

Pietari Kääpä

THE NATIONAL AND BEYOND

THE GLOBALISATION OF FINNISH
CINEMA IN THE FILMS OF
AKI AND MIKA KAURISMÄKI

NSEC 12

NEW STUDIES IN EUROPEAN CINEMA

PETER LANG

The films of Aki and Mika Kaurismäki are part of a globalising Finnish cinema, challenging conventional parameters at every turn. This work examines the films that the Kaurismäkis produced, individually and in collaboration, between 1981 and 1995 – films which mobilise various methods to reflect, criticise, counteract and contribute to the globalisation of Finnish society in the era of late capitalist development. This work provides an in-depth analysis of these films, exploring the aesthetic and narrative content of the films as well as their production and reception in Finland. The theoretical scope of the work situates the films not only in the field of transnational cinema, but also that of 'post-national' cinema. Exploring the Kaurismäkis' films in a post-national framework points to new, emergent understandings of both the fragility and the persistence of national culture and identity in a globalising world.

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WENDY EVERETT & AXEL GOODBODY



Peter Lang

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Foreword

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This volume is dedicated to my parents Helena and Pekka, my brother Johannes and to Yan, without whom this project would not have been possible.

Pietari Kääpä
October, 2009

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Introduction

Aki and Mika Kaurismäki

The history of Finnish cinema spans over a hundred years and includes many domestic success stories and ever-increasing cultural prestige. Yet, for most of this time, the cinema of Finland remains resolutely a 'national' form of cultural production – a form of cinema using predominantly indigenous resources and catering for a domestic audience. Over the last two decades, Aki and Mika Kaurismäki, the Finnish filmmaking brothers, have established an international reputation for producing quirky art-house films. Mika Kaurismäki's breakthrough came in 1987, with *Helsinki Napoli: All Night Long*, while his brother began to make a name for himself on the European art-house circuit with *Ariel* (1988). Since then, most of their films have found some sort of outlet internationally through film festivals and art-house distribution. In 2007, the British art-house label Artificial Eye released a three volume DVD box-set edition of Aki Kaurismäki's films, a sure sign of a certain critical and commercial success. The DVD covers are adorned with commendatory quotations from prominent critics. Jonathan Romney, for instance, is quoted as describing Aki Kaurismäki as one of the shining stars of contemporary filmmaking, whose 'films offer the most consistently uplifting signs of life in European cinema.' Another of the DVDs describes him as 'one of the most important auteurs in contemporary European cinema.' Such acclaim establishes Aki Kaurismäki as an 'auteur' filmmaker with a distinctive style, one who works in the tradition of European art-house film production and who has been taken very seriously by audiences and critics across Europe.

Mika Kaurismäki has been making headlines across Europe and in Brazil due to the festival success of his latest music documentary on Brazilian samba music, *Sonic Mirror* (2007). In the past ten years, Mika

Kaurismäki has produced films in the United States, Germany, Estonia and Brazil and worked with production companies from the United Kingdom and Germany, among others. He is also a founding partner of Mira Set Filmes Ltda, based in Rio de Janeiro. Working with multi-national funding and crews, and focusing on topics that hardly chime with the conventional categories of national cultural production, Mika Kaurismäki's contemporary prominence is clearly that of a filmmaker whose career transcends national borders.

It is certainly not difficult to see that the Kaurismäkis have a very ambiguous relationship with their 'mother country'. Mika Kaurismäki now resides in Brazil, while Aki Kaurismäki's permanent home is Portugal – but they have both maintained close connections with Finland. Their production companies (respectively, Marianna Films Oy and Sputnik Oy) are still based in Finland. Mika Kaurismäki's Brazilian-set music documentaries receive partial funding from Finnish sources and Aki Kaurismäki's most recent film *Laitakaupungin Valot* (*Lights in the Dusk*, 2006) was primarily financed with Finnish funds. They both own decidedly cosmopolitan concerns in Helsinki – Mika Kaurismäki's Bossa, a Brazilian-themed music club, and Aki Kaurismäki's Moskova bar, a Soviet-themed drinking establishment. They also run Andorra – a cinema devoted to international art-house fare – and the Midnight Sun Film Festival in Northern Finland, which is well-known for its eclectic combination of Nordic stereotypes, esteemed guest directors, cult films and major premieres.

From their first collaborative short film *Valehtelija* (*The Liar*, 1981) to their feature-length films set in Finland and the various films they have produced in non-Finnish contexts, Aki and Mika Kaurismäki's productions are filled with contradictory visions of Finnish culture and society and gesture in multiple ways beyond the national borders. Their films blur the distinctions between high culture and low culture in terms of themes and aesthetics, drawing on such diverse sources as Finnish cultural heritage, French New Wave cinema, American popular culture and Soviet iconography, to name just a few of their cultural inspirations. The films are highly critical of what they perceive to be the inadequate functions of the Finnish welfare state, but they are also extremely antagonistic towards capitalist and neo-liberalist ideologies. The Kaurismäkis often work with

multi-national funding and crews, yet their films receive funding from the Finnish Film Foundation and they are included in the Finnish National Filmographies. The films circulate the globe, usually on the art-house circuit, but occasionally via more commercial releases, as well as at festivals, winning awards at Cannes and elsewhere and securing favourable reviews in prestigious film journals. In Finland, as we shall see, their films are simultaneously praised and derided for their deviation from the conventions of Finnish national cinema, and have rarely achieved anything remotely resembling commercial success.

