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Kaurismäki's *I Hired a  
Contract Killer* (1990)

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## A Place to Go? Exploring liminal space in Aki Kaurismäki's *I Hired a Contract Killer* (1990)

*This favoured spot exhibits in perfection all the leading features which characterise the great  
Joyless City. It is, in fact, the heart of the East End.*

- Walter Besant: *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* (Besant, 1902, 132)

*Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.*

*Flowed up the hill and down King William Street*

- T.S. Eliot: *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (Eliot, 1990, 25)

*I Hired a Contract Killer* (1990) tells the story of a lonely, monosyllabic French exile, Henri Boulanger (Jean-Pierre Léaud), living in an oneiric, liminal London. (1) The film depicts the city (its eastern side, especially) on the threshold of change, lurching from post-industrial slumber towards the embrace of the global economy. It appears a curious, transitional territory – a space which continues to resonate with powerful narratives concerning class politics, ethnic ‘Otherness’, degeneration and dark criminality, while at the same time apparently standing on the verge of economic and socio-cultural upheaval. Henri’s lack of youthful energy; his lack of understanding of his immediate cultural and material environment (along with his linguistic ‘Otherness’) mark him as a profoundly displaced, rootless figure. But I want to suggest here that these characteristics are echoed, and indeed informed, by the distinctly liminal nature of his material surroundings. He struggles to psychically and materially locate himself within a cultural space which appears to reside ‘betwixt and between’ concepts of stratified (or mapped) London life.

This, then, is a film about place and displacement; about liminality or ‘betwixt-and-betweenness’; about the thresholds of urban space, urban experience and urban identity in the London of the late-1980s. It cleverly exploits contemporary anxieties concerning the breakdown of individual and national spatial boundaries as it explores the problematic relationships that might come to exist between rootless individuals located within post-industrial urban societies and their immediate material environments. (2) But in order to do this the film also clearly exploits the dramatic qualities of transitional, marginal territories in London, and east London in particular.

After working as a low level clerk for the London waterworks for 15 years, Henri is unceremoniously made redundant when the government decides to privatize the office. It seems that years of faithful service count for nothing in this economic climate - unforgiving capitalist market forces forge ruthlessly ahead. Unable to immediately adjust to his new circumstances, Henri makes botched attempts to commit suicide in his small, drab flat. But after he fails to kill himself, we follow Henri into a decrepit east London wasteland. At the highly incongruous Honolulu bar, situated in the basement of a dilapidated building, behind piles of rubble and debris (Kääpä 2004), Henri informs the local crime boss (Michael O’Hagan) that he wants to take a contract out on his own life. Disbelieving at first, the boss sees the colour of Henri’s money and agrees to this seemingly diabolical request. However, after he meets a kindly flower seller, Margaret (Margi Clarke), in a local pub, Henri suddenly feels a renewed sense of purpose in life, and decides that he wants to renege on the contract. When he discovers that this is impossible (because the building in which the Honolulu Bar has been demolished),

Henri spends much of the rest of the film trying to shake his would-be killer (Kenneth Colley) loose. What soon becomes clear is that the film’s preoccupation with loneliness, physical and spiritual sickness and death, and the tensions that form between Henri and Margaret’s improbable love affair and the spiritual violence of late capitalism appear perfectly suited to the shifting, transitional material spaces in the late-1980s East End. Kaurismäki’s film thus marks east London as a strange, contemporary Gothic space; a doom-laden, wild and desolate urban landscape in which grotesque figures lurk and foul deeds might get done.

The initial opening shots in the film capture the liminal status of marginal territories situated to the east of the City of London, and clearly serve to defamiliarize what we might think of as the familiar cinematic metropolis. This is, after all, not the London that is usually presented in mainstream films. There are no familiar tourist attractions on show here; no shots of Tower Bridge or the Palace of Westminster by which the audience might imaginatively navigate the city (Lynch 1960). Instead we are offered a curious montage of urban locales. The first shot captures the east London sprawl under a coffin-lid sky. The cranes visible in this shot clearly demonstrate that this is an urban environment which is in a state of flux or mutability; it is an unstable rather than a fixed environment.



This is important – the city does not provide a fixed sense of home for the characters in the film. Kaurismäki instead emphasizes its liminal qualities. Indeed, this shot is followed by a shot of the disused London docks which shows large Derrick cranes looming sadly over the dirty water, evoking a contemporary, postmodern Gothic sensibility. Following these shots, we see a medium-long shot of the towers of the City of London, some of which are also clearly in the process of being built or redeveloped (so even the financial heart of the city is unstable).

A shot of Guys Tower and nearby brutalist buildings situated at the south-eastern end of London Bridge demonstrates the apparently inhuman qualities of much post-war London architecture.

