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Violence – Visualised and Viewed

An exertion on the films Before the Rain and Dust

Erik Tängerstad

Introduction

The burglar bends over the old lady that he is just about to stab. A huge colt revolver smacks his face. He cries out in pain when seeing blood on his new clothes. "Of course you're bleeding', I broke your nose", the old lady says calmly, holding the burglar at gunpoint. Unconcerned about his blood and his pain, she then starts telling her captive a story.

The scene is taken from the film Dust (2001). Up to date the Macedonian/American writer/director Milcho Manchevski has made two feature films. Before making Dust he had become a widely acclaimed filmmaker after his successful debut with Before the Rain (1994). Both his films can be seen as depicting a violent confrontation between Macedonia and the West. Both can be characterised as experimental in narrative as well as in visual terms. Both had their openings at the Venice Film Festival. And both are violent films indeed. Here, however, ends the similarity. When Before the Rain became an instant success story – it was celebrated at film festivals as well as it was a major blockbuster, and has later become considered a contemporary film classic – Dust was immediately denounced by both critics and audiences, at least in the west. One could of course ask why the two films were so differently received. But answering that question would be to stretch the limits of this essay, so here I will concentrate on discussing violence in Manchevski's two films. In this essay I will regard them as two sides of one integrated artistic work in progress, leaving the complicated receptions of them aside. When doing so I will make decisive between two forms of film violence; narrated violence and visualised violence. To make this difference clear, I will have to develop on the methodological considerations that lie beneath my overall argument.

The aim of this essay is therefore to analyse the films Before the Rain and Dust in order to see how violence in these two films has not only been depicted, but also how it has been reflected. Violence in Manchevski's films, I will here argue, is not only made visual, but in its own right it forms a narrative core too; these are not only visually violent films, but they are also films on violence. Thus, violence in these two films should not be regarded a mere visual effect, but rather a main theme that is consciously reflected through their narratives. In order to effectuate such an analysis some analytical tools will be needed. After a short presentation of Manchevski, I will therefore sketch my methodological point of departure when studying these films. The point of departure taken for that consideration is David Bordwell's theory on narratives in the feature film, although I will to some extent critically revise that theory.

In this essay, I will argue that both Before the Rain and Dust not only break with the narrative conventions that constitute conventional Hollywood filmmaking, but also that Manchevski through his films deliberately has tried to critically revise and challenge these conventions. To demonstrate the distinction between the principles of "classical Hollywood cinema" and Manchevski's films, I will use Steven Spielberg's film Saving Private Ryan (1998) as an illustrative example with which to compare

Manchevski's films. Even if the three films Saving Private Ryan, Before the Rain and Dust can be described as violent, I will here argue that the manner in which they visualise violence is fundamentally different. Hence, in this essay I will take Manchevski's films as vantage point when discussing the intriguing relationship between the visual and the violent.

A Hollywood Rebel

Although Milcho Manchevski (born in 1959) origins from the Macedonian part of former Yugoslavia, he has spent most of his adult life in the US. During the early 1980s he was trained as a film director in New York. As a moviemaker throughout the rest of the 80s, Manchevski did a number of short-films and music videos. During a long awaited return trip to his former hometown Skopje in 1991 he confronted the high tension that characterised the conditions of Yugoslavia shortly before the collapse and outbreak of war. Because of his long stay outside his native country, Yugoslavia, Manchevski was not prepared to confront the magnitude of the changes that meanwhile had occurred. In order to work out this experience Manchevski decided to make a film. The result became Before the Rain, which became a world wide box-office success in 1994-95: it even became nominated an Oscar for Best Foreign Film at the 1995 Academy Award. After this highly successful debut, Manchevski received a number of offers making films. He went to Hollywood in order to accomplish a filmmaking career there. The differences between currant Hollywood film production and his filmmaking visions however soon became unbridgeable and without having accomplished any new film Manchevski left California to effect his career elsewhere. After much work, Manchevski was able to find a number of different European-based producers backing his next project. Seven years after Before the Rain had had its acclaimed opening at the Venice Film Festival Dust was to open the same festival in 2001. However, Dust did not receive the same kind of critique as had once Before the Rain received. In some cases even the same critics that once had applauded Manchevski's first film now not only denounced his second, but started to express second thoughts also about the quality of Before the Rain as well as about their previous judgements about that film. Currently Manchevski is teaching film at the New York University and is not involved in any further filmmaking project.

Feature films are usually narrative; they tell a story. When discussing a film, one usually starts by telling what that story is about and not how it is told. Since it is indeed a main them in the layout of Manchevski's films, this difference between content and form should here be kept in mind and it could be used, too, as good point of departure when critically approaching his films.

From its earliest days film has been a visual pleasure. In the making of films, however, a major shift in the principles of film editing took place around the time of the First World War. Up until the war, feature film was primarily non-narrative: scenes that were not necessarily interconnected were staged for the camera and then shown on a screen. During the first decades of film-production, audiences were attracted by the vision of moving images alone – and film became known as "movies". But by the time of the 1910s a narrative element in the "movies" became increasingly accentuated. During the 1920s "movies" became primarily narrative. Especially the Hollywood-based film-industry managed from the 1920s and onwards to develop a set of conventions according to which film has generally been made and

understood. For a trained viewer it is relatively easy to "see through" the narrative form of a standardised Hollywood film in order to conclude "what it is about". Again, the underlying assumption thus being that the film is a narrative made up according to some well-established conventions; what is important in a film is what the narrative is about and not how it has been told. After having seen such a standardised film, the viewer is expected to be able to tell what it was about. Although, it still is – perhaps – more the visual pleasure than the intellectual effort that makes people go to cinemas, just as it was around the turn of the century 1900.

For two reasons, the paradigmatic shift from the early 1900s to the 1920s should here be remembered. Firstly, as film audiences we (who are born after the First World War and who are accustomed to standards once set by the big Hollywood studios) are from early childhood trained in viewing and understanding "the movies" according to a fundamentally narrative paradigm – nowadays often called "classical Hollywood cinema". Secondly, Manchevski appears to by trying consciously to reflect and challenge that paradigm in his production; especially his way of dealing with the pre-First World War film heritage in Dust ought here to be noted.

