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feature article

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Hitting bottom: Aki Kaurismäki and the abject subject

ABSTRACT

This article uses a number of recent European films to forward arguments concerning European transnational cinema as well as post-national societies. Particular focus is placed on Aki Kaurismäki's film The Man without a Past (2002), which is seen as a serious, comic and subversive contribution to the debate about the nature of European governmentality in times when there is little room for solidarity or kinship loyalty. The Man without a Past is looked at across three possible intersecting frames of reference, tentatively referred to as social romanticism, a social parable of our time, and the ability to look at a given situation from outside without stepping outside. Together these frames allow an understanding of Kaurismäki's analysis of contemporary society and his construction of a hero, who combines great humanity and humility and makes his otherness the very basis of a new kind of community.

KEYWORDS

Aki Kaurismäki
*Mies vailla
 menneisyyttä/The
 Man without a Past*
double occupancy
European cinema
transnational cinema
community

'European cinema' needs to be thought of within a transnational perspective today. This transnational perspective is made necessary by three factors. First – by the increasing reality of cross-border financing and co-productions within the European Union as the condition for any film-making (after the demise

of virtually every nationally based film industry): a European film combines, on average, funds from four to six, and in some cases up to twenty different production companies, if we include television pre-sales. Second – national cinemas become transnational through the importance of film festivals and, in particular, the international film festival circuit, as the only viable network of circulation and distribution of European films. Festivals also act as the chief marketplace where reputations are established and where cultural capital is accumulated both for individual films and for ‘new waves’ or new national cinemas: think of ‘new Iranian cinema’ about a decade ago, or ‘the new Berlin School’ in the past three to five years. Third – and an outcome of the second, the festival circuit – European cinema (and its different national cinemas) is now best seen as part of ‘world cinema’ rather than as the counterweight, both morally and aesthetically, to Hollywood, as used to be the case roughly from the 1940s to the 1980s, during the time of neo-realism, of the great European auteurs (Antonioni, Bergman, Bresson, Buñuel, Fellini, Visconti), the French *nouvelle vague* and maybe the ‘New German Cinema’.

This apparent ‘demotion’ of European cinema to world cinema status (when compared, say, to the rise of Asian cinema as a commercial rival of Hollywood, as well as artistic rival to Europe) might be regretted or lamented, but it is a fact. And as such, it also, I argue, represents an opportunity to rethink what is or has been specific about Europe not just in matters of cinema: maybe even leading to a new ‘political’ understanding of cinema, as part of the European Union project. For the ‘demotion’ reflects – or corresponds to – one of the most notable features of globalization, namely the shift of the world system away from Europe/North America (or the Mid-Atlantic) to China/North America (the Pacific Rim, the Indian Ocean) as the new epicentres of global power, economically as well as culturally.

DOUBLE OCCUPANCY

One consequence of this reorientation and thus of this reassessment of Europe in the twenty-first century (a century which, as is generally agreed, started around 1989) is a new evaluation of the achievements of the European Union, now not only with respect to the past deadly rivalries between the various nations, above all, France, Germany and Britain, but with respect to the future: the future of the ‘nation’ and the ‘state’, of the idea of sovereignty, and by extension of governmentality, the social contract, human rights, welfare, equality, social justice, self-determination and other values we associate with Europe. In the course of arguing for such a shift in perspective on these primarily historical and ‘geopolitical’ grounds also for our view of the cinema, I have coined the term ‘double occupancy’ to highlight one feature of Europe – often underlined by Zygmunt Bauman as well – namely its extraordinary diversity in its ethnic, linguistic and geographic make-up: claiming that the Europe of nation states is both an extraordinary achievement when compared to what preceded it, and a liability when looked at from the point of view of the future (Bauman 2004a; Bauman 2005). Historically and ethnographically, the peoples of Europe, however they define themselves today – as ‘white’, as ‘Christian’ or as ‘Greco-Judeo-Christian’ – have always been mixed, and are always already occupied, ‘multiple’ and even Diasporic, when one considers Europe’s 2000–3000-year history also as a fairly relentless succession of migrations, invasions, occupations, civil wars, conquests, pogroms, expulsions and exterminations. The nation state has tamed and contained some of these

turbulences, not least by separating Church and State, and by enforcing linguistic conformity through general education and a national literature, but it has famously not stopped wars, racism or other violent forms of exclusion and discrimination.

The liabilities and challenges are two sides of the same coin: what to do with the reawakened sense of diversity, manifest in the 'Europe of the regions' and the 'Europe' of global cities on the one hand, and the Europe of 'non-places' (industrial wastelands, ghetto-like *banlieux* and housing estates, immigration centres) and xenophobia on the other. But double occupancy applies not only at the sub-state level of disaffected immigrant communities. Even the supra-state cosmopolitan elites are doubly occupied:

our identities are multiply defined, multiply experienced, and can be multiply assigned to us, at every point in our lives, and this increasingly so – hopefully to the point where the very notion of national identity will fade from our vocabulary, and be replaced by other kinds of belonging, relating and being. Blood and soil, land and possession, 'occupation' and 'liberation' have to give way to different forms of negotiating contested ownership of both place and time, i.e. history and memory, self and other.

(Elsaesser 2005: 109)

With this move, I not only want to argue against those who barricade themselves inside a 'Fortress Europe' and who voice their anxieties about migration and immigration, but also against the purported antidote to such siege mentalities and their associated fantasies of racial purity and ethnic cleansing, namely multiculturalism. Even without citing, for instance, Etienne Balibar's critique of multiculturalism as 'reflexive racism' (Balibar 2004) or Slavoj Žižek's attack on religious tolerance as the new form of dominance (Žižek 1997), or Jacques Derrida's difficult discourse on 'hospitality' (Derrida 2000), it seems clear that multiculturalism as a viable ideology for the maintenance of the social contract under conditions of globalization is inadequate, and that the different countries within the European Union have had only partial success in accommodating their ethnic or religious Others, irrespective of whether they relied on 'assimilation' (France), 'distribution' (Germany), 'separate development' (The Netherlands) or 'integration' (United Kingdom) – not to mention 'repatriation' (Italy, the French Right). Although the 'nation' became a powerful tool in Europe to enlist the kind of solidarity that made it politically acceptable to raise taxes and redistribute them in the form of welfare provisions to all members of the national community, our multi-ethnic, culturally and religiously diverse demographic clusters living inside or moving across the nominally post-national European Union nevertheless are producing serious strains in this solidarity and the underlying social contract.