The national and beyond

In Anglophone film cultures, little is known of Finnish cinema, one of the more peripheral and least globally distributed of national film cultures. There is thus very little written in English on the Kaurismäkis' cultural roots, their early films, or the complex manner in which they re-work Finnish film traditions, re-negotiate the parameters of Finnish culture and sometimes break free of those parameters. This work, aimed at both Anglophone and Finnish readers, resituates the Kaurismäkis' films and their public personae in the context of Finnish national cinema and culture. The book concentrates on the films that Aki and Mika Kaurismäki produced between 1981, when their first collaborative film was released, and 1994, the year of Aki's *Leningrad Cowboys Meet Moses* and Mika's *Tigrero – the Film That Was Never Made*.

First and foremost, this volume is an analysis of how the Kaurismäki brothers have, individually and in collaboration, challenged the conventional and traditional parameters of Finnish national cinema throughout their careers. Secondly, it is an examination of the developments and changes that Finnish conceptions of national identity and culture underwent in the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. This period functions as a more or less self-contained period in Finnish history as the tumultuous

modernisation and urbanisation of the 1960s and the 1970s permanently fractured traditional conceptions of the nation, and a new generation of disillusioned urbanites came into being. 1982 marked the end of a political era, with President Urho Kekkonen retiring after nearly 30 years in office. The period of the Kekkonen presidency was characterised by a careful balance between appeasing the neighbouring Soviet Union and making hesitant moves towards Europe. With the more progressive social democrat Mauno Koivisto installed as President, the political and economic momentum of Finnish society was increasingly geared towards opening the borders of the nation to the West, a move which was aided by the liberalising policies of Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union. As the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Finland was more than ever before free to re-negotiate its geo-political situation and join the European Community. The end of the period I examine comes in 1995, a year that marks another fundamental change in the political status of the Finnish nation, as Finland joined the European Union, the move signalling a fundamental re-working of the nation's geo-political relationship with both Europe and the former Soviet Union. The period from 1981 to 1995, then, is characterised by profound changes in the socio-economic and geo-political situation of Finland.

The political cinemas of Aki and Mika Kaurismäki

I oppose conventional morality, traditional fantasies, the all-encompassing moral evil of society. Bourgeois morality is in my view anti-morality, because at its basis are the most unjust institutions: religion, the fatherland, family and other pillars of society.

– AKI KAURISMÄKI¹

1 A. Kaurismäki, 'Luis Buñuel ja Jumalan Kuolema', *Monroe*, 2 (1979), 4.

I have no such commitment that I could point out how the affairs of this world ought to be run, what would be the best way of life to appease the conscience. But a certain worry about the way things are conducted is behind my films.

– MIKA KAURISMÄKI²

These early statements, one from each brother, serve to illuminate many aspects of their subsequent distinctive careers. Whereas Aki Kaurismäki sets himself up as the *enfant terrible* of Finnish cinema, Mika Kaurismäki has always been more moderate in his arguments, fully acknowledging the moral compromises and fallacies of the nation, but preferring to vocalise his antagonism in a tempered manner. The films of these two filmmakers are inherently political – they participate in contemporary debates about society, identity and culture. A large part of this political argumentation revolves around the ways the films comment on the globalising nature of Finnish society focused specifically on the pervasive societal influences and effects of ‘late capitalism’ – and its ‘evolution’ into neo-liberalist policies – in the 1980s and the 1990s. In focusing on the uneasy compromise that is the capitalist welfare state, the Kaurismäkis’ films function as instances of what Fredric Jameson has characterised as contemporary post-modernist culture: ‘every position on postmodernism in culture – whether apolo-gia or stigmatization – is also at one and the same time, and *necessarily*, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today.’³

It is not only in the thematic antagonism of the Kaurismäkis’ work that we find a distinct political impetus. Their films are clearly indebted to European art-house filmmaking, a notion that is evident from both the aesthetic and narrative structures of the films. The works of Fassbinder, Godard, Wenders and Truffaut are liberally referenced, distancing the films from mainstream Finnish cinema of the 1980s. As the works of these well-known directors challenged both the cultural canons of their respective national cinemas and the socio-political status quo of their national

2 M. Kaurismäki in P. Von Bagh, ‘Kellarin Filosofia’, *Filmihullu*, 7 (1984), 7.

3 F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 4.

societies, so the Kaurismäkis' films revel in criticising established cultural and political conventions. This artistic politicism functions as a further indicator of the postmodernist tendencies of the films, enunciating a critical distance and a desire to rework Finnish cinema into something new, something that could enunciate the concerns of an emergent alienated generation yet to find its clear voice.

