Before the Rain in a Balkan Context

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In the early 1990s, young film director Milcho Manchevski, born in Macedonia and educated in America, revisited his native country after years of absence. He felt something pervasively tense in the atmosphere of the early post-Yugoslav years, a sensation of something enormous and fearsome which was about to strike. He resolved to make a movie about this foreboding and to communicate to others the strong apprehension that makes one's blood to ache.2 This is how the beautiful Before the Rain (1994) came about.

Most Western viewers responded to the film with a straightforward admiration. To them, I was told, the film was of 'educational' value, since it helped in understanding the absurd logic of the Balkan conflict. It was also a stoic prophecy of the things to come. My own reaction to the film was not as clear-cut, however. Its atmosphere and style fascinated me, but still, something was wrong. As an expatriate, equally concerned with the impending trouble in the Balkans, I just could not take the fatalism at face value. Even though director Manchevski rejected the idea that all Balkan nations are doomed to live through the violent nightmare of ethnic war, this was the dominant Western reading of his film. By uncritically continuing the line of traditional representation of the Balkans as a mystic stronghold of stubborn and belligerent people, Before the Rain continued an existing Balkan trend of voluntary self-exoticism. The picture effectively contributed to the perception of Macedonia as a deceptively quiet but potentially explosive powder keg. Nonetheless, the film managed to show remarkably well to those in the Balkans who were willing to listen what was wrong with them, and thus it had a therapeutic effect. I will look at Before the Rain and its prophecy in the light of current events in the Balkans.

Before the Rain is a singular film, and cannot be seen as a typical work of Balkan or Macedonian cinema. Had the director depended solely on domestic finance and subsidies, I doubt it that such film would be made in Macedonia, or in any other of the Balkan countries. Its financing is a tri-partite European one (France, the UK, and Macedonia) with the participation of international funding bodies, and the people involved in the film are as cosmopolitan as they come, starting with writer and director Manchevski himself. The Paris-based producer, Cedomir Kolar, is of Yugoslav background and has since worked on co-productions with Burkina Faso (Idrissa Ouedraogo's Kini and Adams, 1997), Kyrgyzstan (Aktan Abdykalykov's The Adopted Son, 1998), and on a Holocaust feature directed by a Romanian (Radu Mihaileanu's Train of Life, 1998). The cinematographer Manuel Teran was responsible for the dynamically shot AIDS biopic Savage Nights (1992). The initially recruited DP, Iranian-born Darius Khondji, has shot the French cult movies Delicatessen (1991) and The City of Lost Children (1995), and the internationally acclaimed Se7en (1995), Stealing Beauty (1996) and Evita (1996). Labina Mitevska (Zamira) later had supporting roles in Michael Winterbottom's politically correct blockbuster Welcome to Sarajevo (1997) and in his British-based I Want You (1998). She lives in England today. French actor Gregoire Colin, the young monk Kiril, was seen in Agnieszka Holland's Olivier, Olivier (1992) and since has appeared in a range of European productions. Well-known within his native Yugoslavia, in the early 1990s Rade Serbedzija (Alexandar), at odds with the nationalist regimes in Serbia and Croatia, gradually became a permanent presence in the supporting cast of films made by international directors - from Nicholas Roeg's Two Deaths (1995) and Gregor Nicholas's New Zealand immigrant tale Broken English (1996) through Francesco Rosi's Holocaust drama The Truce (1996) and Stanley Kubrick's Eyes Wide Shut (1999), to pure Hollywood output such as Mighty Joe Young (1999) and Stigmata (1999). Unlike other Balkan films that rarely make it beyond the festival circuit, the film was widely distributed in the West in 35 mm and on video. All this taken into consideration, Before the Rain is not a product of Balkan cinema but rather a work of transnational filmmaking at its best.

Taking Sides

The cosmopolitan photographer of Before the Rain returns to his native village after eighteen years of absence to find the ancient enmities stronger than ever. He is above irrational ethnic rivalries and opposes the violence which he sees perpetuated by the members of his own extended family. In his outright rejection of the violence, he helps the Albanian girl escape the rage of the men who chase her. This act, coupled with the protagonist's worldly ideas of humanist reconciliation, cost him his life, and he is killed by family members whose militant stance he refuses to take. The first lesson: one cannot remain neutral, there is no middle ground; one has to be either on the one side, or on the other. The second lesson: the pacifist intellectual ends up taking sides against one's own. The compulsory taking sides was one of the most difficult experiences that the former Yugoslavs had to live through. Just as in the famous animated allegory in Canadian Norman McLaren's Neighbors (1952): as soon as a fence line is drawn between neighboring houses, the neighbors' earlier friendship turns into an intolerant rivalry; one can only be either on one side or on the other, each crossing of the line, and later on each look across the line, is a good enough reason for a fight. Initially insignificant, the hostility grows into an all-consuming passion, and in the end it is impossible to avoid becoming embroiled in the conflict on the one side or the other.

