

# FINNISH QUEER DIASPORA: In Conversation with Mikko Mäkelä

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**Note for reader:** In respect of the theme *Pervot Paikantumiset*, and in celebration of the pure ontological joy of being able to own a space, the conversation below is not restricted to *talking about queerness* but rather extends to *talking queerly* (Mac 2019, v). Our existence, in the Finnish queer diaspora, equally resists global heteronormativity as well as monolingualism. Our aim is to add to the conversation of what it means to be a queer Finn, particularly outside of Finland. Here, we often use the word *queer* as an umbrella term, not because it is in any way accurate or representative, but because it is a more convenient linguistic shorthand than LGBTQAIP+.

Tietämättömälle, Soulin vibrant queer community may come as a surprise. The capital, with a population just short of 10 million, hosts two queer themed film festivals vuosittain: *Korea Queer Film Festival* ja *Seoul Pride Film Festival*. In November 2018, my then-partner, now-wife, threw a flyer of the latter on my lap and asked with a strong British accent: “Ootsä nähnyt tämän? Se on suomalainen.”

I glanced at the flyer apprehensively. My brain is wired to register most things labelled *suomalainen* with suspicion, hesitation and at times, danger. With misplaced distrust, I picked up the flyer and read the synopsis circled

at the bottom. Was I interested in “a romance that blossoms in the sexy summer nights of Suomen luonto” (SPFF 2018)? We got two tickets.

*A Moment in the Reeds* on **Mikko Mäkelän** esikoisohjaus. Ohjauksen lisäksi Mäkelä on käsikirjoittanut, editoinut, and produced<sup>1</sup> the film. In 2018, it won two prestigious film awards: Best Narrative Feature at *Tampa International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival* and Best Actor for **Janne Puustinen** ja **Boodi Kabbani** at *Nordic International Film Festival*. Suomessa samana vuonna elokuva ansaitsi sekä parhaan miespääosan, että parhaan miessivuosan Jussi-ehdokkuuden. The film has additionally collected nine other film award nominations in a variety of categories worldwide. Not a small feat for a directorial debut.

“Ei me sitä silloin tehdessä ajateltu, että siitä tulisi mitenkään suosittu”, Mäkelä explains with the unnecessary Finnish humility, which I suspect has been ingrained into many of us as children. Mäkelä on saavuttanut jotain aavistuksen tavatonta, and rather than pride, he answers my questions with the same awkwardness and suspicion, I often encounter in the Finnish queer diaspora. The first fifteen minutes of our Skype-interview

<sup>1</sup> Other producers include Jarno Pimperri and James Watson.

on tunnustelemaa hakemista. Emme ole varmoja kielestä, “Are we speaking in English?”, emmekä toisistamme, “So, um, moi?”.

Omien sanojensa mukaan Mäkelä on asunut ulkomailla noin 12 vuotta. Englantiin ajautuminen on hänen mukaansa ollut melkein pä vahinko, mutta Ranskassa opiskelu oli tietoinen päämäärä. “It was a personal goal of mine, to move abroad, and to visit the places I imagined as somehow better.” They are not, Mäkelä täsmentää myöhemmin. Queer paradises, for the time being, exist only in the imaginaries of queers themselves.

*A Moment in The Reeds* on Mäkelän mukaan a commentary on Finnish society. “I wanted to touch upon the unspoken phenomenon of Finnish homophobia, and the, noh, rasismi.” Mäkelä refuses the more polite, and arguably in the context a highly inaccurate term of xenophobia. He also changes the language in the middle of his sentence – an attribute I appreciate, as I regularly struggle to express my thoughts omalla äidinkielelläni.

“Prior to making the film, I was disturbed by the Syrian crisis and the negative European reactions towards refugees. Etenkin suomalaiset näkemykset on the world wide web – they made me sick to my stomach. Having lived in Finland as a gay man, en voinut edes kuvitella miten vaikeaa olisi elää Suomessa as a person of colour.”

Mäkelä brings up the *Being Black in the EU*-report ja Suomen ykkössijan on the charts of *Harassment motivated by racism* (63%) sekä *Violence motivated by racism* (14%) (EUAFR 2018, 13). “Given the political climate now,” Mäkelä jatkaa, viitaten perussuomalaisten suosioon in the 2019 parliamentary elections and the increasing popularity of the conservative populist politics in Europe, “I feel like the movie is even more relevant now, than before.”

*A Moment in the Reeds* kertoo Leevistä, suomalaisesta kirjallisuusopiskelijasta, joka on paennut isänsä ahdasmielisyyttä Ranskaan, and about Tareq, a young architect and a recent asylum seeker from war-torn Syria. Miehet tapaavat Leevin isän kesämökillä and quickly fall in love/*lust?* auttaessaan tätä kesämökin remontoinnissa. Elokuvaan Mäkelä on sisällyttänyt all the required elements to depict a nuanced and woke love story. Instead of taking the moral high ground, however, Mäkelä introduces us to three flawed individuals chased by demons of the past, some of which are of their own creation.

“Leevi does, at times, come across a little privileged,” Mäkelä says after admitting that he shares some characteristics and interests with the blonde protagonist. Keskustelustamme on selvää mihin Mäkelä viittaa; the questions surrounding Tareq’s ethnicity and refugee status, as well as the opportunity for Leevi to move abroad to study literature. Paris, a queer paradise, race, privilege, queer escapism; in different ways it all reminds me of James Baldwin and I have to wonder if Mäkelä shares my fantasies of another life, in a different queer time. Uskaltaudun kysymään, how the film has been perceived in his opinion.

