Army Ensemble in the Helsinki Senate Square. He has also directed short films that reminded music videos. Then again, Kaurismäki has made screen adaptations of literary classics such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment*, William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, Jean-Paul Sartre's play *Dirty Hands*, and the Juhani Aho novel *Juha*.

Most of the Kaurismäki films, however, are based on original scripts written by the director himself.

Some of the feature-length films also form larger entities: the Proletarian Trilogy (*Shadows in Paradise / Varjoja paratiisissa*, 1986, *Ariel*, 1988, *The Match-factory Girl / Tulitikkutehtaan tyttö*, 1990) and the Finland Trilogy (*Drifting Clouds / Kauas pilvet karkaavat*, 1996, *The Man Without a Past / Mies vailla menneisyyttä*, 2002, *Lights in the Dusk / Laitakaupungin valot*, 2006). At the moment Kaurismäki seems to be making a harbour town trilogy: *Le Havre* (2011) and *The Other Side of Hope (Toivon tuolla puolen*, 2017) both deal with the same topic, immigration.

Kaurismäki has also taken his world into other countries: *I Hired a Contract Killer* (located in London, the United Kingdom), *La Vie de Bohème (Boheemielämää*, Paris, France) and *Le Havre* (Le Havre, France).

*The Man Without a Past* has its own spot and roots in the Kaurismäki filmography, but also in the Finnish cinema and the history of cinema in general. It acknowledges its background both with the references dear to its maker and elements characteristic to the world he has created. Especially during his early career, Kaurismäki's films received a rather unenthusiastic reception in Finland. The critics claimed that "the people don't talk like that" nor do they "act like that". Kaurismäki was even accused of presenting a false image of *Finland and the Finns*. The success his films gained abroad helped Kaurismäki to defend his vision and his freedom to create. Also the reaction of the authorities and the tourist industry was surprising one; Kaurismäki's films were considered to ruin the image of Finland abroad.

## SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

*Crime and Punishment (Rikos ja rangaistus*, 1983)  
*Calamari Union* (1985)  
*Shadows in Paradise (Varjoja paratiisissa*, 1986)  
*Hamlet Goes Business (Hamlet liikemaailmassa*, 1987)  
*Ariel* (1988)  
*Les mains sales (Likaiset kädet*, TV, 1989)  
*Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (1989)  
*The Match Factory Girl (Tulitikkutehtaan tyttö*, 1990)  
*I Hired a Contract Killer* (1990)  
*La Vie de Bohème (Boheemielämää*, 1992)  
*Take Care of Your Scarf, Tatiana (Pidä huivista kiinni, Tatjana*, 1994)  
*Leningrad Cowboys Meet Moses* (1994)  
*Drifting Clouds (Kauas pilvet karkaavat*, 1996)  
*Juha* (1999)  
*The Man Without a Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä*, 2002)  
*Lights in the Dusk (Laitakaupungin valot*, 2006)  
*Le Havre* (2011)  
*The Other Side of Hope (Toivon tuolla puolen*, 2017)



## REFERENCES

Aki Kaurismäki is a passionate lover of films. His knowledge of cinema and admiration towards this and other art forms (such as literature, visual arts, music etc.) can be felt, seen, and heard in his films. He often refers to other films, sometimes borrowing directly from them, sometimes utilizing more subtle hints. The experience of watching a Kaurismäki film always includes the pleasure of recognizing references from the history of cinema.

Kaurismäki refers to other films – and not just to films – sometimes quite consciously by replicating scenes or images.



SEQUENCE XIV: 1 - *The Man Without a Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä)*, Aki Kaurismäki, 2002 & *Pierrot Le Fou*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1965

2 - *The 400 Blows (Les 400 coups)*, François Truffaut, 1959 *Making of The Man Without a Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä)*, 2002



3 - *Lights in the Dusk (Laitakaupungin valot)*, Aki Kaurismäki, 2006 *The Other Side of Hope (Toivon tuolla puolel)*, Aki Kaurismäki, 2017



SEQUENCE II: 4 - *The Invisible Man*, James Whale, 1933 (All rights reserved) *The Man Without A Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä)*, Aki Kaurismäki, 2002

SEQUENCE I: 5 - *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat (L'Arrivé d'un train en gare de la Ciotat)*, Brothers Lumière, 1895 (All rights reserved) / *The Man Without a Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä)*, Aki Kaurismäki, 2002



SEQUENCE XIX: 8 - *Stars Will Tell, Inspector Palmu (Tähdet kertovat, komisario Palmu)*, Matti Kassila, 1962 © YLE  
*The Man Without a Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä)*, Aki Kaurismäki, 2002

Helsinki and the Central Railway Station of Helsinki play an important role in Kaurismäki's films but also in Finnish cinema in general. In Matti Kassila's film (picture above) a leather-jacketed young hooligan flees the police and tries to reach his girlfriend by telephone. Forty years later in the same station M, whom the police has just released from a custody tries to reach his girlfriend Irma.



SEQUENCE XVII: 9 - *One Man's War (Yhden miehen sota)*, Risto Jarva, 1972 (All rights reserved) & *The Man Without a Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä)*, Aki Kaurismäki, 2002

The Finnish New Wave film *One Man's War* tells about a man who tries to provide for his family by doing his job well as a constructor. After becoming an entrepreneur he takes risks and makes investments, but the times are hard and he drifts into bankruptcy which leads him to a very difficult economical situation (see historical context p. 6). Thirty years later in *The Man Without A Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä)* Esko Nikkari plays the role of an entrepreneur who robs a bank to pay his debts to his employees.



SEQUENCE VI: 10 - *Eight Deadly Shots (Kahdeksan surmanluotia)*, Mikko Niskanen, 1972 & *The Man Without a Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä)*, Aki Kaurismäki, 2002

The end is not always a happy one, not in a film and neither in real life. Characters, like real people, ponder the big questions about the society and their own fate. The answers they come up with are varying and unique. *Eight Deadly Shots* is a film and a four-part TV-series based on true events: a drunk farmer shoots four police officers in March, 1969. The film tells about the hardships the family meet in the post-war Finland, the ones people remained silent about and yet ones that were familiar to all.



*Hulda from Juurakko (Juurakon Hulda),*  
Valentin Vaala, 1937 © KAVI / Suomi-Filmi Oy

**SEQUENCE I: 11** - *Hulda from Juurakko (Juurakon Hulda, Valentin Vaala, 1937) & The Man Without a Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä), Aki Kaurismäki, 2002*

The film *Hulda from Juurakko* is based on a successful theatre play that was later adapted for the silver screen in the *United States* as well (*The Farmer's Daughter*, H.C. Potter, 1947). In the story a young country girl travels to the capital city in search of a better life for herself. Once there, she sits down on a bench. A small group of men approach her. A rich judge hires her as his housekeeper. Hulda lives a double life and studies in secret. In the end she manages to rise higher in society due to her patience and determination.

The viewer recognizes M's anticipation and hopes as he sits alone on a bench in an unfamiliar and nocturnal city. The three men approaching him do not, however, offer him the same chances as Hulda got.

It is impressive how Aki Kaurismäki shows his respect to the cinematic art in his own work. *The Man Without a Past* is full of references and recollections from the great classics of history of cinema, but also of films that are the director's favorites. The references to the films from the previous decades enrich the work of our own time. It would be futile (perhaps even impossible?) to make a detailed list of all quotations Kaurismäki has brought into his films in scenes or in individual shots. These few examples might awaken a desire in the viewer to see the films in question or just to enjoy Kaurismäki's film as one experiences it on the screen for the first time.

The prevailing weather, the color palette used in a scene, the choice of the objects and the sound world are elements Kaurismäki use to immerse the viewer in the world of the film while he also gives them a chance to familiarize themselves with M's destiny. Sometimes the references are used to create an ambience, awaken expectations in the viewer, or to enrich the narrative. However they may also function as winks, jokes, or visual puns. It is the viewer's task to form his own interpretation.

When M arrives to the container village in *The Man Without A Past* it can remind the viewer, for instance, of the the borderline between the old and the modern world. The reference is familiar for example from the films of Jacques Tati. For a short moment, the both worlds exist at the same time until the more contemporary one grabs the power and breaks the peace so natural to the old world.

In the precisely constructed images every single object, angle or lighting awakens thoughts, guides the viewer's interpretations and creates various kinds of expectations. In an idyllic scenery the pram and the stairs might remind the viewer of the famous scene in the classic Soviet film *Battleship Potemkin* (*Sergei Eisenstein, 1925*) where a pram slips away from the person pushing them and the tram slips down the stairs uncontrolled.



*The Man Without a Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä), Aki Kaurismäki, 2002*



#### SEQUENCE VI: 12 -

*The Man Without a Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä)*, Aki Kaurismäki, 2002  
& *My Uncle, Jacques Tati*, 1958 (All rights reserved)



#### 13 -

*The Man Without a Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä)*, Aki Kaurismäki, 2002  
&  
*Battleship Potemkin*, Sergei Eisenstein, 1925

All rights reserved.



