Landscape and 'Location': Reading Filmic Space Historically in Before the Rain

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The debate about film and/as history now stretches over forty years, but from its most recent phase - represented by the work of Robert Burgoyne, Natalie Zemon Davis, Robert Rosenstone and Hayden White - I believe the following propositions have gained some collective currency in 'enlightened' circles:

- the processes by which films construct 'worlds' can be fruitfully compared with how historians -- among other kinds of writers-- construct world-views;

- self-conscious, or reflexive, experimental films can expose the processes of narrative, representation, characterization and the like in ways that may usefully provoke a critique of these in traditional historiography;

- historical films can pose questions that print-based historians cannot answer;

- historical films are often about difference rather than similarity between then and now;

- 'surface' or literal realism matters less in historical films than values, perspective and 'authenticity';

- film can create forms of discourse not possible on the page, which are peculiarly suited to representing certain phenomena and concepts.

However, even if these views now command some support, there is still a need to develop the concept of film's visual discourse in relation to history's predominantly verbal discourse; to create an active dialogue, which treats the representation and interpretation of the visual more adequately. For it is here that

narrative film is most often taken to task, admittedly by those skeptical of its historical value, for its pervasive inauthenticity. The inventions of scripting and anachronisms of production design still loom larger than they should in a serious debate over cinema's power to 'revision' (in Rosenstone's term) both the past and the other.

Milcho Manchevski's Before the Rain offers an intriguing challenge, precisely because it deals with the 'past-in-the-present' and with the experience of 'otherness' in a recognisably contemporary world, yet without portraying any specific 'historical' event. It makes considerable play of being a story of two places, two worlds, far apart in some ways, yet in others closely joined - not least by a flight time of only several hours. Rural Macedonia and central London: country and city, landscape and cityscape. Furthermore, the meaning of the film seems to lie in the contrast between these places, or kinds of place, which shape and ultimately destine its emblematic characters. In short, Before the Rain belongs to a recognizable genre of film in which landscape, or setting, has more than background significance. It functions instead as foreground. The totality of the landscape -- with its human and temporal elements, as much as its topography -- is the subject. The figures are primarily reference points -- compositional devices, we might say -- as in a landscape painting by Poussin or Claude. The most notable current exponents of this genre would be Angelopoulos and the Taviani brothers; previously they would have been Tarkovsky or Antonioni; and before that the early Renoir, Rouquier and the Italian neo-realists of the late 1940s, with Flaherty as perhaps the genre's founding father.

I want to suggest is that to understand fully what Before the Rain is saying/showing, we need to work out how to read it properly, which I think may benefit from consideration of the history of the genre of landscape portrayal, and of its relationship, in turn, to the tradition of critical historiography. I take as an encouragement in this enterprise an aside by W. J. T. Mitchell in his introduction to a collection of essays on landscape:□ Although this collection does not contain any essays on cinematic landscape, it should be clear why moving

pictures, in a very real sense, are the subtext of these revisionist accounts of traditional motionless landscape images in photography, painting and other media. (Mitchell 1994: 2)

What I hope to do here is make explicit some of Mitchell's 'subtext', using his and others' revisionist ideas about landscape as very much more than background or the subject of passive contemplation. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to establish what pre-dates revisionism: is there a significant consensus about the significance of landscape? A cluster of apparently related writings from the late 1940s will shed useful light on a range of views at that time. First, Kenneth Clark, in his Slade Lectures on the history of landscape painting, restated what was no doubt widely accepted: namely that the emergence of landscape in the Renaisance was linked with the new analytical spirit that would lead to the birth of 'real science' some two centuries later (Clark 1949: 30). An earlier landscape of symbols gave way to a 'landscape of fact' after about 1420, as 'a new idea of space and a new perception of light' produced the enclosed space unified by realistic lighting that is characteristic of Flemish and Florentine art of the later 15th century. Later this would be eclipsed by fantastic and idealized landscapes. Clark's view is essentially evolutionary or developmental: landscape painting 'marks the stages in our conception of nature… it is part of a cycle in which the human spirit attempted once more to create a harmony with its environment' (17).

