Returning the Gaze in Milcho Manchevski's *Before the Rain*

Angelina Ilieva
University of Chicago

A great deal of critical inquiry in the past two decades has centered on the identity dynamics between the "West" (*i.e.,* the center of economic power and normative, desired, civilized humanity) and the "Rest" (*i.e.,* the poor periphery, alternatively backward and volatile, or spiritual and authentic). The South East corner of Europe shares the predicament of other late modernizers, where the very inception of national identity is marked by an acute sense of having already fallen behind. Investigations of South East European self-representations have pointed to the process of the internalization of the imagined Western gaze for whose benefit the collective selves stage their aspirations for recognition. In such a symbolic economy, Europe is the neutral and universal, while the Balkan ("Rest") self is the Other, the marked member of the pair, the particular rather than the universal. Thus, by internalizing the center's gaze, the periphery internalizes its own otherness.[1]

One example of this consciousness can be found in a long-standing tradition in the literature of the region to represent the *Balkan* self through the eyes of a western observer or a local who, in one way or another, privileges the *West (European)* gaze. From Aleko Konstantinov's educated 19th-century narrators who tell each other how they have been embarrassed in front of their European acquaintances by their compatriot Bai Ganyo Balkanski's antics on his trips to Europe,[2] through Ivo Andrić's French consuls who try to make sense of Travnik's stifling silence in *Travnička Hronika*, and perhaps most recently through Orhan Pamuk's exile narrator Ka who recovers his poetic inspiration in the white Turkish (though not Balkan) snow upon returning from Germany, we can find the identification with the foreigner's gaze pervading cultural production in the Balkans.

A point worth making is that the national narratives of the emerging South East European nation-states are also part of this dynamic. On the one hand, the story of the nation had to be written in the standard genre of such a national narrative and had to prove the ancient origins and continuity of the nation. (In other

words, we had to prove that we are sufficiently "like" the West and can be allowed to play in the sand pit of nations). At the same time, the national narrative of the periphery had to stress uniqueness and authenticity – usually in the heroic suffering of the nation – in another gesture of offering the victimized national self as an object of desire to the Center. *Europe* then is also the site of The Gaze that grants recognition (in a Hegelian sense) and through recognition bestows selfhood, confirmation of the worth of the peripheral culture.

The existential position of identifying symbolically with a normative site outside oneself places the self in a precarious position. The images of this self are marked by a lack (of civilization, culture) or excess (of authenticity, intensity of feeling).[3] The responses are varied but acutely felt: from self-consciousness to defiance and arrogance, to self-exoticization and self-mythicization, to self-abjection (Herzfeld), all of which I view as forms of a quest for dignity. The exploration of the intricate relation between an imagined West and the imagined Balkans, of the implications of the deep awareness of another's judging gaze directed at oneself, therefore, plays a key role in the investigation of identity politics in the Balkans.

This article hopes to make its small contribution to the discussion by focusing on the problematic of observation in Milcho Manchevski's 1994 film *Before the Rain.* At its 20th anniversary, this film remains one of the most sophisticated treatments of the ethics and politics of observation, representation and the existential condition of internalized otherness. Interrogating the problem of representation as one of its most poignant themes, Manchevski's film makes apparent the plethora of tensions inherent in the act of gazing itself. In so doing, it invites the reexamination of the dynamic between "the West" and the "Balkans" and its attendant judgments and affective claims. *Before the Rain* unsettles the presumed normative superiority of the Western gaze, highlighting both the problematic voyeurism and the moral responsibility inherent in the act of representation, and implicating the Gaze in the violence it observes. At the same time, the film critiques the "Balkan" internalization of the western gaze *and* the resultant self-mythologizing gesture – both positive and negative – through which the "Balkans" respond to the judgment of the "West."

Before I begin my analysis, I will provide a short plot summary. The film examines the dynamics of the emergence of a *hypothetical* inter-ethnic conflict, which has the potential of escalating to the vicious circle of war. I stress the hypothetical aspect of the conflict, since *Before the Rain* was emphatically not

documenting events on the ground. Rather, Manchevski studied the tension which he sensed in Macedonia during the war in Bosnia and explored the possibilities inherent in such a tension.[4]

The film consists of three parts. Part One, "Words," takes place in Macedonia, where we witness the death of the teenage Albanian girl Zamira, who has been accused of murdering a Macedonian man. Part Two, "Faces," takes place in London, where we meet the photo-editor Anne and her lover, the Macedonian-born photographer Aleksandar. He comes back from Bosnia, where, he tells her, he killed, and asks her to go with him back to Macedonia. That night, Anne meets her husband Nick at a restaurant. In the background, a conversation in Serbian between a young waiter and his visitor escalates into a fight. After the shooting, Anne finds Nick dead, his face disfigured by a bullet. Part Three, "Pictures," follows Aleks's return to Macedonia. In his remote village (represented through his at once alienated and nostalgic eyes), he finds the Macedonian-Albanian community tense, as some of them worry that Macedonia will be the next Bosnia. Soon Aleks's cousin Bojan is found dead, and a group of armed Macedonian men leaves to seek revenge – they have been told an Albanian girl has killed him. In the middle of the night, the Albanian Hana, Aleks's unforgotten childhood love, comes to ask for his help – his cousins have taken away her daughter. Aleks is shot dead while leading the girl – whom we recognize as Zamira from Part One – away from his cousins. The final scenes repeat (*almost* exactly) the opening shots of Part One. The film's end loops back into its beginning, the circle of its form implying the vicious circle of violence.

