

Dust - On Politics, War and Film

By Iris Kronauer

Dust is the second full-length film by the American-Macedonian director, photographer and author, Milcho Manchevski.

After making music clips, advertising spots and experimental films, he achieved a sensational film debut in the mid-nineties with *Before the Rain*, which was awarded thirty-one prizes at film festivals throughout the world, including a Golden Lion at Venice, and which was nominated for an Oscar. The low-budget production, shot in England and Macedonia, was received equally enthusiastically by critics and the public.

His first film reveals the director's interest in splitting-up linear narrative structure and in an experimental approach to time in film. Manchevski is concerned with how stories can be told in a medium whose technical capabilities have, from its very beginnings, made it an ideal instrument for showing the chronological sequence of events in a new order.

In *Dust*, this interest is continued and extended on many levels: it is not just the order in which events are shown that is important, but also who it is that is telling the story.

Manchevski set his second film in a framework that spans the twentieth century and uses three different locations: the Wild West at the beginning of the twentieth century; the declining Ottoman Empire at the same time; and today's New York, as well as a flashforward to the New York of the nineteen-forties. Its story switches in space and time between several focuses: its dying narrator, Angela; a New York petty criminal, Edge; two brothers, Luke and Elijah; a prostitute, Lilith; a pregnant village beauty, Neda, and "the teacher", a revolutionary. *Dust* begins at night on the streets of New York, homing in on a run-down apartment. In it, a burglar, Edge, is frantically searching for money, when he is surprised by its elderly inhabitant, Angela. With a shot from her revolver and a well-judged blow to the nose, she prevents Edge from fleeing. She then compels him to listen to her story. She also offers to leave him her gold, on the condition that he bury her where she was born. The lure of the gold, combined with Angela's unexpected combat skills, persuade Edge to stay on for the moment, if somewhat unwillingly. Angela begins the story of two brothers, Elijah and Luke, in the Wild West. Elijah is the younger, shy and pious, while his elder brother, Luke, is cool and tough. Both fall in love with a beautiful prostitute, Lilith. She favours Elijah and marries him, estranging the brothers. Luke leaves town – and Angela hints at clandestine relationship

between him and Lilith. Landing on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, he goes to Paris, where on a visit to a cinematograph theatre, he learns of "the teacher", a revolutionary who is leading an insurrection in the Ottoman Empire. A price of 12,000 ducats has been set on his head. Luke sets off for the 'Wild East' and joins a band of cattle thieves, hoping to kill the teacher and pocket the reward.

Luke and his band capture the teacher, but are then attacked by another band which includes, of all people, Elijah. Elijah has tracked Luke for over two years. He shoots his brother and severely wounds him. The skirmish ends with both brothers being taken captive by the Turks. The teacher has fled. At this point in the story, Angela becomes faint and Edge takes her into hospital. Back on the streets, Edge is threatened by corrupt policemen, who he owes money to. He visits Angela in hospital, hoping that she might reward him with some gold for helping her get to hospital. The only way to that, however, lies in listening to the next instalment of Angela's story.

Luke's prowess as a marksman earns the respect of the Turkish general, who sets him free. Before leaving, Luke knocks his brother down with his Colt revolver. Still badly wounded, Luke heads for the mountains, where he is found by Neda, the village beauty. She is expecting the teacher's child and attempts to win Luke over to the revolutionaries' cause, in vain. Luke is too busy trying come to terms with himself and his memories of Lilith. When the severed head of the teacher is displayed in the village by the Turkish general, Neda's father in law begs Luke to flee with his daughter in law and her unborn child. Unscrupulously, Luke takes the gold that the old man has offered him, but leaves Neda, whose contractions have already begun, behind. In a final encounter with Elijah, Luke learns of Lilith's suicide. Elijah spares his brother's life, but nonetheless, Luke dies alone, just as Neda had predicted he would.