#### SEQUENCE V: 15 -

*The Man Without a Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä)*, Aki Kaurismäki, 2002  
&  
*Pierrot le Fou*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1965  
&  
*The 400 Blows*, François Truffaut, 1959

© 1959 Les Films du Carrosse / SEDIF – Photo © André Dino / mk2 D.R.

The mysterious gaze directed at the camera in Ingmar Bergman's film *Summer with Monika* (*Sommaren med Monika*, 1953) has inspired several directors, especially the makers of the French New Wave which was a genre that appeared first time in the late 1950s, like Jean-Luc Godard in his film *Pierrot le Fou* (1965). Bergman's film was an important inspiration also for François Truffaut's film *The 400 Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*). In *The Man Without A Past* in 2002 Irma looks straight at the camera, something very rare for Kaurismäki. In the scene in question Irma is alone in her modest room, looking through the window to the nocturnal city that M is also concurrently observing in his own loneliness. Throughout the film the exchange of looks between Irma and M are intensive. Irma's gaze searches for love, creating expectations in the viewer.

## INTERVIEW

Peter von Bagh (PvB): A new aspect of *The Man Without a Past* is a sort of fantasy side in its emphasis, the potential death of the protagonist.

Aki Kaurismäki (AK): *Nah, he doesn't die. I'm a filmmaker, not a doctor, but I believe that it's obvious to every conscious viewer that a dead man doesn't walk. Perhaps there was too little staff both in the hospital and in heaven, and obsolete machinery, and our character was able to slip past due to some error a bit like the protagonist in Michael Powell's and Emeric Pressburger's film A Matter of Life and Death (1946). And besides, no-one cares a whit about such a guy in his forties or fifties any more these days, they can't even be bothered to check that he's properly dead. They go to the maternity ward to have a smoke and the deceased jumps and skips through the city.*

PvB: I am relieved. Can you recall how this story, one of your best, came to be?

AK: *It comes from playing with the same building blocks as in the previous worker and loser dramas, so after initial difficulties it was completed in the space of the normal few days once I finally summoned up enough courage to sit down at the typewriter. No serious director has too many themes, so-called professionals are a different thing: they make a film without personality from any theme. [...]*

PvB: One of the great things about *The Man Without A Past* has to do with the intensive color expression. Usually the border areas of the society are depicted differently from the containers and canteens of this film.

AK: *There weren't too many authentic locations, although people were living in the containers before we came. The problem with Helsinki is that it has no shoreline where we could have built the container village so that you get the city in the background. One cannot get a general view of Helsinki anywhere except from a few towers.*

PvB: Now this comes close to Kurosawa from two directions. *High and Low (Tengoku to jigoku, 1963)* and its two societies, and on the other, *Dodes'ka-den (1970)* with its rich colours.

AK: *Drunken Angel (Yoido retenshi, 1948)* did visit my mind but it didn't progress to the level of concrete influences.



PvB: Frank Capra and Vittorio De Sica were mentioned as the godfathers in connection with *Drifting Clouds*, and you admitted it yourself. What about here?

AK: *This film had pretty few godfathers, I think I made it almost alone by myself. In fact I used up in this film all the building blocks left over from my previous films with the similar style.*

PvB: How did your idea of a color palette work in this film?

AK: *At the set design stage I again had the color chart in my back pocket. I threw colors codes from it to the set decorators quite boisterously and arbitrarily. I tried to create some kind of harmony through counterpoints. Later we also graded the print an extremely warm tone, bringing up the reds and yellows. In this way, we created an illusion of set design continuum.*

PvB: I assume that your visual narrative lacks a great number of means to do with modern technology?

AK: *The filmmakers' unreasonable exhilaration over ever-emerging new techniques is in fact covering up the fact that they don't know how to use the old ones, either. Cinema begins with the camera obscura and you don't need a too complicated box to produce an image of a good quality. As a matter of fact, Institute Lumière in Lyon asked some years ago a group of filmmakers to shoot*

*films of a few minutes duration with the old camera of the Brothers Lumière, and the end result didn't lack much from the present ones.*

*I don't believe in digital photography or digital cinematography because electricity will never replace light when we talk about the image. Flowers need light, digital bits turn them into artificial flowers. In the same way digital sound recording takes away something essential from music: the cosmic static, the distortion, in a word: the soul. Digital cinematography also introduces the problem of credibility; Harold Lloyd's hanging from the hand of a skyscraper clock (Safety Last! 1923) loses its significance if the viewer can't trust the fact that Lloyd is really doing it.*

*I am getting old enough to call it quits if shooting and editing with the traditional technique becomes impossible. I have most of all considered myself as an artisan during all these years, and that has been the source of the occasional joy that can be gained from this pro-*

*fession. In one seminar people justified the excellence of the digital silver screen because opening the door in the middle of the film when people get out of the cinema will not disturb the picture. First of all, why should people get out in the middle of the screening? And secondly, that problem was solved already during the varietee days with a simple curtain in front of the door. Behind all the idle words lies just the desire of the film industry to cut their costs and the number of projectionists.*

*Even our memories are quite strongly connected to the light where something has taken place. Light comes before what happens.*

[...]

PvB: How was the musical world of *The Man Without a Past* born?

*AK: In a commercial cross-draught. My original intention was to use plenty of old rhythm'n blues and popular music. All my plans were wrecked, however, by huge prices demanded by corporations that have stolen the life's work of countless musicians and the legacies of widows with a price of few cents. So I couldn't really use any of what I'd planned, but perhaps it paradoxically made the musical background better, or livelier at least.*

[...]

PvB: You said you often use music to replace dialogue. Can you do the same with colors?

*AK: Yes, if you use them like that. You can make comments about a person with colors, define a scene and thus the characters' state of mind. You can do anything with colors, even ruin a film like Peter Greenaway has shown us.*

*On the other hand, only light can show us the colors and create the shadows, which are the mirror of the soul, as we have learned from Rembrandt. FBI men have no shadow.*

(Peter von Bagh: Aki Kaurismäki, Helsinki: WSOY, 2006/2012, pp. 183-189)



## SEQUENCES OF THE FILM



1 – Opening credits and preface. M arrives by train at the Helsinki Central Rail. He is beaten up at night and gets damaged so seriously that he is pronounced dead twice. (0 à 06 min 07)



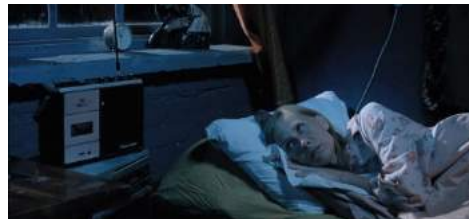
2 – M leaves the hospital, arrives later to the seashore. A family living in a container in the port area on the edge of the city takes him in. (06 min 08 to 07 min 46)



3 – The Nieminen family takes care of M. He utters his first words: he doesn't remember a thing. M observes the everyday life of the family and the village community. (07 min 47 to 11 min 47)



4 – M first visits the folk canteen with Nieminen, then a bar. M exchanges his first looks with Irma. (11 min 48 to 19 min 00)



5 – Irma is alone at home. Outside the window lies the same sleeping city that M watches at the same time from his own vantage point. (19 min 01 to 21 min 10)



6 – M is introduced to Anttila, from whom he rents a container to himself to live in. With the help from his friends, M settles in his new home and plants his potatoes. (21 min 11 to 29 min 36)



7 – M meets Irma again in the Salvation Army canteen. They discuss his situation. Irma encourages M to take his life into his own hands. (29 min 37 to 30 min 41)



8 – At the Employment Agency M tries to register as a jobseeker, without a success. (30 min 42 to 34 min 00)



9 – The owner of a small café treats M in a warm, humane manner. After finishing his meal, M leaves to visit the Salvation Army where he is also welcomed with benevolent warmth. (34 min 01 to 38 min 21)



10 – M negotiates with Anttila and promises to pay his rent immediately after receiving his pay. M escorts Irma, now his fellow worker, and steals a kiss. (38 min 22 to 44 min 17)



11 – Irma dresses up for lunch with M. As they listen to music on the couch, they lean against each other. (44 min 184 to 47 min 43)



12 – Having met the Salvation Army band M suggests they take up a new musical style with more rhythm in it. M negotiates with their leader. (47 min 44 to 50 min 50)



13 – Midsummer party arranged by the Salvation Army. At their workplace, M and Irma tell each other their future plans. (50 min 51 to 53 min 02)



14 – M and Irma set out for a trip in a car rented from Anttila. When they return Anttila tries to sell them tickets to a concert arranged by M. (51 min 03 to 57 min 14)



15 – M would get a job as a welder, but can't start without identity papers. (57 min 15 to 59 min 18)



16 – M tries to open a bank account when a bank robber attacks the bank office. M is taken to a police station to be interrogated. M calls Irma who gets him a lawyer. (59 min 19 to 1h 09 min 15)