Representing the Gaze

As an émigré war photographer, Aleks occupies literally the position of the Western gaze directed at the Balkans, turning them into an exotic object of curiosity and study, and affirming the West's normative status. He thus stands for the internalization and perpetuation of the Western gaze against which critics have cautioned.[5] Significantly, however, we meet the photographer not during his stable career when he "performs" the Western gaze comfortably, but at the beginning of his journey away from that identification, when he has been confronted with the underlying dangers of his role. The character's development through the narrative constitutes a commentary on the problems of observation and representation. And, inasmuch as he and his craft refer to the director and his work, we can read Aleks's

difficult negotiation with his responsibilities as the film's own gesture of self-reflection.

The reader will remember that we meet the character, a Pulitzer-prize winning photographer, in Part Two of the film, when he returns to his London photo agency from Bosnia unexpectedly, tells his lover Anne that he has killed, that he has resigned from his job, and that he is flying the same night back home to Macedonia with her.[6] Only in Part Three, when Aleks writes a letter to Anne, do we find out what really happened in Bosnia:

> Dear Anne …. Last week I told you I killed. 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 me. I did. I took sides. My camera killed a man. I never showed those pictures to anyone. They're yours now.

Revealing the Perverse Enjoyment of Observation

The film's most significant contribution to the dynamic of gazing lies in its exploration of perverse pleasures (as the corollary effect of gazing) in both observer and observed. Aleks's involuntary involvement in the violence he hopes to prevent by documenting it stages the uncanny moment when the object of observation suddenly comes alive and looks back at the gaze. The "uncanny" quality stems not so much from the fact that the relation between observer and observed is suddenly rendered reciprocal and that the observer himself comes under scrutiny, but from the fact that the object "returns" to the gaze the latter's own unconscious (perverse) desires. The object offers to the gaze what that gaze seeks – violence. By satisfying literally (cynically-perversely) the photographer's "wish" for exciting shots, the militia man confronts the observer with the hidden sadistic dimension of the search for these interesting shots. The need to represent violence to the West in order to shock it into action slides into the quest for violence itself. Watching turns into vampirism.[7]

The issue of enjoyment is also at the center of Žižek's critique of the West's relationship to (the violence in) the Balkans as "a strange mixture of repulsion … and attraction." In Žižek's account, the Balkans are a fantasy space where the West projects its "repressed" dark passions. The ambiguity becomes especially

pronounced in a morbid fascination with the victims. The western viewers "were horrified, yet at the same time they 'couldn't avert their eyes'" ("Underground or Ethnic Cleansing," no pagination). Manchevski's film offers a similar commentary on the gaze directed at the war. We find it in the treatment of the photos in Anne's office, for example, where the juxtaposition of the picture of the scantily clad Madonna with that of an emaciated man from the Balkans suggests the aestheticization and eroticization of violence through its very inclusion in the representational machine of mass media.

The film also represents the local attitude toward the western observers, and toward having become a strange object of observation and wonder. In Part Three, Macedonian Dr. Sašo quips cynically on the Western observers: *Sega Zapad seir gleda. Chekaat da se ispokolat do posleden* ('Now the West is watching the show, waiting for [those in Bosnia] to slaughter themselves to the last one'). Victor Friedman has glossed the episode in detail. "[*S*]*eir* is a word of Turkish origin meaning 'spectacle' or 'sight worth seeing'… the implication is someone who watches uselessly." Friedman clarifies his point by referring to a cartoon where the label of the West European "observer" (*posmatrač*) is substituted for by the word *seirdžija*, with "the connotation of useless 'bystander, rubberneck'" (141). To develop Friedman's point for my purposes, the replacement of *posmatrač* with *seirdžija* also includes a dimension of *enjoyment* which is lacking from the former neutral term. Calling the western observers *seirdžiji* not only highlights their perceived uselessness but also the perverse enjoyment that a *seirdžija* receives from seeing the spectacle in front of him. *Seir* also presupposes a power dynamic in which the pleasure of the observer derives partly from being safely excluded from (and thus superior to) the scene in front of him, which, more often than not, involves the embarrassment of the participants.

In Dr. Sašo's sarcastic remark "Now the West is watching the show"/ *Sega Zapad sejr gleda*, I see an intellectual, verbal analogue to the mute defiance of the militiaman in Bosnia. In both responses one can detect the bitterness, anger and humiliation of having become the object of observation, wonder and disbelief, as well as the assumption that such observation is enjoyable to the observers.[8]

Through Aleksandar's experience in Bosnia, the viewers can also gain insight into what Herzfeld has called "the complicit logic of self-abjection" – the phenomenon of the locals embracing the West's negative image of themselves.[9] The Western gaze directed at the "other" marks the latter as an abnormal, strange entity whose actions and motivations, while entirely outside the moral stature and

beyond the comprehension of the "normal" civilized center, provoke the uncanny curiosity of that center. However, the moment when the observed object suddenly returns the gaze negates the radical difference between observer and observed. Confronting the former with a terrifying dimension of his own perverse desires, the return of the gaze shatters the comfortable image of the "civilized" West free from the primitive passions of the barbaric Balkans, and writes center and periphery within a similar libidinal economy. By embracing his role as an actor in a *spectacle*, the militia man embarrasses the observers with their own voyeuristic enjoyment. Turning them from "monitoring" outsiders into an "audience" (which has gone there to watch a performance, and in other circumstances would pay for it), he gains, however briefly, the moral superiority which has hitherto belonged to his observers, because they can no longer maintain the distance which allows them to take the stance of moral superiority, that of "disgust." In the militiaman's gesture, we can detect a type of Dostoevskian Underground-Man attempt to reclaim a morbid kind of dignity, one that is laced with the pleasure of defiance.[10]

The encounter of the photographer, the militiaman and the prisoner therefore reveals the perverse enjoyment in both observer and observed, an enjoyment that binds them together in a complicit performance.