The Kaurismäkis' films need to be understood in the context of Finland experiencing the effects of increasing globalisation. The complex, often contradictory processes of globalisation are understood in two main ways in this work: 1) globalisation is inherently connected to neo-liberalist conceptions of a world society, which emphasise capitalist directives and open market policies predicated on the unhindered flow of capital and commerce; 2) globalisation involves individual and local identity negotiations, where individuals situate themselves within the compressing spatial and temporal boundaries and unequal power structures of a constantly transforming global society. These definitions are over-lapping and reciprocal in nature, as globalisation is a complex and multi-directional form of social, cultural, economic and political change. As such, the globalisation of national cinema that this work explores is more accurately understood as 'glocalisation',⁴ emphasising the reciprocal interaction between local or national cultural elements and those of a more global variety. Accordingly, this work examines the multiple ways in which the Kaurismäkis' films meet and negotiate these challenges as their work both widens cultural horizons inside Finland, and, in turn, creates new interpretations of the constitution of that national culture.

To situate the contributions of these films in a wider cultural framework, I shall also examine the critical discourse surrounding the films – in essence, how the critical perspectives of the films were renegotiated and appropriated in Finnish cultural circles and how such efforts rework and redefine Finnish culture during the era under analysis. Through examining these cultural texts as both reflectors and contributors to debates on

4 R. Robertson, 'Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity', ed. M. Featherstone, S. Lash and R. Robertson, *Global Modernities* (London: Sage, 1995), 25–44.

social and national identity in a world defined by the rapidly accelerating transnational flows of culture, people, information and capital, a multi-levelled and multi-sided model is created, designed to reveal the complex ways in which the effects of globalisation on Finnish culture and society are understood and negotiated in cinema. I will not examine the non-Finnish reception of the Kaurismäkis' films in any significant detail. This is for two reasons. First of all, the length of this work is not able to do justice to the complexity of the Kaurismäkis' international distribution and reception. Second, my analytical approach is consciously focused on the ways in which Finnish cultural policy makers and critics attempted to negotiate the challenges these films present for national identity and culture in a globalising world.

Theoretical framework

Commentators, such as Peter Von Bagh and Sakari Toiviainen, have interpreted the films of Aki and Mika Kaurismäki in specifically Finnish terms.⁵ The suggestion in these views is that the films are inherently connected to traditional norms of Finnish culture, where they function more or less within the parameters of a traditional national narrative. Several articles have questioned this way of conceptualising the Kaurismäkis' work, with Andrew Nestingen understanding them as chronicling the transnational dimensions of contemporary Finland⁶ or, alternatively, in the view of Henry

5 S. Toiviainen, *Levottomat Sukupolvet: Uusin Suomalainen Elokuva* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2002); P. Von Bagh, *Aki Kaurismäki* (Helsinki: WSOY, 2006).

6 A. Nestingen, 'Leaving Home: Global Circulation and Aki Kaurismäki's *Ariel*', ed. A. Nestingen, *In Search of Aki Kaurismäki: Aesthetics and Contexts* (Beaverton: Aspasia Books, 2004), 96–115; A. Nestingen, 'Aki Kaurismäki's Crossroads', ed. A. Nestingen and T. Elkington, *Transnational Cinema in a Global North* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005).

Bacon and Anu Koivunen, as playing with Finnish cultural history by using traditional cultural elements in a way which subverts the meanings of national history in contemporary society.⁷

The approaches of Bacon, Nestingen and Koivunen foreground the ways in which the textual and discursive structures of Aki Kaurismäki's films reflect the changing nature of Finnish society. The arguments of these scholars are well-founded and insightful, but I will expand on their work in two ways. First of all, they focus almost exclusively on the works of Aki Kaurismäki. By examining the work of Mika Kaurismäki alongside that of Aki, a more complex framework of analysis emerges, due to the different approaches these filmmakers take to questions of national identity. Secondly, I suggest that these films create a fundamental break with the parameters of the traditional nation – a break conceived on both cultural and socio-economic levels.

