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Doing a lot with little: The camera's minimalist point of view in the films of Aki Kaurismäki

Abstract

Aki Kaurismäki's film style has often been labelled minimalist, but the concept has been used without an exact definition and even fundamental questions relating to his minimalism have gone unanswered. This article contextualizes Kaurismäki's cinematography as well as explores in detail his systematic and significant use of camera techniques that can be productively understood as minimalist. Examples demonstrate how Kaurismäki's camera positions the audience in a specific relationship to the story world and its characters, guiding viewers to experience these from what is termed the camera's minimalist point of view.

Keywords
Aki Kaurismäki
cinematography
engagement
film style
minimalism
point of view

Aki Kaurismäki is noted for making films that are stylistically straightforward and understated yet intense. Instead of exaggeration and embellishment the film-maker relies predominantly on sparse cinematic techniques. 'If a character walks through a gate in a wall, I see no reason for the camera to climb across it', Kaurismäki states (Bagh 2006: 175–76).[1] Throughout his career he has striven to do a lot with little. Kaurismäki's maxim is: '[n]o ornamentation; the basis for all art is reduction, simplicity. You go from an initial idea or narrative that you progressively reduce until it is sufficiently bare enough to be true. Then, and only then, are you finished' (Cardullo 2006: 8). In an age of hyperbole this orientation has not gone unnoticed by critics. 'In all of Kaurismäki's work', Peter Schepelern observes, 'there is hardly a scene with complex scenery or expensive production values, and he seems to have chosen this approach not only to save money but also because it is artistically fruitful' (2010: 99). It is a common perception among critics that Kaurismäki is a minimalist. For example, Pietari Kääpä argues that Kaurismäki has 'developed a minimalist aesthetic style' (Kääpä 2010: 255). Roger Connah refers to Kaurismäki's 'deliberate minimalism' (Connah 1991: 397) and Andrew Nestingen to the film-maker's 'distinct style of minimalist direction' (Nestingen 2013: 14). Tytti Soila, on the other hand, argues that the films are instances of inverted excess because they present 'a *mise-en-scène* which is highly stylised, archaic and minimalist' (2003: 10). In Schepelern's opinion Kaurismäki's 'minimalism finds an echo in the work of American independent film-makers like Jim Jarmusch, Kevin Smith and Hal Hartley'

(Schepelern 2010: 98). As far as Kaurismäki's minimalism is concerned, these arguments and observations are just the tip of the iceberg.

Since Connah's 1991 book *KK: A Couple of Finns and Some Donald Ducks*, critics writing about Kaurismäki in English and Finnish have approached his films mainly from cultural perspectives. Various questions about how the films participate in contemporary debates about Finnish society, identity and culture have been asked and appropriately answered (Koivunen 2006; Kääpä 2010; Kivimäki 2012; Nestingen 2013). Others have discussed the films in the context of European cinema (Elsaesser 2010; Rascaroli 2013). Furthermore, there is research about Kaurismäki's career as a film-maker (Toiviainen 2002). What I see as a major gap in Kaurismäki research is a cognitive-formalist account of his films and the ways in which they engage the audience. This lacuna has major consequences, because without a proper understanding of style one does not understand '[w]hat kind of product… the film distributor who purchases the rights to distribute Kaurismäki's cinema [is] buying' and how his work 'attracts an audience' (Nestingen 2013: 134, 132). Prior to my recent article (Seppälä 2015), only one article by Henry Bacon systematically discussed Kaurismäki's style. Bacon argues that the films are characterized by a distinctive 'poetics of displacement' characterized by an impassive acting style, laconic and often absurd dialogue, long silences, caricature-like characters, minimalist sets, restrained use of colour, static camera, economical narration and nostalgic music. These elements create a sense of day-to-day reality that differs from everyday reality as one knows it (Bacon 2003). As I pointed out previously, however, 'the poetics of displacement, if understood strictly in terms of systematic and significant use of cinematic techniques, is only one aspect of Kaurismäki's style, an aspect that is operative within a wider stylistic framework of his that is yet to be explored and understood' (Seppälä 2015: 36). With the present article on Kaurismäki's minimalism I begin my exploration of this framework.

