Don Marshal Interviews Milcho Manchevski

Q: How would you define the term "art film"?

MANCHEVSKI: It's probably impossible to define what an "art film" is. I mean, we can talk about good films, bad films--films we like and films we don't like--but if we're honest, we're probably talking about films that touch our hearts and films that just *don't* touch our hearts. And that's probably the ultimate in judging films. The term itself seems to have been invented by people who needed help in classifying and qualifying films. People who distribute films or people who write about films--or bureaucrats perhaps who are somehow involved in the process of filmmaking. When I sit down to write a script or direct a film, I don't tell myself, this is going to be an art film or this is going to be a commercial film. Of course, there are completely different kinds of films. We can talk about experimental or avant-garde which one could relate to contemporary painting or abstract films or literature. There were even avant-garde "dada" films created during a certain period. If you look at the range, then, on the one hand, you have avant-garde films and what are usually called "art films"; and then, on the other, you have studio films or mainstream films or commercial films. Yet, the term “art film” as such has been used and abused for marketing and other reasons to a point where it has lost any meaning.

I guess I would like to think about it in terms of the filmmaker's honesty. In other words, how much of the film that I'm making really relates to who I am? How much of it relates to what I really want to say, and what comes from my heart or from my thinking about life and about people and the human experience--*and* how much of what I do is actually a calculation of what people would want to see or what people would want to buy?

Q: Is that last part important to you?

MANCHEVSKI: No. No, I really don't think of it in terms of what people want to buy. But in the big picture, I guess if one were trying to be generous to the term "art film," then that would be a film that comes from the heart as opposed to a lot of these films created by the industry--by a committee--created within the studio system, regardless of whether we're talking about a studio system in Hollywood or a "studio system" in Europe, where some filmmakers--and some systems--create films just for

mass consumption, without those films having any link to the heart of the filmmaker, even when masquerading as art films. I guess this would be one way of defining the term "art film." But, ultimately, I think this comes from the need to lump films into files and drawers, and--as a filmmaker--I am that *kind* of filmmaker who is really more interested in the personal expression and the personal experience *while making the film* and thus relating it to more abstract forms of art rather than to entertainment.

Q: At what point in your life did you feel yourself being drawn into cinema as a profession?

MANCHEVSKI: I was always a writer. I feel very good and very comfortable and very happy--*writing*. And I could write when I was four years old--and I was already writing little stories about cowboys and Indians by the time I started school. I remember doing a cross-word puzzle on the first day of school--which is very funny--and then I continued writing and, by the time I was in high school, I started publishing fiction--a short story, a poem--here and there and then I started writing for magazines. Then, at one point, two things happened: I was assigned a film column in a magazine, so I started getting more involved in reading and writing about film. And, at about this same time, I began to realize--and I must say I was encouraged into this realization by a high-school teacher of mine--that there is way too much censorship in newspaper writing. And I actually remember talking to her about this and asking her, "What can I do?" and she said, "Well, you've directed some beautiful plays in high school. Why don't you try being a director?" So this was her idea. And I thought, "Hmmm . . . this is *not* a bad idea . . . ." And this actually happened--this realization--during my senior year in high school, here in Skopje.

At the time there was no film school in Skopje and, even if there had been one, I didn't have the proper connections to be admitted. So--I tried the film school in Lodz, Poland--and I was told to wait. So, during the year I was waiting, I applied to several film schools in the states--and I was accepted--so I ended up going to film school in Illinois--at Carbondale.

Q: And was that a good--and positive--experience?

MANCHEVSKI: While I was there, I was very homesick. I was quite young--only nineteen at the time--so it was quite a culture shock. I had traveled extensively before that, but this was the first time that I was actually *living* away from Skopje. And this experience in Illinois was very different--not only the corn-belt culture and this

university town with a lot of kids from the Chicago suburbs, but also my first encounter with avant-garde cinema--you know, Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, Maya Daren, Kenneth Anger, Bruce Connor, Bruce Baillie, Chick Strand, and so on. It was a combination of all of this--being homesick and encountering a different culture, and encountering avant-garde film; it was quite a shock to the system for me. Yet, I grew by leaps and bounds—both as a person and as a filmmaker.

Q: Can you recall now if there were any directors in particular--or specific films--which sort of helped form you, helped you move in the direction you eventually went?