My main critique of the politics or ideology of 'multiculturalism' is that it does not signal either the power dynamics in play or the asymmetries at issue when confronting the question of the social contract, once the 'nation' is no longer the entity guaranteeing solidarity. With respect to the micro-politics of 'the neighbour', multiculturalism neither transcends the identity discourses of the different groups claiming victim status as 'minorities', nor does it specify the entanglements of self and other that makes interpersonal relations, inter-ethnic communication and transnational politics often so intractably difficult. Multiculturalism – to pick up Žižek's polemics – is the form of ideology most

appropriate for global capitalism, because it reproduces universalism and hegemony, but by adapting itself to local circumstances, much the way that McDonald's adapts its menu in Moscow or Beijing:

[Multiculturalism] 'respects' the Other's identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed 'authentic' community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position. Multiculturalism is a racism which empties its own position of all positive content (the multiculturalist is not a direct racist, he doesn't oppose to the Other the *particular* values of his own culture), but nonetheless retains this position as the privileged *empty point of universality* from which one is able to appreciate (and depreciate) properly other particular cultures – the multiculturalist respect for the Other's specificity is the very form of asserting one's own superiority.

(Žižek 1997: 44, italics in original)

Double occupancy, then, is my counter-term, or rather, place-holder term: it acknowledges irony and negativity as part of our Enlightenment scepticism, but also reflexivity and implicatedness as part of our modernity. It is what we Europeans, out of a very specific historical experience, may have to give to the world, now that we are no longer the centre of that world. It names the double heritage of our philosophical world picture, derived from Greco-Roman antiquity and its ideas of polis, citizenship and the state, as well as our Judeo-Christian value system and its ethics of individual accountability, the sanctity of life and the responsible community.

It speaks of our ethnic patchwork identities and linguistic diversity, it puts eternal verities 'under erasure', it recognizes the tensions between 'nation' and 'state', it justifies our 'negative aesthetics' as well as faith in human progress, and thus, as a mode of being-in-the-world and of being-with the Other, it has tragic, comic and utopian dimensions.

POSTMODERN AGENCY

Where, you may ask, does the cinema come into any of this? At first very generally: if the cinema can do anything well, it is to make an audience experience how much Self and Other, inside and outside, are intertwined, how they depend on each other, while still eliciting empathy, participation, identification: with heroes and exceptional individuals, but also with villains and the agency of destructive forces; with idealized projections of our desires and aspirations with regard to physical beauty and charisma; but also with victims, with marginal protagonists, as well as with excessive affects or transgressive subject positions. Psychoanalytic and feminist film theory, for all their possible theoretical shortcomings, firmly kept these dynamics in their sights.

Second, concerning questions of agency: crucial to our idea of Hollywood cinema is the action hero. Audiences love American films for their practical problem solvers, their gangster-mafia entrepreneurs, their world conquerors, their reluctant but ruthless avengers, sly and wily detectives, law enforcers, wilderness-civilizing pioneers or their child heroes and young men, initiated into manhood by proving themselves against human adversaries and cosmic adversity. So strong has been the reliance on the action hero that such single-source agency as he displays has become one of the bases for defining not only the classical 'Hollywood' cinema, but also the European cinema

as its inverted mirror image. While the Hollywood story is character-centred, with its protagonist a goal-oriented autonomous agent, motivated by rational choices and committed to a linear time frame proceeding by a logic of cause and effect, the typically European story features an indecisive, troubled central character, lost in an urban labyrinth or traversing a desolate landscape of the mind. The action is open-ended, the causal nexus is weak, the plot episodic, and time – even if linear in its overall sense – dilates, runs backwards or simply stands still.

A whole ideology of can-do pragmatism is embedded in the American action hero, and also in his negative counterpart. Is such trust in individual agency not counter-intuitive, when despite philosophical assumptions of source–path–goal schemas, everyday experience suggests that in its very embodiedness, the action hero's *modus operandi* is abstract, selfish and even autistic? Are there not other – cooperative, diplomatic, collusive, negotiated – ways of solving problems or getting things done? Is not the European attitude much more 'realistic', seeing that as individuals, we very rarely 'come, see and conquer', but bungle our way through life with indecisions, rash moves we come to regret, and the knowledge that the chaos we have created for ourselves defeats our best efforts to control it?

The European imagination (and its cinema) is resigned to and even proud of its Hamlet heroes, doubters and procrastinators, who 'probe dilemmas' rather than 'solve problems'. Think of the protagonists of Bergman, Antonioni, Wenders or Angelopoulos: plagued by hesitation and rumination, they are drifters, knight errants, wandering Jews, men of God who have lost their faith, or self-exiles forever trying to return home, driven by inner demons as well as lofty but unattainable ideals.

