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Race, Sex and Politics

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**A Romance for the New Age: Mikko Makela's *A Moment in the Reeds* (2017).
Race, Sex and Politics**

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In the woodiness of rural Finland, to see another human being might already be quite a feat; to stumble upon a gay architect from Syria – forced by circumstances to earn a living in a capacity far below his talents, making out with a Finnish student just arrived from Paris – surely beats that by a tenfold at least. And yet, it is around this trope that the Finland-born, London-based director Mikko Makela builds his first feature film. Makela's 2017 debut touches upon questions of an individual's identity and sexuality at a time when events like the 2015 immigrant crisis or the recent economic struggle of old Western democracies come intimately close and spawn a variety of hitherto largely ignored conflicts and encounters. By linking global histories with local, small-scale dramas, Makela offers a story which moves and angers, shames and excites, unsettles and promises hope.

Narrative-wise, Leevi and Tareq initially seem to fit in a pre-assigned structure, only to discover that its frames are far too constricting and rigid to contain their story, even if at first glance it comes across as another re-enactment of the tale of desiring what one lacks – or actually, desiring the other object for its promise to fill in the void, the gaping hole, in one's subjectivity. While both of them might be perceived as representing the stereotype of the sad young man, only Leevi answers to it fully because – to quote Richard Dyer – “there is something specifically white about the stereotype” (Dyer, 1990, p.124). Tareq, as a Syrian, acutely offsets Leevi's character which, in turn, can give way to defining “queer masculinity as white sensitivity” (Dyer, 1990, p. 124), because Leevi, in stark contrast to Tareq, stands out as frail, somewhat sickly, ephemeral even, melancholic, and youthful but past the

“border into the half-world of homosexuality” (Dyer, 1990, p. 128) because he has already come out as gay. That in turn tallies well with how Leevi wishes to present himself to the world – his academic interests place him within a particular tradition, or trend, which to a large extent define his lifestyle and sensibilities.

Tareq, the hired handyman, arrives very much *in medias res*, catching Leevi and his father in the middle of an argument. His arrival only adds to the overall confusion and resentment. For one thing, Tareq is not Finnish; he is not even European, but Syrian, and his Middle Eastern appearance stands in a stark contrast to Leevi and his father’s Nordic paleness and blondness. What is more, Tareq does not speak Finnish which prompts the father to call the work agency and remonstrate them for “sending someone like that” (Makela, 2017, 17’).

Once father is called back to his office and leaves Leevi and Tareq to their own devices, they quickly develop an easy camaraderie and gradually find out more about each other. However, as they grow more cosy and natural with one another, the drastic discrepancy in their circumstances begins to loom over their emergent friendship. Tareq is employed by Leevi’s father – which would not have to be problematic at all, had it not been that Tareq’s qualifications are actually much higher than the job calls for. As it is, positions of superiority/subordination are introduced, even if none of them admits to being aware of them, at least not immediately. Obviously, too, Leevi would be the last person to try and exploit his advantage in any way, though perhaps he still assumes a slightly too patronising a tone when he talks to Tareq about his studies and the thesis he is writing and discovers with dismay that Tareq has heard of Arthur Rimbaud. He makes an effort to mitigate for his too open an expression of surprise by confiding in Tareq that he hasn’t done much renovation work – an occupation which in fact might be just as foreign to Tareq, too. Had things been different politically and economically, in Syria but in Finland, too, Tareq and Leevi could very well chance upon one another in a trendy bar in Paris or Amsterdam or London – or anywhere, really. Be that as it may, they meet in the Finnish wilderness where their roles have been pre-scripted for them by the immediacy of

the socio-cultural context. Leevi is a somewhat *blasé* upward-mobile North European, raised under the sheltering umbrella of the welfare state and the EU, who exercises his power to choose a vocation – and becomes an emigrant, or *émigré*; Tareq has just come on foot all the way from Syria which he had to flee for life-and-death reasons – in a way, he, too, has chosen his fate but Finland is where his free choice ends, and he can only count on the Finnish government’s goodwill in upgrading his status from that of an ‘immigrant’ to that of a refugee. For what it takes, Tareq feels grateful to have ended up somewhere in rural Karelia, where – although, as he says, “People are different, more reserved, less social, it’s hard to make friends” (Makela, 2017, 33’) – he wishes to stay, even if he has to battle stereotypes and a fair share of xenophobia.

Nevertheless, he is somewhat taken aback by Leevi’s invitation to the sauna, where they sit half-naked, sipping beer and sweating, which he comments upon with a bemused: “Well, this, as a starter – we don’t get off our clothes with each other” (Makela, 2017, 32’). An intrinsic component of ‘Finnishness’, the sauna has been a place for much more than warming up in the bitter cold of northern weather – it has functioned much in the way the bath, the Oriental *hammam*, has – as a meeting place, a ‘coffee house’ (perhaps minus the coffee), a gossip hothouse; as a realm for closeness and bond-building, in many senses of the word. It is in the sauna that Tareq and Leevi wordlessly confirm what each has suspected of the other, and discover first intimacy, in this way re/claiming the space for a new generation of lovers.

