Independence: Art & Activism / A Conversation With Milcho Manchevski

By Keith Brown

Milcho Manchevski was born in the Yugoslav republic of Macedonia in 1959. He went to film school at the University of Illinois in Carbondale, and after graduation made several music videos and experimental short films. His first feature, *Before the Rain,* tells the story of a war photographer who returns home to his native Macedonia to find an atmosphere of intercommunal suspicion and violence. Widely distributed in 1994, when the fighting in Bosnia was at its height, the film was embraced by Western audiences as a powerful portrayal of Balkan fratricide, and also won critical acclaim, including the Golden Lion at Venice and an Academy foreign language film nomination, for its non-linear, interlocking narrative form. Manchevski's second feature film, *Dust,* was released during armed conflict in Macedonia in 2001. More ambitious in scope and form, the film jumps between continents and centuries to undercut simplistic ideas of historical truth. It was nevertheless again read as the director's commentary on the present, and was less well received outside Macedonia. Manchevski now teaches in the graduate program at New York University. His new film, *Shadows*, opened at the Toronto Film Festival in September 2007 and was chosen as the Republic of Macedonia's entry for the 2008 Academy Awards. Set mostly in present-day Skopje, Macedonia's capital city, Shadows is a psychological thriller which has been read as telling the story of modern Macedonia's emergence from, and reckoning with, the trauma of its history.

This interview was compiled from conversations with Milcho Manchevski in December 2002 and April 2007, both at the Watson Institute at Brown University, and subsequent telephone and email exchanges over the summer of 2007.

Brown: Let me start by quoting a couple of academic responses to your work. In 1997, Slavoj Žižek wrote that "*Before the Rain* offers the western liberal gaze precisely what this gaze wants to see in the Balkan war, the spectacle of a timeless, incomprehensible, mythical cycle of passions, in contrast to decadent and anemic western life." And Dina Iordanova, in 2001, wrote "The film mirrors the long standing stereotype of the Balkans as a mystic stronghold of stubborn and belligerent people… and asserts the existing Balkan trend of voluntary self- exoticism."[1] What do you do with comments or reactions like this?

Manchevski: *Before the Rain* and *Dust* are meant to be, and I think they turned out to be, films about people. They're not about places, and not about people from particular places. The mythical and mystic in them is not about Macedonia, but rather about those particular stories and those particular people. I think these critics make the same old, same old mistake – they a read a film <u>from</u> Macedonia as if it is a film <u>about</u> Macedonia.

[1] Slavoj Žižek, "Multiculturalism, or the cultural logic of multinational capitalism." New Left Review I/225, September/October 1997; p.38; Dina Iordanova. Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media. London and Berkeley: BFI & U California P, 2001: p.63.

They can't shake off their need to put things in neat little folders. That stereotyping disguised as defense against stereotyping borders on intellectual racism. A good work of art is about people and ideas and emotions, not about geopolitical concepts. I don't see why Wong-Kar Wai couldn't make films about New York or Bergman about Taipei or Tarantino about Lagos. Those films would not be that different from the films these filmmakers have already made.

Brown: I'm struck that Žižek sees the film as offering a gaze from outside the region, and Iordanova as a construction from within. Both *Before The Rain* and *Dust* feature characters who struggle to straddle worlds and perspectives. Do you?

Manchevski: I was born in Macedonia, but at the time it was a part of a country that does not exist anymore. Sort of like being born in Austro-Hungary. I was educated in the U.S. Midwest, yet I spent most of my life in New York, and my films are financed in Europe. More importantly, my artistic, intellectual and cinematic influences are international, or rather – cosmopolitan, as is the case with most filmmakers. Film heritage today in the era of globalization is transnational, and no amount of reactionary crypto-racism will change that. As a matter of fact, I believe art has always been interested in means of expression, regardless of its origins. It is usually the outside forces that try to limit the ways in which an artist can express himself or herself.

Brown: In fact, *Before the Rain*, originally, wasn't going to be set in Macedonia, right?

Manchevski: Yes, the outline for the film, the synopsis, was set in an unknown country. I wanted to keep it free of daily politics. Yet, once you start turning a story into a screenplay it has to become more specific: the characters will have to speak a certain language. What will they wear? Is this something that people wear in Macedonia or is it something people wear in Azerbaijan? What do their houses look like? How about the streets? The landscape? The customs and habits? Do they have doilies on the TV sets? How about the couch - would the cushions be imprisoned in plastic? Even if these things are not central to the film, you have to make those decisions. Of course, you can go for the "neutral," but that often means bland. This never stopped Hollywood from making unconvincing films set in foreign places where everyone still speaks English and they dance exotic dances invented in Burbank. As a filmmaker, I need to feel the background of the place, not because it's a statement about the place but because this will root it for filming purposes. Once I started writing, *Before the Rain* somehow took place in Macedonia. Perhaps I was lazy. But it's not about the place, it's about people. They could easily live somewhere else. I have had people come to me after screenings and say, "I'm from Israel. This film could easily take place there." Or "I'm from India. This film could easily take place there." And I was very happy to hear that.