Given what I have invoked as the end of the Europe–Hollywood divide and the desirability of a transnational world cinema perspective, I am suggesting that it makes sense to classify different types of cinema not in terms of classical and post-classical, mainstream or auteur cinema, not even into categories of auteur, genre, narration or mode of production, but instead around different action scenarios. Such a classification schema in which 'agency' plays a major role has of course been advanced by Gilles Deleuze, who identifies what he calls the 'motor-sensory schema' of the 'movement image' (which to him signals the embodied agency of perceiving, feeling, comprehending and acting), in order to distinguish classical (American) cinema from modern (European) cinema. The movement image places the emphasis on the (large) sensory motor schema of 'disclosure' (of the world as to be acted upon) and 'adequacy' (to the milieu, capacity, event), so that a character's look and what he 'sees' provides him with a vantage point, whose truth is its degree of adequacy to the situation perceived and thus indexing his ability for taking action. Contrasting such motor-sensory alignment of body, agency and identity with its rupture in the 'crisis of the movement image', Deleuze posits the emergence of a new type of cinema, organized around the 'time image' where vision, affect and agency are split, pointing to the incommensurability of the situation or event, and thus 'explains' the typically European inaction hero (Deleuze 1989: 40–41).

This is a helpful, but as I argue elsewhere, incomplete categorization. Especially in the way it is generally applied, it becomes a rigidly binary a scheme that ultimately more or less reproduces the old Hollywood–Europe divide (Elsaesser 2009). We could add to the action/inaction oppositional pair also reaction, the 'delayed action' of trauma, the posthumous agency of *The Sixth Sense*

(M. Night Shyamalan, 1999) or *Abre los ojos/Open Your Eyes* (Alejandro Amenábar, 1997), the random reaction of certain male rampage films, the emphasis on running, in films as diverse as *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) and *Lola rennt/Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998), *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996), *Cidade de Deus/City of God* (Fernando Meirelles, 2002) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle, 2008); or the strategic use of car rides as the static vehicles of suspended but consequential agency in Wenders and Kiarostami, Jarmusch and Petzold.

Many, though significantly not all of the kinds of agency I have summed up here, rely on a number of implicit presumptions about the nature of cinema: that we look at a screen frontally placed before us, that the image is framed and bounded, that what happens on the screen affects us in a complexly compensatory manner, and that it is basically a subject–object relationship which binds us to the screen image. The dynamic vectors of this relationship are conceived in terms of active/passive, absent/present, fused/distanced, the look and the gaze: fields of force across which identification, ‘suture’, engagement, or affective alignment take place, whereby the central character’s look functions as a spectatorial mirror. But contemporary cinema has, in many respects, left the traditional cinema spaces and put itself on the move, migrating to different kinds of screens, different locations, different platforms, different viewing conditions. This mobility of both screen and audience also requires an adjustment of our concept of agency, tied as this agency has tended to be (in the action/reaction model) to the classical Newtonian physics of cause and effect, plotted in linear succession.

In the European cinema since the 1990s (as part of world cinema) we find all kinds of narratives, but many feature the modern global city or the urban sprawl that surrounds it, as the site of multi-ethnic and sub-cultural desire, violence and power (often symbolized by drugs, music, intense sensations, and out-of-body experiences), and thus implying a more dispersed, randomized, intermittent agency of unintended and unpredictable consequences. Recent examples might be *La Haine/Hate* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995) or *Gomorra/Gomorra* (Matteo Garrone, 2008) or *Auf der anderen Seite/The Edge of Heaven* (Fatih Akin, 2007), but multi-strand movies are generally symptomatic of this trend towards different forms of agency. Other films focus on immigration, usually through a female heroine from somewhere in eastern Europe who is forced into prostitution or has to fend for herself and her child in a hostile, not to say predatory environment. Women and children are most often the victim agents, whether the films are made in Sweden (*Lilja 4-ever/Lilya 4-ever* (Lukas Moodysson, 2002)), Britain (*Last Resort* (Pawel Pawlikowski, 2000), *Dirty Pretty Things* (Stephen Frears, 2004) or *In This World* (Michael Winterbottom, 2005)); Belgium (*Le Silence de Lorna/Lorna’s Silence* (Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, 2008)) or Romania (*4 luni, 3 saptamani si 2 zile/4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (Cristian Mungiu, 2007)).

Yet other films – by Scottish, French, German, Italian, Danish or Dutch directors – could be said to explore the idea of interference agency or agency at cross-purpose. They concern relations of interdependence, of parasite and host, of heteronomy (i.e. where initially antagonistic parties are obliged to cooperate because both are responding to outside forces over which they have little control). Popular movies such as *Good Bye Lenin!* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003), *Das Leben der Anderen/The Lives of Others* (Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006), *Le fabuleux destin d’Amélie Poulain/Amélie* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001), *Idioterne/The Idiots* (Lars von Trier, 1998) or *La Finestra di Fronte!*

Facing Windows (Ferzan Ozpetek, 2003) show the partly beneficial, partly fatal consequences of such (mutual or unilateral) interference. A further group of films that could be classified in terms of agency focuses more specifically on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, of which one example, along with Lars von Trier's *Dogville* (2003), Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* and Fatih Akin's *Gegen die Wand/Head On* (2004), is Aki Kaurismäki's *Mies vailla menneisyttää/The Man without a Past* (2002), to which I will return.

MUTUAL INTERFERENCE

In order to be able to address the issues of agency that these films raise, with all the ramifications they have for the changing connotations of private and public, for the new permeability of 'I' and 'we' in the social network society, and for the new relationality of distance and proximity, I make a case not only for 'double occupancy' but also for 'mutual interference'. Mutual interference is meant, first of all, to displace the discourse of identity in the direction of Self-and-Other; second, to attend to the different valences of 'action' beyond active/passive; and third, to relate agency to the micro-level of affective and cognitive engagement, of immersion and interaction in the post-cinema, moving-image experience.