The Responsibility of Observation

Aleks's experience in Bosnia shatters the naive belief in the neutral position of the observer, in the possibility of watching but remaining untouched, outside the war's imperative violence. Instead of following its own "autonomous" logic of development, the "object" under scrutiny incorporates the fact that it is being observed into the economy of its own actions. Violence becomes a spectacle enacted *for* the benefit of the gaze, and war emerges as an impromptu performance carried in active dialogue with its audiences. In this dialogue, the observed can actively manipulate their own representation – either in aggressively enacting the role of barbaric "others" to the West (as discussed above), or in riveting the audience's attention by embracing their role as a victim. I have in mind here the liberation movements in the region at the end of the 19th century, when revolutionary activities were often carried out in the hope of attracting the attention of Western public opinion and provoking the Great powers into action.[11] That Susan Woodward notes a similar manipulation of the representation of violence in the wars at the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s should not be read as a sign

of the Balkan's timelessness but as a symptom of the unchanged relation between the center and its margins:

> The psychological warfare to justify the creation of national states would be to no avail if diplomatic recognition did not follow. Military engagements aimed not merely at physical control of territory but at foreign support. Military strategists and political leaders *chose targets* and managed media coverage so as to shape international opinion and local sympathies. … All sides used attacks (and mutual incriminations of blame) on cultural monuments, on civilians in breadlines, on wedding and funeral parties, on busloads of orphans … to mobilize sympathies and hostility at home and abroad. … the UN organizations on the ground became vehicles of [the nationalist leaders'] statemaking, *in effect not observers but integral parts of the political struggles that included war* (*Balkan Tragedy* 236, 318, italics mine).

The spectators, especially when they are the powerful in the global political scene, bear responsibility because their expectations and responses influence the outcome of the performance. Woodward laments the failure of Western powers to recognize what Manchevski's character immediately recognizes – his own influence on the events on the ground. Yet another episode in *Before the Rain* highlights, perhaps unintentionally, the West's role in the relations between Balkan countries themselves. The quarrel between the waiter and his visitor in Part Two enacts the drama of the Balkans for acceptance into "Europe." The waiter, clean shaven, hard working and likeable, is trying to blend in the "civilized" West. His ultimate goal as an immigrant is to make money and join "normal" bourgeois life. His dream, of course, is shared by every country on the European periphery – to become a legitimate part of Europe and to have the chance to live the life of the "civilized," "normal" West. The desire to belong to the Economic Center, especially poignant after the dissolution of the socialist system, is to a large extent the obverse phenomenon of the objectifying Western gaze – if the latter marks the observed peripheral object as alien, exotic and different, the peripheral *subject* gazes longingly at the center, seeking to erase the difference and write itself as same.[12]

While the motives for the quarrel remain purposefully unclear,[13] the visitor seems to be ridiculing precisely the waiter's petty concern with money: with an

expression of contempt, he throws money at the waiter's face and repeats "Money, money, money" (*Pare, pare, pare*). At least to this viewer, the derision relates to the Balkan's own myth about itself as a place of authenticity – as a place of spiritual rather than worldly concerns, where one rises above petty cares, above money and ownership, and values only ties with friends and community. It is here we should remember that the mythic image of the Balkans does not exist solely for the benefit of the western gaze and it does not function only to affirm the "Macedonian/Balkan/Eastern" unambiguous inferiority. Self-mythologization has also been a strategy for *self-valorization* of national identities in the European periphery since the time of their inception in the 19th century. These nations' elites did indeed internalize the attitudes of the "European center" when they looked at their "backward" homelands. At the same time, however, the elites discovered in these homelands that which the modernized, industrialized and romantic West lacked and desired – authentic folk and unspoiled natural beauty. The "backward object" then (or rather, the elites who identified with its romanticized image) found the saving grace of backwardness, and saw itself as the place of inherent spiritual authenticity and divine immanence. The emergent national selves, therefore, were effectively fashioned as the objects of desire for an alienated West. The internalization of the western gaze and the attendant self-mythologization then carries also the ideal (self-)image of spiritual pre-eminence, of the superior capacity for authentic enjoyment.[14]

From this perspective, the waiter is betraying his loyalty to a (heroic, epic, romantic) ethos of community for the ethos (or lack thereof) of western egotistic individualism – he demeans himself by literally serving the West. The intruder's provocative behavior challenges the West's presumed position of superiority by challenging its esteem of economic success – the West has lost its soul to monetary pursuits; the backward Balkans are thus superior because they have preserved their soul. This militant character then engages in a struggle for dignity similar to that of the militiaman in Bosnia. The latter shocks his observers by throwing back at them – embellished – their own image of him as a violent savage; likewise, the restaurant bully elevates the myth of his own exotic authenticity and indulges in the (poignant) enjoyment of moral superiority which he gains, however briefly, in his arrogant denial of squeamish bourgeois etiquette.[15]

The waiter for his part wants to be distinguished from this unacceptable (to the west) visitor from his past – a connection with him threatens the immigrant's successful integration. As his guest demonstratively throws money at him and

attracts everyone's attention, the waiter struggles with humiliation and restrains himself from responding, trying very hard to maintain dignity and *not* participate in a spectacle. The restaurant owner, however, does not appreciate his employee's efforts:

> Owner (with dignity): "George, I think it would be best if you left the restaurant as quickly as possible. And don't come back."
> George (indignantly): "Sir, sir, I didn't do anything!"
> Owner: "I am sorry, George. And make sure your friend leaves with you."

