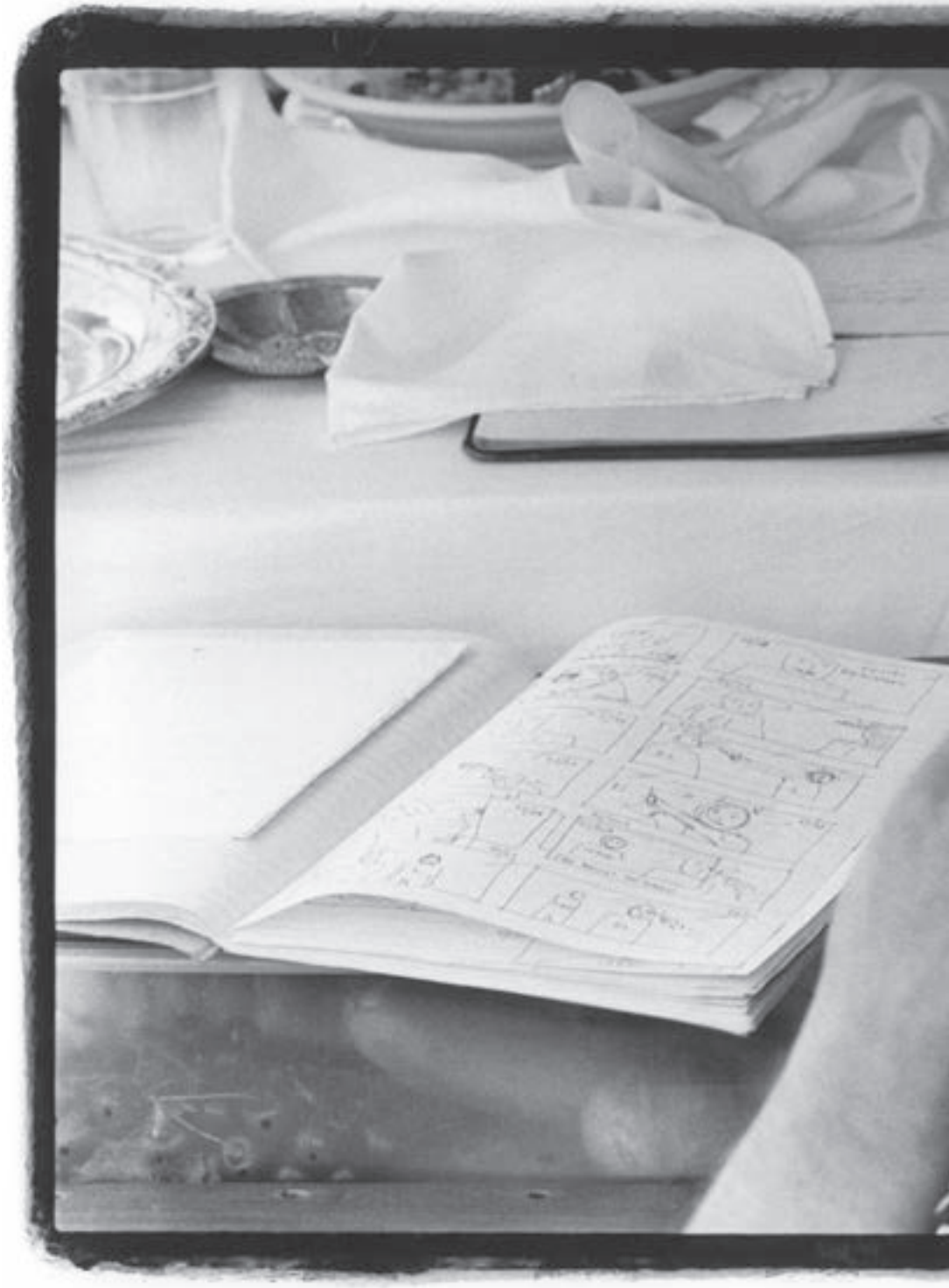
Milcho Manchevski

ESSAYS



Why I Like Writing and Hate Directing:

Confessions of a Recovering Writer-Director

I don't really hate directing. But I want to share a few thoughts and personal experiences which – I would hope – might shed a bit of light on how I go about making films. It would be great if any of it were useful in your research on how some writer-directors work.

I'll try to focus on the give-and-take between the writer and the director, highlighting the tension and synergy when the two tasks are performed by one artist.

1.

People usually chuckle when I say that I became a film director in order to make sure a bad director does not ruin my screenplay. It's a joke, but as with many jokes, there is some truth to it.

However, deciding to start directing was not purely self-defense or – script-defense. The decision also involved offensive-minded plays, chief among them the desire to engage in creating works of syncretic art – film.

Film employs tools developed or derived by other art forms (visuals, drama, music, words), as well as uniquely cinematic modes of rendering (such as film editing). Still, it seems self-evident that – at least as far as the conventional narrative film is concerned – the centerpiece of any individual film is the story.

I don't mean the plot. I mean the story.

People like stories, they like hearing and telling them. Why? Why do humans like stories? Why do we need them?

Is it because hearing and telling stories brings us closer to other people? Or is it because we like hearing how other people (even if they are invented) behave? Do we like learning how gods, or movie stars, or neighbors, or geniuses behave? Do we then learn from those stories how to behave ourselves? Or do we learn answers to important questions from stories? Answers such as – is love worth it?, or what is left behind when we are gone?, or is sacrifice a good idea?, or does good always triumph over evil?, or does the strong guy always get the girl?, or should I be pretty and faithful if I want my prince on the white horse…? Do we like the fact that stories are better ordered than our lives?; our belief in cosmic or poetic justice is reinforced, as most stories have happy or satisfying, cathartic endings. Or do we simply like the experiences we get out of hearing stories which attempt to parallel real experiences – except we don't have to suffer the real consequences as this is *only* a story.

Really – is storytelling and storyhearing a form of human interaction on the par with the intercourse? Why are many of us addicted to soaps, or jokes, or history, or memoirs, or gossip, or movies….?

Whatever the reason, fondness for stories cuts across generations and cultures.

Are we hard-wired to need stories? Isn't pretend play in earliest childhood an early way of telling stories? I've heard people find stories in Jackson Pollock's squirts and dribbles or in Mike Rothko's soft squares and rectangles. (Personally, I love Rothko and admire Pollock, but I see them as pure non-narrative form, like music. Which doesn't make them any less enjoyable and profound. On the contrary.)

2.

As a film director, it is my job to tell a story.

I don't think that directing narrative film is about the visuals or the fancy shots or even about good scenes that stick in the mind of a critic. It is the director's job to truly, deeply understand the screenplay – and I don't mean only the plot or the characters – I mean the meaning, the themes, the connections to our experience and even to our subconscious that go beyond the pure mechanics of the plot. The good director gets to the essence of the story, then makes sure this essence is communicated, amplified, shaped and defined by all cinematic means at his or her disposal: casting, performance, blocking, framing, pacing, color, music, tone, sound… they all work towards one goal.

Towards telling a story well.

So, the director tells a story, but he or she is not the one who puts it on paper. The director is not the originator. The big bang has already taken place by the time there is a director on board. It has taken place months or years earlier at the humble keyboard of the writer. (Of course, the big bang could be a big whimper if there is no powerful medium to amplify the bang.)

3.

I am a writer-director. I tell my students that while I write, I – the writer – don't let near me the other part of me that is the director.

I want to protect the freedom of the writer, I want to be free to fool around, and that is why I need to avoid Milcho the director. He always worries. He worries about how to bring things in front of the camera, whether we can find an actor who can deliver such a difficult role, how to convey the foreboding feeling while keeping the pacing brisk, how to shoot a convincing battle scene on the inadequate budget, how to get the crew to the best-looking locations… Milcho the director is much more responsible, restrained and concerned than Milcho the writer.

In other words, while I write a screenplay, I try to stay with the writing. I try to do the things writers do, and I avoid thinking of things directors do (such as casting, visualizing, blocking or thinking about music).

As a writer, I try to balance things between the fun of creation and the requirements of the piece I am writing. I am not talking about the practical requirements. I am talking about the requirements that stem from the responsibility the artist has to his or her work. I don't think the artist has a dialogue with the audience or with the film critics or historians – he or she has a dialogue only with the work of art itself. The audience can always be bribed, something well illustrated by the success of the formulaic blockbusters. The critic or the historian can be bribed too, as illustrated by the art-house genre or the Sundance genre or the film-from-an-exotic-country-at-a-major-festival genre. In other words, working within the expectations of the viewers is a way of bribing them.

(On a related subject, I must quote the wise man who described the relationship between the artist and the art critic as similar to the relationship between the donkey and the zoologist.)

While I write, I simply write. I keep the dialogue with the work itself going, and I try to have fun. I often start with a feeling or with a formal concept, then move on to the plot. Creating the plot is easy, something I've learned from the stories I've loved all my life: comic books, serious books, historical research, good jokes, folk tales, other films….

I write as if writing for another director, someone competent who will understand and appreciate the screenplay for its plot, characters, themes and depth, another director who does not need too many words or details in the screenplay, but who will occasionally appreciate an incisive sketch of the proposed visuals, or a fun twist of phrase in stage direction. Someone who will further develop the written word into a full-blown film.

I focus on:
. the plot (which is the skeleton I hang everything else on);
. the people in the film (also known as characters, who are sometimes versions of people I know in real life: twisted, re-imagined, combined, complicated or simplified);
. the dialogue (keeping it fat-free, while aiming to have the characters speak, rather than sound as if they were trying to deliver plot points or suggest emotions on behalf of the filmmaker),
. but most of all, I take great pleasure in the wonderful surprises that can happen only when creating art from scratch, when writing or painting or composing…. When imagining and inventing. I try to enjoy the great sense of freedom that comes with creating from scratch.

These irreverent surprises are why I write.

Even though I treat the screenplay like a game of chess, I sometimes do not have a rational explanation, no good reason (nor rhyme) for the way things go in my writing. The overall structure is there, and I stick to its common sense diligently, but on the ground – where it matters – I follow my nose, fancying myself a prairie hunter. Even though perfectly sharp and sober, I sometimes act as if drunk and dare to take a wrong turn. I try to listen to the story the way one listens to jazz: "This twist *feels* right, that one just does not." My criteria are sharp and precise (to me at least), but by no means *rational*. Often the rational explanation is not obvious at first. Sometimes it never is.