17 – The bank robber contacts M, making him an offer M cannot refuse. M starts to clear up the entrepreneur's debt. (1h 09 min 16 to 1h 14 min 12)



18 – M is satisfied with his potato crops. The police arrives, having sorted out M's real identity. M leaves to check out his past. (1h 14 min 13 to 1h 17 min 48)



19 – M realizes he's not the man he used to be. (1h 17 min 49 to 1h 26 min 26)



20 – Having made peace with his past M returns to Helsinki. He meets the men who assaulted him, who are alarmed to realize M is alive. Led by Anttila, the villagers teach them a real lesson. (1h 26 min 27 to 1h 28 min 59)



21 – M returns to Irma. They leave the silver screen together.. (1h 29 min 00 to 1h 32 min 24)



## QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GAZES IN THE FILM

A gaze has an especially important status in cinematic expression. It is often a central instrument for expressing emotions and feelings. The look retained its expressive force even after the birth of sound cinema, but it was used in very inventive ways in silent films already. The relationships between the characters are reflected in their eyes, but in their mirror remains the characters' experience of themselves, too. "A good actor can express more with his left eyebrow than dropping down few helicopters or a guerrilla war in the living room." (PvB, p. 157)

The gaze creates an extremely strong bond between two characters, or a character and his surroundings, revealing everything about how the character feels. In Kaurismäki's films the acting is plain and restrained. It represents the art of leaving things undone or the art of a modest expression. Gazes are some of the most visible parts of the work between the actor and the director. For instance, while building the interaction between two characters, the director may point out the direction with his finger where the actor in front of the camera should look. The look is therefore not between two real actors but between the actor and the director's finger on the other side of the lens. "At times Kaurismäki asked me to look four centimeters past the girl's nose. Sometimes the director wanted ten percent pride or 33 percent melancholy." (actor Janne Hyytiäinen, PvB, p. 157).

The gaze constructed in this manner gains its meaning and emotional content at the editing table. Thus we can follow the rebuilding or creation of M's identity in *The Man Without A Past* by observing the gazes he directs towards the world and himself. The rhythm and the duration created by the editing process. The angle of the frame and size and the sound world affect the viewer's perception and interpretation of the gaze.

Below we have verbally interpreted the meanings and emotions conveyed by the protagonist's gazes in fixed images. There may be several interpretations, The effect is also created by the editing (the duration), camera angles, the sound world, and possible music playing in the background, the lighting, etc. Different people can also perceive emotions and the ways they are expressed in different ways.

The gaze is an essential element in the cinematic art in general. You can observe the use of the gazes in other films as well, especially the great classics of cinema history. When analyzing the gaze you can also use the pedagogical film about the gazes in the CinEd collection.



*Pensive, lonely, expectant, calm*



*Concentrated, agitated*



*Powerless, surprised, masked*



*Fearful, uncertain*



*Determined, open*



*Dreamy*



*Wistful, melancholic*



*Optimistic, curious*

Confusion, surprise and curiousness in M's eyes as he sees something that reminds him of his past :



1

M at the unemployment agency:



2

The gazes M directs at other people, especially the representatives of different institutions challenging him, describe the attitude the system has towards the protagonist. In these scenes, also the angle changes. M is looked at from "above" (the upper corner on the screen). Whereas the people in power are usually looked from below (on the screen, from the low angle). M's gaze reveals the position he is put in or the position he takes in different situations.



3

M seeks a job:



4



5



6



7

M in a bank:



8



9



10



11



12



13



14

Relations between people can be seen as a duel of the gazes. The battle is fought with the means of the film narrative: acting, mise en scène / set design, and directing, sound design and editing (duration and rhythm). These all together create an illusion of emotion and strengthen it. The viewer feels sympathy towards M.



15



16



17

M is defenseless in front of the police, getting into deep trouble. The duel turns into a three-way affair when a lawyer arrives to defend him, a sort of deus ex machina which quickly makes the interrogator feel trapped.



18



19



20



21

There are very strong gazes between M and Anttila from the beginning of the film. We follow their contest through Irma's eyes and gaze, and it shows the gradual change and progress of M's position. Finally we no longer look down on him.

A loving gaze / a lover's look is doubtlessly the one provoking the most interest and emotions in the viewers. It is one of the most well-known and most often repeated motifs. The encounter of M and Irma, love's first flames and the development of their relationship, powerful emotions and the problems they bring, are there to be read in their gazes from the beginning of the film to its end.

The first look between Irma and M is a very powerful moment in the film. Time seems to stop, and we immediately feel the significance of this prolonged moment.



22

## SEQUENCE IV



23



24

The repetition intensifies the power of the gazes: M and Irma in the same frame, already closer to each other, but still separated by objects and the roles of the helper and the one who is being helped. At close distance they already dare to look each other directly in the eye.



35



26

When Irma and M meet for the first time at the soup kitchen – the scene is preceded by the nocturnal sequence where the editing already predicts what is coming by connecting the two solitudes (Irma in her room, M in the container village) – the intensity of the gazes grows too strong and certainly burning. So they have to turn their eyes away, yet still in the same direction.

## SEQUENCE IX



27

The search for the right distance between the characters, in this case between lovers, requires several phases. Norms of the society, Irma's faith and blamelessness symbolized by the uniform she carries, and the broom M uses, these all serve to maintain the distance between them, binding them to their roles. The gap is also symbolically highlighted by the coolness of the autumn, reminded by the dead leaves (absurdly in the middle of the summer) driven around by the wind.

## SEQUENCE X



28



29

With the table determining the proper distance between M and Irma, they can safely slip into each other's gaze at equal height in the soft light.

## SEQUENCE XI



30



31

Again there is no obstacle between M and Irma and the intense look begins to feel too bold and strong. Irma directs her gaze out of the frame to have the courage to meet M's look again.



32



33

When they have given up their roles (of which the most obvious sign was Irma's uniform), a warm and potent gaze can light up the lovers' eyes.

## SEQUENCE XIV



34

The dog's gaze. Hannibal only eats raw meat. Dogs are important characters in Aki Kaurismäki's films. His own dog appears in almost all of his films as an extra at least. In *The Man Without a Past* the dog is introduced as a mean beast, but the look in its eyes contradicts the role, immediately revealing the animal's true nature. Contrary to what its original owner wants to claim, Hannibal is a sensitive and friendly animal. The dog's name creates irony around the couple as well. Hannibal doesn't mangle or maul anything, neither does Anttila who is nothing like Attila the Hun.



35



36



## REALISM AND POETRY

Because of the subjects of Aki Kaurismäki's films, they have often been described as realistic by the critics. This notion is undoubtedly partly also based on the fact that Kaurismäki never works in a studio. In an interview Kaurismäki gave as a young director in 1984 he said that he favours reality, i.e. prefers to shoot in surroundings that exist despite of the filmmakers. In doing so, he acknowledged his shared roots with the "new waves" born within the cinematic traditions after the late 1950s in various countries. Such as Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (*À bout de souffle*, 1959) and Agnès Varda's *Cléo from 5 to 7* (*Cléo de 5 à 7*, 1962) where many scenes are shot in the streets of Paris in the middle of the everyday life of the capital city. Although Kaurismäki's style has developed towards an increasingly fictional reality since his first film *Crime and punishment* (*Rikos ja rangaistus*, 1983), especially in his early works the narration was dependent on prevailing locations: "Conscious use of milieu is usually rather sparse in Finnish cinema, content being much more important. We [Aki and Mika Kaurismäki] have often first found the milieu we favor and only then done our thing in that particular milieu."<sup>1</sup> In 1992 the director again expressed his desire to use existing locations. Because "the old Paris can now be only found in the suburbs" he decided to film *La Vie de Bohème* in Malakoff: "It's about the atmosphere. I find it repulsive to change reality. That's why I have to film where people actually live, even if it's an eight-square-metre room."<sup>2</sup>



Kaurismäki's method began to change when he directed *Drifting Clouds* (*Kauas pilvet karkaavat*, 1996), the first part in his trilogy depicting Finnish reality. He explained it in an interview he gave to the daily newspaper Helsingin Sanomat: "When I started to write this film I placed Frank Capra's emotional salvation story *It's a Wonderful Life!* on one extreme edge of the assignment and Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (*Ladri di biciclette*) on the other, and the Finnish reality in the mid-point of them. My secret aim has always been to make films that leave the audience be a bit happier when they exit the cinema compared to when they were coming in. With this theme [the financial recession of the early 1990s and the mass unemployment that followed] it was essential. [- -] I had to discover optimism without losing my grip on reality, make modern neorealism in color. [- -] *Drifting Clouds* (*Kauas pilvet karkaavat*) was made

like a studio film. We rented empty apartments, of which there's no shortage in Helsinki. I ordered colour maps in advance for the set decorators. Pointed at them; that color and that. I tried to make sure, however, that we wouldn't be creating anything like *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (*Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*) [- -] The film has quite a strong Hopperesque influence. The asceticism attracted me. Clean colors. I like to play with colors all the way to the fantastic."