At a first glance also Manchevski's films appear to be obeying well-established film conventions. But it should not take a common moviegoer more than a second glance to see that that is what they do not do. On the contrary, both Before the Rain and Dust are edited in such a way that audiences are forced to reflect the narrative structure of the films they are viewing. On a basic level these films short-circuit the distinction between form and content so that they on a crucial level could be said to be about how they are told. Of course, anybody assuming that these films are to follow the standards set by the "classical Hollywood cinema" is then bound to be confused, and perhaps even frustrated as well as annoyed. When being confined in a cinema and so-to-speak being forced to see the film to end, any viewer – common moviegoers and professional film experts alike – might even get angry by being forced to interpret according to what appears to be unknown interpretative schemes. Because there is an element of force involved in such a situation, it can be said that a form of visual violence is intrinsically intertwined within both the narrative structure and the viewing situation. The commonly upheld distinction between the viewer on the one hand and the visualised narrative on the other is being challenged: by being forced into the processes of actively creating the narrative, the viewer is in a way dragged into the narrative. Would a viewer under this circumstance feel pleasure? The old lady holding the burglar at gunpoint while forcing him to listen to her story could perhaps be seen as a metaphor for the filmmaker forcing his audience in the enclosed cinema to endure the narrative of his film. In turn, that would open up for a reflection on violence in film.

Making Sense of Film and Discourse

As has already been suggested, when interpreting a film, the above suggested distinction between what it is about and how it is told – between "content" and "form" – appears to be a good starting point for the discussion. But again, Manchevski's films appear to deliberately short-circuiting the conventional distinction between "form" and "content". Because of this reason, these films take a position so-to-speak in between conventionally made and artistically made feature film. It is still an open question whether a film like Dust will bridge the abyss between profit oriented popular film and academic oriented artistic film or fall in between by being regarded neither-nor, hence running the risk of being neglected and forgotten. In any case,

when judging a film like Dust one needs some analytical tools and I will here sketch the means used when analysing the films in question.

The general point of departure when studying a film (or any artwork) is that it does not contain any concealed or immanent meaning of its own. The meaning of a film, or its "content", is constructed by the viewer when viewing and reflecting the film. Of course, this meaning-making activity is not made at random, but is dependent of existing contextual conventions. If the studied film is the text under scrutiny, then the situation in which that examination takes place is the context, and the system of conventions directing the study is the discourse. It should immediately be stressed that discourse here means the totality of elements that form the interpretative situation. The interpreter – any interpreter – is always located within discourse, so that discourse can only be reflected from within discourse. Transcendence beyond discourse is not possible. This condition needs a further comment.

Neither the interpretation of the film in the meaning-making process, nor the film as an artefact (or artwork) is made at random. Just as the interpretation of film follows certain conventions, the production of film has also been subjected to conventions. This does not mean that filmmakers through film send certain confined messages that are to be received by audiences. It does mean, instead, that the entire process from conceiving and making to viewing and understanding a film takes place within discourse, i.e. in this case the convention-driven context. Also the systematic reflection of the conventions that make up discourse take place within discourse – that is, the critical and systematic reflection of conventions takes place within conventions and through conventions. Because of this reason, any discourse analysis is subjected to discourse since we, as human beings, cannot transcend or in other ways distance ourselves beyond discourse. But through discourse we can critically and systematically reflect our position within discourse. Put crudely, as living human beings we can only reflect life through life. Although life is bigger than discourse, life can only be made intelligible in and through discourse. What we, as living human beings believe that we know about life is therefore to be understood as reflection of discourse, not as a reflection of any presupposed form of non-discursive life. This point is as central for the following argument as it is – perhaps – still controversial, since 1900 century conventions on knowledge held it to be the other way around: according to those conventions knowledge could transcend discourse and identifying non-discursive realties such as non-discursive life.

That being said, it should come as now surprise that there exist no direct connection between the expression made by filmmakers and the impression received by film audiences: no film actively sends a message that is passively received by an audience. Instead, a film is an artefact that has to be given meaning by the spectator, or rather by collectives of spectators, i.e. audiences. In the meaning-making process, the audience is the active part, not the passive. In other words, and contrary to classical conventions, the viewer does actively project meaning onto a film and does not passively receive a meaning that is supposedly immanent. It is this meaning-making process that is here under examination.

Filmmakers produce film in order to pursue expressions and to earn profit, just as film audiences watch film in order to receive impressions and to feel pleasure. As a consequence, filmmaking exists within an immanent conflict between pursuing expressions and earning profit, just as viewers are put in just as immanent a conflict between receiving impressions and feeling pleasure. Under this predicament it is not

difficult to understand that the filmmaking industry strive at maximum profit by handing audiences what it believes will produce the largest collective feeling of instant pleasure (which in turn will attract paying audiences to attend cinemas, thus increasing the film-industry's gain). At the same time, it is not difficult seeing that artists doing film in order to pursue a critical expression will be frustrated within the realm of commercially oriented filmmaking industry. Seen from this perspective, the controversy between the filmmaking artist Manchevski and the profit-oriented film-industry of Hollywood should come as no surprise. The question is not why Manchevski had to leave Hollywood to continue his filmmaking career, but how the layout of Manchevski's films differ from classical Hollywood conventions. To be more specific still, the question is how violence performed in Manchevski's films differs from Hollywood film conventions on how to present violence.

David Bordwell and Narration in the Feature Film

To tackle this question I have taken my point of departure from David Bordwell's theory of how to analyse film narratives. In his book Narration in the Fiction Film (first published in 1985 and by now something of a classic within its field), Bordwell, however, is focusing the problem of how to analyse meaning-making actions taken by spectators. At the same time, he distance himself from any discussion about filmmakers meaning-making activities. Since I in this essay aim at analysing the conventions challenged by the filmmaker Manchevski, leaving the reception of his films aside, I have to revise the categories and theoretical perspectives proposed by Bordwell. The question to be answered is how Manchevski's films are to be made object for critical examination, not how audiences have received them. Even more to the point: How is the use of violence in Manchevski's films to be understood?