Bit by bit, Edge's interest in Angela's tale has grown into genuine curiosity and involvement. When, at last, he discovers the gold in Angela's apartment, hidden in the fridge, he goes back to her – not without first revenging himself on the corrupt policemen. He does not tell her that he has found the gold. Only when Angela is on her deathbed does he admit to having taken her hoard. Angela, who understands that he has not returned to her out of monetary interest, can die contented. Edge fulfils Angela's last wish, bringing her ashes back to where she was born. In the plane on the way there, he tells Angela's story, in his own way, to the woman seated next to him. His is the story of the reformation of the egoistic Luke, which mirrors his own. Luke, practically risen from the dead, returns to the village to save Neda and her child. In trying to save them from the clutches of a Turkish soldier, he accidentally shoots and kills

Neda. In a last bloody showdown, Luke himself is killed by a fleeing Turkish soldier. In Neda's baby, whom she brought into the world to the deafening din of gunfire, we recognise Angela. Elijah, who has survived, finds and looks after her, promising to take her away with him.

Where does our voice go, when we are no more.

The film's message – and the existential question posed by the dying Angela – find a clear answer in the film: our voices live on in our stories and in those to whom we have told them, freely adapted and passed on by them in their turn.

Thus, times past are contained in the present-day and continue to exist in it. In one of Dust's last scenes, we see Elijah, in the ruins of the village, decide to take the baby Angela with him. Then, before us in the sky, an aeroplane appears, in which Edge is telling his version of the story to an astonished young woman. The borderlines between time past and time present are dissolved, permanently.

In the same moment, the spatial separation of the present day tale and the historical one is finally ended. It has long been called into question by anachronisms spread throughout the film: for example, the narrator's physical presence at the site of the battle; the rap music backing to the scenes in the Turkish camp, which leads in to the streets of New York.

For Manchevski, however, what is important is the relativity of the tales told: their dependence on each particular storyteller. The director highlights the mythical quality of storytelling in film (among other media). He shows Angela's pleasure at her control over her memory (she argues with Edge about the right number of the Turkish soldiers) – and with the introduction of Edge as a second narrator, he takes his argument to the extreme. After Angela dies, we can not know how she would have continued her account. Instead, we see and hear Edge, who even goes as far as to claim that he was there himself. As proof of this, he offers his disbelieving fellow-passenger a photo that shows him with the two brothers in the Wild West, at the beginning of the story.

Manchevski splits up the linear narrative in *Dust*: a more elaborate approach than that of his first film, which subverted this brilliantly through its disjointed circular structure.¹ Both parts of the plot are connected by numerous details and influence one another directly. The present-day story, which takes up half of the film, has absolutely no authority over the flashback which is embedded in it.²

Moreover, references to historical forms of visual presentation and a stylistic "tour de force" covering the history of one of the most popular of all film genres intimate that, at the beginning of a new century in cinematography, Manchevski is also interested in an aesthetic debate about new ways of telling stories in mainstream film and, further, in the question of what stories will be shown in cinemas.

¹ cf. Erik Tängerstad: *Violence – Visualised and Viewed. An Exertion on the films Before the Rain and Dust*, (due for publication).

² cf. Beatrice Kobow, *Wie funktioniert ein kubistischer Eastern ? Zur Zeit – und Erzählstruktur in Milcho Manchevski's Film Dust*. (beatkob@hotmail.com)

After the Rain – or How to Become a Slav.

Manchevski began work on the script for *Dust* soon after his first film was completed. Initially developed at Miramax, a first draft script was ready in 1995. After disagreements over the budget, *Dust* was developed further at Robert Redford's Southfork Pictures. Richard Gere expressed interest in the part of Luke – it was at this time that Manchevski changed the setting from the Macedonian revolt to the Mexican revolution.

In spite of that, no agreement was reached with Gere. The project was then offered to producers and backers internationally. After several attempts to put together European co-productions, the passing involvement of scores of actors with the project and yet more changes of location (Turkey, too, was under consideration) the project was ready for filming in spring 1999 in Macedonia, as an English, Italian, German and Macedonian co-production. At this time, however, NATO began its bombing of Yugoslavia and insurers were not willing to carry the risk of covering filming on location in the neighbouring (and formerly Yugoslavian) republic of Macedonia. It was not until 2000 that *Dust* could be shot: in New York, Cologne and Macedonia. The post-production work was done in London during 2000-2001.