With respect to the problematic ideology of multiculturalism with which I started, 'mutual interference' is meant to highlight a certain, fully intended transgressiveness, not only because it signals reciprocity, but because it implies spaces to be redistributed, egos to be dissolved, identities to be questioned, and power relations to be renegotiated. Taken together, then, the terms 'double occupancy' and 'mutual interference' designate a complex, multilevel and possible confusingly inclusive semantic field: one where, with respect to the social contract, such 'soft' *ethical* demands – as the need for 'dialogue' with the other, for 'tolerance' and for 'trusting the other' – are understood not so much as 'requiring direct action', but more like 'hold open a space', or designate the conditions of possibility, for a much 'harder' *political* mandate, one that does not come for free, but at a cost, namely of action as 'interference', but under conditions of being 'implicated'. In other words, I am trying to include the active part of 'in-betweenness', of 'entanglement' and of 'hybridity' (to name some of the terms of the postcolonial discourse), and to emphasize the risks to selfhood and autonomy, when talking of embeddedness, embodiment and situatedness (to name three terms much in use in contemporary theory and cultural studies).

Just like 'double occupancy', the term 'mutual interference' was chosen for a number of reasons. Both terms can have tragic dimensions, but they also make room for the comedy of errors and mistaken identities. Mutual interference ideally even holds out hope for a utopian option: taking responsibility for the other, while neither imposing on the other nor forsaking self-interest, but acting out of 'enlightened altruism'. If double occupancy connects with 'identity', then mutual interference evidently connects with 'agency'. Thus, besides the generic or rhetorical implications, a reason for choosing the term has to do with the changing nature of agency not only with respect to the Europe versus Hollywood divide, but also in view of the changing character of cinema itself. On the one hand, the cinema is still part of a recognizable public sphere (where the 'I' of the singular spectator interacts and mingles with the 'we' of the spectatorial community). On the other hand, film viewing has become an increasingly privatized activity. Yet home cinema or

1. When inventing these big ideas of Europe, one realizes just how many different scenarios for the geopolitical future of the Union exist. Focusing on just some of them, for instance, one can distinguish the hope for a European Union as a multicultural melting pot along the lines of the former Austro-Hungarian empire; the ideal of a Christian Europe; Europe as the super-nation of the United States of Europe; the Europe of the strong nation states, ceding as little of their sovereignty as possible; Real Europe, i.e. an association of largely economic interest groups under a common legal framework and binding rules of the game.
2. 'The most obvious feature of [our present] world is American power; but in the long run the most important facts may be the end of empire and the transformation of the state through globalization. The most hopeful feature is the emergence of the postmodern system of security in Europe' (Cooper 2003, Preface, p. x). See also pp. 3–4 about 'interference in each other's domestic affairs'.

downloading movies are privatized experiences often in such interpersonal modalities and under such technical conditions that they in turn lead to the 'private' becoming once more 'public', as on the Internet, among gamers, via YouTube or on Facebook, where 'sharing', 'liking', 'friending' and other forms of exchange and interchange resurface as viable forms of agency in the public domain.

However, my main reason for choosing the term 'mutual interference' brings me back to the specifics of Europe, and its internal debates around nation, state and sovereignty. In particular, there is one version of the political objectives of the European Union, in which mutual interference plays a crucial role. As is well known, very different agendas circulate among the political elites, as to how the European Union might evolve in the twenty-first century – from no more than a trading block held together by free-market principles and possibly a common currency, to the United States of Europe – a unified confederation bound to each other via checks and balances, on the model of the Federal Republic of Germany if not the United States of America.¹

After the failed referendum in France and the Netherlands for a European constitution, one commentator, the American sociologist Benjamin Barber, opined that what Europe needed was not, like the United States of America, a 'Declaration of Independence', but a 'Declaration of Interdependence', which sounds a little like what I am talking about (Barber and Myers 2004).

But the term 'mutual interference' actually comes from a book by the diplomat and writer Robert Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations* (2003). Cooper argues that the present world order – based on liberal democracy – will come to an end, since, as everyone readily acknowledges, we are currently in the middle of a major reconfiguration of geopolitics. He distinguishes four state forms: the hegemonic state or contemporary form of imperialism (USA), the post-modern state (EU), the modern (nationalist, authoritarian) state (Pakistan, Iran) and the pre-modern (failed) state (Sudan, Congo). Cooper maintains that the European system of nation states and their concept of sovereignty as non-interference in matters of state and religion by outside powers, as formulated in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and reaffirmed by the Vienna Congress in 1815, will have to give way. According to this view, the old balance of power system has been superseded, because the European Union has institutionalized the mutual interference in domestic affairs between nation states as its *modus operandi*. Cooper's model of the European Union as a conglomerate of nation states that are connected with each other through the right and necessity of mutual interference contrasts with the Franco-German notion of a European superstate, but it was also intended as part of a damage-limitation argument against the Bush doctrine of pre-emptive strike and unilateral interference in the internal affairs of another country.²

Cooper wrote in the wake of the accession talks with the post-Communist states of central and eastern Europe, as well as in view of the talks about membership with Turkey and Serbia, where it very much seemed that it was the European Union interfering in the sovereignty of these nations, but with very little mutuality in return. Even so, Cooper's notion reminds us of the fact that Europe is present in our everyday lives often at precisely this interface of Brussels' interference in the shape of mundane but irritating detail. In Britain you now buy your bananas by the metric kilo rather than the pound; what goes into German sausages has been regulated along with the size of Dutch apples or French cheese. Still, as an ordinary citizen you can also take your own government before the European Court in Strasbourg and seek redress

for something that the laws of your own nation state have not provided for, are flouting or want to ignore.

