Montage and the Semiotics of Credibility:

An Analysis of *Before the Rain*

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This paper is about what makes a fact. Put another way, this is about the manner in which we constitute facts, by what act of belief something comes to be construed as a fact. To borrow a metaphor from legal culture, the question might be stated as, what is "the smoking gun" made of? What is that highly-prized, determining evidence we select as an incontrovertible fact, that irreducible fact that will define a legal case and irrevocably send it in the direction of a particular outcome? Within legal culture, a smoking gun is something that is discovered rather than invented. It is something perceived as self-evidently credible, as objective, as beyond interpretation, beyond manipulation, and therefore beyond the reach of the forces of incredibility. I am going against the tide to say that a smoking gun is something we make up, because a smoking gun within legal culture is absolutely what is NOT made up. I have chosen to explore this issue through an analysis of films because the art of film-making consciously explores and develops what legal culture so ardently suppresses: how we determine what is real to us. Much of film-making is devoted to the question of what makes something credible to an audience. Lawyers believe they find facts "out there." Film-makers know they make them up.

Perhaps no contemporary film distributed in the U.S. has explored this issue so imaginatively and cogently as *Before the Rain*, a film written and directed by international film-maker Milcho Manchevski and released in 1995. This film creates a highly original montage that exposes the irreconcilable narrative facts of three stories about contemporary life in Eastern and Western Europe – more specifically, in rural Macedonia and London. The elements I want to explore here involve linear narrative, documentary photographs, indexical meaning, and representational cinematography's first commandment, thou shalt not cross the 180 degree line. It is the synthesis of these mutually re-inforcing elements that makes for a "fact."

Before the Rain is composed of three parts – "1. Words," "2. Faces," and "3. Pictures" – that correspond roughly to three stories. The first, "Words," is a story of love between a young Macedonian Christian, Kiril, and a young Albanian Muslim woman, Zamira. Set in rural

Macedonia, a country where the ethnic antagonisms of the former Yugoslavia pit Albanian Muslims against Christian Macedonians, the conflicts of their cultures both initiate and destroy their relationship. The second story, "Faces," dramatizes the dilemmas of an English woman, Anne, whose daily life in London is an intricate imbalance among her husband, her mother, her job, her pregnancy, her political convictions, and her lover. As each aspect of her life conflicts with another, we come to know Anne's lover, Alexander, a Pulitzer-prize-winning war photographer. He is the focus of the third story, "Pictures," which centers on Alexander's return home to his native Macedonia after sixteen years of being based in London and working for Western news agencies, the same rural Macedonia where the love story occurs. While the three stories can be separated out as distinct plots, their meaning cannot be separated.

The originality of the film, as Manchevski himself has noted, lies in the way the stories are interwoven and juxtaposed. The montage of *Before the Rain* is more than an intersection of co-incidences. In Moshen Makhmalbaf's *The Peddler*, the three stories intersect narratively and thematically, but the montage collisions in *Before the Rain* have a more profound effect. They change the meaning of the stories being told. In watching *Before the Rain*, the viewer's initial sense of co-incidence among particular people and events is gradually transformed into a realization that the temporality of each story is qualitatively different and yet the meaning of each story cannot be isolated from the others. Film theoriet Teshome H. Gabriel raised the issue of incompatible temporalities a decade ago in his contrast between the cognitive characteristics of third world cinema and folklore on the one hand, and the art forms of literate Euro-American culture. Gabriel opposes the two. According to him, in third world cinema, "Time [is] assumed to be a subjective phenomenon, i.e., it is the outcome of conceptualising and experiencing movement." In Western European and American art forms, especially Hollywood studio cinema, "Time [is] assumed to be an 'objective' phenomenon, dominant and ubiquitous" and "each scene must follow another scene in linear progression." Gabriel implies that a film will exhibit either one or the other of these concepts of time. *Before the Rain* takes the more daring step of putting both in the same film, recasting objective linear narrative as *itself* a subjective phenomenon, no more real or true than any other concept of time. It is part of a belief system, not an objective or