Even before the film's world premiere in 2001, in Venice, the director was being confronted with questions about the relationship of the fictional, historical content of his film to current politics. Some suggested that Luke, the bounty hunter who suddenly finds himself in the turmoil of the Balkans without any idea as to what is happening, might symbolise NATO and its situation there.³ Interpretations of films in the light of current events are nothing uncommon, but this approach seldom does justice to the films themselves, which have usually been many years in the making.

In the case of *Dust*, this meant, from the very beginning, that it would be difficult to keep the finished film separate from the current political debate on NATO's 'Balkan' theatre of operations, irrespective of whether this meant Kosovo, Macedonia or another part of the region.⁴ A statement on the political situation there was expected of Manchevski, who has lived in the USA for the last twenty years, as a matter of course. In contrast, questions about

³ Quoted from LA Times, David Holley: Film explores a timeless 'Dust' swirling in the Balkans, June 6th, 2001.

⁴ Ibid. "Loosely based on history from the final years of the Ottomans, 'Dust' can be seen as an artistic commentary on the wars that tore the Yugoslav federation as it broke up in the 1990s. ... In some respects the

New York, the city in which *Dust* begins and in which half of the action takes place, were never put to him.

In April 2001, a detailed report on the filming done in 2000 appeared in a British newspaper, *The Guardian*. This had even more significance for the reception of *Dust*. It was accompanied by a subsequent interview with the director about the state of the conflict that was already smouldering between Macedonian government forces and the ethnic Albanian UCK.

Manchevski took a clear stance against the view (widely propagated in the Western media) that this was yet another ethnic conflict in the Balkans⁵, pointing out the mafia-style activities of the armed groups concerned (in drugs, people-smuggling and acquiring land) and condemning their violent tactics⁶.

His remarks were not printed without the comment that the director himself belonged to the Slav majority, synonymous in a large section of the Western press with potential 'oppressors': *Manchevski, it has to be said, is a Slav...*

Here, the Western media's already questionable emphasis on an ethnic explanation of recent wars on the territory of ex-Yugoslavia became personalised: Manchevski's support for peace in Macedonia could, in the eyes of the media, no longer be considered without categorising him ethnically as a "Slav".

In his article "Just a moral obligation," the director again made a public statement in support of peace in Macedonia, just a few weeks before the premiere of *Dust*. Moreover, it received considerable media attention. He demanded that NATO take back the weapons which it had once given to the so-called Kosovo Liberation Army, who now made up most of the UCK's 'ethnic cleansers' in Macedonia.

film foreshadows the current fighting in Macedonia – which seceded peacefully from the Yugoslav federation – between ethnic Albanian guerrillas and government forces. ..."

⁵ cf. critical comment on this: Norbert Mappes Niedeck, *Balkan Mafia. Staaten in der Hand des Verbrechens – Eine Gefahr für Europa*, Berlin 2003, p.13: After the smiles and the peace accord, after the odd arrangements made subsequently, a horrible suspicion began to dawn on the viewer up in the gallery: the conflict in Macedonia had not been about minority rights, but about protection money and spheres of influence – and the protagonist had not been a subjugated, or even a roused people, but a criminal underworld that had crawled up into the light of day.

⁶ "When the world feels sorry for the Albanians, I think they should remember their grievances are not so great that they justify going to war....Too much has been made of this stuff about centuries-old hatreds. At least a part of the shooting is about local strongmen being able to keep their thieftoms so there are open roads for smuggling, the drug trade and who runs the brothels and gets first go. It is that basic for a lot of these guys with the guns. There is a big problem with crime, drug-running and prostitution among the Albanian community and it has got to be faced up to." *Guardian*, Friday Review, April 13th, 2001, p.4.

This obligation, Manchevski wrote, was rooted in both morality and realpolitik and he demanded that it be fulfilled by NATO: thus he favoured a NATO operation in Macedonia. When the Venice Film Festival began at the end of August, the article was known to many of the reporters there from its publication in *The Guardian* and in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Neither of these newspapers had used the title⁷ that Manchevski had supplied. Rather, they had decided to base the headline on his criticism of NATO, thus placing undue emphasis on Manchevski's apportioning of guilt to NATO and obscuring the point of what he was saying. The *Guardian* article did not mention Manchevski's demand that weapons be taken back at all.

