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Luke Balkanwalker Shoots Down Corto Maltese: Milcho Manchevski's *Dust* As An Answer to the Western Cultural Colonialism

It took seven years for Manchevski to make his second feature film. Some time was obviously required to outgrow a somewhat naive belief in the Balkan evil, emanating from his first film, *Before the Rain*, and maybe to ponder on what he would need more: a major movie award or his intellectual integrity. In my view, he also needed more time to invent so many new and unseen film images.

The new Manchevski movie is in a kind of dialogue with another great and profound movie about the Balkans, made since the war in Yugoslavia started, ***Ulysses' Gaze*** (1995) by Theodoros Angelopoulos. Angelopoulos' movie plot starts with a search for a long-lost documentary made by Balkan film pioneer Milton Manaki. This early footage of Balkan anthropology should be a key to the collective Balkan memories, and the personal memories of a hero, played by Harvey Keitel. The same woman appears in different parts of the Balkans, different historic periods, and she speaks a different Balkan tongue each time – Macedonian, Greek, Bulgarian, Serbo-Croatian. She dies in Sarajevo under siege, as the hero eventually comes closer to finding Manaki's movie. This re-appearing woman is a symbolic collective Balkan memory, oral, repressed, marginalized, victimized, excluded from the leading (male) politics and ideologies. This powerful and challenging vision was not prefered by the Western critics and juries that year. They loved Emir Kusturica's colorful, but manipulative movie about the Balkans, ***Underground***, misusing once again Roma culture, promoting stereotypical 'Serbian charm' and cunning adaptability, along with agressive sexism, and heavily falsifying the political situation in the manner which we, the locals, recognize immediately as the wisdom of a colonizer, a trickster's strategy, and an intellectualy dishonest gain. Among others, Kusturica asked for and got financial support from the Milosevic regime for this movie. Manchevski decided to choose another way. He removed without a trace of sentimentality or nostalgia the search for the Balkan memory from the space of reality, and put it back into the space of fiction, imaginary, narrative, and myth, where it has belonged anyway. Instead of lying, like Kusturica, or trying to explain, like Angelopoulos, Mancevski boldly enquired into the narrative structures, genres of dicourse, and ideologies lurking behind the popular culture. Not a little arbitrarily, he decided to put the

plot of his movie into the same period Milton Manaki witnessed through his camera – the beginning of the 20th century. And it is not by chance that the unlikely hero of his movie, a fast-drawing and mean cowboy from the Wild West decided to go to the Balkans after he saw a promising (when it comes to easy money, lawlessness, and violence) news film about the region in a cinema in Paris.

Manchevski's concept is simple, ingenious, and radically provocative: it reverses the stereotypes, and questions the economies of exchanged stereotypes. The Balkans have, until now, bought, swallowed, and immitated innumerable cultural stereotypes coming from Western culture. The best case in point is the popularity of Western movies, with their European branching into the spaghetti-Western. Other remarkable examples are comics, and contemporary action movies, which formed the whole stunning visual construct of the Yugoslav war on all sides as a quotation of popular culture - in reality. A perfect consumer, pushed by the lack of a fantasy market, by patriarchal boredom, and also by restrictions imposed by some local socialist regimes (this was not the Yugoslav case), the Balkans have engulfed everything. In return, in times of crisis, as they emerged in the global media, the Balkans are asked to reflect a picture of sheer reality, without myths and narratives, true and simple, so that the West could understand what the hell is going on out there. Instead of finding out about the 'truths', to rationalise, research, systematise, and blend everything into an emotional and poetic form with a touch of political correctness to move the Western soul, Manchevski hit back, by proposing Balkan narratives, stereotypes, myths, the Wild East. The West is scandalized. Manchevski's movie gets all kinds of silly reviews, most of them purely political. It seems that a product of a colonized country cannot compete and sell on the market controlled by a colonizer, without complying to the existing rules on power and imagination. The West preferred Kusturica with his exploited Roma people, absurd plots, exotic Balkan paranoia, instead of Angelopoulos (too reflexive and complicated) and Manchevski (too provocative). And the latest Oscar goes, quite expectedly, to a Bosnian movie (*No Man's Land*) in which the Balkan men are featured as dangerous, unpredictable, but funny and warm lunatics.