Around the same time, Ernst Gombrich also addressed the question as to why landscape should have emerged as a rising new genre; and he quoted a 17th century writer, Edward Norgate, referring to it as 'a Noveltie, though a good one' (Gombrich 1953: 107). Gombrich showed how the early Renaissance painters gradually admitted landscape as more than mere background or decoration through a combination of discovering its status for certain ancient authorities and admiring the achievements of Northern painters who already specialised in its portrayal. But there was, in his view, a crucial distinction to be made between the growing prominence of landscape backgrounds and the landscape genre as, in Norgate's phrase, 'an absolute and entire Art' (107). As a conventionalist, he is

concerned to refute any idea that landscape painting reflected a new appreciation of the natural world per se. This would be 'a dangerous over-simplification', perhaps even a reversal of the actual process. Instead, theory and landscape painting precede the recognition of the picturesque in nature. Landscape is never merely perceptual or visual: it is composed -- and later, during the 17th and 18th centuries, it will literally be constructed as 'land-scape' in the craze for garden design.

Gombrich is interested in the internal articulation and progress of the genre of landscape; how it developed a hierarchy of value, especially after Poussin gave it a new dignity in his heroic landscapes. He also notes how Turner produced his Liber studiorum in the early 19th century, contemporary with Beethoven's 'Pastoral' Symphony, as a lexicon or typology of landscape sub-genres from the Rural (the lowest) to the Heroic, via the Historical, Pastoral, the Elevated Pastoral, the Marine and others. Landscape had thus entered the canonic system of the arts, even before Romanticism would annex and amplify its artistic meanings.

With Gombrich's strictures in mind, we may look afresh at one of the classic statements on landscape from cinema's shorter history. In the course of his writing about the Italian neo-realists, the major French critic Andre Bazin commented more than once on the significance of landscape, and we can trace the growth of a theory of what might be termed 'intentional cinematic landscape' (Bazin 1971). Discussing the Po marshes episode in Rossellini's film about the liberation of Italy, Paisa (1946), he notes that 'the horizon is always at the same height', because this 'is the exact equivalent, under conditions imposed by the screen, of the inner feeling men experience who are living between the sky and the water and whose lives are at the mercy of an infinitesimal shift of angle'. Seven years after his first championing of neo-realism, Bazin defended Rossellini's Viaggio in Italia (1953), particularly against a widely voiced disappointment over the film's 'incomplete' depiction of Naples. The locations used - excavations at Pompeii and a street with the St Gennario procession - may be few, but according to Bazin they have a 'wholeness'. More precisely, this is Naples '"filtered"

through the consciousness of the heroine. If the landscape is bare and confined, it is because the consciousness of an ordinary bourgeoise suffers from a great spiritual poverty.' (98) The fragments of Naples which form both a backdrop to and a catalyst for the heroine's recovery from her spiritual crisis are, for Bazin, 'at once as objective as a straight photograph and as subjective as pure personal consciousness'. Here, then, is an authoritative formulation of the idea of a specific 'location' both informing and being informed by - in a reciprocal process - the dramatic narrative set within it.

Before returning to Mitchell and considering what application his ideas might have to Before the Rain, there is another important cluster of thinking about landscape which needs to be acknowledged. Two leading figures from the British 'new left', the art critic John Berger and the literary and social critic Raymond Williams, both raised questions about the 'address' of landscape in the early 1970s (Berger 1972; Williams 1973). In his critical intervention in art history, Berger discussed a well-known painting by Gainsborough, Mr and Mrs Andrews, in which the landowning couple is shown in the foregound of a rural landscape (106). He quotes an art historian's angry objection to his insistence that the painting deals primarily with property relations, claiming instead that it shows them engaged in 'philosophic enjoyment of…unperverted Nature' (107). But, replies Berger, to be a landowner was generally a precondition for such philosophic enjoyment, which in turn did not usually permit any similar enjoyment by others; and one of the prime pleasures of the painting for its owners was surely that of seeing themselves portrayed as landowners, with all the substantiality of oil paint. By contrast, Williams' study of the dialectic of country and city in British culture identified a dilemma facing any writer from the mid-19th century onwards: if they are writing about country matters, they are doing so for a largely urban audience, which lacked first-hand experience of such matters. The represented countryside or rural landscape is thus already exotic, or picturesque or nostalgic for a majority of its audience, which has neither a philosophical nor proprietorial relationship to it.

Taking this historicisation of landscape relations as a cue, I

turn finally to Mitchell's collection of essays. He distinguishes in his introduction two major shifts in thinking about landscape art that post-date both Clark and Gombrich. One is the modernist shift that traces the history of landscape painting as leading ultimately to abstraction, as in the work of Kandinsky or the Abstract Expressionists. The other is the postmodern, which decenters the role of painting in favour of a semiotic or hermeneutic approach to landscape as allegory. His aim, however, is to go beyond that choice between contemplation and interpretation: to 'change "landscape" from a noun to a verb'; to refigure it 'as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed' (Mitchell 1994:1). This involves what we have done and are doing to our environment, what the environment in turn does to us, how we naturalise what we do to each other, and how these 'doings' are enacted in the media of representation we call landscape.