MANCHEVSKI: A lot of filmmakers, and a lot of writers, and painters, and a lot of music and musicians--a lot of it is probably not even conscious. If you really like a piece of art, or if you have a powerful experience in life, it becomes a part of your system, a part of your gray matter, and it informs the work you do down the line.

And, of course, I can speak of the filmmakers and artists I like. I'm not sure who has more influence if you actually, specifically, look at my work. I recall, for instance, watching ***Rashomon*** on TV when I was very young, and I remember my father telling me, "Check this out. It's good. It's a work of art." And I really didn't quite understand it; I was actually a little bored. There was this peasant walking through the woods, with an axe on his shoulder and there were tracking shots of the axe with the foliage behind. And, at the time I was more into adventure films--Vikings or spaghetti westerns, so this felt like it was really not part of my world. But I *remembered* it! It sunk in. And later, when I was older, I saw ***Rashomon*** and I liked it very much. And I remember liking Hollywood of the 70's--you know, ***One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*** and ***MASH*** and ***They Shoot Horses Don't They***. And I liked Polanski very much--all of his stuff up to ***Tess*** I liked enormously, and I studied it and wrote essays about it. And I thought ***The Tenant*** was a masterpiece. And I was really impressed with the first ***Halloween*** by Carpenter--and how effective it was in manipulating its audience. Or did it come from the gut? And then, I guess like most people, I liked the French New Wave. But I liked the edgier stuff: I really liked Godard, even though it took some getting used to his films. And Milos Forman is one of my heroes. I also liked Fassbinder and Scorsese a great deal--and, later on, got to like Todd Solondz a lot. And I like Robert Rauschenberg--the painter. I can really relate to his work a lot because, on the surface he seems very modern, quirky and edgy, and almost too fashionable--especially at the time. But then you take a look at it, and there's something that touches your soul and you realize there's a lot of old-fashioned aesthetics there--and it's not just flashy; it's actually quite

emotional. I like those two extremes in his work, and I think there's something of the combination of those two extremes in my own work as well--the old-fashioned and emotional versus the avant-garde, the romantic versus the structuralist and conceptualist. Putting those two together is really interesting. I mean, I felt that way when I was doing both ***Before the Rain*** and ***Dust***. There's something very romantic about both films and yet they're both told through a very structuralist perspective.

Q: Now, ***Dust***, I don't think I know. Was that filmed here in Macedonia?

MANCHEVSKI: It was initially produced by Robert Redford, with financing from Miramax. After I delivered the script, Harvey Weinstein reneged on his contractual obligation about how we were going to make the film, so we took it back. It took me six years, but I eventually set it up as an European co-production--a Macedonian, British, Italian, German co-production. It was a difficult one to finance because it was an expensive undertaking for a film that was an odd, innovative piece that took pride in questioning venerated film clichés, especially those concerning film structure. The actors in it were David Wenham, Joseph Fiennes, Adrian Lester, Anne Brochet, Rosemary Murphy, and Nikolina Kujaca. It was a fairly big film--finished in 2001--and it opened the Venice Film Festival. But an interesting and actually strange thing happened with it. It was essentially "assassinated" in Venice: the reception was really hostile and political to an absurd point. People were projecting their own politics upon it, partly because of its high profile, partly because it happened when Macedonia was in the news with the war of 2001 and I had weighed in calling NATO to task for helping create a blowback which caused immense harm to Macedonia, and partly because the film itself is very happy to provoke the lazy viewer. I feel the film was really misread--and part of the criticism was malicious and personal. After that reception, it was basically shut down on the spot, and it got very little distribution. It was a hit in Macedonia, some interesting papers were written about it in Europe, including an academic conference in Leipzig. It did eventually play theatrically in the States; Lion's Gate distributed it and it opened in L.A. and New York briefly. And on TV it played a lot--on Cinemax and the Sundance Channel--and the video's been widely released. 90 or 95% of the film is in English. There are a couple of important scenes--and a few lines here and there--that are in German, Turkish, Macedonian, and also in Albanian and in Greek. And, in the American theatrical release, unfortunately, those parts, for some reason, have not been subtitled in English.

Q: Well, I'll definitely have to track down that film. Now, let's go back to what happened between your schooling at Carbondale, in the U.S., and the filming of ***Before the Rain***.

