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The “Dust” Files: One Example of How Macedonia Lost the War for Truth

The West with a Skeleton in the Closet

The Venice critics agreed on how to welcome the film two days before they got to see it!

An English critic – Alexander Walker - comes up with a brilliant thought: he claims that the goal of “Dust” is to block Turkey’s admission to the EU!

The German *Der Tagespiegel* declared the film anti-Albanian and Neo-Fascist, saying: “*Instead of the Albanian Muslims we have here the Ottomans as the ,untermenschen’ and the Macedonians are as innocent as lambs, which are slaughtered during the film numerously. And the black boy whom the old woman explains the Balkans to, is nobody else than the West, who has to be waken up by the sounds of the fanfare and fight against the everlasting Osmanic Islam.*”

Western critics tried to fit a Macedonian film into their own inaccurate picture of the events “down there.”

For the first time ever, a country under attack by imported and local gangs declaring themselves a “Liberation Army” while carrying out ethnic cleansing, murder and outright plunder has been declared racist because it tries to defend the law and order. The US and EU political elites embraced the position of the terrorists in Macedonia, pronouncing them fighters for human rights; consequently, the image of Macedonia in foreign media reports was seen from that perspective. The US and the EU, in fact, used this story in front of their own constituencies to help them hide their responsibility for the spillover of the Kosovo crisis over the border into Macedonia.

Macedonia, its political establishment in particular, failed to produce an articulated response to this political and media behavior of the EU and the US. Whatever our politicians told us, they were not heard by the world. The battle for the truth about Macedonia was, and still is, fought outside institutions. It is fought on web sites, such as www.realitymacedonia.org.mk or www.ok.mk, it is fought by countless personal protests and letters to foreign journalists regarding their reports, letters to European and world politicians and institutions...

Ultimately, the only one who called to task the West and asked for accountable behavior in this dangerous situation was Milcho Manchevski. This he did in his article “Just a Moral Obligation” and in numerous interviews he gave before and during the Venice Film Festival for the foreign media. His case is enlightening.

At the end of August, a week before “Dust” opened the Venice Film Festival, Manchevski published an opinion piece in the eminent *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* entitled “Just a Moral Obligation”. The London *Guardian* and the Skopje *Dnevnik* printed the same text; it was also widely distributed on the Internet. (Manchevski did not offer his article to *The Guardian*. The London-based paper downloaded it from the Internet, changed the title, cut off the end and made several modifications to the body itself. The Slovene film critic Miha Brun published a comparison between the original and the text “fixed” by the editors of *The Guardian*.)

Several lines of Manchevski’s commentary sum up his view: “Macedonia is collateral damage to NATO’s involvement in the Balkans. Body bags are not sexy, so NATO chose to let the militants keep their western weapons. NATO’s Kosovo escapade did much more than arm and train the militants who now execute a classical blowback. It escalated the conflict in the Balkans to a higher level. The psychological effect of the entire world putting itself on the side of the Great Cause (as seen by the Albanian extremists) has given a boost to their armed secessionist struggle. Ethnic cleansing and occupying territories is an advanced step in redrawing borders. The US has a moral obligation to stop the Albanian extremists from turning Macedonia into another Afghanistan (the article was written in July, two months before September,11) or Cambodia, two sad examples of blowback and collateral damage from American involvement”, - Manchevski writes in “Just a Moral Obligation”.

The Moscow *Pravda* also published this commentary, as did the Belgian *De Standaard*. The latter paired it up with a “response” from an Albanian reader. *De Standaard* thus shifted the emphasis of the article from an argument for re-establishing peace to an inter-ethnic debate. In other words, Manchevski’s article echoed around the world as a “defense” of the Macedonian position during a war, much louder even than the voice of the Macedonian government itself (Macedonian government officials’ statements and press-conferences rarely – if ever – received this much attention by the global press).

“Dust” or “Saving Private Ryan”

To what extent his expose affected western culture analysts and political analysts became clear in the initial western media reactions to Manchevski’s film “Dust.” They did not argue directly with his commentary, but instead projected their prejudices concerning Macedonia onto the film. In case we forget – “Dust” was the first Macedonian-made product unveiled to the world on an equal footing during the war. It was our film that opened the Venice Film Festival.