Among the Theses proposed by Mitchell are a series of assertions intended to shift the idea of landscape from timelessness and passivity towards an active, historicized understanding of the genre. It is, he claims, 'a medium of exchange…a social hieroglyph.. an exhausted medium… an historical phenomenon'.

In this sense, Manchevski's film may be first understood as a beneficiary of the new landscape cinema initiated by Angelopoulos in the 1970s, itself the result of a desire to communicate a particular complex of space and time - or landscape and history - characteristic of the Balkans. The form of The Traveling Players is that of a peculiarly postmodern landscape, an ironic anti-pastoral. The actors who are endlessly enacting a traditional pastoral drama are the chorus, or witnesses, to the political 'normalisation' of post-war Greece. Each location they visit is a specific topos, a site of popular memory, as we experience a guided tour of the political landscape of post-war Greece. The roots of this strategy can perhaps be found in Brecht's Mother Courage, set during an earlier civil war, with its endless, pointless changing of place: movement without goal or purpose, except survival. The distinctive 'chronotopes' (to use Bakhtin's term for space-time

articulation) of The Travelling Players - circular camera movements during which time 'slips'; or action taking place entirely off-screen, signalled only by sound -- represent a particular historical experience: that of civil war in the late modern or post-imperial world (Georgakas 1997).

It seems clear that Before the Rain follows on from this model, and from aspects of Angelopoulos's subsequent films, in which landscape is 'historicised' in a variety of ways, up to the major Balkan overview of Ulysses' Gaze (1995), completed in the same year. But Manchevski's specific concern is the relationship of the local to the global. He wants us to feel 'locality' linked to, but also in tension with, 'globality'; hence the triptych form, the panels of which turn out to be linked as three segments of one story, told 'out of order' in way made popular by Altman's Short Cuts (1993) and Tarantino's Pulp Fiction (1994). Here, however, the intention appears to be to suggest a mythic recurrent pattern, closer to Kieslowski's La Double Vie de Veronique (1991) or, ultimately, to Borges (1965). From The Traveling Players also comes the idea of a clandestine or suppressed history, one that cannot be spoken or shown by 'direct' means.

The juxtaposition of two sharply contrasted settings can usefully be explored by reference to Henri Lefebvre's phenomenology of space, in particular his distinction between 'absolute' and 'abstract' space. According to Lefebvre: The cradle of absolute space… is a fragment of agro-pastoral space, a set of places named and exploited by peasants, or by nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists. A moment comes when, through the actions of masters or conquerors, a part of this space is assigned a new role, and henceforth appears as transcendent, sacred… however, it continues to be perceived as part of nature. (Lefebvre 1991: 234)

What Lefebvre calls 'abstract space', which is the space of the modern world, comes into being between the 10th and 19th centuries, through a series of shifts that are apparently unrelated, but result in the modern state: political, institutional and apparently homogeneous (but only apparently, he insists). Shaped by the visual, by display, by the geometric and the

musical, it embodies many of the characteristics of imperial Rome, rediscovered in the modern world.

Before the Rain moves, in Lefebvre's terms, from absolute to abstract and back to a corrupted form of absolute space across its triptych. But this movement is neither linear nor progressive, any more than is the separation between Lefebvre's forms of space. For the characters in the narrative move differently: Annie is present fleetingly as a witness in the first, and is pivotal in the second, but present in the third only as a distant figure seeking to make contact between these two radically different spaces, by telephone. Likewise, Alexandar is absent from the first (except as a barely-seen corpse), central to the second, and dies in the third. The circular narrative works to create the sense of a fable, to weaken narrative causality in favour of 'fate' or 'destiny' as prime agents.

In the film's first part, entitled 'Words', we see almost diagrammatically the elements of absolute space: the church by the sea overlooking the 'sacred space' of the homeland; a sacramental realm consecrated by the traditional burial taking place, with its religious symbols linked to the earth; yet one already tainted by the young monk's breaking his vow of silence and by the signs of violent death surrounding the burial. The second panel, 'Faces', is set in London, and shows the abstract space of the city with a particular emphasis on refraction or mediation. We see Annie working with images as a picture editor; and during her taxi ride with Aleksandar, the city streets are reflected in the window, as if superimposed. This is a spectral city, recalling Williams' review of 'The Figure in the City', running from Blake, through Thomson's 'City of Dreadful Night', to Eliot's 'unreal city'. It is the city of death in life; and indeed Alex's mission is to tell Annie that he has been complicit in killing, for which confession, appropriately, he takes her to a graveyard -- the only pastoral, or absolute/sacramental space in a city. The last part of this second panel takes place in a stylish restaurant, where an obscure dispute involving one of the staff provokes a bloody massacre, in which Annie's separated husband is randomly killed. As she cradles his body, her voice lamenting his shattered face continues over an aerial view of Macedonia to

