

Loneliness in the films of Aki Kaurismäki

Loneliness is a major theme in Aki Kaurismäki's cinema. As Andrew Nestingen has put it, 'the primary narrative of Kaurismäki's films is one in which the protagonist finds himself dislocated and alone, looking to put together a life' (2013: 62). Critics have been interested in how 'Kaurismäki's outcasts are pushed into the margins, which they then transform into heterotopic spaces to survive in the social order that represses and alienates them' (Pantet 2018: 56). For some of Kaurismäki's protagonists, however, the process of 'creating and affirming a new group identity' (Pantet 2018: 56) is very challenging. These lonely characters put their faith in ordinary decency, but for reasons that are never made entirely clear to the viewer, most people do not want to have anything to do with them. Kaurismäki is interested in his characters' actions and behaviour, their state of being that is, but not in psychological explanations or sociological explorations. According to Ginette Vincendeau, 'verisimilitude is not Kaurismäki's main preoccupation' and thus the loneliness of the characters should be understood as 'an existential condition rather than a sociological expose' (2007: 70). Similarly, Henry Bacon points out that the filmmaker creates a vivid sense of existential displacement of his characters without exploring specific societal situations (2003: 95). Up until now, the critical attention on

loneliness in Kaurismäki's cinema has not been sufficiently close or attuned to style. To develop a richer understanding of Kaurismäki's handling of the theme, I build on these general observations focusing on his systematic and significant use of cinematic elements.

The theme of loneliness connects Kaurismäki's films to many masterpieces of world film history. The filmmaker is inspired by 'the cinematic representations of isolation prominent in some American and European inter-war and post-war cinema, and in particular the auteur cinema' (Nesting 2013: 103). Indeed, the solitary figures of French poetic realist films and American film noirs have had a major influence on Kaurismäki's cinema, not to mention the lonely protagonists of Robert Bresson and Jean-Pierre Melville. Kaurismäki has mentioned these film movements and filmmakers in numerous interviews he has given. In addition, Kaurismäki has been influenced by paintings and novels. Critics have noticed the resemblance between Kaurismäki's shot compositions and the works of Edward Hopper (Vincendeau 2007: 70; Monk 2009: 273; Rascaroli 2013: 328), an artist who 'paints man in his alienation from and disenchantment with everyday life' (Solana and Cluzel 2012: 9). The theme of loneliness is also pivotal in the literary works – *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, Dostoevsky, 1866), *Hamlet* (Shakespeare, c. 1600) and *Juha* (Aho, 1911) – Kaurismäki has adapted. The theme is present in a more philosophical form in Jean-Paul Sartre's play *Dirty Hands* (*Les mains sales*, 1948), which discusses individuality and freedom of choice. Kaurismäki adapted the play for television in 1989 as *Likaiset kädet*.

Kaurismäki's interest in loneliness derives to a degree from his personal history. In an interview published after directing his first feature film *Crime and Punishment* (*Rikos ja rangaistus*, 1983), Kaurismäki explained that his family moved a lot during his childhood, and that he still remembers what it is like to be the new kid in school:

Every time you manage to form some kind of a social network, it gets cut by an axe. Nothing feels like anything when you experience five times what it is like to go to a new school at the beginning of a school year. There you stand wearing a leather jacket, looking at others, a bit aloof from everyone else. And you do not know anyone. (Hämäläinen 1984)

Kaurismäki says that experiences of not belonging made him an existentialist, but he does not specify what he means by this. Kaurismäki's philosophical idol Sartre saw loneliness as a central and inescapable fact of the human condition: as the universe is a cold, meaningless and indifferent place, we alone have to create our values and make our choices (2020). One can suppose that Kaurismäki's childhood experiences have shaped his aesthetic sensibility. Even his camera habitually portrays the world and its characters from the point of view of 'a socially excluded, sympathetic stranger who observes people and their gestures with keen interest and would like to engage with them, but is unable to make his presence known' (Seppälä 2016: 19).

Kaurismäki probably sees the topic of existentialism through literary and cinematic representations, as he is not interested in academic debates. Film noir, for example, has been famously analysed in existentialist terms (Porfirio 1996). *The Liar* (*Valehtelija*, 1981), a film directed by Mika Kaurismäki and partly written by his brother, contains a humorous sequence in which characters talk about existentialism and literary giants, which leads them to ponder whether the promised land of modern existentialism is France or Finland. As a filmmaker, Kaurismäki follows Sartre who believed that in theatre 'situations must be found which are so general that they are common to all' (1976: 4). At the heart of each film he has directed lies the problem of modern alienation and the need for social connection. Kaurismäki's protagonists live by the values of solidarity and equality. However, whereas Sartre believed that 'love's inevitable failure hurls the lovers into a more desolating loneliness than the metaphysical and epistemic isolation they had hoped to escape' (McGraw 1995: 49), Kaurismäki portrays 'romantic, heterosexual love as redemptive for alienated lower-class characters' (Nesting 2016: 293).