MANCHEVSKI: After my three years at film school, I came back here to Macedonia, because I had a very interesting project that was just about to take off--a full-length film called ***Moussaka***--which ultimately never happened--because the finances fell through. The older filmmakers here didn't want this "new kid on the block"--and they managed to kill the project. So, I just packed my bags again and moved to New York--exactly 20 years ago. And, for a few years, I did odd jobs--both *in* the industry and outside.

Q: Now, it seems to me that I read that both Warner Brothers and 20th-Century Fox hired you to do films which never happened. Is that right?

MANCHEVSKI: That was later. But while I was in New York, I had ideas for a number of scripts and short films which I wanted to get off the ground, and one of those scripts was called ***Possession***. And even though I had people who wanted to buy the script, they wouldn't let me direct it. I did, however, find a little money, and so I shot he first seven minutes of that film--and, based on those seven minutes, I was offered to make music videos. And I liked music videos when they first appeared, because it felt like they could be little experimental films--you know, little *avant-garde* films sort of like Kenneth Anger and others were doing. But all too quickly they became completely commercial, leaving little room for any creativity. But anyway, I did like the opportunity to do *something* with my craft--and I was hoping that I might have the opportunity of doing things that were more creative.

This was roughly about 1990, and there *was* one company that hired me—Picture Vision--and I did a couple of videos for them. After a year they dropped me. Then I went to a smaller company and was soon bidding, along with a lot of directors, on this very very low-budget video for a song called ***Tennessee*** by a new hip-hop band called Arrested Development The label liked my concept the best--and my passion for the project--because the song *was* beautiful--just fantastic actually--and I really wanted to do it. So I started talking to the band--and we got along well--and we were developing the idea together about doing a video which would address the community—there were children and old folks in it, everyone was together--and would be softer and not the typical "gangster rap." This was

something very opposite of that, there was something very soulful about the video. We used images inspired by black-and-photography of the Depression era and up through the 50's and even the 70's--like the photos of Diane Arbus, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank, and even Garry Winogrand. It took me a long time to convince them that we should shoot the video in black-and-white, but once the video came out, it was extremely successful, it became a Buzz Clip on MTV, it went around the world, and the band exploded. MTV picked it as the best video of its genre for that year, and the Rolling Stone magazine put it on its list of the best 100 music videos ever.

So, after that, I was offered dozens and dozens of music-video shoots, and during 1992 I believe I shot more videos than all the directors at Picture Vision combined--even though the year before they had dropped me because they couldn't get me enough work. Anyway, a year or so later, ***Before the Rain*** happened. After the film came out I was offered a number of studio projects as well as European films--and some of those studio projects were films in development with Warner Bros, Paramount, and Fox.

Q: But you didn't finally do any of those--is that right?

MANCHEVSKI: I started working on a few of them. There were various levels of involvement: for example, I was offered a James Dean bio-pic, written by Israel Horowitz--which was with Warner Bros. It was a beautiful script, but I wasn't convinced enough that anybody would want to go to the movies to see a film about James Dean. And more than that, all along I was wanting to get involved in getting my *own* project, ***Dust***, off the ground--rather than doing a studio project.

On top of that, I was also already involved in the film that came to be called ***Three Kings*** which, at the time, was being called ***Spoils of War***. It was also a really good script with a strong anti-war message which managed to combine a thoughtful message with a genre film which, at the same time, was contemporary. I started developing it with Warner's: we were talking about actors, we held a few meetings, we started budgeting, and I did some extra work on the script. The original plan was to shoot it in Morocco, but then suddenly, for some reason, they suggested Australia. I told them that Australia just wouldn't *look* like Iraq or Kuwait, but they insisted; there were corporate reasons for Warner's wanting to shoot the film in Australia where they had subsidiaries. At that point, I just declined it and said, "No, I cannot make that work. It will look like ***Mad Max*** rather than Iraq!" So I just walked away from the project--at which point they made the film with another

director who also rewrote the script. And I don't know where they finally shot it; I haven't even seen the film. I've seen parts of it, and I know that it wasn't shot in Australia *nor* in Morocco.