which Aleksandar is returning. The transition from an interior landscape after battle to a 'barbarous' landscape, which Aleksandar still considers home, is accompanied by Annie's repeated phrase, 'your face', suggesting a metaphorical caution regarding the 'face' of the country that Aleksandar thinks he knows well.

Later in this third panel, 'Pictures', as he explores the newly polarized terrain of his former home, divided between Orthodox and Muslim, there is another eloquent passage that offers further insight into the complexity of spatial representation in Before the Rain. Aleksandar's departure from the Muslim village where he has been met with suspicion is accompanied by an 'oriental' sounding song, which is of course open to different interpretations by those with different degrees of familiarity with Macedonia (is it plaintive/Muslim/ethnic/regional, or some combination of these?). Next we see a uniformed postman approach a rural post-office whistling the 'Internationale', a reminder of the persistence of Yugoslavia's communist culture (and again open to different interpretations); and as he arrives, a telephone conversation heard only in voice-over brings Annie's voice from London into Macedonia, trying to make contact with Aleksandar. Sounds, especially when combined non-synchronously with images, guide our interpretation of the filmic discourse, creating signification from the amorphous visual. Indeed, in this passage, the connotations of music and speech superimpose a political matrix, although not a univocal 'meaning', upon otherwise 'neutral' (to an outsider) images of Macedonia.

I turn finally to an aspect of Before the Rain which links it with the era of Neo-realism, and separates it from much of narrative cinema. As an end credit affirms, the film was 'entirely filmed on location in London and Macedonia'. But why should we care, since it can probably be assumed that most film viewers do not expect films to be made where they claim to be set? Popular awareness of illusion and artifice -- and simple substitution - is almost as old as cinema itself. From the Californian desert of DeMille's Ten Commandments and salt serving as ice in midsummer for the climactic battle of Eisenstein's Alexander

Nevsky, to the Phillipines and South London various doubling for Vietnam in Coppola's Apocalypse Now and Kubrick's Full Metal Jacket, up to the elaborate computer generated images of Titanic, we expect things seen on screen to originate differently from how they appear. The reasons are technical, in a variety of ways, practical and, most often, economic: to shoot on a studio back-lot, or where there is cheap labour or fiscal incentives, makes financial sense for a product as expensive as narrative cinema, especially when an historic period has to be simulated. Authenticity, in both the filmmakers' and the sympathetic historians' senses, does not require literal pro-filmic accuracy - London for London, and Macedonia for Macedonia. But here we have it anyway; so what does it signify?

In part, there is an economic dimension, since this certified authenticity allows the film to count as a UK-Macedonia co-production, and so enjoy certain subsidy and fiscal benefits available to European co-productions. But more important is the implicit claim to visual authenticity that is furnished by the indexical signification of images photographed in Macedonia and in London - the imprint of these places, preserved in the film. The issue is clearly different in painting, which may be related to the landscape it depicts in a multiplicity of ways, none of which are linked in this mechanical way. For instance, Monet's series paintings of London and Venice were started 'on location', but finished years later at his studio near Paris. We would normally say of these that it is their rendition of effects of light by means of paint that matter, rather than their 'truth to topography'.

But what if landscape understood historically is the subject of the film, as I have claimed? Mitchell analyses several landscapes - two New Zealand paintings and a modern photograph taken in Israel - to explicate their articulation of power, possession and imperialism, interpreting them as allegories of the state of power relations understood by their makers. Like Gombrich, Mitchell insists that landscape is already representation, which is then re-represented. In film, this work of 're-representation' is carried on through the control of perspective and enunciation - making evident from whose point of view we are seeing - so that the act of seeing is inscribed in filmic landscapes. Someone is always

seeing; landscape has become intentional, narrativised. In this respect, Before the Rain offers a striking corrective to the reporter/foreign correspondent narrative present in so many films, where we 'see through' the eyes of the visitor, in a trope of discovery/revelation. Here, Aleksandar is a native, and one experienced in seeing/picturing (a Pulitzer prize winning photographer, no less). But he insists on seeing everything as it was, instead of what it has become; and he dies ultimately as a result of his inability, or refusal, to read the new signs of ethnic-religious polarization. Like Neil Jordan's Angel (Ireland, 1982), also structured around a reluctant participant-observer, Before the Rain functions as a lesson in cultural geography of contemporary civil war, in learning to read subtle and often confusing signs of allegiance and intention. In this sense, it is a tutelary film about how we read and compartmentalise space in the modern world: how landscape is politicized as 'location' through the filmic process.

