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Adult Love: Kaymak by Milcho Manchevski

With Kaymak, his new film, Milcho Manchevski approaches a lighter cinema without abandoning the principles of his most committed cinema. Winner of the Golden Lion in 1994 for his first feature film *Before the Rain*, the Macedonian filmmaker preferred to try his hand in a freer cinematic environment, even though the doors of Hollywood were wide open for him. Although his later work is less known, it is not inferior to his debut film. If we want to describe Manchevski's filmography, we need to identify two tangents which, although clearly distinct, are interconnected. On one hand, the study of the relationship between reality and its representation – as in *Bikini Moon* (2017) and in *Mothers* (2010) – and therefore of the alterations that cinema, including documentary cinema, make in describing reality, and on the other hand, the non-linear narrative and the narrative structure based on multiple parallel or interconnected stories.

Thus *Before the Rain* tells three distinct episodes from the war in Bosnia, while in *Dust* (2001) we follow three historically distant but somehow linked events, and in *Willow* (2019) we witness stories of women trying to emancipate themselves in different ways. *Kaymak* follows this second direction, tracking the parallel stories of two couples of different ages and social backgrounds who live in adjacent houses. The location of the two apartments is very evocative: the young and wealthy couple live in a modern loft located on the upper floors, while the middle-aged, lower-class couple live in a shabby apartment located below, a choice that many might remember from Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019). As in other Manchevski films, the place has its centrality. In *Before the Rain* it was the monastery by the lake, or, as in the middle chapter, the city of London, which was characterized by very narrow intersections and brief detail. In *Kaymak* it is Skopje, which is shown as a chaotic, disorganized metropolis characterized by omnipresent construction sites. In the way he portrays the Macedonian capital, Manchevski shows his intention to condemn the excessive crowding caused by intensive construction and the resulting anxiety for those who live there. Not surprisingly, in one of the initial scenes, the first contact between the two couples takes place precisely because of an argument between neighbors. While it plays an important role in how the story unfolds, it is not the class struggle that is central to the film. Manchevski describes it as "a love story for adults".

Specifically, *Kaymak* explores the erotic dynamics of its protagonists, who find themselves breaking some taboos and finding new relational balance. There is none of the audacity of Gaspar Noah's *Love* (2015) or Nagisa Oshima's *The Empire of the Senses* (1976), as **Kaymak is**

more interested in the interrelational consequences than in the morbidity of erotic activity. Curiously, **the film also manages to stand out for the unpredictability of the plot,** which distracts from the often banal outcomes of films with this theme. **Clearly, sexuality is accompanied by a rediscovery of gender identification and breaking away from the traditional family system, but not in the sense we are used to seeing in queer cinema.**

Kaymak, which gives its name to the film, is a type of cream common in the Middle East and the Balkans. The title, not surprisingly, refers to a specific scene in the film in which Caramba explains to Danche – the lower class couple, played by Aleksandar Mikic and Simona Spirovska – that, although he’s aware that it’s not good for his health and that they can’t afford it, he still intends to eat the kaymak because he likes it. If it is true that there is a narrative motivation to which it is linked – it is Violetka who prepares it and sells it, with whom Caramba has an extramarital relationship – the scene evokes the concept that Manchevski wants to convey: as for the damage caused by the kaymak, if what happens within the confines of one’s home were to leak, the reputation of the protagonists would be ruined. Nevertheless, though, they themselves enjoy it. **Thus the conflict is between the public decorum and the private psychophysical-relational well-being.**

Manchevski does not appreciate genre limitations, and so Kaymak should not be considered a comedy – despite having an explicit comic vein – but neither a dramedy, as its shocking and bitter ending might suggest. The feature film could be compared to *Deset u Pola* (Not So Friendly Neighborhood Affair, 2021), by the Bosnian Danis Tanovic, which, similarly to Manchevski’s film, is different from the author’s previous filmography. **In Kaymak, however, there is a more refined development, a more characterizing thematic choice, and the presence of a distinct directorial voice, which makes it a more complex feature film than a simple comedy. The film also has the courage to be daring,** exploring a subject that can be even more controversial in the Balkan environment. This is not a film that reaches the heights of *Before the Rain* or *Willow*, but that does not necessarily make it inferior or unsuccessful. Manchevski’s attempt to take a new, more irreverent and less serious direction demonstrates how the filmmaker is still capable of choosing surprising subjects for his works.