Although the concept of minimalism has frequently been used in academic discussions of Kaurismäki's cinema, very little has actually been written about the topic. It seems to be a recurrent assumption that something so obvious needs no further definition, and consequently fundamental questions have gone unanswered. For example, what are the salient minimalist techniques that Kaurismäki uses and how do they elicit thoughts and feelings? Focusing on cinematography, a major aspect of Kaurismäki's film style (Seppälä 2015: 20–21), I will first contextualize his systematic and significant use of camera techniques in his feature-length fictional films to show in what sense his style can be understood as minimalist, where the techniques derive from, and why he relies on them. Second, I will examine the aesthetic functions of those cinematographic techniques that can productively be understood as minimalist. These include, but are not limited to, long static takes, tracking shots forward, uses of off-screen space, close views of hands, and notable ellipses, all of which the competent viewer can recognize and enjoy as Kaurismäki's stylistic signatures. All of these elements do not necessarily appear in all of his films, but they are frequent enough to make them noticeable. Though the style of Kaurismäki's cinema is largely classical, the ways in which these techniques are used is more akin to the style-centred mode of film practice that David Bordwell (1979) calls art cinema. My overall goal is to demonstrate how Kaurismäki's camera positions spectators in a specific relationship to the story world and its characters, guiding them to experience these from what I term the camera's minimalist point of view. While my analysis

concerns the minimalist aspects of Kaurismäki's films, this is not to suggest that features like irony are not important; on the contrary. I will return to this idea at the end of the article.

As Ed S. Tan puts it, '[f]ilms are designed to produce a particular effect and, as artefacts, they display both a functional design and a certain consistency' ([1996] 2011: 3). Cinematography is a vital part of such design because the world of a film opens up to the audience through a camera, which represents it in a certain way and from a certain spatial position. Thus the camera has a point of view, not a mere view. As Gregory Currie argues, 'to have a point of view is to have certain capacities or resources for knowing about, telling of, and generally responding to the world' (2010: 125). The concept of point of view is closely related to questions of what the audience sees and how viewers comprehend when they watch fictional films (Wilson [1986] 1992: 207). The camera's point of view is worthy of analysis because it directs the audience towards certain cognitive, evaluative and emotional responses to the story. Ultimately, '[w]hat the characters are like counts for less in a work of fiction than the way they are presented, the way we come to know them' (Perez [1998] 2000: 368). For example, the camera can observe characters from close or far and it can either respect their privacy or intrude on their intimacy. These matters have a significant impact on the audience's experience of any fictional film.

Modernist minimalism and the challenges of small nation film-making

In art history the concept of minimalism refers to the American modernist art movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, best represented by artists like Tony Smith, Robert Morris and Donald Judd, who all understood minimalism as 'an aesthetic of refusal, of reduction' (Meyer 2001: 80). Their works did not contain any traces of emotion or intuitive decision-making, nor allude to anything beyond their physical presence or existence in the real world (Meyer 2000: 15). When art historians use the concept of minimalism in relation to contemporary artworks, they connect them to this movement. No direct connection has been established between Kaurismäki and the minimalists. Some similarities nonetheless exist. At times the movement has been discussed in terms of 'minimal formal effect and insufficient labour', which is 'the cliché of the minimal' (Meyer 2001: 90); in reviews and non-academic discussions, similar criticism has been directed at Kaurismäki.

Film scholar András Bálint Kovács understands modernism as a historical movement in cinema that began in the 1950s and had faded by the late 1970s (2007). Minimalism was one of the many modernist styles that film-makers such as Robert Bresson, Yasujiro Ozu and Michelangelo Antonioni adapted. Kovács defines minimalism as 'a systematic reduction of expressive elements in a given form' (2007: 140). Although Kaurismäki directed his first feature length fictional film in 1983, after the movement's wane, Kovács sees him as one of the auteurs who continue to work according to the premises of modernist minimalism (Kovács 2007: 140–41). Considering how well Kovács' definition captures the essence of Kaurismäki's maxim, his discussion of the concept should prove productive in the analysis of his *oeuvre*.

Kaurismäki can be understood as a representative of what Mette Hjort and Duncan J. Petrie call small nation cinemas, where film-makers face challenges that include the limited reach of small

nation languages, harsh competition with Hollywood films and small budgets (Hjort and Petrie 2007). Whereas Hjort and Petrie emphasize factors related to production, Nestingen adds that 'a crucial dimension of small-nation cinema is also distribution and exhibition' (Nestingen 2013: 131). Indeed, the notion of 'national' becomes blurred. Kaurismäki's films no longer depend on Finnish funding and are circulated through the international film festival system because their primary audience is outside Finland (Nestingen 2013: 132, 135, 137). For Kaurismäki, minimalism was originally a way of confronting the challenges of small nation film-making. 'In this country the conditions for film-making were so primitive that reduction was the only possibility' (Fross 2005), Kaurismäki says, referring to his early years as a film-maker when the basics of his style evolved. He now sees minimalism as a way of doing a lot with little. 'If the film is tuned on a minimalist level', Kaurismäki exemplifies, 'even the sound of a cough will be dramatic' (Cardullo 2006: 8). The argument stands up to scrutiny because in the context of a sparse style a simple device and variation of an intrinsic norm can take on notable perceptual power (Bordwell 1997/1985: 307–08). Connah observes that Kaurismäki 'extracts maximum melodrama from an event as ordinary and as important as getting dirt from under a nail' (Connah 1991: 162). Kaurismäki's cinema is paradoxically minimalist yet melodramatic. Nestingen even mentions that the film-maker can be seen as a Douglas Sirk in reverse (2010: 49). It is crucial to note that Kaurismäki's minimalism is not ascribed to financial constraints alone: he finds the style artistically productive and likes to work on small budgets that grant him the artistic freedom he needs. He could now make films with larger budgets, but does not want to: 'If you can make a film for £70,000 why use more?' Kaurismäki asks. 'Send the money to some poor people and don't use it for the film – you will make a better film with less money' (Martin 1990).