In this article, I analyse how Kaurismäki employs his signature style of ironic minimalism in representing loneliness. Using minimalist cinematic devices, the filmmaker guides viewers to react with sympathy and empathy to the thoughts and emotions of his deadpan characters as they are treated with injustice (Seppälä 2016). Kaurismäki's ironic devices, on the other hand, add strangeness and comedy to the films, not

to mention artificiality (Seppälä 2018). The filmmaker fuses the seemingly incompatible qualities of sympathy and irony, achieving aesthetic unity and balance. From this perspective I demonstrate that Kaurismäki's representations of loneliness are bleak yet not morbid, poignant yet not sentimental and absurd yet serious. My focus is on the loneliest and most melancholic protagonists in Kaurismäki's oeuvre. These figures are Iris Rukka (Kati Outinen), Henri Boulanger (Jean-Pierre Léaud) and Seppo Koistinen (Janne Hyytiäinen), the lead characters in *The Match Factory Girl* (*Tulitikkutehtaan tyttö*, 1989), *I Hired a Contract Killer* (1990) and *Lights in the Dusk* (*Laitakaupungin valot*, 2006), respectively. Antti Rahikainen (Markku Toikka), the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment*, could be added to the list, but his isolation is of a different sort, as he prefers to be alone. The three characters selected for analysis are slightly caricatured and stylised, to use Henry Bacon's model of typification, appearing 'faintly naive and not well in touch with modern life' (2018: 159). In comparison to protagonists in most mainstream films, 'they have a fairly narrow range of emotional expression' (Bacon 2018: 159), but not so much that they become cartoonish or lacking in human warmth. *The Match Factory Girl*, *I Hired a Contract Killer* and *Lights in the Dusk* are often seen as the most despairing films in Kaurismäki's oeuvre, as the theme of severe loneliness and the need for togetherness is at the heart of each of them.

Lonely Persons in a Social World

As Andrew Nestingen argues, Kaurismäki's 'characters are invariably aliens in their social worlds' (Nesting 2013: 12). *The Match Factory Girl* opens with a montage that follows assembly line match production in an anonymous factory. Loud rhythmic sounds of the heavy machines accompany the sequence that is composed of approximately thirty static shots. The camera shows only two humans working on the line, suggesting that the process has been automated to the maximum extent possible. Iris Rukka's monotonous job is to ensure that labels have been properly attached to the boxes that roll by her on the line. As shots of her working follow the montage, the sequence elicits a sense that her role in the system is comparable to that of a cog in a machine. As Yangos

Antiochos has put it, 'the viewer faces the utter emptiness that has come as a result of banishing the human factor from modern mass production' (2012: 78). The camera shows a close-up of Rukka's hands. They move in the rhythm of the assembly line, taping boxes every now and then. These are robotic and repetitious movements of a bored person who leads an empty life. Rukka's is a job where skill is not needed and thus on any given day the management could replace her with someone else. The following view is a close-up of Rukka's static, inexpressive face in which her eyes follow the movement of the boxes. She withholds emotions from her facial expression, much like the static protagonists of Robert Bresson and Jean-Pierre Melville, but looks sad nonetheless. The reason for this is her downward gaze. Gazes and their directions are salient aspects of Kaurismäki's minimalism. 'Gaze, I build upon that. It tells everything,' the filmmaker says (Lindqvist 1996). After associating Rukka with the assembly line, the camera shows her in a medium long shot. Now the alert viewer can spot her pink hair band, which becomes a vital leitmotif in the film. The detail is in an expressive relationship with other aspects of the mise-en-scène, especially with the pale colours of the loud machines that dominate the factory. The vibrant pink colour of the accessory implies that there is more to Rukka than meets the eye. As the colour pink is frequently associated with the romantic, the hair band can be interpreted as an expression of her rosy dreams. Supporting the interpretation, Kaurismäki later indicates that she is a fan of romance literature. As there is no way Rukka's dreams could be fulfilled in the factory, she appears displaced. What is so admirable in this opening sequence is that Kaurismäki manages to evoke a sense of Rukka's loneliness and unfulfilled dreams by using only simple shots in which nothing in particular seems to happen.

