

In the Guise of Irony

A closer look at the function and effect of irony embedded in the cinema of Aki Kaurismäki

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Table of contents

Introduction.....	3
1. Léaud Volés	7
2. The <i>Dark</i> Comedy of <i>No</i> Remarriage	18
3. A Successive Failure.....	27
Conclusion.....	39
List of references.....	42
Appendix 1 – List of film-references.....	44
Appendix 2 – List of video-references.....	46
Appendix 3 – List of text-references.....	46
Appendix 4 – Filmography Aki Kaurismäki.....	48

Introduction

Pietari Kääpä describes humour or comedy in Finnish film history as one of the most ‘enduring and perseverant’ types of cinema being produced in the country. Even the first Finnish movie ever made, *Salaviinanpolttajat* [The Moonshiners] (1907) by directors Louis Sparre and Teuvo Puro,¹ can be considered a comedy in which ‘ironically’, similar to the oeuvre of Aki Kaurismäki, drinking plays an important role². Humour and Kaurismäki are also inseparable. Although the filmmaker is one of the most important ‘export products’ of Finland and with that often considered a spokesman for the country’s identity and political situation, his films possess an airiness, inviting the spectator to always take its content or message with a grain of salt³. Also the mixture of wayward and peculiar characters, unconventional dialogue and stiff ‘Bressonian’ acting are, at first sight, some of the many factors contributing to such a comedic effect, adding a certain lightness to the story they entail.

The filmmaker is often being deemed to make ironic cinema. Connecting Kaurismäki to irony is not surprising, but is surprisingly enough, not so much scholarly researched in the past⁴. Even though the existence of a ‘political’ type of irony is often debated, the political context in which irony appears in the cinema of Kaurismäki seems quite apparent. Although the director personally dismisses most of his films as ‘dreadful’ and ‘lousy’, he can be considered a respected and highly praised political filmmaker as his films increasingly involve a deeper ideological, political or symbolical meaning⁵. Especially his last film *The Other Side of Hope* (2017) exemplifies this, highlighting the refugee crisis as the main theme of the film. His cinema is not only political though, and surely developed throughout the years in both content and context. Irony has always, seemingly, been present though, throughout the comedy in his cinema. But what is this irony specifically?

Stanley Fish claims in his article ‘Short People Got no Reason to Live: Reading Irony’ (1983) that the story of irony is one of ironists, interpreters and targets, and this interaction can be considered risky as the interpretations can fluctuate tremendously⁶. The ‘tricky’ and

¹ The perseverance of such films is even being underlined quite recently by Finnish director Juho Kuosmanen ‘remaking’ *Salaviinanpolttajat* as a live performance (2017), a fragment of which can be found on <https://vimeo.com/234633969>.

² Kaurismäki even owns two bars in the city center of Helsinki, again pointing out his link to drinking.

³ The Finnishness of his cinema is very often questioned in interviews (*Cinema Cinemas 1990, For One Week Only* 1991), literature (Nestingen 2013) and articles (Donner 2003).

⁴ Nestingen (2013) & Austin (2018)

⁵ Hattenstone (April 4th, 2012)

⁶ Fish (1983), p. 175-191

sometimes even ‘dangerous’ nature of irony involves different parties, most importantly these parties exchanging ‘a joke or jokes’ and the ‘telling’ and ‘getting’ of it⁷. Different discursive contexts come into being here. Using irony often suggests an intelligent or rather well-informed ironist being fully aware of a certain subject or context he/she wants to make discussable. It can be present in the guise of an exaggeration, in mostly an (at first sight) verbally good sense. When for example one individual praises another for a simple task like doing the dishes in an extreme exaggerated way. So it is a form of critique disguised as a sarcastic (although there is a genuine difference!⁸) note or comment opening up a discussion by confronting the target (even though often ‘camouflaged’) directly and judgementally.

It is important to be aware the differences between sarcasm and irony, because although these terms are often put into relation with one another and do address or connect in many ways it refers to different elements of, in this case, comedy. Sarcasm can be considered rather a product of irony than being its equal or enemy. When irony is present it often refers to the overall tone of the situation, it is the overarching presence of humour rather than anything singularly specific and with that often possesses a certain indeterminateness, through which it can be interpreted both positively and negatively. Irony is a melange of specific elements. One of these elements could be that of sarcasm which is often related to a person that mocks or attacks someone or something by being credibly insincere. When using the two strategies or techniques simultaneously it can often be recognised by its biting tone as sarcasm does create a determination in its goal, whereas irony does not⁹.

Irony comes in different disguises, largely depending on the function of it; what the ironist wants to achieve. Applying irony can originate from an urge to complicate a matter of discussion but can also be applied to translate the oppositional stance the ironist wants to reveal. In the case of Kaurismäki his intentions or motivations in his choice of theme and subject are essential to the humour he adapts in telling his stories. Nevertheless it seems hard to really reconstruct or describe what Kaurismäki is often actually aiming at, because right at the moment a statement or opinion seems to prevail, humour is added to seemingly alleviate the pressure.

Kaurismäki has an enigmatic status, which does not appear out of nowhere, and instead of offering a solution or more clarity or direction to his character and ideas his ironic attitude can often intensify the confusion surrounding his identity. The spectator ‘needs’ to be

⁷ Lejeune (1989)

⁸ Hutcheon (1994), p. 135-69

⁹ Hutcheon (1994), p. 9-34

aware of this in order to really understand his cinema. Hutcheon also explains that irony relies on particular discursive communities, in which certain knowledge is shared or circulates. One has to be aware or familiar with all or particular elements of such discourses in order to understand the ironist¹⁰. Visiting for example a contemporary art exhibition about slavery, does often ask for a certain understanding of the historical or cultural context to really understand the background and then often also the artist' intent, of course depending on the specificities of the exhibition. Irony happens in between the artist and the visitor in this case, and that is why all these elements matter.

Jaakko Seppälä links the irony of Kaurismäki to that of romantic irony: 'what is said is both meant and not meant.'¹¹. There is frequently a certain purpose behind the humour, as if mistakes or failures are made deliberately through which the suggested failure is no more a failure, but rather a well thought out plan or strategy, but in romantic irony this interpretation of the term becomes somewhat wobbly. Philosophers (starting from Friedrich Schlegel) like Adam Müller, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Søren Kierkegaard debated extensively about the term and also writers like Raymond Immerwahr, Hans Eichner, Ernst Behler and Lilian Furst delved into the subject¹². Furst refers to the term in *The Fictions of Romantic Irony*, and contrasts the term with the 'traditional' irony. In traditional irony there is a connection between narrator and reader in a sense that the reader is guided by the narrator to the underlying 'real' meaning that lies beneath the initial form of words that tell the reverse. Romantic irony appears between the narrator and the story. Here the narrator reflects on both the narrative and himself as a writer or director by openly manipulating elements of the story. So rather than guiding the reader towards certainty, the reader becomes part of the process and gets to realise the unreachability of truth. Furst provided an explanatory example herself with the idea of the clown walking the tightrope 'poised dangerously between explicitness and impenetrability'. So the clown walks the tightrope and obviously, as he/she is a clown, seems to hopelessly fail in his/her clumsy performance, nevertheless the clown has to be a very good at walking the tightrope in order to pretend to constantly almost fall of¹³. So it is a self-conscious and self-reflective stance the maker takes, that is often realised by making the reader or spectator believe the one 'reality', but then confronting him or her and him- or herself with the falseness of it or an alternative to it.

¹⁰ Hutcheon (1994), p. 35-54

¹¹ Austin (2018), p. 100-21

¹² Garber (2008), p. 15-20

¹³ Verstraten (2016), p. 27

There always seems to be an unidentifiable suspense of an intrinsic story or goal with his filmmaking. This can be partially exemplified by his attitude and behaviour outside of his cinema. The filmmaker is known as wayward and almost living the characters he portrays in his films. Also in interviews he does not step back from taking a stance against the matters he seems to want to discuss with his cinema, revealing these are matters that are close to his heart¹⁴¹⁵. This stance even extends to rejecting the invitation to the New York Festival in 2002 and the Oscar-ceremony of 2003, protesting respectively the refusal of a visa for Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami and the involvement of America in the war on Iraq, by boycotting both the festivals¹⁶¹⁷.

But in his cinema this stance is often transformed into rather a *di*-stance. Whereas filmmakers like Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica and Ken Loach really extend their opinions and concerns to a body of neorealist and social realist works revealing their stance, Kaurismäki's cinema does not really seem to push the viewer into any specific direction. Kaurismäki observes, lays out the present topics, but distances himself with his touch of irony that lightens the weight of the subjects being discussed. Of course this style of filmmaking does not pass by unnoticed and also his influence on other filmmakers seems unmistakable. Northern European filmmakers like Roy Andersson, Alex van Warmerdam and Bent Hamer are often connected to the Finn, and also 'overseas' directors like Jim Jarmusch, Wes Anderson and Steve Buscemi are aware of his cinema and notably picked some elements of his style in shaping their own.

His films seem to put the suggested message into perspective rather than judge or criticise, and the tool that is apparent in doing so is the humour that is always present. This humour, in the guise of irony, extends throughout several elements that will be discussed in the three chapters of this thesis. Although all of his films contain similar characteristics embodying the ironic angle of incidence, whereby the currently apparent division of elements can be connected to all of the divergent titles that are separated from one another in these chapters, the division of films is applied to bring in structure and clarity to the argument(s) being put forward. Furthermore the comparisons that are made to other filmmakers and films in connection to the film in dispute serves similar purposes, but also points out an important characteristic of the filmmaker himself that often colours the situational irony present in his cinema: his cinephilia.

¹⁴ Bockting (April 19th, 2017), p. 9-10

¹⁵ Burg (February 2nd, 2012), p. 14

¹⁶ *Kaurismäki boycotts the NY festival after Kiarostami snub* (October 1st, 2002)

¹⁷ *Kaurismäki boycotts Oscars in war protest* (March 3th, 2003)

His focus, style and attitude do possess a story, which will not be explained by the filmmaker itself. The main focus of this thesis is not to unravel the ‘real identity and story’ of Aki Kaurismäki but rather to provide an insight and overview of what his cinema presumably does with the spectator and how this is done, all in the context of irony, leading up to the main research question of this thesis being: *How does irony prevail and function in the cinema of Aki Kaurismäki and how might this influence his audience?* His cinema involves a lot of real, confrontational and controversial subjects, characters, storyline and atmosphere, but always enhances a certain deadpan tone that distances the viewer from really emotionally connecting with his ‘message’. In this thesis a distinction is made between three stages or phases in the career of Kaurismäki.

Chapter 1 focuses on the stage of the unemployment or proletariat cinema, with an excessive presence of deadpan humour and somewhat disconsolate plain surroundings. Here the focus will be on the stereotyping and exaggerations that are being used to reach such a comedic- but distancing effect, and here is also explained how the casting of Jean-Pierre Léaud constructs an ironic commentary on the actor’s previous work. The second chapter will focus on *Mies vailla menneisyyttä* [The Man Without a Past] (2003) from the *Finland*-trilogy. Here the cinema becomes more colourful and the narrative seems to predominate rather than the silent deadpan comedy of *I Hired a Contract Killer* (1990), becoming more complex and referential in a sense. Also the social and political engagement seems to slowly get more involved compared to his earlier cinema. This chapter will outline how the film can be read as an ironic underlying commentary on the comedy of remarriage of the thirties and forties. The last chapter is literally the farewell-chapter of this thesis and will contain an analysis of the possibly final film of the Finn. In this stage his cinema becomes more politically engaged, and humour seems to be an explicit presence positioned directly next to the narrative rather than intensively interweaved. This last chapter will contain an analysis of how irony is used here to serve as a well thought out but hilarious homage to his main inspirations and role models in cinema, but also simultaneously establishes a certain political engagement that at the same time distances the spectator that is being engaged here.