Do I exagerate? Since the war in Yugoslavia began, the West – and I am talking about my personal experience, and the experience of many of my friends – preferred simpler versions of explanation. Therefore the Western media and intellectuals were immediately exposed to many strategies of the colonized, individuals from the region, who saw right through them and discovered quickly their gaining ways: lies, false representation, flattering, begging, undeserved pompousness – everything that other locals could just helplessly

perceive without ever being heard, their explanations being much more complicated, burdened with responsibility, and demanding time and knowledge - like local languages, history, and even geography, to be quite rude and merciless. There are several elements in the Western reception of the Yugoslav war that can corroborate such hypothesis: there was a certain tendency in the general coverage of the events to promote 'authentic' discourses, like children's testimonies, everyday life descriptions instead of local expertise and analysis, less risky authors were privileged, local authors' irony, or any other form of distancing was not tolerated. This is a typical view that the colonized are but infants, whose judgment is underestimated, and testimonies are taken as raw material for further, more objective investigation, for which he does not qualify. Things are not clearly defined, and there are feelings of ambivalence. A famous joke about Western journalists coming to a refugee camp during the war in Yugoslavia, and asking for women who have been raped and speak English came from both sides, Western journalists and refugees. General public and intellectual and artistic elites in the West often exchanged their positions, and negotiated new degrees of command over information and views. Certainly many a critical voice from the region, aimed at dismantling manipulative strategies of some of those accepted and acceptable to tell the 'truth' about the war in Yugoslavia was often labelled with envy for not being chosen, instead of simply being heard. Maybe it is true that nobody really wanted to complicate their lives and torture their minds with what was going on in the Balkans. But then, how could one understand some unbelievable manipulations put forward by some Western intellectuals, entering impossible deals in the region, in order to take the position of a *Saint of a small nation*? How to understand, for instance, Peter Handke's passionate and partisan sympathy for the most exaggerated Serbian nationalism, his taking part in official Serbian manifestations during Milosevic's rule? How to understand that Alain Finkilekraut hides in France the fact he was elected Member of Croatian Academy of Sciences, or a Danish slavist Per Jacobsen, who defends the most nationalist members of Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences – being also an elected Member? Beside these, more or less clear cases, how to explain that many travellers to Sarajevo under siege preferred not to take some people out, but rather to leave their work to be translated in Sarajevo? How to explain that there is only one literary author from the former Yugoslavia who dared to criticize this behavior, Dubravka Ugrešić? Milcho Manchevski is now in her company.

The West does not like to see its culture being turned upside-down, so that all the stitches can be seen, all the strategies of colonial manipulation. That is exactly what Manchevski did in his movie. This known carnival procedure, which has its aim in showing

how the machine functions inside, and letting lose all the pressure, does not often find a positive answer from a dismantled side. The main aim of the colonizing culture is to make an object of perception and research out of the colonized culture, and certainly not the place, the subject, or the authority in explaining. The independency of the colonial 'object', and its transition into the subject of interpretation is painful, and it can lead to mistakes, lack of precision, loss of competence, even end in nationalism, native autism, provincialism, and cutting short the dialogue with the world, including the colonizer. In the case of Manchevski, a superficial sympathy and support on behalf of some Macedonian nationalists pairs a superficial criticism in the Western media. At the same time, colonizing cultures as we know them have a number of healing mechanisms, achieving transparency, and inciting tolerance: they just have to be read. Unfortunately, the back up by the media is the least credible help a colonized country might expect. Other alliances should be sought after. That is why Manchevski's challenge is so radical: no film maker from the Balkans dared to risk that much since the Yugoslav war started and ended. ***Dust*** determines that crucial moment of the loss of innocence, unveiling false appearences, and rejecting the 'wisdom' of the colonizers. It also puts an end to the strategies of hiding the goals and playing around with meaningless exoticism, and it cuts deeply into the narrative status of 'reality' in the Balkans.