No matter how unwillingly, everybody in Yugoslavia was to undergo an imposed re-identification - from the inclusive concept of 'Yugoslav,' which was cultivated for decades but now abandoned overnight people had to switch to a restrictive concept of belonging and confine themselves to a clear-cut ethnic identity. But was everybody ready to take sides? Did everybody want to? How about those of mixed background who had to choose between two inherent ethnicities? What about those who simply resented the rigid logic of 'identity politics'? To many, the forced taking of sides resulted in disillusionment with the meaning of commitment. Those who did not want to cave in to the nationalist hysteria had only one remaining choice - to side

against their own ethnic group. Only such an act would reject the mass madness of nationalism. It seemed the only way to avoid succumbing to the dominance of ethnic rivalries and to preserve the individual's right of self-determination. Take the case of Croatian film director Lordan Zafranovic, who left Croatia and settled in Prague to be able to complete and release his Decline of the Century (1994), a controversial indictment of the Nazi inclinations of some of his fellow Croats. Or writer Dubravka Ugresic, a vocal critic of Croatian nationalism. Or, take the case of those Serbs who chose to stay in besieged Sarajevo and be exposed on a daily basis to the shelling by what can be described as their 'own people' from the surrounding hills.

With Before the Rain, Manchevski also sided against his 'own.' But he managed to show remarkably well why he did not approve of their ways and what was wrong with them. His protagonist comes back to Macedonia haunted by the memory of his own ordeal in 'taking sides.' Alexandar has witnessed the death of an innocent man; but it is a death which he has inflicted, albeit inadvertently. Alexandar has lost peace of mind and keeps repeating remorsefully: 'I took sides, I killed.' So when he comes back to Macedonia, it is not just for a visit; he returns carrying a superior consciousness of the devastation that rages nearby. He comes prepared to take stance against his own people, if needed. And it becomes necessary even sooner than one would think. Approximately at the same time as Manchevski, another intellectual ended up taking sides against 'one's own' people, this time in Greek Macedonia. Expatriate anthropologist Anastasia Karakasidou published her ethnographic research which consistently described how the processes of rigorous national consolidation throughout the century had transformed the multicultural region into an ethnically homogenous one. Karakasidou brought in extensive evidence showing that nation-building mechanisms had often involved coerced re-making of ethnicities, intolerance to otherness, and pressures to suppress multi-ethnic ancestors and genealogies in favor of a uniform Greek identity. She sided against the national ideology which 'imposes its constructs of the present onto the developments of the past'(Karakasidou 1997: 237). Karakasidou's work was received with hostility in Greece; her taking sides against 'one's own' was not tolerated. Manchevski's work, on the contrary, was

celebrated in Macedonia; his critical stance was seen as a chance to re-define the meaning of 'one's own.' Was it because Manchevski articulate siding against one's own was so clearly meant to prevent? Or were the Macedonians better prepared to listen?

Teleology of Conflict

In discussing the historical film as a corrective to 'real history,' Robert Rosenstone distinguishes two main approaches (Rosenstone 1995). The explicit approach is dictated by the political and social concerns of the time the film is made, while the implicit one pursues the creation of a cinematic text which is then judged by historical criteria. If we apply this framework to recent films about the Balkans, we would easily classify most of them as following the explicit approach as they are often made in response to the immediate concern about the conflict in the 1990s. The stories told in these films, however, vastly depend on what ending point has been chosen for it is the ending that determines what is used in the beginning and in the middle.

Most scrutiny of Balkan history is done with the aim of finding the roots of today's conflict and explaining the 'bloody demise of Yugoslavia.' The undertaking is teleological by default and makes it almost impossible to resist the temptation and to abstain from putative speculation. To make its point, Michael Benson's documentary Predictions of Fire (1994), for example, endowed an innocuous Yugoslav fire safety animation from the 1960s with the symbolic meaning of clairvoyancy. Looking at Montenegrin Vlatko Gilic's short In Continuo (1971), about the appalling ritualistic violence in a slaughterhouse, a film scholar interpreted the blood-soaked imagery and the suggestive title of the film as a nightmarish vision of the violence that was to come to Yugoslavia twenty years later, without taking note that a similar inference could declare George Franju's Blood of the Beasts (1949), an equally violent and shattering documentary on a slaughterhouse, as a prophesy for the Algerian war.3 Yet in other cases, literary scholars traced back today's violence to the wealth of violent scenes found in Njegos's romantic folk poem The Mountain Wreath (1847), a deduction equivalent to explaining

the Nazi extremities with the macabre aspects in Brothers Grimm's fairy tales.4

These undertakings are premised on the belief that there is a direct causal link between past visions and the present-day state of things. In such endeavors, however, one inevitably makes provisional choices about which visions from the past would best fulfil the need for an explanation of today's events. If it is not about history but about the use of historical remembrance, is a distinction which is rarely explicitly acknowledged.

