



To Hell with Realism

Dismounting the bicycle, he asks, "What is it?" "More living dead," a portly man smoking a cigarette responds.

They are watching armed police and investigators gather in front of a shipping container. A security guard doing his rounds heard cries coming from within, so authorities are now prying the container open. What they see inside are not the living dead – lifeless bodies, zombies, *Muselmanns* – as the portly man predicted, but seated refugees, proud and dignified, staring back at them and out into the dark movie theatre. Not horror and chaos. Just ordinary people who happen to be in this difficult circumstance.

Aki Kaurismäki had originally planned on filming a container full of filth. This and a few dead bodies, he reasoned, would adhere to the reality of having been locked up and transported for two weeks.

But something didn't feel right, "I could not go through with that, and I thought I'd do the complete opposite. Instead, I'd show them wearing their respectable Sunday best – to hell with realism" (interview with Peter von Bagh, *Film Comment*, September–October 2011).

“To hell with realism” is an aesthetic choice, and I’ve been wondering about this scene in *Le Havre* (2011) for years, ever since I first saw it at TIFF Bell Lightbox in Toronto. I can recall my feelings on leaving that cinema.

Walking home in the night rain, the rattle of the King streetcar brought me back to this world, where refugees and migrants frequently perish in containers as they attempt to cross man-made borders. But the city lights reflecting in puddles and the patter of water hitting umbrellas – the two women huddled under a jacket, laughing as they ran for shelter – somehow made life seem less real than the celluloid world of happy endings that had just been projected onscreen ...



In *Le Havre*, the young refugee Idrissa (played by Blondin Miguel) finds himself on the run in an unfamiliar city. Opposite: Marcel (André Wilms), who makes his living shining shoes, tries to throw the local police inspector (Jean-Pierre Darroussin) off the boy's trail.

I'm with my partner, Gökbörü, and, as always, we share our thoughts after seeing a film. It's one of the ways in which we remain in love.

"What did you think?" We're at an intersection, and when the orange hand turns into walking man, we cross.

"I don't know," I say, "It was definitely entertaining."

But I'm uneasy that a film about refugees entertained me and put lightness in my step.

The basic plot: a container carrying African refugees from Gabon, en route to London, is discovered in the French port city of Le Havre (or "The Haven"). A young boy, Idrissa (played by Blondin Miguel), escapes and becomes a fugitive – the refugee as fugitive (*refugee* and *fugitive* share the same Latin root word: *to flee*). At the pier, Idrissa chances upon a poor shoe shiner, Marcel Marx (André Wilms), who throws the police off his scent and leaves food for the boy. Then, Idrissa secretly follows Marx home.

LE HAVRE IMAGES: JANUS FILMS

Without discussion, hesitation, or zeal, Marx (yes, a nod to Karl) and his cast of working-class, misfit neighbours work together to protect the boy from the state who, in the character of Inspector Monet (Jean-Pierre Darroussin, inspired by Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*), is out to capture him. It turns out that Monet is sympathetic all along, and through a series of fantastic co-operations, Idrissa evades arrest and sails off to London on a fishing trawler to reunite with his mother.

We make a turn at Spadina, heading north, "It all got resolved so easily ... like a fable," I say. Later, I would read an online review that called the film a white saviour narrative – another white man who comes to the rescue of a black boy. Yes, fair enough, but ...

"Don't you think the style is interesting, though?" my partner asks. We're approaching Queen Street, where we see the distinctive golden arches of the McDonald's on the northwest corner. Panhandlers, runaways, and unhoused folks frequent this corner, seeking a hot cup of coffee and some change. I remember a young woman in camo holding a sign that read: *Don't need charity. Just need to eat*. When I dropped a toonie into her crumpled bucket hat, she and the loyal dog sitting next to her looked up at me. Their faces without expression.



As if it is a reward for his good deed, Marx's terminally ill wife is miraculously cured of her ailment in the end. Music swells, the credits roll.

Gökbörü continues, "the dry humour isn't supposed to match the subject matter, but it works –"

It's true. The comedic deadpan so characteristic of Kaurismäki's oeuvre is brilliantly applied to the grave topic of refugee migration – to the best of my knowledge, for the first time in film history. A decade later, Ben Sharrock's *Limbo* (2020) will use deadpan to underscore the profound melancholy of refugees awaiting a decision on their asylum claims on a small, remote Scottish isle. Everything is offbeat, humorously touching, and at times surreal.

The most realist moment in the film is actually a dream sequence where Omar, the protagonist (Amir El-Masry), reunites with his militant brother Nabil (Kais Nashif) in a cabin amidst a blinding snowstorm. Reminiscing about life in Syria and reconciling their differences, the naturalistic dialogue and emotive acting, drenched in firelight, build dramatic tension.

As Omar bites into an imagined piece of amardeen (dried apricot paste his mother used to make), everything else in the film evaporates into an illusion, morning dew in the blinding desert sun. Earlier, he explained the Arabic saying *bukra fil mish-mish* to a friend, "tomorrow there will be apricots." Used to refer to things that will never happen, like "in your dreams."