In other words, if something feels right, I will put it in the screenplay, but I won't necessarily have a good rational explanation as to why. It will just *feel* right. Still – and I want to underline this – it must feel right, it cannot be haphazardly thrown in, it should not be driven by exhibitionism or lack of discipline or – even worse – laziness, or – heaven forbid – narcissism.

As a matter of fact, the answer to the *why* question must be rock solid – it just does not have to be a *rational* rock solid answer.

I play in the sandbox with my keyboard, but I am aware that I am now a responsible adult.

(With this issue of intuition vs. the rational in making films, one could argue that experience in telling and hearing stories can make you internalize the rational, so then it comes out as intuition.)

At the beginning of the process there is the bread-and-butter of the script, the humble, but strong skeleton upon which we will hang the flesh, nerves and handsome face of the screenplay – the plot. Its gallop toward an emotionally satisfying conclusion is driven by common sense, but not by the need to have rational clarity.

This is one of the disagreements I have with the Hollywood script doctors. We do not have to understand everything in the script to like it. I've seen many films that I fully understood, but I was still sorry that I wasted two hours of my life. I've also seen films that I do not understand to this day, but the thought of them fills me with joy. (I guess I prefer the script witch doctors to the Hollywood script doctors.)

Then, once Milcho the writer has completed the final draft, he delivers it to Milcho the director. The director in me usually accepts the script. He doesn't need many meetings, pitches or rewrites.

Then Milcho the director fires Milcho the writer.

4.

Let me repeat – I don't really hate directing. After all, directing is when you take the story to another level, add fantastic new dimensions. You are creating or re-creating worlds and landscapes, especially mind landscapes.

When I – as director – sit down to do the director's work – casting, storyboarding and blocking, location scouting, acting rehearsals – that is when I begin to get into the script, analyze, dissect, and expand upon the themes and tone of the screenplay. This is when I begin to understand some of the surprises the writer in me had put in the script.
However, I dare not change things on paper, except for details that help clarify and refocus the ideas, themes, characters and plot.

When making directorial decisions on things that seem unrelated to the story – such as casting choices, or visual direction (the blocking, the mood, the colors, the lighting, the lenses) – I often get back to what the film is about. What is it that the writer wanted to say, as my grade-school teacher would put it?

For example: let's say that we – the writer, the director, the heads of departments, the actors, the people I test the film on telling them the story or asking them to read the screenplay – have somehow decided that the film we are making is about how optimism and warmth and the will to live and to love triumph in the face of obstacles, mental problems and selfish society; in the casting sessions I will prefer the actress who

offers this kind of energy, and I would encourage the actresses who approach the character from a darker perspective to give the character a heart of inextinguishable belief that things can be good in spite of everything.

I will make decisions guided by the discovery of what the film/the script is really about. Of course, not all decisions are dictated by the big picture, but the important ones should be. The big picture should be hidden in the detail. The god is in the detail. It is up to the good director to decide which detail is hiding god in its nucleus, and which detail is simply detail.

Early on, I analyze and discuss the intentions of the screenplay with the production designer. We come up with visual expansion on the screenplay, while at the same time I create the storyboard and discuss the approach with the director of photography.

Regardless of how well-written a screenplay is, the characters are incomplete until the actors and the director put their fingerprints all over them, internalizing and then spitting them out. I believe that a good actor will know more about his or her character than the writer or director.

I continue with this process of dissecting the screenplay and putting together the outlines of the film through pre-production. If there are changes in the script at any time during pre-production, we put them on paper, and distribute them to everybody. For example, while rehearsing with the actors, there is always a continuity person present, and she will amend the script.

And on towards the task of actually shooting the film as closely to the script as possible.

5.

Everything I said might sound as if I have a well-defined way of writing and then translating the written word into a film. It is only partly true. My experiences have been all over the map. Thank god.

For example:

I toyed with the five-page synopsis for Before the Rain for about a year and a half before I felt ready to write the screenplay. Then, once I sat down, it took me about two weeks to write the first draft. What you see in the finished film is basically what was in that first draft. In the meantime, in development and while we were prepping, Channel 4 asked for a number of changes which had mainly to do with script doctoring by the book. I fought them, but consented to some. When Channel 4 pulled out of the film two weeks into production, thinking we would never finish the film, I promptly threw out the changes they demanded. Once we started shooting, I stuck to the script as to a gospel, even resigning for 12 hours when I realized that the producers – without telling me – had removed several small scenes from the shooting schedule in order to save time. (They reinstated the missing scenes.)

On *Dust*, by contrast, I did many drafts, and the script really came together only when I rewrote it at one point from scratch during the long financing and development process. At that point, I simplified it and trimmed it by more than 20 pages. We did extensive historical research as half of the film was set in the Ottoman Empire and the American Wild West. Our bibliographical list consisted of more than 160 entries.

All of this detail and the ambition of the film guided the director in me to a lot of detail in the finished film. This contributed texture to the tissue of the film, but was contrasting the lean nature of the text.

I was also hired to make a film for 20th Century Fox, *Ravenous*. It was written by a young Hollywood writer and it held the potential of a dark vampire-themed film about cannibalism in the snow-covered mountains of the Wild West. I saw it as a dark tale along the lines of *Rosemary's Baby* or *Fearless Vampire Killers*. The studio saw it as *Scream 5*. Shortly before we were scheduled to start filming, the studio head flew to London from Los Angeles; the writer and a creative executive came with her. The producer and I were summoned from Prague where we were prepping the film. Over a 20-hour session at a nice London hotel we went through the script line by line and the studio head changed a number of things before we went into production. The thing I missed the most after the surgery was a surreal adrenaline-fueled cannibal chase scene in the snow which saved the studio some money, but left a gaping hole in the middle of the story. Predictably, *Scream 5* won and *Rosemary's Baby* meets *Fearless Vampire Killers* lost, and I was soon off the project.

On *Three to Kill* I had the opposite task – I was writing a script for another director. I was adopting a noir book by the French writer Jean-Patrick Manchette for a young Italian director. The book had previously been made into a film with Alain Delon, but I had not seen it and insisted on not seeing it. The book was lean and mean, to the point, and verb-driven. It was easy to turn it into a screenplay. What was more demanding was trying to discern what the first-time director wanted, what would excite him and what would highlight his strengths.

6.

Allow me now to zero in in greater detail on three other examples from my writing-dash-directing experience, which should better illustrate my working process.

In my film *Before the Rain*, there is a sequence consisting of three scenes featuring Aleksandar, the protagonist, and his extended family and friends: (1) feast, (2) wedding and (3) bedroom.

Aleksandar has just returned from London to his remote village in the Macedonian mountains, and the family throws a feast for him. His cousins and aunt have gathered around a table, drinks and food keep coming, people chat and joke. It is a scene of warmth with a whiff of threat hanging in the air. The overall feeling is that of familial comfort. In the screenplay, this first scene of the sequence – the feast – peters out, ending on a mild joke. Then the merry family hears the heavy sound of drums and music approaching – a wedding party.

Next – in the second scene – we see the initial group observing the village wedding from a little knoll. A majestic wide shot of the village and the river of people cascading down its steep streets resembles an old painting. The bride in heavy traditional costume is riding a horse, guests dance and wave a flag as the drummer and musicians play syncopated folk music. The portrayal of an ancient ritual helps establish the context and the contrast. A few lines of drunken dialogue from

the group observing follow, one of the characters falls of a chair. End of scene.
Then a hard cut takes us to Aleksandar's bedroom. He is hung-over and an old flame comes to pay him a visit. Scene three.

That was what the writer in me wrote.

However, the director in me was not entirely satisfied. I didn't want to be rude to the writer, but it was not working, really. Yes, the necessary information was delivered, the relationships within the family and the community were established. The characters were sketched out for further development. The tone of this new portion of the film was set up.

But, the inner dynamics of the sequence were creaky. We were already almost two thirds into the film and languid introductions would be counterproductive. We needed to be thrusting the action along at the same time as we were introducing new characters (two thirds into the film) and establishing new relationships and action. In addition, we were recently coming off a montage sequence that got us from London to the remote village, and now needed to get going.

Of the three scenes which constituted this family sequence, I felt that the problem was with the first two. They were slowing us down, and we couldn't afford that. Yet, we needed the information and the tone that the feast scene provides, as well as the wider context provided by the wedding scene. There was also the added bonus of serious production value in the wedding scene – beautiful tableaux, wide shots, dozens and dozens of extras, exotic costume, fascinating music…

I did two things to try solve the problem. One of them I seldom do, but the other one I sometimes employ, even though not extensively.

I made a change to the script on the spot, while filming. That is the thing I very seldom do. Not that the script is sacred, but by the time I start filming, I usually have gone through several drafts, an extensive analysis while storyboarding and scouting, and weeks of rehearsal. All the changes that I may feel are necessary would have already been implemented.

This change to the script while filming involved the end of the feast scene. I felt that as written it was ending with a whimper. I asked for a few moments to think, something the director was not supposed to do on this film, considering how tight the schedule was. I decided to add a little coda. The family has been eating and drinking for some time when – according to this change – a white-bearded grandpa says in an improvised non-sequitor: "C'mon, Alex, take a picture of us." So, Aleksandar – who is a Pulitzer-winning photo-journalist – sets the camera on automatic and runs to join his family for a group portrait. As they face the camera with smiles, a fly lands on his forehead. He smacks it dead at the very moment the shutter clicks and he is posterized with the hand on his forehead and a silly grin on his face. Everyone laughs and we have one of the iconic moments of *Before the Rain*[1], a still that ended up accompanying many newspaper articles about the film, and at least one about the Balkans in general.

1 I riffed on this moment in my next film, Dust. An Ottoman major is having a photo taken. He and his soldiers are posing with the severed head of a local rebel, when a fly disturbs the major. He slaps it at the very moment that the photo is taken. His sudden movement causes the head he's holding in the other hand to exit the frame of the photograph. History registers the mundane and misses the historic.