While George requires that the difference between him and the "primitive barbarian" be recognized, his boss refuses to acknowledge the distinction between the two foreigners and insists on seeing them together as an entity, drawing a line between himself and the two of them. It is at this point that the real fight erupts: having lost the battle of acceptance, the waiter relinquishes control and hits the bully. As the fight escalates, the owner of the restaurant fails to see his own role in its outbreak.

This last exchange recalls, in its own peculiar way, the fears of the Northern Yugoslav republics in their quest for admittance to "Europe."[16] I do not want to suggest, however, that this incident should be read literally as an allegory of the Yugoslav dissolution. Rather than attempting to map specific historical events and actors unto the film's episodes, I want to draw attention to the dense web of mirroring gazes from East and West that *Before the Rain* masterfully brings out in its dramatization of mutually dependent identity claims.[17]

Finally, the restaurant scene "does not allow for the representation of Western Europe as a superior 'civilized' space that has overcome its ethnic dilemmas" (Marciniak 69), because it insists on reminding its viewers of civilized England's own uncomfortable violence. To Nick's comment ("At least they aren't from Ulster"), the owner rejoins, "No, sir, I am from Ulster." Just like the waiter before him, the owner is caught in the need to negotiate the stigma of his place of origin (the imperial periphery) and his chosen belonging to the (imperial/economic) center. Nick's comment and his subsequent toast ("Here's to civil wars getting more civil once they get here") may be interpreted as a gesture toward what some critics have termed the comforting effect of Balkan violence: the savagery of the "other" confirms the "civility" of the self.[18] In the short

conversation between Nick and the owner, however, Manchevski's film precludes the possibility of such comfort. The violence we have witnessed becomes a part of a general problem rather than a uniquely Balkan trait. Rather than confirming the West's image of itself as free of the barbarism of less developed countries, the film frames together the West and the Rest.

(Self)mystification and Responsibility

The incident of Aleks's camera also highlights a problem with the Enlightenment trust in direct representation as a reliable vehicle to "understanding" reality.[19] Observation does not provide adequate understanding of reality, first because it can only take in that which the object chooses to show to the gaze, but also because it fails to perceive what is beyond the frame. As already mentioned, the other problem is that the Balkans' status as the West's object of study immediately bars them from the desired acknowledgment of "likeness" to and participation in the West. It marks them as a strange, opaque entity whose actions and meanings are not readily available but can be understood only through careful deciphering. The problem, of course, is not the urge to study. Rather, it is the assumption of radical difference between the subject and the object of study, a difference which makes it impossible for the subject to "understand" *without the possession of the key to some secret, singular meaning*. In other words, in order to "understand," one does not need to be initiated into the secret knowledge of passionate Balkan-ness, but has to examine the social, economic, and psychological factors that created a viable space for the eruption of irrational violence. Scholars of the Yugoslav conflict have insisted that it was *not* a result of ancient hatreds but of "the disintegration of governmental authority and *the breakdown of a political and civil order*" (Woodward 15, italics mine). The conflict should, therefore, be examined through "the same *rational criteria* that the West reserves for itself" (Todorova, *Imagining* 186) rather than as the resurgence of timeless mythic passions. Knowledge of cultural specificities is necessary in order to understand the symbols and discourses through which contemporary historical events are given meaning (i.e., why the mythos of timeless passions has traction in the peripheral sense of self). The motives, actors, and general processes of negotiation and manipulation of historical meanings, however, can only be made sense of if treated as "normal" rather than arcane.[20]

Before the Rain, however, exposes not only the problematic effects of the Western gaze upon the observed and the gaze's responsibility, it also presents us with a critique of the obverse side of the West's frustration at the presumed Balkan inscrutability. Not only does the West accept that it cannot comprehend the Balkans because their meaning does not lend itself to rational understanding, the Balkans themselves try to affirm their specificity and singularity, and insist on the Western gaze's inability to penetrate to their true meanings. Mattijs van de Port has culled the term "obstinate otherness" for the "fierce" denial (of his Serbian Novi Sad informants) that he could possibly understand them.[21] Thus while Žižek is right to criticize the West's approach to the Balkans as a dark, wild, violent entity that does not lend itself to rational analysis, we should not forget that the Balkans themselves are invested in maintaining their mystique. We should remember, for example, that the local nationalist elites provided ample fodder for the problematic "ancient hatreds" stereotypes as they actively recycled national history in order to mobilize popular sentiment. National elites manipulated Balkan mystery in order to carve out their own images as actors who cannot be subjected to the "banal" rules of "Western" ethics. It is in this context that concerns about self-mythologization should be taken most seriously. From Kusturica's statements comparing violence in the region to an earthquake (*Cahiers du cinéma*, quoted in Iordanova 125) to Van de Port's obstinate others, people from the Balkans have perpetuated actively their own mythologization.

