

On the Evolution of Proletarian Narrative Strategies: A Case Study of Ken Loach, Aki Kaurismäki, and Geng Jun

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the film series of British director Ken Loach, Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki, and Chinese director Geng Jun, exploring how the three directors expand proletarian working-class aesthetics and their cultural connotations through their respective cinematic styles. Ken Loach employs a full-bodied realism to open up the depth of the world, integrating the struggles of working-class life into complex real-life circumstances, thereby revealing the violence behind capitalist policies. Aki Kaurismäki, through a minimalist formal aesthetic, uncovers romantic sentiments in everyday life, allowing workers to move toward a poetic redemption through emotional tension. Geng Jun, using a lacerating visual approach, exposes a stagnant society in its boundless desolation, while simultaneously allowing workers to display a reverence for life in their decayed conditions. Grounded in cultural theory and employing textual analysis, this paper examines the stylistic differences among the three directors and argues that, through distinct cinematic rhetorics, they construct different facets and connotations of working-class culture, yet all ultimately converge on a humanistic concern for the human being itself.

Keywords: Proletarian; Realism; Formal aesthetics; Thingness; Expressionist style; Symbolic metaphor

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1. Introduction

The cinematic tendency to speak for the socially underprivileged has long been an important component of film development. In the genealogy of film history—whether German street films, Italian neorealism, or the British New Wave cinema movements—one can discern a close affinity between cinema and marginalized figures. On the one hand, cinema practices Bazin's metaphor of the "cinematic window," constructing cultural publicity for its own development; on the other hand, the rich and authentic social culture of marginal

figures provides an important intellectual site for cinematic creation. With the diversified development of film culture, cinematic expressions of the underclass and marginalized individuals have become more nuanced and complex. Compared with the sentimental celebration of ordinary marginal figures in traditional film movements, contemporary films adopt differentiated aesthetic constructions and cultural logics in their “underclass narratives.” Meanwhile, in recent years, the three major international film festivals have shown a tacit evaluative inclination toward discussions of social class, race, and gender, which has also spurred the emergence of a series of underclass narratives. Hence, this paper selects the film series of British director Ken Loach, Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki, and Chinese director Geng Jun to jointly analyze cinematic representations of proletarian workers. Interestingly, from Loach to Kaurismäki to Geng Jun, their cinematic styles reveal a subtle evolution of narrative strategies.

2. Ken Loach and realism

Ken Loach, as a major British director of realist style, consistently affirms and attains the value of realism in his films. To date, surveying Loach’s oeuvre, one finds that his camera always focuses on ordinary people experiencing social upheaval within a realistic framework, reconstructing a reflective significance of observation and critique through a realist style. In films such as *I, Daniel Blake*, *Sorry We Missed You*, *Kes*, and *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, Loach employs a documentary-like narrative strategy to reconstruct the tension of objective reality. Typically, in films, directors endow characters with strong agency in the face of given contradictory predicaments, achieving narrative closure through resistance to difficulties.

However, in Loach’s narratives, characters encountering enormous real-life difficulties are not given exceptional agency; rather, the logic of existing predicaments is preserved to the greatest extent. This logic entails two possibilities: either the problem is resolved as the action advances, and the characters are redeemed from hardship, or, as the contradictions intensify, the action fails to alleviate the predicament, and the characters remain passively trapped in reality. In *I, Daniel Blake*, Blake, suffering from heart disease, must apply for social welfare at the local council; on the way, he meets Katie, a single mother who, like him, is unemployed and reliant on state support. The two strive together to improve their social situation. In the film, their attempts to qualify for welfare only trigger a series of further difficulties and crises. At the end, after numerous ordeals, Blake collapses in a restroom, never receiving the welfare benefits. In *Sorry We Missed You*, the Ricky family faces a severe economic crisis; Ricky and his wife must work to alleviate their domestic hardship. Ricky works day and night as a delivery driver, while his wife exhausts herself caring for the household. Yet as events unfold, the family falls into even greater emotional distress. After a series of life upheavals, their situation turns bleak. In these two films, Loach adopts a simple, unadorned narrative approach, bringing the struggles of marginalized, helpless proletarian individuals to the screen. He strips away dramatic elements and replaces them with a more layered and complex reality itself.

