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INCONVERSATION

MACEDONIAN MYTHMAKING: MILČO MANČEVSKI with Conor McGrady & Dario Šolman

by Conor McGrady and Dario Šolman

Milčo Mančevski, photo courtesy of Milčo Mančevski.

Macedonian director Milčo Mančevski is internationally recognized for his films *Before the Rain* (1994), *Dust* (2001),*Shadows* (2007), and *Mothers*(2011). *Before the Rain*, which explores inter-communal tensions in Macedonia through three interlocking narratives, received an Academy Award nomination and 30 awards, including the Golden Lion for Best Film in Venice; Independent Spirit,FIPRESCI, and UNESCO awards; and awards for best film of the year in Argentina, Italy, Sweden, and Turkey. Also a writer and artist, Milčo has published fiction, essays, and op-ed pieces in *New American Writing*, *La Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera*, *Sineast*, *the Guardian*, *Suddeutsche Zeitung*, and *Pravda*. He has also authored a book of fiction, *The Ghost of My Mother,* and released two books of photographs, *Street* (1999) and *Five Drops of Dream* (2010), which accompanied exhibitions of the same works.

Mančevski is currently Head of Directing Studies at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts Graduate Film program. Conor McGrady and Dario Šolman recently spoke with Milčo in Skopje, Macedonia, as he was finishing work on his new film, *Mothers*, in which the relationship between fact and fiction is explored through a complex and innovative narrative structure. Stylistically provocative, *Mothers* challenges standard cinematic convention, beginning as drama and ending as documentary. It premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in September and will have its official launch at the Berlinale 2011 in February.

Rail: Living and working in the U.S., what is it like to return to Skopje as a filmmaker, and how difficult—or easy—is it to make films here as opposed to in the U.S.?

Milčo Mančevski: A lot of the work I did in Macedonia ended up here without me really wanting to come back to shoot here or to make a film set here. It just developed that way. I guess there is something emotional that draws me back. When making *Before the Rain*, I battled with myself for the longest time—whether to set the film in Macedonia or in a nameless country, whether to use the name in the dialogue—mainly because I was sketching a fictional situation, which had nothing to do with the truth of what was happening there then—not that it would be my job to record the facts of what was going on. Now many people say that the film foresaw what happened eight years later—the war in Macedonia in 2001—but I think the war was different.

With *Dust,* we actively searched locations in Turkey, Morocco, Italy, and Greece for a story that would have been set in an unnamed part of the decaying Ottoman Empire, but ended up shooting in Macedonia—not that I minded. *Shadows* was originally set in New York City.

At this point, I feel I belong to both places, New York—not so much theU.S.—and Macedonia, and yet I don't belong to either place, which is perfectly fine with me. The sensibility of the films I like and I make is rooted both in the European and in the American film traditions, even though the grammar of what I do draws more on the language of American film. But I guess the essence of my work is more European, more excited about innovation, more irreverent with the form and structure, in a way more introspective, and that makes it difficult for me to get financed in America, where most of the time

film is business. And it's okay that film is business, as it is so expensive to make a film, but I think Hollywood's going too far. You can have a great, creative, even innovative film, which at the same time makes money. You don't have to imitate in order to be commercially successful. Look at the films which at various points in time were the best-selling films of all time: *The Godfather*, *Jaws*,*Star Wars*, *Titanic*. They were mainly the brainchildren of the directors—even the studios had doubts, turned some of them down, wanted to replace the director, sold off some of the rights out of the fear that the film would not sell. So pitting the commercial and the artistic is crap—it is an excuse for Armani-clad egos to control things, to direct or write vicariously. The industrial, corporate way of doing things too often runs against the grain not only of art, but also of the human spirit and human experience. There is no excuse for allowing the corporate mindset to dictate how we make art.

This is the main reason I work in Europe. I think there are things that are not for sale—the way you can't sell a child. In the same way, you can't sell the creative rights to a work of art. Hollywood is a great place if you want to do a job for hire, for money. I don't need that much, and I find it much more important to work on interesting projects, with decent human beings.