universal fact exterior to its subjects. Manchevski destroys the pre-eminence of linear narrative because linear narrative is only one kind of story being told. (This is why *Before the Rain* is so much more innovative than Quentin Tarrantino's American film, *Pulp Fiction*, which was released at the same time. Although Tarrantino's editing may appear to challenge conventions of linear narrative, it does so only superficially. Watching *Pulp Fiction* is like viewing film reels out of order, perceiving a non-linearity that is superficial in the sense that the linear narrative could be easily reassembled from the parts. The cartoon-ish shock value of John Travolta's death and return to life in *Pulp Fiction* does nothing to disrupt this. Indeed, it only re-affirms a belief in the universal validity of the white-male-linear-Western European-American perspective. *Pulp Fiction* suppresses the possibilities that arise from the death of a white male main character in the middle of "his" film. We are allowed to recoup from this hiatus as if it had not occurred.

Not so with *Before the Rain* and the interpretive significance of Alexander's death.) Bruce Kawin has wrongly and reductively described the film's narrative as "circular." The thread of the film's narrative is more like a Moebius strip, where we can distinguish an inside and outside at any point, but not in a sustained, continuous way. As we travel its contours, the inside becomes the outside, and the outside becomes the inside, with no beginning or ending point that can be determined. We can, however, follow the journey along the strip. The problem, then, is not that we can't follow the stories in *Before the Rain*, but that in some sense we *can* by changing the story we are seeing as we go. This is what is truly disturbing to a viewer accustomed to linear narrative. In this regard, Manchevski's film raises important questions about what is credible by suggesting to us that, like the characters in the stories, we are not aware of how we perceive ourselves and other people – and that we think it doesn't matter when "in fact" it does.

This sense of misunderstanding, of continuous misperception, underlies the general sense of lawlessness that pervades the three stories, each of which culminates in a violent death. The supposedly definitive cultural imperatives that the characters believe to be true do not anticipate or explain these deaths. For example, the internal conflicts of Macedonia are drawn between Macedonian Orthodox Christians on the one hand, and Albanian Muslims on the other. Yet the killings we see do not reflect these conflicts. The Albanian Zamira is shot in the back by

her Albanian brother. Alexander, a Macedonian, is killed by his Macedonian cousin -- ironically in the midst of an appeal by his family members to unite against their Albanian enemies. In England no less than in Macedonia, ideology fails to define the cultural lines between adversaries. Anne tells Alexander that it's important to "take sides," that is, to oppose war. For her, the boundaries are drawn between 'we' and 'they' like this: We in England are at peace, while they in the Balkans are at war. But Anne's own husband is then gunned down in a chic London restaurant by a stranger who sprays the restaurant with bullets. In each of these stories, there is no expectation that the killer will ever be brought to a court of law, much less convicted, even though there are many eye-witnesses to each death. Violent death is a cultural mistake or an accident that lies outside the ideology of self and other.

The characters, it seems, do not know themselves, attributing to "the Other" what is true of themselves. Gabriel's theory of the difference between first and third world temporalities is similarly lacking in awareness, Manchevski's film suggests. In *Before the Rain*, the linear progression of first world narrative best characterizes the stories that take place in rural, third world Macedonia, not the story that takes place in London. Both part 1 and part 3, which take place in rural Macedonia, can be roughly rendered as a linear narrative. In part 1, a young Macedonian monk, Kiril, discovers an Albanian girl Zamira in his cell when he goes to bed for the night. He attempts to conceal her presence but fails. Kiril is banished from the monastery with Zamira. They leave together, climbing on foot over the hills. As Kiril and Zamira embrace on a mountain top, armed Albanian men suddenly appear, led by Zamira's grandfather and her brother. Her grandfather orders Kiril to go away without her and he obeys. Zamira protests and runs after Kiril. Her brother shouts "No!" and shoots her in the back as she runs, killing her. Part 3 can also be summarized in a linear way. Alexander returns to his family home in Macedonia and is welcomed back into his extended family. Alexander then goes to a neighboring Albanian Muslim village to see his old high-school sweetheart, Hannah, who is now a widow with two children. One of those children is Zamira. Soon after, Alexander's cousin Bojhan is killed with a pitchfork and Zamira is suspected of killing him. Hannah asks Alexander to find and protect Zamira. Alexander finds Zamira, who is being held captive by his cousin Zdrave. As Alexander

takes her away, Zdrave protests. Other Macedonians urge Zdrave to shoot and he does. He kills Alexander but Zamira escapes, running across the hills toward the Macedonian monastery where she will hide.