Catering to the explanatory needs of the moment, many documentaries end up as nothing more than projects of an 'instant history' type. The teleological approach to history becomes a decisive factor in decisions as to what is recycled for use in the reconstitution of the historical backdrop to today's events, and what is laid to rest. 'Ancient enmities' are reiterated and supplied with appropriate images, thus authenticating their status as real factors influencing today's outcomes. Scenes of the Belgrade TV feature production Battle of Kosovo (1989) depicting the dramatic and violent clash between Ottoman and Slav forces at the famous battlefield, were used, for example, by the British Channel Four news as a background image for their daily piece-to-camera reports on the Kosovo crisis 1998, thus providing a clash-of-civilizations-type visual reference, even though such an interpretation was not directly present in the commentary.

Films made at a later point, when the story had developed in one of the many possible ways, and needed quick explanation and a new causal linkage with the past, brought into consideration facts and footage that were deemed useless at earlier points, the complex picture of the past thus flexibly adjusting to the changing 'telos.' The footage of earlier unrest in Kosovo, for example, was only occasionally used until 1998.

But doesn't the persistent reference to past conflicts make the new ones look inevitable, as though they have just been waiting to come about? Hasn't all this body of works resulted in the perception of war no longer as an aberration but as a norm for the Balkans?

These questions become particularly important in regard to Macedonia where the trouble is not an actual one but only a projection. Since the early 1990s, Macedonia was extensively discussed in the scenarios of journalists and political analysts as the real 'powder keg,' from where uncontrollable violence could spill all over. Presumptuous freelancers who traveled to Macedonia in search of stories could not help expressing surprise at the peaceful and even sleepy atmosphere and could not interpret it as anything but deceptive. In addition, there was the long record of violence and terrorism associated with the innumerable Macedonian uprisings, conspiracies, kidnappings and other violent disputes. In anticipation of a new wave of violence, preventive peacekeeping units were stationed in Macedonia in 1993.

In 1999 the tensions are still contained and the apocalypse has not yet happened. Nevertheless, most of the commentary on Macedonia in the West is an anticipatory one - if there isn't a war yet, it is around the corner. The text displayed on the cover of a documentary called What about Macedonia? (1994) tells us that the reason for making the film was fear 'that the ethnic bloodshed and human rights violations now taking place in neighboring Bosnia and Croatia may spread to Macedonia and lead to a new world war.' According to the promotional materials of another documentary, suggestively entitled Macedonia: The Next Bosnia? (1995), the film sets out to explore the present-day state of things with the conviction that 'Macedonia is set to follow the disastrous path of Bosnia, and that civil war in Macedonia would almost certainly embroil neighboring countries.' The film contains 'secretly' shot footage of ethnic tensions, interpreted as a 'badly kept secret.' In the film, director Julian Chomet uses footage of empty restaurants and hotels in the tourist region around Lake Okhrid, shot out of season, to imply that the tourist industry in Macedonia is in decline because of the impending trouble. A sequence of a semi-destroyed building is supposed to show the devastation in the economy; the shots are, in fact, of the old Skopje train station, torn in half by the earthquake of 1963 and left standing as a monument to the disaster.5

Before the Rain, structured around a mystical cycle of events where everything is bound for trouble, is another manifestation of this syndrome. Director Manchevski seems to reject the idea that all Balkan nations are doomed to succumb into a violent nightmare. He, however, admits he made Before the Rain after he 'was struck by a heavy, pervasive sense of expectation' during a visit to Macedonia in 1991. In an interview Manchevski said:

I didn't want the film to comment on any event or events happening right now. You see, I don't know enough about the war. I haven't lived there for years. I wanted rather for my story to be pulled out of those events in its style, music, and in its content, too [...] What is important is that I do not mean my film to be taken as a documentary of actual events (Manchevski 1995:E5).

Critics, however, read the film differently. According to Variety's Deborah Young (1994), Manchevski's approach was to represent ethnic hatred as 'endemic to the region,' and according to New York Times' Roger Cohen (1995), the film's circular imagery comes about mostly because 'of course, war in Macedonia would be nothing new,' and conveys 'a haunting evocation of a Macedonian society on the verge of final fracture.'