Chapter 1

Léaud Volés: *I Hired a Contract Killer* (1990)

Most of Kaurismäki’s work consists of Finnish (spoken) films, with (and virtually exclusively in this decade) only a few exceptions. Right at the start of the decade the

filmmaker premiered such a non-Finnish film called *I Hired a Contract Killer*. In the film Henri Boulanger, a reclusive Frenchman living in London, sits out his days working at the Majesty's Waterworks. Through impending privatisation the company is obliged to fire some of its employees, with the non-British citizens being the first ones to leave. Henri cannot envision any more purpose in life and decides to end it. Nevertheless he finds out, after several attempts, he is, as he puts it: 'too yellow'¹⁸, to do this himself. He decides to hire a contract killer to do this job for him. After stoically awaiting his upcoming death, there being no further purpose in life, Henri decides to go to a local pub and put his non-drinking principles aside consuming numerous whiskeys and smoking several packs of cigarettes. The alcohol seems to serve as a social lubricant and he confidentially starts interacting with a flower-saleswoman. He falls in love, which grants his life a purpose anyhow, and he tries to waive the 'order' for the killing he put in earlier¹⁹.

The film was released in the same year as *Tulitikkutehtaan tyttö* [The Match Factory Girl] (1990). Both stories portray archetypal 'slaves' of the monetary system, passively obeying capitalism, following the structures and direction of society stoically. Both main characters radiate a particular emptiness and hopelessness, which seemingly draws some parallels with the state of Finland described earlier²⁰. Their goals are slowly fading, diminishing them to nameless entities only breathing in their meaningless existence, but there is always a spark of hope or way out²¹.

Iiris (Kati Outinen) in *The Match Factory Girl* and Henri (Jean Pierre Léaud) in *I Hired a Contract Killer* seem to find meaning by escaping their solitude and resist against the everyday stream of 'normality'. Iiris does this by searching for love and, when being rejected, taking revenge on her 'enemies' and Henri does it by seeking refuge in stimulants and falling in love. In short, both characters step away from the path containing societal pressure and restriction expecting particular behaviour and directions one follows. Instead both characters choose a path that can be described as more fearless, compassionate and punctuated with desires and emotion.

Such life-path-changing developments seem apparent throughout the oeuvre of Kaurismäki; Nikander (Matti Pellonpää) in *Varjoja Pratiisissa* [Shadows in Paradise] (1986), Taisto (Turo Pajala) in *Ariel* (1988) and Valto (Mato Valtonen) and Reino (Matti Pellonpää)

¹⁸ *I Hired a Contract Killer* (1990)

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Singleton (1998), p. 134-146

²¹ *Laitakaupungin Valot* [Lights in the Dusk] (2006) could be considered an exception where almost everything seems to go wrong and get worse for the main character Koistinen (Janne Hyytiäinen).

in *Pidä Huivista Kiinni, Tatjana* [Take of Your Scarf Tatjana] (1994). All these characters are stuck in their current existence and undertake a particular journey that disengages them from this life. This also goes for Henri Boulanger, even involving a contract killer to make his escape from everyday-life literally come-thru. When discovering the ‘forbidden pleasures’ and finding someone to live for his desire changes and a new escape route seems apparent.

An important and unmistakable difference between the two films is, as said, in a literal sense, the ‘non-Finnishness’ of *I Hired a Contract Killer*²². It is an English spoken film, which takes place in the United Kingdom (London, England), with the leading character being a somewhat goofy and logy Frenchman speaking moderately English.

The location where this film takes place, and also Kaurismäki’s cinephilia, is emphatically being highlighted in the dedicative words at the beginning of the film. Primarily at the opening of the film the opening titles state ‘Dedicated to the memory of Michael Powell’. The British filmmaker Michael Powell died on February 19th 1990 and is considered being (unfortunately mostly only in retrospect²³) one of the most important filmmakers in British cinema. Powell, throughout his career, mostly collaborated with Hungarian scriptwriter Emeric Pressburger, but also directed and produced cinema autonomously. He is admired for his romantic and often poetic and personal national cinema, also offering interesting reflections on the shifting British identity and culture.

The work of Kaurismäki differs quite a lot from Powell. Kaurismäki is a contradictory individual though, which does create some link to the British filmmaker, also creating films that reveal some contradiction as it can often be considered a hybridity of genres and styles. Looking at Kaurismäki, his contradictions appear in many shapes and sizes. His cinema always touches upon the gap between the rich and the poor, the bohemian ‘clochards’ and the capitalist elite. Such a thematic perspective can be traced back to genres like the Italian Neorealism of the forties and the social realism of early British cinema already apparent at the beginning of the medium (and also the later British ‘New Wave’ of the fifties and sixties) although in the case of Kaurismäki it always possesses a comedic touch to it, marginalising the magnitude or impact of the tough drama that is being presented. The filmmaker can rather be found in the grey area separating both the gap that is thematically present and the gap between melodrama and comedy. Although he balances between two areas he does seem preoccupied in its stance towards the matters being discussed. The stories mostly evolve from

²² *De Surprise* [The Surprise] (2015) by Mike van Diem basically tells the exact same narrative; both these stories are based on the short story *De Surprise* by Dutch writer Herman Pieter Schönfeld Wichers, commonly known as Belcampo.

²³ Danks (2002)

the perspective of the ‘loser’ or working class-type revoking him-/herself, ‘fighting’ against an elite group or capitalistic stronghold.

From the perspective of the social realism analogy it is ironic that the film is dedicated to Michael Powell, who is not a filmmaker known for his social realism, but rather for his expressionism, romanticism or melodrama often consisting of well-structured and generic productions. The very expressive cinema of Powell is quite contradictory with the cinema Britain is known for in the period he worked, which is mostly the ‘documentary’-style social realistic cinema. Powell was rather experimental in his work and is a filmmaker that used, as said, a hybridity of styles and approaches in his filmmaking, especially in his collaboration with Pressburger. Some examples are *A Canterbury Tale* (1944) in which aspects of realism, documentary, romanticism, expressionism and melodrama is mixed together or *Black Narcissus* (1947) in which again styles, in this case types of cinema, are mixed with on the one hand the classic British realism and on the other hand the flashbacks of Sister Clodagh (Deborah Kerr)²⁴.

The fact the Finn is referring to this filmmaker already reveals some of the characteristics the audience connects to the image of Kaurismäki. The filmmaker is a distinct commonly known film connoisseur, expressing a great love for- and knowledge of the history of the medium. His work is dotted with references to his inspirations and ‘heroes’²⁵. The fact that Powell was only later on in his life being rehabilitated for his ‘greatness’ by critics and filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola, does not seem surprising in relation to Kaurismäki and his view on cinema. The Finn educated himself in his discipline by mainly visiting screenings, watching as much film as possible and profiling himself as a bohemian who is true to the art²⁶. Instead of conforming to conventions he portrays himself as a wayward outsider, choosing his own path, having his own interests and deciding himself what is good and what not, a very Truffaut-like attitude, known as a self-thought cinema expert.

Powell’s career decayed quite rapidly after the release of the, now classic film, *Peeping Tom* (1960). It received such a critical mauling the filmmaker became unable to get his later films funded by the British production companies and needed to move to Australia to keep on working on film (although much more minor, less noteworthy productions)²⁷. In

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ These references are present both thematically, aesthetically and as physical objects in his films in the form of posters, paintings and photographs.

²⁶ Nestingen (2013), p. 1-17

²⁷ Shail (2007), p. 168-172

retrospect this ‘career-ending’ film is often considered not only a classic, but also a film exploring and reflecting upon the meaning, application and process of cinema. Firstly it is a film that was a ground breaking confronting and (for that age) utterly explicit psychological horror-thriller that really made the audience stay awake at night. But besides that it portrayed Powell as one of those classic film directors that was attached to also the material of ‘real’ film so to say; making a film about filmmaking and about the art itself, and the troubling excessive insanities or obsessions it is able to reach²⁸. The director once wrote: ‘I fell in love in 1921 when my celluloid mistress was the most beautiful, fascinating, irresistible object in the world.’²⁹. This love for the physicality and mere presence of cinema is very much present in *Peeping Tom* and not unfamiliar to Kaurismäki either.

The filmmaker never uses digital film shooting his films due to this appreciation or love for the physicality and craft of making ‘real’ cinema³⁰. Besides that; approaching Michael Powell as the criticised ‘stranger in our midst’ can also be considered a characterisation relatable to Kaurismäki. Powell’s reintroduction to the audience was only years later being triggered by filmmakers and critics basically criticising the critics and audience during that time for their unawareness of its quality. It again reveals the nostalgia of the filmmaker and the appreciation and admiration of ‘quality’ and ‘real’ cinema. This nostalgic attitude constantly appears in the cinema of the Finn and honouring such makers suggests not only a dedication to anyone specific, but rather paying an overall tribute to times gone by of both the process of filmmaking itself and filmmakers, but which is also present throughout other aspects of the film³¹.

Thematically the film covers quite a weighty subject, namely: suicide. Fact is the main character of the film is so fed up with life and seemingly depressed he wants to end it. The frustration that appears when he is not succeeding in ending it by his own and forces him to redirect his death wish to an actual hitman can be read as quite dramatic. Nevertheless the film displays comedy rather than ‘heavy’ melodrama and although Henri is constantly fleeing from a murderer, it does not seem to be the main focus of the viewer in watching this film. His death wish is rather funny in how it is presented in the film than being tragic or terrible. When he loses his job he first runs up to a telephone booth and scrolls through his contacts of which he has none left, after which he visits a do it yourself shop where he buys a rope, quite

²⁸ *Film Talk: Martin Scorsese talks to Mark Kermode about his love of Michael Powell movies: ‘My mother would ask – is it necessary to watch that again?’* (2010, November 19)

²⁹ Sanderson (29.07.2005)

³⁰ Nordine (25.03.2018)

³¹ Saint-Cyr (2014)

showy looking up at the testing the rope and looking up to the ceiling from where he will hang it up. The owner seems to notice but ignores it. When arriving home he stops at the landlord to already give notice on his future termination. These over the top exposed series of events, all presented in this Bressonian (*Pickpocket* (1959)) fashion, is so stiff and systematic it distances itself from all the emotional involvement or magnitude of such a burdened moment³².

Léaud plays the somewhat clumsy weird bohemian Henri Boulanger. This casting choice can be considered quite remarkable as Kaurismäki until then (and also in later films) most often worked together with a (to a certain extent) fixed cast, consisting of among others Kati Outinen, Sakari Kuosmanen and Matti Pellonpää. It is exemplary for the historical (cinema) awareness, for which the director is known, and also the director's nostalgia as Jean Pierre Léaud can be considered one of the great actors of the Nouvelle Vague playing his most well-known roles between the fifties and the seventies. In an interview for the documentary *Léaud L'unique* [The Unique Léaud] (2001) by Serge Le Péron Aki Kaurismäki elaborates on this casting choice by stating: 'He was actually my hero as an actor. When I was young, a filmbuff, he was the best.'³³ Aki's performance as Ville Alfa in his brother's (Mika Kaurismäki) *Valehtelija* [The Liar] (1981), *Jackpot 2* (1982) and *Arvottomat* [The Worthless] (1982) was even shaped after Jean-Pierre Léaud, in his goal to shape a character that transmits a feeling of alienation; an exiled individual³⁴.

Léaud did not play a big leading role for quite some time before being asked as the protagonist of Kaurismäki's film, playing, as the filmmaker himself puts it 'not himself'³⁵. His breakthrough as an actor was the 1959 drama *Les Quatre Cents Coups* [The 400 Blows] by Francois Truffaut³⁶. In this film the actor is only fifteen years old and Truffaut extended his acting career, apart from other makers as well, with expanding his '59 film into a cycle of five films all telling the story of Antoine Doinel. Truffaut considered the character to be his alter-ego and also felt a deep connection with the actor playing the character, saying he was often mistaken for Léaud by others³⁷. Kaurismäki, as said, seems to feel a similar connection.

The acting style of Léaud surely developed but always had a personal touch to it, which was already apparent in his first performance in 1959. His transition from boy to man

³² *Pickpocket* (1959)

³³ *Léaud L'unique* (2001)

³⁴ Nestingen (2013), p. 47

³⁵ Bagh (2011)

³⁶ *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (1959)

³⁷ Baecque & Toubiana (2000), p. 233

in both acting, character and real life is most accurately portrayed in *Baisers Volés* [Stolen Kisses] (1968)³⁸.