However, it isn't simply that Gabriel is inaccurate about the narrative structure of third world consciousness. He's also wrong about first world consciousness. Part 2, which takes place in London -- certainly a center of first world literary, artistic and cinematic culture – is told in the idiom that Gabriel attributes to third world cinema. The story set in London cannot be summarized in linear fashion, but the non-linear sequence can be described. Notice the difference. Anne works in a photography news agency, where she examines pictures in an office. She gets a phone call and finds out she's pregnant. She is in the midst of crossing a busy London street. She meets her mother and walks with her on a sidewalk. Alexander shows up unexpectedly, kisses Anne, and Anne's mother leaves, surmising that her daughter is having an affair. Anne takes a long ride in a taxi with Alexander. He tells her he is quitting photography because he killed someone on his last trip to Bosnia. Anne is very upset. So is Alexander. They sit down in a cemetery and Alexander asks Anne to go with him to Macedonia that night. She says she can't. Anne works again at the photography agency. She sees photographs of Zamira dead, lying on the ground. Alexander gets in another taxi. Anne meets her husband Nick for dinner at a restaurant. She tells him she's pregnant, he's the father, she loves him, and she wants a divorce. A customer with a gun shoots many people in the restaurant. Anne cries when she sees Nick dead on the floor. We view the hills of rural Macedonia from a plane's perspective.

And we view them with relief. After the unrush of images and sounds that is part 2, we are glad to be going back to Macedonia. London is too confusing, too fast-paced, too violent, too chaotic and lawless for the civilized linear viewer. Enough of subjective narrative, especially when it ends so horribly. We Americans are going home to Macedonia where we started and where we know our way around in linear time. What we don't know is that "before" and "after" are the opposite of what we think and that our precious linear narrative has already slipped away from us. But that's not part of the plot. Or is it? Let me suggest that it is.

Self and other, before and after, the insides and outsides of cultures – we invert them with ease as we travel along the Moebius strip of this film, changing the story as we go. As to why this happens, there are elements in all three stories that bear analysis, but I want to look primarily at part 2, the London section where Western viewers would presumably follow the story with ease, and yet nothing is more difficult.

The duration of a shot and the juxtaposition of shots (montage) have a great deal to do with how we perceive the temporality of a narrative. Part 2 has fast-paced editing, emphasized by its contrast with the end of part 1, where shots have a longer than 6 second duration. Part 2 begins with shots of 2-3 seconds duration. We get only a glimpse of what is happening. Moreover, the multiple soundtrack is often about something different from what we are seeing, and the full effect is a sense of too much to see or hear at once. Multiple sources of sight and sound provide too many meanings to take in. There are long sequences (up to 2 minutes) where the shots are rapidly paced and semi-abstract or fully abstract. For example, we glimpse parts of cars, parts of people and so on as they pass before the camera with the speed of traffic while Anne, in focus, waits on a median to finish crossing a busy street. We hear sirens, jackhammers, passing cars, horns, whistles, the haunting music of Macedonia, and Anne's mother's voice. Shots that are slower-paced in Part 2 often do not orient us even when we have a longer time to look at them. For instance, we get a close-up of a gloved hand (presumably Anne's) with a caterpillar inching along her finger. Did this arrive along with the latest photos from Bosnia? The little catterpillar's slow pace and its evocation of the world of nature contrasts strongly with the fast editing and intense florescent lighting and ultramodern furnishings of the agency. Also with the industrial machine version of a Caterpillar that comes shortly after