The scene ended with what it was about – the family, but it also ended on a completely unexpected, humorous note. This coda made the scene more human, and it also provided a micro-crescendo which set the table for a hard transition to the next scene.

The second thing I did in trying to make the sequence work better is something I sometimes do – I changed things in the cutting room. This is not the infamous "We'll fix it in post." It's rather a re-write.

I often tell my students: The director who does not exercise the possibility of refocusing, recalibrating or outright reworking the story in the editing room is passing on a mighty storytelling tool.

What you have on film or on your hard drive as you begin the editing process is always different from what you had on paper. That's the nature of the medium. It is your duty as a director to assess what you have in the can, to see the new strengths and weaknesses of the material you have in the can and to find the best way to exploit the former and underplay the latter.

Like it or not, the editing room is where you write the final draft of the film.

So, I killed the wedding scene. It wasn't adding enough to the film to justify eating up valuable time so late in the game. The buildup was too slow. And as for the production value and the ritual? Most of it I threw away, but not all of it. I moved several shots – the beautiful wide shot of the village with the many extras, and a couple medium shots of the backlit drummer and musicians – to an entirely different place in the film. We moved it to the moment after Aleksander has decided to take action and is on his way to the sheepfold. He hears the distant sound of drums. I actually used a casual off-screen glance by the actor, added music a couple of seconds before he looks off screen and then cut to the few wedding shots, as if they are his POV from a hilltop down at the wedding in the village.

This gave the moment a different meaning. The lively wedding was not only establishing the social context, but it was now being contrasted with the tense action unfolding at the finale of the film.

Back to the original sequence: here is what we had in the film after rewriting the script on the set and in the editing room: a warm family gathering streaked with hints of danger that ends on a seemingly goofy high note (which becomes iconic once the film is released), then a hard cut to the bedroom scene which proceeds as written.

The combination of a small, but important re-write during filming and another intervention in the editing room helped fine-tune this portion of Before the Rain. It established and propelled the dynamics of the plot and the relationships, while moving the film at a clip.

7.

Allow me another example from the same film of how the writer and director in me collaborated:

At another point in *Before the Rain*, a couple is on the run. He is a young Macedonian defrocked monk, she is an Albanian teenager in distress. A gang of Albanian men – her family – surrounds them. They are looking to save her from an opposing clan. Still, when the armed band lays their hands on the couple, her grandfather punishes and humiliates her publicly, beating her brutally, albeit reluctantly. Then her brother erupts in a fit of jealous rage and shoots her dead.

Now, in all the drafts of the synopsis, the brother killed both the girl and the monk. This was a befitting tragic end to the modern-day civil war Romeo and Juliet. They are both dead.

Yet, Kiril, the monk, refused to die. It didn't feel right to kill him. I don't know why. I could claim a number of rational explanations why not to kill him, such as that in Before the Rain different ethnic groups always kill their own, making thus the point that any war, and especially a civil war is in fact fratricide. The brother and the monk are not related.

However, the real reason was that Kiril, the character, simply refused to die. I tried killing him on paper, but he wouldn't budge. And I followed his wishes.

The fact that Kiril did not die on the mountaintop gave me the opportunity to bring him back later in London. It also allowed me to have him sit on the tattered suitcase next to her body, looking on in silent shock as the life drains out of her. It allowed for a final exchange between the lovers: he says, "I'm sorry," she – referring to their inability to understand each other's languages and to his now broken vow of silence – puts her finger on her lips, "Hush."

The tone of the silent goodbye scene was developed after I completed the screenplay. The director contrasted wide shots of a sole human in a vast, spectacular landscape with tight close-ups of the dying girl and the stunned ex-monk2. These close-ups turned out to be an important tool at this point in the story.

As for the wide shots – we invested a lot of time and energy in finding the most appropriate locations. We ruthlessly combined different places, creating cinematic space which does not exist.

2 Since we were running out of time during the main shoot, we picked up the closeups of Kiril and Zamira against sky and neutral background on several later occasions – a few weeks after we filmed that particular scene, in a different location in Macedonia; and during post-production, in London, some six months after we initially shot the bulk of the scene.

I also filmed the gang walking away in silent procession after Zamira's death, passing by the heart-broken Kiril seated on the brown suitcase. In the editing room, though, I decided to eliminate that part of the scene, as it felt at odds with the quiet and intimate way the scene was building to a crescendo. The music suggests a fleeting moment and the scene ends with a single flute accompanying the image of a lone boy under a solitary tree. He is alive, but alone. On the wings of the solo flute, we travel from the Macedonian mountains to a claustrophobic shower stall in London, where a woman breaks down in tears under the shower. Part 2 begins.

I remember watching this moment with an audience at the Cineteca di Bologna. I somehow managed to view the film as a viewer, not a maker, and I was excited by the leap, the emotional crescendo that is irreverently cut off.

This became one of the most important (and I dare say, poignant) moments in the film, a pivotal point when the cheeky leap from a place to a distant, seemingly unconnected place happens right after an emotional high note. It almost feels like a leap in time. The lift off and the landing together create new quality, presenting the director with an opportunity for a subdued (or an operatic) tour-de-force.

Even though the script called for this jarring, radical leap in the story (leaving behind everything we had developed to that point – the story, the characters, the setting and the atmosphere in Macedonia), the tone of this transition was developed by the director, not by the writer: the pacing, the music, the contrasting colors, the contrasting shot size, the timing of the change…

In other words: even though the potential for this moment of directorial fireworks emerged from what was on the page and from the writer's freedom to be irreverent, it was dully amplified by the disciplined directorial work.

8.

The final example from my experience as writer-director is probably most challenging, but so was the film.

At the very beginning of the process of creating Mothers, I had a real-life story. A series of rape-murders of retired cleaning women in a small Macedonian town leads to the arrest of a journalist who was reporting on the very same crimes. He is then found dead in his prison cell, his head in a bucket of water. The authorities declare it a suicide by drowning. I was interested in this unusual story, but I was also very interested in the background – the suffocating life in a small town.

I knew this story was going to be only a part of a feature-length film. I did not see the documentary as a full-length film. Instead, I saw it as only one segment in a film consisting of three parts. These three parts would contrast and complement each other to create a bigger whole. I was not interested in telling the story of the crime and punishment, but was instead interested in telling the story of telling stories.

As I was developing the other two parts, I realized I had to start filming the documentary while the iron was hot. I did not want to run the risk of the real people involved in the story getting too far from it. There were also practical considerations – what if the story in their heads started to change, as stories always do, or what if some of them became unavailable?

So, I started filming the documentary, while I was still working on the big script.

I went to the small town, shot establishing and mood shots, found a local collaborator and started putting together the puzzle. I interviewed the families of the victims, the family of the journalist, and then the investigators who broke the case, the judge involved, the forensic pathologists, etc.

The information I was putting on film (or, rather – on hard drive) was in turn informing the big picture. I dropped the initial idea of making three versions of the same events – fictionalized, a fake documentary and a real documentary – and focused instead on creating three completely different stories which connect only on a different plane.

Mothers was intended as an experiment of sorts – two parts of the film fiction, and the third a documentary, so I started searching for the two fictional stories. In terms of the narrative, these two stories were supposed to have nothing in common with the documentary, except for thematic echoes and amplifications. They were, however, going to be connected by tone and the big picture itself: the nature of truth. And how we tell it.

This is a fairly unusual combination – fiction and documentary. We perceive the two in a completely different way; our expectations and the way we experience them are different. And therein lie the experiment – what will happen if we treat both as simple means or tools in telling a story, the way an artist like Rauschenberg mixes photographs or even a blanket within an old-fashioned painting?

For parts one and two of the film – the fiction parts – I chose real-life stories told to me by friends. The event underlying part one had happened some eighteen years ago; the one underlying part two more than thirty years ago. One happened to a little girl in a big city, the other to old folks in a deserted village. They had seemingly nothing in common with the documentary about a serial killer of retired cleaning women and a suicide in a bucket of water.

Yet, they felt like they fit perfectly together. The contrast and the resonance felt just right. I had my three sides of the triangle-film.

So, while filming the documentary, I went about writing the fiction. When I felt I had shot enough of the doc, I started preparing the filming of the fiction parts. After I filmed those, and after we edited the doc, we went back to the real-life small town and filmed the missing links in the documentary portion.