Also, around this time, I was involved as well in a script by Joe Eszterhas and that original script--which I really liked--was called ***Human Interest***--or ***Reliable Sources***--but I don't think that has ever been made. And then Eszterhas did a script for a mocumentary which I was interested in, but that didn't work out either. I wanted to make it look really stylish, and they wanted a quickie. While all of this was happening, I was trying to put ***Dust*** together. As I said, it was originally set up with Robert Redford as a producer, and Miramax as a distributor and financier. Early on, I had a fight with Miramax, because they lied to me. There was a real important contractual point that they were reneging on, and I told them I didn't want to work with people who lied to me because, down the line, it would be an even bigger problem. Redford was instrumental in getting it back from Miramax or we would never have gotten it back. While I was trying to set it up elsewhere with various producers and actors, I was also working with studios on projects that had been offered to me.

So--***Before the Rain*** came out in `94/95, and all of this we've been talking about was in the late `90's. Another project that came around during this same time was a remake of ***Dial M for Murder***--and, at the time, it was to be remade with Nicole Kidman, the producer wanted to rush it into production before she started Kubrick's ***Eyes Wide Shut*** with her then-husband Tom Cruise. I felt that the ***Dial M for Murder*** script needed some work, and I also didn't want to prep a difficult film in seven weeks. The producer wanted to go into production before Nicole started Kubrick's film, and, in a way, he was right, because it took them a year-and-a-half to complete ***Eyes Wide Shut***. So I ended up saying, "Sorry then; I'm not going to make it." And I don't think the studios were very happy that I was walking away from all these projects, because they weren't used to directors doing this and especially--in their eyes--not used to "newcomers" walking away like that.

And there was still *another* project I turned my back on: ***From Potter's Field***, at Universal--based on a Patricia Cornwell novel. She had done a couple of rewrites, one of which I had participated in, and then I did still another rewrite myself.

Eventually, I started shooting a film for Fox--***Ravenous***--and we had major conflicts over what the film was going to feel and look like. The studio head at the time Laura Ziskin was a control-freak and wanted to direct vicariously, through somebody else. I guess that's a common practice in Hollywood, but, even for Hollywood, I think she was just too much: controlling casting even down to the non-

speaking parts, instructing you what to shoot and what to reshoot, studying your "dailies," and even controlling who would be heads of the various departments, vetoing the production designer I wanted to work with, rejecting the composer I wanted to work with, even though the studio and she herself admitted that he was really, really good—(it was Zbigniew Preisner who did all the music for the Kieslowski films and was probably one of the very best composers alive). So there was *way* too much control in the hands of people who are essentially not qualified to make a creative piece. Tom Waits was supposed to be in the film and she insulted him until he walked away, so that they could bring in a star from a teen-age horror flick. The studio was trying to gear the film toward teenagers, while I was seeing a darker film, more along the lines of ***Rosemary's Baby*** or ***The Exorcist*** or ***Deliverance***. And I told them that that was where I was going with the film--but I guess that's one of the sports in Hollywood: how to jockey the director into what "we" as "suits"--as "creative executives"--want to do. And I just don't believe in the infallibility of the "creative executives"--a label which is itself an oxymoron--sort of like "military intelligence"!

I created thousands of storyboard drawings, gathered a couple of thousands of pages of research, Fox was the only studio that still had an operating research library and the people there were happy someone wanted their services—they got me tons of material about the Wild West, the Donner Party, the Native American customs and languages, Sierra Nevada… yet the head of production at Fox told me: "Why are you bothering with all this? You are making a film about people eating other people."

So then, after months of very rocky development and pre-production and casting (during which I managed to bring into the project Robert Carlyle, Guy Pierce, Jeffrey Jones, Jeremy Davies, and Neal McDonough), and then after two weeks of actually shooting, I was fired by Fox. I felt I was in good company because, years before, Fox had fired Kurosawa--from ***Tora, Tora, Tora***! When I left, some of the crew and some of the heads of departments also walked away--the director of photography, the editor--and even some of the actors wanted to leave because they had come onboard because of the script and because of myself, but then they were threatened with lawsuits. The guy who had directed ***Home Alone III*** was brought in to direct and there was mutiny until, eventually, he too was sent home, and Antonia Bird finished the film.

Q: If I were a young would-be film-maker and heard all of that, I'm afraid I'd already be considering going into another--and less frustrating--profession! But you seem to

have been a rather positive survivor!

Now you've mentioned doing ***Before the Rain***, but you haven't talked about how that got completed. Where did the money come from for that film? And were you living back here in Yugoslavia--and Macedonia, specifically--at that time?