Rukka's relationship to her workmates is well illustrated in the sequence in which she is on a break. In a long take the camera shows her in a static medium long shot, as she sits next to her colleague in a locker room. The characters are physically close to one another, but mentally miles apart. Rukka stares quietly at the floor looking miserable and the workmate looks blankly ahead while smoking a cigarette. 'I'm pregnant,' Rukka says unexpectedly. This is her attempt to begin



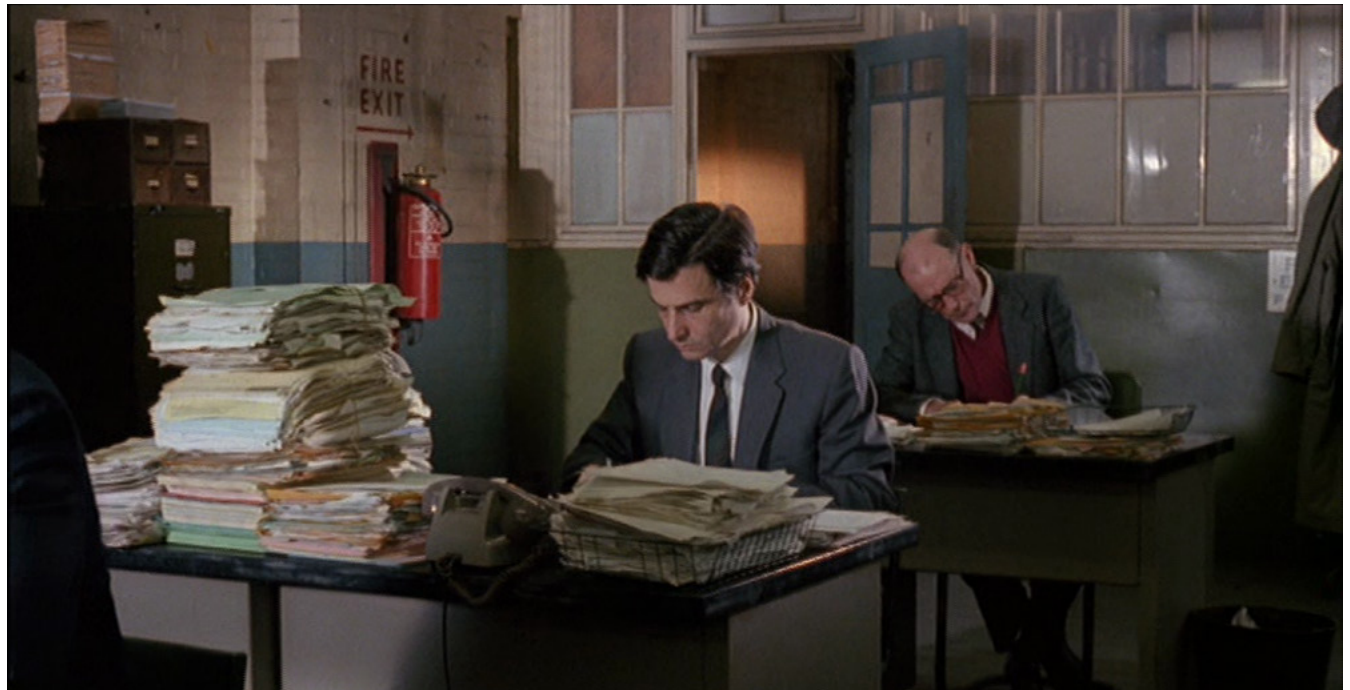
a conversation about an important matter that is worrying her. Clearly, she has a very human desire for attachment with other people. 'Really?' the workmate says without looking at her. The laconic comment kills the conversation before it even began. To make clear where she stands, the workmate dumps her cigarette and leaves the room. The brutally honest gesture indicates that she would rather sacrifice her cigarette and break than have a conversation. This makes the scene not only poignant but also absurd, as it magnifies the contrast between Rukka's effort to seek value and meaning in human relationships and her inability to find anything of the sort. Rukka's company became too much for the workmate to bear as soon as she opened her mouth. It seems that Rukka's workmate sees her more as a machine than as a fellow human being. The comedy of the sequence flows from the absurdity of the work colleague's response, speaking amusingly of the way the factory has conditioned non-responsiveness and avoidance of human contact as part of its *modus operandi*.

A different kind of work place proves equally alienating in *I Hired a Contract Killer*. Henri Boulanger is a Frenchman who works as a clerk in the registry office at Her Majesty's Waterworks in London. He is introduced in a sequence that begins when the dirty blue-grey double doors leading to the office swing open as a pile of documents is carted in. The view is anything but spectacular, as the office is dominated by the same lifeless colours, echoing the restrained use of colour in Melville's *The Red Circle* (*Le cercle rouge*, 1970) and John Huston's *Fat City* (1972). Some ten clerks sit working at desks piled high with enormous amounts of documents. In this Kafkaesque office, work is a never-ending process, the piles suggest. Even though Kaurismäki is a minimalist, his style of filmmaking does not exclude deadpan exaggeration. He manages to achieve a balance between these two apparently contradictory states by underusing the documents: much like in the cinema of Jacques Tati, 'we discover humorous situations that are hinted at but not developed' (Thompson 1998: 257). Boulanger is introduced with a shot in which the camera tracks towards his face. When the protagonist is seen in a medium close-up, he lifts his head from the documents he is keenly working on and looks genuinely surprised. The camera movement indicates that he found something