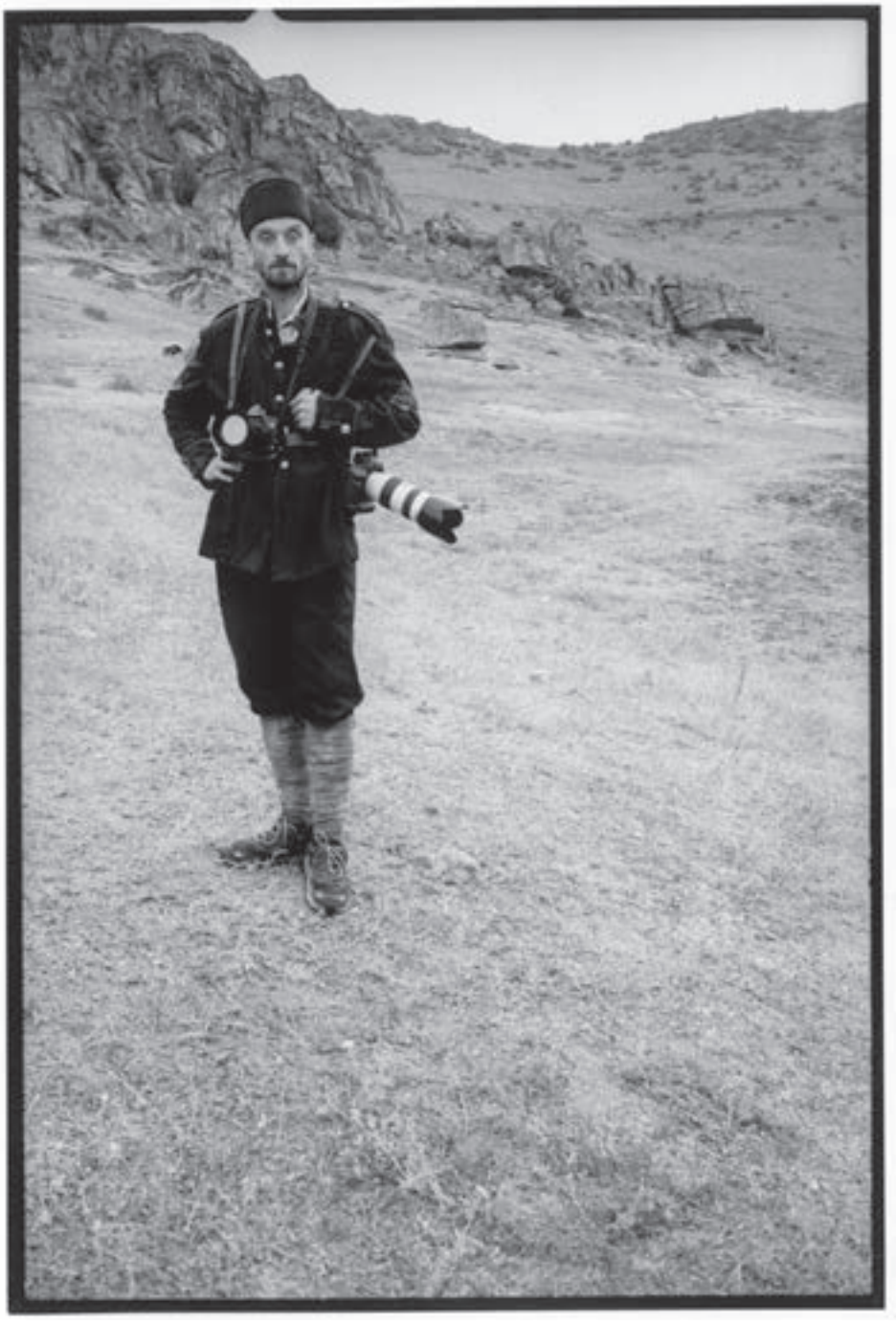
The day-to-day writing of the fiction screenplay was not affected by the developments in making the documentary, but shooting the doc had opened the doors to better thinking about the rest of the big picture. The writing and the directing did not exactly happen at the same time, but I came as close to interweaving the two in the same span of time as I would ever dare.

Thus, in *Mothers* I wrote, then filmed, then edited, then wrote again, then filmed some more, then filmed yet again, and then edited the whole. This is very different from the way I always work. The writer and the director in me interwove their work on this project. The writer let the director shoot before the entire script was finished, and the director started shooting before the entire screenplay was finished. This was new and it was different.

And, in a significant way, it was also liberating. It allowed for freshness that is seldom possible when making a film. It allowed a certain level of spontaneity that the necessarily bulky process of filmmaking restricts. This freshness and freedom marked not only a new approach for me, but also new quality in that I was able to let the instinct have a bigger part in the final product. I wasn't writing lines of dialogue on the set, nor letting the actors improvise, but I was shaping the structure of the overall screenplay after I started filming. This was an experiment in a somewhat different film form, yet I was very happy with the experience and with the result.

I don't know whether I'll ever replicate this experience, but it certainly opened new possibilities. It demonstrated that it is possible to make intuition play a bigger part in the creation of this bulky cyborg animal called film.

I think that I would be more open to other experiments where strong intuition or well thought-out framework would allow for a different schedule or a different kind of give-and-take between the writing and directing segments of the process. If this means more fun (while still effectively managing the overall practice of making a film), and especially if it results in a good film, I'd be game for it.



Truth and Fiction,

Art and Faith

Three years ago I read a fascinating article in the New York Times. The article told of Vlado Taneski, a Macedonian journalist. He was a correspondent for a major Macedonian newspaper from a small town, Kicevo. Taneski had been covering the case of several missing women in Kicevo. They were all elderly, some of them used to work as cleaning women, and they all lived in the same neighborhood. They could almost see each other's houses from their windows. Taneski wrote that the retired women had all gone missing over a period of three years. Their bodies were later found in plastic bags, discarded in illegal dumps, raped and strangled.

No sooner did Taneski finish writing his most recent report on the unknown serial killer than he was arrested and charged with rape and murder. His DNA was found inside the victims, his wife's hair was found on the clothes the victims' bodies were wrapped in, and the evidence started accumulating.

Taneski was a neighbor. He lived in the same neighborhood as the victims; one of them lived only three houses down from Taneski. All the victims knew him as a friendly neighbor. Their children went to the same schools. They shopped in the same stores. They chatted when they met in the street. Sometimes they would help each other. He may have asked one of them to help him clean his house – his wife lived in the capital, and he was a man alone. He was well-respected as a solid citizen, a journalist, a pillar of his community.

I read the article and pictured Kicevo. It is a small town where people know each other and most live quiet and conservative lives. Many businesses, most of them industrial plants, closed their doors over the last twenty years. Unemployment is high. Macedonian and Albanian peasants from the countryside come to town on the market days to sell fruit, vegetables and their wares. Children play basketball right next to a car wreck left to rot in the school yard. Attractive women socialize in the downtown cafes.

It was hard to believe that these hideous crimes took place there. We are used to serial killers in America, not in the sleepy Macedonian countryside. And not just any serial killer, but a rapist who preys on retired cleaning women. This is not something one associates with the country I know.

To make things stranger, Taneski not only wrote the articles about the serial killer (including one titled The Investigation Stalled, where he chides the police for shoddy work), but he also went to see the families of the victims after the women had disappeared and before the bodies were discovered. He went to the families asking for statements, information and for photographs of the missing women to accompany his articles. They kindly obliged.

The Vlado Taneski story went around the world: a crime reporter who allegedly killed by night, and wrote about it by day.

Three days later an even more bizarre twist of events was reported. Vlado Taneski was found dead in his prison cell, his head in a bucket of water.

"Now, this is impossible," many readers exclaimed.

It does seem impossible. Even after two years, the official investigation has not uncovered what had happened that night. The coroner reported that the death was caused by drowning; he reported no signs of violence on Taneski's body or traces of any mind-altering substances in his blood. The press from as far

as Korea, Argentina and the US had a field day with the story: a crime reporter, suspected of the serial rapes and murders of retired cleaning women that he was reporting on, ends up dead in a bucket of water in his prison cell.

"Now, this is impossible," is the way many would describe this string of events. "It can't be true," others would say.

As I said, I read this story in two articles in the New York Times in the summer of 2008. I am a storyteller and filmmaker, and I often look at things in life or read books and stories thinking what they would look like if one tried to convert them into films. This story stood out. It was one of those stories that are unbelievable, yet true.

"But, it really happened" is something a student of mine once told me after I remarked that his idea for a film did not hold water dramaturgically. His reaction is typical of a common belief which holds that if a film is based on events that really took place the film itself should be believable and believed.

Yet, we have all seen bad and unbelievable films based on real events. And we have all seen great films that were entirely the product of someone's imagination.
Still, just like my former student, most of us do look at films differently or accept stories in a different way if we believe they are true. We watch a documentary film in a different way from the way we watch a drama. We read a magazine article in a different way from the way in which we read a short story. Sometimes, we even treat a film that employs actors differently because we were told that it is based on something that really happened. We treat these works based on truth or reporting on the truth in a different way.

Why?

What is it in our relation to reality or in our relation to what we perceive to be the reality that makes us value a work of artifice (an art piece) differently depending on our knowledge or conviction of whether that work of artifice is based on events that really took place?

Mind you – this is not a case of actually observing reality. We are not watching events as they unfold. We are not observing the **truth happen**. What we are observing in a film based on a true story is a highly artificial construct. We are observing actors delivering lines written by a scriptwriter, actors and landscapes and objects filmed in a way determined by the director and by the director of photography and by the production designer. What is left out of the film is determined by the director and the editor. What we are observing is a work of art – or sometimes just a movie – with its own inner logic, rhythm, development and feel. These are all created by the filmmakers, usually deliberately and in line with numerous conventions established between the filmmaker and the viewer, and following the concept or idea the filmmakers had in mind.

The same applies to a documentary. When we watch a documentary we are not observing reality happen in front of our eyes. What we are observing is a film. A documentary film. With its own set of rules and conventions, with its own conclusions as to what exactly happened. These conclusions will sometimes depend on the point of view or on the context the particular film establishes. It

will depend on the conclusion the filmmakers have come to while making the film, or – quite often – before even setting out to make the film. Regardless of how faithful the filmmakers want to be to the events they are talking about (and which most of them had not witnessed first hand), such a film is a reconstruction. Or a construction.

In addition, the feel of the documentary will depend almost entirely on the filmmakers, and this may remove the film one more step from reality – and sometimes even from the truth. Quite often the feeling we'd have when we walk out of a film, even if it is documentary, will be very different from the feel we'd have if we were to observe reality instead of watching a film about reality.

In other words, the film – any film – will be different from the reality or the truth it is talking about.

Why then insist on the "faithfulness" or "truthfulness" of the film? No one has ever said – except on advice of their lawyer – "This film was entirely made up. Nothing in it is true." On the contrary, filmmakers often highlight their film's connection to the real events or people, sometimes at the very beginning of their films.

Does it make a film more truthful if it is based on a true story?

Or do we insist on the "faithfulness," the "truthfulness", the "based on a true story" as a way of giving the film more credibility? In the sense of, "This is not just something I dreamed up. It really happened, I am reporting it and that makes me a serious member of society." Is that why a lot of serious people prefer documentaries?

As the former student of mine would put it: "But, it really happened!"

Do we use it because the tagline "based on a true story" helps the viewer suspend their disbelief? A viewer walks into a theater and she is supposed to enter the filmmakers' world. It may be a world she likes or a world she doesn't like; it may be a world she believes, or a world she doesn't believe (a world of constructed connections and artificial feelings instead of a world of coherent vision and compact drama).

The filmmaker needs to gain the viewer's trust. And this is where the filmmaker may say: "What I am saying makes sense because it really happened. Trust me."

As every artist knows – or, at least, feels in his or her bones – it is essential to gain the viewer's trust if you expect for the work to resonate with the recipient. It is not easy to establish the **field of reality** in a dramatic piece, so using the true story crutch may be helpful in gaining the viewer's trust.