This is one of many colliding juxtapositions that tells us only that space and time are not and cannot be perceived in a unified, linear way. In the absence of juxtapositions that would orient us in a linear time frame, we focus on Anne's apparently habitual actions – working in a room at the agency, crossing the street, walking down the sidewalk, meeting her mother for lunch, taking a taxi with Alexander, meeting her husband for dinner, talking on the phone. Since all of these appear to be activities she repeats frequently, a great variety of temporal sequences

are possible and no particular order suggests itself. Moreover, it doesn't matter what comes before or after what, and this is why we lose our sense of before and after in this section. The montage conveys an impression of Anne's harried and complicated life. It is as though she leads five different lives, all of them in conflict with each other – her lover, her job, her pregnancy, her husband, her mother, and her dedication to justice. We experience a sense of time passing as Anne moves from one place to another and from one person to another, but there is no sense of a linear direction to this time. Time is a factor only in the way it separates people, puts them in different spaces, keeps them from colliding, for we soon understand that it's important who is with whom. When she is not successful at keeping different people in her life separated from each other, collisions result. It is as though she is living out an Eisenstein montage, where unpredictable collisions continually produce new and unforeseeable conditions. For instance, when she meets her mother for lunch in a two-shot and is interrupted by Alexander, who makes it a three-shot. Anne is taken by surprise, her mother is surprised by her affair, Alexander enters into intuitive combat with Anne's mother, and when Anne tries to direct this social traffic, she is rebuffed by both of them. Often she is alone in shots, but even when she is not, she stands alone psychologically, never permanently (indexically) tethered to any one person, place, or action – to anything that might help us place her in some fixed or predictable sequence. Often we see her with people who are not significant to the story we are following – or trying to follow.

After spending a day – or many days – with Anne (we don't know which), part 2 culminates in a long sequence between Anne and her husband Nick as they have dinner. Much of it is an intense shot/reverse shot that asserts the possibility of traditional coherence and unity She had said earlier she was going to see him in the evening, and here she is with him. Perhaps there is some linear direction to her life – if this is the same day. However, the comforting suture of traditional film is continually interrupted from without as the camera cuts away, as if continually distracted, to other people and events in the restaurant. It is also resisted from within by Anne. She tells Nick she wants a divorce. "I don't want you to forgive me the photographer!" she says angrily, insisting on the emotional presence of the absent Alexander. Tension is thick as she refuses her husband's entreaties. It is blown away when the gunman starts shooting and people

start screaming. The shot/reverse shot relocates to the gunman and the people he is killing in the restaurant. In our hope and search for traditional unity, we are sutured into a chaotic massacre.

The police and the law, also known as law and order, are peripheral to events and we feel bad about that because we could use some law and order. The only presence of the law among any of these three stories is the United Nations in Macedonia, their vehicles cruising through the streets of Skopje or trundling over the steep Macedonian hills, conspicuous only in their ability to arrive after the event. U.N. personnel prevent nothing. Instead they document. As a Macedonian doctor cynically observes, the stance of the United Nations is, "Have a nice war Take pictures." Photographic images figure strongly in the connections between the three parts of the film. As a war photographer, Alexander has taken many such pictures documenting war. A moment in the first part of the film shows a local boy snapping pictures of an armed group of Macedonians. Anne works at the photographers' agency in London that sends Alexander to Bosnia. It is here that she views the pictures that war photographers like Alexander are taking, and perhaps also the pictures like the anonymous boy is taking. We see her examining photographs several times. Among them are the photographs documenting Zamira's sudden death in Macedonia, the distraught Kril sitting silently on a suitcase beside her as uniformed personnel look on and someone takes photographs (including a photograph of a photographer who is photographing Zamira—the infinite regression of signs).

It is these same photographs that also figure prominently in the film's portrayal of the limits of linear narrative, for it is by these photographs that linear viewers 'tell time' as they watch the fast-paced second section of the film. We assume that part two follows part one chronologically when Anne views the pictures of the dead Zamira. Part I ends with Zamira's death, so part 2 must follow it. And, we suppose further, part 3 is the last of a three part linear narrative. We begin to doubt our linear narrative when Zamira appears in part 3 alive, but we use this to rethink part 3 as a flashback, and therefore still within the cognitive realm of linear narrative. It is Alexander's death that incontrovertibly "proves" to the Western viewer that what seemed to be a unified linear narrative is not. We think back to the photos in part 2, and think simultaneously we have misunderstood something important. We have.