The critical approach of these films establishes a 'post-national' form of identity politics, with the films featuring people that identify and situate themselves in opposition to both the dominant socio-economic structures of Finnish society and traditional conceptions of national culture. The concept of the post-national will be explored thoroughly throughout the work. For now, it is sufficient to understand the 'post-national' as referring to individual forms of social and cultural identity politics that seek to unpick and renegotiate the cultural boundaries of the nation. The post-national is both a critical reflection on the role of national culture in a globalising world and an approach that seeks to envision social and cultural identity outside the conventional or traditional parameters of the nation. Through the narratives of the Kaurismäkis' films, the dominant parameters of Finnishness – as a form of cultural and civic identity – are contested and re-applied so that they take on thoroughly alternative, even subversive forms. My focus on the 'post-national condition' in the Kaurismäkis' films will provide a

7 H. Bacon, 'Aki Kaurismäen Sijoiltaan Olon Poetiikka', ed. K. Ahonen et al. *Taju Kankaalle: Uusin Suomalainen Elokuva* (Helsinki: SEA, 2003), 88–97; A. Koivunen 'Do You Remember Monrépos? Melancholia, Modernity and Working-Class Masculinity in *The Man Without a Past*', ed. C. Thomson, *Northern Constellations: New Readings in Nordic Cinema* (Norwich: Norvik Press, 2006), 133–148.

significantly different take on the socio-political scope of the films from the arguments of Nestingen, Koivunen and Bacon – one that is designed to open up further work on the films of the Kaurismäkis.

Chapter breakdown

The Kaurismäkis' films are examined in loose chronological order, charting the ways in which they take part in and contribute to debates on the meanings and constitution of Finnish culture. The first chapter provides a general overview of key moments and films that mark the development of Finnish cinema. The focus here is on the constant re-structuring and historical development of Finnish cinema, thereby establishing the general context from which the Kaurismäkis originate – and against which they frequently rebel.

Part 1, 'Developing post-national forms of cinema, 1981–1985', situates the films the Kaurismäkis produced in this period in the context of a transforming Finnish cinema. Chapter 2 focuses on the four films the Kaurismäkis produced in intense collaboration – *Valehtelija* (*The Liar*, 1981), *Saimaa-Ilmiö* (*The Saimaa Gesture*, 1981), *Jackpot 2* (1981) and *Arvottomat* (*The Worthless*, 1982). As these films establish the representational and argumentative basis of much of the Kaurismäkis' subsequent work, I refer to them as the 'template' films. In contrast to these collaborative efforts, Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive view of how their thematic and stylistic approaches diverged early on in their careers, but also how the Finnish critics approached these thematically different, yet politically similar interpretations of Finnish society. Aki Kaurismäki's *Rikos ja Rangaistus* (*Crime and Punishment*, 1983) and *Calamari Union* (1985) strive to undermine any cohesive or traditional portrayal of that society. While Aki Kaurismäki's early films are decidedly dystopian, Mika Kaurismäki's *Klaani – Tarina Sammakoiden Suvusta* (*The Clan – a Tale of the Frogs*, 1984) and *Rosso* (1985) take issue with traditional national culture from

the perspective of 'heritage' cinema in the case of the former, and through transnational collision in the latter.

After an examination of the distinct approaches of Aki and Mika Kaurismäki in these early films, Part 2, 'Life in a capitalist welfare state: marginal hope and dystopian prophecies', will move on to examine the two trilogies on the contemporary state of Finnish society that the Kaurismäkis produced in the latter half of the 1980s. Aki's 'proletarian trilogy', comprising *Varjoja Paratiisissa* (*Shadows in Paradise*, 1986), *Ariel* (1988) and *Tulitikkutehtaan Tyttö* (*The Match Factory Girl*, 1990) offers a variety of perspectives on societal marginalisation by focusing on the fragmented and unstable life-styles of the 'silent majority' of Finnish society. To provide a necessary counterpoint to the examination of the capitalist welfare state 'from below', chapter 4 also examines Aki Kaurismäki's *Hamlet Liikemaailmassa* (*Hamlet Goes Business*, 1987), focusing particularly on the film's ironic reflection of contemporary class politics and the moral compromises of the nation's economic world. While these films emphasise the distinct and very visible fissures developing in contemporary Finnish society, Mika Kaurismäki's simultaneous examinations of social inequality take on a more balanced, though no less ironic, depiction of the contemporary social malaise. Chapter 5 examines what I call the 'life-politics trilogy', comprising *Cha Cha Cha* (1989), *Paperitähti* (1989) and *Zombie ja Kummitusjuna* (*Zombie and the Ghost Train*, 1991). Rather than providing an unquestioning vision of Finnish society and culture, the films instigate severely ironic and subversive plays with hegemonic conventions under their seemingly simplistic surfaces.

While the Kaurismäkis' Finnish-set films include transnational elements as an inherent part of a transforming Finland, Part 3, 'The international adventures of the Kaurismäkis', focuses on two sets of films, one from each brother, which take place in non-Finnish contexts. Chapter 6 discusses Mika Kaurismäki's *Helsinki Napoli: All Night Long* (1987) and *Amazon* (1990), both films which feature multi-national casts and protagonists who engage in cross-border cultural exchange in spaces defined by multi-cultural interaction. In the West Berlin of *Helsinki Napoli*, conventional notions of historicity and spatiality are absent, replaced by cosmopolitan identities and geopolitical displacement. Cosmopolitanism also seeps into