The film's treatment of this dynamic displays an intimate understanding of cultural complexities yet refuses to accept the logic of obstinate otherness. As an emigrant, Aleks has not lived through the dissolution of the Yugoslav community and the emergence of the nationalist monster. He returns to Macedonia both a westerner and a Yugoslav antique. His efforts to argue against his cousins' quest for revenge are thus dismissed on grounds of his inability to understand. Running into his cousin Zdrave and the rest of the armed gang as they announce their program *Site šiptari na kol* ('All Albanians to the stake'), Aleks asks the obvious question *I posle?* ('And then what?'). The response he receives neutralizes the "foreign" attempt at intervention precisely by suggesting that there is a meaning inaccessible to outsiders: *Ti glej si seir. Ne si od tuka* ('You watch the show. You are not from here').[22] Zdrave retorts far more brazenly during the confrontation at the sheepfold, when Aleks has found the gang with the Albanian girl Zamira as their captive and is about to lead her away:

> Aleks: *Zasrami se!* ('You should be ashamed!') ….
> Zdrave: *Bračed, odamna si izlezen od tuka, ne znaeš kako sidi toa. Gledaj si ja tvojata živeačka* ('Cousin, you left from here a long time ago, you don't know how things are here. Mind [literally, watch] your own life').

By presenting the obvious situation of violence as some inscrutable matter which eludes the grasp even of a local who has spent time abroad, Zdrave effectively invalidates Aleks's judgment and standards and carves out a special moral place for himself and the militia gang. It is in these details that *Before the Rain* critiques not only the Western mystification of the Balkans, but also the local claim to be an incomprehensible mysterious entity – ultimately, both become convenient ways of avoiding moral responsibility.

Thus, through Aleks's westernized gaze, the film brings forth a necessary recognition of responsibilities and manipulation of differences. Concerning Aleks's refusal to be infected by the virus of war, the emerging militias develop into doubles of each other in the process of fraternization against the enemy. Woven into each other in the final circle of the narrative, Macedonian and Albanian militias grow to become one entity precisely in their attempt to draw boundaries and separations. One desperately needs an evil neighbor against whom the self can be set. In this respective mutual definition, one is of course the mirror of the other. According to the pessimistic reading of the film, the westernized (humanist) gaze remains sadly outside, because the logic of doubles does not permit a point of entry. The film highlights the similarity between the militarized men precisely through staging the symmetry of the two sides in their radical contrast to Aleks. Against the local "nesting orientalism," represented by Mitre, which couches the other entity as the dangerous remainder which obstructs the self's rightful identity with itself, and against the thrust of the nationalist "narcissism of small differences" busily carving boundaries and belongings, Manchevski forces a recognition of the likeness between the self and the "enemy" against the humanist westernized gaze. In the vicious circle of the death drive, writhing together in a twisted suicide, the one is forced to recognize the self's identity with the demonic alter-ego. As personal reports of émigrés confirm, it is usually their direct confrontation of the presumed "enemy" (Greek, Turkish, Bulgarian) in a Western context that suddenly brings home the commonality between the self's and the

"local demonic" other's humanity. Inducing such a "revelation" in the Balkan audience is no small achievement for the film.

Aleks's Journey Home – The Gaze and the Boundaries of the Self

When the object in Aleks's camera comes to life and throws the perverse truth of his unformulated wish back in his face, Manchevski's character (unlike the restaurant owner or the politicians to whom Woodward refers) immediately recognizes his responsibility in the murder. By embodying the Western gaze, the photographer has sinned against the "western" belief in the absolute value of human life as well as against his former Yugoslav self. His resignation and his return home are acts of penance and the beginning of a quest to recover, at least partially, a core of his prelapsarian self. Since his responsibility is that of the gaze, his cleansing necessarily passes through the gradual renunciation of the camera as a mediator between himself and violence. The slow process of emerging from behind the camera accentuates the photographic medium as a protective screen between the self and reality.

His first step is to separate himself from his unfortunate pictures from Bosnia and to bequeath them to Anne. Before Aleks can send his pictures, his cousin Bojan is found dead. The film's slow, relentless exploration of Bojan's wounds clearly coincides with the war photographer's experienced gaze, a coincidence which expands the specificity of the scene to the generality of all other scenes of violence that he has shot on film. The slow camera movement, the slowed action and the reigning silence recall the stunned slowing of time in the moment of shock. We see Aleks's hand motion to adjust the imaginary camera's lens and press the button, and then see him look away. Taking the imaginary picture, he renounces the real camera. His gesture of renunciation seems to be also the gesture of accepting the finality of Bojan's death. Having slowly and quietly taken the imaginary shot with Aleks, the film's focus moves away from the dead body and the dripping blood toward the people around it and their emotions. The action speeds up and the sound grows louder. Renouncing the position of the correspondent, the gaze behind the camera does not remain fixated on the (arguably aestheticized) object of the violated body but travels beyond it to the humanity of the people who have to negotiate the death.

Aleks's final distancing from the photographer's mode of looking at the world is also the character's final preparation for confronting his cousin. I find a possible key to this final step in his conversation with Hana. The reader will remember that after the death of Boyan, Aleks's cousin,, Aleks's other cousins blame Zamira for the murder and take up their arms to avenge him. That night Hana, Zamira's mother and the love of Aleks's youth, comes to beg Aleks for help. This is the only conversation that the two have after Aleks's return, and the memories of their past love that binds them are inextricably linked with the thoughts of the present tensions that separate them.