There is more to a film than its narrative, but I will follow Bordwell by starting to analyse the narratives of the films. How is that to be done? Roughly speaking, a film can be analytically divided into the story, or "what the film is about", and the plot, or "how the film is told/shown". By viewing, reworking and reflecting the plot, the spectator is making up the story. In his model for analysing film, Bordwell has being much inspired by the Russian Formalists of the 1920s and has taken up some of their terminology in order to gain precision. Following the Formalists reflection of Aristotle's Poetics, Bordwell suggests a distinction between the film as a whole and the narrative of the film. He then concentrates on the analysis of the narrative.

Bordwell calls that the meaningful narrative made up by the spectator is the fabula. In other words, the fabula is the story that the viewer makes up on the basis of the watched film. The basic element used, when the spectator is constructing the fabula is the plot-line of the narrative, or the syuzhet. Or put differently, the syuzhet is the plot that structures and composes the narrative. The shape of the syuzhet can be differently composed according to different modes and means of style. Style is therefore the means forming the syuzhet, which in turn is the basic element of the fabula.

For example, a film depicting a war, a civil war, or an uprising will be, by the nature of its topic, a violent one. The syuzhet will contain acts of violence, such as mass killings. The question how these acts of violence will be presented in the film is a question of style. A killing that is central in the syuzhet can be either visualised in great detail or it could be eliminated altogether by a gap, such as for instance a blackout. The effect on the fabula created by the spectator would nevertheless be the same: the viewer will understand that a killing has taken place. The stylistic means

used when presenting the violent act – for example between a detailed visualisation or a blacked out scene – in the narrative would however differ, and so would, most certainly, the emotive effect on the individual spectator. Because of this reason, we have to differ between two different levels of film violence; i.e. the narrated violence that takes place in the film syuzhet and the visualised violence that take place in the film style.

To this should be added that besides the interactive relationship between syuzhet and style there exists yet a further component in the spectator's meaning-making process, namely the spectator's individual experience. It is important to stress that the individual viewer does not have to be consciously aware of these experiences, but that they could (and most certainly do) exist, too, on an unreflected and subconscious level. Being eyewitness to a bloody mass killing is a traumatic experience. It is not easy dealing with such an experience and it could easily be oppressed from reflective consciousness. Seeing detailed depictions of, for example, bloody mass killings shown in great detail in a feature film will have strong emotional impact on any audience. But individual spectators viewing narrated hints of such killings – for instance, by gaps in the syuzhet or by blacked out, silent sections of the film – will most certainly react differently and in consonance with individual experiences. A traumatised person could project his or her traumatic experience into the syuzhet gap or the stylistically placed blackout scene in a manner that would be impossible for a person lacking that kind of traumatic experience. The proposition that a film does not in it self contain any meaning or fabula is thereby highlighted. It is the individual viewer that actively – however not always consciously – makes up the fabula and projects that as meaning onto the viewed film. And again, that meaning-making process takes place within discourse, just as any interpretation of that meaning-making process takes place within discourse.

Again, for the sake of clarity, here should be underlined what discourse is not: discourse is not existing reality within which we exists as physical beings. That is, we have here a clear-cut demarcation between on the one hand the existing reality and ourselves as physical beings, and on the other side our discursively produced understanding of existing reality and ourselves as physical beings. Our understanding of existing reality and ourselves as physical beings is not identical with existing reality and ourselves as physical beings. We have here a clear demarcation between on the one side knowledge and on the other side reality. The proposition is that the object of knowledge cannot be identical with reality as such: we cannot know anything about reality as such, our knowledge is limited to discourse – and basically this is, too, the very same point that for example Kant argued in his Critique of Pure Reason more than two centuries ago. The reason guiding this argument is that our knowledge is a product of discourse while reality is not! In other words, since we cannot transcend ourselves beyond discourse we cannot claim the existence of any identity between our discursively produced knowledge and the existing non-discursive reality: hence we cannot know anything about reality, we can only know discourse, which we can try to grasp by reflecting discourse from within. This point is once again underlined, since it runs contrary to much of mainstream 20th century theory on knowledge, and as such it still runs contrary to much mainstream theory on film reception, too.

The above argument lies immanent in the reason of Bordwell's line of argument. He is, however, notably hesitant and, I argue, he does not himself draw this conclusion from his own reasoning. Because he is focused upon the pure film-elements and their relationship with the spectator, Bordwell tend to play down the

importance of non film-elements and their relationship with the spectator within this overall meaning-making process.

In any case, but surely in accordance with Bordwell's line of reasoning, the narrative takes place in an ongoing exchange or interactivity between syuzhet and style. When watching this interactivity or exchange – which makes up the duration of the film – the spectator conceptualises the fabula. However – and this condition I will again underline since Bordwell has a tendency of playing it down – when conceiving the fabula, the viewer uses not only information that is provided by the film, but also personal experiences of different kinds as well as general film conventions that are central to the act of interpretation, although they are not necessarily put forward in the actual film. Furthermore, the knowledge that the spectator possesses can be subdivided into experiences and expectations.

Conventions could be specific for a certain film genre. For example, when seeing a war-film, the spectator will expect – on the basis of previous experiences – already before starting to watch the film that it will depict at least two parties confronting one another in a violent conflict. In a Hollywood-produced film on the Second World War, for example, from the very outset the spectator can expect to be presented a depiction of GIs fighting either German or Japanese soldiers. More than that, according to basic Hollywood film conventions, the GIs would be the protagonists while the Germans or the Japanese would be the antagonists of the narrative, thus helping the viewer of structuring the film according to a "we - they" scheme in which "we" are the "good" GIs and "they" are the "bad" enemy. It should here be stressed that the distinction between "we - the good GIs" and "they - the bad enemy" is a convention that exists as a film convention within the interpretative situation in which the viewer is constructing the fabula. This scheme does not exist in the individual film as such. By enforcing this convention, the interaction between syuzhet and style in any such war-film about the Second World War would help the already accustomed spectator to make up the fabula, thus giving meaning to the film. On the other hand, by complicating and/or challenging this convention the film would confuse the spectator that is accustomed to this specific film genre. And a spectator who is not already accustomed to this specific convention would create an entirely different fabula out of the very same film. The point being, of course, that it is not only the film itself that constitutes the groundwork upon which the viewer creates the fabula. The discourse in which that fabula is produced is more complex and more decisive upon the conclusive meaning-making process than is the individual film discussed and analysed. But by systematically and critically analysing and discussing certain individual films, the discourse will be made subject to critical reflection.