Of course, every work of art has to earn the viewer's trust. The viewer comes to the piece with a level of trust, but the artist has to satisfy – or, if possible, expand on – this trust. The viewer trusts that the film will be worthy of her expectations, that it will be an emotional, intellectual and perhaps even a learning experience for her. She trusts that you will take her by the hand and rule her inner world for two hours.

She has faith in your ability to deliver, but she also has expectations.

Now what is interesting about this trust – or faith – is that it goes both ways.

Or, rather – it is something that happens twice: once when the artist creates the piece – and once when the viewer takes it in.

So, the trust is essential for a work of art to:
(1) Be created, and
(2) Be consumed.

We are talking here a high level of trust.

I need to trust that the film I am making is worth it in order for me to invest my emotional and, often, physical well-being, plus a minimum of two (and in one case, for myself – seven) years of my life.

Most importantly, I have to have faith in this undertaking in order for myself to strip down to the core and to bare my soul, my real emotions and my deepest thoughts on essential issues. It is important that I strip down in order to reach the emotional and conceptual essence of what I want to say, even when my work does not necessarily seem personal. Yet, it is this personal involvement that provides the basis for my art.
Again – I don't need to talk directly about my concerns, but I need to invest myself into my art for it to gain that breath of life. Craft alone is not enough.

Of course, every piece of art has to contain the truth. But, not the truth of "what happened." It needs to contain the truth of **how things are.**

While making my art, I am communicating with my piece, not with the audience or with myself. My commitment is to the piece of art alone. Nothing can make my faith in my work relative. The art piece is not negotiable.

It is a little bit like a musician on stage, playing his instrument with the light in his eyes. He is wrapped up in the music, and becomes aware of the audience only when they start applauding.

The honesty of my relationship with my piece, plus my ability to communicate this onto the work of art is what inspires faith inside the viewer.

For her part, the viewer – as I said – comes to the battlefield, or to the bedroom, or to the cinema theater with herself also exposed, even if to a smaller degree. She comes and says, "I like this kind of films, I am investing my time, a bit of my life, and my emotional expectations in your work. I believe you to the point of crying because an actor on the screen pretends to be dying. Do it for me."

Both of us are taking a major leap of faith.

What does the filmmaker do with this faith is essential. If the artist takes it seriously and repays it multiple times with his or her work, it becomes **love**.

I approach the film I am creating with faith. The viewer approaches the film she is watching with faith. There is no film and no art without this faith.
This is it: faith in the art piece itself to transcend the moment.

A perverse question floats up to the surface here:

Did Vlado (if he was the real murderer) need the reality of the rapes and murders so that he can write about them? It is as if he could not just **write** about them, invent them, but he needed to report about them. Could that be part of what happened?

Two days ago a viewer asked me why I decided to make the film about Vlado Taneski a documentary.

Yes, I did make a film about the case of the Kicevo reporter who died in a bucket of water in prison, after being charged with raping and killing the retired cleaners he was writing about.

However, the story of Vlado Taneski, told as a documentary, was only a part of the film, only one of three completely unrelated stories that comprise my film *Mothers*. The other two segments are drama pieces, with actors and scripted dialogue. Yet, they are both based on real events. What unfolds in these two drama parts is based on what happened to two friends of mine. Thus all three stories were based on real events, but they were treated differently; I applied radically different cinematic approaches.

Truth is extremely important, and I fulfilled my obligation to it in *Mothers* by trying to get to the bottom of what happened in this complicated series of events. The facts and the context. I also tried to give everybody involved a chance to convey their experience. Yet, this attempt to tell the facts and to satisfy different perspectives was not the most important thing.

What was more important was the following: I was trying to ask questions about the nature of truth, rather than about truth plain and simple. We see different permutations of truth and lies in the three parts of Mothers.

In a structuralist manner, we are finally faced with considering the medium itself, the font the song is printed in, the texture of the canvas, the clash and marriage of the
documentary and fiction approaches in one and the same piece.

So *Mothers* is comprised of three unrelated stories – two of which are drama and one a documentary.

These stories never really come together on the narrative level. The fact that they remain unconnected plot-wise, and – more importantly – the fact that I mix drama and documentary (or as some people would have it "truth and fiction") is not very common. Documentary and drama usually don't mix. When they do, the drama is often just a re-enactment of what happens in the documentary.

I wanted to combine these two approaches, two genres, two kinds of filmmaking. I felt there was no need to be restricted in the way I use the material, in the style and approach, the way we have been taught. Painting has been using found objects for about a century now. Many great artists have been incorporating found objects in their art pieces. The shock of seeing an unexpected other medium (found object) within a painting or sculpture ads a new level to the experience. Artists like Picasso and Rauschenberg have created works of art of classic beauty by using objects seemingly incongruous with a work of art, such as a blanket, linoleum, bicycle handlebars, stuffed goat or newspaper photographs. Yet, what really matters in the final piece is not the shock that we are looking at unexpected material where we don't expect it, but rather the fact that the found object has been incorporated into the art piece in a way that contributes to a great piece of art, a piece of art that has touched our heart, has spoken to our mind.

In other words, the novelty of incorporating found objects in a work of art (or of mixing drama and documentary in a substantial way) is not enough. The work itself still needs to be good.

Why couldn't film expand the means at its disposal by freely mixing documentary and fiction? Why do those two approaches – documentary and fiction – have to be considered mutually exclusive? Is it something in the nature of our perception of the work of art, the work of telling stories, of creating something out of nothing that makes us treat the drama and documentary as separate animals? After all, a story is a story?

This is where we neatly circle back to an earlier point – We watch a documentary film in a different way from the way we watch a drama. We read a magazine article in a different way from the way in which we read a short story. Sometimes, we even treat a film that employs actors differently because we were told that it is based on something that really happened. We treat these works based on truth or reporting on the truth in a different way.

Why?

I am not sure.

Several years ago I screened my first film, Before the Rain at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. That film consists of three love stories set in London and Macedonia against the backdrop of tension and potential violence which is about to erupt – both in London and in Macedonia. Some of the tension is caused, "excused" or enhanced by ethnic intolerance. However, there was no violence in Macedonia at the time. The film was made eight years before an ethnic conflict – or what was being explained as an ethnic conflict – erupted in Macedonia.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Yet, since *Before the Rain* came from Macedonia, and Macedonia had only recently declared its independence from Yugoslavia, which itself was right then torn apart by wars of disintegration along ethnic lines, many people looked for clues about the nature of the actual war in this film.

I did not feel that watching Before the Rain would help anyone understand the facts of the actual wars in Yugoslavia. (For starters, there were no politicians in Before the Rain.) My intention was to talk about other human issues that concerned me, not to explain a particular war. I conceived and perceived Before the Rain as a piece of fiction applicable to any place in the world. And, indeed, viewers from very different places did come up to me after the film opened to tell me that it had made them think of their homelands. That it could easily have taken place in their homelands.

With this in mind, I told the viewers before the screening at Brown that the film they were about to see was not a documentary about Macedonia; nor was it a documentary about the wars in what used to be Yugoslavia. It is not a documentary at all, I told the audience. Satisfied that I helped frame the film for the viewers, I settled down.

After the screening I came up for a Q&A session. An elderly lady raised her hand and asked the first question: "Did what we saw in the film actually happen to you or to anyone in your family?"

Relying on whether something "really happened" or valorizing documentaries over drama only because they are documentaries, or praising a film because of the subject matter it treats and not because of its essence, soul, mind and muscle feels like a cheat. A crutch.

It seems that some of us need to know that something is "true" only because it would help our faith. Our faith in the power of the piece of art. Whether something is "true" or not is an external category. Sure, it can ease our way into trusting the plane of reality of the particular work, but it can not substitute for the lack of heart and soul.

Did the lady in Providence like Before the Rain more because she thought it was "true"?

I don't think so. As I said, we've all seen many "based on a true story" films that were no good. We didn't like them. I would like to believe that the lady in Providence liked the film because of the film itself.

I believe that deep down our experience with a film does not really depend on whether the film speaks of events that truly happened or not. Yes, both viewers and filmmakers often put a lot of stock in whether something is based on a real story. Still, I am convinced that the emotional charge we get out of a great work of art is mainly related to that particular work of art, to that particular piece of artifice, to that particular object, that particular sound or that particular image or that particular concept which we call a piece of art.

Faith that needs outside support ("based on a true story") seems suspect to me. Seems like faith lite.

