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Aki Kaurismäki and Finnish strangeness: *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* as a cult film

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Abstract

Leningrad Cowboys Go America (1989) was Aki Kaurismäki's international breakthrough. The film has been less frequently analysed than prototypical Kaurismäki films such as Mies vailla menneisyyttä (The Man Without a Past) (2002). This article approaches Leningrad Cowboys Go America as a cult film and argues that it introduced Kaurismäki's signature style of ironic minimalism to international audiences in an especially ironic form. The film participated in the creation of the strangeness that Finland is eager to market today.

Keywords

Aki Kaurismäki

cult film

Finland

strangeness

ironic minimalism

Before the *The Man Without a Past (Mies vailla menneisyyttä)* (Kaurismäki, 2002) won the Grand Prix at the 2002 Cannes film festival, Finnish filmmaker Aki Kaurismäki was probably best-known among international audiences from his cult film *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (1989) (Schatz 2014). Here, I understand a cult film as an unordinary film that has a dedicated and passionate fan base that is interested in repeated viewing, a cult following that is. At the turn of the 1990s, Kaurismäki 'came to the attention of the festival circuit' (Nesting 2013: 121) and Finns realised he was more popular in mid-Europe than in Finland. *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* 'represented

the filmmaker's major breakthrough on the international stage' (Thrift 2017). The film was shown on nine festivals around the world and sold to five countries. Soon the titular band began to tour in countries in which the film had been a big hit (von Bagh 2012: 96). Later *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* has been shown in special screenings and it has circulated in home cinema formats; it was recently released by the respected Criterion Collection in its Eclipse series.

Even though *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* contains numerous themes (criticism of capitalism) and elements (characters looking for better living conditions) that are typical to Kaurismäki, the film is not particularly representative of his oeuvre. Kaurismäki sees himself as a melodrama filmmaker in the tradition of Douglas Sirk (Brooke 2012: 20) and his prototypical films have been productively discussed in these terms (Nesting 2013: 43). But the melodrama of passion, a category into which Sirk's best-known films belong, is not helpful in the analysis of *Leningrad Cowboys Go America*. The film is a strange genre hybrid that utilizes musical, comedy and road movie genres. It is difficult to think someone could find it touching in the vein of *Varjoja paratiisissa* (*Shadows in Paradise*) (Kaurismäki, 1986) and *Toivon tuolla puolen* (*The Other Side of Hope*) (Kaurismäki, 2017). One reason for this is that the protagonists are exceptionally flat and opaque even for Kaurismäki. They are not approached as individuals, but as a group. The sequel even uses different actors, but no one seems to care. Unlike most of Kaurismäki's films, *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* does not aim to evoke strong feelings of sympathy and empathy in the audience. The monomania of the band members is inherently cartoonish. The film is, nonetheless, made in the filmmaker's signature style of 'ironic minimalism' (Seppälä 2016: 19), but ironic devices are numerous and hyperbolic to the extent that the minimalist film feels absolutely ludicrous. It is no wonder that critics recognised *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* as 'a "cult" road movie of quite irresistible charm' (McNeill 1990). I argue that the film gained its cult following because audiences found it so strange it was good.

Leningrad Cowboys Go America repeats for international audiences what Kaurismäki had done for Finnish audiences in *Calamari Union* (1985). The earlier film is about fifteen men named Frank and one Pekka on an odyssey from Helsinki's Kallio district to Eira. The division is physical and mental, as the poor northern neighbourhood is separated from the rich southern quarters by a long bridge. The humour of the film stems from the fact that in the real world one could make the journey on foot in less than an hour. Only two of the Franks reach the destination, as others die on the way, get lost or get married. *Calamari Union* has a cult following in Finland, especially in the capital, but not so much abroad: its comedy cannot be fully appreciated unless one is familiar with Helsinki. *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* tells the tale of a worthless band and one village idiot that travel from an imaginary fusion of The Soviet Union and Finland to The United States of America from where the journey continues to Mexico. The musicians are much like workers that are being exploited by their capitalist manager. Finland excluded, the three countries and their stereotyped cultural associations were globally known at the time of the film's premiere, which made it easy for international audiences to appreciate the comedy. Kaurismäki replaced the workers' district Kallio with the fusion of The Soviet Union/Finland and the luxurious Eira with The United States of America. In the earlier film, Eira turns out to be a disappointment and thus the two Franks attempt to reach Estonia by a small rowing boat. In *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* Estonia has been replaced with Mexico where the characters drive.