The Conventions of "Classical Hollywood Cinema"

Which, then, are these classical film conventions that help trained film audiences to rapidly create a fabula on the basis of a conventional feature film? When speaking of classical feature film, or even of mainstream commercial film, the term "Hollywood" will soon emerge. But what, then, is meant by "Hollywood"?

More than the geographical location of the worlds most important film industry, "Hollywood" has became the shorthand for a certain brand of feature film. For about four decades, from around 1920 to about 1960, Hollywood was indeed the geographic centre of international film-industry. During that era, Hollywood based studios

controlled the entire filmmaking process, from the first movie-draft to distribution and public screening of the finished film.

Film industry is an extremely high-risk industry. The investor cannot be guaranteed in advance what kind of economic gains (or losses!) the film under production will generate. The Hollywood studios during the first half of the century developed standardised procedures for filmmaking in order to have relatively quick and secure turnouts of invested money. Of course, film producers adapted to what they thought were the movies that would attract mass audiences. On the other hand, audiences adapted to the actual films shown. Just as masses of people wanted to see the elaborated products that the studios produced, the studios elaborated their products in accordance to what they thought that masses of people wanted to see. The simple form was (and is) that many people go where many people go. Within the process, film conventions where created and upheld. And in turn, they generated growing audiences and growing gains for the Hollywood studios. Or at least until the 1950s, that is. For different reasons, from the 1950s and onwards filmmaking was not anymore as lucrative an industry as it had been during the first half of the twentieth century. The 60s and 70s saw the downfall of the classical studio system. Since then, instead of having one integrated studio controlling every step in the individual production of a film, films are now produced by numerous independent producers that join individual joint-venture companies that are exclusively producing one single feature film.

But even if the shape of film-production has changed since the 1950s, the classical film conventions made up in Hollywood (and by "Hollywood") during the first half of the twentieth-century do largely still remain. When presenting the conventions that have since then become known as the "classical Hollywood cinema", Bordwell writes:

'The classical Hollywood film presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals. In the course of this struggle, the characters enter into conflict with others or with external circumstances. The story ends with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the problem and a clear achievement or nonachievement of the goals. The principle causal agency is thus the character, a discriminated individual endowed with a consistent batch of evident traits, qualities, and behaviours. […] The most "specified" character is usually the protagonist, who becomes the principal causal agent, the target of any narration restriction, and the chief object of audience identification.'[1]

(A gap to be filled)

Diegtic and mimic

As is well known to any reader of Narration in the Fiction Film, Bordwell opens his book by referring back to Aristotle and the distinction between the "diegetic" and the "mimetic":

'Diegetic theories conceive of narration as consisting either literally or analogically of verbal activity: a telling. This telling may be either oral or written. […] Mimetic theories conceive of narration as the presentation of a spectacle: a showing. Note, incidentally, that since the difference applies only to "mode" of imitation, either theory may be applied to any medium. You can hold a mimetic theory of the novel if you believe the narrational methods of fiction to resemble those of drama, and you can hold a diegetic theory of painting if you posit visual spectacle to be analogous to linguistic

[1] Bordwell, David: Narration in the Fiction Film Routledge: London, 1997 [1985], p. 157

transmission. The Aristotelian distinction enables us to compare the two principal traditions of narrative representation and to examine how the theory has drawn upon each one.'(Bordwell's italics)[2]

In other words, no immanent distinction between the categories diegetic and mimetic can be deduced from the actual object under scrutiny (i.e. the actual film to be analysed), but the analytic chooses to view that object from either a mimetic or a diegetic point of view. This clarification should be kept in mind when discussing Manchevski's films, since they constantly and apparently consciously challenges distinctions such as these of mimetic and diegetic, or of shown and told.

But would there still be an important difference to make between the mimetic and the diegetic, between what a narrative visualises and how it reads? In the following I will argue that in a discourse founded on the belief that it is indeed possible to transcend discourse, a crucial difference exists. The whole notion that a narrative should be "about" something points in that direction. The mimesis between the narrative and reality points in the direction of an identity between what the narrative is "about" and the presupposed non-discursive reality "out there – beyond the narrative". In such a case, the narrative could be understood as a vehicle with which human knowledge could transcend discourse and become identical with non-discursive reality. The mimetic would be the connection granting this transcendence and identity between the narrative and reality. On the other hand, the diegetic would not point beyond discourse, but instead reflect it and point back to the narrative as such. In other words, the shown would show the real, while the told would reflect the telling.

This difference becomes most significant when discussing the nature of history. Does history point beyond the discourse in which it has been produced so that it could be used in order to get to know "the past as it really was"? Or does history, instead, reflect the discourse in which it has emerged so that "history would be about history"? In the first case ideal history would be identical with the past as such, while in the second case, ideal history would be a critical instance in which discourse could be made intelligible through critical reflection? In the fist case, history would be a vehicle that would enable the transcendence of time, while in the second case it would be an instrument of reflection within time. Or put a bit more crudely, is ideal history to be regarded as identical with the past as such, or is ideal history, contrarily, to point out that no identity between the present and the past exists, and that history cannot be used as a vehicle when transcending time?

To make the implications of this rather philosophical reflection on aesthetics and the groundwork of narrative analysis in film studies a bit more handy and easy to understand, an example should be presented. When director Steven Spielberg and his Hollywood producers make their highly popular and commercially successful historical films – such as Schindler's List (1993), Amistad (1997), or Saving Private Ryan (1998) – they attempt to dramatise past events "as they really happened" according to a coherent and chronological narrative structure. Their aim is undoubtedly to make a film that should mimetically represent a past epoch just "as it really was" so that the viewer will believe that he or she is actually watching the past as such and not a contemporary feature film. According to Bordwell, the story within classical narration "embodies the action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and a spatial field" so that, by the end of the plot-line, "all story events can be fitted into a single pattern of time, space and,

[2] Bordwell 1997 [1985], p. 3

causality".[3] Hence, following the rules of classical film narration, a good syuzhet should be composed in such a way that it at the end has uncovered a story, which is held together as a diegesis in which time and space could be integrated into a causal whole by the active audience. Therefore, producers of classically narrated feature films try to knit together story and plot in order to create a mimetic whole that enables audiences accustomed to the narrative structures of canonical Hollywood film conventions to easily construct their vision of an integrated and coherent epic. Of course, for a spectator used to Hollywood conventions, such an epic would be the content of the film, not the fabula that the spectator is currently construction.