Viewers orient themselves by the documentary black-and-white photographs because of the apparent simplicity of their meaning. They are the "smoking gun" of linear narrative. Unlike the drama we are watching, they seem firmly united to what they depict, not subject to interpretation or the collisions of meaning that active montage creates, and therefore not subject to misinterpretation either. In the sea of images that is part 2, they appear to be a stable point of objective reference. Documentary photographs can serve the same purpose in a legal case. As objective fact, as irreducible fact, as authentic points of reference, documentary photographs are seen as occupying a cognitive space and time outside the verbal shiftiness of words, beyond dispute in their content. Photographs of a dead body place their origin firmly after the material fact, establishing an irreversible linear sequence: first the murder, then the photograph of the murder. First part 1, then part 2. When Alexander dies, the neatness of linear narrative is irretrievably lost, for it is the montage juxtaposition of Alexander live in part 2 with the photographs that could only have been taken after his death that create the dilemma of a linear narrative that does not add up. Why, then, don't we notice this collision when it happens? The film passes through it without the viewer noticing because we are involved in the collisions of Anne's life and the subjective temporality they project. Moreover, without a knowledge of Part 3, we cannot know that Alexander dies, and that he dies before Zamira does. In short, it does not occur to us that there is another frame of reference because the documentary photograph of Zamira's death *generates the idea* of a linear progression: first the death occurs, then the photograph of the corpse occurs.

The documentary photograph also generates a concept of objectivity, of an event that is defined by the existence of the photograph as outside the viewer's own culture because it is outside the photographer's 180 degree line of representational photography. This imaginary line is believed to be real to the extent that we believe a documentary photograph observes and records events but does not participate in them. When we take a snapshot that shows a finger partly covering the lens, or we look down to take a photo of something and our own toes appear in the bottom of the picture, we have broken the 180 degree line. The film re-inforces this concept through its use of a direct shot of documentary photos. One after another, they appear

on the screen, asserting a 180 degree line between the film and the viewer. At one point, however, as we are looking at photographs "with" Anne, she leans into the frame, blocking our uninhibited view, as it were, as the shot becomes a point of view shot. The unity of place is briefly interrupted. This "disturbance" of the purity of documentary photos is temporary. Our sense of those photos is changed radically in part 3 when Alexander, writing a letter to Anne, tells how he killed a man in Bosnia. He describes it this way: "I got friendly with this militia man, and I complained to him I wasn't getting anything exciting. He said, 'No problem,' pulled a prisoner out of the line and shot him on the spot. 'Did you get that?' he asked. I did. I took sides. My camera killed a man." Alexander's own actions create the killing he documents. More than that, as a documentary photographer he takes sides *against* the prisoner, opposing him on the other side of the 180 degree line that separates subject from object. His objectivity is an illusion. Facts are made, not photographed already in existence, even photographs of murders. Documentary photography is not even an act of compassion. It is a deathly indifference that seeks to hide itself in the guise of objectivity. In seeing himself as having chosen to take the photograph instead of trying to stop the killer, Alexander rejects the idea that the sequence of his actions were inevitable. He can imagine another act, another frame of reference, another narrative that would have turned out differently.

The documentary photograph and the montage of linear narrative both depend finally on a concept of indexicall meaning as their primary aspect of signification. Modern semiotics is indebted to C.S. Peirce for the concept of indexical meaning. An index is a particular kind of sign that is, by definition, not arbitrary. Unlike the arbitrary signs of language, an index bears an intrinsic, inherent relationship to what it signifies. It is a signal, a sign with an invariable meaning. For example, where there's smoke, there's fire. Smoke is an indexical sign of fire, the thing signifed. Another example, from the opening of *Before the Rain*: "The flies are biting. It's going to rain." As Peter Wollen observes, the concept of indexical meaning was taken up by film theorist Andre Bazin, who argued that realist photography is indexical. Documentary photography implicitly makes the same claim, that the image has an intrinsic relation to the person or event it pictures. When we see an animal killed in a film, we may fear that the film-

maker actually killed an animal to get the shot, that is, that the image we see has an indexical relation to what happened in the process of making the film. Legal culture's metaphor of the smoking gun is a metaphor for an indexical sign.