the environmental themes of *Amazon*, necessitating the re-evaluation of Western complicity in environmental destruction. In contrast to Mika Kaurismäki's cosmopolitan adventures, Chapter 7 focuses on spatial displacement in three films that Aki Kaurismäki produced between 1989 and 1992. *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (1989) mostly takes place in a United States that looks uncannily like the Finland of other Kaurismäki films. Similar reworkings of socio-cultural space emerge in *I Hired a Contract Killer* (1990), where most identifiable cultural features of London are absent, and *La Vie De Bohème* (1992), which constructs a displaced Paris through inter-textual means. Through analysing the international films of both Aki and Mika Kaurismäki, this part will build a wide-ranging depiction of the ways in which Finnish identity has been negotiated in these filmmakers' works – and also, how these identity negotiations were taken up by Finnish critics, who in turn contribute to the debates instigated by the films.

In contrast to the seemingly clear distinction between international and domestic space, Part 4, 'Transnational travel and the difficulty of "home": projecting the post-national condition for an EU-integrated Finland', argues for fundamental reconsideration of such distinctions. Chapter 8 examines Aki Kaurismäki's *Total Balalaika Show* (1993), *Leningrad Cowboys Meet Moses* (1994) and *Pidä Huivistasi Kiinni Tatjana* (*Take Care of Your Scarf, Tatjana*, 1994) as a sort of return home after the wayward adventures of his international trilogy. But instead of an unquestioning acceptance of the traditional customs and political values of the contemporary nation, these films discover that much has changed and a fundamental re-negotiation of societal mores and values needs to take place before any sort of reconciliation is at all possible. In contrast, Chapter 9 suggests an insurmountably fragmented conception of the relationship between cosmopolitan identities and the contemporary nation-state, a sort of farewell to cultural Finland, as seen in Mika Kaurismäki's *The Last Border* (1993) and *Tigrero – the Film That Was Never Made* (1994).

Through these chapters, the many complexities and contradictions of the Kaurismäki's films are examined in relation to discourses of nationhood in the era of late capitalist globalisation. This analysis will situate the films within the broader context of Finnish cultural and cinematic production, especially in terms of how the films re-think and re-contextualise traditions

and cultural elements both inside and outside Finland. This volume is therefore a contribution to the existing debates on Finnish cinematic production and self-conceptualisations of national identity on the one hand, and, on the other, to the significant body of literature, both journalistic and academic, that already exists on the films of the Kaurismäkis. In so doing, I hope to be able to push the study of the Kaurismäkis' films and of globalising Finnish culture in new directions and also contribute to the burgeoning theoretical work on transnational and post-national cinematic production.

The cultural context of the Kaurismäkis: Finnish films for Finnish people?

National culture and film production

As the concept of national culture is challenged by complex processes of increasingly transnational connectivity and global economic and political metamorphosis, it would be problematic to persist with strict, traditional definitions of national culture and identity. But considering the prevalence of the nation in global politics – not to mention the resurgence of debates over economic nationalism – it would clearly be counter-productive to argue that the national is facing extinction. As several recent studies have shown,¹ the national remains an essential facet of contemporary cultural and identity formations. The persistence of the national is explicitly visible in the field of cinema, as the markers of national culture and identity penetrate most aspects of cinematic production and consumption. Many contemporary studies take Andrew Higson's lead and define national cinema according to four main factors: the production, the distribution, the actual representation contained within the films and the respective consumption of the films both within the national sphere and outside it.² While it is certainly possible to make the case for national cinema by exploring these factors, Higson's categories are arguably more productive in challenging any simplistic conceptualizations of national cinema. For

- 1 A. Nestingen and T. Elkington, ed. *Transnational Cinema in a Global North* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005); U. Hedetoft and M. Hjort, ed. *The Post-national Self: Belonging and Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
- 2 A. Higson, 'The Concept of National Cinema', *Screen*, 30, 4 (1989), 36–46.

one, the production of 'national' films is often achieved on the basis of multi-national funding and casts and crews, which complicates a purely national vision of such films. The transnational distribution of films works not only to export cultural images that are nationally-specific, but also to impact upon the cultural constitution of the nation where these films are consumed.³ The dominance of 'Global Hollywood' at the national box offices suggests that the cultural elements and ideologies present in these films have a significant impact on the ways that audiences construct their cinematic 'life-worlds', even if these elements are always appropriated differently in different cultural contexts. While the implied or desired audience of national films may be constructed on the basis of cultural homogeneity, the reality of the audience constitution differs significantly from this. In the domestic market, the 'national' content of a film may be interpreted from a multitude of angles, where contradictory or deviant readings complicate any implied homogeneity.