What is the significance of Loach’s approach? The answer likely lies in his characters. In Loach’s films, the documentary-like narrative strategy is not merely a methodological choice but a means to re-engage with these marginalized individuals through the purest recording, thereby realizing humanistic care. In both *I, Daniel Blake* and *Sorry We Missed You*, the characters’ situations metaphorically reflect the impact of the British financial crisis on workers and the underclass. They cannot find solutions through social policies; they are exiled to the margins of policy, leading to social problems stemming from the failure of livelihood

guarantees—such as new dilemmas imposed by bureaucratic systems, abuse of power by authorities, opaque policy procedures, and the impact of new technologies on ordinary people’s survival. The straightforward, linear narration in these films closely aligns with the characters’ real circumstances and psychological states. For example, in *I, Daniel Blake*, Blake, at his wit’s end, tries to apply for benefits but is helpless against unfamiliar communication devices, losing his dignity and eventually collapsing alone in a public toilet. Similarly, in *Sorry We Missed You*, Ricky’s hard work fails to stabilize his family; due to the lack of time with his children, their family faces a crumbling crisis. Overall, these narrative logics address those unprotected proletarians. In facing social hardships, their individual self-salvation finds no effective outlet, leaving them to passively sink. Moreover, such narration prompts reflection beyond the story: are the characters’ tragic fates linked to the brutality and madness of capitalist social policies? Loach, through calm and direct narration, levels a strong critique against capitalism as a whole.

3. Emotional dimensions in “small-scale spatial framing”

Ken Loach’s cinematic language, combined with his realist narrative strategy, presents an authentic aesthetic expression, and he opts for a typical “small-scale spatial framing” to capture the surging emotional dimensions of reality. In *I, Daniel Blake* and *Sorry We Missed You*, the shot structures can be roughly divided into two basic styles. One is for interior spaces, where Loach predominantly uses close or medium-close shots, aided by fixed camera positions; the other is for exterior scenes, where he employs long shots, also with fixed framing. Interestingly, in interior shots, Loach creates a warm, moving emotional tone through small-scale framing. For instance, in *I, Daniel Blake*, when the single mother shares her life’s hardships with Blake at home, the director first gives a medium shot; as their conversation deepens, Blake moves from off-screen into the frame, the shot size gradually tightens, showing the two in close conversation. Soon, the scene cuts to the nighttime interior of Katie’s home, where Blake leaves her a note offering help. The warm yellow lamp and the domestic setting create one of the film’s rare, touching moments of warmth. Subsequently, Loach again uses a small-scale shot: Katie stands still in the frame and slowly fades out. Similarly, when depicting the interactions between Katie’s two young children and Blake, the director deliberately chooses interior spaces; the small-scale framing places the characters’ emotional and psychological connections in a more intimate and close-knit field. This not only signifies their emotional bond as social counterparts (both struggling and adrift) but also highlights precious emotional value within oppressive reality. In *Sorry We Missed You*, the story largely revolves around Ricky’s outdoor delivery work and his family’s indoor scenes. When depicting the son’s quarrel with his father over parental neglect due to work, Loach again arranges a small-scale shot: the close framing clearly reveals the facial expressions of both son and father; amid the heated argument, a bitter helplessness and more complex, inner emotions emerge within the tight frame. Conversely, when portraying characters in modern urban settings, Loach deliberately uses wide shots—partly to establish spatial context, partly to highlight the contrast between these proletarians and the modern metropolis, conveying a cold, mechanical, monotonous visual impression. When these characters return to interior spaces, the director mobilizes all elements (lighting, props, objects, performances) to manifest the intensity and richness of emotion within the real space.

4. Aki Kaurismäki and formal aesthetics

In contrast to the realist style of Ken Loach, Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki adopts a constructive, formalized aesthetic style to depict proletarians in Finnish society. Kaurismäki has created numerous films, and his camera consistently focuses on the marginalized, powerless remnants of the lower classes. However, Kaurismäki does not simply portray their struggles; he emphasizes the sincere, fluid emotional connections among them, and on this emotional basis introduces philosophical reflections on existence. Surveying Kaurismäki's narrative strategies, his plots often exhibit elliptical, loose, and concise features. His narrative can be roughly divided into two types. One type, as seen in films such as *Fallen Leaves*, *The Man Without a Past*, *I Hired a Contract Killer*, and *Shadows in Paradise*, follows a protagonist who, after falling into a life crisis, experiences a brief period of despondency before meeting a beloved woman. The disillusioned male lead then re-engages with life through her presence, maintains an emotional bond, and looks forward to the future. The other type, as in *The Match Factory Girl* and *Lights in the Dusk*, begins with the arrival of love, making life seem hopeful; but as the story progresses, the protagonists face difficulties, negotiate with life's adversities, and ultimately start anew. Kaurismäki does not present particularly complex plot structures or large-scale storylines; instead, he employs a mild melancholy to punctuate the everyday occurrences of ordinary people. In this sense, his representation of proletarian figures is infused with a more intrinsic, spiritual quality.

