

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON



FALLEN LEAVES
(Language: Finnish, Arabic)

Director: Aki Kaurismäki

UK Release: 2023

Running time: 81 minutes

Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 11 September 2024

“Aki Kaurismäki is the Finnish director who is notable for being not simply one of the directors who is always welcome in the Cannes competition, but also is one of the rarer subset who actually makes funny films; that is, actually-funny and not just arthouse-funny. *Fallen Leaves* is another of Kaurismäki’s beguiling and delightful cinephile comedies, featuring foot-tapping rock’n’roll. It’s romantic and sweet-natured, in a deadpan style that in no way undermines or ironises the emotions involved and with some sharp things to say about contemporary politics.

I found myself rooting for the hero and heroine here in an uncomplicated way that I hadn’t for any other film at Cannes. It’s something which should be adored by Finnish film fanciers – who will incidentally savour the silent cameo from Finnish director and Cannes competition veteran Juho Kuosmanen – but it’s really for everyone and despite the title, this is a movie with springtime in its heart.

Ansa (Alma Pöysti) is a woman who works in a supermarket on an exploitative zero-hours contract, and resents that part of her job is to throw away perfectly good food at the end of the day; a sullen security guard clocks her giving stuff like this to desperate hungry people, and she is fired for trying to take home an expired sandwich.

Later Ansa finds herself in a karaoke bar where she meets a construction worker called Holappa (Jussi Vatanen), and there is a heartmelting connection between these two lonely people. They go on a very successful date to the cinema, although a subsequent series of terrible mishaps means that their relationship could be doomed – and here Kaurismäki may intend us to appreciate a filmic echo with *An Affair to Remember* with Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr.

Moreover, Holappa is a drinker, perhaps an alcoholic, and the booze brings out a nasty side. Idiotically, he doesn’t quite appreciate that drink is imperilling his chance at happiness with his soulmate.

There’s something else too: periodically the characters will turn on the radio for the news (no one appears to have anything as modern as a smartphone or even a

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TV – the action could as well be happening in the early 60s); this is all about the Russian attack on Ukraine, which fills the listener with resentment, depression and defiance. And undoubtedly Kaurismäki intends us to realise something very specific: Finland is on the border with Russia. Fear of Putinism is not the distant matter it might be in the UK, America or even Germany: for Finland, Putin’s troops are very close by. The war is clouding Finland’s sense of wellbeing, but Finns are still intent on carrying on. *Fallen Leaves* is a film with a big heart, and absurd and cartoony as it may be, it fills you with a feelgood glow.”

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 22 May 2023

“Aki Kaurismäki is the modern master of deadpan. From *Shadows in Paradise* (1986) to *Le Havre* (2011), the Finnish director balances his near-impenetrable characters with an undeniable allure. Stripped of superfluous emotions, Kaurismäki’s characters resonate with an understated humanity. Often, their stoic exteriors would allow a more poignant appreciation of their rich internal landscapes. For Kaurismäki, the raw, brutal reality of our interactions is what’s exciting. More often than not, I’m pulled in.

However, *Fallen Leaves* misses Kaurismäki’s usual mark. Instead, his film emerges as half-baked—possibly half-alive—as if we’re missing the access point to this story. Like his other films, *Fallen Leaves* is brimming with subtle whimsy and piercing humor, but throughout the 81-minute runtime, he never sells it. There’s one too many walls between the audience and the characters, despite the good performances and the film’s intriguing premise.

Speaking of half-alive, *Fallen Leaves*’s two unassuming lovebirds are Holappa (Jussi Vatanen) and Ansa (Alma Pöysti). Holappa, a drunk and a metalworker, lives in a small bunk with about five coworkers. They work, drink (a lot), sleep, and sing karaoke on the weekends. That’s where he meets Ansa, a stoic woman battling to find reliable work. After getting fired at the local supermarket for stealing expired goods, she finds work as a dishwasher at a shady bar and then as a worker in an industrial factory. They both are cast aside by society, regardless of their attempts otherwise.

Admittedly, *Fallen Leaves* successfully creates a compelling love story on the surface, and the inexpressive delivery bolsters the alienation felt by his working-class protagonists. Even more so, Vatanen and Pöysti deliver truly convincing performances, molded by a real sense of desire to connect. Still, the

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film wavers between its thematic modes, failing to pick up a cadence, making it a dragging watch.”