Brown: But you do spend a lot of time on research—especially Macedonian ethnography and history.

Manchevski: I feel a moral responsibility to whatever it is we are filming to do as much research as possible. The core bibliography on *Dust* was about 160 pieces and this was mainly things written at the time, from the turn of the 20th Century. The film deals with the Wild West, with the Ottoman Empire, a very small bit deals with Paris at the turn of the century, and then the rest is New York City today. Now, we are never really recreating the period. It's not a document, it's not a documentary. We can't recreate it, we were not there. Narrative film takes a lot of shortcuts anyway. But since people tend

to see things that way, tend to see films as if they really are documents, I would like to have as much background work done as possible. Research also helps the actual work. Even when you don't see it on the screen, it gives you the confidence, it gives the art director the confidence, it gives the actor the confidence. It sort of seeps through the pores and pours onto the screen, and can help your take on whatever you're talking about.

Brown: Which is?

Manchevski: Well, *Dust*, both in its form and in what it talks about, is about the thirst to tell stories and to hear stories. I think to a great degree, we learn how to be through stories, through stories, through gossip, through anecdotes, through history, through CNN, through jokes, soaps, myths, legends. *Dust* deals with that in a formal way, deconstructing the story. In a way, it's a Cubist take on storytelling. It helped me and everyone else who worked on the film when we saw how much of the myths we were dealing with were actually fake - both the myths about the American west and the myths about the fight for independence in Macedonia. For example, I discovered that that famous Western gunslinger Billy the Kid was from Brooklyn, or that most of the people he was supposed to have killed in duels he actually shot in the back. And there were a lot of black cowboys—you don't see that in John Wayne films. General Custer was one of the worst students at West Point (which makes sense, and makes for great dramatic potential when combined with his apparent arrogance). Cowboys and Indians were pretty much never at the same time in the same place, because most Indians were driven out of Oklahoma and Texas by the time the cowboys took over as they were needed to herd cattle to the railroad, which then took them up North. I discovered that the gunfight at the OK Corral happened just a few years before a big labor strike in the silver mines in Arizona, next door. You somehow don't put those two together, gunfights and the labor movement; in our compartmentalized brains we think they belong to different eras. And precisely this was one of the things *Dust* was dealing with – decomposing clichés: we have in the same film (because it happened at more or less the same time) the waning of the Wild West, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the birth of the new times as seen through Sigmund Freud, the birth of the airplane, the birth of modernism through Cubism. So, research is fun.

Brown: Both *Before the Rain* and *Dust* have multiple, interlocking story-lines. Do you want your audience to have to work hard?

Manchevski: Writing comes easy to me, and stories are easy to tell, and I can riff on any subject, and come up with stories and change them and restructure them, and maybe because of that I also find it sort of boring to tell the story in a regular, linear way, going one, two, three, cause and effect, 2 hours, plot, subplot, turns… especially in film. But if we can find a slightly more interesting form of telling that story, then we have a little bit extra in that it also engages a little bit more of our artistic muscle, both for the teller and the listener. The process is more fun, as is the result. I like comparing it to movements in painting (not that it's a perfect comparison), but it would be like painting a portrait vs. painting a portrait in a cubist style, or like using a collage the way Robert Rauschenberg does (where it feels, very sort of modern and broken down, but it actually has very old-fashioned aesthetics to it).

Ultimately, for me it's about playing with the story, and hearing it like music, hearing when it works well and when it doesn't. I find it a very helpful tool when writing, or

before writing, or while writing, to tell the story to somebody, and as I'm telling it I realize that I'm honing it. I'm dropping parts that don't help the telling, and I see when people need more explanation so I start focusing a little more on those, which I guess is sort of like testing films. The difference is that here the actual artist does the testing, and not a suit with the power, but without the chops to make art.

Brown: And was it that playing and testing which produced the non-linearity that really caught critics' attention in *Before the Rain.*

Manchevski: There are many films in three parts, but telling a film in three parts where the ending of the third part could be the beginning of the first one was, I guess, relatively new. But playing with linearity is not a new invention, I mean it was done way back, in *Last year at Marienbad* (1961) and *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), for example. I'm very curious what happens when you start playing with the story creatively. I'm happy to see that that is beginning to happen more often even in the mainstream cinema, with films like *21 Grams*, *Memento* or *Babel*. However, what was important was that in *Before the Rain* there's thematic resonance to this - violence going in circles and how to break the circle. This was in my mind, but replicating it in the structure of the film wasn't a conscious decision. And it wasn't really only about violence and war being circular: it was about how things keep coming back to us. A lot of what we do is just repetition, we put ourselves in similar situations all the time for whatever reason.

