



# Fallen Leaves

**Director:** Aki Kaurismäki

**Country:** Finland

**Date:** 2022

**A review by Philip Concannon for *Sight and Sound* magazine:**

Coming six years after Aki Kaurismäki announced his retirement from filmmaking, *Fallen Leaves* feels like a return to very familiar territory. The director's last two features were unusually explicit in their commentary on the social issues of our time, with both *Le Havre* (2011) and *The Other Side of Hope* (2017) engaging directly with Europe's migrant crisis. Kaurismäki's new film harkens back to the small-scale stories of ordinary Finns with which he made his reputation; in fact, it has been labelled a belated fourth instalment of his Proletariat Trilogy, which consists of *Shadows in Paradise* (1986), *Ariel* (1988) and *The Match Factory Girl* (1990).



That's not to suggest Kaurismäki is turning away entirely from current events. In *Fallen Leaves*, every time Ansa (Alma Pöysti) switches on the radio, she hears another grim update from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a conflict that weighs heavily on the Finnish psyche thanks to the country's shared border with Russia. The precarious state of labour rights in the modern world is also at the forefront of Kaurismäki's thoughts here. Ansa works as a supermarket shelf-stacker until she is reprimanded for giving expired food to a homeless man and taking a microwave meal home for herself rather than throwing it into the garbage as instructed. Employed on a zero-hours contract, Ansa is summarily dismissed with no compensation – and it was perhaps serendipitous that on the same day this reviewer watched *Fallen Leaves*, the

Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK) began a series of strike actions in protest at the newly elected right-wing government's proposed changes to workers' rights and welfare benefits.

Aside from these 2023 signifiers, *Fallen Leaves* takes place more recognisably in the timeless zone of Kaurismäkiland. Over the course of his career, this director has established an immediately identifiable aesthetic. Within his static frames, the *mise en scène* is carefully arranged using a handful of key objects and splashes of vibrant colour, expressively lit on 35mm, as usual, by cinematographer Timo Salminen.

The settings tend to be small apartments, gloomy bars and unprepossessing workplaces, and the characters who inhabit these places are lonely, melancholy souls who behave with a Bressonian lack of affect and deliver their few lines of dialogue in an unwavering monotone. "I've never laughed so much," Ansa declares when she and Holappa (Jussi Vatanen) emerge from the cinema, although it's hard to imagine anyone laughing uproariously in Kaurismäki's world. (I won't spoil the reveal of the entirely unexpected film that they watched, except to say that it's from a director with whom Kaurismäki shares a spiritual kinship, and the cinephile gag that immediately follows this scene is one of the film's funniest.)

Some might accuse Kaurismäki of coasting on style and repeating himself in this, his 20th feature, especially since elements of *Fallen Leaves* recall much of his earlier work, notably *The Match Factory Girl* and *Drifting Clouds* (1996), but the kind of casual mastery that he exhibits in his direction is very easy to take for granted. *Fallen Leaves* is shot and edited with flawless precision, with anything extraneous jettisoned, and Kaurismäki makes every moment of its 81 minutes count.

The opposites-attract romance between Ansa and Holappa begins wordlessly – when they lock eyes across a karaoke bar while their friends flirt – and they haven’t even exchanged names when Ansa writes her phone number on a piece of paper after their first date, but it’s hard not to gasp when Holappa lets that piece of paper slip out of his pocket and blow down the street. By that point, you’re already so invested in this relationship because Kaurismäki makes us understand how important such a bond is for people who have very little else to keep them buoyed in their lives.

Loneliness and the need for a human connection is a theme that runs throughout Kaurismäki’s work. He illuminates Ansa’s isolated existence for us in such an economical way; for example, when she invites Holappa over to dinner, she first has to go out and buy a second plate and another set of cutlery – a perfect example of Kaurismäki using a visual shorthand to quickly give us a deeper understanding of his characters. He often finds great poignancy in such images, such as the pile of cigarette butts outside the cinema entrance that indicates how long Holappa has been waiting there in the hope that Ansa will pass by.

He also uses the actors’ faces superbly, despite directing them to give such undemonstrative performances. Does any contemporary director cast faces as well as Kaurismäki? Just look at the actor playing the security guard who gets Ansa fired from the supermarket – he only seems to have one facial expression, but what an expression.



Much of *Fallen Leaves* is staged in medium shots, where the bright-eyed Alma Pöysti creates a visual contrast with the lanky Jussi Vatanen’s hangdog features, but when the camera moves in for close-ups Pöysti imbues her performance with so much understated emotion and nuance. When Ansa tells Holappa in no uncertain terms that there can be no future for this relationship unless he deals with the drinking problem that killed her father and brother, there’s a tangible edge of anger and hurt underneath her words, and in the context of a film as free of overt gestures as this one is, the smile and wink that she gives late in the film has a seismic impact.

Kaurismäki has said in the past that his goal is to make films that can be understood across all cultures without any subtitles, a desire that led him to make his own attempt at a silent film, *Juha* (1999); his work remains heavily indebted to the master filmmakers of the pre-sound era. He has often drawn comparisons to Buster Keaton for the deadpan way his characters react to all manner of triumphs and disasters, but the more apposite reference point in this instance is Charlie Chaplin.

*Fallen Leaves* is a film about small, ordinary people struggling to get by in an increasingly impersonal and industrial age, who hold on to their humanity and their sense of hope by finding love. In short, Kaurismäki has made his *Modern Times* (1936), and the association is underlined in this film’s lovely closing image.

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