> Hana: … *Ti gledaš li što se slučuva so luġevo naši?* ('Do you see what's happening with our people?')[23]
> Aleks: *Gledam* ('I do').
> Hana: *Ne e za gledanje!* ('It's not a sight one should (have to) watch!')

Hana's idiomatic expression carries the implications of the act of watching as voyeurism. *Ne e za gledanje* indicates the embarrassment that unites the object of observation with the observer in sharing a shameful scene. Recognizing the riveting enjoyment of *seir*, this expression warns against it and hopes for the aversion of the gaze. Against the power dynamic of *seir*, where the one who watches is safely outside and becomes superior by the very act of seeing another's embarrassment, Hana reminds us of the more subtle aspects of human dignity, where the boundaries of the self are more permeable and vulnerable.[24]

After Hana leaves, we follow Aleks as he steps over a book entitled *Alexander Kirkov, Pictures* lying on the floor. The height of his artistic and journalistic achievement, the book remains behind, useless and ignored. The final gesture in his intimate ritual preparation for his confrontation with the gang is to tear up the fateful pictures of the Bosnian prisoner. In this final act of emergence from behind the camera, the cleansing journey toward "settling his debt" nears its completion.[25] Having given up pictures, the protagonist also cuts the distance between himself and the events happening around him: the responsibility of his camera for the murder of the prisoner translates into his responsibility as an observer *of* his cousins' violence. Now he can refuse to acknowledge the difference between observer and observed; he can refuse to allow his intervention to be

neutralized by the argument of his foreignness. The shift of the verb *gledam* which takes place in his response to Zdrave indicates the change in a most succinct form:

> Zdrave: *Bračed, odamna si izlezen od tuka, ne znaeš kako sidi toa. Gledaj si ja tvojata živeačka* ('Cousin, you left from here a long time ago, you don't know how things are. Mind [literally watch, observe] your own life').
> Aleks: *Oti si ja gledam, ne možam so sebe da živeam koga te gledam vakov!* ('Because I mind [watch] my own life, I cannot live with myself when I see you like this!').

Aleks has finally adopted Hana's attitude toward seeing – it is a sight that embarrasses, that degrades both observer and observed. Recognizing the spuriousness of the radical difference between himself and his cousin, between the "westerner" and the "Balkan," he can at least attempt to wake up the others.[26]

It can hardly be contested that it is Aleks's death that finally breaks the strained anxiety and brings forth release with the first drops of rain. In the personal development of the character, therefore, Aleksandar finally succeeds in "returning home." This is why, as Manchevski points out, the character dies happy and, more importantly, makes the film a "happy end": "For him, these thirty seconds before he dies, and even though he dies, are the most important in his life. He dies with a smile on his face, he is the only happy face. Therefore, even if he dies, the end of the film *Before the Rain* is a happy end. …. Aleksandar … dies happy" (Kunovski 49). His death atones for the camera's murder and gives the hope, however tenuous, that "the circle is not round," that, because of his death, these senseless murders may not be repeated again the second time around.[27]

A detail worth mentioning here is that Manchevski plays the role of the prisoner shot in front of the camera. Tängerstad interprets this "authorial death" as a mark of the director's awareness of his own responsibility as a purveyor of representations.[28] If the fictional character atones for the crime inherent in his craft by dying at the hands of the "dark Balkan types" he tried to observe and represent, the director seems to have borne responsibility for his representational craft.

The character's renunciation of his photos also finds a parallel in the formal structural organization of the film. Each of the film's three segments – Words, Faces, Pictures – is named after the medium of representation which, in that segment, is given up, destroyed or rendered meaningless. Part One, "Words"

thematizes speech and language as an inadequate means of communication. The monk Kiril has taken a vow of silence and even when he gives up his vow, he and Zamira do not understand each other's language, since he speaks Macedonian, and she Albanian. Part Two, "Faces," shows us gradual erasure. The camera does not allow us to get close to the characters' faces because we only access them through medium shots, and there are no close-ups in this part of the film. The formal slippage of the characters' faces as they appear to us refracted through the windows of the taxi is aligned with the active attention that the film draws to the fact that the bullet has destroyed Nick's face.[29] Part Three, "Pictures," follows the photographer's slow separation from his camera and his craft, as he learns not to trust its representation. Significantly, it is in this third part, through Aleks's letter to Anne, that the viewers are confronted with the full weight of the issues of observation and responsibility discussed above. Manchevski has noted that words, faces and pictures are also the three main elements of the cinematic medium itself.[30] The character's journey away from his medium of representation then is doubled by the film's form itself, as the medium submits itself to gradual erasure. Making this erasure obvious through the section titles, *Before the Rain* contemplates the uncertainty of its own attempts to represent.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that the difficult quest for identity positions in the Balkans free from the twisted mirroring of the myths from east and west requires a long process of reevaluation, subversion and distancing. It also requires careful examination of the power and economic and psychological dynamics that have produced the internalization of the often imagined western gaze. I see *Before the Rain* as a significant contribution to this process of estrangement. Unsettling the comfortable superiority of the "west" as well as the beloved obstinate and angry mysteries of the "Balkans," *Before the Rain* suggests the desirability of alternative positions of subjectivity. Such alternative positions, however, await further articulation in both cultural narratives and in political realities. It is no coincidence that the possibilities of freedom from the power dynamic of gazing in the film are lived by the émigré photographer and a hushed subaltern-like woman. Somewhat of a stranger in both his homeland and his adopted home, the émigré does not occupy either subject position fully. At the bottom of all authority networks, Hana seeks to transcend them.[31] Yet the subject positions outside the dynamic of internalized otherness that these and other characters from the regional chart remain strictly individual.[32] Similar *collective*

peripheral, in our case southeast European, identities post-1989 await successful narration.