“Siis, Suomessahan se on selkeästi nähty homoelokuvana”, Mäkelä sanoo hymyillen. “But in Britain, and elsewhere, the focus has been on race.”

Suomalaiset eivät ole tottuneet näkemään suomalaisia seksuaali- ja sukupuolivähemmistöjen edustajia as the main characters on the big screen. Even on Finnish television, queer people are American, English, Swedish, German, even Japanese – rarely are they *Finnish*.

Mieleen palaa *Salattujen elämien...* “Mikä sen nimi nyt taas oli?” I ask, frustrated. “Kalle”, Mäkelä avustaa huvittuneena. That’s it! Kalle Laitela, henkilöahmo, jonka tarina kuljettaa vuosiksi ulkomaille, making him yet another temporal figure in the Finnish queer diaspora.

Mäkelä miettii ääneen, whether it might be the absence of films that portray specifically Finnish sexual and gender minorities, mikä saa suomalaiset keskittymään nimenomaan homoseksuaalisuuteen katsoessaan *A Moment in the Reeds*. Maybe Leevi, standing at the intersection of homosexuality and Finnishness makes the film somehow novel for Finnish audiences? Or, is it possible that Finns lack an awareness of, or vocabulary to discuss the challenging topics invoked by Tareq's equally, if not more so, intersectional positionality? Institutional racism. Queer people of colour. Mitenkäs nämä sanotaankaan suomeksi?

Mäkelä on alkujaan lappeenrantalainen. I grew up in Seinäjoki. Currently, Mäkelä lives and works in London and describes himself as “kind of” settled there, with a British partner. Minä taas asun vaimoineni Etelä-Koreassa. Mäkelällä ja minulla on molemmilla tapana, more or less subconsciously, to avoid other Finns. Miksi? “I don't really know,” Mäkelä says. “Näyttelijöitä haastatellessakin Boodin kanssa löytyi yhteinen sävel nopeimmin. It was easier to be myself with him, rather than with the Finnish actor-candidates. Ehkä syy on kielessä?” Ehkä. Ehkä syy on minun ja Mäkelän yhteisessä ennakoasenteessa suomalaisia kohtaan?

When you have experienced trauma, ostracism, violence, and then allocated the memories of those experiences to concepts as large as Suomi ja suomalaisuus – the product can be hard to dismantle. What exactly are we avoiding, kun välttelemme suomalaisia? Demons of our own creation? My words, not his.

Yet, Mäkelä does not have any Finnish friends in London. I don't have any in Seoul, either. I feel like I have a better excuse, if, and I mean *jos*, we were looking for one. “I did make new friends in Finland while filming,” Mäkelä huomauttaa sitten. “Uskon, että vasta elokuvan teon yhteydessä opin arvostamaan Suomea, sen kaunista luontoa. Ihmisiä.” Suomalaisia? It occurs to me that Mäkelä probably appreciates Finland and Finnishness

more than I do; the realisation makes me slightly ashamed of myself. En kerro tätä Mäkelälle. I know how it sounds.

Viimeiset kymmenen vuotta, I have been keeping a mental log on the Finnish queers I meet abroad. Our lowest common denominator on use in Leevin tarinan kaltainen kokemus. A (hi)story about wanting to belong, and a negotiation around the realisation that you do not. We are often seeking for a fitting, unapologetic queer existence and space. Sometimes, elsewhere, this is achieved through contradictions: South Korea does not recognise sexual minority rights, neither does the state have any useful anti-discrimination legislation for the protection of queer people. Yet, it is often easier to breathe in Seoul as I do not have to work to fit in; I know that I never will, and it has nothing to do with my sexual orientation. “Vähemmän paineita”, Mäkelä adds as an afterthought.

What is it, that makes Finnish queers leave behind not only Finland, but Finnish culture, and, most bafflingly perhaps, jopa suomen kielen?

Mäkelä ei ole Suomessa kohdannut homofobiaan liittyvää fyysistä väkivaltaa. “I have never felt particularly unsafe in Finland.” He counts his blessing to be thanks to his standard gender performance that does not call for social policing, his height, and his broad build. *Blending in* can function as queer escapism. Kaapissa piilossa, or kaapissa turvassa? “It's just that, especially in Finland, overt homophobia would be, and is, easier to call out. It is the covert, structural stuff that gets to you,” Mäkelä explains. “*Homotus kappiin!*” on paljon helpompi ymmärtää syrjintänä, kuin rauhallisesti esitetty mielipide: “*En ymmärrä miksi seksuaalisesta suuntautumisesta on pakko tehdä niin suuri numero.*” The underlining logic of the statements is however exactly the same.

It is the covert homophobia Leevi has escaped from in Paris. It is the covert homophobia people often talk about tavatessaan uusia suomalaisia in the

Finnish queer diaspora. It is the covert homophobic encounters Mäkelä wants to avoid. It is certainly why, due to its internalised forms, I struggle to form a healthy relationship with my suomalaisuus.

“Are you planning on ever moving back?” kysyn Mäkelältä suoraan. “No,” he responds with the same, cutting straightforwardness. As a result, I do not ask him why. I doubt he would offer any straightforward answers even if I did. “But I do want to make more movies. Toivottavasti myös Suomessa”, hän lisää hymyillen. I nod in recognition ja puolisalaa kadehdin Mäkelän uutta suomalaista verkostoa; his new way back in, if he so wishes.

*A Moment in The Reeds* : <https://amomentinthereeds.com/>

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