Closer examination of some of the scenes in the second part of the Finland Trilogy, *The Man Without a Past* reveals elements that bring to mind both Capra's utopistic world and De Sica's poetic one. A good example is the container village where M finds

refuge, having first become a victim of an assault and then miraculously leaving the hospital. The viewer will never find out how M ends up on the seashore – the descending camera finds him lying on the rocky shore, suggesting that he may perhaps have fallen from the heavens like a wounded angel (sequence 2).

The home of the Nieminen family is extremely poor but gracefully furnished. The foodstuffs and the tableware arranged on the shelves, the lace curtain on the window, and the chequered cloth on the table are all evidence of an attempt to turn the gloomy container into a cosy habitat. The lamp placed in the frame's middle area casts a soft light on the faces of M and Nieminen's wife discussing

at the table. Although the composition of the characters doesn't directly refer to any of Edward Hopper's paintings, the velvet-like light, the stationary postures, and the lit faces remind us of the style of this particular American painter.

<sup>2</sup> Peter von Bagh, "Kellarin filosofia", Filmihullu 7 / 1984, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Anquetil, "Le mélo d'un excentrique", Le Nouvel Observateur, 12.–18.3.1992, p. 97

<sup>4</sup> Helsingin Sanomat 27.02



The home of the family Nieminen is modest but cosy.

Happy communal life in the container village yard: the people play music, cook, look after a baby and flowers, wash clothes and themselves. The tunes of an accordion, the sunny weather, the washing fluttering in the wind on the clothesline are reminiscent of an old-fashioned world created by Jacques Tati in *My Uncle* (1958). The homemade shower operated by Nieminen's sons is a proof of the survival skills and inventiveness of the small community. The devices show the power of co-operation and reminds in its lyricism of the countless machines, contraptions, and other inventions a poor person can use to retain his dignity. On a general level, the container village is an open space opposed by state institutions (employment agency, police station, the bank) depicted as closed spaces without hope and solidarity.



A home-made shower is proof of inventiveness and survival skills.



Motherhood is a recurring theme in the visual arts. This sunny take of a young mother and a baby asleep in a cart is a Kaurismäkiesque version of the theme.



An accordion, "the poor man's organ", accompanies the everyday routines of the small community.



The vending machine for milk in Charlie Chaplin's movie "Chaplin's son" (1921) © Roy Export S.A.S.



The replacement of a pillow in Charlie Chaplin's movie *A Dog's Life* (1918) (C) Roy Export S.A.S. © Roy Export S.A.S.

### FIXED FRAME / MOVING CAMERA

Takes without camera movement and accentuated, measured compositions that draw the viewer's attention are typical to the style of Aki Kaurismäki's films. The Kaurismäki form pursues compactness both with careful framing of the shot and the use of ellipsis, i.e. encapsulating the narration to the story's turning points, momentarily distilling the narrative. The take recorded by an immobile camera is also an independent zone, an islet encompassed by the framing or composition, a sort of cinematic painting. Its immobility seems to try to stop all movement, and by implication, all life in order to be able to capture the moments before they disappear. By the same logic, the solidified, heavily built, and quiet bodies create at least an ostensible impression of order and permanence.

Slow, heavy and perfectly stationary, Aki Kaurismäki's characters seem to wander from one film to another in a melancholic state. Ever since his debut feature film *Crime and Punishment* (*Rikos ja rangaistus*) the fate of many protagonists is grief and desperation. The pessimism characteristic to this director's work is not brightened by a few "happy endings" where the leading couple flees towards a better life (*Shadows in Paradise*, *Ariel*, *I Hired a Contract Killer*, *Take Care of Your Scarf*, *Tatiana*, *The Man Without a Past*) or starts to build it on the ruins of their former life (*Drifting Clouds*). Death stalks people in Kaurismäki's films: murders, suicides and fatal diseases bring people down, stopping them for good. Whether they are workers, unemployed, or artists of the modern world, in the end the capitalist economic system rises up against them, breaks their spirit, blocks their path, paralyses them, or pushes them aside.

Typical to these marginalized characters is a heavy gait, stagnation, drowsiness, dozing off, even violent physical breakdowns, a vacant gaze, and reticence. Directional work (mise en scène) takes part in expressing the emotionless state, reluctance, and discouragement by favoring takes without camera movement, allowing for duration, and by placing the almost expressionless actors within a plain and sternly framed image.



*The image of a person sleeping, unconscious or lying (on the ground) is repeated in *The Man Without a Past*. After being assaulted, M is buried under his suitcase and belongings*



*M lies unconscious in the railway station public toilet.*



*M rests on the hospital bed.*



*M shipwrecked on a desolate shore.*



*A homeless man has fallen asleep on the rocky ground under the stars.*



*Irma lies on her bed, listening to rock music.*



*M lies on his straw mattress.*

In Aki Kaurismäki's films the contrary dynamics aiming at disintegration and dilution rises as a counterforce to closed, stagnant, ordered, and constricted. Examples of these are e.g. numerous fade outs ending the films or even in individual takes, and especially the feeling of sliding, created in certain takes by the movement of camera, characters, or objects.

A panning shot of an urban scene is a recurring motif in Kaurismäki's films. These takes of the city do not tell the viewer anything, nor do they really show us anything – unless that of what is fleeing, disappearing, absent. The detachment of the takes from the story corresponds to the distance of the location being shot. This manifests in the images both as the camera's distance (long shot, high angle) and as disturbances in the view (night, fog). The scene flees the eye. It slides, like the camera slides panning the city, like the headlights of cars slide in the darkness. In these images the city makes its presence known while it does not accentuate itself – it is both there and not there, within reach and hidden, always existing and yet forever already lost.



*As M arrives to Helsinki by train he watches the nocturnal city gliding past outside the window in a horizontal panning shot (opening credits).*



*Having stepped out from the train M sits down on a bench in a park and falls asleep. Before the shot where we see him sleeping, a slow panning shot shows us the night-time silhouette of the city.*

Like a yearning which takes over someone prone to nostalgia – one who "feels in his spirit the distance to the place where his body is" – being on board (in a ship, car, motorcycle, tram, or train) provides a passenger an opportunity to put some distance between himself and the present. At the same time the scenery we travel through quite often start to glide by to the tunes of a slow-playing song or a melody from another era or place (when M arrives in Helsinki by train, the song *Hawaii No Yoru* by the Japanese Crazy Ken Band is playing – sequence 19). Kaurismäki's film *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (1989) is punctuated by several series of horizontal tracking shots presenting the musician's travel as fleeting pieces of the American landscape. The scenery glides past our eyes, leaving no space for observation. The viewer's gaze slides over the fleeing, fragmented reality without a centre, indefinite spaces, nocturnal cities, on the outskirts of towns, industrial areas, corn fields, or wild nature. The scenery slips past onscreen without demanding attention, it glides, allows itself go, like one can let oneself die. When the tracking shots are joined together at the editing table, the places fleeting past are linked together like the gigs the musicians play, inexorably repeating and duplicating each other. Kaurismäki doesn't show us so much the landscape but rather their soon to disappear remnants. Neither does the movement within the images, and the journey it creates from appearance to disappearance, create an impression of "documenting locations" as presenting their "final moments".

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L'Irréversible et la Nostalgie*, Paris, Flammarion, coll. « Nouvelle bibliothèque scientifique », 1974, p. 281.



## FRAME ANALYSIS

### SMALL HEART (SEQUENCE 13)

**Background.** After M has introduced the Salvation Army musicians to the world of rock'n'roll, he suggests to the manager of the recycling centre that they should include popular music to the program of the social evening. "So far music hasn't killed anyone," the manager replies, and continues: "We could try it. I used to sing myself a bit when I was younger. Let's go." Camera moves to a medium close-up of a Salvation Army officer briefly introducing the tango Small heart. In the role of the officer we see the well-known cinema historian Peter von Bagh. He has written about popular music in several books and documentary films, calling it "the nation's secret memory" and "the history of feelings". In the frame being examined we hear the first beats of the tango.

**Cinematography.** The image in question is a shot horizontally divided into two separate areas. In the forefront, sheltered by fences, the canteen customers dine and listen to music. The colors are faded except for a red splash resembling a heart, created by the coat of a woman in the middle of the frame. Rising up in the background, the cold white facade of modern building hides the sky. It is a spice and coffee factory still in operation. The strict geometric pattern of the rows of windows form a contrast to the temporary benches and tables placed here and there by the Salvation Army. The characters and their belongings are placed on the screen in the form of a circle. This is a metaphor of their ally-ness in the front of threat of capitalism.

