

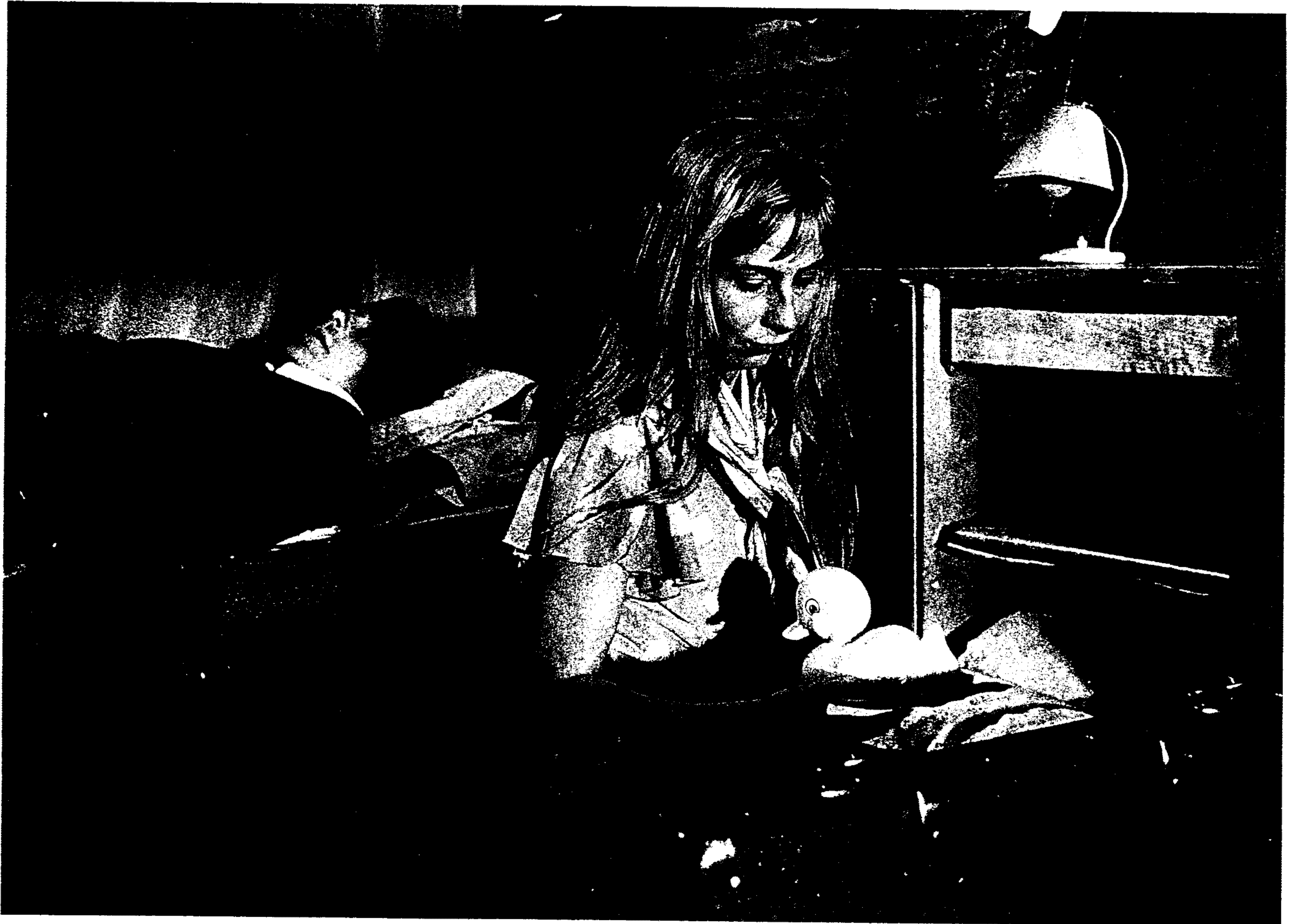
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Aki Goes Silent

Aki Kaurismäki: *Juha*



Aki tells us a little about Juha

Juha will be premiered in the Forum at the Berlin Film Festival with an orchestral accompaniment. What is the line-up going to be?