In this film Doinel presents himself as the deadpan and very physical comedy actor he is so well known for. The film follows Doinel after being kicked out of the army because of unsuitability. He becomes the night-watchman of an hotel and gets back together with his girlfriend Christine. He then retrieves a job as a private detective but falls in love with the woman he has to spy, and is the wife of his client. Eventually it all surpasses and Christine makes him fall for her again. Truffaut was a personal autobiographical filmmaker and the developments taking place in the life of Doinel are based on his own life story. He deserted from the army at a young age and with that was kicked out of it being, just like his alter-ego, unsuitable³⁹.

His film *Les Quatre Cents Coups* was also based on his youth and when released kick-started the Nouvelle Vague or French New Wave movement he and his French contemporaries are known for. But coming back to *Baisers Volés* there is an important shift to mention in his work as a dimension of irony became more present here. James Monaco describes this irony as material irony. In Truffaut's films there is always a division between both the narrative level and the material level. Narrative consists of the story line, the characters, atmosphere and so on. The material level is more concerned with the cinematic aesthetic matters. Monaco states that in *Baisers Volés* these cinematic aesthetics are embodied by an ironic commentary on the system of values represented by the films from the thirties and forties Truffaut grew up with, which he is able to reach through for example adding the Charles Trenet soundtrack to the film which adds a particular resonance to the décor, as well for the funny exaggerations of the various jobs of Doinel. These are some of the elements that do interact with the narrative, but are distinct from it⁴⁰. This analysis of Truffaut's cinema reveals an interesting way of approaching Kaurismäki's irony similarly.

'A ginger ale!'⁴¹, Henri says when approaching the bartender, the old song on the radio abruptly stops, and the bar is silent. It does not seem that it is supposed to be seriously threatening in any way, as the comedic tone to it is quite obvious. Colour always takes a strong presence in Kaurismäki's cinema. Even though Henri enters a shady shifty bar with exclusively unlawful guests the interior can be considered quite stylish and cheerful with its mixture of strong blue, green and red colours. There is even a tropical looking plant filling up

³⁸ *Baisers Volés* (1968)

³⁹ Baecque & Toubiana (2000), p. 162-65

⁴⁰ Monaco (2004), p. 23-33

⁴¹ *I Hired a Contract Killer* (1990)

the shots. Also already the name of the *Honolulu bar* humorously contrasts with what it actually contains. Comedic elements are also present in the lighting. The hard shadows and with that the strong outline of the stripes or rays of light outlining the characters gives the décor an artificial touch already suggesting the unrealism or rather surrealism of the whole situation. Similar to the little rooftop garden these ‘tropical’ green oases are being put forward, as a sort of way out from all the problems.

The style of lighting in this scene is a well-known characteristic in the oeuvre of Kaurismäki. Again his awareness and references come forward here, this time referring to the classic genre of film-noir, which was most popular between the forties and late fifties of the twentieth century⁴². The filmmaker comes across as a filmmaker being rather open in highlighting the plasticity of the medium than masking it too much with any sort of extreme realism. This makes the spectator aware of the fact it is a movie rather than an accurate representation of reality. This is also present in the dialogues and/or monologues in this (and so many other) scene(s). Most dialogues and/or monologues have a very stylized poetic and with that an unrealistic tone to it, clearly contradicting ‘real’ conversations. When having ordered the drink Henri turns around and looks around the café:

‘Where I come from, we eat places like this for breakfast!’

This sentence in itself is so genuinely cliché and at the same time so unrealistic in its so-called threat or toughness the character seemingly wants to suggest, it again settles the whole mood and tone the filmmaker wants to indicate. This over exaggerating is done so often, the technique in itself becomes an over exaggeration that seems to form the base of the irony that is brought across in this film.

By being so obviously ‘funny’ and emphatically rejecting the idea of realism by constantly making the spectator aware of the plasticity and presence of the surroundings, content and general shape of the film, and with that making the spectator almost enthusiastically aware of the medium, diminishes the complexity of the topic and makes the theme approachable for an extensive audience. This approach manifests itself throughout several scenes. The scene in which he actually tries to perform the suicide himself exemplifies this argument best. Boulanger tries to hang himself at first, but the single plug the rope is attached to obviously succumbs under the weight of a full grown adult. After that he tries to

⁴² Keating (2010), p. 38-46

asphyxiate himself by sticking his head in the oven, but he runs out of gas⁴³. The whole film consists of such ‘extremities’ and clumsiness with Léaud as an important player in the midst of all this. As Boulanger he plays an important role in creating this somewhat strange feeling, and with that it suggestively entails more than just being funny.

The acting brings an airy feeling across, amidst of the weighty theme/subject. Looking at the décor for example it is not the most happy and lively area to live in and in that sense is a solid representation of the theme of the film and the situation our main character is in. The colourfulness or hilarity is rather being exposed through the actor(s), the acting and the tangible aesthetics that give it a dynamic spark now and then. Grasping back to Monaco’s analysis of *Baisers Volés* as an ironic commentary, *I Hired a Contract Killer* could also be read as such. In this case it is not so much a commentary on the thirties and forties cinema but rather on the Nouvelle Vague work with which Léaud is so inseparably identified.

Léaud’s acting thrives on its unpredictableness and originality, which has quite a humoristic touch to it. His acting style often enhances a great amount of improvisation, known by directors working with him. His mannerisms are also recognizable for most spectators as well as his very personal staccato diction and elocution⁴⁴. This very particular and unique way of acting attributes a certain identity or rather ‘character’ to the films he acts in. As said, Kaurismäki’s admiration for Léaud is no secret, and the performance of Léaud in the film radiates that in a sense. His performance could be described as a ‘singular combination of stoicism and lightness’⁴⁵. This combination of characteristics seems sensitive for friction, which the film translates in the radical evolution Henri runs through. His stoic objection of sensitivity and passion radically changes over a few hours, and the ease with which this transition takes place seems necessary but unrealistically swift. The irony prevails in connection to the cinema Léaud stands or stood for; the Nouvelle Vague, and this irony seems to be mostly present in its exaggeration and rather extreme oppositional characters, but also the narrative plays a part here.

Although the acting wears the recognisable signature it does need to deal with total different surroundings and situations than Antoine Doinel in Truffaut’s 1968’ film. Instead of the romantic magical backdrop of Paris, Boulanger is located in a desolated bleak area of London. There is no breath-taking balcony view in his apartment but a solid brick wall

⁴³ *I Hired a Contract Killer* (1990)

⁴⁴ Some recognizable characterizations: Constantly spontaneously stroking his hand through his hair, his somewhat staring gaze playfully interrupting the overall dynamic and paste in his performance, his speech and intonation, his somewhat wooden shrewd posture and movement.

⁴⁵ Hawker (2014)

straight across his kitchen window⁴⁶. His balcony is now located on the rooftop and does spark some colourful magic with a somewhat bleak but touchingly small romantic garden existing of a few plants in pots, as if the young romantic and life loving kid is still there somewhere inside, and mostly as if Kaurismäki wants to explicitly make the spectator aware of that.

The connection to this specific Truffaut film is even more underlined by adding the ‘private detective’-figure to the story, this time in the shape of a contract killer. A shoe store owner in *Baisers Volés* hires Doinel himself as a private detective. He is enlisted with the job of observing and intercepting his employees speaking ill of him when he is not around. This at first sweet and hilarious little adventure brings him in contact with the wife of the owner: Mrs. Tabard (Delphine Seyrig), for whom he develops a serious attraction. The young Doinel hilariously struggles and stumbles in his sexual anxiety and in one of the most memorable and intense scenes repeats the names of Fabienne Tabard and Christine Darbon (Claude Jade) in front of the mirror like he needs to make the most decisive decision in life. As Henri Boulanger he is also opposed to radical life changing developments, rather this time it is a literal choice between life and death, he at first chooses death, but then love appears, and chooses life again. So even when life is at its most depressing and death seems to be the only way out, love is the only saviour and still at this point matters more than anything.

The story of Doinel is clearly a romantic comedy, with the romanticism spread out through all the images. It is also about a young exuberant character that is open to life and stands in the midst of it. His choices are not only connected to the women he is with but also the jobs he has switched constantly and are quite absurd and divergent. It is a chaotic dynamic individual who possesses a certain creativity, which adds a liveliness to both him and everyone/-thing around him. Although Kaurismäki’s story also can be read as a tale of romance and comedy it has a much darker and tragic edge to it. The streets and buildings are sober and the morbid humour of course, as the whole story kick-starts from the suicidal thoughts and -endeavours, surely sets a different tone. From a dynamic lively atmosphere the film now highlights rather the exact opposite, with a much more static character, style and rhythm. Whereas Doinel follows his objectives, he is now being followed and has to literally run for his life. He is no longer the young kid chasing and challenging life and looking for new adventures, but rather seems to be slowly engulfed by life, being chased by death.

⁴⁶ *Baisers Volés* (1968)

At the end of *Baisers Volés* the other mysterious man that followed Christine approaches the couple in the park. He speaks of the temporality that is apparent in most relationships or love affairs, and how he is different when it comes to love, offering whole his life and time for his lover. The ‘new Antoine Doinel’ of Kaurismäki now has quite a similar approach to love, and basically goes ‘all-in’.

Looking back at the argument of Monaco in his analysis of *Baisers Volés* an interesting similarity can be discovered. Both the narrative irony and material irony come into being. In its materiality the highly exaggerated contrast between decors, light, camera and surroundings display such a deep contrast between the two films it does not directly seem obvious to connect the two. The way it is being presented though does suggest a certain meaning. It is such an explicit presence and with that not only makes the viewer aware of the plasticity of the medium but also makes the viewer aware of its mere presence, like it wants to tell the spectator something with it. This connection then with *Baisers Volés* is not surprising but rather necessary in a sense that it is a way to make its presence understandable. The material than, which highly contrasts, displays the irony of it. This combined with the narrative and main character an even more serious overlap occurs, which makes the material a rather funny contrast that due to its exaggerated differences becomes even more hilarious and obvious. The film seems quite adjusted to certain examples in past cinema (Powell and Truffaut for example), and the irony seems to prevail in its rather oppositional but clearly referential character.

So here the technique (or material) and development of the narrative is of major importance in the analysis of this cinema. Both areas interact on the level of production and a particular stage of the development of the film(s). Especially the use of certain type of actors is highlighted here, to stress the value of such decision-making. Zooming out and with that slowly moving away from the tangible influences, the next chapter will delve into the approach of genre as a sort of overarching theme or idea within the process of filmmaking. It again involves technical aspects and narrative components, but shifts away from any deep or intense look at specific characters that carry these components and rather elaborates more specifically on how the overall use of genre and also adjustment of particular genres or genre elements in itself can be perceived as ironic.

Chapter 2

The dark comedy of no remarriage: *Mies vailla menneisyyttä* [The Man Without a Past]
(2002)

The Man Without a Past premiered at the Cannes Festival of 2002 where it won the Grand Prix and was nominated for an Oscar in the category of Best Foreign Language Film⁴⁷. The film tells the story of a man who, for unspecified reasons, travels to an anonymous city, spends the first night sleeping at the park and gets brutally beaten up by a ternary of belligerent punkers. Everything he carried with him is either stolen or thrown away in the trash and he falters his way to the nearby train station where he collapses. Arriving at the hospital the doctor soon declares him dead, but after leaving the room the man miraculously rehabilitates. He escapes from the hospital and wanders the streets, again collapsing, only this time in a harbour where a poor family, living in an old shipping container pities him. He does not remember anything due to the beating and lost all of his possessions. He has to start again from zero and slowly rebuilds his life in this lower class environment being surrounded with either the homeless or poor and the Salvation Army helping these individuals. Instead of offering possession or money the people offer him warmth, friendship and love, all contributing to the reinvention of himself⁴⁸.