Talking with Leevi about dating applications, Tareq says how it always had to be ‘subterfuge’ in Syria, whereas in Finland he “feels so free” (Makela, 2017, 1h7’). Of course, the issue is much more serious than the question of hooking up with a random sex partner; nevertheless, Western sexual freedom – from an axiom – turns into a fact of life when compared with the sheer peril of being found out doing something that the state and tradition deem illicit in Eastern societies, such as Tareq’s Syrian one. Nevertheless, the systemic violence implied in the inequality of their circumstances cannot be denied; in this light, Leevi’s rejection of Finland as oppressive and suffocating might come

across as a 'whim', especially when juxtaposed with Tareq's dramatic flight from Syria, though of course it is in no way Leevi's 'fault' that he was born to certain privileges. Still, despite his good will, honesty and decency, it remains problematic. Although they both admit to strong feelings for each other, Tareq already sees their 'fling' for what it is – when the summer is over, Leevi will return to Paris to go on dreaming of becoming a poet, and he will stay here in Karelia trying hard to make it. He is no daftly dreamy boy like Leevi, and he “cannot afford starting from zero” (Makela, 2017, 1h28'), but Leevi still clings to the illusion of a long-distance relationship.

Perhaps the strongest and most important thing Tareq says in the film is, “I don't want to see this country the way you see it” (Makela, 2017, 1h37'), spoken towards the end of the film. Tareq's observation very accurately captures how high the stakes are for him – perhaps against his nascent feelings for Leevi, Tareq is struggling for his right to make choices, and act upon them, embracing his own agency and foresight. As the story draws to an end, the viewers are made to accept that this is not going to be a 'happy together against the world' sort of ending - Mikko Makela decides to devise a different future for his protagonists. It is not a hopeless vision, though; while nothing is stated explicitly, somehow the impression lingers that Tareq will make it; that he will find a satisfying way to fit in. As for Leevi, whereas we do not know whether he will fulfil his dream of becoming a writer, we may stipulate that the events of the summer, largely brought on by Tareq and all that he stood for, will help him communicate with his father.

In *A Moment in the Reeds*, Mikko Makela captures Finland at a time when moods of discord and enmity swell, and the immigrant is inevitably the other, posing a threat to social stability and security, to the observance of traditional values, and to the politically overblown concept of patriotism. This in turn fosters an overexposure of non-Europeans within the largely homogenous Finnish society, generating a particular gender-based social branding within the framework of which non-European (mostly Muslim) men are represented as 'primitive' and 'savage' and whose masculinity is toxic and outdated, further frustrated

by having to fit in to a culture of equality. By all means, the status of the queer immigrant male of a Middle Eastern descent proves even more problematic – the queer (male) Muslim poses a challenge to social outlooks, because on the one hand he is still taken to represent the culture and the faith which at least stereotypically are seen as incompatible with the Nordic ones, but on the other, he falls into the clearly defined category of the socially oppressed minority and strikes a sensitive cord within a society which stands firmly by values of equality and fair treatment, even if abiding by these is not always easy.

Makela presents a gentle and courageous film which avoids clichés and other textual and/or technical pitfalls largely thanks to the characters it employs, who are credible and authentic, and in their raw truthfulness – very relatable. Makela truly has taken a leap of faith with his decision to make such a film – and the result has proven a resounding success internationally, albeit to lukewarm and rather cautious reviews in Finland. His work certainly breaks taboos, the most immediate of these being the explicitly gay story and its very graphic scenes of gay sex which are enacted by gay actors. Along the way, Makela also challenges Finnish – and generally, Western – audiences to come face to face with the fact that the ethnic composition of their countries is becoming more and more heterogenous; at the same time, he is daring them to acknowledge that the communities they live in will be becoming not only more diverse racially but in terms of sexual identities, too.

The way in which the film presents a romance for a new age is first and foremost through the characters who embody ‘new’ sexual identities enacted by means of a new masculinity. It is anything but the kind of conventional masculinity employed in traditional romances, both literary and on-screen; rather, it is a masculinity which does not define itself by exclusion or by resorting to essentialist dichotomies such as female vs. male, or manly vs. unmanly, effeminate. This masculinity is in fact one out of many and dares to go back and beyond, and sideways across binarisms. While challenging, the realisation that Finland – and actually all other western countries – is at once gay, black, hetero, white, trans, queer, patriotic, bohemian, ecologic, organic, traditional etc., and

that these do not have to be mutually exclusive categories, is now long overdue. Importantly enough, following the 2019 general elections, the Finnish prime minister is Sanna Marin, the world's youngest prime minister and daughter of what she calls "a rainbow family" consisting of her mother and her mother's female partner (Ng, 2019). Marin, a staunch promoter of equality and human rights, leads an all-female coalition, setting a precedent for other European countries. In this light, surely our historical moment is that of new beginnings and negotiations, a moment which might be seen as a prolegomenon to an era of inclusivity and plurality, in terms of personal identities, inter/national loyalties, and social practices and responsibilities alike.

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