OUTSIDE WITHOUT STEPPING OUTSIDE

Here, I want to discuss the third group of European films, which focus more on inclusion and exclusion than on double occupancy and mutual interference. They may be seen as presenting the double occupancy/mutual interference model *from the outside*, but without *stepping outside*. Aki Kaurismäki's work, insofar as I am familiar with it (*Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (1998), *Kauas Piloet Karkaavat/Drifting Clouds* (1996) and especially *The Man without a Past*) seems to me exemplary in this respect, less as an illustration of this maxim and more as an ongoing – serious but also comic-subversive – contribution to the debate about the nature of European governmentality in the force field made up of globalized capitalism, the nation state as welfare state, and the forms of social contract or reciprocity possible when nationalism and a boom economy no longer provide the sticky glue of solidarity or kinship loyalty. I shall concentrate on *The Man without a Past*, which I propose to look at across three possible frames of reference, all of which intersect, but also displace or modify my general argument about transnational cinema and post-national governmentality. What initially struck me about Kaurismäki is that he does not need prostitutes from Moldavia or Lilyas from Latvia, he does not need Afghan or Bosnian refugees, he does not need involuntary organ donors or exploited maids, in order to go right to the heart of the matter of what is at stake in Europe today, between globalization and outsourcing, high tech and low wages, the social contract and the systematic production of human expendability. Rather like Lars von Trier's minimalism in *Dogville* with its chalk marks on the bare floor-boards, an abandoned container by the Helsinki waterfront, a bunch of drunks, a jukebox and a few other ready-to-hand props are all Kaurismäki needs to make his points. Helped no doubt by the fact that Finland is one of the European Union countries with fewest immigrants, but with nonetheless a high incidence of xenophobia, he elegantly bypasses both the pat denunciations of racism and the pitfalls of multiculturalism. Instead, in what I take to be a typical piece of Finnish humour, Kaurismäki simply whacks his hero over the head, and hey presto, he has a perfect specimen of the 'stranger', the 'Other', the 'migrant' and the 'victim', without having to leave the country or change language.

My first frame of reference would be what one might call social romanticism. An ordinary man and citizen, minding his own business, is suddenly evicted from his no doubt comfortable surroundings and loses all items of personal identity (name, memory) and signifiers of social integration (ID papers, social security number). Now a loner, an outcast, he finds among other marginals and outcasts the rudiments of a community whose values are not those of acquisitive capitalism or even of the welfare state, but at once more archaic, more 'authentic' and more 'primitively' socialist. We can read the story like a reverse *Bildungsroman*: of an education into a happier and simpler state, where you grow your own potatoes and wash your own shirts, where simple human companionship is worth more than a house, a career and a wife. *The Man without a Past* in this respect might usefully be referenced to certain films by Mike Leigh, as examples of stories about 'losers' who seem to inspire hope by the very 'terminal' condition they get themselves into. In another sense, the film 'touches bottom' by a sort of generalized state of destitution, hinting

at the kinds of communities that, for instance, drug addicts form when they share needles or a hit. In *Trainspotting*, for instance, they are depicted as having some of the features of anarcho-communist utopias. In *The Man without a Past* the men and women on the breadline are the ones who most readily accept his zombie-like state, which in turn allows M, the otherwise nameless hero to reconstruct a network of mental coordinates and points of affective contact that sustain his will to live. When once more he is attacked by the hooligans who robbed and all but killed him in the opening scene, the beggars and cripples take up their crutches and planks of wood, rescuing him: reminiscent of those Vittorio de Sica films, like *Miracolo a Milano/Miracle of Milan* (1951) where the poor of Milan's slums and *bidonvilles* also drive out the bad guys from the government, help each other and are rewarded by magic that makes them fly off into the sky and to a better life.

Such a reading of Kaurismäki's film as a therapeutic narrative of the poor with a heart of gold, of solidarity and brotherhood as the natural nobility of the deprived and exploited is inviting in these cynical times, but surely also misleading. Kaurismäki may be familiar with de Sica, but so he is with Luis Buñuel, whose vicious beggars and cruel children in *Los Olvidados/The Forgotten Ones* (1950) came onto the cinema scene in almost the same year as de Sica's film, demanding of the audience a quite different – anarcho-surrealist? – sense of solidarity through empathy with victims *and* victimizers, heteronomously intertwined and interdependent in the mutuality of their equally hopeless situation and sordid social transactions. Kaurismäki is also no doubt familiar with Rainer Werner Fassbinder's films and their victims, male or female, masochists or exploited, who feel no special obligation to be less vicious and cruel than the rest of the world when they see a chance to victimize someone else. The opening scene of M getting beaten up in the park is visibly Kaurismäki's version of the opening scene in Fassbinder's *In einem Jahr mit 13 Monden / In a Year of Thirteen Moons* (1978), with the differences as striking as the similarities.

A second frame of reference would be that of the social parable for our age: a Grimm fairytale of banks and bankers helping themselves before serving their customers, of multinationals depending on cheap labour and job-outsourcing, and of the welfare state caught between big business privatizing the profits and socializing the losses, and a market economy which needs cycles of 'creative destruction' to foster competitiveness and 'innovation', while also needing consumers to spend the money they do not have.

In this reading – as an allegory of the increasingly conflicting relations between a consumption-based 'national' market economy and the social-democratic welfare state, as both are coming under pressure from global capital flows – the film offers an intriguingly nuanced and yet sardonically apt picture. First, we see 'religion' (in the shape of the Salvation Army) step in where the state's hands are tied, as it were. As in the Middle East, where Hamas and Hezbollah provide the social services that corrupt politicians and impotent civil institutions are incapable of delivering, the Salvation Army can use unofficial circuits of distribution, acting both at sub-state local and supra-state international level. Kaurismäki here clearly indicates how (and some of the reasons why) in our post-secular society, religious influence – from all religions – is on the rise. But the film also neatly sketches the dilemma of the state: the welfare provisions it offers require workers to be 'citizens', with papers, name and address, and so our hero can neither apply for a job nor receive the social benefits of the jobless.

By contrast, in today's economy, the film seems to say, a worker with a memory of the past and personal attachments is actually at a disadvantage. Amnesia – structural amnesia as well as individual amnesia – is much better for the overall system reboot, but also for making the individual flexible and adaptable. The scene in the welfare office, where M is caught in a Catch 22 situation with the bureaucracy, is matched by the scene in the shipyard conglomerate's office: global capitalism only needs raw labour power; since it does not provide benefits, it can afford to provide work, without caring if his name is Albert Einstein or King Kong. In the drive for low-wage advantage and a seasonal/flexible workforce, it does not matter what sort of past you have.

