Closing Arguments
Kaurismäki and Melodrama

- Reading filmic codes as evidence to make arguments
- Context: Who is Aki Kaurismäki?
- Why is Aki Kaurismäki’s film *The Man Without a Past* relevant to our course?
- Kaurismäki’s films use history of cinema (melodrama) to make evident and critique stylistic and historical “crime scenes”
Filmic Codes as Evidence

- “Object, manner, and means” (Aristotle)
- Codes are evidence that point to manner
- Different interpretations of codes (means) as evidence lead to different arguments about manner (communication)
Context: Who is Aki Kaurismäki?

- Another question of codes
- Some historical codes
  - Production system
  - Aesthetic style
  - Relationship to historical moment
- Some authorial codes
  - Authorial signature
  - Critics’ opinion
  - Audience tastes
  - Genre elements
- *Ariel* (1988)
What authorial and historical codes are evident in this sequence from *Ariel*?
What authorial and historical codes are evident in this sequence from *Drifting Clouds*?
Kaurismäki in Historical Context

- Transformation of the Finnish Welfare State
- European Common Market (EC) Integration 1985
  - “Structural Transformation”
  - Changes in labor-capital relationships underpinning welfare state
- Casino Economy late-80s
- Collapse of USSR 1991
- Finnish “Depression” 1993-1995
- EU Membership, globalization, and economic growth post-1995

Looking for work in Ariel

Helsinki’s Forum Shopping Center
Economic destruction as narrative beginning in Ariel
The displaced worker arrives in Helsinki by train.
A landmark building figures in the backdrop of the beating, establishing a historical point of reference.
Sanomatalo, Helsinki
Kaurismäki’s style

• 1930s-1940s Studio style
  – Static camera
  – Elliptical narration
  – Music conveys film’s stakes
  – Dense referentiality to cinematic history

• Historical contextualizing
  – Temporal jumble in mise-en-scene
  – Laconic, “working-class” characters
  – Subtly conveyed political-economic “lack”

• Melodrama
  – “Means” of representation that supposes underlying moral structure (contra realism or modernism)
  – Drama that works to force underlying moral structure into view
    • Subjective moral sources
    • Collective moral sources
  – Melodrama stages a stylistic and historical critique
A moment of melodrama in the *Match Factory Girl* (1990)
How *Does the Man Without a Past* force a moral structure into view?
Täältä tullaan elämä
(Here We Come) 1980
The Connection

• Break in Kaurismäki’s stylistic pattern undercores reference to *Here We Come, Life!*

• Films share a similar conflict:
  - The outcast seeks to construct a new life among a group of other disenfranchised people
  - The social world from which the outcast is excluded lacks concern for the outcast’s situation

• Films share a similar relationship
  - Kati Outinen’s (Irma) first screen role in *Here We Come, Life!*
    - Plays a similar tough but compassionate character

• Visual design of mise-en-scene links melodramatic home to economic transition, and to the infrastructure of globalization
Allan Sekula, “Waterfront Vendors living in Containers,” Veracruz Mexico (Fish Story, 1996)
Nieminan (Juhani Niemelä) and Kaisa (Kaija Pkarinen) outside their home in Man Without a Past
Automated container harbor, Long Beach, CA
Automated container harbor, Helsinki
Allan Sekula: Striking workers, Galicia, Spain (*Fish Story*, 1996)
Struggles over the Home

• In melodrama, home is the space of order and innocence, which is disturbed by intrusion.

• In *Man Without a Past*, home is the space of order and innocence, but it is built in with containers, parodying “nativist” notions of home.

• The container makes melodramatic struggle over home and identity central, while creating a political-economic focus.

• Part of distancing strategy that uses irony to siphon off overly intense emotions, thus making political criticism focused and digestible.
Musical irony
Argument

- Kaurismäki’s films use history of cinema (melodrama) to make evident and critique stylistic and historical “crime scenes”
- Orthodox filmmaking style that draws on, among others, Hollywood’s old studio films
- Highlights contrasts with contemporary, ‘glossy’ Hollywood style
- Asserts a moral underpinning to cinema
- That moral underpinning connects to larger social bonds and ethical questions about them
- Part of a resurgence of melodrama in a time of fluidity and transformation caused by globalization