As Jochen Werner forcefully argues, Kaurismäki 'has developed a form of stylistic exhibition that allows him to recall the achievements of cinema and to integrate the diction of the masters of the medium into the textures of his own films' (Werner 2004: 64). To be more precise, by relying on minimalism Kaurismäki has stylistically connected his *oeuvre* to the cinematic masterworks of Bresson, Antonioni and Ozu, who worked according to similar principles. This has not only differentiated Kaurismäki's films from contemporary mainstream cinema – they are often seen as old-fashioned in a good sense – but also fostered a demand for them among film history-conscious art house audiences around the world. There is relatively little 'Finnish' in the style of these films. Kaurismäki draws influences from world film, literature and art and, to use the concepts of Göran Hermerén, paraphrases these into new peculiar combinations (Hermerén 1975: 68), as a result of which his cinema is inherently transnational. By this I mean that even on the level of style his films are systematically connected to techniques, trends and developments that in various ways transcend national limits (Kääpä and Seppälä 2012: 30).

With regard to Kaurismäki's cinematographic minimalism, the single most important influence has been Bresson. Kaurismäki himself affirms this: 'Bresson has influenced me directly and permanently' (Puukko 2000). The three main aspects of Bresson's minimalist style – extensive use of off-screen space, elliptical narration and a radically dispassionate acting style (Kovács 2007: 141) – are salient characteristics of Kaurismäki's style as well. Although a radically dispassionate acting style is not a cinematographic technique, it is still important here, since it has encouraged Kaurismäki to find cinematographic techniques to circumvent the inexpressiveness of his actors,

primarily tracking shots forward and close-ups,[2] which are more common in his films than critics have realized (Seppälä 2015: 27, 33). In addition to these techniques that Kaurismäki repeatedly uses, I explore his use of static long takes that contain little, if any, action.[3]

Downhearted characters in long takes

In the contemporary media environment Kaurismäki's films are often experienced as quiet and sluggish; thus they can be placed in the category of slow cinema. The average shot length of his films is 12.4 seconds, including credits. The median is 10.9 seconds. These figures are high in comparison to contemporary mainstream films, but not even near the extremes of slow cinema. (Seppälä 2015: 24–26) But, as Song Hwee Lim argues, 'long takes alone do not a slow cinema make' [*sic*] (2014: 79). Both the form and the content of the shot must be taken into account, not to mention the context in which it occurs. In contemporary mainstream cinema long takes are frequently sequence shots that incorporate 'a sophisticated set of dynamic camera moves and framings […] very often encompassing action from several scenes that would otherwise be covered with a number of separate shots' (Mercado 2011: 173). Kaurismäki's longest takes differ from this in that they are often static and depict characters who do not actually do anything. Because the camera is habitually in a position that a human observer might take, it seems to keep these characters company, though its presence is unfelt. Even in classical films the narration 'places a spectator within or on the edge of the narrative space' (Thompson [1985] 2002: 158). What is unusual about Kaurismäki's lengthy, static takes is that although the camera seems to be with the characters, there is always a distance – both epistemic and spatio-temporal – between them and the camera. Thus the audience can paradoxically feel that it is with the characters and not with them at the same time.