In other words, the biopolitics of casual work in Helsinki are no different from those of Nike's or Adidas's sweatshops in Bangladesh, but in the next breath, quite rightly, the film also points out that such bare labour is better than starving, no less in Helsinki than in Dacca or Bangalore. Tragic and tragic-comic dimensions come to the fore in the figure of the old-style factory owner, who would rather rob a bank and then commit suicide than be thought by his ex-workers to be a profiteer or a cheat. These scenes, too, remind me of other films (by Charles Chaplin, Frank Capra's Depression movies, Italian Fascist melodramas), and again, Kaurismäki deftly undercuts the pathos, when in the bank hold-up, he has the woman cashier, whose last day it is, point out that the surveillance camera he has just shot is not working anyway, because the bank is actually closing the branch, as the new owner, a South Korean *cheabol*, is 'consolidating', that is, saving money by shedding jobs, with the unemployment benefits due to these employees most likely being paid out by the Finnish state. The 'solution' to these dilemmas is also presented, namely 'flexible entrepreneurship'. In one of the great scarily comic and comically scary creations of recent European cinema, Kaurismäki gives us the character of Anttila, the perfect embodiment of the 'new' capitalist (in contrast to the factory owner), who sees and seizes an opportunity to make money in the most creative manner and creates opportunities where none exist, as when he tries to charge M for the open-air concert of the Salvation Army that M himself organized:

Anttila: Tickets.

M: What do you mean?

Anttila: You haven't paid.

M: But I organized this.

Anttila: That's what you think.

M: Is that so?

Anttila: Yes.

M: Fancy that.

Anttila: That's outrageous!

M: It is, isn't it?

In fact, Anttila is a popular villain on the Internet, in much the same way that Hannibal (the cannibal) Lecter is popular (in honour of whom Anttila seems to have named his dog Hannibal, who 'only eats raw meat' (at least in the subtitles. I gather that in Finnish, the dog is called Tähti, i.e. 'Star'). The Internet Movie Database dutifully lists most of his best exchanges with M:

[M is renting an abandoned shipping container]

M: When can I move in?

Anttila: As soon as I turn my back.

M: And the keys?

Anttila: You see a lock anywhere?

M: No.

Anttila: Don't go splitting hairs then, or I'll take the door, too. [...]

Anttila: But if you don't pay, I'll send my killer dog to bite your nose off.

M: It only causes trouble, shadows the way wherever I go.

Anttila: You couldn't smoke in the shower anymore.

Again, one can see Kaurismäki's sense for, not so much the 'absurdity of existence' (as critics like to describe his deadpan humour), but more precisely, for the interdependence of opposites (and thus a form of 'mutual interference'). At first sight, M and Anttila are antagonists in this exchange: one exploited, the other exploiting. But with regard to their humour, they are complementary – parasite and host, if you like – in that the source of their wit, a self-deprecating sarcasm that escalates to nihilism, is synchronous, in the sense that each depends on the other being on cue, like performers of a duet.

This brings me to my third frame of reference for *The Man without a Past*, which I have earlier referred to as the ability to look at a given situation *from outside without stepping outside*. If my allegorical reading gives us a parable of today's global capitalism locally experienced, where M's amnesia turns out to be a blessing in disguise as well as a bitter truth about our present world, my third reading would take the same state of affairs – the 'objective' advantages of amnesia – but now from the point of view of the subject. In order to do so, however, one needs to uncouple the subject from the subject–object relationship, as it were, which also means one should not see our protagonist as 'victim' – either in the sociological sense (e.g. as a victim of urban crime) or in the personal, affective sense (e.g. as a victim of his wife's infidelity). Kaurismäki could not be clearer about this, whether after M leaves the hospital and finds a home among the containers, or at the end when he meets his ex-wife and her new man, who feels duty-bound to offer M a fight, only for our hero to dismiss any such notion of male dignity and pride. M's subjectivity, on other words, needs a new definition, or rather a space and a context in which his particular form of agency can be identified or understood.

ABJECTION AND THE ABJECT SUBJECT

For this space and context, I draw on Manuel Castells and his vision of Europe. Castells, best known for his books on the network society, has often argued that the European Union will not be able to sustain itself as a viable political experiment if it relies on its Christian values, or even on its present understanding of liberal democracy around the notion of ethnicity and multiculturalism. Castells's main concern is to insist that the European Union cannot escape the impact of globalization dividing up the world quite differently, namely between those who are networked, connected and 'online' and those who are not (Castells 2002). Translated into slightly different terms, Castells predicts a situation where there are human beings that are useful to the world system as producers or as consumers on one side, and those who are too unskilled, too sick or too destitute to be either producers or consumers, not even consumers of health and welfare services on the other. Unable or unwilling to participate in any of the circuits of redistribution and networks of exchange – of goods,

services, affective labour or needs – these human beings effectively drop out of the human race. In fact, by this reasoning, not only drug dealers, criminals, traffickers of women or refugees, but also patients in hospitals or a car thief in prison are more useful to our society than, say, someone who grows his own vegetables, is self-sufficient and never leaves his plot of land. Castells, with a sarcasm that Kaurismäki might appreciate, goes so far to speculate that to be a slave labourer or a colonial subject might come to be seen as preferable to being not even thought valuable enough to be exploited.

Similarly gloomy but less ironic, such considerations can also be found in the writings of Zygmunt Bauman, especially in his *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*: 'The production of "human waste" – or more precisely, wasted lives, the "superfluous" populations of migrants, refugees and other outcasts – is an inevitable outcome of modernization', he writes (Bauman 2004b: 5). To Bauman, this expendability is an unavoidable side effect of economic progress and the quest for order, which always involves a reclassification. Modernity is like a gardener who takes over a field or meadow, and now suddenly considers most of what has been growing there as 'weeds'.