Yet, the concept of national cinema persists in both domestic and international markets, functioning as a handy designator of cultural capital. Understanding national films within a historical narrative of national culture is another frequent method for exploring the significance and the constitution of national cinema. Here, cinema is seen as reconstructing 'myths already mobilised by the nation as they are inscribed in the indigenous culture', as Susan Hayward puts it.⁴ Sociologist Anthony Smith has defined such adherence to national traditions as 'ethno-symbolism', a sociological approach which draws on 'elements of myth, memory, value, symbol and tradition' across an extensive historical time span.⁵ This approach sees national culture as an adaptive presence in the 'life' of the nation, one that holds in common certain core ethnic values, yet which can also

3 A. Higson, 'The Instability of the National', ed. J. Ashby and A. Higson, *British Cinema, Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 2000), 35–47; U. Hedetoft 'Contemporary Cinema: Between Cultural Globalisation and National Interpretation', ed. M. Hjort and S. MacKenzie, *Cinema & Nation* (London: Routledge, 2000), 278–298.

4 S. Hayward, *French National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), 15.

5 A. Smith 'History and National Destiny: Responses and Clarifications', *Nations and Nationalism*, 10, 1 (2004), 196–197.

accommodate changes and new additions to its constitution. Ethno-symbolism is a particularly appropriate method of analysis of national cinemas as it emphasises the material nature of the signs and symbols of nationhood, a matter which is highly prominent in the visual medium of film.

The ethno-symbolic history of Finnish cinema

Finnish cinema has certainly exhibited a significant degree of ethno-symbolic continuity, exemplified by its adherence to national cultural traditions. In such ethno-symbolic visions, stereotypical national characteristics often either conjoin with images of a rural idyll or clash with more or less dystopian cityscapes. Narratives focused on national traditions dominate Finnish film culture, a notion underlined by the official approval of funding bodies such as the Finnish Film Foundation (Suomen Elokuvasäätiö). While Finnish language has acted as a clear demarcation of Finnish cinema from other national cinemas, a set of representational elements unique to the Finnish context were established in the silent period in films such as Erkki Karu's *Nummisuutarit* (*The Heath Cobblers*, 1923) before linguistic matters became more pronounced. The use of landscape as a mythic, shared essence of the Finnish people harkens back to the depictions of national life in Aleksis Kivi's novel *Seitsemän Veljestä* (*The Seven Brothers*, 1870) and, significantly, Finland's 'national epic', Elias Lönnrot's *Kalevala* (1849), where images such as the following, identified by Tutta Palin, were persistently recycled: 'the ridge landscape, the archipelago sea, the lake-view [and] the expansive hill-peak view of forests and lakes'.⁶ In such ethno-symbolic conceptions, the landscape becomes *patrie*, a shared *heimat* connecting blood and soil.

6 T. Palin, 'Kuvissa Tuotettu Maisema ja Kansa', ed. T. Lehtonen, *Suomi – Outoinen Pohjoinen Maa. Näkökulmia Euroopan Äären Historiaan ja Kulttuuriin* (Jyväskylä: PS-Kustannus, 1999), 218.

The countryside has been the most prominent manifestation of this, a place that life revolved around. In Sakari Toiviainen's view, 'one was born, lived and died in the countryside, one could leave it, but one also often returned to it.'⁷ As urbanisation increased in the 1930s, and gained momentum throughout the subsequent decades, visual representations of the countryside inevitably changed: 'The countryside morphed into the roots of mythology and into a mindscape, where subjective experiences became immersed in collective images, the memory of the people and cultural heritage.'⁸ The countryside started to lose signification as an actual, material point of reference and became a metaphorical mirror that reflected the loss of authenticity experienced by the urbanised. The countryside and the rural way of life became an extension of the mythic Finnish nature of grand, forbidding forests and endless tranquil lakes. These became integrated into national memory, into an ethno-symbolic tradition, which could be drawn upon to signify the authenticity of the 'national experience'.

While the use of landscape in cinematic nation-building is nothing new (indeed, most national cinemas use such methods), Finnish cinema has had an especially productive relationship with landscape imagery to which the sheer number of films rejecting depictions of the city in favour of more rural matters can attest. Rural life was ever-present in the popular Niskavuori series and Nyrki Tapiovaara's *Juha* (1937). Nature / man parallels were another recurrent feature in films such as Valentin Vaala's *Koskenlaskijan Morsian* (*The Logger's Bride*, 1937) and Erik Blomberg's *Valkoinen Peura* (*The White Reindeer*, 1952). Yet, the intertwined relationship between landscape and the national character often relied on stereotypes, especially those of the Finnish male. Negative characteristics of the Finnish male feature such charming designators as 'uncertainty, male chauvinism, self pity and awareness of utter failure in both professional and personal life'⁹ or 'existential loneliness, the pondering of lost chances and

7 S. Toiviainen, *Levottomat Sukupolvet: Uusin Suomalainen Elokuva* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2002), 99.

