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Fallen Leaves

Frederick Ruf
Georgetown University, rufb@georgetown.edu

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Fallen Leaves

Abstract

This is a film review of *Fallen Leaves* (2023), directed by Aki Kaurismäki.

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Fallen Leaves (2023), dir. Aki Kaurismäki

It used to be called black comedy, but it's aptly called dark comedy now. *Catch 22*, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *Dr. Strangelove*, Monty Python: irony and understatement in a grim but grinning awareness of death, isolation, and contingency. There was always something adolescent about dark comedy, an Existentialism filtered through middle school. Sartre's very serious *Nausea* became Salinger's much more entertaining *The Catcher in the Rye*. These comedies were able to make light of the darkness, as adolescents often do. Romanticism was famously humorless and so was Emersonian Transcendentalism, but in the twentieth century, literature, film, and religion could laugh – or had to laugh. Think Walker Percy or Flannery O'Connor, whose religious sensibility

ran to grotesques. A good man was not only hard to find, his plight was worth a rueful smile. Dark comedy is, in fact, a kind of theodicy, though less an explanation than an attitude: bear it with an amused grin. Religion has a special relation to dark comedy because of religion's blunt acknowledgement of finitude and its opposition to resignation. We might as well say it: laughter is redemptive.

Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki's *Fallen Leaves* should be called a dark comedy like those mid-century works for it shows us deadpan humor in a world gone mad. It's a world with plenty of the music, film, romance, and joy but they're far out of reach for real people. And yet, this film manages to be not only funny but also optimistic and charming, in spite of the wasteland. *Fallen Leaves* is not comedy and it's not tragedy; it's in that twilight, liminal zombie zone between comedy and tragedy, and maybe that's the theodicy of all dark comedies.

Ansa works in a supermarket in Helsinki with a cartoonish flat affect, a bit zombie-like. Half of her job is stocking shelves and half is throwing away expired food: her face remains utterly immobile in both cases. Right from the start, the title of this movie echoes: both Ansa and the food are fallen leaves, as we see when she's fired for taking some of that expired food home. She's impassive about being terminated, too. What else is new? People are fired for absurd reasons. Kaurismäki's other films are concerned with the discarded and life-less, as well. In *The Other Side of Hope* a stowaway immigrant rises from a vast pile of coal in a ship's hold. He's just stone, just dust. A woman in the same film wants to retire to Mexico City "where I'll drink sake and dance the hula-hula. I need action after all this peace and quiet." Even her dreams are misinformed. Frequently, Kaurismäki's films present the drone of working-class life. But all are humorous in a similar deadpan way.

Every time Ansa turns on the radio there's news of another atrocity in Ukraine, especially ominous in a country – Finland – bordering on Russia. There's nothing hopeful geopolitically, but perhaps there is at the karaoke bar where Ansa goes with her friend and co-worker Liisa. A less entertained crowd is hard to imagine. The word “dour” kept coming to mind as no one showed any animation at the liveliness of the music, “Get on, baby, get on!” sung flatly to a rocking Chuck Berry-like tune, with just one nodding head in the entire room. Singers and drinkers are equally joyless, with a more comical than dejected affect. But this film isn't about Scandinavian seriousness, it's about the human plight of being caught in a world that just doesn't sweep us toward romance or joy, though music and film seem to promise they will. The movie isn't “a lovely ode to movies,” as one headline had it; instead, it's a love affair lackadaisically swum against two tides, the overly optimistic current of music and cinema and the droning of proletarian labor and war. There is no magic, no light, no dance. But, damn, they're funny in their utter impassivity.

Parallel with Ansa and Liisa are Holappa and Huotari, toiling away with heavy machinery while dressed like robots. The slow-motion repartee between the two men is a pleasure to watch. “The number of vices is endless,” observes an alcoholic Holappa. Holappa accuses the quiet Huotari of being a babbler. When they're considering going to a karaoke bar, a decidedly untough Holappa declares, “Tough guys don't sing.” “Listen and appreciate,” says Huotari, when he goes up to the stage. All in a deadpan tone. The men are in the mood for love without having any knack for it at all, and karaoke is a fine figure for the empty parody of love, singing another's song in tuneless imitation. “The berries on rowan trees grow crimson as blood,” sings Huotari, a song to spark romance if ever there was one. “You have a firm voice for someone so elderly,” says Liisa. The middle-aged Huotari is nonplussed.

Ansa and Holappa manage to stumble toward romance, but they're thwarted by film cliches – he loses her phone number, she hasn't told him her name; they look for, and miss each other, by minutes; he walks to meet her and has an accident. Such cliches can't be avoided any more than their grim jobs or their plain homes, but Kaurismäki gives new life to those tropes when Holappa and Ansa react to obstacles so impassively, and viewers very much want them to reconnect. They go to the cinema, another cliché of the muse of love, but they've picked Jim Jarmusch's zombie movie, *The Dead Don't Die*. Music, cinema, Hollywood cliches: nothing sweeps these two towards romance. And yet they move. The dead don't die.

Two sad Finns in a wasteland, zombies in an impersonal industrial society. And still, they don't give up. Ansa adopts a stray dog and when Holappa finally leaves the hospital, he swears off liquor. The final shot should become a classic: crossing a park, Ansa striding, Holappa hobbling along on crutches, and the dog, Chaplin. They're all fallen leaves, “born to sorrow and clothed with disappointments,” as one of the film's songs has it. Yet, in the final song, we're told, “when autumn falls, the leaves in the park with bright splendor glow.” They're all little Tramps, making their way through hardship with decency and dignity, hobbling toward the future.

It's that attitude that makes *Fallen Leaves* worth the attention of those interested in religion. William James judges pure pessimism, not religion; he sees the complaints about life in Nietzsche and Schopenhauer as “the sick shriekings of two dying rats.” Religion, James says, is an addition to life. At its most extreme it's “the floods and waterspouts of God.” There are no waterspouts in *Fallen Leaves* or in dark humor generally, but managing to hobble toward love is surely a genuine breeze.