This is followed by a number of shots of dilapidated buildings and dismal sites of urban dereliction – partly-demolished east London industrial units and closed shop fronts. (3) Here the city is clearly depicted as an 'inbetween' space - between the past and the future - between dereliction and renewal. The existence of such spaces of ruination in 1980s London can be read as a symptom of the destructive nature of 1980s capitalist property development and the concomitant neglect of seemingly unvalued material spaces (Edensor 2005, 4).

These drab urban sites might appear peripheral (or even invisible) to the sophisticated urbanite, but Kaurismäki decides to show us that the so-called 'great' city of London also incorporates wasted, apparently 'dead' locales. Indeed, he notices the dramatic potential of such spaces, and realizes that they can operate as potent signifiers or symbols of a transnational post-industrial spiritual malaise. So Kaurismäki effectively shows us that parts of the body of the great city have become atrophied. These sites appear to provide ample evidence of material, economic and spiritual lack. They signify a vanished fecundity and an uncertain future (Edensor 2005, 7). Kaurismäki's film thus demonstrates the potential impact of the lack of investment on material spaces, as well as the effects of a lack of spiritual investment in some of the individuals who reside in these spaces. Just as the capitalist ideologies of development and progress would surely decree that such unproductive material spaces should be turned into productive, abstract spaces (Edensor 2005, 8), characters such as Henri and Margaret also initially appear in real danger of being viewed as unproductive - as dead to the city (not unlike characters in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, for example). So, in *I Hired a Contract Killer*, Kaurismäki celebrates the detritus of the city - both architectural and human.

These derelict, neglected spaces pictured at the beginning of the film provide the ideal location, then, for the examination of Henri's liminal character. He is, we soon learn, a derelict, neglected figure. His life, like the dead sites around him, has gone to waste. He is certainly not a man who has made significant progress within capitalist economic terms. Indeed, as his attempted suicide suggests, he has begun to believe that he cannot adequately function or exist within this particular socio-cultural system. Henri's body, much like the topographical markers of his 'soft city' (Raban 1988) or 'city of the mind', appears to have no monetary, or, indeed, intrinsic value. His body and the wasted body of the city effectively begin to inform and mirror each other in the film. As Elizabeth Grosz has argued, the city is "*a reflection, projection, or product of bodies*" (Grosz 1998, 44). Initially, then, Henri stands as an example of socio-cultural detritus. Within capitalist economic terms, 'value' is initially imagined in the film to reside elsewhere, away from east London, and, significantly, away from Henri Boulanger.

However, as we watch the narrative unfold, and we begin to become aware of the complicated spatial politics of the film, it might appear to us that we have some prior, uncanny knowledge of this London. Perhaps the spaces the film shows us seem somehow familiar. Tim Palleine has suggested that Kaurismäki's London has "*a recognisable atmosphere that manages completely to avoid familiar landmarks*" (Palleine 1991, 46). Although not solely shot in east London (but also around the Holborn Viaduct, Portobello Road and Stoke Newington) (4), this atmosphere is effectively created by the film's intertextual acknowledgement of the rich nexus of East End narratives which still seemingly haunt the streets of east London; narratives which continue to interest writers such as Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd (5).

For example, as the camera focuses on the sign that indicates Henri's place of work, "Her Majesty's Waterworks," Kaurismäki may well be offering a pun on London's long-held identity as a space in which socio-cultural human and material waste has gathered. Indeed, in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), Dickens described the east London docks as a low space "*where the accumulated scum of humanity seemed to be washed from higher ground*" (Dickens 1976, 63), capturing the changing spatial politics of London brought about by Joseph Bazalgette's new sewage system, which, significantly, carried the waste of the city downwards and eastwards (Porter 2000, 312-324).

John Ebdon's production design for *I Hired a Contract Killer* also clearly exploits east London as a discursive territory in other ways. The office interior is distinctly pre-modern. In what looks to be no more than a damp converted warehouse, old desks are seen to nestle close together in neat rows. Middle-aged men in suits work in silence at these desks - ciphers ground down by the monotony of their labour. This is not a modern office designed in the International Style. It is not an office that values its appearance, such as the high rises occupied by the commercial banks and insurance companies in the nearby City of London. Instead it functions as a stylised space that somehow exists outside linear historical time, not unlike the enduring, mythical idea of the pre-modern East End itself. The film seems to suggest, then, that 'outcast' east London is finding it hard to shake its image of danger, decadence and decay, even in this period of economic and socio-cultural transition.



As Henri's stalker (Colley) begins to hunt down his prey and we see the figure of a killer stalk the east London streets and alleys, the film draws on and subverts other famous east London narratives which have helped to keep the mythic concept of the East End alive. Indeed, after Henri is almost framed for the shooting of a jeweller, we see a newspaper headline that reads "*Whitechapel Murderers Caught*." This redeployment of Whitechapel as a toponym which brings to mind a space of murder allows the spectator to imaginatively draw on the dense discourse of the Jack the Ripper myth which developed out of the public response to the Whitechapel murders of 1888, as well as the mythology surrounding the criminal activity of the Kray twins. So *I Hired a Contract Killer*, while telling the story of a lonely man living in the post-industrial wasteland of contemporary London, also draws on an enduring, dense discourse that continues to breathe cultural life into the derelict and depressed quarters of the eastern side of the city. As such, elements of a mythic past can be seen to erupt into this present London scene. Again, this causes Henri's experience to become liminal – he finds himself located 'betwixt and between' imagined events and real events, between the past and the present, between real and imagined cities, on the threshold of a haunted discursive territory.