thought-provoking in the documents. Ironically enough, to the audience the piles look as dull as dust. The sequence could certainly be funnier, had Kaurismäki wanted so, but he introduces just a hint of humour here, resisting the impulse to turn it into a gag. What the sequence tells us is that the protagonist differs from his workmates in that he finds the work stimulating. As the camera introduced the office, it showed a clerk sleeping on his desk, as if to emphasise just how life-draining the documents are to the other clerks. We might notice that Boulanger's workmates have small personal items on their desks, such as a souvenir Eiffel tower, a photograph and a cactus. The absence of any personal items on Boulanger's desk suggests that unlike the other clerks, he has no life outside work: no social life, no family life, nothing to go home to. As a bell signals the beginning of a break, the clerks get up and leave, all except Boulanger who works just a bit longer than others: being alienated from social life, he lives for his work. There is certain irony in this, as Kaurismäki makes the work look as daunting as possible. Here, as in the

opening sequence of *The Match Factory Girl*, Kaurismäki relies on restrained means that elicit a sense of the lonely life his protagonist leads. By showing Boulanger enjoying dull office work, Kaurismäki gently mocks the character, possibly because unlike his other protagonists he is a white-collar worker. In his films Kaurismäki often makes fun of middle-class characters and higher education, not to mention rich people. Boulanger is more strongly caricatured than Rukka in that whereas she dreams of a different kind of life, he cannot think of what more to ask for. Yet Kaurismäki is careful not to make Boulanger too comic, as that might cause the audience to lose sympathy with him.

Like Rukka, Boulanger is an outcast in his work community. Kaurismäki makes this apparent with a static shot of a lunch break, the composition of which is dominated by two tables: Boulanger eats alone at a small table on the left, right next to a six-person dining table where the other clerks eat and chat together. The two-dimensional shot looks quirky in its awkwardness, much more so than that of Rukka next





to her colleague, as the frontal staging comically emphasises the imbalance between the two tables. The artificiality makes it easy for the audience to find comedy in the sequence. The framing contrasts the solemn Boulanger with eight jolly workers sitting at the bigger table making him look lonely. Their smiles are expressions of pleasure and happiness but, like Rukka, Boulanger withholds any sign of emotion. In comparison to his lively fellow workers, the static protagonist is akin to the living dead. As Boulanger's table is missing a chair, we can suppose that one of the extra chairs at the bigger table has been borrowed from there. The strangeness of the sequence lies in that the tables are close to one another, which encourages the audience to compare them, but they have not been combined, which is a common custom at workplaces when a group of diners does not fit at the same table. Clearly, the other clerks do not want to have anything to do with Boulanger, just as Rukka's workmate does not want to have anything to do with her. Both protagonists are excluded from their work communities. The scene cuts to a medium close-up

of Boulanger as he turns his head towards the other clerks and attempts to smile at them. His is not a true smile, but a falsified facial expression with which he attempts to make a social contact – it is a jerky grimace that makes him look ridiculous. This shot gives a reason to suppose that Boulanger is not happy, even though he finds his job inspiring. So much time has passed since Boulanger last smiled that he is not able to fake the expression effectively. Like Rukka, he does his best to connect with his colleagues, but he too fails to get a response. Boulanger turns his gaze back towards the camera and lets it fall down in an unintended signal of disappointment caused by his failure to socialise. Despite his hard work and attempts to be friendly, no one recognises his existence. This prompts the audience to sympathise with the character, as he is clearly treated with injustice. Because the grimace and the overall artificiality of the sequence work against any deeper emotional involvement, the sequence never becomes melodramatic.

The opening sequence of *Lights in the Dusk* is yet another instance in which Kaurismäki does seemingly little and yet



elicits a vivid sense of the lonely life the protagonist leads. Seppo Koistinen, who works as a security guard for Western Alarm, is introduced descending the stairs of an underpass. The camera shows him in an extreme long shot as he walks confidently and in a carefree manner dangles a nightstick in his hand. As he reaches the street level, he routinely glances to his left to check that everything is in order. The combination of confidence, carefreeness and routine elicits a sense that Koistinen is experienced and knows what he is doing. When it comes to security guarding, he is a professional who enjoys his work, which guides the audience to respect him. Koistinen is just the kind of blue-collar worker Kaurismäki treats with admiration in his films. The camera shows Koistinen standing on an escalator in a medium shot. Unlike in the earlier shot, he is standing still and has a moment to think private thoughts, as the technology carries him upward. As Koistinen looks ahead, his deep melancholic eyes move, signalling a moment of confusion and a sense of being lost. He soon lowers his head and looks down, which suggests he is sad, but