There is a sequence in *Tulitikkutehtaan tyttö/The Match Factory Girl* (Kaurismäki, 1989b) where the camera shows a vacant table in an empty bar before the protagonist Iris enters the shot and sits down with her small beer (Image 1). It is as if the camera waited for her, knowing she would come, and this makes its presence very noticeable. As Iris sits down, the camera tilts slightly with her movement, but the take is otherwise static (Image 2). The shot is deprived of all drama: Iris merely sips her beer and glances through a magazine that happened to be on the table. The take is one minute long. It can feel even longer, because nothing narratively important takes place. Olli Manninen has argued sarcastically that 'Kaurismäki has a phenomenal skill to make a minute feel longer than sixty seconds' (1994). As Perez observes, time in a shot like this is 'not a time of what next but a time of what now' ([1998] 2000: 370). Alignment, to use the concepts introduced by Murray Smith, shows the audience what the character does, but this does not necessarily communicate a subjective access needed for allegiance and moral evaluation of the character (2004). It is difficult to say with any certainty what Iris desires, believes, thinks or feels in this sequence. Long takes can offer the audience a 'sustained access to characters that are difficult to know' (Jaffe 2014: 164) because such shots provide time to interpret them, which can decrease the epistemic distance. The audience either thinks about the opaque character and her situation or feels bored, as there are few other options.

Iris keeps her coat on and sits with her shoulders hunched, which does not make her look particularly appealing. 'Despite her youth, Iris's body seems to be worn down' (Kivimäki 2012: 80–81). This implies that she has been through a lot and does not attract romantic interest. The magazine Iris skims through can be understood as a substitute for someone to talk and listen to. In other words, everything in the shot works to convey a sense of her intense loneliness. As uneventful as the take is, it has an important function in the film because it implies that for Iris this is as cheerful as her life is going to be; it is weekend afternoon and she is now enjoying her time off from work. The more the audience thinks about Iris and her situation, the more likely it will feel sympathy for her because a common moral sensibility dictates that no one should be this isolated.

Here I rely on an analytical distinction between sympathy and empathy. Sympathy is feeling for a character whereas empathy is sharing feelings with a character. Sympathy, Howard Sklar argues, is a moral emotion because it involves an understanding of suffering as something negative, the judgement that the suffering of another is unfair, negative feelings on behalf of the sufferer and a desire to help (2013: 35). The important point that Sklar emphasizes is that 'we do not have to *understand* a character to sympathize' (2013: 53, original emphasis). Sympathetic allegiance as described by Sklar is the dominant form of character engagement that Kaurismäki's film style – not merely long takes, but other techniques as well – and narration aim to evoke. It has an important structural similarity to a form of humour that is always present in his films. Much like sympathy, laughter often places the audience in an asymmetric relationship to the characters, looking down on them from a superior position. 'Humour points out failures, as Aristotle told us; we use it to point out each others' failures, and perhaps the competitive nature of humans that has always existed for other reasons co-opted humour for this purpose' (Hurley et al. 2011: 43). This structure that guides the audience to look at the characters and their situations as if from the outside connects the comedic to the sympathetic. As Anu Silfverberg writes in her review of *The Match Factory Girl*: 'small details of the sparse narration eventually make one laugh, even though there is every reason to cry: the girl's cheap coat is wrongly buttoned' (2002). As the comment exemplifies, the viewer can paradoxically laugh at the character and simultaneously feel like crying on her behalf.

Revealing subjectivity with tracking shots forward

Kaurismäki's films are widely known for their deadpan quality of acting. Such acting works well because his 'characters tend to lead dead-end existences that have naturally deadened their spirits, and they are not offered very many emotional outlets or stimulants' (Cardullo 2015: 159). Restrained acting violates the principle of expressivity, which means 'a relation of directness between intentional states and their physical expression' (Smith 2004: 167). Because faces are areas of high information, conventional film acting relies heavily on widely recognized facial expressions (Tan [2005] 2007). Actually, interpreting the facial changes of characters is at the heart of fictional films and many other narrative arts (Zunshine 2012). Empathy, Sklar argues, is a '"chameleon emotion" in the sense that, when we experience it, we take on the emotional experience of another as our own' (2013: 24). The so-called facial feedback hypothesis states that the audience mimics characters' facial expressions and thus catches their emotions in a weaker form (Plantinga 2009: 125). Kaurismäki's characters rarely evoke empathy by triggering such strong embodied

simulations because their facial expressions are so restrained and minimal. There simply is not much for the audience to see and mimic. According to the theory of mind, the audience generates and attributes thoughts to characters on the basis of available information, especially communicative body language; social and psychological familiarity plays a key role. In mainstream films, just as in real life, facial expressions are salient cues that help the audience to perform 'genuine feats of mind-reading' (McNeill 1998: 164), that is, to understand what characters think and feel, something a camera cannot show directly. Since the deadpan quality of acting makes character appraisal difficult, Kaurismäki sometimes employs alternative techniques to circumvent the issue. A more noteworthy solution to this problem than the long take is a short tracking shot towards a character or the object of his or her gaze. Bresson uses such shots (Browne: 2011: 283) and it seems likely that Kaurismäki adopted the technique from him. Such shots are also used, however, in contemporary mainstream films, where they often call attention to moments when a character 'makes a meaningful discovery or has to make an important decision' (Mercado 2011: 143).