In Manchevski's film, Macedonia is depicted as a medieval-feudal culture divided into the hostile ethnic-religious camps of Muslim Albanians and Orthodox Macedonians where everyone who tries to break the cycle of violence is killed by their own people and from where violence spreads as far as a quiet London restaurant. The countdown to the final clash has already started, slowly but securely turning into an inescapable bloody conflict.

Still, there is no war in Macedonia as of yet, and the country has managed to maintain a good record in spite of all the apocalyptic predictions.6 If, however, a conflict erupts, the reaction of the West will most likely be: we know what these people are like, we saw it in that film, and we have been expecting it to happen for quite a while.

Gazing at the Balkans.

In a body of recent works historians like Maria Todorova (1997) analyzed the 'Orientalist'-type construction of the Balkans within Western perceptions.7 It was also recognized that this construction was an on-going process that continued throughout the 1990s. What was even more important, it was recognized that the 'Orientalization' of the Balkans could not be declared a purely Western project, as it was a process which had been embraced, internalized and partially carried out by consenting Balkan intellectuals. It was not just the West which constructed the Balkans compliant to Western stereotypes, this construction was also carried out by Balkan writers and filmmakers themselves. They not only submissively accepted the semi-barbarian perception of the Balkans but even made their own contribution to it. 8

The classical cinematic example of this willing self-exoticism in narrating the Balkans is found in Cypriot Michael Cacoyannis's Hollywood adaptation of Kazantzakis's novel Zorba the Greek (1964). The story is told from the point of view of a British writer (Alan Bates) who is visiting Greece, and who comes across this incredible individual, the flamboyant and colorful Zorba (Anthony Quinn). The numerous challenges of Zorba's non-standard behavior are supposed to be a learning experience for the Briton and to provide him with an opportunity to re-evaluate his rigid Western attitudes. But it remains an on-looker type of situation. The Briton is intrigued, but he is far from abandoning his own ways which he 'sacrifices' only occasionally in order to 'adapt' to the local mores.

Today, the leading 'Balkan' narrative configuration still relies on the brokerage of a Western narrator to validate stories taking place across the troubled Balkan lands. In Winterbottom's Welcome to Sarajevo (1996), the plot evolves around Western journalists covering the Bosnian carnage. In Godard's Forever Mozart (1996) it is a bunch of Parisian intellectuals who set out to reach embattled Sarajevo and suffer in the hands of local thugs. In Petar Antonijevic's Savior (1998) it is a Western mercenary witnessing the faults of all sides embroiled in the

conflict. Even Gadjo Dilo (1997), directed by Toni Gatlif who has usually managed to tell stories about his Gypsy people without the need of this narrative device, is structured around the journey of a young Frenchman who ends up in a Romanian Gypsy settlement.

While the preference for such a narrative approach can easily be explained in the case of Western directors, one cannot help noticing that it is also characteristic for Balkan directors who willingly adopt the pattern. They find it natural to depict their own cultures through the eyes of Westerners (or locals who have spent sufficient time in the West, for that matter). In these films, the directors constantly keep into account the foreigner's point of view, leaving the Balkan people to be watched and judged by strangers. The 'otherness' of the Balkans has not only been internalized by the directors, but has even become a preferred mode of discourse about themselves. This results in perpetuation of the Eurocentric gaze (Shohat and Stam, 1994) both through the chosen narrative structure and through many basic textual elements. Romanian Lucian Pintilie's An Unforgettable Summer (1994) tells the story from the point of view of an Austro-Hungarian aristocrat swept away by fate to a remote imperial outpost in the Balkans. Greek Theo Angelopoulos's Ulysses' Gaze (1995) is told from the point of view of an expatriate filmmaker who travels across the shattered Balkans in a pensive and melancholic journey after 35 years in the West.