Brown: You mention the violence in Before the Rain – I've been in audiences where people flinch. In *Dust*, it feels like there's more blood, but there's also a different tone to it.

Manchevski: *Dust* is more irreverent, more playful, more in-your-face, more alive, and that scares a lot of people. It is violent, but if you put it next to even mainstream films like *Saving Private Ryan*, you see that it's very tame. There's a major debate about how you respond to violence in the arts, and on film. I subscribe to what Bergman has said about violence, and I am paraphrasing here from memory – he says that film is a perfectly legitimate way of ritualizing violence. Ritualizing, not glorifying. Society needs to deal with this extreme – yet integral – aspect of its existence. Ritualizing has been a central way of dealing with it since time immemorial. Film lends itself to ritualizing it for many reasons, and convincing "realism" not one of the least important. I believe that hiding violence from art or from social storytelling is not an answer—in fact, I think there's something hypocritical about all the fuss about it. Those same people who object to violence in film support many other kinds of violence. What about, say, a loyal employee being laid off after twenty-five years. For some people that's perfectly ordinary, acceptable. It is legitimate to ask, is that violence? And what does the fact that we don't discuss it as violence tell us about ourselves?

But on-screen violence in particular, I think there's room for realism. When someone gets shot, they don't just fall back, or lie down. Probably it hurts, maybe they stagger, then they look at themselves and they are shocked. Do they at some point start laughing, and say, is this really happening to me? Or do they say, damn I wish I had more sex when I could have? Or do they whine? What happens to this person during those 20 seconds or 20 minutes while he's dying? So, fortunately in a film it is all make-believe, so you can

explore a little bit of that. But, if you treat violence as something without real consequences, something fun and easy, the way a Simpson-Bruckheimer film or a Stallone film or a Schwartzenegger film does, then you are doing society a disservice. I believe that what really matters in film is the tone, not the story. It is the tone that sends the message and communicates with the viewer much more than the story. In *Dust* we were trying to face violence with our eyes open, and I think that that's perhaps why some critics had a hard time with it. I didn't fulfill their preconceptions about what I was supposed to be filming. I had somebody describe *Dust* this way, he said if watching a good Hollywood film is riding a rollercoaster, watching *Dust* is like sitting in a car with a test crash dummy. It's interesting if critics find the shifts in tone hard. The film is funny, and then it's brutal, and then it's very sad, and then it's funny again. And you say, wait a minute, what did the poster say, what did the press release say, was this a funny film or a sad film?

Brown. So what's the press release for the new film?

Manchevski. Taglines are more fun than synopsis—though of course that is a completely different category, a different format. Our tagline is "sometimes the dead speak louder than the living." Shadows is also a film about sex and death and a few important things in between. Or if you want a literary reference point, you can also think of it as the story of what happens if Lady Macbeth had lived today and survived to have a grown-up son. He would try to come to terms with her overbearing presence in his life, and her past transgressions.

It's actually an old-fashioned, slow-burn of a film, and in many ways it's my most personal film to date. It's scary - I love scary films, love having to face your fears, even though it hurts and we seldom really do it in real life. Perhaps that's why we need rollercoasters and scary films and tragedies. But it's scary with no jolting moments, cheap frills, sound bites or easy solutions. The terror simmers underneath. It's about a man trying to have a dialogue with the dead, and becoming more alive for that experience.

Brown. So is it fair to say that the film presents the past as some kind of refuge from the present? I was struck by the main character's search for tenderness, and a certain stillness, in a sometimes sordid and always hectic modern world.

Manchevski. Absolutely. It's interesting that you would see it in that way, because that was the emotion that ended up shaping the movie – it is heavy and scary, but somehow liberating at the end as we go into a flashback. As if there is something redemptive in re-living the pain of the past. As for the main character's search for tenderness – none of his living family who surround him offer him much outside of their expectations that he deliver in a hungry rat race. The dead are much warmer to him. And yes, a little bit of stillness when you empty your mind of adrenaline might be healthy. So maybe *Shadows* offers something like a natural closure to the three films.

Brown. But more rollercoasters to come, I hope?

Manchevski. I only guarantee tomatoes.

Keith Brown is an associate research professor at the Thomas J. Watson Institute of International Studies at Brown University. Drawing on a background in classics and socio-cultural anthropology, his area of specialty is Macedonia, and he has authored numerous works on culture and politics in the Balkans, including analyses of international and domestic reception of Before the Rain, the construction of history in Macedonia, Greece, and Bulgaria, and foreign intervention in the former Yugoslavia.