When Kaurismäki's camera tracks towards his characters, it is as if it tries to understand them. An illuminating example is found in *Rikos ja rangaistus/Crime and Punishment* (Kaurismäki, 1983). In this sequence Antti Rahikainen, a murderer, is at the Helsinki Police Department, where Inspector Pennanen informs him: 'We are questioning you for the murder of Kari Honkanen, a businessman'. The audience is first shown Pennanen from Rahikainen's point of view, but when the suspect hears the name Honkanen, the film cuts to a medium shot of him. The camera tracks towards Rahikainen's face until he is seen in a close-up (Images 3 and 4). This small track is noticeable because it is unexpected: it breaks the conventional shot/reverse-shot pattern that the sequence has followed. The track clearly is meant to convey information about the character when he hears the name of the man he has murdered. However, Rahikainen's facial expressions and body language reveal little about his emotions and intentions since he is trying to hide them, a not uncommon pattern among Kaurismäki's protagonists.[4] Because this is a point-of-view shot, it also represents the inspector's keenness to assess his suspect's reaction. It is nonetheless probable that the audience, which has been guided to ask whether Rahikainen can keep his secret, primarily experiences the shot as revealing something about him. Understood this way, the camera movement suggests an unexpected shift inside Rahikainen; perhaps hearing the name generates fear of getting caught. Thus the audience can imagine that the character is nervous. Like James Zborowski in his analysis of classical Hollywood films (2008: 72), I am drawn to an analogy with the literary device of free indirect style. The camera movement expresses Rahikainen's emotional experience and offers the audience a similar one. In other words, the short tracking shot aims to evoke empathy, which need not be incompatible with sympathy. Actually, it is probable that most audience responses to characters and their situations are simultaneous mixtures of empathy and sympathy (Plantinga 2009: 99).

In Kaurismäki's cinema, short point-of-view tracking shots forward are occasionally used to reveal what a character thinks about something he or she is observing. A sequence in *Le Havre* (Kaurismäki, 2011) illustrates this technique. In this film Marcel Marx, an artist-turned-bootblack, is hiding Idrissa, an illegal immigrant, in his home. As one police officer keeps Marcel pinned to the wall, others search the premises. This creates excitement because the audience has been guided

to worry whether Idrissa will be found and sent back to Gabon. Contrary to what one might expect, Marx calmly takes a drag on his cigarette while the camera tracks towards him until he is seen in a medium close-up. Here too the camera movement indicates that something moves inside the character, but not unexpectedly as in the shot analysed above. Marx clearly knows something about the situation that the audience does not know and is thus untroubled. The following tracking shot towards an open window in the adjoining room suggests what he has on his mind. As the camera moves towards the window it cants to the right and in so doing repeats Idrissa's movements as he escaped through it (Images 5 and 6), an event Marx either remembers seeing or simply presumes has happened. In short, the camera offers the audience a mental point-of-view shot that expresses Marx's understanding of Idrissa's escape from the house.

Extensive use of off-screen space in closed films

'If there is development in the society and economy somewhere, it does not touch these people' (Bacon 2003: 94), Bacon argues in his analysis of *Kauas pilvet karkaavat/Drifting Clouds* (Kaurismäki, 1996). The argument is spot on, because Kaurismäki's films rarely contain notable references to anything outside the sphere of his protagonists. Leo Braudy reasons that depending on how they present the visible world, films can be divided into two major ideal types that he labels 'closed' and 'open' ([1976] 2002: 46). The strength of these concepts lies in how they contrast with one another.

> In a closed film the world of the film is the only thing that exists; everything within it has its place in the plot of the film – every object, every character, every gesture, every action. In an open film the world of the film is a momentary frame around an ongoing reality.[5]

To put it differently, the world of a closed film is artificial in the sense that it seems to exist only in the frame, whereas the world of an open film seems to exist independently of the frame. (In both cases worlds and characters are open to interpretation, of course.) Kaurismäki, who in his own words strives to 'take away everything unessential' (Rinne 1996), makes closed films. This has a major impact on how they are experienced. Kivimäki, for example, feels that 'in his world there are no nannies, nurses, office clerks or call centre workers' (2012: 78). As the comment exemplifies, because of the closed nature of the films the audience rarely gets a sense that 'something more awaits at the edge of the frame' or that 'the camera races to catch up with action that always seems to be elsewhere', as Dudley Andrew puts it in his discussion of classic French film (1995: 198, 302). Yet extensive use of off-screen space is a major trait of Kaurismäki's style.