Power over the story.

It is quite amazing how many new signs Manchevski invented in order to avoid simplicist explanations and understanding. In a brilliant sequence in which the old lady (Angela) forces the young thief to listen to her story, Turkish soldiers from her story disappear, according to a negotiation on convincing numbers between the two. The memory counts its own numbers. The old lady herself appears between two soldiers; a sheep with a Turkish hat replaces a missing soldier. Photos in the movie change, depending on who is telling/retelling the story.

Ironic interventions are numerous: a Macedonian village is an ironic native idealization. Neda, a perfect woman, has a cross tattooed on her forehead, speaks fluent English, and utters short slogans on killing in the name of liberty: she typifies the status of the colonized. A known character from a highly stylized comic, Corto Maltese, the ultimate wandering adventurer/colonizer, appears among the Turkish soldiers. Most of the Western public will recognize this character much easier than the story depicted on the outside wall of the village church in front of which Corto Maltese stands – the Judgement Day. When Luke

shoots down the comics' hero, a kind of poetic justice is symbolically done. For movie goers from the former Yugoslavia, quotations/allusions to the famous series of movies on ***Captain Leshi*** (1960, 1962), or ***Miss Stone*** (1985), all by the same film director, Zika Mitrovic, reinforce the effect of irony. There are other allusions and quotations too: Luke's handling of guns and gold, and misshandling of life is reminiscent of the new wave of American westerns of the late 60's and 70's, and most specifically to ***Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid*** (1969), by George Roy Hill. While the bad brother Luke gets the best of the modern Western film heritage, the good brother Elijah takes his heritage from the European spaghetti-Western. He is reminiscent of early era Clint Eastwood (***A Fistfull of Dollars***, 1966, directed by Sergio Leone), and his rhetorics are appalling – he has to repeat each of his pseudo-biblical sayings twice. There are several visual reminders which place Luke historically, and link him to the early 20th century. His vision of the past is represented in the early part of the film's visual framework, his memories and outer-grave visions are in foggy black and white; there is a burlesque scene when Luke meets Sugmund Freud on a boat to Europe, in which Freud 'vomits' the Western world onto his manuscript. There is an airplane, as the mythical death messenger. The privileged Luke's status in the story, as the uncosciousness but aggressive Western intervener is confirmed in one of the most poetic scenes in the movie, when Luke confronts a refined Turkish officer. This cultivated and at the same time brutal character tries to find out which of the civilized languages Luke speaks (French or German), amd remains utterly surprised when he discovers Luke speaks none. His communication then shrinks into a simple message on the future: 'When you see an airplane, you die!' The filght of an airplane, which transgressed from the mythical/heroic into the real/technical experience exactly at the time of the film's narrative, and needed Freud to explain its hidden sexual meaning, thus becomes the backbone metaphor of ***Dust***.

The web of quotations.

Making a collage of quotations which are part of the popular culture on the Balkans, Manchevski gives an ironical revision of his favorite Western movies. On one hand, this is a kind of intimate and local reminder, a procedure of collective memory similar to, for instance, recognizing the familiar Yugoslav scenery in the German B movies on Winetoo, in which great local actors played in episodes, and you could occasionally recognize your friends as extras – and laugh about it. This confronting of the local, well known folklore, being used by