Collateral Damage in Venice

Dust had its world premiere in 2001 at the Film Festival in Venice. It was the opening film of the festival and triggered off a furore among film critics and journalists. The majority of leading international film reviewers tore the film apart. Scandal and controversy are nothing unusual at major film festivals.

They were accompanied, however, by defamatory attacks, accusing Manchevski of racism, that are without parallel in the recent history of contemporary film journalism. Moreover, it was insinuated that the director was trying to put across a crude political message, even propaganda. The factual basis of such arguments was seldom drawn from an analysis of the film, but from what their authors knew of the situation in the recent conflict in Macedonia and of Manchevski's public statements. As conveyed by the media⁸ - and supported politically by the USA and the EU - attacks by the Macedonian UCK appeared to be a legitimate fight by the Albanian minority against the so-called 'Slav' majority of the Macedonian population. Manchevski's criticism of the UCK's violent behaviour did not fit into this picture.

Manchevski's experiment with narrative structure, on the other hand, was also dismissed by those critics who had not taken part in the convenient politicisation of the film.⁹

⁷ Title in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 25th August 2001: *The Seed of Armed Violence. NATO is to blame for Macedonia's Fate.* *The Guardian Online* of 15th August 2001 used the title: *NATO gave us this Ethnic Cleansing.* The text appeared first in *DVEVNIK*, in the Belgian paper *DE STANDAARD*, in *Pravda* and in internet publications: cf. Marina Kostova, *The Dust Files: One Example of how Macedonia lost the War for Truth. The West with a Skeleton in the Closet.* *realitymacedonia.com.* Jan 16th 2002.

⁸ cf. critical comment on this: Andreas Ernst: *Verborgene Facetten der Krise in Macedonia. Entwicklung vom intraethnischen zum interethnischen Konflikt*, in: *NZZ*, 22&23/12/01.

⁹ Referring to the article, Urs Jenny wrote in *Der Spiegel*: "Measured against this, his film - imagining a past in which good and evil still seemed clearly distinguishable from one another - is overwhelmingly naive. It is pure - and even in the wildest slaughter, highly virtuoso - cinematic spectacleManchevski has great - and also very literary - ambitions, but he is most convincing in his successful resurrection of the Spaghetti Western in Macedonian costume...", *Roulette der Gewalt, Augenausstechen als Leitmotiv*, *Spiegel online* 5/9/2001.

Commentators such as Alessandro Baricco, best-selling Italian author, who vehemently defended the film and recognised its innovative nature¹⁰, remained exceptions. A significant number of positive reviews, together with the positive audience reactions at the film's public screenings, went unnoticed in the general hustle and bustle of the Festival¹¹.

The basis of the accusation of racism¹² faced by the director was the criticism made by an English film critic, Alexander Walker, of his portrayal of the occupying Turkish forces in *Dust*. Without taking the film's narrative context into consideration, Walker had already reproached Manchevski for his depiction of the Turks during the press conference in Venice. The critic's blinkered ethnic approach to the film culminated in his asking the director whether, with *Dust*, Manchevski was trying to torpedo Turkey's application for EU membership.

His review also includes a cheap attempt to equate the cowboys with NATO:

Milcho Manchevski's *Dust* isn't a disaster: far from it. But it is a film with very disturbing racist overtones... It is promoted as a Spaghetti Western, Sergio Leone-style. But it appears to have a more insidious and contemporary political agenda: the cowboys can be seen as representing mercenary America getting involved in overseas civil wars in which it has no standing. The Turks are treated as gibbering hyenas in red fezzes, indiscriminately and repugnantly caricatured. The fact that Turkey is currently pushing its claim to become a European Union member - a move that wouldn't be welcomed in Manchevski's native Macedonia, or in Greece, either - makes *Dust*'s timing not just unfortunate, but downright suspicious.¹³

¹⁰ "I like *Dust*. It is an open work with everything and it's opposite, it combines linguistic fragments and archetypes to create a product so un-polished that the Americans would have shot down in flames... The critics are not prepared for films and books like these. It would be like going to the mountains in a bathing costume and being surprised by the cold, like seeing a locomotive for the first time and saying 'Where are the horses?' .It's lucky that the public is more intuitive about works like these than the critics." Quoted from Vizzavi.it, Speciale Venezia.