Thus, complex and profound emotion constitutes the inner driving force of Kaurismäki's narratives. Although his films mostly depict Finland's lower-class individuals, Kaurismäki does not center on their crises and suffering; rather, he approaches them with respectful, dignified camera work, drawing near to them and understanding the precious emotional values in their lives. For instance, in *Fallen Leaves*, the male lead always waits for his partner after work with gentlemanly grace; even when facing other difficulties, the scene quickly cuts back to their deep, moving love. In *I Hired a Contract Killer*, Henry cares for his girlfriend Mary in an intensely romantic manner. These somewhat awkward love stories precisely express Kaurismäki's reverence and honor for these ordinary people. If Loach, through realist style, recreates the tragic lives of the underclass and critiques capitalist society, then in Kaurismäki's films, he mercilessly satirizes the vulgar figures representing capitalism and money-power, but his greater aim is to showcase an elegant, charming, and abundant life-force within these lower-class individuals. Through praising these ordinary people, Kaurismäki introduces a deeper thematic concern: the spiritually rich life attitude of the proletariat. In these films, whether the unemployed, down-and-out characters or the emotionally repressed gentlemen, they all strive to rebuild their spiritual territories, constantly seeking sweetness amidst burdensome life. This elegant and abundant life attitude may appear as simple yet decent dates in *Fallen Leaves*, quiet enjoyment of alcohol in *Lights in the Dusk*, or a serene dinner in *The Man Without a Past*. These moments sketch one noble soul after another. Even in barren real circumstances, these small characters, through trust in emotions and pursuit of spirit, infuse life with romantic and beautiful qualities.

5. The self-speech of “things”

Precisely because Kaurismäki's films always manifest the inner richness of characters, his cinematic aesthetics consistently exhibit the vital agency and expressive value of “things.” Kaurismäki has stated in interviews that he was influenced by Bresson and Ozu. We can also observe in his works an aesthetic style that synthesizes diverse formal elements, wherein the display of “things” becomes an important means for

him to represent proletarians. The “things” referred to here are not the “object” in a binary opposition, but the presence of “things” after the speculative realist turn. In Graham Harman’s *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*, he argues that “things” themselves are inexhaustible, possessing their own agency and expressive potential. This aesthetic and value of “things” find maximal articulation in Kaurismäki’s cinema.

In Kaurismäki’s works, “things” constitute concrete expressions of the poetic redemption of ordinary people. A notable feature is that those gentleman-like lower-class men often have their hair slicked with shiny “hair gel”—Holappa in *Fallen Leaves*, Kari in *Drifting Clouds*, M in *The Man Without a Past*, and Koistinen in *Lights in the Dusk*. These men are mostly facing life’s difficulties, yet they always apply gel to their hair, appearing so neat and dignified. Clearly, these gelled hairs, as “things” in Harman’s sense, do not merely signify stylistic prominence or perfection. Rather, as material attributes, they radiate a bright, dazzling vitality. We can contrast these with the characters’ modest living spaces—the dim tones and oppressive environments (real-life dreariness) often resonate with the shiny hair. Kaurismäki does not merely portray the endless suffering of these drifting proletarians; instead, through the sheen of “things,” he points to the significance of life’s vitality and expansiveness. Similarly, in *Fallen Leaves*, the female lead works as a dishwasher in a bar, daily cleaning glasses. But Kaurismäki does not simply present this as a passive, cheap, menial scene; rather, he repeatedly holds the camera on these clean, bright glasses, regarding their presence with an almost equalizing gaze. Besides glasses, the plain yet quality furniture in the films also reveals an unnamed life-force amid dim lighting. These objects do not merely serve narrative functions but return to their own tension, providing poetic consolation to the characters through equal attention. These “things” manifest the dignity of marginalized people, creating life’s romance even under difficult circumstances. Moreover, from Harman’s perspective, these objects possess profound meaning. The director employs an open, egalitarian camera gaze to situate society, people, and objects within an inclusive context, allowing viewers to derive their own interpretations.

6. Geng Jun and expressionist style

Director Geng Jun is a key figure in the New Wave of Chinese Northeast cinema. His films carry a strong literary quality, expressing the sorrow and helplessness of the underclass through comedic means. In his works, he skillfully weaves marginalized characters into playful, absurd narratives; these characters tear and agonize within intensely dramatic situations, ultimately finding release in melancholic nostalgia. Whether in his early *Free and Easy* or *Manchurian Tiger*, which was selected for the Shanghai International Film Festival, his camera consistently focuses on ordinary people constantly negotiating with life.

The so-called literary quality refers to Geng Jun’s characteristic inclusion of a “frenzied” figure who transcends realistic meaning in his character settings. In both *Free and Easy* and *Manchurian Tiger*, he constructs a philosophically articulate intellectual figure. In fact, this intellectual image directly or indirectly points to Geng’s own idealized but unrealizable “lost person.” Geng Jun was deeply influenced by literature during his schooling; the poetry and profundity of written words were important forces he pursued. When he later turned to filmmaking, his works often existed in a state of aphasia. Hence, placing a literary madman in his films became a significant reference point—be it Xiao Er in *Free and Easy* or the similar figure in *Manchurian Tiger*. They express philosophy through esoteric language and resist reality’s compromises through frenzied postures.