This film is part of the self-proclaimed Finland-trilogy (or loser-trilogy) consisting, apart from this title, of *Kauas pilvet karkaavat* [Drifting Clouds] (1996) and *Laitakaupungin valot* [Lights in the Dusk] (2006)⁴⁹. It was the second trilogy the filmmaker made, his first being the Proletariat-trilogy, which put the working class more in the centre. Nevertheless the differences are not completely clear at first sight. Even Kaurismäki himself cannot always tell the differences between the two trilogies⁵⁰. *The Man Without a Past* can be regarded as the most distinguished title in both these lists and although enhancing a similar thematic approach, as all films reflect on Finland's diminishing economic position and the growing gap between poor and rich, the film differs on several levels. In *Drifting Clouds* a couple both lose their job in a short period of time and both have to deal with their unemployment, struggling and laboriously climbing out of the pit they were involuntary pushed in⁵¹. *Lights in the Dusk* tells about the loneliness of a night-watchman who is bullied by essentially everyone (except

⁴⁷ Nestingen (2013), p. 2

⁴⁸ *The Man Without a Past* (2002)

⁴⁹ Nestingen (2013), p. 42

⁵⁰ Martilla (2006)

⁵¹ *Drifting Clouds* (1996)

for the snack bar owner who seems to have a crush) and is being dragged along criminals that ruin his life even more and more⁵².

All three films tell stories about misfits or so called losers that all seem to be mistreated in some sort of way, although they are being put forward as ‘our’ heroes. Their heroic qualities lie mostly in their considerably wayward approach or somewhat ‘strangely’ unique perspective on society. From the perspective of the maker it is rather the world around them that is strange or treats them unreasonably, which is present throughout almost all of the films, also outside this trilogy⁵³. Nevertheless the stories all highlight a conflict between ‘the people’ (as in society) versus our main character(s). Looking at the development of the stories society alters all chosen paths and impedes the main characters rationally and without any remorse, whereas the filmmaker portrays them as executors of the law and the main character(s) as the one holding on to a certain passion or principles that are mostly built upon a moral compass guided by humanism.

M (Markku Peltola) is the main character reinventing life and stumbling upon obstructions that are mostly built on bureaucratic structures, it is the humanity and warmth or heart of humanity in which he seems to find his answers. Also this warmth is brought across with a laugh, as this is constantly trivialised by humour. When M ‘steals a kiss’, as he puts it, from Irma, the moment never levitates towards the realism of filmmakers like Rossellini and Loach, although it oozes humanity. It is rather a sweet and loving scene, with at the same time the extremely awkward and with that hilariously weird overtone.

In general this characteristic of humanism can be appointed to the Finnish director. His dry and somewhat black comedy may put some of the discussed content in the pillory. Nevertheless it always touches upon the sentiment that could be defined as humanity or heart, although this presence of such a feel did change over the years⁵⁴. In for example *I Hired a Contract Killer* a similar notion is present, only in a later stage of Kaurismäki’s career, and clearly visible in this film, this humanity is happily and properly dressed in a much more colourful and talkative way, and with more divergent characters and diverse relationships that stimulate the feeling of social engagement and social awareness, which is more on the background in the 1990 film of the Finn. From the more silent deadpan comedy the director now created a film with a great amount of dialogue and talking in general, which is already quite ironic due to its deep contradiction.

⁵² *Lights in the Dusk* (2006)

⁵³ Previous chapters’ *I Hired a Contract Killer* is one of those many examples.

⁵⁴ Nestingen (2013), p. 55-60

The thematic approach, the aesthetics, narrative but also the humour have always remained quite similar and with that recognisable for the style and work of the director. Differences though appear in the developed textual and textural layer that is being put forward. Textual in a way that dialogues and monologues seem to matter more and even possess comedic elements responsible for many laughs in this film. Also the texture in a sense that the film covers a more varied and ‘complex’ story, with more characters, more bumps in the road and more ‘adventures’. The adventure comes across as more widespread in a sense that it is not only covering personal developments of a protagonist, but also introduce a lot of new or extra additional characters and characteristics of these characters that serve as a noteworthy addition to the character’s development.

The overall theme in the film could be specified as the loss of memory or as a product of that: the search for identity. This theme has been used very often in cinema throughout the ages, with one of the earliest examples being W.S. van Dyke II’ *I Love You Again* (1940) and the better known Alfred Hitchcock’s *Spellbound* (1945)⁵⁵. Also at the beginning of the millennium the subject reappeared in quite a manifold with Doug Liman’s *Bourne Identity* (2002), David Lynch’ *Mulholland Drive* (2001), Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2000) and Kaurismäki’s *The Man Without a Past*⁵⁶. Although the theme is similar, the approaches are quite different, with Kaurismäki’s interpretation being rather unique and ‘typically Kaurismäki’. Whereas the affection is often being handled quite seriously and functions as the main trigger of the main character in all of his actions, this approach is rather laconic and hilarious in numerous ways.

Putting the film in a contemporary context it can well be connected with titles from more or less the same year of its release. Nevertheless these approaches are radically different from Kaurismäki’s interpretation of the theme. Putting a genre indication on the film it reveals quite some strong connections with a romantic comedy. But when analysing it closely it seems rather a subgenre of romantic comedy as it does seem clear that the film is not a typical contemporary romantic comedy. The typical romantic comedy is often structured in quite a similar manner. It always involves a man and a woman who often either find one another and fall in love or lose one another and maybe or maybe not get back together again. Essentially it always tells the story of ‘true love’. Often the two that are ‘meant’ for each other are not able to reconcile or simply get in touch with each other due to (many) circumstances.

⁵⁵ *Spellbound* (1945)

⁵⁶ Of course it is a theme spread throughout the whole history of cinema, but this is just to provide an overview.

Tension builds up till the point the love story seems to be doomed to fail, and then happily ever after ends with a fairy tale like kiss that brings the two (back) together anyway⁵⁷.

There are of course some exceptions to this analysis of structure and Kaurismäki's film definitely fits in one of those⁵⁸. Although *The Man Without a Past* does involve the two 'meant to be' lovers bumping into each other, needing to overcome many obstacles (with their treacherous interaction being one of them) and eventually when it all seems to fail and fall apart getting back together anyway and even having the great kissing moment, it does not particularly come across as the typical romantic genre movie. Its interpretation does surely entail comedy, but in rather a different manner. The unhandy and awkward interaction between characters is not funny because it is recognisable like in many romantic comedies, but rather because it is somewhat weird and uncommon. Also the general pace and rhythm of the film conveys a different feeling than the 'standard' classic romantic comedy. His deadpan comedy is quite the opposite of the quirky fairy tale-like romantic comedies that were mentioned earlier. The comedy of Kaurismäki is often deemed as dark or tragic, and combining this with the romantic comedy label is not that obvious per se⁵⁹.

Coming back to the films entailing a similar thematic adaptation of memory loss and also use this romantic comedy structure of telling this story is Dyke II's *I Love You Again*. Van Dyke II's film is not, similar to *The Man Without a Past*, a typical romantic comedy although it possesses some elements of it⁶⁰. It can rather be deemed one of the many late thirties and early forties screwball comedies that were tremendously popular around that age. Screwball comedy reveals close similarities to a romantic comedy, but the humour is often utterly different and also the almost standard struggles that occur are not a coincidence, but rather specific to the genre: the battle of the sexes, farces and disguises, fast paced humour and dialogue etcetera⁶¹. The comedy that is used in cinema from this age is obviously time-bound. The slapstick jokes, slick one-liners and theatricality is something strongly connected to the time of production⁶². The screwball genre became popular in the thirties and forties in the American cinema. It often involves a strong self-confident (emancipated) female character who is involved with a man struggling with his masculinity. Often there is a struggle involved

⁵⁷ McDonald (2007), p. 7-17

⁵⁸ A few recent examples would be *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008), *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) and *The Lobster* (2015), which also play with the typical genre characteristics and mix it up with different genre elements or change the 'regular' character and story development.

⁵⁹ Wilson (2009)

⁶⁰ Especially the element of 'true love' is apparent in both distinct genres.

⁶¹ Millberg (2013), p. 5-14

⁶² Byrge & Miller (2001), p. 10-19

between economic classes and many of the story developments take place on the base of funny mistakes, miscommunications or coincidences.

Dyke II's *I Love You Again* is an example of such a comedic approach. As already explained in the first chapter Kaurismäki's cinephilia is no secret to his audience, and the possibility of him being familiar with this film might not be such a random or surprising pick. In this film the leading character Wilson (William Powell) gets hit on the head and forgets his past and who he is now. Coincidentally enough the last thing he can remember is being on a train on his way to a fight⁶³. The character finds out there is a lot of money on his accounts and wants to lay his hand on that as fast as possible, when the story unfolds Wilson finds out there is no need for fleeing and 'just' being rich anymore, but rather settling and finding the true love and warmth of a close one as something to really live for. At the end of the film Wilson again gets a knock on the head, this time by a punch and seemingly snaps out of his memory loss, being the old self again. When the others leave the room and he is alone with his wife he whistles as a bird to her, telling her he faked it⁶⁴. Interestingly *The Man Without a Past* literally displays a scene in which Nieminen (Juhani Niemelä) tries to hit M on the head with a stick in an attempt, as he explains it, to get his memory back. 'I saw it in a movie once, where a guy gets hit on the same spot and gets his memory back...'

Looking at the film from Stanley Cavell's point of view the plotline and story development reveals close similarities with a subgenre of the screwball comedy: the comedy of remarriage. The theme of marriage or remarriage is also often used in screwball comedies to create the conflict that is apparent between the central male and female. Nevertheless philosopher Stanley Cavell developed the terminology to indicate this distinct subgenre of the screwball comedy that is literally focussing on this conflicting situation being so apparent in *I Love You Again*⁶⁵. This subgenre was used to make the filmmakers able to tell a story of illicit sex or adultery without explicitly showing it⁶⁶. In some way it is an ode to the marriage based on true love rather than marriage as a formality, culture, religion or tradition. David R. Shumway debates Cavell's identification of this subgenre by stating there is not really a division between the screwball comedy and comedy of remarriage, as both genres mystify marriage making romance rather the objective than the marriage itself⁶⁷. Nevertheless the

⁶³ For leading character M in *The Man Without a Past*, the last thing he remembers is being on a train. The train brings him to the (for the spectator) unknown place where he gets in a fight.

⁶⁴ *I Love You Again* (1940)

⁶⁵ Cavell (1981)

⁶⁶ Cavell (1981), p. 191-94

⁶⁷ Shumway (1991)

genre does distinguish itself in involving partners that always come back together again rather than the characters just getting together.

A lot of the humour in both these distinguished genres possess rather similar elements. The fast dialogues punctuated with catchy one-liners like ‘Would you mind getting rid of your wise cracking stooge...’ or ‘That could go through the whole alphabet!’ when Wilson mentions the money on his ‘C-account’. Much of the comedy in the film is connected to, or triggered by, the performance of the characters. The rapid exchange of interaction is also of major importance to the comedy. The mimics of Wilson and his opponent ‘Doc’ Ryan (Frank McHugh) are so obvious and theatrical it almost seems like it is a stage play. Furthermore the situational slapstick humour like the scene in which Wilson is first confronted with the new fiancée of his wife he did not know he was divorcing. The new fiancée punches Wilson in the face, turns around and bumps to the door himself.

At a first sight, drawing parallels between Kaurismäki and the comedies of Howard Hawks, Frank Capra and W.S. van Dyke II seems rather strange⁶⁸. But interpreting Kaurismäki’s approach as ironic reveals a deeper layer that could explain much about the filmmakers interests and interpretations. The humour in Kaurismäki’s film is presented differently but surely is apparent. Besides that the ‘lightness’ in handling the serious disturbance of memory loss seems quite similar as well. It is not being made a fool of or subject of shallow jokes, but it is rather dealing with the gravity of the subject by looking at it from a more humorous perspective, being aware of the humour rather than play it down with humour. This can be considered an important aspect of irony. The ironist is always solidly aware of the subject he/she touches on and the context that surrounds the subject. Nevertheless the humoristic ironist uses the subject to transmit his/her humour⁶⁹.

But irony also works in a similar way as *I Hired a Contract Killer* hence the exaggeration of the genre or history Kaurismäki is referring to. His awareness seems indisputable and with that the ironist prevails. M initially forgets he was ever married, then eventually returns to his wife and finds out he is already divorced. When the new husband of his now ex-wife asks him if they need to fight over here, he rejects the offer and accepts the developments. There is no fighting or discussing or quirky one-liners in combination with the fast paced theatrical acting of the forties comedies. It is rather the direct opposite that constructs the absurd humour and also the absurdity of his general approach to, or interaction with, the genre.