**Community.** Canteen customers sit in small groups. Despite the company, everyone is silent – as if sunk in their loneliness. Still, a community is forming under our very eyes that as a silent and nameless one will rise up and demand to be recognized. The apparent chaos reigning in the Salvation Army backyard creates an impression of life completely missing from the modern architecture in the background. Future lovers Irma and M are already standing together by the soup kitchen. In the hands of the



*The Salvation Army is organizing a popular ball to celebrate Saint John's Day with the needy.*

Salvation Army this army-issue mobile kitchen perhaps serves as a reminder that love and solidarity are a power stronger than all wars and armies.

**The star.** In the middle of the composition above the red-coated woman performs the Salvation Army band with the Recycling Centre manager as their soloist. She is played by the great Finnish singer Annikki Tähti whose career began already in 1953. In the film she sings two of her most popular songs (Do You Remember Monrepos / Muis-tatko Monrepos'n and Small Heart / Pieni sydän), which can be found on the A and B sides of the first Finnish gold record. During the frame we examine the audience hears the first notes of the tango Small heart. The lyrics list various contradictory feelings and sensations that can fill the human heart. There is love and squalor, happiness and sorrow, noble ideals and squalid thoughts, i.e. everything that Fate will bestow on us. In the scene the series of portraits of the faces and bodies of men and women who have seen the life corresponds visually to this list.

**Let them dance.** After tango's arrival from Argentina it had its first golden era in the 1930s and 1940s in Finland. Certain thematic and stylistic features developed in the

Finnish tango that distinguishes it from its Argentinian role model. The Second World War played a central role in this development. The disappointments of a nation in the throes of the horrors of war and financial shortage seem to have characterize the Finnish tango deeply. Instead of burning passion, they find inspiration in crushed hopes or betrayed love. Dancing was forbidden during wartime Finland. "Let them dance," says the Salvation Army officer in Kaurismäki's film. Music soothes and offers a chance for encounters between people.

6 Pirjo Kukkonen, *Tango Nostalgia. The Language of Love and Longing*, Helsinki, Helsinki University Press, 1996.

## SHOT ANALYSIS

### AND THEY LIVED HAPPILY...

**Background.** After M has made peace with his past in a scene where he, his ex-wife and her new partner make up, M returns to Helsinki. He has miraculously survived another attack – his homeless friends come to defend him, led by Anttila the guard – M reaches Irma, kneels down in front of her and leads her out. At the same time the Salvation Army leader performs a nostalgic song of the lost province of Karelia. "You didn't stay away for long," Irma says. "No." M replies. "For a moment I worried." Irma continues. "No reason to," says M. After which they exit the frame to the left, their backs towards the camera and they walk hand in hand (in the final image of the film) towards the storage and cargo area. Before the concluding fade-out a long freight traverses the frame slowly from left to right, momentarily hiding Irma and M from sight. When the last car is gone from the view, the lovers have vanished.

**Departure.** This shot is typical to Kaurismäki. The final scene – or the final shot – of his films often depicts moving away: someone or something (a ship or a boat) moves away from the camera standing still. This is, of course, the sign that the film is about to end. Similar endings are many in the history of cinema. One of the most famous ones is in Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times* (1936) where the Tramp and his companion (the Girl, played by Paulette Goddard) walk hand in hand away, towards their destiny. At the same time sun rises in the horizon and the films' theme song Smile starts to play. In Kaurismäki's film it is not morning but evening. The characters are no longer living the golden days of their youth, but closing on to fifty. The song accompanying the scene, Remember Monrepos? is a waltz in low-tempo. The lyrics, full of nostalgia, describe the wonderful Monrepos Park where memories alone can now transport us. The aged voice of Annikki Tähti is frail, momentarily almost breaking. All the elements of the scene seem to convey the idea of a finish, or a transition. We are, after all, in an area reserved for transporting traffic where the rotation of people, trains,



and goods never stops. Occasionally paths connect, like in the last frame of the film where railway tracks cross a wooden gangway the lovers proceed along. In the twirling waltz, the intertwined dancers whirl around themselves. Likewise the ending story coils into a ring: the nocturnal cargo area and the freight train bring the viewer back to the beginning of the film where M arrives in the dark Helsinki on the evening train.

**Monrepos.** The famous park the waltz tells about is located in the almost mythical town of Viipuri ceded to the Soviet Union after the Second World War. The French word "repos" means "rest", and reminds us of the popular motif of the golden era of Finnish paintings (appr. 1880-1910): the Garden of Death. The theme stems from the Mediaeval belief that the dead rest in a flowering garden. Hugo Simberg was one of the pivotal painters of the era, and his painting *The Wounded Angel* (*Haavoittunut enkeli*, 1903) is directly referred to both in *The Man Without a Past* (in the scene where the boys of Nieminen use a wooden stick to carry a water canister and find the unconscious M on the shore) and in *Calamari Union* (1985). According to Simberg, "the Garden of Death is a place where souls end up before they are admitted to heaven." M is a wounded angel, but he may as well be dead already. In the first

scene of the film M is beaten up and left to lie on the ground, buried under his suitcase. Then he is pronounced dead by the toilet attendant, and finally by the doctor in the hospital. Aki Kaurismäki's film that primarily describes the historical and verifiable effects of economic recession on people already in a vulnerable position, turns into a horror movie where death sows terror in passers-by (the wounded M at the railway station) and where homeless people suddenly appear from nowhere like zombies in a horror flick (M's friends save him at the last moment from the hands of the bullies threatening him in the cargo area).

<sup>7</sup> The sentence is written on a sketch made by the painter on the theme of the *Garden of Death*. See Sakari Saarikivi, Hugo Simberg. *Elämä ja tuotanto* (Hugo Simberg. His life and works), Helsinki, WSOY, 1948, p. 153.

**Fairy tales.** The final scene of the film and its final shot describe the real life familiar to us. A couple on the verge of a breakup finds each other and gets a second chance. At the same time certain elements preceding the final frame of the film lead us into the world of fairytales. Kaurismäki has used it as a source already in his film *The Match Factory Girl* (1990), which utilizes parts of Hans Christian Andersen's famous story *The Little Match Girl*. At the musical soiree arranged by the Salvation Army M kneels in front of Irma like a charming prince, taking her hand in his. Looking deep into each other's eyes, they get up and head towards the exit. Their movements are slow, as if the rhythm of the film had slowed down for a moment. The famous slow motion scenes and the couple's ascent towards the heavens in Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* (*La belle et la Bête*, 1946) come inevitably to mind. A charmed moment like in fairytales where the prince's and the princess's life together is often sealed with the famous sentence: "And they lived happily ever after."

**All is grace.** Kaurismäki leaves the ending open. We will not know whether the future of M and Irma will be happy or unhappy. But even if everything was gloomy and the scene carries a melancholy undercurrent, there is still hope. "All is grace," says Irma earlier on in the film. The line has been borrowed from the final words of Georges Bernanos' book *The Diary of a Country Priest* (*Journal d'un curé de campagne*, 1936), dealing with faith and doubt: "But a few moments later he put his hand over mine, and his eyes entreated me to draw closer to him. He then uttered these words almost in my ear. And I am quite sure that I repeat them accurately, for his voice, though halting, was strangely distinct. 'Does it matter? Grace is... everywhere.' I think he died just then."

## SCENE ANALYSIS

### IN THE LOWLANDS (SEQUENCE 9)



**Background.** M's visit to the Employment Agency ends with a bitter disappointment. He is unable to fill the forms the official gives him because he can't remember his own personal details. The agency chief sends him away, saying drily: "The Drama School's round the corner. They might have use for you. Don't waste our time again. Some people here want to work. (...) Now get out of my sight. Drugs you can find on the streets." The bar scene we study here where M, who has literally hit the bottom, receives help from two unknown persons, is direct continuation to the scene where the Unemployment Agency chief throws M into the street.

**Tension decreasing.** The encounter of M and the owner of a modest corner café – played by Anneli Sauli, the icon of Finnish cinema who began her career in the 1950s – is built on the drama between these two characters. Separated by the counter dividing the space, M and the owner observe each other, one as discouraged, the other seemingly crank. Their gazes touch slightly, but do not properly meet. The expression on the woman's face seems to speak of growing disgust as M's wretched condition gradually becomes clear to her monitoring gaze. When M takes a matchbox out of his pocket and digs a used teabag out of it that he then drops into his cup, the degradation is culminated and the tension becomes extremely strained. The owner disappears behind the kitchen curtain. The viewer is certain that M will soon be thrown out in the street again. In the next shot the owner, now accompanied by the cook, steps into the frame together with the sound of a curtain drawn back, and their impenetrable eyes serve to strengthen the impression. The surprise is great in the next shot when the owner steps up to M and brings him a portion of food left over from lunch. "You seem hungry," she says. "I have no money," M confesses. "Doesn't matter. We'd just throw it away," the owner replies. The formal way of addressing M, that at first seemed to keep the character at a distance from each other, turned into a sign of respect. When both M's body and soul have been fed through the unexpected and unlikely love of his close ones, in the next scene he enters the Salvation Army store to receive new clothes, a job, and a new chance. The café where M regains his strength is called Alma's Saloon – a most appropriate name for an establishment whose owner has a "good soul" (soul translates "alma" in Latin).