Like Bresson, Kaurismäki often lets his characters walk out of the frame as the camera lingers on the empty space for a moment. This technique has been termed 'affirmation of empty space' (Sitney 2011: 121). In Kaurismäki's films it often evokes a sense that the camera, which is deeply enmeshed with the characters, cannot or will not follow them for some reason and is therefore left alone. I thus disagree with Cardullo who argues that Kaurismäki's *temps morts* convey a sense of 'the sublime indifference of the physical world to the problems and needs of his characters'

(Cardullo 2015: 160). In his affirmations of empty space the physical world may be indifferent, but the camera is not.

That Kaurismäki's camera does not follow the characters can sometimes seem to convey discretion or respect. A revealing example is found in *I Hired a Contract Killer* (Kaurismäki, 1990). When Henri and Margaret, newly in love, embrace in a cheap hotel and fall onto a bed, the camera pans to the right following their movement, but very noticeably does not tilt down to show them in bed (Images 7 and 8), which conventions of contemporary mainstream cinema would dictate. As the couple disappears from the frame, viewers look at a small lamp on the wall, a narratively insignificant detail, giving them time to think about the events taking place off-screen. Because everything in this sequence can be slotted into the schema of a new couple making love in a hotel room, it is easy to perceive the camera as acting like a considerate human observer who avoids intruding on an intimate moment. Here, as so often in Kaurismäki's films, there is nothing mysterious or enigmatic in the use of off-screen space – widely shared schemas guide the audience to understand what happens there. The narratively unmotivated decision not to tilt the camera is meant to elicit a sense that this moment does not belong to the audience: it can thus be experienced as an ironic or even parodic variation of classical Hollywood's means of averting censorship.[6] The 'old-fashioned' sequence is ironic because it implicitly invites comparison to the explicit sex sequences in many contemporary films.

The opening sequence in *Le Havre* is a notable borderline case, if not an ironic exception. In it two bootblacks, Marcel and Chang, stand in a railway station waiting for customers when a well-dressed thug handcuffed to a briefcase wants his shoes polished. While Marcel works on the shoes, the customer notices two suspicious-looking men watching him.[7] The thug leaves and the camera then depicts Marcel and Chang rather than showing what happens in front of their eyes (Image 9). Screeching tires, a screaming woman and three gunshots can be heard from the off-screen space. In Bresson's films, sound systematically represents off-screen action, thus promoting audience comprehension (Hanlon 1986: 140). This is frequently the case in Kaurismäki's cinema as well, but here the function of the soundtrack is rather to arouse confusion. The audience is likely to speculate, but it is difficult to say with any certainty exactly what happens in the off-screen space. 'Poor devil', Chang says. 'Luckily he had time to pay', Marcel adds, implying that the thug is dead. Kaurismäki refuses to offer confirmation through a reverse angle shot, which the audience probably expects. 'Better go, they'll blame me anyway', Marcel says, preparing to move on. The irony of the sequence is that whatever happened in the off-screen space is not narratively salient. The point is that in *Le Havre* underprivileged people are likely to be blamed for things they absolutely have no part in. The contents of the briefcase, the identity of the thug, and the conflict that presumably leads to his death do not directly affect the lives the protagonists lead, so Kaurismäki leaves them unexplored.

Expressive close views of hands

One can learn a lot about Kaurismäki's characters by looking at their hands and what they do with them. Even in everyday life hands convey a lot of information because 'they are the source of

gestures as well as potential threats' (Bordwell 2008). People work with their hands and express their emotions with them; hands can be loving, aggressive or playful. Like facial expressions, body gestures are often 'specifically produced to be understood as part of a person's overall communicative intentions and must be recognised as such for successful interpersonal interactions to occur' (Gibbs 1999: 84). In Kaurismäki's cinema hands are a recurrent motif. They are frequently depicted in extreme close-ups, close-ups and medium close-ups to the extent that they appear at times more expressive than faces. Kaurismäki has probably adapted this technique from Bresson. As Carl-Johan Malmberg points out, more than any other director Bresson shows characters doing something with their hands (1989: 119). When he cuts to hands he guides the audience to think about off-screen space – the space where characters' faces are. However, in a Bresson film '[a] close shot may obscure our sense of where we are in that shot' (Hanlon 1986: 114), but this is rare in Kaurismäki's films, where close views of hands are typically metonymic cues to be interpreted. By showing a hand instead of an inexpressive face, the camera guides the audience to interpret what the character in question thinks and feels.