Take for example Saving Private Ryan. That film opens with a twenty minute long mimetic representation of the D-Day invasion during the Second World War. That segment of the film is composed so that the viewer – who should be familiar with the conventions of narrative film structures – would imagien that he or she has been transported through space and time back to Omaha Beach on the 6th of June 1944 and is now watching the events exactly as they happened. Hence, Tom Hanks is a US marine fighting on the beach and not merely an actor playing a US marine fighting on the beach. The film, then, would function as a time-machine with which it is possible to transcend space and time in order to "go back in history and see how it once really was". Or to describe this condition differently, the convention that it should be possible to "see through" the actual film-imagery in order to "see the actual event" that is depicted means that the viewer accepts the idea of not only using and he syuzhet when constructing the fabula, but also identifying that fabula that he or she is currently constructing to be a mimetic representation of the past as such. When having accepted that point of view, the viewer is likely to accept the rest of the film not as Spielberg's fiction but as a mimetic representation of real events that took place in 1944. To achieve this interpretative effect Spielberg has to play along with the existing conventions concerning film narratives. The viewer must under no circumstances notice the syuzhet, because then the ongoing work of constructing the fabula would be damaged. Or in other words, the violence depicted in the Omaha Beach sequence must only be a visual effect attached to the narrative, and it must under no circumstances be an element that makes the syuzhet noticed by a mimetic destroying reflection.

To Spielberg and to the conventions of "classical Hollywood cinema", the visualised violence is a stylistic means with which the syuzhet can be put forward. In other words, the visualised violence is mere effect to developing and highlighting the narrative violence. To Manchevski that is not good enough, I argue, so that he instead tries to bring the visualised violence in conflict with the narrative violence.

Because of this reason Spielberg and Manchevski can be seen as two filmmakers taking the exact opposite stands in respect to the conventions of "classical Hollywood cinema". Even if both Spielberg's above mentioned films and Manchevski's two films have in common that they depict much violence in form of killing and cruelty, the way violence has been treated by these two filmmakers is fundamentally different. When Spielberg uses visual violence as a means to hide the relationship between syuzhet and fabula, Manchevski uses visual violence to visualise that relationship. In this respect, Spielberg works in accordance with the basic conventions of "classical Hollywood cinema", while Manchevski consciously (as it appears) tries to challenge these conventions. Hence, even if these films tend to show much violence, the film violence in Spielberg's and Manchevski's films are fundamentally different in

[3] Bordwell (1997), p. 49

character. I will now try to develop this assertion further by connecting to Manchevski's actual work. But first some other analytical concepts should be presented.

Diegiese and Diegetic

When the syuzhet/style interaction produces a narrative, the spectator is enabled not only to produce the fabula but also to create a narrative universe in which the fabula is staged. Such universe is called the diegesis, and the elements in the narration that are used when composing this universe are called diegetic. Claudia Gorbman has defined the diegesis as the spatial-temporal world of actions and persons that is produced by the narration.[4] According to the norms of realism, the diegesis should correspond and resemble the notion of the (extra-diegetic) "real universe" in order to make the narration realistic. In other words, in a "realistic film" the diegesis is supposedly a mimetic depiction of reality. When audiences identify what they see on the screen with what they already possessed as common knowledge, a "reality-effect" is collectively perceived.[5] Since the prevailing belief-structure of the audience is reinforced through this effect, the individual viewers collectively think that they have gained knowledge of real events by watching the film.

The point here is to underline to what extent audiences actively construct meaning when confronting a narration. And again, the narration should not be understood as a carrier of inherent meaning that some kind of recipient could passively absorb and/or reflect. Instead, meaning is something that the interpreter actively produces in his or her direct encounter with the narration. Thus, by creating a fabula the active interpreter produces meaning that could be projected onto the narration in order to make it a meaningful whole for the active interpreter. On the other hand, the word "story" conventionally — at least in the cultural sphere of the West in which Bordwell writes — tends to be understood as exactly such a narrative carrier of inherent meaning. The fabula is then the meaningful whole produced by an audience in its direct encounter with the film. When analysing a fabula one has not only to pay attention to the actual context in which it has been produced, but also to be aware of the fact that one is reflecting the discourse in which the fabula has been produced from within discourse.

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[4] Cf. Gorbman, Claudia (1987)'Narratological Perspectives on Film Music' in Claudia Gorbman Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music London and Bloomington: BFI Publishing/Indiana University Press. In this case I have relyed on the Sweidish translation: Gorbman, Claudia (1995) 'Narratologiska aspekter av filmmusik' in L.G. Andersson and Erik Hedling (eds.) Modern Filmteori 1 Lund: Studentlitteratur. Because I have re-transalted Gorbman's definition back to English its exact formulation may differ from her original. But I only sketch the theory around the diegesis concept, such treatment of the definition may be forgiven.

[5] About the concept "the reality effect", cf. Ankersmit, F.R. (1994) 'The Reality Effect in the Writing of History: The Dynamics of Historiographical Topology' in F.R. Ankersmit History and Tropology. The Rise and Fall of Metaphor Berkeley - Los Angels - London: University of California Press, pp. 125-161. The concept was origianly coined by Roland Barthes, who used it in order to describe an effect that could be perceived when confronting different interlinked texts. When reading and experiencing the tension in and between texts, one can perceive a sense of reality, and this sense is "the reality effect".

"Presented with two narrative events, we look for causal or spatial or temporal links", Bordwell writes, and he continues: "The imaginary construct we create, progressively and retrospectively, was termed by Formalists the fabula (sometimes translated as 'story')."[6]

The point here made by Bordwell is absolutely essential for my argument. No film, nor any other artwork, contains inherent meaning that an audience passively reflects. Instead, the audience has to actively construct meaning when encountered with a film or any other artwork. Therefore, an audience collectively construct meaning when confronting issues of culture. Or rather, an audience, as a collective, culturally construct meaning in the encounter with film and other forms of art and culture. From this presented background and with the help of these analytical tools, it is now possible to start analysing violence in Manchevski's films.