**Aesthetics of reticence.** The scene consists of fourteen shots. Apart from a small panning shot following M's arrival into the bar, the camera does not move and shows the people as equals (characters measuring each other with their gaze) and objects (M's tea cup and meal). The aspects of the shots alters from a medium shot to a close-up. Only in the two first shots framing the events the aspect is larger. Even though the scene is founded on an increasing tension ultimately subsiding in a surprising concord, the rhythm of the shots and inertia and the sparse dialogue convey an impression of reticence. The dialogue is extremely scarce: most of the scene takes place in silence, giving room for the language of gazes that reveals the difference and distance between the main characters inside the scene. The gazes work as powerfully as the counter separating them physically.

The bar is gloomy although outside it is a sunny day. The location with its flowers, wooden surfaces and the red, orange and yellow-hued window stickers remind us of the 1970s. The window is barred – a detail that reminds us the prison inside one's head where M has drifted into due to his loss of memory. The impression of a frozen pocket in time is strengthened by the music playing throughout the scene. The tune is melancholy, performed by Tapio Rautavaara. Besides a popular actor, he also won the Olympic gold medal in javelin-throwing in London Olympic Games in 1948. The name of the song recorded in 1951, *Älä unhoita minua* (*Don't Forget Me*) crystallizes both the contents of the scene and the central theme of the whole film.

**Man of the bars.** The shot leading to the café scene depicts Sörnäinen, an old working-class district that now houses the Theatre Academy as well as several trendy bars and restaurants. It is also known for the social problems caused by unemployment, drugs, and alcohol abuse. The street, Hämeentie, visible in the frame is its main thoroughfare, already seen in *Shadows In Paradise* (*Varjoja paratiisissa*, 1986), used daily by thousands of people. Among these wayfarers the lonely, nameless, and dispossessed M is just one of the shipwrecked.

In every Kaurismäki film there is at least one scene where a character enters a bar to kill time. They are usually cafés and bars forgotten by time, seemingly relics of an already

lost folk culture. The Finnish musician, composer, poet, and author M.A. Numminen wrote a book called *Baarien mies* (Man of the Bars) in praise of these disappearing cafés. According to Numminen, cafés and bars are "for many, the only place where to come. Another living-room, one that prevents marginalization" – just like Alma's Saloon. Aki and Mika Kaurismäki own themselves a popular bar in the centre of Helsinki. It has been divided into two sections: Corona with its billiard tables and long bar counters that resemble a street bar in New York. The smaller Kafe Mockba (Bar Moskva) next door manages to capture the atmosphere of disappeared Soviet bars. Bar Moskva can be seen in the scene where the bankrupt entrepreneur has decided to commit suicide and asks M to pay his debts to his nearest business partners. (Sequence 17)

<sup>8</sup> *Helsingin Sanomat*, 26.01.03

## IMAGES AND ECHOES / COMPARISON

If a film director wants to change the world – even if just by bringing things into the viewers' awareness – he must know how to do it with images. Aki Kaurismäki's concern for the Earth and the fate of its inhabitants is well-known, like his compassion towards the most underprivileged. So it is not surprising at all that he addresses social problems in his films, and creates characters rebelling against the often hard and cruel economic reality.

The tradition of the visual representation of revolutions is full of powerful symbols and key characters that interest the young revolutionaries and to whom they want to join.

The twentieth century and especially its pivotal art form, the cinema, have turned its gaze towards the ordinary people, the little people who are mere grains of sand in the hourglass of great historical events. The revolutionary images of this film offer a fresh perspective, a new position for the common people, members of the group. A minor gesture may spark the revolution – declining inedible food (*Battleship Potemkin*), picking up a fallen flag (*Modern Times*) or a board with nails in it (*The Man Without a Past*). Once the revolution has been turned on it can strengthen until it transforms the whole world and the fate of all of its inhabitants.

At the end of the film M has learnt about his own past, that he now can completely leave behind him. He meets again the men who assaulted him in the beginning of the film, preventing him from pursuing a better life. This time he decides to defend himself, even though he fights alone against the three. The self-confidence with which he picks up a piece of a board from the ground gives an example to others, too. As he refuses to become a victim he encourages others like him who thus get the courage to rise up against unreasonableness and take their destiny in their own hands. When we see Anttila take "our" side against "them" we realize that the world has changed. One man's revolution has born fruit.



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2



3



4

1 *Liberty Leading the People (La Liberté guidant le peuple)*, painting by Eugène Delacroix, 1830

2 *Lenin proclaims Soviet Power*, painting by Vladimir Serov, 1947

3 *Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin)*, Sergei Eisenstein, 1925

4 *Modern Times*, Charles Chaplin, 1936. All Rights reserved

5 & 6 *The man without a past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä 2002)*, Aki Kaurismäki



5



6

## DIALOGUES BETWEEN CINED FILMS

We can create connections between the films in the CinEd collection ([www.cined.eu](http://www.cined.eu)). In this section we study Kaurismäki's film *The Man Without a Past* in connection with Luis Garcia Berlanga's *The Executioner* (El Verdugo, Spain 1963). Berlanga's film, which could bear the subtitle "a man without a future", follows a young man who ends up continuing the work of his father-in-law. Information and study material for *The Executioner* can be found from the CinEd-platform.

In *The Man Without a Past* and *The Executioner* we follow a main character whose life does not follow the most conventional path. Both men are benevolent in their own way, even-tempered and kind. Both want to take part in building the society and be its member. The main character of Luis Berlanga's film ends up, through his kindness, sacrificing himself and his dreams by blindly obeying the authorities, deciding to trust their honesty, goodness, and fairness without ever rising to actual resistance. He surrenders himself to the surrounding community, his close-ones, and lets the expectations of the society dictate his life. Both protagonists, Berlanga's José Luis Rodríguez and Kaurismäki's M are connected by a dream of being entitled to their full rights as a citizen, which is denied from them, albeit for quite different reasons. They are united by a strong inner vision of freedom, because of which they don't follow all of society's rules just like that.

Rodríguez talks incessantly about his dreams: social mobility enabled by education, and a possible trip abroad. As he speaks, he seems to believe in his dreams, aided by his imagination, and thus to change the course of his life and to avoid the inevitable: executing a human being. In this sense Rodríguez is a rebel even after his choice of profession. However the viewer might easily think that his fate as an executioner has been sealed.

M is a man with a strong will and determination who has left behind his home and his life. One could also see him as a marginalized loser whose marriage has ended in a divorce and who has lost his steady job. Before his amnesia, however, he has himself decided to leave his cul-de-sac of a estranged life and change his course.

The looks of the main characters and the sets in which they are filmed tell us about their personality traits and relationships to the world. In *The Executioner* the space, the composition and the framing of the shot often define as if foreshadowing the way Rodríguez's life will take. Even in the exterior shots it seems that the others have in advance decided the routes he will use. He gives up his own life to marry the executioner's daughter and to adopt the professional identity of his father-in-law. Rodríguez seems to lack a will of his own and ends up following those who – sometimes even physically – guide his actions in the way they want.

### RODRÍGUEZ, M AND DESTINY

In the beginning of *The Executioner*, after the preface and the introduction of the characters, Rodríguez literally arrives at the gate of his future life. He brings the briefcase of Amado, the executioner, which the man has forgotten in the hearse driven by Rodríguez. The space is filled with people who will play a pivotal part in Rodríguez's life. Particularly there is the woman the protagonist wants to marry and who binds his destiny to his father-in-law, Amadeo the executioner. In the image, the hallway is long and narrow, offering no chance to deviate from the route, to wander, or to escape. Camera waits Rodríguez inside as if already prepared for his arrival. Through the camera, the viewer is also already in the company of the executioner, i.e. the future father-in-law. The impression of the significance of the situation and the steps taken along this hallway is strengthened by the powerful image showing hesitant Rodríguez on the threshold – Rodríguez, who is already under control of his future wife and father-in-law. The composition of the image is like a frame divided in two parts (split-screen) showing simultaneously two different environments, two points of a view on the same situation. This is how two otherwise distant situations are brought together.



1



2



3



4

In frames (3rd and 4th, sequence 18) in *The Man Without a Past* the hallway parses the space. Like in *The Executioner*, the perspective points the way for the protagonist.

A light shines inside M's former home, but this time the camera does not determine the events from inside the house. Instead, it waits (and makes the viewer wait) like M outside the door. So the space seems to still give M a chance to change direction and turn on his heels. Even though the door is open, M does not step in. Instead he waits on the threshold for someone to come to him.