Hardly any regular moviegoer expected the charged reception of the film. Here, however, we are not discussing whether the film deserves good or bad reviews. The reviews of “Dust” were not, in fact, aesthetic evaluations of the film. They were, rather, reactions to a high-profile and ambitious product coming from Macedonia and – what is even more disturbing – reactions (negative) to a well-researched and proud view on one’s own history. In other words, western critics reacted instinctively and negatively because someone dared show the Macedonian history – and by extension, present – differently from their own perception of Macedonia. Furthermore, Manchevski did so with an extraordinarily self-assured artiste hand (and with no excuses whatsoever).

The German critic Fritz Gottler implies in the high-circulation *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (the same paper that published Manchevski's commentary) that many of the international critics in Venice discussed how to welcome Manchevski's new film two whole days before it was screened. The critics decide how to welcome the film before they actually get to see it!

Now that the film has been applauded in Toronto, Macedonia, Tokyo, Taipei, Thessaloniki, it becomes evident that the critics had an agenda of their own.

David Stratton, the critic for Hollywood *Variety* implies that "Dust" is replete with violence, so that it's hardly believable that the western audience will accept it. Right here is the real reason for the negative reactions emerges (reactions rebuffed by Alessandro Baricco and by many regular viewers evaluating "Dust" on film web sites). It was the western cinema that invented film violence to satisfy the needs of western viewers. The Indians, or Russians, or Poles, or Japanese, or Macedonians did not invent film violence, and it is never put up on the screen for their sake. When an experienced critic attributes excessive violence to "Dust," it cannot be a coincidence. In fact, there are 7 or 8 minutes of violence in "Dust," as opposed to the 45 minutes of brutality in "Saving Private Ryan," brutality that in Spielberg's (excellent) film goes as far as hands and legs exploding all around; not to mention films like "Pulp Fiction," "Schindler's List" or "Seven," Shakespeare's bloody plays, or even the Bible for that matter. David Stratton feels free to employ double standards – one set for the Hollywood/western films, and another set for the films from other countries, i.e. "eastern films."

The arrogance of the western pseudo-critics goes so far that they do not even try to conceal their racism and political agenda. The TV audience had the opportunity to see Alexander Walker from the London *Evening Standard* accusing Manchevski that he had made a racist film, showing the Turks "as herd of a corrupt people who gibber like apes in red fezes, and are more violent and far less responsible than Macedonians". Walker then asked Manchevski: "I wonder what you think the effect will be upon contemporary Turkey which is at the present moment trying to enter the European Union. Do you have a political agenda by this film?" (Manchevski only said: "Thank you for your statement.") Those who have seen the film (a few thousand at festivals on three continents, and more than 70,000 in Macedonia, the only country where the film has opened in the theaters) can assess for themselves whether Walker's claim that the film is racist is substantiated, or whether it is but a brazen forgery and callous attack. The viewers can see for themselves if "Dust" is a racist piece of art, or rather a film featuring both good guys and bad guys, blood-thirsty and innocents on all sides (of the ethnic divide). The film, actually, does not deal with ethnic issues at all; it deals with sacrifice and selfishness, regardless of ethnic colors. Anyway, even if it were a racist film (?!), it is unconceivable that a film may, even if it seeks to, stop a country from being admitted to the European Union.

The British got carried away the most in the political showdown with the Macedonian co-production. Apart from Walker, Peter Bradshaw refers to "Dust" in *The Guardian* as "a special pleading for Macedonian nationalism." In Macedonia nobody took up arms on seeing "Dust." On the contrary, many had already taken up arms paid for with *The Guardian* journalists' tax money. Those who'd taken up arms had been trained by *The Guardian* journalists' fellow citizens. These reporters display knee-jerk negative reaction to a film trying to portray the relativity of recounting history when it's

written by the mightier, a film stating loud and clear the historical fact that Macedonians have suffered at the hands of ravaging Albanian gangs.