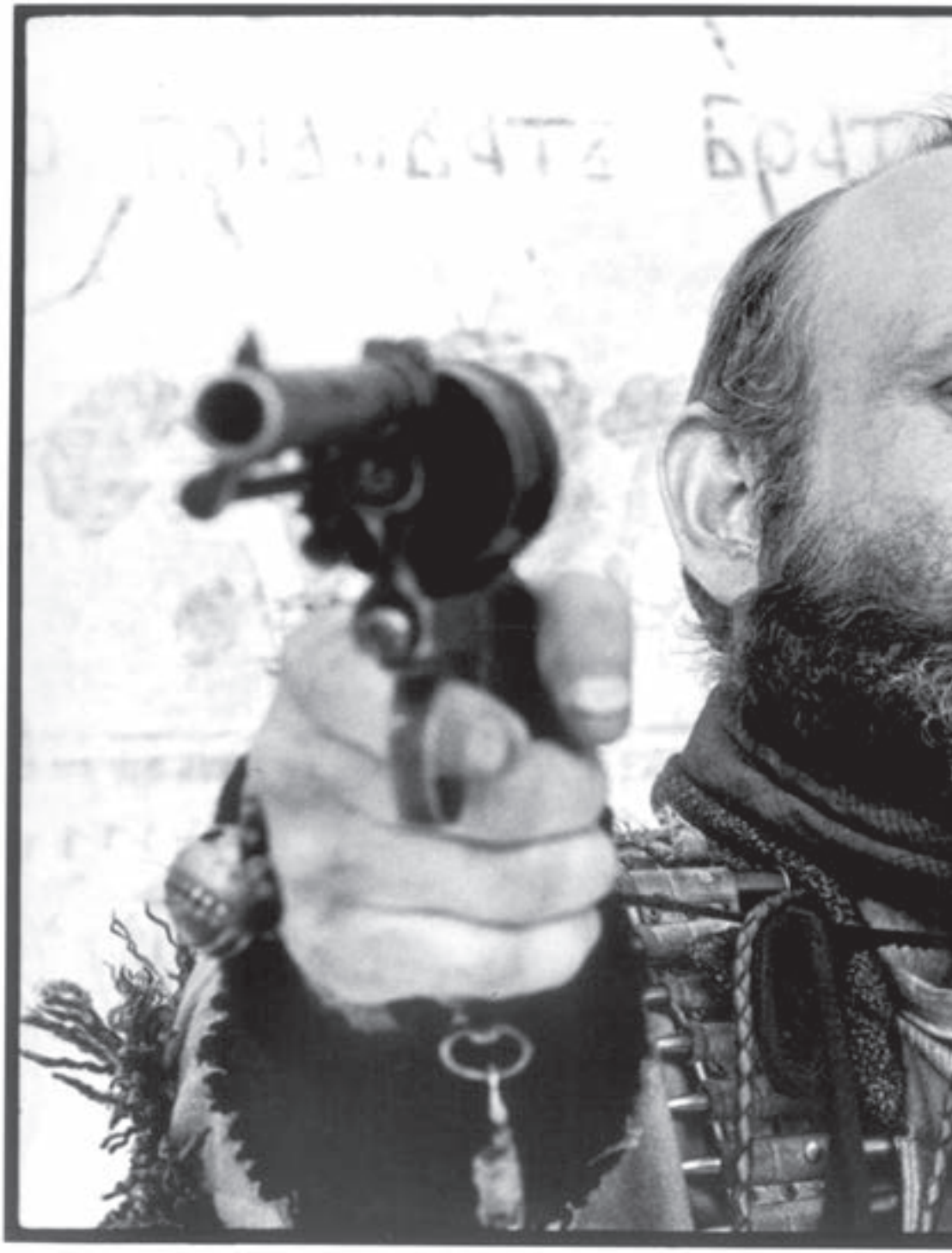
I think that when we like a work of art, we like it because of what it does to our body and soul while we are receiving it. We like it because of what we are experiencing while watching, reading or listening; we like it because we trust the **plane of reality** created by the work itself, we trust its inner logic and integrity, we have faith in what happens while we give ourselves to this work of art.

In other words, it is beside the point whether a work of art is real or fiction – it is the viewer's faith in the work of art, that that particular piece of art has earned, which makes it work.

We accept the artistic truth because we have faith in it.
In order to accept art, we need exceptional faith.

ART, VIOLENCE + SOCIETY: A FEW NOTES

TONE AND FUNCTION: ART AND RITUAL



violence

Function: noun
1 a : exertion of physical force so as to injure or abuse (as in warfare, effecting illegal entry into a house)
b : an instance of violent treatment or procedure
[...]
3 a : intense, turbulent, or furious and often destructive action or force <the violence of the storm>
b : vehement feeling or expression

ritual
Function: noun
1 : the established form for a ceremony; specifically : the order of words prescribed for a religious ceremony
2 a : ritual observance; specifically : a system of rites b : a ceremonial act or action c : an act or series of acts regularly repeated in a set precise manner

. Ingmar Bergman is quoted as having said that film is a perfectly legitimate way of ritualizing violence in society.

. Mind you - ritualize, not glorify.

. [Bergman is also quoted as having said: "When we experience a film, we consciously prime ourselves for illusion. Putting aside will and intellect, we make way for it in our imagination. The sequence of pictures plays directly on our feelings."]

. The ritualistic aspect (among other things) has to do with creating a substitute, a mock-up, a representation of a particular experience.

. This representation, re-creation provides the experience of the real thing without the necessity to face the consequences. More importantly - it also allows one to deal with the meaning of the real thing, the thing that is being represented.

. For example, riding the roller-coaster is a mock-up of a particular experience – falling down. The fear is real, but the danger is not, as we know the contraption is supposed to be safe.

. Film is often like a roller-coaster for the mind, the gut and the heart: experience without the danger, experience without the consequences. ("...we consciously prime ourselves for illusion.")

. Even though the viewer knows perfectly well that the film/painting/story/play is a lie ("When we experience a film, we consciously prime ourselves for illusion."), she still desires to respond as if it were real. This is simply because the lie is - at the same time - a truth.

. As the hero fires his gun, he really does fire a gun, even if it is one loaded with fakes.
. As an actor at the receiving end of this shot falls down, playacting, we know that he is pretending he has been hit. Yet, we also know that he really fell down, cried in anguish, writhed in the dust.

. Playacting or not, all of these actions really did take place. And they suggest what the filmmakers wanted to suggest and what the audience has agreed to assume - that the actor is dead.
. The meaning has been put together.

. That is part of the contract ("...we consciously prime ourselves for illusion.") - the viewer knows full well that the actor is not dead; yet the viewer accepts that these more-or-less realistic symbols and gestures say "I am dying/dead."
. More importantly, the viewer's heart and gut respond to these as if they were real.

. Ultimately, as the piece wraps up, the viewer has accepted the emotional, narrative or philosophical point; the meaning that the artist wanted to communicate has traveled via the work of art.

. One aspect of contemporary rituals is not that different from ancient rituals. Experiencing it without really doing it.

. How much do we fill in the blanks? Is the actor's death realistic without our participation and without our acceptance of the rules of the game? Will an unsuspecting viewer who doesn't know that this is a piece of fiction think the actor has really died?.

. Is this any different from the experience in the syncretic art?
. Is it different from the experience during a ritual around the bonfire thousands of years ago?
. Is it different from what the audience of the oral storytellers experience? The audience of Homer, bhopas (bards and shamans, oral storytellers in Rajasthan) or guslars (musician/storytellers of the Balkans)?

. Society's survival depends on its ability to pass on information.

. In other words - to teach.
. What would happen if every generation had to discover anew the fire? Or the wheel? Or electricity?

. Society facilitates the transfer of information from the teacher (the one with the experience or knowledge) to the pupil (the one without the experience or knowledge).

. The cornerstone of this activity is the potential for the pupil to absorb information without having to personally experience it.

. The narratives are one way to teach.
. The Bible teaches its students how to behave.
. Even the less overt instruction manuals do so by providing templates of behavior (if Zeus can cheat on his wife Hera, why shouldn't I?)

. The narratives were only oral at first.

. Speech, written language, mental concepts.

. Art is non-verbal conscious communication. ("Putting aside will and intellect, we make way for [art] in our imagination.")

. Rituals - and, by extension, art: experiencing (and exploring) it yourself without the consequences. Participating and experiencing the emotional impact. Learning - or at least feeling.

. Do the technological developments make the experience more convincing? Is a bhopa listener in Rajasthan less convinced of the "realness" of the story she's experiencing than a kid at an IMAX theater in New York with its gigantic screen and sophisticated surround sound? (A standard IMAX screen is 22m wide and 16 m high (72.6 x 52.8 ft), but can be larger.)
. Were the 3-D films too realistic, or were they irrelevant?

. Is the intensity of the experience relative to the personal investment, or do the technical attributes add to the experience? Is it relative?

. I remember reports of adults in cultures unexposed to film who were confused when they had their first experience with film. They were confused by many conventions of the form that we take for granted: editing - changes in shot size, time compression, parallel action...

The movie theater obituary had been composed several times - with each new technological discovery affecting film exhibition - and always prematurely. The film industry itself has certainly contributed to this with its own paranoia. (Anyone who uttered the word "television" on a Hollywood movie set in the 40s was fired on the spot; Universal sued Sony over the invention of the Betamax video recorder. Today film studios make more money off TV or video than at the cinema box office).

. In spite of the convenience of TV, pay-per-view, video, ti-vo, people still go to the movie theaters by the millions. Is it the collective experience?

. Film is experienced alone - we usually don't talk much while watching a film, we don't chant, don't boo, nor hiss (unless in Cannes). Still, we usually prefer company while engaging in this solitary experience. Even when we rent a film, we often invite friends or significant others to see it with us.

. Does the collective aspect of this solitary experience resemble the experience of participating in a ritual?
. In this respect, how much does a movie theater resemble a temple?

. The first time I saw John Carpenter's Halloween, I was blown away by the effect the film had on its audience. It was profound and it was visceral. The viewers were so terrified that it was almost palpable. I saw the 6 o'clock show, and then decided to stay for the 8 o'clock as well. The new audience reacted in much the same way, screaming, shrieking, shouting at the screen and covering their eyes - at the same places.

. Halloween kick-started the renaissance of a venerable old genre (going back via Hitchcock, Frankenstein and Dracula to The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari and way beyond). There were half a dozen sequels to Halloween alone, as well as a series of other scary sequel-spinning films. Over the following couple of decades these scary films evolved into films of gore. Horror no more, gore now.

. Yet, there was not a drop of blood nor gore in the first Halloween. Only masterful manipulation of the cinematic elements and the Freudian subtext to cause a pure visceral reaction in the viewers.
. All of this on top of a rudimentary narrative. A strategy that only enhanced the mastery and the subtext.

. Marshall McLuhan has reportedly said that the characters at the movies are like gods - big and powerful, while the characters on TV are like friends - accessible.

DIALOGUE: OF DONKEYS AND ZOOLOGISTS

. The emotional, visceral and intellectual responses to art are only personal. They are ultimately in the eye of the beholder.

. It seems absurd to discuss the experience of experiencing art. It is like discussing the experience of experiencing love, or fear.

. In spite of how absurd it seems, we do discuss those, as we are social animals. It may even help us deal with the experiences themselves.

. Art provokes what's inside the beholder.

. The force of the emotions stirred is an indication of the powerful effect the work has on the beholder. The root is often in the taboo and is triggered by the tone of the work of art.