The global spread of the modernity has given rise to growing quantities of human beings who are deprived of adequate means of survival, but the planet is fast running out of places to put them. Hence the new anxieties about 'immigrants' and 'asylum seekers' and the growing role played by diffuse 'security fears' on the contemporary political agenda.

(Bauman 2004b: 5)

What is relevant about this position with respect not just to Kaurismäki's film but to European cinema is that it alludes to a state of subjective destitution that has been thematized in many recent films from the last two decades (though they are probably not entirely confined to Europe). One might call this state that of abjection, to use a term made familiar by Julia Kristeva (1982), or the state of 'bare life' in the terminology of Giorgio Agamben (1998). Such abject heroes (or heroines) can be found in the films of Fassbinder, Agnès Varda's *Sans toit ni loi/Vagabond* (1985), the films of Catherine Breillat, Mike Leigh's *Naked* (1993), Gaspar Noé's *Seul contre tous/I Stand Alone* (1998), the Dardenne Brothers' *Rosetta* (1999), or Fatih Akin's *Head On*. In several of these films, the protagonists are indeed members of minorities, ethnic 'others', or hyphenated nationals (French-Moroccan, French-African or German-Turkish), but the films are not primarily about race or ethnicity. Rather, they are about human beings who have, for one reason or another, lost the ability to enter into any kind of exchange, sometimes not even one where they can trade their bodies. The protagonist's stories generally take them through this progressive stripping of all symbolic supports of their selfhood: they lose their jobs, their friends, their family, their mind or their memory, as in the case of Kaurismäki's protagonist.

To reiterate, it is significant that most of these protagonists are not victims; at least they do not consider themselves as such. This removes them from yet another circuit of exchange and interaction – that of the victimizer or perpetrator – but also neutralizes the power of those who through tolerance and philanthropy, or in the name of human rights, implicitly or explicitly assert their moral or material superiority. Such films, in my scheme of things, are the negative equivalent of double occupancy: they may be subjects 'in circulation', but they are 'out of service'. Or, to vary the metaphor, the subjects of such

narratives have been vacated, even by their oppressors, and the space they occupy has been declared a blank. 'Vacated' heroes or heroines in European cinema are not only symptomatic for what they tell us about a society and subjectivity that no longer has a social contract about what counts as the minimum conditions of value and use, labour and affective work in and for a given society or community. They may also tell us something about the possibility of a counter-image of what it means to be human, and thus they approach what could be called the utopian dimension of double-occupancy.

The interesting aspect of *The Man without a Past* is that it makes us see the consequences of exclusion from the side of the excluded, not as victims or 'waste', but as the basis for a different sense of both singularity and community. The space of abjection which the film gradually establishes is the one that shows the now separate and distinct 'archipelagos' of the former unified state of the nation; the national economy and its social services come together in what is usually considered a 'non-space'. But the film indicates that this is the only space where the structure and dynamics of contemporary society can be seen in the way this society actually hangs together and its antagonisms are interrelated.

Thus, the term that comes to mind for the subjectivity of the 'Man without a Past' would be that of the 'abject subject', though perhaps not quite in either the way Kristeva understands it or in Agamben's sense. For Kristeva, the abject is situated between the subject and the object; in fact the abject is a necessary category when the various ways of positioning oneself in the world along the Hegelian subject-object divide are no longer sufficient, and the 'agency of objects' has become part of our thinking about subjectivity. In this sense, the abject would indicate a different, post-Cartesian as well as post-Hegelian 'subject-position', which recognizes the fundamentally if not constitutively 'traumatized' position of the global-local subject, but which is also envisaging the possibility of a liberating or utopian potential in abjection. In the context of my overall argument we need to ask about the kind of agency that typifies this abject subject.

This agency at first seems to approach what I earlier called 'posthumous agency' or the post-mortem agency of the corpse, of a walking dead or zombie – but a zombie with a subjective point-of-view shot! Kaurismäki has come up with an extraordinary scene to illustrate this post-mortem mode, when – with a subjective camera tracking shot – we are placed 'inside' the left-for-dead protagonist, as he staggers from the park into and through the railway station, to collapse, blood-soaked beneath his welder's helmet, in the men's lavatory, like a ghost in armour.

On further reflection, and in the course of the film, the hero's agency is less that of a ghost (he does not haunt anyone) and more that of the abject, if we can describe and define the abject subject more precisely. The agency of abjection would encompass a 'sacred space' which is more powerful in its singularity than the atomized and fragmented institutions that now work at cross-purposes, in a society that is in denial about the degree to which the parliamentary politics and the welfare state have already ceded to these different configurations of global business and the separate social formations that now wield power, with little or no contact between them.

The 'abject', as I argued, is distinct from and at the same time rearticulates the various victim discourses (three kinds of victims: the 'passive' ones whose suffering the mass media, notably television, 'harvests' in talk shows, or when there are natural catastrophes or man-made disasters; the victims who make

themselves powerful when they decide they have nothing (more) to lose, not even their lives, because they already feel dead – suicide bombers; and the victims that become ‘active’ in another mode, actively passive.³