others in non-familiar, more or less fictional plots, was one of the strongest effects of Manchevski's first movie, ***Before the rain***. But the irony in ***Dust*** is more corrosive. The basic plot is recognizable: a hero (or several heroes) comes to an idyllic village, and dies or wins defending something that he neither understands nor accepts (***Yojimbo*** 1961, Akira Kurosawa**,** ***Magnificent Seven*** 1960, John Sturges); The experienced heroes might be half-wits who do not have a clue where they are or what they are doing (***Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid***), they sometimes react to rudimentary life symbols, like gold or babies (***A Fistfull of Dollars***, 1964, Sergio Leone, ***Three Godfathers*** 1949, John Ford), including debatable concepts of honour and identity in post-modern times (***Silverado*** 1985, Lawrence Kasdan**,** ***Unforgiven*** 1992, Clint Eastwood). All of the possible varieties of Western movies are in play – classic, spaghetti, German Karl May line, 1970's American political, bloody post-modern, Asian artificiality – and they parade in Manchevski's quotations, making the profitable side of this kind of cultural colonialism look ridiculous. But there is a play with collective memory which is even more provocative: posing in woman's dress in one of the sequences from memory/vision of the dead, Manchevski 'visualizes' a theoretical maxim of today, that gender is constructed in culture. This is the clue to the three feminine characters in the movie, Lilith, Neda, and Angela. Both the unscrupulous seductress Lilith and the faithfull wife Neda have to die from male selfishness and irresponsibility. Lilith saves her human dignity by committing suicide, while Neda, killed accidentally, in an attempt to be saved, has to prolong her dying until she gives birth to a new (feminine) life. Her daughter Angela, an object of negotiation from the moment of birth, knows very well how to negotiate her own death rituals while she is dying. In exchange for gold, she manages to secure the transfer of memory/narrative, and the transfer of her body. It is less important that her ashes are returned to the 'fatherland': it is far more important that the transfer is carried out by a bearer of memory/narrative, the one capable of renewing the story, the new master of quotations, the one which would 'insert' himself on the photos, give his own number of Turkish soldiers, his own description of the bloody events, and so on. The gold takes a position of a stable quotation, its price facilitating the transfer of ashes and of memory/narrative. Thus Angela's former/further life is constructed as an empty quotation, a place for a new narrative. Manchevski gives an ironical initial intervention in a new chain of possible narratives, with a photo of Angela together with the President Tito.

Two crucial points in this sublimation of the Balkan fate, that of a woman, are Angela's birth and Angela's death, and it is not just a beginning and just an end: Angela, as her Greek name indicates, is a *messenger*, a bearer of stories, a manipulator of quotations. By

being a woman (angels are otherwise sexless), Angela is a messenger of the world of dead and the world of memories, a master of mixed strategies and techniques that enable her to intervene in the stories. In the historic anthropology of the Balkans, mostly women deal with the rituals around a dead body, which is untouchable and polluted for men, just as giving birth is. Men do not approach women in labour and newborns, as well as not approaching dead bodies. Women attend to women in labour, to newborns, and to the dead. Marked by this double *miasma* (a Latin translation of this Greek term is *pollutio*), women negotiate or fight a certain amount of power in the patriarchal community. A dead hero belongs to women, who wash him, dress him, wait over him, prepare him for the funeral, and cry over him. The limits between the manly, official world, which might include an ideological manipulation of women's grief, often presented as 'collective' grief, are not clear: they are negotiated in very different contexts. Power over death, intimacy with death, less fear of death – these are the main feminine privileges obtained in a long history of negotiations and fights, which can sometimes be capitalized in an open political struggle. This was the case of the Women in Black movement for peace during the war in Yugoslavia. Collective memory is thus a space in which women do not fight for an abstract equality, but for more power over the narrative.

Choreography of violence.