¹¹ The journalist, Maria Pia Fusco, in a public discussion on *Dust* with Alessandro Baricco and the Italian co-producer, Domenico Procacci: "It is a film, that in its almost total negative criticism can be credited with uniting the right, the left and the centre. But it has to be said that though the press screening ended with applause and whistles, the public in the main theatre (Sala Grande) received it very well." Quoted from Vizzavi.it, Venezia 2001.

¹² cf. e.g. Rüdiger Suchsland on the press conference in artechok.de: "This film, financed not least with grant money from Germany and Great Britain, caused controversy less because of its sometimes exaggerated bloodbaths, than because of its wholly one-dimensional portrayal of the occupying Turks - it was difficult to contradict those who spoke of this as racism."

¹³ This is London online, September 4th, 2001. Walker stood by his view of the film when *Dust* was released in England, in only a few cinemas, in early May 2002. He vehemently attacked one of its backers, Civilian Content, for investing British Lottery money in the film. cf. Alexander Walker: *Dusty and Dire*, in: This is London (The Evening Standard Online), May 3rd, 2002: "My revulsion watching it was redoubled by my shame as a minor shareholder in the company, Civilian Content, that controls the National Lottery franchise which invested 1,699.000 (pounds) in it. I'm currently a loser on my shares. The public are even bigger losers - on the movie. With the aged squeezed for pensions, school desperate for teachers and hospitals bereft of almost everything, aren't we generous financing obnoxious bits of Balkan history like *Dust*?"

Even though other reviewers did not refer to Walker's abstruse suggestion regarding the EU, his politicising agenda-setting was successful.

"The business with the Turks" even appeared stereotypically in reviews where one may legitimately doubt whether their authors had actually seen the film concerned:

The story, which links up America at the beginning of the twentieth century with modern-day Macedonia in the midst of the Balkan wars (at no point in the film is it about Macedonia today – IK), seems extremely contrived, while the ghastly endless shoot-outs in the style of a Balkan-Italo western became increasingly boring. Added to this is his political message, almost propaganda, which gives the Turks, in particular, a very raw deal.¹⁴

A direct relationship between the portrayal of the Turks and Manchevski's political activities was drawn by Jan Schulz Ojala, writing in Berlin's *Tagesspiegel* newspaper. With questionable logic that serves only to arrive at his final denunciation, the critic abridges and falsifies the form and content of *Dust* in a hair-raising manner, to the point at which it lets him relate Manchevski's political articles directly to the film's story. He identifies three levels in the film, of which one relates to the encounter between Edge and Angela after the former has broken into the latter's New York apartment. The second level relates to the Macedonian part of the story, told by Angela.

The third shows several extensive, rural, battle scenes, in which the Turks come on as stupid, loud, cackling villains (against noble Macedonians whose honour and sovereignty has been injured) so that after committing a number of provocatively gruesome crimes, they can be justly mown down by the surviving Macedonians. ... Dust is loud in its concept, confused in its structure and wholly lacking in humour – in the shape of an Eastern-Western, it seems like a propaganda film for Manchevski's thesis, disguised in a historicising veil: instead of the Albanian Muslims, it is the Ottomans here who behave like the epitome of savages, while the Macedonians are as innocent as lambs and go to the slaughter in droves. And seen like this, the young black, who the old lady explains the Balkans to, is nothing other than the West itself, which in the fight against eternal Ottoman Islam needs, to an extent, to be woken up with trumpet blasts. The caricature-killer aesthetic with which the Turks are stereotypically depicted – and that is the scandal – has something undeniably (neo)-Fascist. What on earth where the Festival's organisers thinking of when they chose this film to open the programme? Surely it can not have been the sarcastic pleasure of making at least Berlusconi's friends on the far-Right happy.

Schulz-Ojala was not only irresponsibly free with his accusation of neo-Fascism. His article also thoughtlessly glossed-over real acts of violence taking place in Macedonia, which had

cost innocent people their lives. At the same time, he denounced Manchevski's political activities in support of peace there as mere ethnic self-interest. The critic also introduced another contemporary conflict into *Dust's* story: the West's struggle with Islam. The depiction of violence in *Dust* has many faces. They are certainly beyond ethnic categorisation.