Strangeness as Finland's unofficial national brand

Due to its outlandish story and odd style, *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* participated in the creation of Finnish strangeness. Today, strangeness is Finland's unofficial national brand. While the official brand stresses technology, education, good governance and clean nature, the unofficial brand heightens the more peculiar aspects of the Finnish culture. For years, annual international wife-carrying, swamp football, air guitar and mobile phone throwing championships have been

organised in Finland. World Sauna Championships ended in 2010 due to the death of one finalist and near-death of another. The country won the Eurovision Song Contest 2006 with the over the top monster band Lordi and there are more heavy metal bands per capita in Finland than in any other country in the world. Being aware of this, in 2016 Barack Obama humorously asked president Sauli Niinistö whether the high number of heavy metal bands correlates with Finland ranking high on good governance. The comment went viral. Even Finland's less inviting weather conditions are now part of the brand. In November 2016 delegates to the start-up event Slush were welcomed with a banner saying: 'Nobody in their right mind would ever come to Helsinki in November. Except you, you badass. Welcome.' At that time of the year the country is covered in darkness and the weather is frosty and wet. According to British newspaper *The Telegraph*, this banner 'could be the greatest tourism poster ever made' (Morris 2016). Indeed, abroad Finland is often seen as the odd Nordic country. Kaurismäki has done more than his share in the creation of this brand and not only with *Leningrad Cowboys Go America*. His original film style is celebrated by global art-house audiences and he is known from his subversive attitude and odd behaviour; the filmmaker twisted on the red carpet at the 2002 Cannes film festival, for example.

Kaurismäki and cult film aesthetics

Leningrad Cowboys Go America is one of the stranger films Kaurismäki has made. Stylistically, it has a lot in common with *Calamari Union*, which the filmmaker wanted to be 'as bad and lousy as possible' (von Bagh 2012: 38). Both works can be productively placed into the category of the underground cinema, as they mock bourgeois values and shun the mainstream cinema and its audiences. The roots of Kaurismäki's 'filmmaking lie in the anarchism and nihilism of 1970s punk rock' (Nesting 2016: 308). This explains his interest in underground cinema and its filmmaking techniques, such as not using a screenplay. Kaurismäki's films are niche films everywhere (Nesting 2013: 136–137), but that is especially true of this vein of his cinema. Many cult films

are appreciated for being so bad they are good, *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (Wood, 1959) being a case in point, but this does not help one to understand why *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* became a cult favourite. It does not fail to conform to the artistic mainstream, as bad movies do – it does so on purpose. ‘If we cannot assume that a film intended to achieve certain aims, then we cannot deem it ‘bad’ for failing in those aims, and cannot then recast this badness as “so bad it’s good”’ (MacDowell and Zborowski 2013: 5). Without a doubt, the cult attraction stems from the film’s intended strangeness. *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* is full of unconventional concurrences, deadpan dialogue, unusual representations bordering surrealism, underdeveloped comic sequences and musical performances that vary from lousy to great. Lousy songs excluded, these elements can be found in most of Kaurismäki films, but here they are exceptionally self-sufficient. The story of the film is weak on purpose: it merely sets things in motion and connects individual scenes. To use the words of cult cinema scholars Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton, the mentioned elements are aimed at ‘trigger[ing] enthusiasm, aberrant reactions [and] repeat viewing devotion’ (Mathijs and Sexton 2011, 7). This is precisely how fans have reacted. ‘Try the movie again a year later and it will be even more enjoyable because now you can attend to the hilarious detail which you have missed first time around,’¹ pseudonym mpeters-7 argues on IMDb. ‘Every time I watch it, it just gets funnier!’² Melissa A Hemenway comments her DVD purchase on Amazon.co.uk. Pseudonym jokadmin has an advice to give to those IMDb users who are interested in the film: ‘watch it as many times as you can.’³

Irony, intertextuality and minimalist comedy

‘Somewhere in the tundra,’ an intertitle informs the audience as *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* begins. Accompanied by the sound of a cold wind blowing, the text suggests that the opening is set in Siberia. But contradicting expectations, the film cuts to an extreme long shot of frozen Finnish fields. As woods and numerous buildings can be seen in the background of the shot, audiences can