The main point I wish to make here is that indexical meaning closes down the possibilities for interpretation, denies the tension of multiple significance and alternative perspectives, by asserting an intrinsic relation between the sign and it referent. The invariable signal makes things into facts. Or, similarly, it makes signs into facts. Once the rope of intrinsic relation ties the sign to the signified and the signified to the referent, the invariable signal results and interpretive consciousness is lost. Voila, the "fact." Realism results if this is done in a sustained way. To sustain an indexical method of interpretation, film uses the linear narrative. Aware of the creative dangers of juxtaposition, film-makers use linear narrative as a method of controlling montage, of binding one image to another in an orderly, uni-directional succession that severely limits signification for it does not allow images to move in multiple ways in relation to each other. This is the production code of Hollywood producers, and of many lawyers. Once those images start moving, as Manchevski allows so abundantly in his film, multiple meanings and multiple perspectives are generated.

What Manchevski shows throughout his film is that one person's indexical signal is another person's arbitrary signifier. The documentary photographs that mean so much to Anne, and so much to the linear viewer, are viewed with contempt by the doctor in Macedonia, who sees them as a meaningless exercise in avoidance. What is at issue with indexical meaning is the issue of credibility, of *what is believed to be intrinsic or inherent*, and by whom, under what conditions – or possibly, under what collisions. Linear narrative seeks to conceal and suppress those conditions, and these questions, by positing – rather literally – a train of events, where one event leads inexorably to another in a chain of causation that is total and linear. Open the doors and walk through the cars, one after another. Start at the front of the train and walk to the back each person doing this will get there in the same way. This is the invisible editing or montage of American linear film, and it depends on the artificial reduction of multiple meaning to the

conventions of genres, and ultimately to the invariable index, where smoke will be followed by fire, and the smoking gun will point to the identity of the criminal. It is also a lawyer's ideal case.

Before the Rain exposes the narrowness of indexical thinking in numerous ways, offering many examples that lead up to the dislocation of documentary photographs from their pedestal of truth. For example, when we see a young man in an A's baseball cap and sunglasses at the door of the ancient Macedonian church, and we see him slowly pull his glasses off and stare in awe at what he sees, we think he's an American tourist. He's not. He's a Macedonian gunman from the neighborhood. Is he a terrorist? That doesn't seem quite right when we find out his prized possessions are a donkey and a boom box. Another example: Zamira's grandfather cuts her hair short to punish her for going out alone. The haircut is intended to be sexless and humiliating, but if she were in London it would be a very stylish crew-cut. Context matters. Indexical meaning is deeply dependent on the cultural conditions and belief systems in which it occurs, but that dependence is effaced in the act of belief that a sign can have intrinsic meaning, can be indexical.

C.S. Peirce was an outspoken racist and it is not hard to see in his theory of the index an expression of the illogic that underlay his racism. For him, the characteristics of racial inferiority were indexical in nature – black skin or an African American physiognomy were inherent signs of mental inferiority and vicious violence. A similar reasoning has typically informed the coding of masculine and feminine as a set of supposedly innate characteristics – gender profiling, if you will. Alongside these obviously prejudicial beliefs stands the apparently neutral documentary photograph, but it, too is based on the same principles of reasoning. *Before the Rain* suggests that when people are faced with multiple perspectives and an awareness of cultural relativism, when we find out how deep the arbitrariness of signs can be, we react with an appeal to something that seems invulnerable to context, resistant to variable signification. Indexical signs like photographs appear to be free of bias, of politics, of opinions, of social conditions and varying interpretations, but this is a false freedom. It depends on coercion and suppression. It serves injustice, not justice. When indexical meaning is privileged, this may produce the apparently neutral fact of the moment, the smoking gun, but it simultaneously privileges the systems of prejudice that also depend on indexical meaning. There can be no recognition of the subjective

nature of indexical meaning for a fact to be a fact, any more than there can be a recognition of the subjective nature of linear narrative. The absence of the subject's interpretive consciousness is essential to both. The result is a situation like the Amidou Diallo murder case, which depended on the automatic response to indexical signs that the police perceived. Diallo reached for his wallet – they thought he was reaching for a gun. A policeman tripped – he must have been shot by Diallo. The verdict of acquittal validated the police responses that were based on indexical signification. Thoughtless? Exactly. That is what indexical meaning requires.