8 Toiviainen, *ibid.* 100.

9 Toiviainen, *ibid.* 164.

choices, uncommunicativeness, low self-esteem and unfortunate childhood events.¹⁰ These were inherently tied to studies of the national character in films such as *Nummisuutarit* or Edvin Laine's *Tuntematon Sotilas* (*The Unknown Soldier*, 1955).¹¹

But this is not to say that nature-bound epics are the only types of films produced in Finland. The period from 1961 to 1977 was characterised by so-called 'participatory' cinema – a politicised form of cinema based on social relevance and the use of innovative cinematic forms, often drawn from international styles such as Italian Neo-realism or the French New Wave.¹² The purpose of this cinema was to exhibit new, challenging ways of documenting national life in contrast to the the entertainment-based and commercially orientated filmmaking of the previous eras in Finnish cinema. This politicised cinema is epitomised by such films as Risto Jarva's *Työmiehen Päiväkirja* (*The Worker's Diary*, 1967) and Mikko Niskanen's *Kahdeksan Surmanluotia* (*Eight Deadly Shots*, 1972), which dealt with uncomfortable subject matter, such as unemployment and the decline of the rural way of life, in a stark, confrontational manner. The films were often shot in black and white and adopted an understated, 'realist' style and type of acting, in a vein similar to Italian Neo-realism or Germany's concurrent Autorenfilm. The politicised cinema of the 1960s and the 1970s answered

- 10 K. Ahonen, 'Suomalaisen Miehen Omakuva', ed. K. Ahonen et al. *Taju Kankaalle: Uusin Suomalainen Elokuva* (Helsinki: Suomen Elokuva Arkisto, 2003), 145.
- 11 Finnish cinema has been dominated by a pre-occupation with male characters. This is not to imply that female characters have been completely ignored, as the popular Niskavuori series would attest. Rather, Finnish films have favoured 'the male odyssey'. For more on the Niskavuori series, see A. Koivunen, *Performative Histories, Foundational Fictions: Gender and Sexuality in Niskavuori Films* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2003).
- 12 In 1961, a state grant system was established, awarding the producers of 'quality products' a prize bursary on the basis of a film's contribution to nationally-relevant culture. The establishment of the government-funded Finnish Film Foundation in 1969, and the changing of the grant system to an advance support system, only reinforced the status of quality cinema as the main form of national film production. The following text elaborates on these debates: A. Honka-Hallila et al. *Markan Tähdet: Yli Sata Vuotta Suomalaista Elokuvaistoriaa* (Turku: Turun Yliopisto, 1995).

to contemporary concerns about the decline of the rural way of life and the overpopulation of the city centres. Accordingly, the textual realism of the films intermingles with visual reminders of the ethno-symbolic tradition, adapted to the contemporary socio-economic decline of traditional ways of life – the technicolour utopias of golden age cinema were overtaken by gritty images of abandoned fields and rotting barns and stables. The aesthetic and ideological forms favoured by the politicised cinema of this period would form an important point of reference for the Kaurismäkis, whose films engage in similar forms of social criticism.

A new generation emerges

The preferred genre of the politicised cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, the social realist drama, remained a vital component of Finnish cinema in the 1980s, with established filmmakers such as Mikko Niskanen, with *Ajolähtö* (*Gotta Run!* 1983) and Anssi Mänttari, with *Huhtikuu On Kuukausista Julmin* (*April Is The Cruellest Month*, 1983), and new-comers such as the Kaurismäkis and Tapio Suominen, continuing to study the unfavourable social conditions of the period, though in very different ways. Tapio Suominen's *Täältä Tullaan Elämä* (*Right On Man!* 1980) is a watershed vision for this type of cinema, aiming to provide a voice for the modern teen lost in the claustrophobic, rootless city.¹³ While the film shares certain narrative and thematic similarities with earlier depictions of the 'lost generation' of the 1960s, such as Mikko Niskanen's *Käpy Selän Alla* (*Skin, Skin*, 1966), *Täältä Tullaan Elämä* paints an anguished picture of urban displacement experienced by the youth of the nation, allowing the films to claim a sense of social relevance while appealing to the frequently under-represented

13 P. Von Bagh, *Drifting Clouds: a Guide to Finnish Cinema* (Helsinki: Otava, 2000), 90.

majority audience that visit cinemas on a regular basis, teenagers and the 19–25 age group.

Throughout the 1980s, a number of directors attempted, with varying success, to re-invigorate popular genres that had proven lucrative throughout Finnish cinematic history, such as the rural melodrama, farce and the war epic. Edvin Laine, the director of two of the most renowned Finnish films, the original *Tuntematon Sotilas* and *Täällä Pohjantähden Alla* (*Here Under The Northern Star*, 1968), returned to the rural farce with *Akaton Mies* (*How to Find a Wife to a Farmer*, 1983) and *Akallinen Mies* (*The Farmer Has a Wife*, 1986). Mikko Niskanen made his final film with *Nuoruutteni Savootat* (*The Timbercamp Tales*, 1988), a naturalistic look at the logging culture of rural Finland based on the memories of the renowned author of rural Finnishness, Kalle Päätalo. Rauni Mollberg re-made *Tuntematon Sotilas* in 1986, though this time the emphasis was more on the horrors and sacrifice of war rather than the classical characteristics of the war film, heroism and comradeship. The films of Niskanen and Mollberg have a decidedly gritty slant in their depictions of tradition, reflecting the increasing uncertainty of the contemporary state of the nation, where the rural way of life faces extinction and national security is threatened by the appeasement politics addressed to the Soviet Union. Significantly, the homogenising connotations of these traditional narratives are undermined by factors such as the social inequality encountered by the characters of *Nuoruutteni Savootat*, or the destruction faced by the often ideologically confused soldiers of *Tuntematon Sotilas*. Instead of encouraging viewing these films as homogeneous portraits of national life, such social and ideological factors provoke the spectator to identify an underlying sense of disparity in any 'totalising' representation of the nation.