As for Macedonia, it's both easier and more difficult to work here. On one hand, because of my high profile here and because people like my work and my stand on issues, regular folks want to help: we get access, we can move faster, we can get things done. On the other hand, this is an extremely inefficient system; plus I constantly have to deal with jealous politicians and the cultural establishment, which will not forgive international success. Because it drains a lot of time and energy for non-creative things, I don't think I will shoot in Macedonia again. I think that my films are from Macedonia, but not necessarily about Macedonia.

Mothers, a film by Milčo Mančevski. Photo courtesy of Banana Film.

Rail: In terms of the idea of the periphery versus the center, for economic reasons the centers tend to dominate the work of filmmakers and artists. Thus the "periphery" exerts less of a presence. Do you feel that the work of artists and filmmakers in Macedonia is overly influenced by what we consider the centers, in particular the U.S.?

Mančevski: I think that artists here are very strongly influenced by everybody, almost uncritically—so they're not predominantly influenced by the U.S. The taste is excessively conformist. In spite of some good work, what is happening in Macedonia in terms of art is to a great extent the tragedy of the small place, the tragedy of the parochial, an arts community overrun by the petty, the sycophantic, and the untalented, where there is very little critical thought, very little sharp critical feedback that would help you with what you create, that would praise you when your work is worthy of praise and criticize you when it deserves criticism. Unfortunately, most of the criticism is uneducated, and it has a lot to do with personal benefits, corruption, and nepotism, which makes the parochial whirlpool extra strong. Macedonia really is the deep periphery of what is going on in the arts in general and is not even influenced by "a center," like America. It is just influenced by whatever sounds foreign enough and by the personal, rather than by the artistic or social, agenda of the artist or the critic. Which sounds funny when you see all the quasi-
nationalistic posturing.

At the same time, I would like to think that you do not have to be in the center to create great art. I would like to think that it's a matter of hard work, talent, and communication, which is becoming relatively easy now. Most of all, I'd like to think that it's a matter of having an honest approach. If you can do that in a small place, you don't need to be in Berlin or New York. But this is an ideal scenario.

Rail: How do history and politics interact in your work as
a filmmaker?

Mančevski: They are two different things. In politics, I have a strong opinion. I am not sure if you could tell what it is from my work, because I think art is about people and ideas that are bigger than politics. I do see a lot of artists who use politics for personal gain in their work. It helps them position or sell themselves. I subscribe to what Kurt Vonnegut said: when an

artist tries to bring his or her politics into their work, they are bound to create shit. History I'm only interested in indirectly. I'm curious about what people really did, and how they really lived a hundred or a thousand years ago—that's very different from what historians can tell us. I'm interested in re-creating that moment or that environment, the way people interacted, how different those relationships were from what we do today, how people perceived their environment and the meaning of life, what their body language was like, were they smarter or happier than we are today.

Right now I'm doing a commercial where we are recreating the Neolithic period, about 4,000 years ago, and Roman times, and I'm learning things that I didn't know. It's amazing. I'm also interested in confronting clichés, and history and politics are areas that are packed with clichés. It's easier to sell concepts through clichés, so we go through life learning clichés about history.

Rail: To expand on this topic a little further: How do mythology and ideology interact in Macedonia, in terms of its current situation—since its transition from socialism to capitalism almost 20 years ago—and in terms of recent tensions? In a situation where national identity has been reconstructed to a certain extent, mythology must play a significant role. How do you deal with this as a filmmaker?

Mančevski: I find it fascinating. It's a difficult and thankless position, but it's also great to be an artist or a filmmaker at a moment when national identity is being constructed, or reconstructed, or reinforced, because everything is still raw. It becomes an occupational hazard if you are a filmmaker or a storyteller whom a lot of people look up to in a young nation going through transition. Almost everything you talk about in your work is instantly picked up and analyzed. There is a lot of strong feedback and sense of self-examination. Unfortunately, a lot of it is ill-informed and many people try to use the arts, or at least film, as a substitute for psychotherapy or plastic surgery, as in, "How are you showing us to the outside world?"