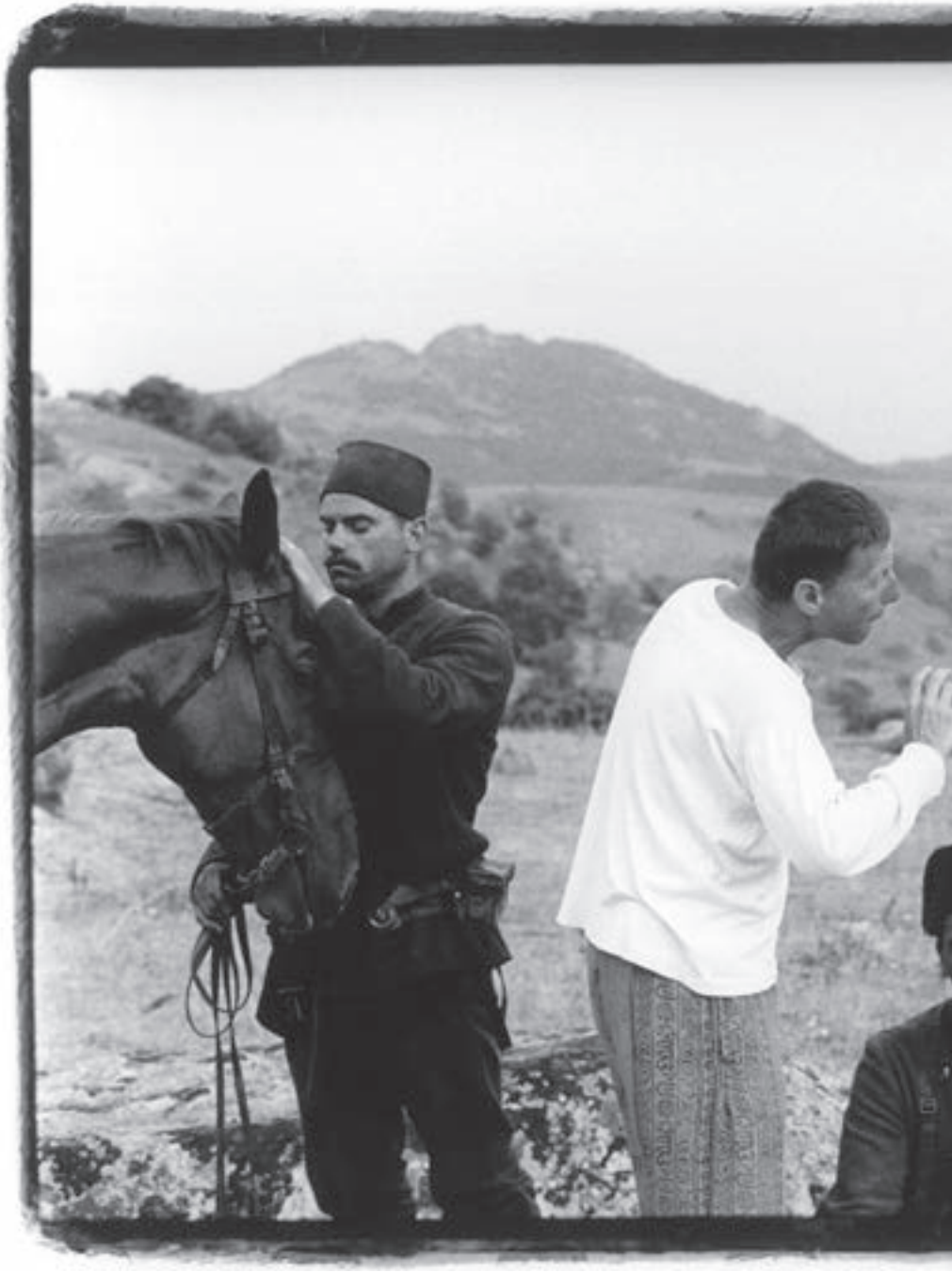
. If the beholder lies to himself/herself, then a reminder of the lie in the form of art feels like a provocation.

. Art functions on a personal level. It is a proto-emotional, sur-philosophical one-on-one metacommunication.

. The arts deal with the personal needs - and by extension with the social needs - of the society as reflected in the individual (as no man is an island). The plane of communication of the arts is personal: emotional, by extension philosophical, sometimes conceptual.

. The social reaction to art has everything to do with society, and nothing to do with the art: Guernica, The Wild Bunch, Lolita, Damian Hirst...

. A public debate of the personal experience is bastardization of the experience; yet the impulse to discuss and judge is understandable as homo sapiens is zoon politicon.



. The public re-telling of the beholder's personal experience with art is not unlike pornography.

. This public re-telling may be relevant to the teller or even to some listeners, but it is irrelevant both to the work of art, and to future works of art.

. The loudness of the voice debating the work of art has no correlation to the work of art. Even its relation to the experience itself is often doubtful. Yet, it has everything to do with the societal structures.

. Mass-media treatment of the arts (film, but also other arts).
[. Picasso is said to have said: "Computers are useless. They can only give us answers."]

. Society responds/reacts to art that deals with taboos.
. Art is equipped (and indeed expected) to deal with taboos.

. The representation of violence is a taboo in contemporary society.
. The hypocritical nature of social attitude towards art is reflected in society's attitude towards the representation of violence.

. The reactions to works of art in other representative arts (painting) and narrative arts (literature) dealing with violence seem less vitriolic nowadays. This might be due to the fact that film (rightly or wrongly) appears to be more convincing. One often hears that film is the most "realistic" art.

. What is realistic? It is often taken for granted that what we find convincing or what "seems" realistic or "reflecting reality" is realistic.
. Is a real-time eight-hour film of a man sleeping realistic?
. And what if there is a cut in the middle? Does it make it less realistic?
. What if the eight-hour experience has been condensed to two hours? Five minutes? Ten seconds? Do these interventions make the film less "real"?
. In film is it realistic to hear music as the hero and heroine finally consume their relationship on the beach (more music preceding this at their first encounter, perhaps)? Where is the orchestra?

. Realism is just another form of stylization.
. Like Expressionism or Cubism or Impressionism.

. Realism is a form of stylization which convention has declared closer to our desired perception of physical reality outside the plane of the work of art (outside of the movie theater).

. What is realistic changes with the times. Marlon Brando in A Streetcar Named Desire was once deemed too realistic/naturalistic. His acting today feels highly stylized, not gritty.

[. It is said that a graduate student once asked Daisetz T. Suzuki whether he spells reality with a small or a capital "r." Professor Suzuki nodded, then closed his eyes, went on nodding, and - it seemed - thinking. Ten seconds passed, then a minute, then five. As it started to look that he fell asleep, he finally opened his eyes and answered the student's question. "Yes," he said.]

. Still, if the artist wants to have a dialogue with society or with those who have declared themselves its spokespersons, s/he is compelled to take the art critics into account. As inspiration and as the object of (sociological?) (anthropological?) analysis, not as a guide in creating art.

. The artist needs the critics as much as the donkey needs the zoologists.

. Debates about art often center on the "representation" of the world, as perceived in a work of art.

. There are several issues here:

> . The artist deals with her or his world, not with the world outside. The outside "real" world comes into play as something to be refracted through the artist and the work of art, and as the host of the final result, the work of art.
> . The way the beholder sees the world "portrayed" has more to do with the beholder's perceived (or ideal) world, not with the aspects of the scraps of reality refracted through a work of art.

. It is more likely that a disturbing "portrayal" is disturbing or undesired not so much because it "shows" an outside world that the beholder does not like/appreciate, but rather because the "portrayal" awakens an inner world in the beholder which disturbs the beholder, upsets him/her, angers her/him, leading him/her where s/he consciously would not want to go, regardless of whether the work of art is dealing with a taboo at all or not.

. It is not that important what/how the work of art "portrays." It is much more important what is the goal and - even more importantly - what is the tone.

. Ultimately, the dialogue about and through art is an intimate experience and it has to do with the individual's experience of him/herself and the universe around.

TONE, OR GOD IS BETWEEN THE LINES:

. Thousands of painters could have painted Mona Lisa. Some possibly did. Including Leonardo. It is his touch that made her "portrayal" what matters, not the thing/person he was painting.
. Picasso and Braque painted the same still lifes in the same studio, often painting together, each on his easel. Even though the paintings were done in the same style, they are very different.
. Several directors have worked from the same scripts, most notably from the classics. Each film is distinctly different. Do Polanski's, Welles's and Kurosawa's Macbeth even have similar tone? How about Zeffirelli's and Luhrman's Romeo and Juliet?

. So, it's not the text.
. It is between the lines.

. Humanistic, reflective...?

. An often-heard complaint about the mainstream studio and independent films is that the stories are all the same.
. I don't think that this is the main problem with the mainstream studio and independent films.
. I think the main problem with them is that the tone is always the same.
. Open endings, mixed feelings, fractured feelings, shifting feelings, unpredictable tone, tragedy, and especially - doubts are big No-Nos.
. Even though the outside ("corporate," "committee," "money") control over the film works of art centers on the story, it is actually more concerned with the tone of the work. This control, however, is more subtle and involves several layers of controllers and middle-men.

. If the tone is what's between the lines, what kind of tone does the social art critic like in his/her work of art?
. What about violence in art?
. Does s/he like gleeful violence?

. Is it supposed to be dismissive and easy? Like Arnold Schwarzenegger? (In one film, his character promises a minor movie villain that he would let him go if he gave him the information he needed; once he gets it, he throws the petit villain into an abyss, saying "I lied.") Like Sylvester Stallone (the vehicle for the stunning transformation of the bottled-up Rambo from First Blood into a killing machine in Rambo 2 and 3)? Like Michael Bay, Simpson/Bruckheimer + Co, the Hollywood blockbusters of Ronald Regan's 80-90s?
. Sadism might be an explanation for this tone, but somehow that doesn't seem to be the real answer, as these films seem to suggest an emptier, less affected, less involved tone than that of a sadist.
. The tone of psychopaths?

. It is easier for the suburban and the politically correct latter-day transfigurations of the Mayflower and Salem judgmental spirit to focus on measurable quantities like minutes than on empirically imperfect elements like tone and intention. Tone is not a scientific, nor a statistical category.

. Professor Charles Harpole mentions in his lectures that in Hollywood films of the 40s and 50s, a character would shout "Darn," after being shot in the knee. Not "Damn!" or more appropriately "Fuck!" After being shot in the knee.