⁶⁸ *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) & *It Happened One Night* (1934)

⁶⁹ Hutcheon (1994), p. 35-40

Kaurismäki is aware in a sense he is a well-known cognoscente of especially cinema from this age⁷⁰. His films always involve classic American automobiles from the fifties and sixties, as well for the music and aesthetics in general. There is a constant reference and with that an awareness of the past and also an appreciation of it, this nostalgic attitude or characteristic is well known, documented and recognised by the filmmaker himself⁷¹. So reading his cinema as a body of work from an earlier age in cinema is not that absurd, but rather contextualising in a certain manner. Nevertheless putting it in such a past context there are numerous differences to be noticed as well (comparing the genres specifically within this timeframe) but is that not just the ironic attitude of it?

Using Cavell's approach of the comedy of remarriage the first thought is that the term in theory essentially suits quite well to *The Man Without a Past*. The film follows a man that is lost, but found and brought back to his wife, in a sense posing the possibility of remarriage, which is rather laconically being rejected by the three involved parties: ex-husband, ex-wife and new husband⁷². Although there is this rejection, the formal element is present in the plot. Looking back on the relationship of the two they both got rudely and suddenly separated from one another due to an external unpredictable inconvenience happening to M. Similarly to Wilson M loses his memory and is confronted with a return to a wife that already filed divorce. In Wilson's case it is presented as something to fight for and which is also done by the main character, ending up in their reconciliation. In M's case it is rather the tough realism kicks in and the spectator gets to learn that not every problem can be solved forever and always. The marriage is over but it is okay and directly accepted by all parties.

They both lead their separate life and M even stumbles upon a new woman who is presented and accepted by him as his true love, although their conversations are unlike any of the fast paced and 'constant interactive' kind as in the comedies that Cavell described, but rather the opposite, developing very difficult and somewhat painful. In the spirit of wry realism the 'lost' M is found again and brought back with his wife. When the story would end here and they would reconcile and understand they are after all truly made for each other this could be read as a summary of a typical comedy of remarriage. It is its atypicality though that makes the connection so ironically explicit.

⁷⁰ Bunbury (14.03.2018)

⁷¹ Nestingen (2013), 87-111

⁷² The comedy of remarriage always portrays this as an important and much discussed moment in the film. In *I Love You Again* there is constant fighting or bickering going on whenever this subject is being put forward. It is considered to be something to fight for.

‘Does a bird have wings? Does a wolf cry out for loneliness?’

~

‘If authorities ask -

‘I shall deny you trice like Peter denied Christ at the coal fire.’

‘As it happens I don’t even know who I am.’

~

‘Shadow’s the way wherever I go.’

~

‘It’s no more smoking in the shower for you. Bye.’

These are some quotations that seem deep and florid, but also enhance an abstract tone suggesting more to it than meets the eye (or ear). Reading these lines singularly and out of context, it seems like there is a certain depth or resonance to a lot of the dialogues and monologues in the film, but it all contains a somewhat, whether or not intentional, jokingly character. When the warden of the harbour first meets M he introduces himself as the whip of God. The conversation is followed by several of these, so called, quasi-poetic sentences. But just like a lot of poetry the reciting can be an important part of the effect. The ways these words are delivered determine the presumed message it hides. Reading it as sentences from van Dyke II’s movie it would have been brought across differently and would be read as one of the many catchy one-liners with which screwball comedy is punctuated. A big difference though is that in such a van Dyke II movie it is part of a fast paced conversation that constantly goes back and forth. In the Kaurismäki version of it, the conversations develop in the opposite direction and the interaction seems to involve more silence than sound. Especially the big pauses in between the characters’ interaction are obviously totally different from what the spectator is used to of such a genre comedy.

By adapting some of the formal means but applying them in an opposite way irony prevails. Doc Ryan jumps and moves around like he is performing on stage. Also the mimics of all the characters in *I Love You Again* are so to say quite extreme compared to today’s standards. Again this is time bound but also deeply connected to the genre. Theatricality and screwball is inseparable and produces many laughs in this forties comedy. This way of acting and slapstick comedy is a style of performance that keeps up the pace that is so inseparably connected to the genre. The super-fast interaction comes into being through this over the top acting that provides it even more magnitude. This is not something that totally disappeared in

today's cinema⁷³, but is surely less common. Moreover, Kaurismäki takes quite the opposite measurements that can also be deemed quite uncommon. In the acting in his films there is a complete absence of theatre that can be described deadpan comedy, which only can be traced back to a few directors, with Robert Bresson being deemed as the inventor and most well-known applier of such an acting style.

This acting comment is necessary in a sense that it points out the deep contrast or rather the radical opposite that is pushed forward by the director. By creating such a wide gap in mimics and dialogue (or acting in general) on the surface the contrast becomes the reference. M is not the slick Casanova or smooth talker that swirls the mind of the lady he wants to have. The 'lady' itself that decides to dress him up with a suit is applying his closest look to a character of such status. In that sense Irma reveals quite some close similarities to the women from the comedies of remarriage in which they mostly perform as independent self-willed individuals. Of course Irma is not in any way the fluent sexy feminine type, but does act, although awkwardly, as such towards the man that wants her.

After the night M and Irma had their first date and actual kiss M asks Irma to go out again at a Salvation Army event. Irma is being presented as the strong female figure. She acts somewhat cocky and says she cannot setup 'shady meeting during working hours', but then states it is all right anyway. Her whole posture and physical communication gives away her quite insecure and uneasy nature, but she explicitly profiles herself not as such. This behaviour can be considered referential due to the ironic exaggeration and contradiction.

The contrast here between the usage of genre is interesting, but also the contrast between the earlier work of Kaurismäki and this film is interesting. The silent deadpan comedy is still being used, but also more dialogue and monologue comes into being. So whereas the director first aligns his cinema to a certain extent with his main examples or role models, he now adapts his approach of a complete genre, which produces a rather different ironic approach⁷⁴.

As said the comedy of remarriage is often being referred to as the sexless adult film that possesses many explicit references to the subject but never actually reveals it. Looking at the awkward stammering sexual interaction between the two adults M and Irma, it can again be interpreted as an extreme usage of this consorting. Although their interaction remains (visually) sexless they experience true love. The remarriage eventually does not happen, but is

⁷³ With relatively recent popular films like the *Jackass*-series being probably one of its best examples.

⁷⁴ *Rikos ja rangaistus* (1983), *Hamlet liikemaailmassa* (1987), *I Hired a Contract Killer* (1990) & *La Vie de Bohème* (1992)

highlighted as a distinct possibility. Instead of the classic comedy of remarriage homage to true love in the shape of the two ex-lovers coming back together, Kaurismäki chooses a rather opposite interaction and opposite characters. The ‘stumbling’ romance is still there, just like in the comedy of remarriage, but due to its explicit extinguished love for the woman he would remarry in such a comedy, this classic development of such a story is put of the table and M is brought *back* after all, but only now to the first love of his new life.

So there is a certain development present in the cinema of the Finnish director. Besides the evolution of dialogue in a sense, there is also the social and political engagement that seems to be of a growing value in his films. The fighting against bureaucracy and the constant presence of authoritative figures opposed to the ‘losers’ of society gets more attention. In his ‘last’ film *Toivon Tuolla Puolen* [The Other Side of Hope] (2017) this political engagement grows even further, with a story closely related to the present topical debate concerning the refugee crisis. How does Kaurismäki’s cinema relate to such literal current topical issues with his (always) comedic and somewhat contextualising approach?

Chapter 3

A Successive Failure: *Toivon Tuolla Puolen* [The Other Side of Hope] (2017)

The latest and possibly last production of Kaurismäki was released in 2017 and premiered at the Berlinale (Berlin International Film Festival) on the 30th of March 2017. Here it was nominated for the Golden Bear for best movie, and awarded with the Silver Bear for best directing. At this festival the director announced his retirement from cinema and with this film being his last⁷⁵. It is the second production in an unfinished trilogy dedicated to the humanism (again), the harbours and the refugee problem. In itself this already ridicules the idea of a trilogy, most commonly known as a series of three films, rather than two. *Le Havre* (2011) is the first of the two productions and focuses on the flee of a young African boy, discovered by an old shoe polisher, when taking a lunch break at the harbour. Here the film is settled in the urban port commune of Le Havre, France. This is necessary to mention as the film comprehensively visualises the atmosphere and images of this Normandy town, playing an important part in the movie⁷⁶.

Le Havre is, as the title suggests and similar to his 1992 film *La Vie de Bohème*, completely French spoken. *The Other Side of Hope* is Finnish spoken and focuses seemingly

⁷⁵ *Toivon tuolla puolen* | Press Conference Highlights | Berlinale 2017 (2017, February 15)

⁷⁶ *Le Havre* (2011)

less on the setting in which the story unfolds, but more so on the people, and especially Waldemar (Sakari Kuosmanen, a ‘Kaurismäki-regular), helping the lost refugee in reviving and regaining hope. In the film *Khaled* (Sherwan Haji) arrives at Helsinki camouflaged in a big pile of coal on a cargo ship. He directly turns himself in to the authorities applying for asylum. His application is being rejected and he sees no other option than fleeing the facility he was staying in. He hides near a restaurant where Waldemar finds him and provides him a place to work, eat and sleep. Waldemar helps Khaled tracing and eventually finding his sister in Lithuania. They hire a trucker to smuggle her into Helsinki and let the two reunite. Hope seems regained again, but a racist thug, that already threatened him a number of times, harasses Khaled and stabs him presumably fatally, putting an end to all the fighting and struggling⁷⁷.

It is probably the most urgent and topical film of Kaurismäki’s career that is directly linked to a current and still on-going unsolved debate present all around Europe. All of Kaurismäki’s films are topical or entail a certain social or extracurricular message, but in this particular film the link to the current main agenda of European (or even worldwide) political issues and popular news media is more accurate than ever before. The fact that the refugee is Syrian rather than unspecified in its origin, like in *Le Havre*, is an important factor stimulating the topicality and also sensitivity of the subject.

A lot of the politically engaged cinema involved in highlighting this specific discussion is mostly embedded with a tough social realism trying to paint a picture for the audience of the misery and pain so many of these people have to go through and deal with. Films like *Welcome* (2009) by Philippe Lioret, *The Invader* (2011) by Nicolas Provost and Gianfranco Rosi’s *Fuocoammare* (2016) clearly adapt a different approach to this theme than the Finnish filmmaker. His constant balance between both comedy and socio-political engagement is present throughout all of his films, and here it becomes very apparent once again. The ‘neo-realist with humour’ as he once put it himself⁷⁸. So how does this humour work or how is it constructed dealing with such sensitive topical matters?

Intermingling these elements is not unique, but his particular approach is utterly different compared to his colleagues, naming recent examples like *Willkommen bei den Hartmanns* [Welcome at the Hartmanns] (2016)⁷⁹ and *Welcome to Norway* (2016)⁸⁰. The quirky and fast cut trailers with ‘funny’ uplifting music already reveals the goal of these

⁷⁷ *The Other Side of Hope* (2017)

⁷⁸ Romney (1997)

⁷⁹ *Willkommen bei den Hartmanns* (2016)

⁸⁰ *Welcome to Norway* (2016)

makers and the laughs it wants to produce. Both films put the focus very much on the locals as the helpers who have to deal with the way the refugees are welcomed in their country. *Willkommen bei den Hartmanns* thrives upon a certain directness that is exemplified by numerous practical jokes like for example the dinner table scene in which grandmother asks her grandchild about his music preferences. The conversations are cliché and really strive for the direct impact of the predictably funny interaction, with the boy telling his grandma the hip-hop music he listens to is ‘...*pussyfreundlich*...’ (pussy-friendly). Another example would be the grandfather struggling with getting older appealing for all necessary measures to stop his aging, also leading up to many funny scenes illustrated by an exaggeration of the clove between the elder and modern technology and his hip weird dentist friend that embodies an extreme stereotype of such an ‘old-young’ character.