¹⁴ Erwin Heberling, Die Politik kehrt zurück: Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica, Venedig 2000 (sic), in: schnitt.com.

What you see is what you get

Domenico Procacci ¹⁵, the Italian co-producer of *Dust*, is not alone in saying that the hostile attitude of the press towards the film had already been adopted before it was shown at the afternoon press previews on the 28th and 29th of August.

In strong contrast to Cannes, the opening film is not without controversy: "Dust" – by Milcho Manchevski, who won a Golden Lion in 1994 with his debut film, "Before the Rain". "Dust" is a hard Balkan-Western, a Cain and Abel story in the guise of two cowboys from Arizona – Joseph Fiennes and David Wenham – who in 1912 get caught up in the turmoil of the first great Balkan war at the time of Atatürk. It is a film that is uncompromising in its opinions (see Manchevski's article on the Macedonian conflict in the SZ of 25/8)...¹⁶

Here it is implied that Manchevski is uncompromising as a political commentator and that this attitude is reflected directly in his work as a film-maker.

In Venice, numerous critics concentrated (as did the preview report in the SZ) on the Macedonian part of *Dust*'s storyline, thus ignoring half of the film that they were supposed to be reviewing. Since both parts of it are inextricably bound together by the narration, this not only dispensed with the New York element of the plot, but also falsely represented the element which was actually discussed.

Above all, this facilitated the wholly arbitrary association of the film's storyline with the then political situation in Macedonia.

Dust is based on a personal discovery: in photos, the last cowboys of the American West look just like the wild bands of men who rose up in rebellion against centuries of Turkish rule in 1912. So Manchevski sends two young men from Oklahoma to the Balkan war of the time: Luke (David Wenham) is a bounty hunter in search of riches; Elijah (Joseph Fiennes) is a cuckolded husband in search of revenge. They become involved in the fight for freedom, the ethnic butchery, that exacts a bloody tribute from Turks and Macedonians alike. On one occasion, it is a herd of sheep that is caught in the crossfire; on another, the village harvest.

¹⁵ Procacci in the panel discussion about *Dust*, cf. veneziafilmfestival.com, Meeting Domenico Procacci and Alessandro Baricco.

*Huge water melons burst next to soldiers' heads – and afterwards, myriads of flies descend on what is left. All this is difficult to bear and it serves only one purpose, if any: to point out, yet again, to the parties in the current Macedonian conflict how necessary it is to search for peaceful solutions.*¹⁷

At Venice¹⁸, and in later interviews too, Manchevski never tired of emphasising that the idea and script for *Dust* had been developed over many years beforehand – and moreover, that he was not interested in making political films – but the film's timing left him caught in an historical trap.

In addition to this, some critics had specific ideas about the artistic position that Manchevski, as a director, should have taken up in his work with regard to the events then unfolding. In *The Guardian*, for example, Peter Bradshaw wrote about his linkage of a modern story, located in New York, with the Macedonian one:

*Putting a modern perspective on the abyss of central European warfare and bloodshed is a shrewd idea; the shootout sequences between noble peasants and fez-wearing Turks are unusual to the point of delirium, and Manchevski finds pleasingly cruel twists in juxtaposing the crime and corruption of modern Manhattan with the distant war of Macedonia. But there is something obtuse and disingenuous in finding this modernity not in the obvious fact of NATO intervention, but in a hip-hop New York crime scene, where no one knows that this history has real, contemporary meanings and repercussions quite distinct from Manchevski's sentimental phantasy. He gives Macedonian identity an apolitical sheen of stylistic cool, just as Luke and Elijah get to do a sort of glamorous *Butch – and Sundance – in Bolivia* riff.¹⁹*

Here, Manchevski is actually expected to relate his work to current affairs²⁰. His artistic freedom is limited to the role imagined for him by the critic as a director who commentates in film on the current political situation in the 'crisis region'. As a director who is not aiming for a quasi-realistic filmic portrayal of current events such as "the obvious fact of NATO

¹⁶ SZ, 29/08/2001.

¹⁷ SZ, 31/08/2001(Tobias Kniebe).

¹⁸ cf. e.g. Rüdiger Suchsland's interview with the director in *Tagesspiegel* online of 4/9/01.

¹⁹ *Guardian* online, 1/9/2001.