Aki Kaurismäki: Well, there are about 55 musicians on the soundtrack, a full symphony orchestra. I think the live version by Anssi Tikanmäki will be arranged for 13 musicians.

When did you first think about directing a silent film?

We had talked for years with Tikanmäki about making a silent film. At the same time I had thought about making *Juha* for a long time. Five years ago, I almost made *Juha* as a sound film in Portugal but I gave up the idea. The characters would have been shepherds who live in the mountains. It would have been exactly the same story but it would have been set here in Portugal. Then I found out that I didn't know enough about local... I'm not talking about society but details of the life in here. Three years ago we combined the ideas of *Juha* and a silent film and that's when things started moving on.

Are you planning to make films in Portugal then?

I have reached a conviction that one should make films in one's own country.

Aki Kaurismäki:
"Teuvo Tulio is the world's greatest director of melodrama."

Juha has more connections to the Finnish film history than Aki's previous films. Nyrki Tapiovaara directed the same novel in 1937 and Teuvo Tulio's films have been an inspiration for the film. In Tulio's films citylife demoralizes a number of healthy young women arriving from the countryside (which were mostly played by Regina Linnanheimo, an actress as legendary as Tulio himself).

There are no direct quotations from Tulio's films except one, when Marja has



to scrub the floor. This is a so-called Tulio cliché. In the town scenes you can probably see more of his influence, from his film *As You Desired Me* (1944) and the wages of sin is death -kind of philosophy. To me, Tulio is the greatest Finnish director of all times.

How would you define the meaning of *Teuvo Tulio* for foreign people who don't know him?

He is the greatest melodrama director in the history of film. And I mean world-wide. Did your regular actors adapt to the methods of making a silent film?

They did. *Juha* is not a silent film from the beginning of the era of silent films, it's more from the latter part of it. If I had to locate it in the era of silent films, I'd say it was made in 1928.

I heard that the only film you made your team watch was Murnau's *Sunrise* (The first film that he made in the United States, in 1927, has a story similar to *Juha*. In *Sunrise* a woman tries to seduce a farmer and persuade him into drowning his wife and moving into the city with her.)

I think that and Griffith's *Broken Blossom* are the two greatest silent films ever.

Are you going to make more silent films?

I am not planning to make more but you never know. It's funny to realize that making silent films is not easy. You have to study quite a bit before you can make one. I watched over hundred silent films and

I still did not want to use any fast-motion or jerky acting or gesticulation. In that sense *Juha* is a silent film from the latter part of the era. And the cinematographical narration almost reaches the 50's. So it's not an orthodox silent film, really. And I didn't try to copy one, either. I made my kind of a silent film.

Coming soon:
the jauntier part two of
the Unemployment Trilogy:
Queuing for Soup

What do you plan to do after *Juha*?

Hopefully I'll be able to shoot a film in May and June. There will be more dialogue and it will be shot in colour. It is part two of the Unemployment Trilogy: *Queuing for Soup*. But there's much more to it than the soup queue. If you compare it to *Drifting Clouds* (the first part of Kaurismäki's Unemployment Trilogy), *Queuing for Soup* is much cooler and jauntier, and there's much more action and dialogue in it. It is kind of a cross between Melville and *The Worthless*. (The *Worthless* was the first film directed by Aki's brother Mika Kaurismäki as well as Aki's first time as a screenwriter in 1982.) Do your plans extend beyond *Queuing for Soup*?

Oh yes. I will have a couple of years off. How have your director colleagues reacted to your radical decision to shoot a silent film? Have they already poured their hearts out to you over similar ambitions?

Well, I mostly talk to old, retired colleagues. Many of them have told me that they have thought about making a silent film, too... I must say that it scares me that these foreigners trust me so much. They have bought 40 copies in France and 30-40 copies in Germany. I wonder what they expect of the audience? I tried to warn them a bit but they wouldn't listen. Ha ha.

Juha, the latest offering from Aki Kaurismäki (born 1957), is a black-and-white silent film! This is in no way incomprehensible if one looks at the dialogue in Kaurismäki's twelve previous feature fiction films – it is so scarce that it is just a tiny step from silent film.