Maxwell Rabb, *Chicago Reader*, November 21, 2023

“Even though Aki Kaurismäki has won every award going and is a household name in his native Finland, where he is treated like a god, it may be that you’ve never heard of him. He is the business. He specialises in understated dramas about deadpan losers whose hopes are often crushed, but who somehow find comfort. If that doesn’t sell it, try this: he is so briskly clear-eyed that his films never outstay their welcome and his latest, *Fallen Leaves*, runs to just 81 minutes. Could we love him more? Might he not be our favourite auteur of all time?

Fallen Leaves, which won the Jury Prize at Cannes and is Finland’s submission for the Oscars, has a straightforward premise that isn’t original by any means: can two lonely people find each other? But his take is original, if hard to explain. Kaurismäki somehow suffuses every frame with feeling, even if his storytelling is so pared back it is almost unfeeling. It’s the opposite of melodrama, whatever that is. The film follows two main characters. One is Ansa (Alma Poysti), a middle-aged woman who lives alone in a Helsinki apartment and loses her supermarket job when a belligerent security guard discovers she’s hidden an expired sandwich in her handbag. Meanwhile, across town, Holappa (Jussi Vatanen), a lanky metal-worker, is fired from a construction site due to an accident that his boss blames on his drinking. Actually, it was due to faulty machinery, but it’s true that Holappa is an alcoholic with vodka stashed in his locker. The pair first meet in a karaoke bar. They clock each other but don’t speak. The script is so spare it probably only runs to a couple of pages, but every moment is imbued with meaning and lonesomeness. I was often put in mind of Edward Hopper’s paintings.

The two next run into each other in the street, and from then on it’s a romance (of sorts) as they repeatedly connect and then lose each other. It is sometimes very funny, but you’ll have to take my word for it. I typed out a line that made me laugh at the cinema but in print it looks stupid. What happens in Kaurismäki’s world needs to stay there.

And it’s a world that is all his own. The film is set at a time unknown. The Ukraine-Russia war is on the radio but the phones are landlines with curly cords and there’s a poster for *Brief Encounter* outside the cinema. There is no fancy camerawork. Mostly, it stays still while characters talk to each other in a

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flattened, dour way. And the palette is exaggerated, with colours popping against deeply saturated backgrounds. Unlike Wes Anderson, however, Kaurismäki is not purely a stylist whose films are fundamentally empty. He has plenty to say about how people are able to care for each other in a world that does not care for them.

There isn't a great deal of plot to unfold: Holappa is sacked from another job, Ansa finds new work in a factory, then there's an accident. That's pretty much the sum of it, although Ansa adopts a stray dog because, presumably, what are she and Holappa if not strays in search of good homes? Kaurismäki loves his characters and treats them with such respect and affection it's like you've known them for all your life. Rather than just 81 minutes."

Deborah Ross, *The Spectator*, 30 November 2023.

"The films of the Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki (*Le Havre*, *The Man Without a Past*) rank alongside abandoned teddy bears strapped to the bumpers of bin lorries and really ugly dogs in rehoming centres as the most melancholy things in the world. And his latest, *Fallen Leaves*, is no exception. Themes in this tragicomic romance include chronic alcoholism, job loss, isolation and despair. The soundtrack features ballads about inclement weather, disappointment and cemeteries (with special emphasis on disappointing, rain-lashed cemeteries). What's remarkable, though, is dour though it is, this is an unexpectedly uplifting film. With its droll, deadpan humour and poignant central story of two lonely souls connecting, it's the closest Kaurismäki gets to a feelgood movie (albeit a feelgood movie with incipient liver failure).

The setting is modern-day Helsinki; however, through music choices and a handsome, if slightly defeated-looking retro colour palette, we are given the sense of a city still nursing the hangover of the mid 20th century. Ansa (Alma Pöysti) works in a supermarket, before she loses her job for taking a pack of out-of-date cheese. Holappa (Jussi Vatanen) is a metalworker, before he loses his for drinking. A chance encounter at a karaoke bar leads to a tentative courtship. They share few words, but the silences are filled with longing. Happiness, though, is hard-won in the films of Kaurismäki, and fate conspires against them. Holappa struggles to see a future beyond his drinking; Ansa adopts an apologetic-looking stray dog. But there's hope, delivered with a disarming wink – a near-perfect moment in this understated charmer of a film."

Wendy Ide, *The Observer*, 2 December 2023