I am less interested in nation building than in the human condition and human emotions, in general concepts that apply to people everywhere. I try to be a good role model for the young, but I don't think anyone should be telling people what to do.

At the same time it can be interesting—how often can you help shape a national myth? Because I am an irreverent person—a punk, if you wish—I always have this drive to construct and deconstruct at the same time. It comes from being a thinking, critical person, suspicious of grand ideology, careful of not falling for "isms." This is particularly relevant when we're dealing with something that is supposed to be venerated as a myth. So, for example, in *Dust*, I was trying to do both at the same time—construct and deconstruct national myths. Not many artists have had the opportunity and the privilege to do that.

I try to see what it is in my work that could be helpful in terms of the big picture—of the greater good—even though I would never sacrifice an aesthetic or a philosophical concept for the "greater good." My main purpose is to create a good piece, and while doing that I have a dialogue with the work, with the art, and not with the viewer or with the critic. Of course, it's nice when a viewer finds beauty in what you do. It's nice if your work can help one gain or regain a little grain of pride or self-confidence, especially in a small place where it's a national sport to loath yourself.

Rail: What are your thoughts on the age-old debate as to whether cinema is an art form or a commercial enterprise?

Mančevski: I used to claim point blank that film is too much of a bastard to be art. There are also all the practical considerations that make it less of an art. In a lot of films there is too much influence from people who are not creative—the "oxymorons" (creative executives)—to really consider it an art endeavor. Too many films end up being a piece of design rather than art—a moneymaking, somewhat creative undertaking that does not have beauty for its own sake at its core.

More importantly, it's hard for film to be treated as art because by its nature film stifles spontaneity. Money, technology, egos, and armies get in the way, so it's very difficult to really let your impulse out and at least for me, allow my creative charge to make it into the finished film unadulterated. In other words: It takes too long, there is too much planning, it costs too much money, there is too much technology, too many other people, too many non-creative people. All of this stands in the way of discharging the creative impulse into a work of art.

Rail: How do independent film and Hollywood contribute to the overall cultural climate here?

Mančevski: Like everywhere in the world, film, and especially Hollywood, are very influential in shaping people's perceptions. It has tapped into the myths that people need, and keeps feeding off of those myths and back into them—like a giant leech which is stuck to your neck and has become a part of your system.

Hollywood also has fantastic marketing. Independent film is relatively well-known in certain circles in Macedonia, albeit fairly small ones. There was a good festival in Skopje that brought in a lot of great independent films, but it's now taken over by people who wouldn't recognize a roll of independent film if it fell on their head.

There is absolutely nothing outside of mainstream Hollywood in the theaters, even though they take money from Eurimages to screen European films. In a city of close to 700,000 people, there is one theater with two screens, 99 seats each. An entire country of two million people has only three full-time movie houses. There is a television station, Telma, that tries to fill in that vacuum.

And you can buy pirated DVDs that you would not expect to find in a place so swamped with Hollywood junk. You can find *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* and *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, for example. You can find*Save Me* or *My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done* or *Animal Kingdom*. Or*Wendy and Lucy*, a beautiful small film that's obscure even in the States. So it's a little strange to find some of these films here.

But for 99 percent of the people here, there is no independent film.

Rail: To return to your work, in *Dust* you take emblematic Hollywood motifs and relocate them to Macedonia. Can you talk about this strategy?

Mančevski: It felt like it would be fun. Making art should be fun, and then you should pile tons of hard work on top of the fun, and then—if you are lucky—you end up with something worthwhile. Contrast is good and incongruity is good, as long as you find the harmony within. As in Cubism, I like the juxtaposition of two clichés that you'd think don't go together, but as

you start looking into them, you realize that there are a lot of similarities. You discover that the two worlds, Ottoman Macedonia and the Wild West, were not *that* different, and you start deconstructing a bunch of clichés.