Still, it is a unique experiment. After all, has the movie-going public during the last 50 years witnessed other "silent films" than, say, those low-tech freakouts by Andy Warhol and *Silent Movie* by Mel Brooks, which merely made fun of the early history of the cinema?

The inspiring *Juha* by Kaurismäki is something completely different. It is based on the eponymous 1911 novel by one of Finland's national writers, Juhani Aho (1861–1921).

The characterization of Juha and Marja in the first text plate reads, "They are happy as children."

The book is a story of an elderly man called Juha who lives with his young wife Marja in the Finnish backwoods. One day, a slick Russian travelling salesman called Shemeikka lures Marja into joining him. The consequences are tragic. In this film, Kaurismäki, who in his previous films has rather liberately interpreted *The Crime And The Punishment* and *Hamlet*, strictly adheres to the original story.

He has, however, changed the age of the principal character. The role of the protagonist is played by the big and jovial Sakari Kuosmanen, who has had bit parts in several previous Kaurismäki films. Another familiar face is Kati Outinen as Juha's wife. The first text plate in the film describes the couple's simple life – and does full justice to Sakari Kuosmanen's disposition: "They are happy as children."

In the '90s Finland, the wife, of course, is not abducted to Russia but to central Helsinki, where Shemeikka runs a night club with his minions. The part of Shemeikka is played by the French André Wilms (previously seen in *La Vie de Bohème*, 1992).

Kaurismäki says that Wilms was not purposefully included in the cast as a European, a representative of the EU. Rather, "Let's face it, he's a pimp from Helsinki."

The pimp picks Marja up by a cabbage field and sweeps her away in his fancy sports car – the innocence is poisoned. The universal conflict resembles the fabulous silent melodramas of the 1920s.

Team composer Antti Tikanmäki deserves a special mention for his contribution. Besides his 75-minute symphony, only some roaring of car engines and whistling of wind is heard in the film. The total number of frames in this silent film for the '90s is about 600 – twice as much as, for instance, in the previous Kaurismäki film *Drifting Clouds* (1996).

Juha, the image of the Finnish man, has been filmed three times before

Kaurismäki's *Juha* is deeply rooted in the Finnish film tradition in a way foreign viewers may fail to notice. *Juha* has been filmed three times before.

The first version by Mauritz Stiller dates from the original era of the silent film, year 1921. Born Finnish, Stiller worked mainly in Sweden and is known today as the man who introduced Greta Garbo to Hollywood (even if the outcome was different than with Juha: Garbo reaped success while Stiller never made it as a director in the USA).

