

# Le Havre

Countries: Finland, France, Germany

Year: 2012

Writer & Director: Aki Kaurismäki

Cinematography: Timo Salminen

Editing: Timo Linnasalo



CAST André Wilms, Kati Outinen, Jean-Pierre Darroussin, Blondin Miguel, Elina Salo, Evelyne Didi, Quoc Dung Nguyen, François Monnié, Little Bob (as Roberto Piazza), Laïka the dog.

[www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk](http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk)

‘Aki Kaurismäki’s **Le Havre** is a film you want to hug. It is so adorable – like a loved mutt – that it lowers your blood pressure while heightening your besotted and caring interest. In a noirish corner of north-west France the former author and social rebel Marcel Marx (Kaurismäki regular André Wilms) employs himself as a shoe-shiner. In a vocational *acte gratuit* (existentialism alert!) he has gone native with the common people. He is now a one-man catchment and protection area for foreign fugitives, such as the young Gabon stowaway Idrissa (Blondin Miguel) pursued by immigration police. Imagine a plot made from Rimbaud, Camus and Simenon, mixed together, then served with a festive cracker and funny hat.

Kaurismäki finds that point where a basilisk spoofiness intersects with a throbbing verismo. You can take the film seriously: the ominous music, shadow-edged décor, men in hats pursuing men without. Or you can giggle in pastiche-lovers’ delight. Or you can do both. This is the *temps perdu* of novelist Céline and filmmakers Melville and Carné. People say solemnly surreal lines like “She is the road manager of my soul.” And who could resist

the Dadaist scene of a brooding black-coated detective (Jean-Pierre Darroussin) sitting in a bar holding a pineapple, drinking a Calvados, pondering unsolved crimes? Maigret meets Magritte.

The plot, I *think*, resolves itself... But I have no certain memory. I was on cloud nine throughout the film: that place of Technicolored rapture where Kaurismäki fans dwell, and where past, present and oneiric future are rolled celestially into one.’

*Nigel Andrews, Financial Times*

## Background

Born Aki Olavi Kaurismäki in Orimattila, Finland in 1957, he worked as dishwasher and postman, then as a film critic, before starting a production company in the early eighties with his older brother, Mika, for whom he scripted their first three films. Since then, the two brothers have accounted for half of Finland’s cinematic output.

Aki’s first features: *Crime and Punishment* (1983), the cult *Calamari Union* (‘85) and *Shadows in Paradise* (‘86).

Other films include *Ariel* (‘87), *The Match Factory Girl* (‘89) and the *Lenningrad Cowboys* trilogy (‘89 and ‘94), *I Hired a Contract Killer* (‘90, UK), *La Vie de Bohème* (‘92), in which Wilms’s character, Marx, first appeared, and *Take Care of Your Scarf, Tatiana* (‘94).

He holds that films should never last longer than 90 mins; his best known run closer to 70 mins. In 2003, he refused to attend the Academy Awards for *The Man Without a Past*, because he “didn’t feel like celebrating” in a “country at war” and, in 2006 he refused his nomination for *Lights in the Dusk*, declaring that George Bush’s foreign policy “lacked even the solidity of pancakes.”

Aki Kaurismäki sits in his heavy black coat, grimacing. The miserabilist’s miserabilist is looking more miserable than it is possible to imagine. I have been told it is best to interview him first thing in the morning, because he starts to drink after that. It is now four in the afternoon, and he seems to have been glugging back the white wine for a good few hours.



He is waiting for a member of staff at Soho House in London to tell him to put out his fag, and he is not disappointed. “I’m sorry, sir, we have told you, you can’t smoke in here.” Kaurismäki looks surprised, as if this is the first he’s heard of it, apologises and throws his lit cigarette into a glass of water. The waitress picks up the glass to take it away. Kaurismäki shouts, as if he’s just been mugged. “That’s my water! That’s my water!” She runs away. Finland’s greatest film-maker smiles.

**Kaurismäki**, now 55, is one of my favourite directors. For 30-odd years, he has been making the bleakest comedies – films that reflect his own soul, and that of his mother

country, perfectly. They are dark and joyless, starring men who look like walruses and women who look like rats. His characters work away at dull jobs in factories or down coal mines or washing dishes, and rarely talk to each other. (In 1990’s *The Match Factory Girl*, there are 13 minutes before the first line of dialogue, and the whole film is only 68 minutes long.) They usually drink too much and the more decisive ones kill themselves: in *Ariel*, a father and son sit in a bar; then the father gets up, goes to the loo and shoots himself. The best his protagonists can hope for is escape, usually by boat.

