

Living/Reliving  
Before the Rain

by Thomas Woodard

Though the camera doesn't lie, it cannot make us see truth, which is invisible. Truth is living.

And how could movie reviews tell the truth? (If one picture is worth a thousand words, what can 500 do?)

In any case, movie reviews don't view, much less re-view or pre-view, films: they are merely lines of print pretending to transmute two hours of images that seem to move into 500 words that seem to boil down to a single definitive judgement such as, "this is a good (or bad) movie", "you'll like (or hate) it", "it's worth seeing (or a waste of time), because it has these strong (or weak) points".

The above paragraphs, though, are not the preface to a movie review (with its multiple social and commercial functions), but to verbal reflections on a few aspects of *Before the Rain* (1994) - that is, a piece of writing, which, just like a review, can bear no immediate, direct, or simple resemblance to the film itself.

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Written and directed by Milcho Manchevski, a Macedonian who has lived in New York; internationally produced (Macedonia, France, UK); and with its three leading roles assigned to actors of three different nationalities and three different native languages - an English actress as Anne, English, who can get by in French; a French actor as Kiril, a young Macedonian monk who also knows some French; and a Yugoslavian actor playing Aleksandar Kirkov, a polyglot character speaking English, Macedonian, and Albanian, plus probably other languages - and including on its sound track Macedonian, Albanian and Serbian, as well as English and snatches of French and German - *Before the Rain* confronts us throughout with cultural, ethnic, and linguistic barriers which cut people off from one another in miscommunication or antagonism yet which love or compassion can instantaneously bring crashing to the ground.

After introducing itself as "a tale in three parts", the movie eventually numbers and names each part. The first is "Words". More basic than the various languages that distinguish communities is the human capacity to speak or remain silent. The first character appearing in the film has in fact taken a vow of silence, and his later disavowal of silence is a major turn in the drama. But words are not only chosen or avoided by the characters inside the story: they are an element of the film itself. They appear visually in two lines of verse before the credits ("my blood aches from waiting..."), in the title and credits, and in its opening announcement of itself as a story; they appear audibly. In this way, words are fundamental to *Before the Rain* - on its first frames, in its script and throughout its action. In the beginning were the words. The title of the first part thus evokes a Christian text and the Christian motif of the Word of God. First episode in the movie: a monastic garden, with two Eastern Orthodox Catholic monks, the older one

garrulous, carrying on a what he refers to as a "one-sided conversation" with the silent Kiril. This episode, which begins without spoken words, dwelling on Kiril's work picking tomatoes, ends with the older monk remarking on the vast magnificent landscape (and seascape) surrounding them: "this heavenly beauty merits words".

Two other parts then complete the trinity. "Faces" suggests the characters in the drama, especially in close-ups, and the actors used in filming. "Pictures" calls attention to photography: still photos, the film's own frames and visual art, as well as Anne and Aleksandar's profession.

Words are transpersonal public coin. Faces are personal yet publically visible. Pictures are physical objects made to be seen. This triptych dissolves out into our experience as we live through the film, but equally, on reflection, back into people who created it with script, cameras, and actors. Out of the trinity a unity emerges: the motion picture, the composed work of art, and its impact on us. As we watch *Before the Rain*, we experience words, faces, and pictures appearing, disappearing, evolving, until the film ends and we realize we have participated in the creation of a whole work titled "*Before the Rain*" which is now complete. But which is not complete, because we must still live with it, relive it, remember it, reflect on it, and try to make our experience of its disruptive fragments coherent. If we want meaning...

In other words, at the end of this movie we realize it doesn't form a static triptych, visible all at once, or intelligible as a unified whole. It is a picture in motion, and still going on in us. This results in part from the way the action comes back around to its beginning and starts over again in the monastery garden with the two monks in their one-sided conversation about when rain will finally break the drought. At the same time, we realize we haven't understood what sort of motion picture we were watching while its riveting action was unwinding. We assumed that its events, however jolting or even irrational, were taking place in a rationally comprehensible universe. So the ending of this drama about the irruption of violence in the midst of the most secure human environments - pastoral landscapes, tight-knit extended-family communities, posh urban restaurants, monastic enclaves - is itself a violent blow to one of our most tightly clutched assumptions about the world, namely that it drives forward in time along a one-way street.

*Before the Rain* - as the first word of its title ostensibly takes for granted - proceeds as if obeying the laws of objective, linear "chrono-logy", only to explode both that time and that logic. Meanwhile, its main characters are a photographer who renounces photography and a monk who breaks his vows.

During *Before the Rain* we viewers become caught up in what initially seems merely a local Balkan vendetta, but which, like the Balkan episode which precipitated World War I, eventually extends as far as England (the enraged Serbian spraying bullets around in a restaurant for no reason we can understand), and finally goes beyond the level of individuals and nations to undermine our faith in universal temporality and hence in the logic of cause and effect. In the last analysis, after much uncomfortable reflection, we are forced to question our usual conception of history: both as the avenue leading toward the fulfillment of human hopes, and as a cosy prison, a confining, secure framework, within which we must work out our personal and collective destinies. The result of the

film may be that we glimpse a hope of healing historical trauma while we also feel trapped in an unending, tragic cycle.