Of course Kaurismäki also (theoretically) enhances certain techniques to fulfil his comedic ambitions. Nevertheless the films differ due to the combination of measurements that is utterly authentic. Surely Marcel Marx (André Wilms), the hero of *Le Havre*, can also be analysed as quite a stereotype poor shoe polisher and the exaggerations are also present again, in for example the scene in which Little Bob (Roberto Piazza) reunites with his wife again in a café. The excessive amount of shots that Little Bob drinks in the dark and the bright artificial light that is being literally put on when his wife reunites with him is exaggerated to quite an extent, but enhances the scene an artificial presence which can be linked to the classical Hollywood cinema genres like film noir for example in which techniques like low key lighting, hard shadows and such are so often used⁸¹. So its not so much aspiring an ‘easy’ laugh than evocative references. The difference is not so much in the question *what?* But rather in the *how?*

Looking at the German blockbuster the music is quite a presence throughout the film. It is loud, fast, hip and catchy so to say and perfectly suits the general paste of the film, which is similarly *speedy*. In both the editing as the essential story development the paste is up-tempo. Movement of the camera, characters and cuts enhance a certain internal rhythm to the film that makes the specific characterisations that were just made so different from one another⁸². Kaurismäki is known for his nostalgic nature in his cinema. The old music, cars, clothes and commercial items all refer to a faded history. The films reject the modernised world with its glamour and eminence. Also the absence of ‘highly’ developed technologies come into being. This absence is also noticeable in the actual visual image of the film. The

⁸¹ Nestingen (2013), p. 18-26

⁸² Abel (1988), 162

filmmaker does not use the latest technological developments of the medium, like: 3D or 4D, virtual and augmented reality, editorial colouring or lighting effects and so on. Kaurismäki always shoots his cinema in 35mm and never applied to any recent convention or development to change that⁸³. Even the rhythm resonates this feeling. Kaurismäki never speeds up his stories, but exposes an observing view, being patient, looking and listening to his characters next step⁸⁴.

His filmmaking can be deemed as a type of classical narration. The modern techniques are in reach and the filmmaker is surely aware of it, but rejects it anyhow. This outspoken approach to storytelling is what creates this great gap between the two ‘refugee-comedies’. As explained similar elements are used to produce or reach a laugh. Comparing *Wilkommen bei den Hartmanns* and *Le Havre* it is the pace, rhythm and overall style that essentially divides the two. Although both films address similar topical debates and are with that very much connected to current world debates, Simon Verhoeven puts every divergent element of the film in the present tense and with that makes it recognisable and identifiable. Aki Kaurismäki is a nostalgic and chooses to deny the temporality and similar to Verhoeven’s film, this approach is apparent in every aspect of the film.

So the content of comedy surely is different and bears the ‘author’s’ stamp. His techniques in itself already possess a great deal of irony, but analysing it only as such would be too superficial. The irony hiding under such technical interventions does not appear out of nowhere. His approach to comedy is profound in many ways and the resonance of his profound humour seems apparent in particular ludic references throughout the film. Intertextuality is an important trademark that could be noticed in every chapter so far, being reached through actor choices or genre adaptations. Taking Kaurismäki’s promulgation of this film being his final ‘trick’ seriously or at least into consideration completes the echo of its content. The Finnish filmmaker never made a secret of his admiration of certain eras in cinema history, films or makers. His awareness is something his fans or spectators are aware of. Especially his unswerving intense respect, love and admiration for the great Japanese film director Yasujiro Ozu is noteworthy here. This particular admiration comes forward in many media statements⁸⁵. This is seemingly being somewhat embellished but this is just to point out of what importance this maker is to him.

⁸³ Nordine (25.03.2018)

⁸⁴ Nestingen (2007)

⁸⁵ Terreehorst (2012)

Ozu's legacy is immensely extensive comprehending more than fifty films mostly produced between the thirties and sixties of the last century. His films often involve lower class family dramas that almost always involve comedic elements like *Umarete wa mita keredo* [I was Born but...] (1932)⁸⁶, *Ohayo* [Good Morning] (1959), *Akibiyori* [Late Autumn] (1960) and many more. As Eric Rohmer puts it Ozu's films were extraordinary cinema about very ordinary people. His most well-known film *Tokyo monogatari* [Tokyo Story] (1953) is one of the most beloved films Kaurismäki ever stumbled upon and motivated him, as he puts it himself, to give up his dreams about literature and start his search for the red kettle. Kaurismäki also somewhat humorously states in the same documentary from 1993: 'I made eleven lousy films and it's all your fault..', looking at a picture from Ozu⁸⁷.

So his appreciation or even love for the Japanese filmmaker seems unmistakably deep and pure. In 1993 the counter of productions was indeed eleven and now twenty-five years later the number increased but his admiration has remained and *The Other Side of Hope* seems the perfect homage to his lifelong example. His homage is not exclusively pointed at Ozu but rather on the classic cinema that he appreciates and inspired him mostly, although the Japanese filmmaker does seem to be the absolute final focus. The films sets of as the spectator is used to: a silent and slow observation of processes; processes entailing the pure 'traditional' and tough labour. From the garbage man⁸⁸ and tram driver⁸⁹ to the hard work in the harbours, there is always a resonance of the early stage of the capitalist society and the jobs that were of importance back then but are now slowly fading away. This already can be interpreted as a symbolic prologue of the film in which the cinema making of Kaurismäki is added to this stake.

From under a layer of dark coal Khaled appears. The overarching black and white colour of this particular introduction echoes not only the black and white film era but also the appearance of an entity rising up or being constructed from the material he leaves behind like the monsters or superheroes that appeared from the water⁹⁰, snow⁹¹ or stone⁹² that is so strongly connected to the 'visual power' or technical possibilities of cinema. Even the first

⁸⁶ In Yakigaya's documentary from 1993 Kaurismäki even states *I was born, but...* should prevail on his gravestone.

⁸⁷ *Talking with Ozu* (1993)

⁸⁸ *Shadows in Paradise* (1986)

⁸⁹ *Drifting Clouds* (1996)

⁹⁰ *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954)

⁹¹ *The Abominable Snowman* (1957)

⁹² The original superhero stories of for example *The Human Torch*, *Captain America* and *Fantastic Four* by Marvel Comics, founded in the thirties of last century are numerous translated into cinematic adaptations, that make the drawings come alive.

films ever made by for example George Méliès experimented with this particular strength of cinema to make a character appear out of nothing⁹³. It does not so much seem a direct ode to particular film characters or films but it does trigger a minimal suspense that is directly exposed as this phoenix rises from its ashes. The scene seems rather a general reference to the magic of cinema from this age. A possible connotation developing from such an approach could be a critique to society perceiving the refugee as a monster, but rather than pushing forward a socio-political stance and accusing Kaurismäki of such ideas or meanings, this can also just be read from this cinematic referential perspective.

The film continues silently and the ship guard, as an example of the mainstream spectator, is distracted by the trivial amusement displayed on his television when Khaled passes his cabin. Waldemar also undergoes a certain development in his life as he quits his job and leaves his wife starting a totally ‘new’ and different life. The undertaking happens suddenly and unexplained (throughout the whole film) and instead of leaving his wife sitting on the kitchen table with a carnation flower⁹⁴, a quite notable cactus stands in the midst of it. Rather than the red tea pot or kettle from Ozu the prickly bulbous plant is staged as a prominent object in this setting and just like the kettle it brightens up the screen and draws the attention. Apart from the possible symbolic meaning of the object itself it seems apparent that Kaurismäki ironically stresses he eventually did not manage to ‘find the red kettle’ he was all along his career looking for but found his a (poor) substitute instead. Waldemar takes off his wedding ring and throws it on the table: it is over; this marriage is done.

The first meeting between Waldemar and Khaled appears at an intersection. Khaled crosses the street when Waldemar almost hits him with his car. They do not speak but do see each other here for the first time. The intersection leads both characters at first to different directions but later on they do find each other anyway. This actual first meeting takes place in the shape of a sort of Western standoff with the two men standing across one another. In a fistfight they meet each other like ‘real’ men as in the classical Western movies that were so tremendously popular in the early heydays of the Hollywood film industry with which Kaurismäki grew up with. Many of the Kaurismäki-characters in general are Western-movie-like in a sense they do not speak much, move controlled and purposefully and have a very similar rough ‘tough’ appearance. Or as film critic Jonathan Romney once put it: ‘taciturn loners with sentimental streaks...’⁹⁵. The characters of the filmmaker always smoke, drink

⁹³ *The Vanishing Lady* (1896)

⁹⁴ The most common flower in many of his films.

⁹⁵ Romney (2003)

and are somewhat distanced unconversable individuals, but are always put forward as men of honour. This image exemplifies the traditional authoritative masculine men where the typical Western thrives upon and the stand-off scenario even confirms this reference explicitly⁹⁶.

Khaled at first heads to the train station where he takes a shower and one of the most well-known moment in history on the cinematic screen appears when the black filth disappears, like the blood of Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) in *Psycho* (1960), and washes away down the drain⁹⁷. These divergent elements are in a successive pattern almost impossible not to read them as intertextual references. In an interview with Jonathan Ross from 1991 Kaurismäki tells about reading the Truffaut interview with Hitchcock, in which the filmmaker stated the 1866 novel *Crime and Punishment* by Fjodor Dostojevski is too difficult to adapt for a film, and says he took that as a challenge, but failed as it turned out to be too difficult⁹⁸. He was young as he puts it and instead of challenging his words now, he rather praises the filmmaker by adding this reference.

Similar to Kaurismäki, Waldemar puts his current enterprise to a halt, leaves everything (even goes all in) and enters a different pathway at the intersection where he first saw Khaled. Like he announced at the end of the premiere of the film during the 2017 Berlinale this will be his last and although he often suggested similar considerations, taking this one seriously seems to harmonize smoothly with the farewell gift his last production comes to be¹⁰⁰.

Waldemar invests in an, at first glance, faded glory. The world outside of cinema seems the restaurant, which is in its venue, trademark, personnel and customers a sinking ship. Nevertheless the earlier captain, after the transfer of the business, directly runs to the cab that brings him to the airport. Connecting this to the trouble of the refugees that are struggling to become a native citizen and finding a job surely is ironic, but instead of emphasising such moments as tough contrasting images it is rather a funny development that due to how it is presented loses this 'problematic' reference. The ex-owner sells the place, almost saying nothing, loots the cash register and even empties the little tip jar in his pockets, after which he directly hits of to the airport. This mostly silent systematic chain of events happens so rapidly and sudden, it is rather presented as a joke than as a problem.

⁹⁶ Also the nostalgia that is characteristic for Kaurismäki is also very much apparent in Western cinema. The Western Movie is a nostalgic work of art in itself.

⁹⁷ *Psycho* (1960)

⁹⁸ Truffaut (1967), p. 71

⁹⁹ *Jonathan Ross Interview Aki Kaurismäki 1991* (2015, January 8)

¹⁰⁰ *Toivon tuolla puolen | Press Conference Highlights | Berlinale 2017* (2017, February 15)

Waldemar becomes the new owner and in that way, different from many of his fellow natives (also including the skinheads of the Finnish free army and the unsupportive authorities) works, along with the 'honest' working class and the homeless bums that protect Khaled at first in a racial attack, with the developments instead of fighting against them¹⁰¹. So again, like in many of the director's films, the contrast between high and low, the inhuman big enterprise corporations and authorities versus the ordinary warm-hearted community. As Thomas Austin also states Kaurismäki's capitalism is one that works in terms of ordinary people helping and acting together as a community¹⁰². Also from that perspective the connection with Ozu is not surprising.

Under the surveillance of the filmmaker and/or Waldemar this community arises in the restaurant. Here from an at first insignificant abandoned environment a warm hearted respectful society develops in which Khaled eventually is becoming a part from as well. In this construction still certain explicit ironic measurements are undertaken that expand the homage even further and also exposes the humbleness and respect of the maker. The physical mime comedy of Nhyrinen (Janne Hyytiäinen), the cook, reveals a clear tribute to the early days of cinema and in particular the silent comedies. Besides the fact he simply does not say much his physical humour reveals close similarities to Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. Especially the washed out posture and the deadpan wit seems very familiar to Buster 'The Great Stone Face' Keaton movies in which the motionless face and also his somewhat prostrate posture in his undertakings often says the most¹⁰³. The same goes for Nhyrinen when he suggestively wipes the kitchen door glass, when there actually is none. This 'joke' does not need sound and is so sudden and out of the blue, it unmistakably reflects on this quality of early cinema.