he then lifts his chin up again. The sympathetic spectator can sense that Koistinen is missing something in his life, no matter how good he is in his work. In the following extreme long shot he is a tiny static figure who rides the long escalator all by himself in an enormous underground tunnel, holding the escalator rail. The shot correlates with earlier shots of high buildings made of steel and glass, giving a vivid sense of the cold and modern world the character lives in. Carlos Gardel's sorrowful tango 'Volver' (1934) plays on the soundtrack. The old song evokes a sense of a past era and, to use the words of John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, 'the vitality of life on a smaller, more compact scale, where people live and work on the same block' (2008: 249). The use of the melancholic song also indicates Koistinen's inner resilience, as the lyrics are about keeping humble hope alive. In this world of steel and glass, Koistinen is unable to find a sense of community and meaning. Supporting the interpretation, when Koistinen is outside again, three Russian men walk past him talking about major literary authors, but he does not dare to approach them. After Koistinen has done his shift, he reports to the company office. 'And the name is?' his superior asks. 'Koistinen. Just like before.' After Koistinen has left the office, his colleague says to the superior: 'He's been here three years now. Lay off.' 'He'll learn,' the laconic superior replies without a further thought. By pretending not to remember Koistinen's name, he signals that Koistinen is not on an equal footing with others who work for the company. Koistinen nonetheless does his best to keep his chin up. Even though the film treats Koistinen with respect, his situation is not any better than that of Rukka or Boulanger. The three opening sequences analysed depict solitary working but the point of view from which the events are represented is different in each film. To put it bluntly, the audience is directed to take pity on Rukka, smile at Boulanger and respect Koistinen.

In a later sequence in which Koistinen and other security guards are changing in a locker room after their shift, a worker who has not been introduced to the audience walks in. The film shows him and Koistinen in shot reverse-shots, indicating eye contact. For a moment, the minds of the characters are hard to read, as their faces are expressionless. In a medium shot Koistinen lifts his chin and with a kind, trustful



look on his face greets the other man. Here, as in *I Hired a Contract Killer*, the close view emphasises the importance of the friendly gesture. Unlike Boulanger's grimace, this is a true smile that should evoke a positive response. But in a reverse shot the man stares back at Koistinen and soon turns his gaze towards the other men. 'Let's grab a beer,' he says to them. His gesture of turning his eyes away is a social signal that indicates that Koistinen is not welcome to join the company. Despite Koistinen's friendliness, his fellow workers reject him, just as those of Rukka and Boulanger reject them. Koistinen is left alone in the empty room and the static camera keeps rolling as he slowly puts on his coat and closes his locker. There is certain irony in the *découpage*: the sequence begins with an establishing shot, moves to shot/reverse shots and ends with a full shot. The structure is circular – nothing changes and connection is denied.

With means that are minimal yet very bold, Kaurismäki evokes a sense that Rukka, Boulanger and Koistinen are

permanently out of place. At times, the combination of framing, deadpan performance and long shot duration verge on becoming a tableau. This enhances the sense of boldness: we are not allowed to miss the point the filmmaker is making. Indeed, in each sequence I have analysed, Kaurismäki manages to capture the whole in a nutshell, which is an achievement in itself.

Loneliness as the Failure to Notice

Time and again Kaurismäki shows how loneliness can affect attempts to socially connect with other people. For instance, Henri Boulanger and Seppo Koistinen are attractive to women whose need for social connection they fail to notice, even though they themselves are lonely. Kaurismäki treats such encounters with dramatic irony. In *I Hired a Contract Killer* and *Lights in the Dusk*, the audience can see that the women are romantically interested but the lonely and

alienated protagonists are not capable of correctly interpreting their social cues, as obvious as they seem to the audience. The lonely protagonists have been neglected for so long that they find the idea of someone loving them impossible.

After losing his job at Her Majesty's Waterworks, Boulanger decides to die. Before he puts his plan of hanging himself into action, he goes to meet his landlady with the intention of dutifully giving notice for his flat. The characters meet at the landlady's door and the camera shows them in close-ups, directing viewers to pay attention to their facial expressions. The landlady looks weary opening her door, but as she realises that it is Boulanger who has come to meet her, she straightens her back and a twinkle appears in her eye. The small gesture and the tiny detail express her delight at seeing him. But the feeling is not mutual, as one can interpret from Boulanger's face which appears stern throughout the conversation. 'I came to give notice of the flat,' he states. 'Why are you... Just like that...' the landlady responds. She utters the first three words with a warm tone of voice while pushing her smiling face towards his. This indicates that she likes him and does not quite believe his words. But just then the meaning of Boulanger's statement hits her. Uttering the latter part of her sentence, she leans back looking surprised: her eyebrows are raised, the eyes are opened wide and the jaw drops open, parting the lips. The film cuts back to Boulanger as he claims he is moving away and says that in a week's time everything he has left behind can be thrown away – the hidden irony is that this includes his dead body. Now there is a touch of fury in his voice, which suggests he has failed to interpret social signs. The landlady leans back and looks confused, as Boulanger does