It can also be understood in terms of the older tradition of the paysage moralise: allegorical landscape arranged to move us to contemplation of 'solemn things'. In a classic study of the interpretation of one particular subject in this genre, the tomb in Arcadia, the great iconologist Erwin Panofsky showed how this changed between Poussin's time and the 19th century, from a stoical acceptance that Death, too, was present in Arcadia, to an elegiac regret that the characters portrayed - and so by implication the viewers - were no longer in Arcadia (Panofsky 1970). By analogy, we might see Before the Rain as a specifically modern form of elegy, which portrays the beautiful and 'primitive' Balkans, with its traditions of internicene violence, now brought into contact with the civilized 'first world' of London. Such violence, the film argues by its structure as well as its action, will continue to invade the world of its viewers, as long as the capitals of abstract 'imperial' space ignore the grievances of the periphery, still 'absolute' in some respects, which they have helped exacerbate.

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Abstract and keywords

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Abstract

Manchevski's film belongs to a tradition of 'landscape cinema', represented recently by Angelopoulos and the Taviani brothers, and originally by Rossellini and Neo-realism. What these and other related films mean, it is suggested, can best be understood by reference to art historical and critical theory accounts of landscape as a signifying practice, theorized by Clarke and Gombrich around 1950, then by Williams and Mitchell from an ideological standpoint. Lefebvre's distinction between 'absolute' and 'abstract' space is used to characterize the three parts of the

film, moving from Macedonia to London and back; and the authenticity of the locations is assessed in economic and aesthetic terms. The film is identified as an allegory of spatial relations in the modern world of civil wars; and also as part of a tradition of elegiac landscape studies which lament the loss of arcadian innocence.

Keywords film; landscape; realism; art history; phenomenology; Balkans See, for instance but by no means exclusively, Burgoyne (1996); Davis (1987); Rosenstone (1995) and White (1988; 19). These propositions are much indebted to Rosenstone's polemical and hortatory writings.

Theodoros Angelopoulos, b. 1935 Athens, Greece. His films, from Reconstruction (1970) to Ulysses' Gaze (1995) deal persistently but obliquely with aspects of Greek history. The Italians Paolo (b. 1931) and Vittorio (b. 1929) Taviani dealt unconventionally with 'historical' subjects in their earlier films, such as Allonsanfan (1974), but from Padre Pardone (1977) to La Notte di San Lorenzo (1982) and Kaos (1984), they created a distinctive form of meditation on landscape's shaping of human personality and memory.

Andrey Tarkovsky (1932-86) created a series of striking allegorical landscapes, both historical and futuristic in such films as Andrei Rublev (1966) and Stalker (1979), while his last films, Nostalghia (1993) and The Sacrifice (1986), made outside Russia take the form of elegiac reflections on exile. Michelangelo Antonioni (b.1912) was notable for his bold experiments of the 60s in which landscape dominated and to some extent substituted for narrative, as in L'avventura (1960) and Deserto rosso (1964).

Jean Renoir's (1894-1979) Toni (1935) was largely filmed on location and foreshadowed the mid-40s 'neo-realism' of Roberto Rossellini (1906-77). Georges Rouquier (1909-89) showed a French family's life through the passing of the seasons in Farrebique (1946). Robert Flaherty (1884-1951) pioneered the

feature documentary with Nanook of the North (1922) and went on to film other marginal cultures in their threatened habitats.

Bazin, 'An aesthetic of reality' (first pub. Esprit, January 1948), trans. In Gray (1971: 37).

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Bertolt Brecht, Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder (Mother Courage and Her Children), 1939, subtitled 'a chronicle play of the Thirty Years War', Willett (1967: 47)

Several of Jorge Luis Borges' stories propose a recurrent archetype or narrative which will be repeated through history by unwitting actors: see, for instance, 'The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero', in Borges 1965: 112-6.

Lefebvre compares abstract space, with its 'strictly symbolic existence', to the 'fictional/real space of language' (Lefebvre 1994: 236).

It is in fact a British-Macedonian-French co-production, reflecting the important role that French subsidy plays in much non-French based European filmmaking.