Fabula, Syuzhet, and Style in Before the Rain

On way of presenting a fabula reading of Before the Rain can be summarised as follows: An awarded photojournalist, specialised on covering war-zones, decides, after a traumatic experience in Bosnia, to quit his job at a London based agency. With the intention of finding the love of his youth, he turns back to his native village in Macedonia. Back in the village he finds that the community has been broken up and that a line of demarcation between two groups has been drawn. Roughly, these groups are structured according to cultural and linguistic features so that a distinction between "Albanians" and "Slavs" has become over-emphasised. The photographer finds himself in the Slav group, while his beloved is in the Albanian one. When attempting to save her Albanian speaking daughter from a Slav speaking mob, and at the same time de-escalate the conflict, the photographer is killed by one of his Slav cousins. Also the daughter is killed, but by her Albanian brother.

The syuzhet of the film narrative can be broken up into four distinct parts: a prologue, and three individual, however inter-linked episodes, which in the film are called "Words", "Faces", and "Pictures". In the prologue, a young orthodox monk who has sworn an oath of silence, Kiril, is picking tomatoes while listening to an elderly monk's reflections about the coming rain and about how children incarnate the hope for the future. However, the children shown are playing with fire.

In the episode "Words", a Slav speaking mob is searching the monastery where Kiril lives. They are searching for an Albanian speaking girl. Although she has hidden in Kiril's cell, they do not find her. At the same time, Kiril, who had already discovered her, does in the end not reveal his knowledge of her existence to the other monks, although he is shown bewildered about what to do. When the monks eventually find the girl, Kiril is instantly dismissed from the monastery. The monks, however, do not hand over the two of them to the waiting mob – who has besieged the monastery – but instead they help Kiril and the girl to escape during the shelter of the night. The two are then shown leaving the cloister together. Later they are found by a

[6] Bordwell (1997), p. 49

group of armed Albanian speaking men and the girl is shot by her brother. Kril is left helpless, sitting next to the dying girl.

The episode “Faces” is set in London. A young woman, Anne, works in a photo agency. Aleks (Aleksander), who is a photojournalist, returns to the agency just in order to resign his work there. He has suffered a traumatic experience in Bosnia, which made him reconsider his whole life. Now he wants to return to his childhood village in Macedonia and start over. Although she is married to another man, Anne and Aleks are having an ongoing love affair. When Aleks wants her to follow him to Macedonia, she is in jeopardy. Aleks leaves London and Anne is then shown having an encounter with her husband in a posh restaurant. Suddenly a quarrel between two Serbo-Croatian speaking men in that restaurant escalates to random shooting. Anne’s husband is accidentally shot dead.

“Pictures” shows Aleks’ return to his native village. He wants to meet Hana, who is both a friend from his school days and the love of his youth. However, Aleks seems to have misconceived the profundity of the antagonism between the propagators of the different groups that has rapidly developed during his absence. When Aleks’ cousin Bojan is mysteriously murdered, Hana’s daughter, Zamira, is accused of the killing. A Slav speaking mob, armed with machine guns, starts looking for the girl. Hana then begs Aleks to help her find and save her daughter. Aleks tries to find Zamira and discovers that she is being held prisoner by the mob. When he attempts to liberate the girl, another of his cousins kills him. Zamira, however, manages to run away and hide in the monastery where Kiril (who is also a relative of Aleks’) lives. The film ends more or less where it begins, showing Kiril picking tomatoes while listening to the old monk, who is speaking about the rain that will fall.

The narrative structure of the film can therefore be called circular — it ends where it begins — instead of linear, which would be the conventional syuzhet format for a classically narrated feature film. But this is not the issue that makes this syuzhet extraordinary. Instead, what makes the narrative structure of this film unconventional is that the syuzhet constantly undermines the chronological order of the fabula under construction. For example, at the photo agency in London Anne is shown looking at photographs depicting Kiril sitting next to the dead body of Zamira. According to the chronology of the story, this seems highly implausible, since at that time Zamira would still be alive. And, moreover, Bojan would then not yet have been murdered, so that no mob would be out looking for the girl in the first place. The film is full of such details which make the syuzhet actively undermine the chronological structure of the fabula under construction: early in the film, Anne is shown at Aleks’ and Bojan’s funeral in Macedonia, although she at that time would be in London; Kiril is calling Anne in London asking for Aleks, although he, when he still was a monk under the oath of absolute silence, had witnessed Aleks’ funeral, etc.

But it is not only the structure of the syuzhet that makes it difficult for a spectator to create a conventional fabula when seeing this film. The style used by Manchevski also provokes conventional fabula making. As has been pointed out, the narrative of Before the Rain is not composed according to conventional linear syuzhet standards. However, when scrutinised closely, the style that interacts with the syuzhet prevents the narrative from being even circular. Although the scenes in the beginning and in the end of the film to a high degree resemble one another, they are far from being identical. Not only have camera-angles been modified, but the monologue held by the elderly monk has also been substantially changed.

The film begins with the scene in which Kiril is shown picking tomatoes. Suddenly he kills an insect that had bitten his neck. Then the elderly monk says: “It will be rain.

The gadflies bite." Thereafter he looks to the horizon and continues: "Over there, it is already raining." When returning to the monastery together, a distant sound that could be either thunder or canon-blasts can be heard. The elderly monk says: "There is a smell of rain. The thunder always makes me twitch. I fear that they will start shooting also here." Some playing children are shown, and the monk says: "Children… Time never dies. The circle is not round." The children, however, have built a circle of pegs and weed, and they set this circle on fire.

The film ends with a similar scene, however shot from another camera-angle. This time the monk looks at the horizon and says: "It will be rain. The gadflies bite. Over there, it is already raining." Then he turns to Kiril and continues: "Come on! Time does not wait… because the circle is not round". In the background, the viewer can see the girl, Zamira, running towards the camera. The film ends with a camera shot of the dead Aleks, as well as the first drops of rain falling upon him.[7]

The difference between these two sequences may be considered subtle, but is however distinct. Especially the difference between the two lines "Time never dies. The circle is not round." and "Time does not wait… because the circle is not round" clearly indicates that Manchevski did not intend to create a circular narration. Rather, these lines point out that he wanted to problematise the notion of time and temporality within the diegesis of the film. That Manchevski consciously has used the film to problematise time and narration is refrained once more in the film's middle sequence. In a sequence from the London episode the viewer is exposed to the following graffiti: "Time never dies/the circle/is not round".