MANCHEVSKI: No. I had various projects I was trying to get off the ground, and I was living in New York--feeling like a New Yorker--and not even thinking of Macedonia. In fact, I wasn't really in touch and hadn't even come back here to visit for six years. Then my aunt who raised me--since both of my parents died when I was a child--she got ill and I came back to visit her. During that brief visit, I sensed that something was about to happen--here in Yugoslavia. So, with that impression in my mind that something was cooking here, so to speak, I went back to New York, and found myself writing this little six-page outline--which was a kind of exercise, really--on that feeling. I wanted to make it very simple--almost like a short film--and then another short film--and still *another* short film. And it the idea was that it was supposed to feel simple at first—three little films--but it was one of those cases where, when you stepped back, you realized that they were something much more complex than just three short films.

I just sat on it: I didn't think anyone would be interested in spending money on it because I just didn't feel it was commercial enough. However, when someone advised me to send it to England, I did end up sending it to a production company called Aim--but they turned it down. Then I sent it to New Line, and *they* turned it down as well; so I sent it to Macedonian TV and they never responded. ZDF**,** the German TV station, also turned it down. But British Screen liked it--and they commissioned the script. So--I did write the script and, at that point, it was obvious that British Screen was going to be behind the project, and Simon Perry--who was head of British Screen at the time--basically became the guardian angel who got this film made. He put in the first money *and* the last money. Aim Productions came back as if they had not turned down the very same film. Channel 4 was going to be one of the partners, but they pulled out--in the middle of the production--because they thought we were never going to finish the film. The production was a mess, management was poor, so we were late. The director of photography found the whole enterprise too difficult, so he just left after two weeks. The bond company sent the producers home and threatened to fire me, even though I had nothing to do with the delays, and they were talking to the First A.D. about completing the film herself.

Q: And *was* it a long time getting done?

MANCHEVSKI: No, no--everything actually happened in an instant. It just took a long time for the idea to gestate--but then once I wrote it—and it took me something like three weeks to write it--I think British Screen okayed it within a couple of days, and then Polygram France and a Macedonian production company came onboard. All of this was in March--and by September we were already shooting--here in Macedonia--so I think it was really very fast.

Q: I noticed that your cast was rather international--with Katrin Cartlidge from England, Gregoire Colin from France, Rade Serbedzija from here, I imagine--

MANCHEVSKI: Yes--he was Serbian, but from Croatia.

Q: How did you come up with that particular cast?

MANCHEVSKI: Well, I *love* casting, and it was very specific and very precise and I'm basically just intuitive: when someone's good, they're just *good*--regardless of where they're from. And I *love* actors--and feel very paternal towards them even when they're forty years older than me, because they're giving the directors so much trust. And we have to pay them back by being so respectful and good to them.

So--I had a casting director in London and another one in Macedonia, and we just talked a lot, and I looked at a lot of tapes, and finally chose the best person for the part--and it just happened that the best people were from various different countries.

Q: I read a few years ago that Katrin Cartlidge had died. I think she was barely 40; do you know what she died of?

MANCHEVSKI: I am not sure. It was very sudden, and really sad, because she was not only a great actress, but also just a fantastic person--a beautiful, beautiful person.

Q: Such a tragic loss. And Rade Serbedzija: do you know what *he* is doing these days?

MANCHEVSKI: He's in L.A. now, I believe. I think he's been in some studio films, some international films--in Italy, in New Zealand--I think he's doing well.

Q: How did it feel, as a young film-maker with your first film, to have not only shared The Golden Lion award in Venice, but also been nominated for an Oscar and a Golden Globe award, in addition to winning, evidently, about 30 other international awards?

MANCHEVSKI: Well, the feelings have been complex--but the overall feeling, I guess, has been similar to having been hit by a train! I mean, on the one hand, I was surprised, but then, on the other hand, I felt completely vindicated. Going to the university at Carbondale in the U. S. was not easy--especially for a boy from Skopje, Macedonia--and then having my project, ***Moussaka***, almost get off the ground and then seeing it strangled for no good reason, and realizing you'd wasted three years of your life--that was hard. And then, spending another ten years doing all kinds of odd jobs and film work in New York--and getting your scripts rejected even before they were read--was also hard.