As I was looking into this I discovered the case of Albert Sonnichsen, an American from San Francisco who, in 1905, came to Macedonia and joined the local fight against the Ottoman Empire. He went back and wrote a book about it called *Confessions of a Macedonian Bandit*. I discovered this after I wrote the script. You wouldn't think that this would happen. He was like John Reed. There is also the case of Miss Stone, an American missionary from Boston who was kidnapped here in 1901 and held in captivity for six months. Her story made all the front pages. Her companion, who was also captured, gave birth to a baby while in captivity. All three of them were released after a ransom was paid. The birth of Cubism, the death of the Wild West, the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the invention of the airplane, Freud's trip to America—they all happened within several years, almost on top of each other, yet we think of them as far apart. I was trying to work with these juxtapositions, work with the historical and pulp clichés that I grew up with, and through that process examine them, possibly even break some of them, have fun and see how it feels.

When I went to film school I became infected by experimental film, especially structuralist film, and somehow I keep circling back to it. I'm never happy if I just do a straightforward story. This is what was percolating in my head while working on *Dust*. It would be easy to rationalize it, but it wouldn't be fair, as I did not have a real agenda. I never do, I follow an instinct, and I'd like to think that I have a pretty good ear for the truth in what I'm trying to say—the emotional truth, the artistic truth.

Rail: Can you talk about your experimentation with structure and what prompts you to explore such radically different elements of form?

Mančevski: *Mothers* is about the nature of truth, but we deal with this issue through the very structure of the piece, by directly confronting a dramatic segment with a documentary segment in the same film. We as viewers inhale drama and documentary in different ways, and when we are made to inhale the two at the same time, something interesting happens.

At the same time, while making a structuralist or conceptualist piece, it is important that the piece function on an emotional level, not only on a cerebral level. With *Mothers*, I was not interested in narrative devices where one story neatly dovetails into another. I was more interested in a Spartan, austere piece, where the connections are made in the mind of the beholder, and are not necessarily narrative, but rather tonal and perhaps thematic.

I'm also trying to see what happens when you marry something that is austere and structuralist and conceptual to something that is very emotional or almost sentimental. All of this has been done in contemporary art and literature and even in music, but not so much in film and definitely not so much in narrative cinema. So it was sweet and funny how people were talking about how *Before the Rain* was groundbreaking, but this film was doing what has been done in other arts many times. *Dust*, and especially *Mothers*, take this further.

Rail: In *Mothers*, one of the key concerns is of how reality is recorded and manipulated and how myths are established. The film is layered with multiple forms of documentation, from cell phone photos, the sound and film recordings of the documentary crew, family photos, a home video, surveillance footage, news footage, images of television, online news sources, even advertising imagery. Can you talk about the importance of visual documentation within the film?

Mančevski: Because *Mothers* is about the nature of truth, and because I am working a little bit in the structuralist idiom, it was only natural to use various forms of recording, and manipulating, the truth. Film is all about recording and manipulating the recorded, so it was only natural to deal with various forms of recording/documenting. In a sense this is about creating, and re-creating, and manipulating history. One could treat the documentary footage—some real, some fake—the way we'd treat a newspaper clipping in a Rauschenberg painting, or a found object in a Beuys piece. Of course, this is all in service of telling the story and creating the emotion.

Rail: *Mothers* contains multiple incidences of or references to violence and loss. How important is the interplay between communication and distance in the film?

Mančevski: Film is a funny animal. It is like playing chess in another dimension: it offers innumerable options. If you zero in on an element, such as the interplay between communication and distance, there are many ways to deal with it, to underline or to simply suggest it.

The various versions of human interaction—especially warped human interactions, interactions resulting in pain, hurt, and injustice—were one of the themes in *Mothers*. I wanted to suggest the many options, like with the many options of recording reality, but keep them incorporated in the story, keep them simple and subtle. Even the story needed to feel simple: each of the three narratives is free-floating, and find their links only in the head of the viewer on a tonal or thematic level.

I was interested in the ordinariness of evil, and wanted to find *real* cases to support the thesis. All three stories in the film are based on real-life events, but only one is done as a documentary. Yet we learn less and we seem to know less about what happened in the documentary than in the fiction pieces, perhaps because fiction has to make sense. When dealing with all these options while working on a film, I try to keep things intuitive, as a way of playing this multi-dimensional chess.