But, amazingly, these films are funny and romantic. In fact, the bleaker Kaurismäki the man has become, the more tender his films. It’s simple, he says: “When all the hope is gone, there is no reason for pessimism.” *The Man Without a Past*, which won the Grand Prix at Cannes in 2002, is typical of his latter-day ability to find hope in the hopeless: an unnamed man is mugged, left unconscious, loses his memory and is left to rebuild his life, befriended by dossers and drifters.





Kaurism  ki lights another fag. His new film, **Le Havre** (set in France, though as Finnish as ever) is his first in six years, and his most weirdly optimistic. In fact, he might well have created a new movie genre: the asylum fairytale. It begins with the police stopping a

lorryload of asylum seekers; a young boy runs away, takes refuge in the shallows of the freezing sea, and is discovered by an elderly shoeshine who takes him home. Yes, the characters still drink in silent misery, but **Le Havre** is also an astonishing affirmation of the power of love.

What inspired the film? "I read more and more articles, watched more and more TV news about people who have been drowned in the Mediterranean, when they've been promised the golden land of Europe. They come full of hopes, and it started to disturb my mind a lot. So what can I do? It's a film. I might look like a cool guy, but I am most sentimental. I care about others, not too much about myself."

There is a wonderful exchange in the film when the shoeshine asks his wife, ill with cancer, if he can visit her in hospital. She tells him to stay away until she is through the worst. "After two weeks come back and bring the yellow dress that I wore at La Rochelle," she says. I tell him it's my favourite line in the film. He smiles. "My favourite, too. I cried when I wrote that." Why La Rochelle? "Because I had a nice moment with my wife there."

Kaurism  ki continues to smoke in the near dark, waiting for the inevitable tap on the shoulder while telling me about his solution to life's iniquities. This is a philosophy which might have been co-authored by **Samuel Beckett** and Osama bin Laden. "For mankind, I can't see any way out," he says in his deadly monotone, "except terrorism. We kill the 1%." Which 1%? "The only way for mankind to get out of this misery is to kill the 1% who own everything. The 1% who have put us in the position where humanity has no value. The rich. And the politicians who are the puppies of the rich."

Has he ever thought of going into politics? "No, never. Politics are corrupt." You wonder if he would say any different when sober; I suspect, if anything, he would be more extreme. Of course, it could all be a pose but I don't think so. His own life has been even bleaker than his films. He tells me about the men in his close family who have killed themselves, and asks me not to name them. That was their personal choice, he says, and it is not something he wants to intrude on.

The manager of Soho House walks into the room. "I'm sorry, sir, but this really is the last time. We have told you twice you can't smoke in here." Kaurism  ki looks at him with doe-eyed innocence, and apologises again, while we are moved to the verandah. By now we are both knocking back the wine, the only difference being that Kaurism  ki tends to empty the glass in one gulp. Is it true that he can only direct when drinking? No, he says, that's rubbish; he can't write or edit when drinking, but it makes no difference when directing, so he does drink. But he doesn't have to.

What would he say defines the Finnish character? "Melancholy," he says instantly. Why does Finland have such a high suicide rate? "Lack of light. Light in every way. The sunshine. Now it is proven medically that people need vitamin D. It is always dark, and when it is dark, it is also dark in the mind." Does this worry him? He glugs back another glass. "I more or less know I will kill myself, but not yet." What would make him do it? "Misery." I am beginning to feel protective of him. You are too much of a romantic, I protest. "Yeah, yeah. So I don't shoot myself in my head, I shoot myself in my heart."

Still, there might be hope for him. He and his wife now spend half the year in Portugal. Did they move there for the light? "It is the furthest place from Finland in Europe." We talk about family, and he mentions his wife, an artist who doesn't like exhibiting her work. After 26 years of marriage, he is obviously still besotted. Is she as miserable as him? He smiles. It's a lovely, sweet smile; you have to earn it, but it's worth the wait. "No, she loves life. Otherwise I wouldn't be here." I bet you are the most attentive, romantic husband there is, I say; I bet you buy her flowers and that she's got that yellow dress still. "Yes, she does. In my last three films the female characters are all my wife." Does she like that? "She didn't even notice." Do they have children? "Too many." How many? "None."

He lights another cigarette, and tells me he has only just started smoking again. How many a day? "Three boxes, 60. My record is 12 boxes. When I have to deal with idiotic questions like yours I have to smoke more." That's a bit rude. He grins, a little boy who knows he's gone too far. "Well, I wanted a reaction. I didn't mean to be rude, I just wanted to provoke you."