tell that Kaurismäki has not been even close to Siberian tundra. The location is Ostrobothnia, an exceptionally flat region in Western Finland. In this opening Kaurismäki expresses his ironic attitude by juxtaposing discrepant elements. As so often in his films, it is impossible to say what he actually means, as his irony intensifies contradictions instead of solving them. The audience is paradoxically guided to think the location is The Soviet Union and Finland at the same time. The following shots introduces Leningrad Cowboys, a useless band playing their version of The Cossack Song. ‘The Cowboys’ appearance is a bizarre combination of stereotyped Slavic fur-clad and eccentric, over-accentuated rockabilly style, highlighted by the excessively lengthy shoe-tips and extended quiffs’ (Kääpä 2010: 173). Stereotypical Russian elements are fused with American ones and the setting is a Finnish barn (Image 1). The joke is that Finnish culture is depicted as a mongrel mixture of Russian and American ingredients. It is the strangeness of this fusion that is Finnish, the film suggests. Finns like to see their country as a mixture of East and West, but in *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* the fusion is so exaggerated that the film is best interpreted in terms of postmodern play. According to one take, it ‘mock[s] the national audience’s notions about Finnish culture in circulation outside the country’ (Nesting 2013: 119). But just how outrageous the representation is, has been unclear for many international Kaurismäki fans I have discussed with, as their image of Finland has been largely influenced by Kaurismäki’s films. ‘The Finnish Tourism Bureau has considered taking legal actions against me,’ the filmmaker reveals. ‘Every film I make apparently sets their efforts back a decade’ (Nesting 2013: 128). Finnish politicians have also been worried that Kaurismäki gives the wrong image of Finland (Nesting 2013: 129–130). Indeed, tourists looking for the ironically minimalist world of Kaurismäki’s films would be disappointed with what the country really has to offer.

Leningrad Cowboys Go America is full of witty dialogue and has a plethora of repeatable one-liners. ‘It’s shit,’ a potential buyer informs the band after its performance. ‘How come?’ their manager asks. ‘No commercial potential.’ The blunt conversation is followed by a terrific one-liner:

‘Go to America. They’ll swallow any shit there.’ Here Kaurismäki, who is a fan of old Hollywood films, expresses his dislike for the contemporary Hollywood cinema. Indeed, the band is worthless, but if Americans like the films of Sylvester Stallone, which Kaurismäki loathes (Louvish 2002: 24), they might just as well listen to Leningrad Cowboys. One can also make the interpretation that Kaurismäki mocks the whole western capitalist system, which America represents. When in The United States of America, one of the band members says: ‘I wonder when the violence starts. You always get murdered when you go to New York. I’ve seen it on television.’ The absurd comment suggests that there are now people who – because of Hollywood’s action spectacles – associate the country with violent action. *Leningrad Cowboys Go America*, which depicts side streets, empty lots, abandoned buildings and poor Americans living in poverty, offers a strange vision of the country that radically differs from what typical Hollywood films and tourist brochures have to offer (Mazierska and Rascaroli 2006: 15). Other intertextual references are more specific. As the band is playing its poor rock music in a biker bar the crowd gets restless. ‘I can handle this,’ their long-lost cousin (Nicky Tesco), who has just been found, declares. With him singing, the band unexpectedly plays a magnificent version of *Born to be Wild* to a cheering audience. Here Kaurismäki paraphrases a similar sequence in *The Blues Brothers* (Landis, 1980), which he sees as one of the best films of the 1970s (von Bagh 1984: 9). Homages to contemporary Hollywood films are not to be found, except to Jim Jarmusch who appears in the film; his cinematic sensibility is akin to that of Kaurismäki.

The comic sequences in *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* are underplayed and deadpan. Kaurismäki ‘does not foreground his comic gags but leaves them for the audience to find and at times he hints at humorous situations, but leaves them undeveloped’ (Bacon and Seppälä 2016: 218). One of the running jokes of the minimalist film is that the band has its frozen bass player in a wooden box on the top of its Cadillac. ‘I think we better bury him soon,’ one of the Cowboys remarks, as he is looking towards the off-screen space. ‘How come?’, another asks. ‘Guess.’ From

here the film cuts to the reverse shot that shows the car in a long shot. There is nothing different to be seen in the car or in the wooden box on its roof, but in the far background of the shot there is a group of dogs barking. Here Kaurismäki merely hints at a humorous situation, but leaves it totally underdeveloped at the cost of some spectators probably not getting it. The surreal joke is, of course, that the hungry dogs can smell the rotting meat in the box that blocks the camera's view. According to any real-world standards, this should be an intense moment for the musicians, but they are absolutely straight faced. The ridiculous-looking band has a lot in common with the Keystone Kops, as the group behaves like a flock and one member is not different from another, but its way of reacting to emotional situations is more akin to the calmness of Buster Keaton. The strange film is tightly connected to the history of American cinema.

Conclusions

Leningrad Cowboys Go America introduced Kaurismäki's ironic minimalism to international audiences in an especially ironic form. With its perplexing juxtapositions, blunt dialogue, unusual depictions and peculiar comedy the minimalist film did not only gain a cult following, but also participated in the creation of Finnish strangeness. Indeed, even today international audiences expect Finnish films to be like those of Kaurismäki, much to the dislike of his colleagues.

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¹ http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097728/reviews?ref_=tt_urv

² <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Leningrad-Cowboys-Go-America-DVD/dp/B000E8REIE>

³ http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097728/reviews?ref_=tt_urv