

REVIEW

Strangers in the Bedroom

Nikola Ljuca's *Humidity* (*Vlažnost*, 2016)

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Sex addiction, an illness as old as mankind, has recently been given an informed portrayal in Steve McQueen's *Shame*. For all the director's fetish for unworldly aestheticization, which McQueen has carried even into films revolving around hunger strike (*Hunger*) and slavery (*Twelve Years A Slave*), the film shows what needs to be shown – that is the unsatable self-perpetuation of want –, and points, rather less discreetly, to what *cannot* be shown on its protagonist, i.e. emotion, the lack of which is part cause and part symptom of his miserable fate. Thanks in large part to Michael Fassbender's brilliant performance, this conceptual frame-work was filled with life, however gasping, turning Brandon into a man rather than a character reducible to a psychiatric diagnosis. And yet Brandon is just that, a man whose sexual practices are so remote one quickly forgets how much they resemble ours. For every sexual escapade that makes us realize that addiction knows no caps or measure, also enables us to disallow our being party to them. If the prevalence of pornography and of hedonistic dating practices in our society are genuinely problematic (at least they are in the eyes of this mildly conservative reviewer), it is easy to ignore this fact when being confronted by a pervert who spends his nights frequenting call-girls and hookers.

This is an issue unwittingly addressed by *Humidity*, Nikola Ljuca's impressive debut feature which revolves around a hedonistic capitalist who's no more psychopathological than you take our society to be. Its protagonist Petar (Miloš Timotijević) is a successful businessman whose life takes a turn when his wife Mina (Tamara Krcunović) disappears. Mina's disappearance comes entirely unannounced, unless an early sequence in which she stares into the distance while Petar and his colleague Srdjan (Dragan Bakema) joke about their friend's "slutty" girlfriend counts as an announcement. There is a vague sense of Mina being bothered by Serbian machismo, although the viewer wonders what Petar and his friends usually talk about when Mina is around. It can't be Dostoevsky, since Ljuca is realistic enough not to populate Petar's house with books (unlike McQueen, who has Brandon listen to Glenn Gould during breaks from you-

know-what).

Petar reacts surprisingly calm to Mina's disappearance, which is understandable at first since we, too, wonder whether Mina has simply answered an emergency or else gone missing in a trivial sense. But as days pass without him taking any decisive action, one begins to suspect that something is wrong with Petar himself. What precisely is hard to tell as Petar, for all his assertiveness, is wildly erratic, frequently backtracking on decisions without revealing his true motives. Half-way into a visit at his step-mother's place that is supposed to cover up Mina's disappearance, he suddenly decides he has to leave and bursts out of the door. In this opacity, and because of his looks – Petar's wide-shouldered, mildly balding, and flamboyantly charismatic –, he resembles Yanis Varoufakis, whose recent quest for an upheaval of the EU could also be framed as a mystery novel ("where has democracy gone?" might be its lead question).

The universe is responsive to Ljuca's directorial ambitions, producing mystery and wonder at every juncture. The sink breaks the same day that Petar wakes up to the unholy news of his wife's disappearance, and another day he's stuck in traffic because of a nearby suicide attempt. Plenty of suspicious looks are exchanged at Mina's constant absence, prompting Petar to unlikely excuses. At fancy parties and no less profuse family gatherings, he details how Mina's feeling bad or gone on a business trip, often provoking further suspicions. Ljuca wants to unmask the Serbian elite's hypocrisy, which not only manifests itself in their being oblivious to the country's true fate – which is also alluded to, albeit in a non-minatory way, through TV images of a flood and through a conversation between Petar and his wholly delusional sister Bojana (Katarina Marković), a styled-up gal who's "too busy to be depressed" –, but also in their being dishonest vis-à-vis each other.

Tragically, alienation extends all the way to the bedroom and Petar and Mina's relationship. Perhaps, Petar is not just a stranger to his parents and friends, but even to his wife? It is only through her disappearance that Petar gets to know Mina's friends, that he learns she bought their nephew a PlayStation, and that he begins wondering what might have prompted her to leave. Of course, Petar gains these insights through a number of nighttime escapades rather than existential deliberation, meaning that an excessive amount of drugs and alcohol are involved. But save for his worrying machismo, which is presented as a wide-spread trait among Serbian "elite" thirtysomethings, Petar turns out to be tame on the whole, proving unable to engage in much more than elaborate flirtations. Indeed, he shows interest in his wife's friend Karin (Maria Kraakman), a foreigner whose mature and stern temperament flies in the face of the self-objectification many of the local women seem to engage in. (Ljuca and his co-writer Staša Bajac are interested in implicating women in the problems depicted, even if Mina – a woman – seems to be this film's silent hero). Does Petar seek to be parented? At times it feels like he does, and given

the film's potentially universalist ambitions, it is easy to see why. Petar learns on our behalf how unsatisfactory a life devoid of intimacy can be. If it seems slightly optimistic that a man like him should gain that insight, one must remember that it took the disappearance of his wife to have him do so. Indeed, the roundabout way he takes to acknowledging his fate reminds us how difficult it is to recognize that capitalism doesn't even redeem what it promises to its elites, namely a happy life, where happiness means more than driving a BMW, having an attractive partner and owning an impeccably designed apartment. Ljuca's compelling film fans out multiple facets of Serbian society through a story which seems so very simple. A person is gone, and with her all the matter-of-factness of existence.