not realise how much she would like to socialise with him. There is another ironic element to the sequence: Billie Holiday's song '*Body and Soul*' plays on the soundtrack, explicitly expressing the landlady's emotions. Holiday sings: 'My days have grown so lonely. For you I cry, for you dear only. Why haven't you seen it? I'm all for you, body and soul.' As the song is diegetic – it plays in her apartment – it should help Boulanger to interpret what the landlady feels for him, but he fails to do so. He can only think about putting his plan of killing himself into action, finding life meaningless now that he has lost his job. Boulanger and the landlady could be romantically involved, but this is not something the film directly expresses. The connection is there, but we have to make the interpretation. That ethic is built into the style.

Lights in the Dusk contains analogous sequences in which Koistinen fails to realise that the woman who works in the traditional hot dog kiosk he regularly visits is romantically interested in him. The film contains three sequences in which he goes to the booth and meets her, all of which are more poignant than the meeting analysed above. The third visit differs from the other two in that Koistinen is seriously drunk. As it opens, he drinks vodka from a bottle at the back of the kiosk early in the morning. It is as if the hot dog booth has magically drawn him there: it is warmly lit, making it look cosy in the colourless city of glass, steel and brick. As Koistinen tosses the empty bottle into off-screen space, where we hear it breaks – a gesture that signals deep disappointment and indifference to his own fate – the woman steps outside to meet him. The orange coat she wears is in a sharp contrast with the black of the suit he is wearing. The warm colour marks her as

a rescuer, a person who can save Koistinen from his self-destructive tendencies. As the characters meet, they have their hands in their pockets in self-protective postures, expressing reticence and shyness. It is not easy for them to communicate their feelings. The woman kindly offers to take Koistinen home and in the next shot the camera dollies with them as they walk. The change from the static camera set-up connotes progress in the relationship: she is now holding his arm. In the opening sequence Koistinen only had the escalator rail to hold. Just before the end of the shot the woman lowers her gaze which makes her look melancholic. I take it that she feels good with him by her side, but sad because in his stupor he fails to realise her affection for him. When inside Koistinen's apartment, the camera follows her movements as she puts him to bed. From here the film cuts to a medium close-up of Koistinen's face as his eyes stare blankly at the ceiling and then close. He passes out with a wrinkled cigarette in his mouth, not realising that the woman finds him attractive. She takes the cigarette and pulls a puff from it in a medium close-up, which prompts the audience to interpret her unexpressed thoughts. Howard Hawks, whom Kaurismäki greatly admires, was famous for signalling social connection with cigarettes. Here the cigarette is used to symbolise the one-sided nature of their connection. The sequence ends with a sound of a distant foghorn. It connotes loneliness and makes the moment affectively engaging. Foghorns were frequently used in French poetic realist films that Kaurismäki appreciates, for example in and *Pépé le Moko* (Duvivier 1937) and *The Port of Shadows* (*Le Quai des brumes*, Carné 1938). In these films, as in *Lights in the Dusk*, the deep sound implies unfulfilled romance and



longing for something better. The foghorn returns at the film's end, just before Koistinen and the woman hold hands. This time it can be heard as an 'answer' to the earlier foghorn, as it stands for the possibility for them to sail away together, escaping their troubles.

The Match Factory Girl contains a night club sequence in which Iris Rukka meets a man who becomes interested in her company. Unfortunately for her, she totally misinterprets the nature of his interest. The sequence opens with a pan that moves from right to left showing happy people dancing under flashing lights, couples and groups at their tables and finally Rukka alone at her table next to a wall. The camera stops its movement and keeps rolling as she takes a sip from her soft drink. As she raises her eyes from the glass, they widen and lock on something in the off-screen space, as she spots something attractive. The following point of view shot shows a sleazy man at the bar whose tie hangs loosely as he does not stand up straight. The man has one hand in his pocket and in the other hand he has a cigarette and an empty drink. The small details are in stark contrast to Rukka's lemonade that connotes naivety and virtuousness. As he looks back at her, she bashfully turns her gaze away. While Rukka finds the man attractive, she is also scared of the attention she receives from him, as she does not know how to behave. The bashfulness of her gesture signals that she fails to recognise him as a creep. Soon the man sits at Rukka's table, leans towards her and takes her arm. While Rukka's coy smile suggests that she is pleased with the attention she is getting, his face is expressionless. As nothing in his gestures signals genuine romantic interest, the audience might find him scary. He takes Rukka to dance and the camera keeps shooting the empty table for a while, emphasising the lemonade that she left behind. Here it is a symbol of innocence, something from which Rukka is now drifting away. The camera shoots the dancing couple in a medium close-up in which his back is towards the spectator. The positioning of the characters increases the sense that he is a person whose true thoughts and feelings are a mystery. Rukka is the total opposite: she smiles and has her cheek pressed against his chest, which indicates trust and comfort. She is clearly lost in the moment. Slowly the couple turns 180