Notes

1. See Edward Said (1979), Carrier (1995), Žižek (2000) and Bhabha (1990), Chakrabarty (2000); and for Eastern Europe and the Balkans, see Todorova (1997), Wolff (1994), Bakić-Hayden (1995), Longinović (2002), Bjelić and Savic (2002), Goldsworthy (1998), Iordanova (1998), Kiossev (2002) and Ditchev (2002).
2. Aleko's narrators internalize European high cultural ideal and its values and look at their compatriot Bai Ganyo – still carrying the embarrassing legacy of the Ottoman empire – with disgust for failing to live up to the European standard. For an extended discussion, see Victor Friedman's (2010) introduction to the English translation, Todorova (1997), Kiossev (2002), Daskalov (2001) and Igov (2008).
3. For a Lacanian discussion of this dynamic, see Kiossev.
4. See Manchevski (2000), "Rainmaking" and other interviews.
5. See, for example, Iordanova (1998), Žižek (2000) and Todorova (1997).
6. Incidentally, the only place I see Manchevski indulging in balkanisms in his portrayal of Aleks in London. If in Macedonia Aleks is the viewers' anchor to sanity and normality, in London he behaves as the stereotypical Balkan man who enjoys violating the code of social politeness, who wants to have sex in a cab, who demands that the woman who loves him drop everything and follow him wherever he goes, etc.
7. Manchevski himself brings this point up in an interview: "I went to a French TV broadcast when I went to Paris for the film's opening night; there were there some people who had been in Bosnia, who were photo-reporters, people who were very much like Aleksandar. There was also a French female reporter … who talked about how her adrenalin goes up, how people change when they are going to set off from Paris, …. And the host asked her, "Do you like the war?"… (Kunovski 53, translation mine).
8. Another episode highlights the function of the doctor's character even better. Having just seen Aleks's cousins armed with automatic weapons to avenge Bojan's recent death, Dr. Sašo and Aleks wrestle with the ominous possibility of war.
Aleks: 'Where is UNPROFOR now? [*Kaj se sega UNPROFOR?*]'
Sašo: 'They will come back next week, bury the dead and [there you have it]. [Cheers to] the war. Take some pictures' / *Ќe se vratat idnata nedela, ќe gi zakopaat mrtvite i gotova rabota. Aj na zdravje i vojna! Slikaj malku.*] Note the perceived role of the U.N. forces, who are not only useless but seem to act as officiators – their act of burying the dead functions as the performative

inauguration, of naming the war *as* war. At the same time, the character's use of phrases that one expects to hear in a family celebratory gathering (*Aj na zdravje*, *slikai malku* / 'Cheers, take some pictures') once again highlight the presumed aspect of entertainment that the war in the Balkans has for the West. Manchevski doubles visually his character's sense of the observers' enjoyment by juxtaposing, elsewhere in the film, the image of a U.N. truck with the image of a circling bird – crow, eagle or vulture – allowing one to contemplate their unfortunate similarities. I wish to thank Keith Brown for bringing this image to my attention.

9. "[C]harges of innate Balkan evils not only appear to justify foreign intervention but also serve locally, in a sometimes cynical assumption of political agency, to bolster actions and attitudes that have low status in the now-dominant global cultural hierarchy of value …. So runs the complicit logic of self-abjection" (ix-x, Herzfeld, 2002, *Balkan as Metaphor*).

10. The use of the Beastie Boys' song offers additional commentary on the enjoyment of defiance. We first encounter their "So What'cha Want" in Part One from a transistor or walkman a member of the Macedonian militia is holding (later we recognize the same man as the village idiot); in Part Two, the same tune comes from the walkman of a young woman passing by Anne and Aleks at the cemetery in London; finally, in Part Three, we hear it when Aleks approaches the sheepfold where the gang is holding Zamira. The Beastie Boys belong to a counterculture that aims to position itself *against* the "voice of the Big Other of Western civilization," a counterculture that rebels against the perceived alienation, domination and capital and in so doing searches to identify itself with the Other of Western civilization – the aborigine, the beast and chaos. In the economy of global markets, in hip-hop and rap that which gives young world audiences pleasure, resonates (at least in the film) with something in the militiaman. We are invited to contemplate the peculiar enjoyment which unites Beastie Boys and the militiamen in the film, and I want to propose we should think of that enjoyment in the dynamic of defiance. There is an element of pleasurable defiance in this complicit logic of self-abjection.

11. See, for example, Gladstone (1876), MacGahan (1876), Walker (1988) and Millman (1980) on the history and controversy of the representations of the "Bulgarian massacres" and their political effects. On the abduction of the Missionary Ellen Stone, see Carpenter (2003).

12. With the urge to write oneself as the same, each part of the periphery is also busily carving out differences between itself and its more exotic neighbors, thus creating its own "nesting orientalisms," as described by Bakić-Hayden (1995).

13. In a question and answer session at Yale University, Manchevski explained that the point is to show that others' violence is always incomprehensible to the observers (May 2004).