Only after understanding the position of women in Manchevski's film narartive, can we understand why the violence in the movie is an exclusively male ballet. Since some reliable insiders confirmed to me that a cat that crazy nationalists shoot at the threshold of the church in ***Before the Rain*** was a specially imported doll, I can allow myself to venture into this topic. There are three types of violence in Manchevski's movie: the everyday violence of a large city, the fictional violence of the imaginary Wild West, and the fictional violence of the imaginary (Wild) East. As the Wild West violence is part of the global popular culture and belongs to the collective memory anywhere on the planet – it is 'quotable', it is presented in black and white, as 'history'. The (Wild) East violence does not have such status in popular culture, therefore it cannot be 'historic'. It has to be presented in vivid colour, with all the possible technical devices, including a hardly digestable accumulation as a main stylistic effect: this kind of violence is constructed as a total illusion, with all the means, with full steam, at maximum speed. The red liquid flows in streams, the capsules explode under the garments, the body parts fly in all directions, some occasionally caught by a village

Šarplanina dog, the heads are rolling around or being stuck on a stick, the red flokati drying on the rocks correspond to the map of blood spilled, the flies feed on human guts as they feed on open watermellons. It is almost unbearable. But let us think about the possibilities of parodying the violence. In Oscar Wilde's famous story, the Canterville ghost switches to green ink once the red ink for the 'phantom blood stains' runs out. Monty Python often used excessive blood & cut limbs in their early TV shows and in the movies, like a fat guy exploding due to an excess of food in ***The Meaning of Life*** (1983, Terry Jones). In the Star Trek movie ***The Undiscovered Country*** (1991, Nicholas Meyer), there is plenty of pink-purple Clingon blood floating in the non-gravity space, and even the less knowlegeable Trekkies would know the basic fact that Vulcan blood is green. The question is whether Manchevski could use any of these parodying procedures, because of the lack of presence of the Balkan narratives in global popular culture. He could use only the illusionist methods, the tricks, the unashamed film magic. Educated for the political correctness, we, the public, will be more interested in the fate of the sheep, which might be the victims in the making of the movie, than in the fate of the imaginary participants in the Balkan narrative of violence. So if the fate of the sheep is secured – at least before the lambchops phase – why does the rest of the choreography of violence, shot according to the highest technical standards of the Western popular culture's imaginary of violence, provoke such harsh reactions? I am afraid that this reaction is a response to a certain 'dislocation' of the violence, moved from its known context to the unexpected, uncodified, unexpolored, non-mapped, not marketed cultural space. And this 'scandal' will remain, until the violence of any large city is – at least in the movies – considered and conceptualized as 'normal'.

Psychopompos – the souls' companion.

Besides the dominant women in the story, there is a mythical character in Manchevski's movie. A young Afro-American thief, named Edge – a 'nice Christian name', as Angela puts it – is not only the reluctant narrator who had to suffer to get the story, but also a ritual symbol. He introduces the most influential and most privileged mythical space of the Balkans, the Ancient one. 'Egde' is namely quite close to one of the epithets of the Ancient Greek god Hermes, the one who controlls passages, turns, transgressions, the god of the revolving doors. He also controls theft, gambling, signs and writing, numbers, exchange, nomadism, liminal positions and tresspassing, transgression between life and death. The other epithet of Hermes is Psychopompos, the companion of the souls. Hermes weighs the souls,

determining who is going to die and who is not. When under Hermes' control, a soul still has a memory, which disappears when the water of the rivers of the Underworld are tasted, and a soul is handed over to the ferryman, Charon. Being in charge of signs and scripture, Hermes is also in charge of memory, which can be passed on to living mortals, under certain conditions. The black Hermes in Manchevski's movie keeps and changes the memory of the dead Angela, after taking care of her soul at the moment of death. The Ancient Greeks used to put a coin - obolos - in a dead person's mouth, to pay the passage to the Underworld: Anglea pays her Hermes with her gold, which he uses to fulfill the transfer and the preservation/adaptation of memory. Hermes has to be black, to point to the position of the other in both cultures, Western and Eastern, because his black history contextualizes the cooperation of others and of marginals. Hermes is also black because he has to deny the competence over the Balkans on the side of the colonized/local, and to open the field of interpretation to anybody, including that of self-interpretation. By taking all these risks, and opening so many different debates, Manchevski made a movie which is truly 'Balkanic'.

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