Macedonian philosopher Katarina Kolozova had a similar experience with her renowned colleagues. A philosophical article she wrote was unexpectedly blasted by an eminent Paris professor who referred to it as “nationalistic.” After one looks at the topic of the article, things become clearer. Kolozova argues for equality of the intellectual discourse and ideas coming from the small countries and those in the West. Kolozova is among those theoreticians (such as the Bulgarian Marija Todorova and the Slovene Slavoj Zizek) who contend that small countries are entitled to independence in assessing their own image, and who oppose the patronizing attitude of the West. Many highly acclaimed western minds are not ready to come to terms with this attitude of the “natives.”

Innocent Lambs and Blood-Thirsty Murderers

Why did western journalists fail to see an apolitical film (which tells tales of adventures, cowboys, speaks of history, love, suffering and of the power of storytelling)? Why did they interpret this film as a contemporary political parable on the situation in Macedonia? Several Italian and German critics contend that all westerners in the film are shown as bad, as if the good Angela and Elijah are not Americans, and the blood-thirsty Major and the Teacher are not from the Balkans (one a Turk, the other a Macedonian). Maybe this is but a reflex which has to do with the old skeleton in one's closet.

Things finally become crystal clear when put in context. The German “critic” *Jan Schulze-Ojala* in *Der Tagesspiegel* says that “Dust” is an illustration of Manchevski's newspaper article “Just a Moral Obligation,” as if the director could write a screenplay, shoot and edit a film in two weeks, a process that usually takes two years at least (in the case of “Dust” it took as many as seven years; as a matter of fact the film was conceived – AND FILMED before the war in Macedonia even started). The same critic further claims that the film is anti-Albanian because “*Instead of the Albanian Muslims we have here the Ottomans as the ,untermenschen‘ and the Macedonians are as innocent as lambs, who are slaughtered during the film numerously. And the black boy whom the old woman explains the Balkans to, is nobody else than the West, who has to be waken up by the sounds of the fanfare and fight against the everlasting Osmanic Islam. The killerface aesthetic with which the Turks are portrayed does have - and that is the scandal – something (neo) fascistic about it.*” Talk of projecting!

Claiming that Manchevski with “Dust” illustrates the war in Macedonia, the critic of the *London Times*, James Christopher, says :”Manchevski hits important nerves but his politics, like 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?” He, however, does not mention that the conflict the film speaks about is over 100 years old, and that this new war in Macedonia, which is different from the one a century ago, happened AFTER the film was made.

The Croatian *Jutarnji List*, one month before Venice, published vitriolic criticism written by the prominent Bosnian writer Miljenko Jergovic (who had fled Sarajevo when it was under siege), accusing Manchevski of “Macedonian nationalism, failure

to understand the historical situation of the Albanians...” Jergovic did not note that he himself had not been to Macedonia.

As if to continue the political fuss engulfing the film, the most frequent questions in the numerous interviews Manchevski gave in Venice (at least 120 for several countries) had to do with the political crisis in Macedonia. The film was seen through the prism of politics. Even at the gala entrance preceding the opening of the festival, an occasion generally used for glamorous show-biz fluff, Manchevski was asked about the fate of NATO troops in Macedonia (whereupon he answered that those who distributed arms to the militants are now collecting them back). The day after the opening night of “Dust” in Venice, the Associated Press agency released the (erroneous) information that Manchevski was retiring from directing.

Finally, has Macedonia learned its lesson from this battering? Has it learned that the mighty play dirty, and that they punch below the belt, and that when your fate is being tailored by the bigger and the mightier it is very important for the world to hear your side of the truth, no matter what the consequences?

The case of “The ‘Dust’ Files” is telling because the western media gave its bias away – and because the rest of us failed to use the opportunity to speak in a public place about our problems and about our truth. This distortion then becomes only a small piece in the mosaic of a political struggle.

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<http://www.vest.com.mk/default.asp?id=19601&rubrika=Revija&idg=2&idb=440>

posted on http://www.realitymacedonia.org.mk/web/news_page.asp?nid=1322)