But Kaurismäki broke ground by breaking with the conventions of realism – and its handmaiden melodrama – to offer a different way of representing refugees. In *Le Havre*, lines delivered in flat tones, droll movements, and unarticulated motivations empty the plot of its spectacle and the characters of their interiority; they become stock and unbelievable – disbelief is not suspended but let loose to freely roam.

And this happens through a withholding of expressive emotion, or through emotion that is underperformed. And without these emotions, the expected scripts of refuge are disrupted.

What are these emotions? Fear, pity, sadness, empathy, hope, gratitude. What are these scripts? We've seen them before, over and over again: the suffering refugee, who is a victim defined by her loss and trauma, seeks freedom from oppression. Her journey is rife with hardships. Those who save her are thanked in perpetuity. Clearly, there are good guys and bad guys, safe places and dangerous places in the world. Horror, suspense, thrill. Relief. But also, so much tragedy. Deadpan deflates the high drama of the refugee story, leaving it sagging like an air mattress in the morning.

All this came to me later, of course. At the time, I resisted this artistic treatment – do deadpan and anti-realism trivialize the refugee's experience?



Is this fairy tale so fundamentally disconnected from reality? And if so, is the film an escapist fiction meant to make First World viewers feel morally uplifted – all ends well, and we can rest safely at night?

I was expecting a realistic portrayal – having been conditioned, as we are, to associate realism with solemnity. So much so that suffering can only be relayed through realism, and realism can only be achieved through the gravity of pain, misery, and anguish. When we call something realistic, we say, it depicts what we know of this world; it shows life as it really is. Take for instance, Jean-François Millet's classic realist painting *The Gleaners*, where three peasant women with bent backs collect the dregs of abundant harvest, gathering grains no one wants. Their solidify roots them to the ground, outstretched arms so real that you swear you feel the ache in your own body. Nothing is idealized or romanticized – this is life as it is lived. But it's not just the manipulation of colour and light, depth of perspective, and verisimilitude of form that lend the painting its realism. It's also the focus on ordinary people struggling to eke out a living, because realism belongs to those who are marginalized, who hang on to the lowest rung of the social ladder.

A woman I met, upon learning that I had grown up in a refugee camp, exclaimed, “That must have been so hard on you, so much pain for a young child!”

My mind travelled back to the dirt roads flooded by monsoon rains – and I recalled how we children stripped off our clothes and screamed with glee as we pretended to swim in the muddy water, an endless river that would lead us back home.

I don’t think she could’ve understood how true that was.

A genuine engagement and empathetic response can only come from the refugee’s suffering. And realism has become the privileged form through which the social issue of refugee migration is depicted, to capture and also heighten its seriousness, and make others see the urgency of the truth.

But realism only gets us so far. There’s so much experiential truth it cannot convey. How might we see but also understand beyond the refugee’s grim reality?

Because the streetcar tracks are being repaired, there are replacement buses on Queen – we see one coming and make a run for it. In my rush to catch the bus, I dart across the road, narrowly missing an oncoming bicyclist. The rain is coming down even harder now.

Steadying myself on the step as the bus doors close, I realize that my partner is not behind me but stuck at a red light. As the driver steps on the accelerator, I stumble down the aisle, bumping into a young man while dialling Gökbörü’s number. He does not pick up. Looking out the window I see my own face reflected in the darkness.

When the shipping container in *Le Havre* is opened, a sequence of close-up shots begins: a woman with long braids, tied at the back, next to a young girl, their eyes wide and piercing; a woman in a zebra print blouse and hat under a magenta coat, cradling a sleeping infant – her slanted eyebrows are lightning bolts; a man leans his head against the blue metal wall, his body making a pool of shadow; a woman slightly twists the corner of her mouth, as if to say, *What are you looking at?* A man stares straight ahead, giving nothing away.

These shots are some of the most powerful visual representations of refugees. They are simply portraits of people, unglorified and unsentimental, and to get there Kaurismäki had to turn away from the logic of realism to embrace magic instead.

What’s more real than that which couldn’t and didn’t happen, but should have?



And then a young refugee emerges out of the container and darts past the authorities, running into the open city.

I get off the bus a couple of stops later and squeeze under a grocer’s awning. As I wait for my partner, I think about a moment from the past, when I was sitting on my mother’s lap inside a boat crammed with over a hundred people, a boat meant to carry twenty at most. It is as if I’m seeing this moment through the screen of the migrant rain.

Perhaps what’s needed is not a narrative of what’s real and true but a detour from what we already have and know. Sometimes it’s the contrived, the fantastic, the artificial that pushes us forward, so we can access, again, something that rings true, that touches at the heart of a more crucial truth.

Le Havre is not a white saviour narrative because ethics are not to be found in narrative content but rather in *how* a story is told. I’ve come to realize that flatness might be the most appropriate form to narrate refugee stories in the present moment. If depictions of refugees are often weighed down by realism and melodrama, then anti-realism provides us with a more radical way to imagine, and also engage with, people seeking refuge.

When Gökbörü and I step inside our home, the outside world is awash with rain. Through the translucent screen that this rain has created, I can make out a boat, and on it is a young boy waiting to arrive.

VINH NGUYEN is a writer and educator. His writing has appeared in *Brick*, the *New Quarterly*, the *Malahat Review*, and *PRISM International*.