The making of ***Before the Rain*** itself was incredibly difficult, because there were very few people who believed in the film. The producers themselves didn't believe in the film *at all*, and, as I said, at Aim Productions, Inc., the producers Cat Villiers and Sam Taylor of Aim Productions turned down the project initially, but then, once it was financed, they came back and ended up producing the film. The other producers--Cedomir Kolar and Judy Counihan--continued to think the film was just not good. In fact, I have a letter from Kolar saying, "This film is not even good enough for a provincial French festival." Two weeks later the film was accepted to Venice and won the grand prize, plus nine other awards!

The production itself had had a lot of problems. To cite just one example, the camera was half a week late for the first day of principal photography. Now, that wasn't just a prop that didn't arrive, that was the *camera*--so, instantly, before we could even start shooting, we were over-budget. The camera usually arrives a week earlier for tests, this one was late for the start of principal photography. The pressure was always on me to throw out scenes, mutilate the script--just to satisfy the shooting schedule. They even threw scenes out without telling, simply removed them from the shooting schedule. I didn't allow that to happen. I quit the film--in protest—until they re-instated the scenes.

So, going back to your question about how I felt about all the awards we won and all the people who loved the film, yes, I was surprised, but I felt really vindicated because of the incredibly difficult process of *making* the film. And the film *was* good--and it was successful--but most importantly, it touched a lot of people. It was very heart-warming to see people walking out of the film, the look on their faces

revealing that they were emotional about it, tears literally streaming down their faces. And that's the nice thing: knowing that your art has established some sort of communication with the world. And sure, you can say that even *that* is not the ultimate criteria as to whether a work of art is good or not--and that is true. But it was good to see that, nevertheless. It was a long time coming, and so it was nice to feel that what I had done was good.

Q: You know, all the time we've been talking, I've been wanting to ask you *where* and *when* you learned English. You're incredible.

MANCHEVSKI: Thank you. Most of it I learned when I was in school--here in Macedonia. From the sixth grade on, we had to study a foreign language. Then I moved to Carbondale and realized that it was not enough, that I had much more to learn.

Q: Well, your English is *remarkable*.

MANCHEVSKI: Part of that may come from the fact that words have always been incredibly important to me--and I *love* languages--and I love translating. I used to work as a court interpreter in New York, by the way. And I *never* wanted to just *speak* the language; I wanted to *enjoy* the language and *own* the language. So that was part of it--and another part was that I moved to the States at a relatively early age. But the first few years were very frustrating, because, at that point, I had not really mastered the language well enough, so people didn't understand everything I wanted to say, and the accent was also problematic. But now, there are things that I write better in English than in Macedonian. The script for ***Dust***, for example, I wrote in English. I am more precise in English.

Q: Tell me, are you planning a new film now?

MANCHEVSKI: Yes, I am working on another film--and it's still in the early stages. It's called ***Bones***.

Q: Nice . . . . Rain, dust, bones . . .

MANCHEVSKI: Yes--I do like basic things, elementary things--simple things you can't reduce to anything more basic.

Q: And are things working out as far as financing goes?

MANCHEVSKI: Actually--it's pretty good. It's a European co-production again--for the third time--and there are enough interested parties who want to be a part of it. So I'm writing the script and, in fact, just finished the first draft today--and will start the second draft tomorrow--*[he laughs]*--so it *is* coming along really well.

Q: Which part of film-making to you enjoy most? I know you said you really like casting--

MANCHEVSKI: There are actually three parts that I enjoy very much: the writing, the casting, and the editing. The shooting and the pre-production I don't enjoy very much, but it's the work *after* the film is completely finished that I enjoy the least, probably--when you're sort of shepherding the film. I'm talking about presenting it and going to festivals--which is not really part of the *making* of the film, but it is part of the process--part of the job. I also hate the financing, development. I actually like the parts of the film that you do almost alone--like writing and editing. The casting I like because I do really enjoy working with actors.

Q: Speaking of writing, how did you come up with the unusual structure for ***Before the Rain***? Was it that you had three ideas, three stories, and you just decided to interweave them and use them all in a kind of circular way?