Kaurism  ki has never been a great respecter of convention or the law. As a young hippy he drifted from job to job. For a while, he was homeless; he often spent the night in police cells after being arrested for bad



behaviour. You sense he's still not quite sure how he became a filmmaker (as did his brother **Mika**; for a time they ran a production company together, but haven't spoken for 20 years. "For reasons you don't have to know. Never have economic relationships with your

so-called friends").

He certainly loved movies as a child, and found solace in the silence of **Keaton** and **Chaplin**. Homages and allusions to past masters are woven into his films: **Le Havre** nods to **Marcel Carn  ** (the shoeshine is called Marcel, and his wife Arletty, after the star of Carn  's **Les Enfants du Paradis**); there are also nods to **Jean-Pierre Melville** and **Robert Bresson**.

His love of film is equalled only by his despair at contemporary cinema – not least his own. He insists no director has made a masterpiece since the 1970s. What about **Scorsese**? He snorts, and glugs. "**Goodfellas** is bullshit. It is the lousiest film ever, ever made. After **Raging Bull**, he was a lousy amateur." Terrence Malick? "The first one [**Badlands**] was OK. That was in the 1970s. After that they were Christian bullshit."

There is just time to top up with a beer. I ask Kaurism  ki why he has not made a film in six years. Because his films are dreadful, he says; he is getting old and slowing down, and he has already given too much of his life to cinema. What has he been doing with his time? "I prefer to wander around mushroom areas in the forest." Eating them? "Of course. Finland has the best." He gives me a handy hint on hallucinogenics. "Cook them before you put them in the tea. I don't give recipes, but I only eat the ones I pick."

Kaurism  ki sparks up one last time, and we toast the good things in life: drink, mushrooms, death, his wife, love. I ask him what he thinks of his most recent film. "This one?" He looks shocked at the question, and asks again. "My own?" He pauses. "It may be the first one I don't hate."

That's brilliant, I say. "Give me five. On the side. Up above."

"Down below. You're too slow," he says.

And he actually laughs. "I don't like the film, but I don't hate it either. For me, that's progress."

#### Upcoming Cramphorn Films:

Friday, 14 September — **Moonrise Kingdom** dir. Wes Anderson, USA, 2012  
 Tuesday, 18 September — **Salmon Fishing In The Yemen** dir. Lasse Hallstrom, UK, 2012  
 Sunday, 23 September — **Monsieur Lazhar** dir. Philippe Falardeau, Canada, 2011

#### Next CFC Film:

Tuesday 25 September — **Once Upon a Time in Anatolia** dir. Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2011



‘FEW DIRECTORS have quite so singular a voice as that possessed by Aki Kaurismäki. For 30 years the eccentric Finn has brought his charming retro-sensibility – a bit of Jacques Tati blended with incongruous kitchen sink – to the widest imaginable variety of subjects. All life is here, but not in the form you normally expect to find it.

With apologies to the good people of that northern French port city, the latest Kaurismäki project does not journey out with the most romantic title. The name “Le Havre” conjures up images of stalled motor cars, bad fast food and afternoons spent dreaming of another, still-distant destination. As expected, however, the director makes the ferry port all his own. He has indulged in some location shooting. Grey docks and looming vessels make an appearance. But the film is, for the most part, set in a vanished, proudly artificial version of working-class France. It takes place today, in the past and at no particular time. This man brings respectability to the word “charming”.

The scenario would suit a harsh neo-realist such as Ken Loach or Robert Guédiguian. Our hero is an elderly shoeshine, once a bohemian author, named (make of this what you will) Marcel Marx. Given breath by the hardy, solemn-faced André Wilms, Marcel spends his days trying to attract the attention of travellers, chatting to his loyal wife and hanging out in the sort of seedy bar that appears in so many Kaurismäki projects.

One day Marcel encounters an illegal immigrant from Africa who is trying to make his way to London. Assisted by various, equally open-minded neighbours, he offers the lad shelter and helps him avoid the attentions of a diligent – but decent – police detective (the reliably hangdog Jean-Pierre Darroussin). But tragedy is looming at home. Marcel’s wife has contracted a serious disease and the prognosis is looking increasingly bleak.

Spoilsports may complain that Kaurismäki sometimes imposes his key tropes in slightly scattershot manner. Aki veterans will expect an appearance by a sat-upon, likable mutt. Sure enough, Laika, a yellow dog with sad eyes, delivers one of the film’s best performances. Will some aging rock singer of dubious talent turn up to warble tunes from a possessed jukebox? Yes. Roberto Piazza offers Johnny Hallyday shapes as the bellowing Little Bob.