Similarly, Pekka Parikka's *Pohjanmaa* (*Plainlands*, 1988) and *Talvisota* (*The Winter War*, 1989) updated ethno-symbolic content to the late 1980s Finland, where the traditional rural way of life has lost most of its former significance as a means of livelihood and has come to connote a bygone era. Both films simultaneously emphasise the homogenising implications of ethno-symbolic traditions and draw attention to the complex status of the contemporary national society. *Pohjanmaa* is particularly noteworthy for its critical depiction of the Finnish male as it highlights themes such

as uncertainty, male centredness, anger and drunkenness at their most destructive – themes often connected to stereotypes of the Finnish male. *Talvisota*, a depiction of Finland's desperate defence against the Russian onslaught during the Winter War in 1940, continued to explore the relationship between the Finnish male character and the natural environment. While *Talvisota* shares the focus of Rauli Mollberg's *Tuntematon Sotilas* on the relentless horrors of war and the toll it takes on human life, it also embellishes the significance of the ancestral *patrie*. Whereas *Tuntematon Sotilas* has a distinctly claustrophobic feel, despite large-scale battle scenes with numerous extras, *Talvisota* expands its scope to the vastness of the landscape with a number of the battles fought over expansive plains. The *patrie* becomes something inherent to the nation, a material element with ideological connotations, where the sacrifice of one's life becomes rewarded by the prospect of assimilation into the 'immortal nation'.¹⁴

Markku Pölönen and ethno-symbolism for an EU-integrated Finland

Perhaps the most prominent examples of merging popular entertainment and 'shared' ethno-symbolic content are the films of Markku Pölönen. Pölönen gained immense indigenous critical and financial success in the mid-1990s with the 'tango-film' *Onnenmaa* (*Land of Happiness*, 1993), and won several Jussis (the Finnish 'Oscars'), with *Kivenpyörittäjän kylä* (*The Last Wedding*, 1995). The films were significant successes on their initial theatrical releases, with *Kivenpyörittäjän Kylä* and the logger film *Kuningasjätkä* (*A Summer by the River*, 1997) receiving over 100,000 spectators each; and they gained even greater audiences of over a million spectators

14 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 10.

on subsequent airings on television. These films were, in the words of film director Pekka Parikka,

Films about Finns for the Finnish people: about Finnish life and the people, Finnish destinies, Finnish love and death – this is the right direction for film politics: let's make films that no-one else in the world makes!¹⁵

Pölönen has stated that he is interested in the Finland that has been created in images, the picturesque, grand Finnish nature conveyed in paintings and in seminal films from the dawn of Finnish cinema, which all harken back to ethno-symbolic notions of national culture.¹⁶ Images such as the summery countryside and tangos danced on open-air dance floors have lodged themselves in national memory via films, television, paintings and literature and have thus become signifiers of a shared past, an ethno-symbolic point of identification. Pölönen's films provide a comforting vision of the national past for contemporary urbanised audiences, a vision that is presented as common to the majority of the indigenous people, regardless of whether they have ever actually lived in the countryside. For Pölönen, Finnishness represents stability and certainty: 'It is longing for a simple life. It is a fair and uncomplicated state between the sauna and the lake.'¹⁷

Pölönen's success can be directly linked with the 'felt' need to re-visit the nation's history at times when the nation's internal unity is under threat and its external borders are eroding by increased internationalism. The early to mid-1990s had been a particularly difficult time for Finland as the irresponsible economic spending of previous decades had resulted in a catastrophic depression and nation-wide mass unemployment. When Finland became a part of the European Union in 1995, it was released from the constraints of the former Soviet Union, yet membership of the intergovernmental EU again jeopardised its own sovereignty. The rural/urban distinction

15 P. Parikka, 'Kivenpyörittäjän Kylä', *Ilta-Sanomat*, February 25 (1995).

16 K. Ahonen, 'Markku Pölönen – Supisuomalainen Tarinankertoja', 1998. http://www.film-o-holic.com/1998-2003/haastattelut/polonen_kuningasjatka.htm (accessed November 11, 2007).

17 Markku Pölönen in H. Närhi, *Pölönen* (Helsinki: Maahenki Oy, 2004), 180.