So, when examined closely, the narrative proves to be neither linear nor round. Instead, the film indicates a diegesis in which the presence of time is always underlined precisely because the chronology of the story is constantly undermined by the narrative, and in turn causality is short-circuited throughout the diegesis. Therefore, this film can be said to have been made in an attempt to consciously challenge the tendency in conventional moviemaking to let the syuzhet/style interaction coincide with the conventions of mimesis, which in turn should have helped the spectator to create a fabula and to experience a "reality-effect". This film is obviously composed in a deliberate attempt to challenge the idea that feature film as well as historical writing could be a sort of depiction of the past "as it really was" produced from some presupposed neutral position beyond temporality.

The visual violence is starkly put forward in this film. Not only does the film contain many scenes in which people are shot dead, but also the scene in which the children play with fire and are shown throwing live ammunition into the fire, too, produce an uncanny feeling of violence. A slow-motion sequence in which a cat is massacred with a machine gun could be mentioned as another example of violence made visual in the film. The composition of Before the Rain contains, too, violence on its narrative level.

In the film, Manchevski has in a gentle manner put forward the argument that no correspondence between the knowledge and the "real world" beyond this humanly produced knowledge can be construed. Therefore, the convention of realism, according to which an artwork can be compared with the "real" motive it is set out to represent, cannot be upheld. Neither "reality as it really is" can be documented, nor can there be any direct connection between the past beyond human knowledge and the

[7] The transaltion is my own and is based on the Swedish subtitles of a video-pirint of the film. The original dialogue is in Masedonian.

history written by human beings; since we have no access to that kind of past we cannot claim that history could represent it. This epistemological break between the "real world" on the one side and human knowledge on the other is in the film illustrated by the photojournalist who suddenly rejects his earlier belief that he could objectively document reality by photographing it. Instead of his previous understanding of his work — from a neutral position he would transmit knowledge from one end of the world to another through his photographs — he suddenly realises that there is no such neutral position and that he is always taking active part in any situation in which he may find himself.

In the film, a key line marks out this shift in his understanding of the means of photography and of the notion of photographic realism. Aleks says: "I killed. I took sides. My camera killed a man", thus indicating that his notion of a neutral ground from which he used to take his photographs cannot be uphold anymore. As has already been noted, Aleks had decided to quit his job as a photojournalist after a traumatic experience in Bosnia sometime in 1992-93. According to the syuzhet, Aleks got friendly with a militiaman and complained to him that nothing interesting happened. The militiaman then randomly picked one of the prisoners he was set out to guard and shot him on the spot. Meanwhile, Aleks photographed the event. Thereafter Aleks drew the conclusion that it was actually he who had killed a man with his camera and he blamed his earlier naivety for having caused the entire incident. On the bases of this conclusion he decided to stop working as a photographer. Apparently, he at the same time gave up his belief that reality can be documented through the means of photographic realism. This shift in Aleks' world-view signifies, furthermore, that the whole notion of realism should be reconsidered.

This latter conclusion could also be directly ascribed to the writer/director Manchevski, because in Before the Rain he is actually playing a small but significant role: the prisoner being shot in front of the camera.[8] Here, the distinction between syuzhet and style becomes emphasised. Of course, a spectator with no prior knowledge of Manchevski's appearance could be able to identify the shot prisoner with the director/writer of the film. Nevertheless, Manchevski has consciously chosen to play this part himself, thus using it as clear-cut stylistic means. With this Hitchcockian manoeuvre, Manchevski has more than just made an ironic remark to the theory of "the death of the author". To the film he has added a self-reflective remark — he is writing the script and shooting the film within a concrete context and he, no lesser than his imagined character Aleks, can find a neutral position from which he could objectively describe the situation. Instead, Manchevski has visually stated that which could be read as the moral of the film. There exists no neutral spot outside the temporal stream of events from which reality could be documented, hence the groundwork for both the notions of photographic realism and of conventional historical writing (the attempt to represent the unmodified past in the present) has collapsed. With this condition as point of departure, new conventions for the understanding of past and present realities have to be constructed.

Another intriguing example of the film provokes the relationship between visual and narrative violence should be mentioned. The experience he has made in Bosnia has taught Aleks that there are no clear-cut and easy solutions to this kind of conflicts. Above all, there exists no neutral position outside the conflict from which one could objectively document and rationally solve it. "You have to take sides against war",

[8] On a direct question during the workshop, Manchevski admitted that it was he who played the prisoner.

Anne tells Aleks in London. But to make war against war itself is, however, a paradoxical undertaking. The traumatised Aleks responds that "War is normality and peace the exception". Therefore, Aleks conclusion is that one has to take sides within war, but still the same he refuses to line up behind either one of the conflicting parties. Squeezed between the insight that he has to participate, but at the same time unwilling to do so, Aleks seems doomed to disaster. The narrative of Before the Rain resembles more a classical tragedy than a modern realist drama.

As has been noted in the beginning of this essay, Manchevski made Before the Rain in order to work out the experience of tense atmosphere that he had confronted in Skopje. In the face of the wars between first Slovenia and Yugoslavia and thereafter Croatia and Yugoslavia, also Macedonia seemed to be endangered. In a situation of repressed hostility, when a majority of people expect and calculate with war in a foreseeable near future, can such an escalation of violence be stopped and de-escalated? Can a war be fought against the notion of war, so that the outbreak of expected violence and bloodshed could be inhibited? Most possibly, Manchevski conceived and made his film with the direct aim of counter-acting tendencies that could unleash armed conflicts and war in Macedonia the film. Nevertheless, Manchevski has confirmed that he made active use of Shakespearean tragedies when conceiving the script: themes from Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, and Hamlet have been woven into the manuscript.[9] The point to be underlined is that the film is made as a classic tragedy and not as a modern realistic drama. That being the case, after having seen the film, the viewers would then not be supposed to intellectually recognise their own everyday reality, but to have an experience of catharsis: a feeling of purification and relief after having confronted an existential dilemma and having had this dilemma conceptualised. In an interview from early 1995, Manchevski has said that some people in Macedonia complained after having seen the film: "Some people said, 'We don't all live in run-down villages, we also drive Mercedes cars. Why didn't you show that?' But most of them read the film just as I wanted them to, which is as a warning."[10] Yet, even if this film can be seen as a warning that also Macedonia could dissolve in civil war, the notion of war in the film is notoriously ambivalent.

