

BOOK REVIEW

The cinema of Aki Kaurismäki: contrarian stories, by Andrew Nestingen, London, Wallflower Press, 2013, 224 pp., £22 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-2311-6559-4

While Aki Kaurismäki's cinema can be seen as an instance of postmodern aesthetics, Andrew Nestingen claims in *The Cinema of Aki Kaurismäki: Contrarian Stories* that his films' melodramatic seriousness and moral purpose situates them in a more modernist framework (21), casting him with the likes of Lars von Trier, Michael Haneke and Steven Soderbergh, rather than Quentin Tarantino, Wes Anderson or the Coen Brothers. That being said, Kaurismäki's access to film archives and his voracious consumption of films during his teenage years places him alongside François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Jim Jarmusch and Tarantino as a cinephile (and thus pomo?) *auteur*. These seemingly contradictory facets of Kaurismäki's work nonetheless exemplify the ambivalence that Nestingen sees as being critical to understanding his work.

The first English-language book about the director (3), *The Cinema of Aki Kaurismäki* is divided after its introduction into four chapters: The Auteur, The Bohemian, The Nostalgic, and The Finn. With regard to the first of these, Kaurismäki's auteurship manifests via the use of music by 'overlooked, forgotten, and underappreciated performers' in order to 'articulate characters' emotions and moral reasoning, [while] glossing central conflicts' that occur between the alien main character and the social order in which he (typically) lives (26). Ambivalence can be seen in how Kaurismäki's characters seek reconciliation with their community while also refusing to settle. As Nestingen says: '[t]he conflict between an isolated individual's moral justification and the legal but immoral function of institutions recurs throughout Kaurismäki's career' (30-31). Kaurismäki's protagonists are thus generally alone in their social world, like Raskolnikov and Hamlet, and they are isolated by a fateful choice or act, or by their commitment to a strict worldview. For example, *Calamari Union* (1985), *Ariel* (1988), *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (1989), *Leningrad Cowboys Meet Moses* (1994) and *Take Care of Your Scarf, Tatiana* (1994) are all road movies and loser melodramas that are also built around narratives of alienation.

The second chapter considers Kaurismäki's bohemianism, which Nestingen defines, after Mary Gluck, as alternatively ironic and sentimental, although understanding him as the former seems more productive. This is because ironic bohemianism stages different identities and attitudes in critical dialogue with each other and, more broadly, their societies. However, if ironic bohemianism assumes that the bohemian identity is problematic and requires continual iteration, sentimental bohemianism assumes the autonomy of the bohemian identity (59) – and so here we once again encounter some ambivalence in Kaurismäki and his work, as is exemplified by the influential role on the filmmaker by Charles Baudelaire and Henri Murger, whose *Bohemians of the Latin Quarter* (1851) Kaurismäki adapted into *The Bohemian Life* (1992). Furthermore, Nestingen points out that Kaurismäki's bohemianism is strongly related to his own life since, like many of his characters, he was also alienated in society and struggled with social institutions (Kaurismäki had difficulty finding a proper job, finishing university and completing his military service). As the director is quoted as saying, '[t]aking up a series of jobs [rather than settling down] "was the act of a . . . morally uncompromising person"' (62). Indeed, for Kaurismäki, institutional action is another word for cronyism, writing in an essay on Luis Buñuel from 1979 that "[t]he morality of

the bourgeoisie is anti-moral, because it is founded upon the most unjust of institutions: religion, country, family, and the other pillars of society' (56). These words take shape in the bohemianism of Kaurismäki's films as he progresses from a political critique of the Finnish state in the 1980s to a more general economic critique in the 1990s. Nestingen relates the director's bohemianism to the punk movement through which he emerged into filmmaking, while also defining Kaurismäki's business methods as bohemian, rejecting a winner-takes-all dynamic and preferring punk's DIY attitude (low budgets, quick productions, sharing equipment and office space, and, instead of script development, storyboarding, shot-planning, and multiple-take shooting, the privileging of on-the-spot scriptwriting, improvisation between director and actors, location shooting, and spontaneity). In short, then, Kaurismäki puts artistic control, loyalty, and collaboration above profitability.

In chapter three, Nestingen turns his focus to Kaurismäki's nostalgia, which many critics have thought contradictory. However, the director's films express not a desire to belong to the mainstream so much as a desire for belonging that transcends the wealth and power of banks, corporations, and the state (88). In this way, Kaurismäki's nostalgia is more complicated than simply adopting an exterior and oppositional position; instead, it is (ambivalently) embedded in mainstream cinema and culture. As per Baudelaire's 'Painter of Modern Life' (1863), Kaurismäki's nostalgia has a relation with the past that is inextricable from the present, even if it runs the risk of becoming a production/marketing strategy for national cinemas in an era of globalized cinema. Nestingen thus uses Thomas Elsaesser's notion of 'double occupancy' in order to express how past and present, as well as the general and the particular, are applied together in Kaurismäki's creative practice, in the process taking us beyond the usual identity categories and disrupting notions of homogeneity and singularity. Kaurismäki's films make historical references in a symbolic fashion, which makes them appear in some senses as timeless, producing a multilayered nostalgia that weaves together the archival, the anachronistic and the ethical in a productive way. That is, nostalgia works in Kaurismäki's films like an archive in which the director protects the values of the past, creating images of that past in order to be represented constantly in an alternative cultural space. The usage of the archive is thus less for nostalgic reasons but rather to gain access to material that the filmmaker can reuse and revise in order to intervene in contemporary cinema, culture, and politics (25).

The final chapter is about Kaurismäki's Finnishness. His films are broadly understood as 'national' by Finnish and non-Finnish scholars, but Nestingen interestingly notes how Kaurismäki presents himself in different ways at different times when interviewed by journalists, critics, and writers. For, the director creates an ambivalent self-image that involves various roles – sometimes the straight man, sometimes the ironic joker, and rarely the good citizen. Furthermore, some interviews aim simply to promote interest in his films, while others deal with politics, or ethical stances held by the director. For Nestingen, Kaurismäki could have concentrated on 'national' elements in order to gain the support of national audiences; however, he deliberately chose to reflect instead a small urban aggregate, the lumpen proletariat, which belongs neither to the working classes nor to the intelligentsia or administrative classes. In this way, Kaurismäki's construction of nationality is dispersive and at times non-national – and thus, once again, ambivalent.

Finally, Nestingen looks from a dialectical perspective at the director's small-nation authorship and his cosmopolitan multi-nationality. Like many other *auteurs*, transnationalism is important for his work, with his movies appealing to a multi-local, transnational audience far more than to a national one. Although his cinema is regularly understood as a reflection of Finnish nationality and a Finnish cultural export, Nestingen claims that his cinema contributes to a dispute over the suitability of the nation as a structural framework as a whole. His films have a niche

identity in their domestic market, but his primary audience is outside of Finland, with sixty to seventy percent of this box office returns coming from France, Germany and Italy. His production schemes are similarly transnational. In this way, Kaurismäki is indeed a contrarian, always standing in contradiction to mainstream cinema.

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