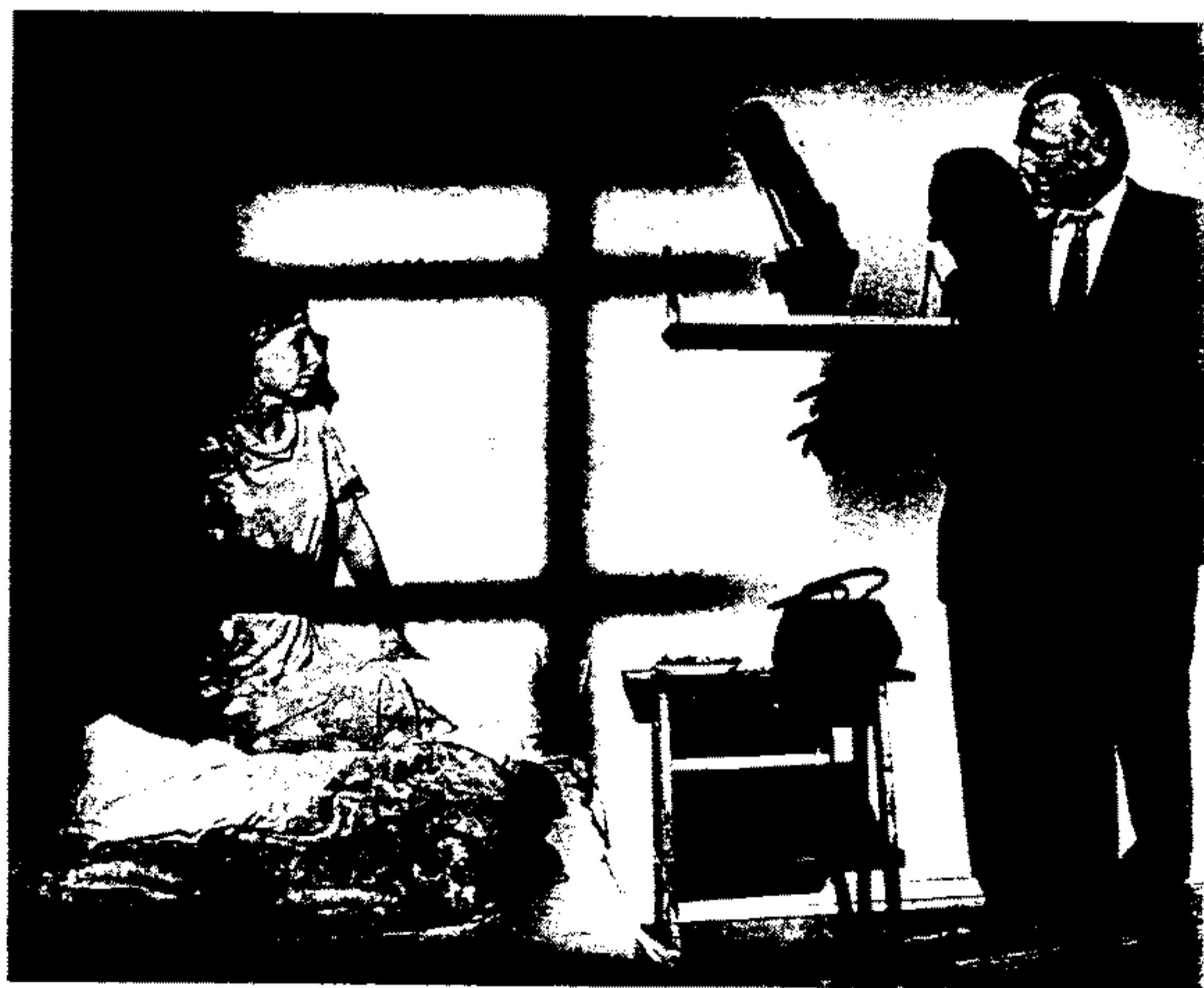
Of all the different versions of *Juha*, Nyrki Tapiovaara's filmatization from 1937 bears the closest resemblance to Kaurismäki's version. Tapiovaara is said to have been the first Finnish director with a true understanding of cinematic art.

It is obviously this Tapiovaara classic that the film archives of the world would like to add to their collections as a point of comparison to Kaurismäki's mute yet modernized version. The intrigue of the novel is situated in the 18th century. Roughly the same goes for the filmatizations – that is, all except the one by Kaurismäki whose films take place in no spec-

ified point of time but rather in an mythical present.

The third predecessor of Kaurismäki's *Juha* was directed in 1956 by T.J. Särkkä, who was the manager of Finland's largest film company during the period of "studio films". Today, the Finnish film production consists in principle entirely of independent films.

As a director, film mogul Särkkä lacked some of the sensibility that the other artists mentioned here had. Still, his version of Juha became a milestone in its own right. It was the first Finnish feature film shot in colour. This fact, too, gives some idea of the considerable symbolic significance of the film. It illustrates the disposition of the Finnish man, that silent but sincere toiler.



This brings to mind several of the characters played by the late Matti Pellonpää in films written by Kaurismäki himself, such as the melancholic *Shadows in Paradise* (1986) or the romantical comedy *Take Care of Your Scarf, Tatjana* (1993), which carried shyness to farcical extremes. The portrayal of the characters also bears a resemblance to Kari Väänänen's performance as the unemployed streetcar driver in *Drifting Clouds*, which in Finland at least was considered as Kaurismäki's most touching work so far.

Jussi Karjalainen