MANCHEVSKI: No, they were always going to be interwoven. They only work as one whole. I think it came from my love for the other arts--for painting, structuralist arts, and avant-garde cinema--and my desire to do something fairly original with structure. I had done performances with a group called "1A.M."--which is basically just myself--and these were bits of performance art. And then I did a little booklet called "The Ghost of My Mother"--which is also basically a structuralist piece of art. And I took this into film-making as well--and even made some structuralist experimental films, conceptual films, in film school and right after. So this was sort of a marriage of narrative film with structuralist and conceptualist art. And that's where it came from, but, at the same time, I wanted it to be emotional, even sentimental and romantic, and to be very heart-felt, so it's not just cold structuralist art. And other than that, I was just always being playful--playing with the story, and finding an interesting way to tell the story, and taking the audience along on a ride where we go through this certain story and then, in the end, we see the same story from a different perspective. And that was the fun of it. And when you see ***Dust***, you'll see

that it does the same, but in a different way: in a more playful yet more difficult way. And it goes to more extremes--and takes more liberties. It's funnier--yet it's more violent and it jumps around in time and place.

Q: I see. And how do you feel about where cinema is going today--in general?

MANCHEVSKI: Well, let's say that I haven't been seeing many great works of art. I mean, I haven't seen great films where I would say, "Damn! This really blew me away!" And that's the only criteria I go by. I don't want to talk about movements and manifestos, etc., but it just feels to me like there were periods when the field was more "dense" with great films and authors. There was a time, you know, in the 70's, when there were great studio films, and yet, at the same time, you had Bergman, and you had Fellini, and you had Antonioni---. There were interesting films being *created*.

I mean, yes--there are some good films out there and there is even an occasional film that excites you, but there are very few *innovative films and film-makers*. And part of this is due to the corporate frame of mind--not only the corporate structure, but the whole corporate *way of thinking* has taken over film-making. You know, there are a few exciting and interesting films here and there--like Todd Solondz's ***Happiness***--and that's it.

Q: How do *you* feel about the work of Tarkovsky, for example, and the films of Bela Tarr-?

MANCHEVSKI: I don't know enough about Bela Tarr--but Tarkovsky I like. Also Kieslowski. His opus was so suddenly and unfortunately cut short when it seems as if he would have had so much to offer. I mean, ***The Decalogue*** is like the Sistine Chapel of film-making. Of course, every great film-maker undoubtedly has his--or her--ups and downs, but I just don't see any film-makers *today* turning out films that are constantly great the way it seems to have been at various periods in the past. Consequently, I just don't go to the movies much these days. I go to the art galleries--and I'd rather buy a recording or read a book or try to catch an NBA game: at least there you don't know how it's going to end.

Q: True! You know, I'm certainly aware that you *like* art, but have you had any training in drawing or painting at all?

MANCHEVSKI: No, not really--although I did take art courses at Carbondale. I had a great

teacher--and I only took two of her classes--but it was beautiful. And I did study art history here in Skopje--but only briefly.

Q: I was thinking about some of the film directors we've mentioned--Fellini, Kurosawa--and Satyajit Ray--they were all artists as well as film-makers . . . and I think that shows in their films. I'm also thinking that Antonioni was also an artist; as I recall, I went to one of his exhibits in Venice once.

MANCHEVSKI: And sometimes, you know, it can be the other way around. I started making films first, and *then* I started doing performance pieces, and then a photo exhibition and a book of photographs.

Q: I see . . . and that's the very thing that Kiarostami seems to be doing now. I just saw a wonderful exhibit of his--all stunning black and white photography of dark trunks and branches of trees in the snow--at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. And the exhibition also included a terrific installation of what appeared to be trunks of real trees--yet turned out to be exquisitely sharp and detailed photographs of tree bark arranged seamlessly on round pillars.

MANCHEVSKI: You know, sometimes you want to do something--all by yourself--that just doesn't require *explaining* what you want to do, nor having a lot of people involved, nor requiring great amounts of money, nor even technology. I'm actually jealous of painters and poets. You do your own thing--and it's done! It's finished, in fact, whether you even show it to anyone!

You know, we were talking earlier about the state of films today--and I wanted to say that, yes, there *is* room for big commercial blockbusters--room for a big fun roller-coaster ride. *But*--the problem is that these films are killing anything creative--especially in smaller films, films from the heart, films that are more personal, more innovative. I have nothing against the popular James-Bond-type flick--as long as it doesn't suffocate the Todd-Solondz flick--but, in a way, that *is* what's happening. And all the quote/unquote "art-house films" are also being homogenized--and a powerhouse like Miramax carries a lot of the responsibility for doing that. They have taken the art-house genre and tried to turn it into an assembly-line-type movie as well, in order to make money instead of just respecting the individuality of each film--and helping them find an audience—and making money in the process.