The lounge lizards could have been beamed directly from earlier Kaurismäki pieces such as [Leningrad Cowboys Go America](#) or [The Man Without a Past](#). It is, however, difficult to begrudge such minor indulgences in a project that – rather than labouring under post-modern footnotes – swells with unbridled enthusiasm for its affectionately drawn characters. No other director could maintain this degree of optimism while telling such a superficially grim story.

Villains lurk politely in the shadows, while the decent working-class folk of Le Havre struggle bravely to do the decent thing. Darroussin’s cop may dress like a film-noir sleuth: fedora clamped on head, black raincoat anally buttoned up. But his amiable manner reassures us that, when confronted with the inevitable moral quandary, he is certain to do the right thing.

Le Havre reminds us that Kaurismäki has always been at home to fairytales. Whereas those neo-realists regard neat, happy endings as a betrayal of narrative purity, the singular Finn embraces such denouements with the enthusiasm of a clever child. The new film closes with a quite outrageous gesture of kindness from a benevolent God. Those on board the Kaurismäki Express will welcome the twist as a manifestation of the director’s unshakable humanity (and humanism). If you find yourself gurgling in furious disbelief then you can, perfectly reasonably, congratulate yourself on remaining true to our era’s stubborn nihilism.

A lovely film about unlovely things.’

*Donald Clarke – The Irish Times*

**Finnish filmmaker Aki Kaurismäki** is one of the most acclaimed writer-directors in the world. Famous for his adaptation of Dostoevsky’s [Crime and Punishment](#), as well as [The Match Factory Girl](#) and [The Man Without a Past](#), he also has a reputation as something of a renegade. Kaurismäki boycotted the 2003 Oscars – where his *Past* was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film – in response to America’s foreign policy at the time. This was but a blip compared to his U.S. attack of 1986, in which he directed the hilarious short film [Rocky VI](#) (the opposite of [Rocky IV](#)), in which the soviet Ivan defeats the iconic Reagan-era hero. As he is reported to phrase it, Rocky VI was “revenge on Mr. Stallone, who I think is an asshole”. Fighting words, literally.

In his most recent picture, *Le Havre*, Kaurismäki invites back [André Wilms](#) to play Marcel Marx, the starry-eyed shoeshine first seen in 1992’s [La Vie de Bohème](#). The film certainly has a political undercurrent, concerning the plight of an illegal African immigrant taken under the wing of Marcel in the French port town. But it’s also warmly funny, sweet-natured, and features a show-stopping musical performance from *Le Havre*’s ‘local Elvis,’ Little Bob. Mr Kaurismäki was kind enough to answer some of our questions via email.

**Q: What was the first germ of an idea, or seed of inspiration, for *Le Havre*?**

AK: I was a customer of a shoe shiner and [at the] same time reading a news-paper which had news of one more sunken, refugee filled boat in the Mediterranean.

**Q: This is your second film to feature the character of Marcel, played once again by André Wilms. What is it about the character that drew you back to him?**

AK: This way I avoided the trouble of inventing a totally new character (which always means work and worries) plus I liked the original one, kind of [like] Athos from the *Three Musketeers*, from “*La Vie de Bohème*”.

**Q: Are you one to write yourself into your screenplays? Do you see yourself in any one character?**

AK: Mostly the main character is a tiny bit my “alter ego”, especially in the way they react to the surrounding reality.

**Q: How did you find Little Bob, the *Le Havre* local who gets a musical interlude in the middle of the film?**

AK: He is kind of Elvis of the town and it is practically impossible to not at least hear about him there, but I knew his music already from late 70s when he even had a tour in Finland.

**Q: *Le Havre* was the Finnish submission for the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar, but the film unfortunately didn’t make the shortlist of potential nominees. Do you think it had anything to do with your boycott of the ceremony back in 2003?**

AK: I don’t know. Maybe. Institutions, like human beings, normally use a given possibility to a small revenge.

**Q: How do you gauge the success of your films? Is it through critical and audience reception, or box office numbers, or are you able to discern at the end of filming whether or not you’ve achieved what you wanted?**

AK: The producer in me is slightly interested in numbers but as a scriptwriter/director I’m most concerned of people’s reaction, not their amount.

**Q: You’ve said *Le Havre* is the first in a trilogy about port cities. Can you tell us a little about the next instalments?**

AK: Since I’m lazier than Middle East Peace Process I need to create some kind of trilogies and announce them loudly just not to continue sleeping but de facto I know nothing of the latter parts, yet.

**Q: *Le Havre*, the town, not only has its own board game, but now its own movie. Have the locals embraced the film?**

AK: They surely have and that makes me truly happy since *Le Havre* was not only bombed down by the Allies during the war but also in France a bit “forgotten” or “looked down” town which makes the citizens even prouder in their eternal resistance.