14. I do not in any way want to suggest that the valorization of community and generosity in poverty over individual acquisition of money arose in response to the Western gaze. Quite to the contrary, as numerous folk tales, songs and proverbs attest, this is a value system that existed

before Romantic nationalism, most certainly a value system that was necessary for the maintenance of life in traditional society. Yet I do want to suggest that, in the story that many of the Balkan *nations* have been telling about themselves since the 19th century, the spiritual superiority over the West figures prominently. Perhaps the most succinct example comes from Desanka Maksimović's poem "Balkanac": "I am not ashamed to be -/as you say -/ a barbarian from the Balkans,/ that zone of filth and turmoil … You first inquire and suspect/ you are distant from your own sons,/ at your table you do not allow/ just any stranger./ You can drink/ without offering anyone/ a glass of wine./ But though our customs are crude,/ we allow all beneath our roof,/ we still greet those we encounter by chance with/ a kiss,/ we carry out feats in the name of hospitality,/ among us each man has/ a whole tribe/ of friends and family" (translation from [http://premaks.tripod.com/Bombing/bomb18.htm], accessed on Jan 12, 2008). Liah Greenfeld, in her *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, interprets the attendant claims to spiritual superiority in the Russian context solely within the context of Nietzsche's *ressentiment*. My goal is to highlight the complexity of this internalized otherness.

15. The episode also highlights two models of masculinity that correspond to the two different ethos – the clean shaven waiter exercising self-control and his bearded guest presumably reacting in response to a perceived offense to mores and honor.

16. As Tomislav Longinović has put it, "[Slovenism] was offered as an escape from the Balkans, towards the promise of Mittleeuropa and 'The serbs' were a threat to Slovene 'European identity' … because they could coerce the Slovenes to remain part of the abject cultural space of 'the Balkans'" (no pagination).

17. The relation of the restaurant owner to the outbreak of the fight in this episode is in fact opposite to the relation Woodward sees between the Western countries and the Yugoslav crisis. In her view, Germany's hasty recognition of Slovenia and Croatia's "nesting orientalist" claims to radical difference from the post-Ottoman south precipitated the violent dissolution.

18. See, for example, Marciniak (2003) and Žižek (2000).

19. See, for example, Tängerstad (2000) and Marciniak (2003).

20. See Susan Woodward (1995), Todorova (1997), Žižek (2000) and Banac (1992).

21. "'You don't know our history,'" he recounts, "would usually follow a news report saying that […] some human rights committee had once more read Serbia a lecture about its misbehaviour in the war zones[…]" 'You don't know our history' was not an encouragement to intensify my studies …. [It] was, above all, a statement of fact (14). Van de Port's account once again highlights the dynamic which, I would argue, motivates such claims to incomprehensibility – from the position of economic power and superiority, the West judges Serbia. Self-mystification then becomes a strategy to rise above humiliation and maintain dignity.

22. Note again that the only viable position for an outsider is perceived to be that of a *sejrdzhiia* – an enjoying observer.
23. I choose the rather clumsy and non-conversational "observe" because it has both meanings of watching and seeing that are present in the interchange between the two.
24. Keeping in mind the gendered aspects and the power dynamic of observation (in traditional patriarchal societies, women are subject to the male gaze but exposing oneself to it and returning it is risky business), it is significant that a female character voices the need for a more nuanced understanding of the implications of gazing. This essay cannot presume to do justice, however, to the complex relation between gender, balkanism and internalized otherness. Such an interrogation should be taken up separately.
25. For a discussion about Aleks's private ritual when he opens an old suitcase containing cigarettes, an old newspaper and an old record from his youth, see Keith Brown.
26. Incidentally, in this refusal, Manchevski's character succeeds in what I see as the anthropologist Mattijs van de Port's failing. In his article "It Takes a Serb to Know a Serb," where he culls the term "obstinate others," Van de Port chooses to accept the truth of his informants that "Western" experiences of history are radically different from Serbian experiences of history ("Blood in the snow. Brains spattered against the wall. The acknowledgement that no diaries can convey the horrors of war …. 'You don't know our history.' 'No. I don't' (16). He concludes that "differences between Serbs and Westerners are for real and unbridgeable at that" (9). Yet his attempt to crack the nut of obstinate otherness fails to recognize that not history itself but the particular ways in which that history has been interpolated in the narrative of national identity and has served to support an array of viable social and individual affects within the structure of Serbian culture can be a key to Serbian and his own Dutch relation to historical experience.
27. Zdrave's actions give some reason for hope: as Aleks dies, Zdrave first grabs his gun and runs to shoot after Zamira, who is peeking behind a rock trying to find out what happens to Aleks. After the first volley of chasing bullets, however, Zdrave drops his arms, his face contorting in the first bursting sobs. The scene suggests, to this reader at least, that Zdrave is suddenly overwhelmed by a realization of meaninglessness and grief. As the rain begins to pour heavily on Aleks's body, Zdrave continues to sob – he has released his grief and allowed it to flow out of him with the rain and has not transformed it into the urge for vengeance. Significantly, he is not among the men looking for Zamira in the monastery the next day.
28. See Tängerstad, p. 179.
29. The "spectral" quality of this part and its focus on the representation of faces has been examined in detail by Čepinčiḱ (1995) and Christie (2000).
30. Personal interview, New York, February 2003.

31. These characters share not only a complex estrangement from the sites of power and production of symbolic identities, but also a Yugoslav past, of its (however imperfect) narratives of living together but also of non-alignment and of the dignity of a (perhaps imagined) place outside the "west" and "east"(*i.e.,* Soviet) identity models. See Brown (1998) and Friedman (2002) for a discussion of the function of the Yugoslav past in the film.

32. See, for example, Mitovski's 2010 *Mission London*.

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