A good example of Kaurismäki's tactic of conveying emotions by showing close views of hands is found in *Varjoja paratiisissa/Shadows in Paradise* (1986). Nikander and Ilona, a new and dysfunctional couple, are listening to a radio on a beach (Image 10). As they sit staring at the sea, bashful Nikander leans over to kiss Ilona and they lie down in the sand. Instead of showing the kiss, which an audience familiar with the conventions of melodrama would expect, Kaurismäki cuts to an extreme close-up of Ilona's left hand (Image 11). Here, as in *I Hired a Contract Killer*, the camera seems reserved, even bashful. Kaurismäki holds the shot for seven seconds. Ilona's hand, the back of which is against the sand, opens a little, implying that she submits to the kiss. If Nikander is strongly attracted to her, Ilona is not as interested in him: the cigarette she was smoking never falls from her fingers. Looking at the hand, the audience understands that Ilona does not mind Nikander kissing her – after all, she stops smoking – but she is not terribly excited, since her hand does not embrace him. As romantic as the sequence is, this close view of Ilona's hand tells the audience a lot about her mixed feelings for Nikander. In typical melodramas 'close-up shots of the character's reactions help the viewer to understand the significance of a particular event for the character' (Tan [1996] 2011: 183). This is also true of Kaurismäki's films, but because his characters do not necessarily express much with their faces, the camera often focuses on their emotionally communicative hands.

A close view of a hand has a very different function in the sequence in which Marcel Marx is asked to pay his three months' rent in *La vie de bohème/The Bohemian Life* (Kaurismäki, 1991). This sequence serves as a reminder that a shot's significance always depends on its context. A thug accompanies Marcel's landlord as he tries to collect what is owed. When Marcel says that he does not have the money with him, the audience is shown a close-up of the thug's right hand. His fingers form a big fist, making the sound of knuckles cracking. This communicates to Marcel that he is now threatened with a severe beating. Thus the shot does not tell as much about the feelings of the thug, who is only doing his job, as it indicates what is about to happen to Marcel if he does not pay. The shot is aimed to cause an empathetic reaction in the audience for Marcel.

Showing the most substantial part of the action

According to Kovács, Bresson tends to show 'only the most substantial part of the action' (2007: 144). This is something that Kaurismäki, who says he 'hates television's coffee cup realism where one has to show everything' (Huttunen 1982), holds in high esteem. Bacon observes that Kaurismäki's narration is frequently elliptical: '[S]hots have often been used to capture only an expressive gesture, and a whole scene can be only one take long. Complex processes have often been encapsulated in one concrete thing, which is allowed to represent the whole' (Bacon 2003: 91).

Kaurismäki, whose films are short in comparison to contemporary mainstream films,[8] keeps up the pace with elliptical narration and in so doing restricts length. It is typical for him to leave large segments of his stories untold, especially moments of action, spectacle and high emotional intensity. A striking example is found in *Le Havre*. 'I need names. Who are your parents? Where do you come from? Start from the beginning', Marcel Marx says to Idrissa, whom he has decided to help flee to London. Before Idrissa has a chance to say a word, Kaurismäki cuts away. He is clearly not interested in psychological or political explanations, and consequently the backgrounds of his characters are never explored in detail. It is enough that the audience knows that Marcel learns about Idrissa's background in order to help him. In the hands of a mainstream film-maker Idrssa's story would probably be an emotional highpoint. As if to support this argument, Kaurismäki says that *Crime and Punishment* contained a scene where Rahikainen touched the shoulder of a woman he was romantically interested in, but it 'felt so hopelessly erotic and warm that I cut it away' (Bagh 1984: 9).

Unlike those of Bresson (Hanlon 1986: 114), Kaurismäki's ellipses are not confusing because they guide the audience to rely on widely shared schemas. A good example of this is the sequence in *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (Kaurismäki, 1989a) where Ivan, one of the cowboys, has been sent to buy food for his hungry fellow musicians. When Ivan returns, he is all smiles and wears new colourful clothes. 'Where is the food, Ivan?' one of the musicians asks. Realizing that something bad is about to happen to him, Ivan stops smiling and gulps in a medium close-up. One function of this shot is to cause a mirroring reaction in the audience, which easily understand that Ivan spent the money on clothes without caring about the hunger of his companions. Now other cowboys move towards Ivan. 'They beat him badly', an intertitle informs us; the actual beating is not shown. In the following shot Ivan is bruised all over. This analysis further demonstrates Kaurismäki's tendency to omit certain events that in the hands of a mainstream film-maker would be highpoints. However, the sequence is unusual even for Kaurismäki in that it uses an intertitle as a substitute for action.