degrees, allowing the audience to see that the man is looking up, first to the left and then to the right. The movement of his eyes implies that the dance does not mean a thing to him. From here the film cuts to an extreme low angle shot of an upper corner of an apartment building seen from the outside in the middle of the night. It is an indirect way of indicating that the characters have sex, which is something Kaurismäki never shows directly. Early in the morning the man goes away, but leaves money for her to find. The detail clarifies that he was merely looking for sex without any commitment. Lacking the comedy Kaurismäki is known for, the sequence elicits a strong sense of sympathy towards Rukka: she was looking for romantic love, but is treated as a prostitute. The sequence is similar to the sequences analysed above in that the protagonist fails to notice what another character is thinking, even though viewers are guided to realise what is really going on. This creates a dramatic irony.

Showing what Loneliness Feels Like

In Kaurismäki's films, shots that represent bereft characters alone in a space are typically longer than is narratively necessary (Seppälä 2015: 23–26; Seppälä 2016: 10). As time passes, the camera rolls and shows action of a mundane sort, people who do not really do anything. In this way Kaurismäki depicts loneliness as a negative state of being without the means to meaningfully occupy time. As the bored characters do not have anything to do or anyone to talk to,



they become uncomfortably aware of the meaninglessness of their existence. By holding the shots longer than necessary, Kaurismäki evokes that emptiness and discomfort, using cinematic devices to show what loneliness feels like.

In *I Hired a Contract Killer* the camera finds Henri Boulanger in an underground train after a typical day at work. As Boulanger sits still, the camera keeps observing him. The train is full of men returning home from work, but he stands out in that everyone else is either involved in a conversation or reading a newspaper. It seems that only the camera is aware of his presence. As all seats in view have been taken, except the one next to Boulanger, he looks lonesome. No one was willing to sit with him in the cafeteria and no one is willing to sit with him in the train, but there is no apparent reason for this. For Boulanger, the public space of the train is a private space: he is lost in his own thoughts and does not pay attention to other people, just as they do not pay any attention to him. This is a theme Edward Hopper often explored in his paintings. As noted earlier, Kaurismäki's compositions tend to resemble those of Hopper. As he sits next to the window at the corner of his seat, aloof from everyone else, Boulanger further resembles a character from a Hopper painting in that he has a vacant, expressionless appearance. Boulanger appears to be the only person who is not connected to society. Indeed, the major difference to the works of the painter is that the other characters appear lively and interested in things around them. Here the other people who read do not appear isolated. On the contrary, they are actively involved with society as they read; one even gets a sense that their conversations have been inspired by the newspapers. The train shakes Koistinen as he sits still, looking a bit down. Once again Kaurismäki uses the minimal device of a downward gaze to signal sadness. Typically for the filmmaker, the long take enables a deeper engagement with the protagonist: the shot encourages viewers to simulate what it would be like to sit in solitude in that train, on that bench, at that hour, amongst all those people. To put it differently, the shot invites us to understand Boulanger's social pain through our own emotions.



Intimate moments of isolation can be more poignant than ones in which characters are surrounded by other people, but even such moments tend to be slightly ironic. An illuminating example is the sequence in *The Match Factory Girl* in which lonely Iris Rukka celebrates her birthday. It opens with an

extreme long shot in which she walks from right to left on a wet road in front of a grey wall that totally blocks the view. The beige colour of Rukka's coat makes her look like she belongs to these outskirts, as she is as pallid as the surroundings. A bus and car pass by, but other than that, she is alone and looks

alienated from the world around her. Rukka appears small and powerless, especially so because she is looking down in the long shot. Here, too, her pink hair band signifies her dreams for something better. From here the film cuts to a shot which paraphrases Hopper's painting *Automat* (1927) in which a

lonely woman in green drinks coffee in an empty cafeteria. In Kaurismäki's medium shot Rukka stares at a slice of cake she has on the table next to a glass of red lemonade. She looks miserable, which is understandable, as it is her birthday and she is alone. Like the woman in the painting, Rukka is in 'a place of social contact', but 'appears entirely turned inward upon herself, and her isolation is increased by a suggestion of hurry and unrest, conveyed by the coat [...] she still has on' (Kranzfelder 2010: 146).