As M is inside in the living-room, Ovaskainen, the ex-wife's new boyfriend, steps forward from the back of the room. In this situation (and in the whole film) the wife is left unnamed – as if this is just the question of two men settling a score in which the ex-wife remains an outsider. Even her gaze is directed elsewhere. Ovaskainen tries to dominate the situation, and M acts according to the rules of the setting. His gestures and the way he settles down in the space signal him as powerful man who is a master of his destiny, and as a man who sits in the master's chair and is able to look Ovaskainen directly in the eye. He is self-confident and seem physically superior. The route from the space and the situation is also open for M. He can see that from his armchair and so he knows that he could leave the situation any time, even though Ovaskainen would concretely stand in his way.

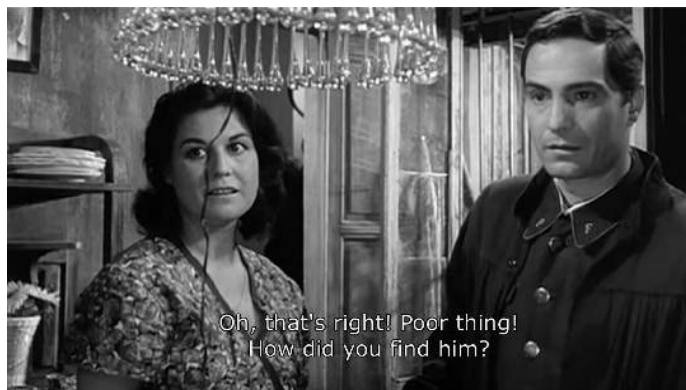


5



6

When Rodriguez comes to his future father-in-law in *The Executioner*, he seems to be in a confined state. The space behind him is closed off, like a cul-de-sac. A wire hanging from the lamp traverses the frame. On its one side we see the future bride Carman (the name echoes a rather dark tone at least in the eyes of those who are familiar with Prosper Mérimée's famous story *Carmen*, 1845), Rodriguez on the other. Their eyes focus on Amadeo the executioner who will be the most important person in Rodriguez's life from now on. He is the most important person even in this image, although placed outside it.



7

Oh, that's right! Poor thing!  
How did you find him?

Even though M is not at his strongest in the following frames (8 and 9, sequence 9) and although the Fate outside his authority has closed some doors for him, some others seem to be at least half open. In this scene the door between M and Irma is more like a symbolic border, it is not a proper door but a mere curtain. The borderline between them is emphasized by Irma's uniform as a symbol of her dedication to a chaste life. In a situation like this, a direct look between them would be too strong and forward a gesture, perhaps even aggressive. So Irma strengthens the border between them by closing the curtain.



8



9

A moment when poor Rodriguez must face the inevitable, his own job, comes finally in *The Executioner*. He seems to be completely resigned, he does not control the movements of his own body any more. His progress is first guided by Amadeo's gaze (image 10) and then the men who literally carry him to his fate (11). The prison door through which Rodriguez inevitably has to go to perform his job are sturdy, and there is something final in going through them.



10



11

Towards the end of the film Rodriguez completely loses control over his life. He is being controlled by other people who lead him increasingly further away from the freedom he tries to uphold in his words. He is chained to the frame (11) and the camera allows him to proceed in one direction only. As the scene progresses and he travels the only possible direction – towards his life as an executioner – he grows smaller and smaller. A life as an executioner had sentenced Amadeo the father-in-law into loneliness, and he guides (or forces) Rodriguez onto the same path. All the way to the end of the film the hope for Rodriguez' miraculous liberation and the fear that he will be unable to avoid his fate alternate in the viewer's mind.

In both films the protagonist signs a paper that symbolizes an important step in their life. Both find it hard to pick up the pen, but they are guided in taking the step. To be sure, Rodriguez is forced (12) whereas M is being supported (13), but the gestures nevertheless resemble each other.



12



13

When Rodriguez finally gets a moment to be alone with his wife and tell her about his dreams (14) he is shown with his back to the camera. Although we hear his voice, his wife's reactions alone seem to determine the progress of events (14 and 15) When the viewer finally sees the joy on Rodriguez's face (16) unknown people in the back of the frame comment on the scene and steal viewer's attention as if insinuating that Rodriguez will never attain the life and the freedom he dreams of. This, too, is a question of the director's choices. By leaving Rodriguez's dreams (speech, gestures, expressions, movement) only a little space, the cropping, composition and the editing of the frame serve to strengthen the fateful feeling in the viewer.



14



15



16

A mean and malicious gaze also follows, assesses and attempts to control M as he takes the first steps of his new life (17). However, M and Irma are already acting together and their eyes turn together although in the frame's composition "the enemy" in the guise of

Irma's colleague has been placed between them to threaten their alliance. In this crucial moment, M and Irma are on the same level in the frame composition as Irma helps M.



17



18

At the end of the film M returns to his true love. Their friends rejoicing over this surround M and Irma (19) although a melancholy tone predominates the colors, the song in the background, and the space. The tone adds depth to the scene, preventing it from becoming too sugary. The looks directed to M and Irma are no longer judgemental but approving and encouraging. The space is not closed, the fate is not predestined. Instead, the couple can freely start towards their future (20) like in all fairytales.



19



20

The ending of *The Executioner*, however, leaves no space for optimism. Although the music and the people dancing to it on the ship's deck are jolly it seems that joy belongs to the life of the others. The Executioner's family hears the merrymaking of the others and they can observe it, but happiness is not meant for Rodriguez, or even for his child. Their path has been predestined.



21



22



## CONNECTIONS

Aki Kaurismäki constructs in his films images and ambiances that refer to other films. Corresponding discussions between images are also born within other art forms. Here are some examples. You can freely search the Internet for more examples.



1 *The Wounded Angel (Haavoittunut enkeli)*, painting by Hugo Simberg, 1906, photograph by Hannu Jukola



2 *The Man Without A Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä)*, Aki Kaurismäki, 2002

1 & 2 Assistance, solidarity, the world of fairytales, encounters and benevolence in paintings and films. The painting where children carry a wounded angel by the Finnish artist Hugo Simberg (1873-1917) is one of the most iconic and internationally well known Finnish painting. In *The Man Without a Past* the children carry a white water canister in place of the angel.



3 *Water Lilies (Nymphéas)*, by Claude Monet, 1906 (All rights reserved)



4 *The Man Without A Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä)*, Aki Kaurismäki, 2002

3 & 4 You can also find another references to an internationally significant artist from the era of Impressionism and the early 21th century.



5 Outi Mäenpää in Aki Kaurismäki's film *The Man Without A Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä)*, 2002



5 When you search images (especially in color) of the essential blondes in the history of cinema (Marilyn Monroe, Kim Novak, Lauren Bacall, Catherine Deneuve, Brigitte Bardot), it becomes obvious that the character played by Outi Mäenpää in *Man Without A Past* (*Mies vailla menneisyyttä*) belongs to the same tradition.



Poster of *Muž bez*. The Czech version *Muž bez minulosti* was directed by Miroslav Krobot in January 2010 for the Dejvické divadlo Theatre in Prague. [LINK](#)

The world and style of Aki Kaurismäki is so original and distinctive that it is difficult to name artists in whose production his inspiration would be consciously and directly visible. Yet his influence on the Finnish cinema is obvious. The international respect he enjoys perhaps offers Finnish directors an easier path to recognition, despite that fact that their films are almost invariably compared with Kaurismäki's works. It is easy to find Kaurismäki-esque elements in other films, for instance in the use of colors, the dialogue, and the scenery selections (a short film by Joonas Ranta [LINK](#) ; une bande annonce d'un court-métrage d'Eero Tammi, [LINK](#)), illustrations, advertisements [LINK 1](#) & [LINK 2](#)

There is also an increasing number of artists who want to pay their respects to the filmmakers and other artists who have inspired them. Perhaps Aki Kaurismäki's films have locally and internationally influenced that the past world is today a bit more closer and livelier to film directors, other artists, and the audience.

*The Man Without a past* has directly inspired other artistic productions. In the Czech Republic, Sweden and Germany the film has been adapted for the stage. The adaptations are faithful to the film's story, but as always when moving from one art form to other those who create new from what already exist are responsible for the interpretations.

Photographs from the performance of *Mannen utan minne*, directed for the Swedish national stage Dramaten by Nadia Weiss in March 2015 can be found here: <http://www.dramaten.se/Repertoar-arkiv/Mannen-utan-minne/>

The German version *Der Mann ohne Vergangenheit*, directed by Christoph Roos, September 2017, Landestheater Württemberg-Hohenzollern Tübingen Reutlingen, presentation video can be found at : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xg72XI5DQWM>

The Czech version *Muž bez minulosti* was directed by Miroslav Krobot in January 2010 for the Dejvické divadlo Theatre in Prague. <http://www.dejvickedivadlo.cz/repertoar/?muz-bez-minulosti>

In Finland the film has also been adapted to a comic book where Donald Duck, the character created by Disney, performs the role of M.

Kari Korhonen, Aki Kaurismäki and Giorgio Cavazzano, *Ankka vailla menneisyyttä* (*The Duck Without a Past*), 2016



The key moment, the encounter between Irma and M by the soup kitchen, can be found already from the front cover of the comic book.