Beyond literary quality, Geng Jun excels at using contrast to create comedic effects and expose the awkward situations of these proletarians. In *Manchurian Tiger*, the director sets up multiple narrative threads in parallel. Ma Qianli, burdened by debts, faces multiple dilemmas: his family demands repayment, and his boss pressures him; in desperation, he kills Xu Dong's dog to entertain his creditors. In handling these scenes, Geng often presents a "bitter" scenario to show Ma's humbleness, but then cuts to another scene that engages Ma in dialogue, ironically revealing his detestable, cowardly nature. Similarly, in *Manchurian Tiger*, when Meiling confronts Xu Dong's supposed mistress, she first appears stern and calm; but upon realizing her mistake, she switches to a Northeastern dialect and tone expressing concern. In *Free and Easy*, the entire story is largely constructed through character contrasts—various personalities with reversed identities are drawn into a case, only to eventually find some consolation. Clearly, comedy is the narrative strategy Geng Jun employs; he generates humor through deadpan wit, but also uses absurdity and satire to hint at the characters' helplessness.

Suspenseful criminal situations are another important narrative strategy for Geng Jun. In *Manchurian Tiger* and *Free and Easy*, characters are invariably drawn into criminal events. In *Free and Easy*, a motley crew is entangled in a "scam" case, engaging in a battle of wits. Throughout this process, the tragic fates of ordinary people are revealed through crime. Geng uses criminal events to implicitly critique society. Likewise, in *Manchurian Tiger*, multiple threads intertwine, and various dramatic conflicts plunge characters into mutual suspicion and violence, ending with Ma Qianli's death, which hints at the cruel truth of alienated reality. Crime films, as a major methodology of classical Hollywood cinema, explore the confrontation between human desire and capitalism's modernizing process. However, Geng Jun does not simply transplant Hollywood crime films. In his works, crime functions as a "situation" with a dual effect: on one hand, it places the plot within the crime genre, resonating with specific viewing emotions; on the other hand, crime becomes the helpless social circumstance of these ordinary people. In *Manchurian Tiger*, Ma Qianli's predicament arises from the irreconcilable local social policies and the social problems spawned by economic decline. Under such helpless conditions, Ma turns to crime. Thus, crime is both a narrative strategy and a profound interrogation of the era, revealing a mournful elegy for a somber age.

7. Symbolic metaphor

Compared to Ken Loach's realism and Kaurismäki's formal aesthetics, Geng Jun's films more prominently feature expressionist symbolic metaphors. In his films *Sickles and Hammers Rest*, *Free and Easy*, and *Manchurian Tiger*, the stories are set in the frigid Northeast. This "cold-climate cinema" as a whole conveys images of stagnation, freezing, and obstruction, imparting a distinct physical quality (a sense of cold) to the film's texture, while also providing a naturally somber narrative atmosphere for the absurd tales ^[1]. Meanwhile, in terms of visual symbols, Geng Jun consistently presents vast snow-blanketed landscapes, withered trees, dilapidated dwellings, and low ruins. These images not only visually convey the northern cold but also reflect a spiritual desolation and loneliness. Moreover, these images also relate to the historical reality outside the text. The Northeast, as an important industrial region in 20th-century China, was a major economic and cultural center. However, due to historical shifts, policy reforms, and multiple real-world factors, the Northeast has declined into decay; the irrepressible sense of loss and nostalgia serves both as the origin of the characters and stories and as a metaphor for the spiritual projection of these lower-class figures.

Additionally, the dialogue in his films carries profound symbolic metaphors—for instance, the portrayal of the madman Xiao Er, including the meaningful lines, reveals Geng’s ideological expression. These lines, with a redemptive, almost divine connotation, depart from the narrative context and become transcendent presences, overflowing from Foucault’s notion of rationality to become the subject of madness, thus demonstrating Geng’s critical dimension through symbolic metaphorical connotations.

8. Conclusion

From Loach’s realism to Kaurismäki’s formal aesthetics to Geng Jun’s expressionist style, all converge on a profound humanistic concern for the proletarian working class. Loach seeks to rediscover the penetrating power of reality within its ambiguity—a plain and sincere observation. Kaurismäki, through the recall of things themselves, offers the most dignified praise to these proletarians. Geng Jun, via emotionally charged genre elements and comedic strategies, affirms the tenacious vitality of these ordinary people. This is perhaps the crucial significance of cinema for society—a convergence of real light that illuminates the countless nameless people of the world; and a focus of the eye of power that summons one soul after another of truth, goodness, and beauty.

Disclosure statement

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