²⁰ cf. also David Stratton, in *Variety*, "There's also a mean-spirited feel to the film, which, seen in the context of contemporary conflicts in the Balkans, hardly provides a positive message about this war-torn part of the world."

intervention", but rather of the New York hip-hop scene among other things, he is, however, dismissed.

A similar argument was put forward by James Christopher in The Times of 3rd September 2001:

Like "Titanic", the whole thing takes on a misty rose-tinted view of the past. And by uncomfortable proxy, the present Balkan crisis...yet the film blindly makes assumptions about ancient Balkan grudges which wouldn't look amiss in a Mel Brooks film.... Manchevski hits important nerves but his politics, like his twin stories are all over the place. True, Dust is not a piece of 'realist' cinema, but having placed his film in the teeth of a deadly serious conflict, can he really shrug off the responsibility?

The idea of taking the history of the "Balkans" as a subject of popular culture – along the lines of Butch Cassidy & The Sundance Kid, or a Mel Brooks film – seems not to conform to the critic's idea²¹ of an artistic statement appropriate to a director who comes from a 'crisis region'. This, it seems, is expected to maintain a direct political relationship and thus fit in with the picture of the region prefigured by the media.

In the FAZ, Andreas Kilb tried to explain why 'old' south-eastern Europe as a whole is not suitable for projecting the Western genre onto:

It is true that Dust attempts to transfer American cinema formulas to old south-eastern Europe. That this proves unsuccessful has nothing to do with Manchevski's quality as a director, or with the abilities of his actors; rather, it has to do with the historical subject. The revolt of the Balkan peoples against the Turks was, after all, not a struggle for new land and personal freedom, but a war of blood ties, language, customs and religion. They too had wide-brimmed hats, rifles and horses, but beyond the mountains lay not the prairie, rather the

²¹ Svetlana Slapsak has suggested that the creation of its own stereotypes, the countless ironic quotes from other Westerns in *Dust* and the creation of its own narrative space for the 'Wild East' are the main reasons for its rejection by critics in the West. "The West does not like to see its culture turned upside-down. So that all the stitches can be seen, all the strategies of colonial manipulation.... 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...". Luke Balkanwalker shoots down Corto Maltese: Milcho Manchevski's *Dust* as an answer to Western cultural colonialism, in: *Identities, Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture*, vol. 1, no.3, 2002, p.97.

*village of the other ethnic group – and the cowboys were goatherds, who fought over the land of their forefathers.*²²

Leaving aside the fact that artistic freedom should allow the director to decide which stories he tells and in which genres, one may ask in return whether the extermination of the American Indians in the west of the continent by the US Army, railway companies, settlers, gold-diggers, adventurers and bandits was the legitimate prerequisite for the rise of the popular Western genre. The brutal and racist history of the 'Wild West' (and was that really anything other than a war of blood ties, language, customs and religion?) did not prevent directors from making superb Western films. Kilb's perception of south-eastern Europe reads like a contemporary illustration of Maria Todorova's thesis of the construction of the Balkans as an especially violent, bloodthirsty counterpart to the supposedly civilised countries of Europe.²³ The aesthetic debate that *Dust* calls for was denied by the critics in Venice.

Interest centred on relating *Dust* to the current political situation, which was only possible by limiting consideration of the film to its Macedonian elements. For one thing, its director's political activities were used to (mis)interpret the film. However, it also became clear that the critics were not minded to accept a film that did not make a political statement on contemporary events. The creation of a narrative space in the 'Wild East', which turned not just a piece of Macedonian, but also of European history into an epic film, seemed to them politically suspect, culturally unacceptable and artistically misguided.

Much of the Western perception of the creative position of a director from the 'Balkans' is revealed in what an art historian said to me about *Dust*: aesthetically an extremely successful piece – if only the director had not related his story to Macedonian history.

As far as the public are concerned, as long as film distributors rely on reviews such as those from Venice (and with *Dust*, they did so), few films that, like *Dust*, are daring in their aesthetics, form and content will make it into the cinemas.

²² FAZ, 30/08/01.

²³ cf. Maria Todorova, *Die Erfindung des Balkans. Europas bequemes Vorurteil*, Darmstadt 1999.

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