. Desensitizing the viewer to the impact of (both real and filmic) violence has more adverse social consequences than portraying violence in its full glory.

. Types of violence: which is worse: a wounded soldier, a dead dog or an employee laid off after 20 years of service?

. How influential is film?:
. On one hand, little Roma kids coming out of the Napredok or Karpos Cinemas, jumping and air kick-boxing a'la Bruce Lee.
. On the other hand neither Genghis Khan nor the Inquisition watched violent films.
. Check a report that the U.S. Air Force pilots watched porn films before going on air raids.

. Press briefings from the NATO bombings in Kosovo and Serbia.
. Ditto the First Gulf War.
. The view of real death and destruction as seen from 30,000 feet eerily resembles the gleeful victory accomplished in a video game. A cloud of white smoke. Game over.
. Detached, fun.
. Getting desensitized to violence.

. If one hopes for a work of art to have a social function (and it is not meant to have a direct social function by any stretch of the imagination), then one should certainly hope that exposing violence in its despicable and repulsive brutality - if not absurdity - is one of the socially beneficial side-effects of art.
. Thus, society is better served by gross "portrayal" of violence than by sanitized studio fare. A matter of tone.

. What is the tone of snuff? Real-life violence. Does it begin to matter only if we know that this is portrayal of real violence?
. Yet, it has been mediated/transfigured to a new place/new meaning.

. The God is in the detail.
. The art is between the lines.
. It is not the "what"; it is the "how."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TOWARDS TOTAL ART:

NEGATION AS MOVEMENT

So, the movement of art as a process of changing the relationship of creativity with reality (that which is objective).

I take that which is objective (reality) as one of the most basic elements in the creative – artistic - process because of its direct connection of the art and that which is objective.

As the second basic element in this analysis, I include creation, and I consider it as a result of the idea and presentation.

And all four (idea, creation, presentation and that which is objective) as an atomized structure of that which is called art.

In spite of the subjective skepticism towards evolution theories, especially those in arts, I do believe that changes in the art can be observed as process of movement; not *a priori* as development seen in a (straight, circular, elliptic or spiral) line with a defined direction; but rather as a movement in coordinates of no dimension.

To simplify the process (and because I am partial to the aesthetics of visual art and music, which stems from my purism), I will observe the changes in the relationships of these four atoms, and with that in art, through the changes incurred in the visual arts, but with hope that the same observations one day may be extrapolated onto the movement of art in general.

1. OBJECTIVIZED ART MAKING

The tradition of realistic painting: the tendencies (if not the achievements) from prehistoric (i.e. post-syncretic) to socialist realism and hyper-realism, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, etc.

The "similarity" of the artwork to the "original" is considered important, and theories on the "objective reflection" of the reality emerge, which when analyzed more closely from an aesthetic point of view bring themselves to sophism or absurdity because of the subjection of these theories to susceptibility (which is incompatible with their basic concept).

Counter-point: "the original" is negated by the artistic creation itself, while the actual art making in this case is itself crucified between the re-creation of that which is objective and the subjectivization, as a key element that drive the art making.

2. SUBJECTIVIZED ART MAKING

Impressionists, expressionists, El Greco, Modigliani, Van Gogh, and co.

That which is objective as the starting point of the artwork (which then passes through the art processing phase) is still important; although the presentation based on similarity yields greater space for subjectivized presentation.

Counter-argument: negated similarity with the initial (objective) object.

3. SUBJECTIVE ART MAKING

Abstract and non-representative painting, Malevich, Pollock, etc.

That which is objective has been rejected as an art element of art. The roles and possibilities of the idea and presentation are released from certain confines.

Counter-argument (trump): the importance of that which is objective as a starting point of the art process is negated or diminished.

However, that which is objective is still the final segment element of the process: idea – art making – presentation. The presentation is still manifested in the physical (objective) object. It is possible to be without that which is objective only at the beginning of the art making.

4. NON-PAINTING, MEDIATING

The Dadaists, Marcel Duchamp, etc.

The art making has been reduced to idea - presentation. Creating and the object are not in the foreground of the art making, but rather the mediation of an object, which thus (by the mediating intervention of the artist) acquires artistic meaning (a urinal placed in a museum with no physical intervention).

That which is objective (the object) passes through the act: idea – art making – presentation without the classical (physically materialized) creative intervention.

Counter-argument (trump): the process of art making as a process resulting in the creation of a physical object is rejected on the account of the idea (of mediating in this case). There still is a physical object but it has only been mediated, not created or altered by the artist.

5. NON-PAINTING, NON-MEDIATING, HAPPENING

Allan Kaprow ("18 Happenings in 6 Parts"), Ben Vautier (who in 1962 moved into the display window of the Gallery One in London and lived there for fifteen days), Josef Honys (who under the title "Mystification Event" organized a fake funeral for himself, invited his friends, and then, without their knowledge - committed a suicide in 1969), Tehching Hsieh (who transforms a big part of his life into a work of art, performing simple, yet difficult projects, all of which last between one year and 12 years), Joseph Beuys (in large segment of his art), etc.

The event, meaning the presentation itself, is the artwork.

No material art is left behind after the happening.

Counter-argument: nothing is left behind the art act, yet it is precisely the material residue, which is one of the destinations of the traditional art.

6. NON-PAINTING, NON-MEDIATING, NON-HAPPENING, IMAGINING

Dr. Charles Harpole (who claims that there is a film in a film can, yet he does not show it to anyone, claiming that the act of the imagining of the film in the box is what is important).

The idea itself is the art, with no assistance of (physical) art making nor (temporal-spatial) presentation in the traditional sense of the word.

Imagining of the art act, or more to the point - of the art piece – is the piece itself.

Counter-point: there is not objective act behind the art, but only the act of imagining, which is deeply subjective and – for the first time not externalized.

Hence, it is not only that material remains are avoided but the objective act of physical (temporal-spatial) performance is also avoided.

7. NON-PAINTING, NON-MEDIATING, NON-HAPPENING, NON-IMAGINING, NEGATING

Achieving a state of non-imagining the idea of the artwork is the art act. So, a state in which there is not only absence of material remains and an objective act, but there is also no imagining of the art. A state in which there is no thought of art.

This state of absolute intentional absence of an idea of the art piece, in a situation where that which is objective, the physical creation and presentation is already eliminated – is the art itself.

Counter-point: the negation of the idea means its own negation as a being of ideas, which ultimately means negation of the art.

Potential counter-point to the counter-point: the self-negation is not necessarily the negation of the art. The art is not identified with the being (with its temporary-physical, temporal-spatial or conceptual manifestation in the art), since once created, it can exist independently of the existence of the being, which means that the negation of the existence of the being can represent a culmination – meaning, total art.

(1983)

MEN WITH

MACHINE GUNS

Men with machine guns made me ill-at-ease three years ago while I was making my first film, BEFORE THE RAIN.

The film consists of three love stories, all ending in violence brought on by ethnic hatred. It's about heavy expectation of war, and takes place in Macedonia, a nation which had just declared its independence from war-torn Yugoslavia. For more than seventy years, Macedonia was within the same country as the areas now awash in blood, like Bosnia and Croatia. Yet, Macedonia was the only part of what used to be Yugoslavia not involved in this war; nearly a miracle, since two Balkan wars this century were fought precisely over her.

So, I felt ill at ease putting men with machine guns in my film: there were none in Macedonia at the time. While writing the screenplay, during preproduction, shooting and editing, one question haunted me: am I actually portraying my country in a funny mirror? Is my hardworking father seen as a drunk, even in a piece of fiction?

I was relieved when the film was applauded there, even beating all box office records. After a few viewers - both at home and abroad - asked me why there are men with machine guns in the film, I told them that BEFORE THE RAIN is not a documentary, that I would not dare make a documentary about a theme as complex as the Balkan war, that there is tension in Macedonia, but no men with machine guns, that it's a metaphor, that the story could take place in any country (including, but not limited to Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Russia or the U.S.), and that it should serve as a warning, not a testimony. And indeed, the Bosnian carnage went on, but over the mountain - in Macedonia - not even a single bullet was fired.

The following year I was in Bologna. The Cineteca was showing a retrospective of my works (the men-with-machine-guns film, plus music videos and spots I've directed), when on CNN I saw a body next to a burnt-out black Mercedes on a cobblestone road. The road was Macedonia Street, the main street in the capital. The body used to be the President's driver. The President was in a hospital, shrapnel in his brain, his right eye gone.

At the press conference after the screening, the Italian press asked me about the assassination attempt on President Gligorov. While answering, I realized that this was an event so unexpected, bold and simply unreal, that it could never make it as a screenplay. This was no simple men with machine guns. Life employs methods bolder and cockier than fiction.

Peace went on.

...Last month I was in Gostivar, a town some fifty kilometers from Skopje, the Macedonian capital. On the main street, riot police with machine guns stopped us. A few armored cars and many cops were baking in the scorching sun. The town was unusually quiet, even for a July day in Macedonia. I saw bullet holes in a tin roof. At one point, tears filled my eyes, and my throat started to sting. Tear gas from yesterday.

The previous day, units of the riot police stormed the city hall and took down the state flags of Albania and Turkey, which the local authorities displayed in front of the building. A few hours later, a crowd gathered, rioting began, then erupted into an armed conflict. With both sides shooting, according to reports, three people died, and many - including cops - were wounded. The police were enforcing the state law and the Supreme Court ruling on the use of flags in front of municipalities in Macedonia. The protesters, considering the Albanian state flag a symbol of their minority, felt offended and reacted with rocks, bars, Molotov cocktails and bullets.

The day we visited, two of the casualties were buried, as peace went on. In BEFORE THE RAIN there is a scene of a double funeral. This real one I didn't see. I was thinking about how difficult it would be to write a realistic screenplay about a car bomb assassination on the head of state in the main street in the middle of the day, and about a bloody conflict over the use of flags.

I was thinking how to reduce the complexity of this, and many other realities to two hours. It felt that the truth which one film talks about could only be personal truth, the author's truth, told with fictional dialogue, actors, make up, repeated takes and music. So, when men with machine guns parade on film, they are only narrators of that personal author's truth, not men with machine guns from the real world.

There's plenty of those on CNN.