In Kaurismäki's cinema long and complex processes are occasionally represented with simple and short shots that can have a comic effect on the audience. A good example is the sequence in *Ariel* (Kaurismäki, 1988) where Taisto Kasurinen has taken Irmeli Pihlaja, whom he has only just met, out for supper. The supper is captured in two short takes. The audience is first shown a machine from which the characters order vegetable soup (Image 12). In the second shot someone dressed in a white coat hands them the order through a hatch (Image 13). The sequence evokes the schema of the conventional date. The second shot would be enough to specify that the supper takes place in a

cheap canteen, but the machine adds a touch of comedy to the sequence. ‘The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life’ (Bergson 1911: 87). Because the machine forces the characters to act in a mechanical manner, it implies that everything on this date follows a fixed pattern, and that makes the sequence comic.

The camera’s minimalist point of view

Kaurismäki’s systematic reduction of expressive elements is evident in the sparse cinematography of his films; he never seems to be trying to impress the audience – on the contrary. It is productive to understand his camera’s point of view as minimalist because expressive elements are systematically reduced. The crucial aspect of this point of view is that it imposes limits on the audience’s access to the story world and its characters’ thoughts and feelings. Since salient story elements frequently take place off-screen or simply beyond the camera’s reach, the audience has to interpret them from the elements that the film-maker offers. As Nestingen has put it, ‘by showing very little, and including little dialogue, one empowers the spectator to read the film’s omissions and silences’ (2013: 121). Thus the camera’s minimalist point of view sets the mood for the audience and challenges it to experience the represented events in an unfamiliar way. As I have shown, the camera techniques that Kaurismäki relies on aim to elicit various audience responses in a myriad of combinations, especially understanding, sympathy and empathy. Contrary to the cliché of the minimal, Kaurismäki’s use of these camera techniques is not only thoughtful, but can evoke complex meanings and emotions in the audience.

Although a camera is not human, one often experiences some aspect of it in relation to a human trait (Branigan 2006: 15–16). Connah, for example, feels that Kaurismäki’s camera has ‘a soul and heart’ (Connah 1991: 262). According to Branigan, it can be productive to talk about cameras ‘not in terms of sense perception alone but as being connected to our “knowledge” of the world’ for the reason that ‘such descriptions might project beyond sense perception towards other areas of experience summoned through memory and felt similarities’. My anthropomorphic concept of the camera’s character refers to the audience’s experience of a camera as a human-like entity that has a personality. Kaurismäki’s characters are easy to understand on a surface level because the camera is not a total outsider, but what the characters ultimately think and feel is often beyond the camera’s reach, as it does not have an insider’s position, as much as it would like to have one. Metaphorically speaking, the camera’s point of view is that 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. This means that the camera offers the audience a point of view that is not that different from that of Kaurismäki’s characters because, to some extent, it imitates them.

The minimalist point of view is not the only perspective that Kaurismäki’s camera offers. On the contrary, one can distinguish at least two major ways of seeing. One is minimalist, as I have argued, and the other is ironic, which I have yet to explore. My hypothesis is that these two points of view are partly overlapping and partly competing with each other. As a result the camera offers the

audience a double perspective that enables it to see the story world and its characters as melancholic and funny at the same time. If this assessment is correct, Kaurismäki's film style can be defined as ironic minimalism. While the camera's minimalist point of view largely stems from Bresson's cinema, I expect the ironic point of view to be closely related to Luis Buñuel's surrealism and various forms of cinematic comedy. A proper exploration of these irony-related issues is a topic I aim to address in a forthcoming article.

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Notes

[1] All translations from Finnish to English are the author's.

[2] Expressive *mise-en-scène* and music also play a role, but these issues lie outside the scope of this article.

[3] Silent cinema, French poetic realist films and Hollywood B films have significantly impacted on Kaurismäki's minimalism as well, but as these have influenced his *mise-en-scène* rather than his cinematography, I leave them unexplored in this article.

[4] 'You been crying?' Marcel Marx asks Idrissa whom he is trying to help. 'No', Idrissa replies. 'Good. It won't help', Marx states and in so doing indicates that certain emotions are better not expressed. As Jochen Werner clear-sightedly argues, 'there is hardly a moment in one of […] Kaurismäki's films in which the characters allow themselves to show a sign of true and inner emotion' (2004: 63).

[5] According to Leo Braudy's thinking, the films of Georges Méliès and Fritz Lang are closed whereas those of the Lumière brothers and Jean Renoir are open, for example.

[6] Kaurismäki says that he is bored with sex scenes in contemporary cinema and prefers the old way of expressing things symbolically, as in the films of Luis Buñuel, Jean Renoir and Alfred Hitchcock (Lindqvist 1996).

[7] It is possible that the men are detectives. Much like those of Jean-Pierre Melville, Kaurismäki's professional criminals and detectives tend to look alike.

[8] Kaurismäki's longest feature-length fictional film, *The Bohemian Life*, runs 98 minutes and 35 seconds and the shortest, *The Match Factory Girl*, 69 minutes.