Another way to approach the liminal status of *I Hired a Contract Killer* is through theories of cinematic genre. Nigel Floyd has amusingly suggested that the film plays "*like an Ealing comedy on downers*" (Floyd 1998, 419). The film certainly recalls the more eccentric aspects of a film such as *The Ladykillers* (1955) in its strange characterization, employment of a mixture of real London locations and studio set ups, and its emphasis on dark, farcical comedy. Indeed, we might even read the Eiffel Tower paperweight visible on Henri's desk at the Waterworks as a direct quotation from another famous Ealing comedy, *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951).

Moreover, through its cinematic defamiliarization of urban space, Kaurismäki's film also often recalls Hitchcock's London films, notably *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956). However, the incongruous employment of music on the soundtrack (bursts of jazz and blues from artists such as Billy Holiday and Little Willie John) also recalls Dennis Potter's BBC television masterpiece *The Singing Detective* (1986) as well as many examples of European art cinema. His use of colour also echoes the mid-period works of Godard. And the film is infused with dark Nordic humour that owes much to the lighter moments of Ingmar Bergman. Tom Pulleine has also suggested that the film can be read as "*mock-Kafka*," and that it features "*spoof B-picture iconography*" (Pulleine, 1991, 46). The exploration of the criminal underworld of gangsters and hit men certainly echoes Hollywood B-movies as well as British gangster films such as *Performance* (1970), *Get Carter* (1971), *Villain* (1971) and *The Long Good Friday* (1979).

As I have suggested, much is made in the film of the transitional nature of urban spaces in east London, and specific shots might remind us similar post-industrial locations utilized in *The Long Good Friday*, *The Last of England* (1987) and *Empire State* (1987). But the film's employment of a run-down, transient and transitional topography also echoes earlier East End 'rubble' films such as *Hue and Cry* (1947), *Sparrows Can't Sing* (1962), and *A Place to Go* (1963). As in these films, *I Hired a Contract Killer* marks the East End as a territory in which particular places, in their derelict state, can resist abstraction and, therefore, perhaps, governance and ownership.

Instead, new life might begin to take root in the rubble, well away from the hegemonic control of capitalist forces. As Henri and Margaret's developing relationship seems to show, material and emotional wastelands can spring back to life organically if they are left alone. Henri Lefebvre has taught us that space can never be empty, but is instead always culturally inscribed with meaning (Lefebvre 1991). In *I Hired a Contract Killer*, Henri and Margaret effectively inscribe neglected space (material and psychological) with love, companionship, and mutual respect. Lefebvre advocated that liminal spaces, or previously unvalued spaces, can become powerfully rich. He argued that they can come to operate as 'spaces of representation' (*espace veçu*), "*spaces of resistance to the dominant order arising precisely from their subordinate, peripheral and marginal positioning*" (Soja 1996, 68). *I Hired a Contract Killer* suggests, then, the ways in which neglected physical and psychological sites can flourish beyond the realms of conceptual abstraction.

So as this curious, existential love story develops, the film's playful subversion of acknowledged cinematic genres helps to place it in a liminal generic-space, in a rich filmic wasteland, open to new life, 'betwixt-or-between' well-known cinematic genres. As such, the film formally and aesthetically echoes not only the liminal urban spaces in which the narrative unfolds but also the liminal experiences of the major characters. An English language trans-European production shot in transitional east London with French and British actors, featuring the diegetic music of Joe Strummer and the extra-diegetic sounds of American jazz and blues – this is a truly liminal film.

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## Notes

1. Sharon Zukin (1991, 28-29) argues that new urban spaces have been formed which have been defined by liminality, and that economic restructuring "makes liminality a pervasive experience". [\[back\]](#)
2. Pietari Kääpä (2004) has discussed the transnational dimensions of Kaurismäki's films, and *I Hired a Contract Killer* in particular. [\[back\]](#)
3. A similar tactic was utilised by Patrick Keiller in his film *London* (1994). [\[back\]](#)
4. Claire Monk usefully pointed out the specific locations employed in the shooting of the film in her excellent paper, 'I Hired a Contract Killer: Kaurismäki in London', delivered at the *Continental Connections* conference, Leicester, UK, 10 July 2007. [\[back\]](#)
5. See Iain Sinclair, *Lud Heat* (1975), *Suicide Bridge* (1978), *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings* (1987), *Downriver* (1991), *Lights Out for the Territory* (1998), and Peter Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor* (1987). [\[back\]](#)

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