¹⁰¹ The honest working class is always apparent in Kaurismäki's cinema and always fulfils the part of the good guy(s).

¹⁰² Austin (2018), p. 100-21

¹⁰³ *The Economist* (17.01.1998), p. 17



Figure 1. *The cook Nhyrinen is waiting stoically to go in*¹⁰⁴



Figure 2. *Buster Keaton in Steamboat Bill Jr. (1928) like in many of his films looks washed out in his appearance, after which often something unpredictably out of his control happens to him.*¹⁰⁵

The first successive comedy of Yasujiro Ozu also was a silent one and as mentioned earlier one of the most beloved films of the Finnish filmmaker: *Umarete wa mita keredo*. Apart from the plotline it is one of Ozu's films (*Hijôsen no onna* [Dragnet Girl] (1933)) in

¹⁰⁴ Screenshot *The Other Side of Hope* (2017).

¹⁰⁵ Screenshot *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928).

which the dog plays a role. Kaurismäki's love for dogs is not a secret and the role of the dog in his last film does at first not seem major, but is highlighted as to be of importance¹⁰⁶. The dog probably not coincidentally looks quite similar to the dog of the silent comedy of Ozu (see images page 36).

The appearance of dogs is not uncommon in Kaurismäki's cinema. In nearly every of his films a dog is present, although sometimes only for a few seconds or minutes¹⁰⁷. Apart from the suggestion they probably always possess a symbolic meaning or hence the story with another strength, they are, in the first place, present. Looking at the theories concerning the referential quality of these animals the dog in *Shadows in Paradise*, which appears on screen for only a few seconds, after the death of the trash man, seems to be a reference to the iconic black dog from Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979). Elaborating on such a reading of the dog might lead to interpreting the dog from *The Other Side of Hope* holding a similar reference, to in this case Ozu's classic.

In an article of the Toronto Film Festival film critic Girish Shambu proposes a division of three stages in the career of Kaurismäki: the early, middle and late and in each period the role and function of the dog changes. His latest film could be appointed to the latest period, starting from *Lights in the Dusk*, and here the dog can be identified with the otherness¹⁰⁸. Applying this view the dog could be a representation of the displaced director himself.

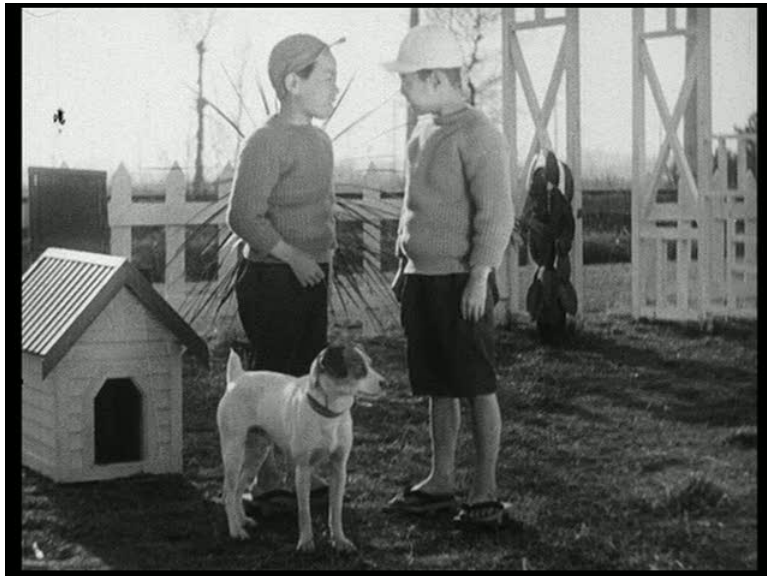


Figure 3. A still from *Umarete wa mita keredo* (1932)¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁶ It is even on the poster and is the last one reaching out to Khaled breathing his 'final' breath.

¹⁰⁷ Shambu (09.12.2017)

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Screenshot *Umarete wam mita keredo* (1932).



Figure 4. One of the many promotional images on which the dog from *Toivon Tuolla Puolen* is portrayed although its actual part in the film is very small¹¹⁰.

In search for more new customers the concept of the restaurant changes in a ludic scene in which a Japanese sushi restaurant is now the formula. Dressed up as ‘typical’ Japanese and with a minor preparation or insight the new concept is opened up to the Japanese tourists that are dropped off by busses. The blunt and futile preparation of the food suggests a minimal understanding of what they got themselves into but also is exaggerated to such an extent it is simply too ironic to be read as a serious activity helping the plot to develop. The irony is present in the obvious misconception of the other culture and cultural forth bringing. The spectator is exposed to the vulnerability of the filmmaker stating he is simply not capable of reaching the level of his Japanese cinema master.

The misunderstanding at first and then, when being out of salmon, adding the Finnish pickled Silliä (herring) from a can ends up in a disaster and rapidly they change back to their old formula, which is not great or perfect but does bring in the people and music the spectator is used to from the filmmaker. Quite literally an old acquaintance of the Kaurismäki legacy reappears when Marko Haavisto & Poutahoukat from *Dogs Have No Hell* (2002) and *The Man Without a Past* perform a song on stage in the restaurant. It is like the filmmaker wants to draw the line of his abilities, humbly admitting he tried to be someone he simply could not be, but let go of it and merely focussed on what he is capable of.

¹¹⁰ Poster *The Other Side of Hope* (2017).

Irony serves as the perfect solution here but at the same time debilitates the overarching plotline that is thoroughly suggestive as well. The topicality of the theme being discussed is not only relevant but also precarious and ‘touchy’ so to say. Nevertheless it is not an offensive film in any way, but it does contain a critique on the surface. This critique is again this division with on the one hand the corporate right and the inhuman strictly regulated authorities, and on the other hand the capitalist but warm hearted and carrying human community that simply helps one another because ‘that is what you do’. The more recent work like *The Man Without a Past* and *Le Havre* obviously carry a similar message, but also his earlier cinema like *Shadows in Paradise* and *La Vie de Bohème* possess such an identity.

The big difference here is that this production can clearly be ascribed to the filmmaker as his most politically engaged one, and this ‘serious’ engagement, as it covers such urgent topical matters, seems problematic. Obviously the filmmaker is valuing the refugee crisis or discussion, but a serious message becomes almost impossible as the dry deadpan comedy is always around the corner, putting even such matters into perspective. In *The Other Side of Hope* this theme is being used to set off such a discussion but also uses it to serve as a vehicle for creating his homage or ode to his ‘true’ masters of cinema, and especially Ozu. The irony with which this endeavour is undertaken is hilarious and seems to put off the pressure that can occur discussing such matters. By accumulating the intertextuality and also exaggerating it so notably it becomes a constructed message or structure one can notice and theorise.

Again the term ‘contrast’ comes into being here. This contrast is now mostly present in the division between the seriousness of the issues that is being dealt with and at the same time the comedic references, funny individual scenes and exaggerations that put the whole issue into perspective, but also seems to distance the viewer from any sort of ‘real’ close engagement with the subject that is discussed. When the restaurant changes its strategy and becomes a Japanese sushi restaurant, it can surely be read as a critique on the modernising world, the decay of national identity or the diminishing economic status of ‘honest’ working men and women in Finland, but the way it is presented is so hilarious, referential and again *dry*, it loses its urgent inner message (without suggesting there actually is one) and particularly becomes more comedy than a warning sign or message.

Conclusion

Throughout the work of Kaurismäki irony does not and never did prevail as an anonymous or invisible presence. This ironic existence though is more than just the material world or dialogue but rather very much embedded in the identity of the filmmaker. His stance, so to say, comes across as an organically developed style or story narrated by the filmmaker itself and (co-)written by cinema as a constant and deeply engrained presence. Reading, listening to- or watching any of his interviews presents a filmmaker who is aware of cinema and its history and who positions himself as a humble participant in this cinematic landscape. Especially his love and admiration for the cinema before the sixties and the filmmakers of this age is always something referred to by and in his work. These references are one of the factors that create this ironic distance between spectator and maker.

Instead of heavy melodramatic tragedies, Kaurismäki seems able to tell tough and/or heart-breaking stories without it becoming too soggy or emotional in general. Humour is his main source of productivity here, but also this source is being used differently than a lot of other filmmakers. His films do not extract or direct an 'easy' laugh, but are rather vague, tragic and estranging to some degree. Exaggerations in both the technique and the acting are some of those wells from which is drawn in many of the films. The deadpan acting by actors like Matti Pellonpää, Markku Peltola, Janne Hyytiäinen and also Jean Pierre Léaud are important factors in transferring and pushing this particular type of humour. Furthermore the hard shadows and contrasts in light, the somewhat bright and notable colouring of the decors and mostly strictly measured static frames also add to the estranging comedy that is always overarching the drama in these stories. Although he can tell similar stories, his stories do not look anything like for example a Ken Loach or Roberto Rossellini film. The films of Kaurismäki are not socio-realistic works due to this constant presence of humour, material irony and resonance, which is mostly produced by (again) his ironic stance.

So the means with which humour is conveyed is unmistakably recognisable a characteristic of the Finn. Then there are these constant references that seem to serve as a sort of ironic commentary that due to such means acquire an identity. The references are always present in again both the material and the narrative. Kaurismäki is a nostalgic and every film of his is punctuated with images, objects and plot-developments (or even overall narratives) that seem to refer to other filmmakers or films, and then mostly films or filmmakers from a past age. Also the comedy of remarriage adaptation, or rather interpretation, can be read as such a reference, although used in a different manner. By suggesting a similar story-/plot-

development these parallels can be drawn, but surely the interpretation is rather different which makes it so hilarious. It is ironic in a sense it uses certain historical material in a very intelligent way, and does again demonstrate its awareness and knowledge, but then distorts the actual source and gives it his own wayward twist.

Also in his last film similar tactics occur leading up to a hilariously clever homage to his heroes of cinema. But especially noticeable in his last film is the weight of the subjects being discussed versus the actual telling of the story. The filmmaker clearly developed some aspects in his work over the years and becomes (became) more politically engaged in his later productions. Nevertheless his subjects in his films are always serious issues or themes, with in these last three chapters respectively: suicide, memory loss and the refugee crisis. Nevertheless his use of technique, style, rhythm and actors but also his ironic commentary on genre, film history and filmmakers constantly put a presence of humour in the midst of it all. This is why there is always a distance between the enigmatic maker and spectator. His cinema brings across situations that matter and are, for many, recognisable and touching, but always on the verge of an emotional outburst Kaurismäki seems to sneak away and hide behind this great wall of irony.

The problems that are being discussed are still problems, and the matters do still matter, but the filmmaker himself is not the one to draw conclusions, hence preventing the viewer too much in a certain direction. When his films talk about one thing at the same time it discusses or represents so much more, which is, sometimes, represented in its ludic developments, situations and characters. Attention is drawn from one noteworthy issue to another hilarious subject, and at the same time meaningful, intermezzo in the shape of a dialogue, action of an actor, abrupt distortion or change of lighting and much more. Such developments are tremendously funny and make the director a distinct individual among his fellow filmmakers with his own signature written over any of his works. Nevertheless it does create a situation in which the discussion or 'message' always needs to be taken with a grain of salt, as humour is around every corner waking up the spectator from his/her emotional or ideological involvement.

It is not an arrogant or distancing stance per se, as it can also be interpreted as a way of connecting more strongly with the audience by including them in the process of opinion making. The spectator, in a sense, is put in the position of the maker and can fill in these 'blanks' that seem to be purposefully left open by the ironist. Kaurismäki does not tell his audience what to do, think or say and reaches this by this dry deadpan comedy approach that always creates a gap between ironist and interpreter. His cinema surely developed over the

years, and this contrast in itself can already be considered quite ironic, developing from silent to talking to actually saying something. But still even in this ‘final stage of serious’ political engagement there is this presence of *romantic* irony through which he seems to, like the clown on the tightrope that is constantly almost losing his balance, juggle with his serious discussion of ‘important’ matters on the one hand and his deadpan comedy action that constantly puts everything in perspective on the other hand. But if he is able to present to an audience his indecisiveness or struggle in finding balance between the two, is he then not a greatly talented clown?