The friendship growing between Nieminen and M is portrayed as the comradeship between Donald and the less-known Disney character Horace Horsecollar.

Irma and M meet again at the soup kitchen on a rainy day.



Kari Korhonen, Aki Kaurismäki & Giorgio Cavazzano, *Ankka vailla menneisyyttä* (*The Duck Without a Past*), 2016

## RECEPTION

*The Man Without a Past* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival In Competition series in 2002. Aki Kaurismäki's new film attracted a lot of attention then. Especially the French critics, who had followed the director's career for a long time already, naturally wrote a lot about the film. It later received the Grand Prize of the Jury and the other main actor, Kati Outinen, won the prize for the Best Actress for her role.

The reception among the French press was excited. The film awoke a lot of respect and it was liked right from the first screening. Quite often with this film people write about its numerous references to other films and art forms. Sometimes they guess that some of the references are purely domestic, and therefore more difficult for the foreign viewers to grasp.

This is how Jean Roy, special correspondent of the newspaper *l'Humanité* wrote about the film on Thursday 23 May 2002. <https://www.lesinrocks.com/cinema/films-a-l-affiche/lhomme-sans-passe-3/>

Do not hesitate to go and see the comments of the Finnish media on the film..

## ACTIVITIES

*These are suggestions for different points of view and instruments for studying the film. Choose the ones that suit you, or feel free to come up with new ones.*

### LOOKS

Consider the different looks of the characters and discuss them.

Consider different looks. What kind of looks do you remember from the film? Who looked at whom? What kind of emotions and feelings the looks conveyed (loving, threatening, etc.)?

You can use as an example the scene where Anttila tries to get M and Irma pay for tickets for the band's gig, and the discussion between the police, M and the lawyer. Watch the scene without sound.

Excerpts have been chosen from films in the CinEd collection for the study video "looks".

Exercise:

Work in pairs or in small groups. Photograph each other e.g. with a mobile phone camera. Put on, for instance, a fearful, defiant, or loving expression. Film altogether five emotions/expressions.

Discuss overacting and underacting in the photograph you took. Think how much you need to act for the camera, and how little clues can convey an emotion or a feeling. Try exaggerating the expression, and downplaying it. Imitate the framing used in the film with only the character's head and upper body visible, with the eyes directed slightly past the camera.

Finally, go through the photographs together with the whole class and discuss which feeling is conveyed by which look. Which emotions were the easiest or the most difficult to recognize or express? Are there elements in the photographs supporting the emotion or the feeling, or made the interpretation more difficult?

Consider what is shown, and what is left out: what can be seen and what is not seen. Could you have expressed a feeling without showing the face – for instance, by photogra-

phing a hand in a fist. What kind of symbolic images can you use in a film to describe feelings? You can also photograph alternative photographs of the feelings where you don't show a face.

### SET DESIGN / SURROUNDINGS, PROPS

First, consider the set design, props and surroundings in the film. What places, spaces and objects do you remember? What kind of thoughts and feelings did they awake in you? What do the places and the objects reveal about their owners, i.e. the film's characters?

Then, continue to work in pairs or in groups.

### A QUICK EXERCISE

Select a few objects and place them in front of you. Photograph the arrangement with your mobile phone. What kind of a person do they belong to? What does the arrangement on the table reveal? Then change the objects – how does the ambience and the interpretation change?

### AN EXERCISE THAT TAKES SLIGHTLY LONGER

Move the desk you want to photograph, or choose the desk based on how light strikes it. Use different light sources (natural light, classroom lights, mobile phone flashlights) to create different ambiances. Use also the surroundings of the desk (a beautiful view out through the window, a wall painted a strong color, a nice backpack, a distressing corner, etc.) and select suitable objects in the classroom or from your own things to strengthen the desired effect. How can you use light and environment to tell a story and describe characters? Show the photographs to others and ask them what kind of people could sit at the desks. What are they like? What do they do? How are they dressed?

### AN EXERCISE THAT TAKES A LOT OF TIME

Study the school and its close surroundings, or alternatively the area around your home. Select an interesting spot with a suitable color scheme and lighting. Photograph one member of the group in this spot. Place him/her in a place and position that conveys as forcefully as possible a certain emotion or feeling or ambience. What kind of clothes suit the situation you are thinking about? Consider also a suitable aspect ratio and camera angle. What methods can you use to strengthen the emotion or ambience you want to achieve?

### CINEMATOGRAPHY

Consider the film's color palette. What colors do you remember? Did they differ from the colors used in other films? Select stills from the Media Kit and study them together. What situations were the colors were used in and what kind of ambiances did they convey? Did the colors strengthen the feelings or create contradictions, or was their effect something totally else?

Study also your school or your homes. How are colors used in your everyday surroundings? How do they affect you? What kind of a film could you shoot in the color palette, lighting, and ambience of your classroom or home?

### INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE AUTEUR'S INTENTION

Director Aki Kaurismäki says he refers to different kinds of films, books, paintings, and other works of art. With some of his colors, for example, he refers to other film directors (e.g. grey comes, according to Kaurismäki, from the French director Jean-Pierre Melville and the red from the Japanese Yasujiro Ozu. You can search the Internet for images from the films of these directors.) What thoughts does this raise? Did you recognize any verbal or visual reference? Do you feel that the director succeeded? Do you understand his intentions, his efforts? Does it matter if the viewer has not seen the films the director refers to?

## IDENTITY

Filmmakers illustrate the characters' identity in many ways: with the set decoration, costumes, lighting, color, camera movement, the acting, the dialogue, etc. Sometimes e.g. an object discovered in a pocket defines a character's identity and points the direction for the story.

First, make a list of the main and supporting characters. (Your teacher can post the characters on the blackboard.) Then, think of what the characters have in their pockets or bags. Try to remember or imagine what M had in his suitcase in the beginning of the film, and what the men who assaulted him stole from him. (You can watch the scene again after your discussion.)

What was left in the pockets of M's leather jacket after the beating, the hospital visit, and lying on the shore? What was in the pockets of Irma's coat? In her bag or in her room?

What do the things discovered in a character's pocket or bag tell about the character?

Write a short characterization of the film's characters and imagine them in your own environment, for instance in your school. How would M behave in your environment? What would interest Irma in your school? Or Anttila? Or the Nieminen family? Where would they want to go, what would they like to see, who would they like to talk to, and about what?

Try also to place yourselves in the world of Kaurismäki's films. Select a scene first (e.g. the Salvation Army soiree and the doling out of the soup) and imagine you jump into it. What would you not understand? Where would you like to go? What would you want to ask, from whom? What are the things and objects you would pay attention to?

Finally: search your own pockets (or bags). Empty the things in your pocket on the desk. What could the others deduce from the objects? Based on the objects found in your pocket, what kind of a person and a story could you develop?

## REALISM AND POETRY

Aki Kaurismäki often combines realism and fairytale-like things in his films. What represents realism in this film? What are the things / elements that create the fairytale-like quality? Study the café sequence (analysis on page 27) and the aggressive scene of the ending – what makes them realistic or poetic?

## EXPECTATIONS

Before watching the film, consider what you know about Finland and / or Helsinki? Discuss and write down your most

important mental images. Do not, however, use the Internet or other reference sources for this.

Continue the discussion after watching the film: what parts of your anticipation were true, i.e. what did you find in the film? What parts were not confirmed by the film?

Consider to what extent the film gives a true representation of Finland.

## TRANSITIONAL SPACES

Discuss the places people live in. Who lives where, and what do we discover in their homes? Who lives in the environment portrayed in the film and who outside the screen (i.e. not shown in the film)?

Describe the railway station, bus stop, school foyer, or some other thoroughfare near you. Observe or draw people or photograph people you know (your friends, members of your group, you partner) who visit these spaces. How do people behave in transitional places like these? What do they look at there? How do they move? Do they differ from people in places where you come to spend some time? What kind of stories would the photographs you have taken suit?

Always remember to ask permission to take photographs, respect the rules of the spaces.

What kind of transitional spaces or "no-man's-places" are there in Aki Kaurismäki's film? What are the places like where they are located? What do the character do there? When are the characters again in their own environments? How do these scenes differentiate from each other?

## MUSIC

What kind of feelings, emotions or ambiances does the music create, or how does it alter what is portrayed?

Study the Midsummer dance scene (ks. s. 25). People dance and it is assumed that they are having fun, but is it so? What kind of a feeling does the scene leave with you?

If you would make your own film with a (dance) scene supposed to strengthen a happy or sad atmosphere, what music would you use? Find it on the Internet and play it to the others.

## MEMORY AND OBLIVION

Imagine that your memory will soon be wiped clean. Write down ten most important things about your life to enable you to read them after your memory is erased. What kind of things would you like to remember?

If you would lose your memory now, what could you determine about yourself or your partner on what you find in your pockets or in your bag?

Write down ten things you remember from the film. Consider what they reveal about you as a film viewer.



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