The sequence is anything but sentimental because of the upbeat Finnish version of a British pop song from the 1960s, 'You've Got What I Like' ('*Se jokin sinulla on*'), which began to play on the soundtrack as Rukka was walking on the street. The placement of the song indicates that it is not part of the diegesis, at least not at first (it could be playing in the cafeteria), which accentuates the fact that Kaurismäki has deliberately chosen to play it here. The song adds ironic distance to the sympathetic emotions the sequence elicits, as a man sings about a woman he adores. The English subtitles translate the Finnish lyrics:

You've got that something, babe. Your smile makes it all worthwhile. So easily you can outshine the brightest stars. For me, your shining eyes turn each day into spring. You've got that something, babe.



The song goes against 'the emotional dominant of the sequence' (Stam 2005: 64), as the protagonist is nothing like the person the song is about. Rukka is cheerless and her eyes are dimmed by sadness and loneliness. By offering a stark contrast, the lyrics emphasise these characteristics of hers. The fast tempo of the song offers another ironic contrast: conventionally, 'slow movement in the visuals correlate with slow tempo, and fast movement with fast tempo' (Chattah 2015: 83), but here it is very noticeably the other way around. And yet, the song is not unfit in narrative terms, as Rukka probably wants to be something like the person the song is about in the eyes of the man she one-sidedly loves (Pekkilä 2005: 57). Thus, Kaurismäki manages to have it both ways: the song is poignant in what it tells about her dreams and yet it makes fun of her by offering an ironic contrast, which makes her look ridiculous and out of place. Here Kaurismäki playfully juxtaposes cinematic elements, creating strange and comic contrasts that express his ironic attitude (Seppälä 2018: 85 and passim).

In *Lights in the Dusk* Kaurismäki connects loneliness to heavy drinking. His drinkers are happy and their drinking stylish when drinking happens in a group as a form of social bonding. But when people are lonely and drink to make their pain go away, their drinking can be destructive. This is what happens to Seppo Koistinen when the woman with whom he has fallen in love with leaves him. In the sequence in question the camera follows Koistinen as he prepares a supper table while waiting for the woman to arrive. He is literally alone, but not lonely as he is meaningfully occupying time. The woman arrives and sits next to Koistinen on a couch. Having given her a drink, he puts his arm around her shoulders, thinking this is the right moment to do so. She loosens herself from his grip and says she must travel. The woman walks out of the two-shot and the camera keeps rolling as Koistinen sits gazing down. The inner corners of his eyebrows are raised and drawn together, further suggesting how miserable he feels. The film cuts to an extreme close-up of a liqueur bottle, which the protagonist grabs and opens. The close view of the hands opening

the bottle is appropriately abrupt. 'To hell with it all,' Koistinen is clearly thinking, as social isolation has deprived him of a sense of purpose. The camera guides the audience to spot the liqueur glass which Koistinen does not use, suggesting that he is drinking straight from the bottle. If Rukka turned away from innocence, Koistinen turns away from civilised drinking. One can sense that he is about to drink the bottle in one go. To reinforce this interpretation, Kaurismäki cuts to a close view of a spinning record, the metaphorical movement of which is not going to stop anytime soon. By using the shot of the record, Kaurismäki gives Koistinen privacy, refusing to exploit his self-destructive emotions.

Conclusions

The Match Factory Girl, *I Hired a Contract Killer* and *Lights in the Dusk* are existentialist films in the sense that they depict lonely characters who face the utter meaninglessness of life without social contacts. Their loneliness is the polar opposite of the working-class togetherness Kaurismäki celebrates in his other films. To put it differently, the films analysed here indicate what the role of the common man is in the modern world if the creation of heterotopias fails or is not carried out. The cinematic tropes Kaurismäki repeatedly uses in his depictions of loneliness include: the downward gaze of the main character; a shot composition in which the protagonist is close to other characters and yet separate from them; a shot composition in which the main character is surrounded by socially empty space; expressive objects and spaces; deadpan acting; silence and symbolic sounds; and music that can be expressive or ironic – or even both at the same time. In his treatment of loneliness, Kaurismäki uses these devices to both invite and block emotional involvement. Watching his films, the viewer can sense that the material could easily be funnier or sadder. Kaurismäki keeps the tone of his works on a knife-edge between irony and sympathy, laughter and sadness, absurdity and seriousness. This is where his cinematic achievement lies. The three films may be among the darkest Kaurismäki has made, but as I have demonstrated, they contain strange and comic elements, the function of which is to ensure that the representations never become too sentimental, morbid, frivolous or serious.

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