Milcho Manchevski's Before the Rain is another example of the readiness to cast a gaze at oneself as an exotic object. His non-linear tale of today's Macedonia, filled with elaborate twists in time and space, is told from the point of view of a displaced native, Alexandar, a world-weary foreign correspondent who returns from the civilized and rational West to his native village after eighteen years of absence and encounters a world taken over by ugly and violent intolerance. Through Alexandar's eyes, contemporary Macedonia is shown as a land of tribal culture and medieval ethos. The movie depicts the growing hostility between Albanians and Macedonians in a region with a mixed population. At the end of the Twentieth century, the principle here is still an eye for an eye. Time has stopped. There is a lot of

atmosphere - mystic Orthodox Christianity, chants, black robes, humid monastery cells, candlelight among crumbling frescoes of hollow-cheeked saints, old houses, nostalgia, the smell of homecoming - all permeated with the scent of stalking danger. The story develops against a magic backdrop that pulls together a deep starry sky, the blue waters of Lake Okhrid, and the tiled roofs of Macedonia. A touch of magical realism breaths impasse and decay: golden tobacco strings dry on the cracked walls, and donkeys carry firewood for old peasant women. Only the state-of-the-art automatic weapons in the hands of local scoundrels suggest that it is a present day situation. Someone is stabbed, but the doctor is completely helpless, and what is left is only the praying and moaning of women in black kerchiefs.9

Due to the very way the story is told, Before the Rain asserts otherness. Once again the film repeats what has been reiterated so often: nothing can be done to change the Balkan cycle of self-destruction; the circle may not be closed but it is not open either; there are no ways available here and now to solve the problems that destroy this self-contained universe from within. Like the other 'Balkan' films, Before the Rain is moving within a prescribed conceptualization mirroring long standing stereotypes of the Balkans as enigmatic and attractive but impossible to deal with.

Conclusion

Before the Rain was predicting that in Macedonia things may explode from within, self-destructively. The local militants in the film do nothing more than destroy their own people - the Albanian girl is killed by relatives, and so is Alexandar. The violent guy who terrorizes the restaurant in the second part of the film, presumably a Macedonian and certainly a 'dark Balkan subject,' resorts to chaotic shooting as an extension of his own helplessness.

As a warning against the dangers of self-destructiveness, Before the Rain certainly worked. The explosion was suppressed, at least for the time being. As a prophecy that made such self-destructiveness look inevitable, the film proved untrue. If things

explode in Macedonia after 1999, it will no longer be a self-inflicted damage but one equally strongly triggered by the external catalyst of the ill-conceived and poorly executed humanitarian intervention of NATO in Kosovo.

Keeping in mind the fatalistic readings which Before the Rain deservedly invited, I cannot help thinking of Popper's distinction between verifiable and falsifiable statements. The film's putative prophecy could not be verified. The currents of time falsified it instead.

Notes

1. Research for this article was made possible through grants from the Rockefeller Foundation held at the University of Chicago (CHI), as well as from AHRB and University of Leicester in the UK.

2. The film opens with a quote from Mesa Selimovic: "With a shriek birds flee across the black sky, people are silent, my blood aches from waiting."

3. Vlada Petric, director of the Harvard Film Archive, talking at the University of Texas at Austin, February 1996.

4. Andrew Wachtel writes: 'if we look at The Mountain Wreath through the prism of the 1990s, the conversations between the Montenegrin Moslems and their Orthodox brothers look chillingly prophetic' (Wachtel 1998: 49). Branimir Anzulovic extensively comments on of Njegos's text and its reception over time as 'a call to genocide' (Anzulovic 1999: 67).

5. I am indebted to Victor Friedman for some of these observations.

6. As expressed by Macedonian media scholar Dona Kolar-Panov: 'Not only is international expertise on the country limited, but it is also derived from perceptions of its instability generated by its proximity to the war, its ethnic composition and the plethora of stories initially of a 'first Bosnia, next Macedonia' type, and more

lately of a 'first Kosovo, next Macedonia' type as the continuing conflict between Albanians and Serbs is assumed to have similar consequences for Macedonia. These putative predictions continue to be made despite the involvement of the Albanian party in the coalition government, the number of state ministers and deputy ministers of Albanian extraction, the existence of affirmative action policies, and the careful attention paid to balancing Albanian and ethnic Macedonian peoples in government posts' (Kolar-Panov 1999: 34).

7. I am using the 'Orientalism' concept not so much in Edward Said's original sense but rather in the way it was adopted and modified in order to describe the Western construction of semi-barbarian Balkans in the work of Todorova (1997) and Bakic-Hayden (1995).

8. These issues are discussed at length in my article: Iordanova, D. (1998) 'Balkan film since 1989: the quest for admissibility,' Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television. 18/2: 263-280.

9. The popular perception of Balkan-specific violence is associated with ethnographic particularities like dagger-piercing, throat-slitting, or roasting on a spit. It is a face-to-face sadistic violence involving blood, spilled guts, severed limbs, tortured and mutilated bodies, one that is far from hi-tech approaches like sniper-shooting or precision bombing. Contrary to these perceptions, all the killing in Before the Rain is done with modern-day automatic guns. For some reason, however, it is the fork stabbing that remains most memorable, maybe because it fits into the established image.

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