AMNESIA: A PRODUCTIVE PATHOLOGY

Amnesia becomes what I have called a ‘productive pathology’ not only because it adapts the ‘subject’ more flexibly to the cycles of creative destruction and periodic ‘system reboots’. ‘Amnesia’ as the psychological name for ‘abjection’ can also be understood as the very form of non-activist protest against the ‘obsolescence’ discussed by Castells and Bauman, produced, according to them, as the natural effect of a certain form of modernity (in this case, global capitalism). In *The Man Without a Past*, this is made very explicit, insofar as our hero is flanked by three other males, all responding differently to the crisis in masculinity and self-value. M’s friend and drinking companion leads a double life: during the day he works in the dark underground and emerges all black, while every Friday he drinks away the money he earns during the week instead of giving it to his family, whereupon he is kicked out by his wife. The more ‘above ground’ existences are the landlord/town official Anttila, in his vintage car, the eternal entrepreneur, the new capitalist who can ‘monetize’ or ‘securitize’ everything under the sun: filthy containers become luxury abodes, a spontaneous concert an occasion to charge an entrance fee, the threat with a dog a way of getting the other to look after the animal for free. And on the other side, the old-fashioned entrepreneur, who robs a bank and then kills himself, all in order to be able to pay his workers after the banks forced him into bankruptcy. ‘Abjection’ in this sense becomes a way of escaping/overcoming/resisting the social order *through the bottom*, rather than climbing to the top by kicking those below. Instead, the hero finds a new form of selfhood through abjection as the protesting mirror image of the respect and recognition that society is not willing to give. In this regard, abjection is not just traumatic (as it is in Kristeva), but also liberating: it ‘performs’ the condition of precariousness within an *ethos* of humility and self-sufficiency that can claim universality by the very fact of having placed itself outside both marginality and hierarchy.

Aki Kaurismäki seems to me to respond to this need for a different way to articulate opposition, resistance and critique of both capitalism and the welfare state, and to pay due attention to the inherent contradictions (positive as well as negative) of global capitalism, immigration, mobility of labour, etc. His films are about the dual image of modern-day entrepreneurship, a theme that takes over from the ‘country’ versus ‘city’ binarism of an earlier European cinema, but also supersedes the old left–right political opposition. Abjection, in the form of binge drinking and alcoholism, could also be read as manifestations of a form of ‘shamelessness’ within the distinct ‘shame culture’ still prevalent in modern-day Finland.

The classically ‘abject’ experience is that of the corpse, that is, something that was once a subject and is now an object, but an object to which cling all the properties, particularities, appearances and memories of a subject. In this sense, Kristeva’s theory of the abject joins the ‘post-mortem’ subjectivity discussed elsewhere: the search for a position both outside and yet part of. In *The Man Without a Past* we have such a typically post-mortem hero.

The point about the (male) abject hero is that he is ‘affectless’, somehow self-enclosed, and almost perfect in its abjection. But his female companion

3. In order to understand the latter, and to see him/her in the context of the abject, it would be useful to look at the debate between Simon Critchley and Slavoj Žižek around Herman Melville’s story of *Bartleby the Scrivener*, and his famous ‘I prefer not to’ cited by both Critchley and Žižek as a form of ‘political’ resistance, which however, does not have to manifest itself as resistance, because it is yielding. For Critchley it approximates his ‘ethical anarchism’ of a politics of ‘infinite demand’, whereas for Žižek this maximal minimalism is the very sign of a collusion with the powers that be, who are much more threatened by non-action (‘Don’t just do something, stand there!’ is how Žižek describes Bartleby’s ‘activism’). For Critchley, see *Infinitely Demanding* (2007), critiqued by Žižek, ‘Resistance is Surrender’ (2007: 7). Žižek’s own ‘Defence of Bartleby’ can be found in *The Parallax View* (2006: 381–85).

and counterpart, the Angel of Mercy, too, has this quality of the abject, which in her becomes somehow a more delicate and dignified stance, but still, in its withdrawn and self-enclosed minimalism, corresponds to the affectless neutrality of the corpse. Besides the (almost lethal) mushroom picnic, abjection is performed in two other scenes: one is the ruined steak (what should have been the date from hell becomes the 'hitting bottom' that brings the two together), and the other the used tea bag in the matchbox, in the way its abject status as a piece of 'waste' is dignified in the restaurant. The abject in our hero is what attracts the women; thus the abject makes him keep his dignity even when he has nothing at all. Translated into the theme of the 'Other', the 'stranger', it means that respect and recognition have to be renegotiated not from the Other's individual culture (as assumed by the logic of multiculturalism), but from the Other's very absence and lack of culture (or symbolic value).

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the film is the use of music to create scenes of abjection: the music that is played on the juke box, and then 'taught' to the Salvation Army boys, is not merely nostalgic; its obsolescence makes room for a new kind of dignity, reminiscent of the Leningrad Cowboys who want to go to America but end up in Mexico. Waste and failure become the conditions and instances of utopia: the goal which you fail to reach turns out so much better for you ('authentic') than had you succeeded.

Yet in relation to the dynamics of oppression/exclusion, abjection is an ambivalent term, because it returns us to our primary (pre-symbolic) selves. Also, the abject always brings back the body, and thus it is a 'living' reminder of our mortality. The abject sounds a warning note about the risk entailed by 'embodiment' and 'situatedness' when understood as unproblematic categories of a new authenticity.

CONCLUSION

The Kaurismäki abject subject would be the dialectic or dynamic complement of 'double occupancy' and 'mutual interference', in the sense of 'voiding' the (doubly occupied) subject, in order to 'open' itself radically towards the Other (on the far side of mutual interference). Such abjection might constitute the zero degree of a new politics of the cinema, in the European transnational context, since – as Kaurismäki shows like no other contemporary director in Europe – his analytical acuity about our contemporary state fashions a moral fable that creates a new kind of action hero, who combines great humanity and humility that can elicit empathy beyond 'tolerance'. It makes his otherness and status as a stranger in his own country the very basis of a new kind of community, which – considered against the social and political agendas of another community, that of the European Union – formulates at once a comment, a critique and a promise. Kaurismäki's film thus perfectly embodies the current potential of European cinema, now no longer just 'demoted' vis a vis Asian cinemas and Hollywood, but rather rising to the ethical challenge of being the 'abject subject' of world cinema.

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