So coming back to the main question of the thesis there is some idea now of how irony functions in his cinema and through which canals or aspects it prevails. It influences the audience in a way that it is creating a certain distance but with that simultaneously leaving space for one's own interpretation. The spectator with that can decide for him-/herself what is good or bad and what the characters should or should not do. There is no enacted sentiment or restricted idea or route the spectator needs to feel or follow. In the guise of irony Kaurismäki will always remain an enigma, but an enigma that possesses a certain warm presence by always inviting, observing and listening in the process of filmmaking.

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Appendix 1 – List of film-references

Baisers Volés [Stolen Kisses]. Dir. Francois Truffaut. Sc. Francois Truffaut, Claude de Givray & Bernard Revon. Cin. Denys Clerval. Perf. Jean-Pierre Léaud, Delphine Seyrig & Claude Jade. Les Films du Carrosse, 1968.

Creature from the Black Lagoon. Dir. Jack Arnold. Sc. Harry Essex, Arthur A. Ross & Maurice Zimm. Cin. William E. Snyder. Perf. Richard Carlson, Julie Adams & Richard Denning. Universal International Pictures, 1954.

I Love You Again. Dir. W.S. van Dyke II. Sc. Leon Gordon, Maurine Dallas Watkins & Charles Lederer. Cin. Oliver T. Marsh. Perf. William Powell, Myrna Loy & Frank McHugh. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 1940.

Léaud L'unique [The Unique Léaud]. Dir. Serge Le Péron. Sc. Serge Le Péron. Cin. Diane Baratier, Nicolas Eprendre, Francois Hernandez & Ivan Kozelka. Perf. Jean-Pierre Léaud, László Szabó & Bernardo Bertolucci. Canal+, 2001.

Les Quatre Cents Coups [The 400 Blows]. Dir. Francois Truffaut. Sc. Francois Truffaut & Marcel Moussy. Cin. Henri Decaë. Perf. Jean-Pierre Léaud, Albert Rémy & Georges Flamant. Les Films du Carrosse, 1959.

Pickpocket. Dir. Robert Bresson. Sc. Robert Bresson. Cin. Léonce-Henri Burel. Perf. Martin LaSalle, Marika Green & Jean Pélégri. Compagnie Cinématographique de France, 1959.

Psycho. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Sc. Joseph Stefano. Cin. John L. Russell. Perf. Anthony Perkins, Vera Miles & John Gavin. Shamley Productions, 1960.

Spellbound. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Sc. Ben Hecht & Angus MacPhail. Cin. George Barnes. Perf. Ingrid Bergman, Gregory Peck & Michael Chekhov. Selznick International Productions, 1945.

Talking With Ozu Dir. Kogi Tanaka. Sc. Kogi Tanaka. Cin. Takashi Kawamata. Perf. Aki Kaurismäki, Claire Denis & Lindsay Anderson. Shochiku, 1993.

The Abominable Snowman. Dir. Val Guest. Sc. Nigel Kneale. Cin. Arthur Grant. Perf. Forrest Tucker, Peter Cushing & Maureen Connell. Clarion Films, 1957.

The Conjuring of a Woman at the House of Robert Houdin or **The Vanishing Lady.** Dir. Georges Méliès. Sc. Georges Méliès. Cin. Georges Méliès. Perf. Georges Méliès & Jehanne d'Alcy. Théâtre Robert-Houdin, 1896.

Welcome to Norway. Dir. Rune Denstad Langlo. Sc. Rune Denstad Langlo. Cin. Philip Øgaard. Perf. Anders Baasmo Christiansen, Olivier Mukuta & Slimane Dazi. Motlys, 2016.

Willkommen bei den Hartmanns [Welcome to Germany]. Dir. Simon Verhoeven. Sc. Simon Verhoeven. Cin. Jo Heim. Perf. Senta Berger, Heiner Lauterbach & Florian David Fitz. Wiedemann & Berg Filmproduktion, 2016.

Appendix 2 – List of video-references

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Appendix 3 – List of text-references

¹ The perseverance of such films is even being underlined quite recently by Finnish director Juho Kuosmanen ‘remaking’ *Salaviinanpolttajat* as a live performance (2017), a fragment of which can be found on <https://vimeo.com/234633969>.

² Kaurismäki even owns two bars in the city center of Helsinki, again pointing out his link to drinking.

³ The Finnishness of his cinema is very often questioned in interviews (*Cinema Cinemas 1990, For One Week Only 1991*), literature (Nestingén 2013) and articles (Donner 2003).

⁶ Also his awards are a sign of this appreciation, especially his last film, which can be considered his most politically engaged film was awarded with a Golden Bear at the Berlinale of 2017.

²¹ *Laitakaupungin Valot* [Lights in the Dusk] (2006) could be considered an exception where almost everything seems to go wrong and get worse for the main character Koistinen (Janne Hyytiäinen).

²² *De Surprise* [The Surprise] (2015) by Mike van Diem basically tells the exact same narrative; both these stories are based on the short story *De Surprise* by Dutch writer Herman Pieter Schönfeld Wichers, commonly known as Belcampo.

²⁵ These references are present both thematically, aesthetically and as physical objects in his films in the form of posters, paintings and photographs.

⁴⁴ Some recognizable characterizations: Constantly spontaneously stroking his hand through his hair, his somewhat staring gaze playfully interrupting the overall dynamic and pace in his performance, his speech and intonation, his somewhat wooden shrewd posture and movement.

⁵³ Previous chapters' *I Hired a Contract Killer* is one of those many examples.

⁵⁶ Of course it is a theme spread throughout the whole history of cinema, but this is just to provide an overview.

⁵⁸ A few recent examples would be *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008), *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) and *The Lobster* (2015), which also play with the typical genre characteristics and mix it up with different genre elements or change the 'regular' character and story development.

⁶⁰ Especially the element of 'true love' is apparent in both distinct genres.

⁶³ For leading character M in *The Man Without a Past*, the last thing he remembers is being on a train. The train brings him to the (for the spectator) unknown place where he gets in a fight.

⁷² The comedy of remarriage always portrays this as an important and much discussed moment in the film. In *I Love You Again* there is constant fighting or bickering going on

whenever this subject is being put forward. It is considered to be something to fight for.

⁷³ With relatively recent popular films like the Jackass-series being probably one of its best examples.

⁸⁶ In Yakigaya's documentary from 1993 Kaurismäki even states *I was born, but...* should prevail on his gravestone.

⁹² The original superhero stories of for example *The Human Torch*, *Captain America* and *Fantastic Four* by Marvel Comics, founded in the thirties of last century are numerous translated into cinematic adaptations, that make the drawings come alive.

⁹⁴ The most common flower in many of his films.

⁹⁶ Also the nostalgia that is characteristic for Kaurismäki is also very much apparent in Western cinema. *The Western Movie* is a nostalgic work of art in itself.

¹⁰¹ The honest working class is always apparent in Kaurismäki's cinema and always fulfills the part of the good guy(s).

¹⁰⁵ It is even on the poster and is the last one reaching out to Khaled breathing his 'final' breath.

Appendix 4 – Filmography Aki Kaurismäki (feature films, shorts and documentaries)

Saimaa-ilmio [The Saimaa Gesture]. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki & Mika Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki & Mika Kaurismäki. Cin. Lasse Naukkarinen, Timo Salminen, Tony Sulzbeck & Olli Varja. Ed. Antti Kari. Villealfa Filmproductions, 1981.

Rikos ja rangaistus [Crime and Punishment]. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki & Pauli Pentti. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Markku Toikka, Aino Seppo & Matti Pellonpää. Villealfa Filmproductions, 1983.

Calamari Union. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Sakari Kuosmanen, Sakke Järvenpää & Matti Pellonpää. Villealfa Filmproductions, 1985.

Varjoja paratiisissa [Shadows in Paradise]. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Matti Pellonpää, Kati Outinen & Sakari Kuosmanen. Villealfa Filmproductions, 1986.

Rocky VI. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki, Mato Valtonen & Sakke Järvenpää. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Matti Pellonpää, Silu Seppälä & Sakari Kuosmanen. Megamania, 1986.

Hamlet liikemaailmassa [Hamlet goes Business]. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Pirkka-Pekka Petelius, Esko Salminen & Kati Outinen. Villealfa Filmproductions, 1987.

Ariel. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Matti Pellonpää, Turo Pajala & Susanna Haavisto. Villealfa Filmproductions, 1988.

Leningrad Cowboys go America. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki, Mato Valtonen & Sakke Järvenpää. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Matti Pellonpää, Kari Väänänen & Sakke Järvenpää. Villealfa Filmproductions, 1989.

Likaiset kädet [Dirty Hands]. (TV-movie). Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Matti Kurkikangas. Perf. Matti Pellonpää, Kati Outinen & Sulevi Peltola. Yleisradio, 1989.

Tulitikkutehtaan tyttö [The Match Factory Girl]. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Kati Outinen, Elina Salo & Esko Nikkari. Villealfa Filmproductions, 1990.

I Hired a Contract Killer. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki & Peter von Bagh. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Jean-Pierre Léaud, Margi Clarke & Kenneth Colley. Villealfa Filmproductions, 1990.

La Vie de Bohème [The Bohemian Life]. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Jean-Pierre Léaud, Matti Pellonpää & André Wilms. Sputnik, 1992.

Pidä huivista kiinni, Tatjana [Take Care of Your Scarf Tatiana]. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki & Sakke Järvenpää. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Kati Outinen, Matti Pellonpää & Kirsi Tykkyläinen. Sputnik, 1994.

Leningrad Cowboys Meet Moses. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki, Mato Valtonen & Sakke Järvenpää. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Sakke Järvenpää, Matti Pellonpää & Mato Valtonen. Sputnik, 1994.

Total Balalaika Show. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Pekka Aine, Tahvo Hirvonen, Heikki Ortamo, Timo Salminen & Olli Varja. Perf. Alexandrov Red Army Ensemble, Twist-Twist Erkinharju & Sakke Järvenpää. Provisual, 1994.

Kauas pilvet karkaavat [Drifting Clouds]. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Kati Outinen, Kari Väänänen & Elina Salo. Sputnik, 1996.

Välittäjä [Employment Agent]. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Kati Outinen & Sulevi Peltola. Sputnik, 1996.

Juha. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. André Wilms, Kati Outinen & Sakari Kuosmanen. Sputnik, 1999.

Mies vailla menneisyyttä [The Man Without a Past]. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Markku Peltola, Kati Outinen & Sakari Kuosmanen. Sputnik, 2002.

Dogs Have no Hell (in *Ten Minutes Older: The Trumpet*). Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Kati Outinen, Markku Peltola & Marko Haavisto. Matador Pictures, 2002.

Bico (in *Visions of Europe*). Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Abel Alves. Athena Films, 2004.

Laitakaupungin valot [Lights in the Dusk]. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Janne Hyytiäinen, Maria Järvenhelmi & Maria Heiskanen. Sputnik, 2006.

La Fonderie or **Valimo** (in *Chacun son cinema ou Ce petit coup au Coeur quand la lumière s'éteint et que le film commence* [To Each His Own Cinema]). Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Olli Varja. Perf. Carl-Erik Calamnius, Marie-Christine Moller Salmi & Matti Hyvönen. Cannes Film Festival, 2007.

Le Havre. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Kati Outinen, André Wilms & Jean-Pierre Darroussin. Sputnik, 2011.

O Tasqueiro [Tavern Man] (in *Centro Histórico*). Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Ilkka Koivula. Globalstone RV Films, 2012.

Juice Leskinen & Grand Slam: Bluesia Pieksämäen asemalla. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Timo Salminen & Olli Varja. Perf. Juice Leskinen. Future Film, 2014.

Toivon tuolla puolen [Other Side of Hope]. Dir. Aki Kaurismäki. Sc. Aki Kaurismäki. Cin. Timo Salminen. Perf. Kati Outinen, Sherwan Haji & Sakari Kuosmanen. Sputnik, 2017.