When making sense out of this film, it is tempting to see the diegetic symbol "rain" as a metaphor for war. The title would then read "Before the War", and the film would warn that war could soon strike down on Macedonia like it had already hit other parts of former Yugoslavia. For example, the lines uttered by the elderly monk in the beginning of the film points clearly in that direction. Nevertheless, the metaphoric does not run as smoothly as that. When Kiril dreams that Zamira is smilingly standing by his bed, it is raining. But when Zamira actually stands by his bed, she is not smiling but hunted and frightened, and it is not raining. Later in the film, Aleks dreams that Hana enter his room and start, smilingly, to undress. At the same time, the falling rain can be seen through the window. But then again, when Hana really enters his room she is frightened and worried. At that time, no rain can be seen through the window. Here, "rain" appears to be not just a metaphor for war, but also for sexual fantasy, especially male ones. Also, the complexity and the ambiguity around the usage of the diegetic symbol "rain" in the film is also singled out through the strophe by Mesa Selimonovic that opens the film: "With a shriek birds flee across the black sky, / people are silent, my blood aces from waiting." With what would this

[9] Manchevski made this confirmation during the discussion at the above mentioned workshop.
[10] Quoted after Brown, 1998, p. 169. The orignal interview was published in Village Voice, 21 February 1995.

frustrating waiting end? Would the relief come with ending of passivity and the outbreak of the awaited war?

After having seen the film Before the Rain, one would be disposed to answer this last question with a clear "No!". Even if an outbreak of violent action would disperse the tense atmosphere of frustrating passivity and therefore initially be perceived as a relief, it would rapidly prove itself to something more hideous than the earlier condition. Therefore, when the film was made within a discourse of escalating violence, and when its purpose was to de-escalate this tendency from within the discourse, then its means would not be to simply reflect the present condition but to present a substitution for the awaited eruption. In that case the means of conventional modern realism would not be sufficient and therefore it is not surprising that Manchevski has chosen to make a classical tragedy.

Fabula and Syuzhet in Dust

The story of Dust can be summarised as follows: During a housebreaking, a burglar gets caught by an old lady, who is the inhabitant of the apartment. Holding her captive at gunpoint, the old lady, who apparently is very ill and presumably is dying, tells the burglar that he is the one that will bury her. For that he will have her gold treasure. But first he has to listen to her story, so that he is to know where she is to be buried. In the midst of her story, the old lady suddenly collapses and the burglar first wants to flee. But since he wants her hidden gold treasure, he then takes her to a hospital. At the hospital bed, the old lady continuos her story for the penniless burglar, who is in great need of cash since he is pressed to pay back some sort of a loan to some sort of blackmailers. When the old lady carries on telling, instead of explaining where the gold is hidden, the burglar returns to the empty apartment. Eventually he finds the hidden gold and he returns to the old lady, with whom he by now has become friendly, to tell her the news. The old lady, meanwhile, continuos her story, until she has another collapse. When finally understanding that the burglar has found the treasure, she dies happily, although she has not yet finished her story. The burglar, believing that the old lady was born in the Balkans, cremates the body in order to take the ashes to Macedonia. On the plane over the Atlantic, he tells his fellow passenger the old lady's unfinished story – which he does not know – to an end.

Actually, in the syuzhet of Dust, this fabula forms only a frame of the entire narrative, letting the lion share of the film be a depiction of the story that the old lady is telling. Since the exact connection between the old lady – as the narrator – and the story she is telling – her narration – never becomes evident, it is up to her audience (the burglar; but also we as spectators) to make up this connection. This is also what the burglar does at the end of the film. However, when his audience – the fellow passenger in the airplane – appears sceptical, the burglar says: "It is my story now", indicating that the narration has changed due to the change of narrator. Because of this reason one can argue that Manchevski has consciously attempted to short-circuit the distinction between plot and story, between form and content, or for that matter between syuzhet and fabula. This should be kept in mind when reflecting "the story in the story", i.e. the narration that the old lady in the narrative tells.

From what has been said, one thing with the narrative structure of Dust ought to be clear, however it has obviously not been understood by many (Western) spectators: Dust does not include two parallel narratives that are connected at the end of the film. Instead, Dust includes only one narrative, however this narrative is a story about a

story, which appears to be about at least one other story. So what does the old lady tell the burglar?

She starts by telling a story about two brothers from the American mid-west who, around the turn of the century 1900, both fell in love with the same women. The brothers Luke and Elijah worked as bounty hunters and had found their love in a brothel where the woman, called Lilith, worked as a prostitute. According to the old lady's story, Elijah married Lilith, even though an ongoing love affair existed between Lilith and Luke. When Elijah's and Lilith's infant baby died, Luke for some reasons fled to Europe. Via Paris, he ended up in the Macedonian part of the dissolving Ottoman Empire. There, on some kind of freelance basis, he tracked down rebels whom he handed over to the Ottoman authorities in change of rewards. The old lady tells the burglar that Luke was a part of gang chasing a rebel leader known as "the Teacher". Apparently, many different bounty-hunting gangs, as well as the Ottoman army, were looking for the same man. In a shootout, Luke is taken prisoner by the Ottoman army. But, according to the old lady's story, also Elijah was at the same location and at time taken captive by the same Ottomans. Apparently, Elijah had for some reasons followed Luke to Macedonia in order to kill him. Before the Ottoman official Luke suddenly threatened to kill his brother. At this stage in the story the old lady collapses for the first time in the film. And since the burglar wants to know where she has hidden her gold treasure, he helps her to a hospital.

The same night, two persons break into the apartment where the burglar is sleeping. They beat him and threaten to take is life, or something worse, if he does not within twenty-four hours pay them what they require. To get hold of the gold the burglar returns to the hospital.