Caught up from early on in suspense and in a fast unfolding of unpredictable yet inexorable events, we take the sequence of scenes as simply chronological throughout Part 1. Part 2 then jumps abruptly in space and in its social and psychological setting. As for its setting in time, this is not explicit, but we assume it is later than the end of Part 1, and this is confirmed when we see still photos of the young ex-monk sitting on his suitcase beside the dead body of the young girl he left the monastery on account of - photos which must have been snapped within minutes after the final image of Part 1. Next, we hear his voice telephoning London from Macedonia in search of his uncle Aleksandar who is just leaving England to return to Macedonia. So far so good: Part 2 follows Part 1, then Part 3 follows Part 2. Only at the end of Part 3 do we see that Aleksandar was killed on account of the young girl, Zamira, as she began her flight from two mutually antagonistic local groups of assassins. Aleksandar is "therefore" dead before Zamira seeks sanctuary in the monastery, before Kiril conceals her presence, and of course before she is killed. "Therefore", Aleksandar is shot before he appears in London and hence before he returns to Macedonia where he is shot. Finally, we realize we have seen his dead body in a coffin early in Part 1 at the rural funeral (actually a double funeral for the two cousins) attended also by Anne, his English lover whom he asks to elope with him in Part 2. Chrono-logical impossibilities. But there are more. In Part 3, Anne tries to reach Aleksandar by long distance from London. This is after her husband's death and after she has already seen the photos of the dead Zamira. Her call is received in Macedonia during preparations for the wedding which takes place simultaneous with the killing of Aleksandar when he tries to save Zamira. At this moment, Zamira is "thus" both dead and alive.

So are one or other of the Parts simply flashbacks? This desperate attempt to preserve chrono-logic gets washed away by *Before the Rain*. It requires us to believe that the photo of Kiril beside the dead Zamira, and Kiril's call to London, and Anne's call to Macedonia, are glitches, bloopers, "minor oversights" on the part of the film's director & writer, plus its editor, producers, and entire crew. (Such is the position of Janet Maslin writing for *The New York Times*, Feb. 24, 1995; also David Denby, *New York Magazine*, March 13, 1995.)

Now there is no doubt that most of the events of Part 3 occur "before" the opening sequences of Part 1. This is most poignantly and artfully expressed in the evolution or devolution of the character who shoots the cat on the monastery roof. In "Pictures" he is meekness itself - a somewhat simple-minded animal lover (shown petting his donkey's head), who has never held a gun until Mitre puts one in his hands. He appears to us in "Words", however, wearing a baseball cap, hence already with his fingers in the American pie, and soon reveals himself as the most guncrazy hard-rocker of the whole wild bunch.

So why does *Before the Rain* not only circle back on itself in an unending strip of film but take place outside the confines of the universally perceived and experienced human universe of one-way temporal flow? If we trust that this film is grounded in a meaningful point of view - however this takes off from common sense - we must endure, and try to make sense out of, its explosion of narrative time logic.

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We need an overview. So let's start over. Before the Rain obeys an expanded form of the classical dramatic rule of "unity of time and place": the setting is "Earth" and the time, "the full of the moon". A strong sense of the contrast between rural and urban landscapes (especially when we are thrust into a London street scene right after leaving the Macedonian countryside) gives way to awareness that the differences between "civilized" England and a "primitive" Balkan village are superficial; moreover, we see rural and urban vistas simultaneously from Aleksandar's plane window. And an almost surreal full moon illuminates every night seen in the movie, implying that the entire action occurs at the same time. So, in a double sense, Before the Rain evokes space-time integration: the film as a whole is a single work folding back on itself; simultaneous connection transcends all differences (of environment, culture, history). The fundamental temporal concept for this integration is the cycle of seasonal birth and death. The dominant visual images for it are circles: tomatoes, petroglyph, twigs, halos, turtles, moon. But only geopoliticized spaciality and geocosmic temporality cohere in an objective "unity". Otherwise, a linear temporal flux and spatial restlessness overwhelm us throughout. As if to relieve the stress of this constant driving motion, the film consists of three separate segments, numbered 1, 2, and 3.

Part 1 centers around Kiril. Its title, "Words", reflects his primary concern, the quest for spiritual purity through renunciation of human intercommunication: he has taken a vow of silence. He is blissfully serene and secure in the monastic enclave. The early scenes focus on his youthful innocence, his uncomplicated freedom from troubling passions, his apparently easy path toward salvation. But by the end of the Part all this has changed: Kiril has spoken, violated monastic rules, been ejected, perhaps fallen in love, and is out alone, homeless in a harsh world.

Part 2 centers around Anne, stressed-out, sophisticated, 30-something. The title, "Faces", and the cinematographic emphasis on close-ups in this part, express her complex, overly complex, life of relationships in the midst of modern urban frenzy, as well as her profession, editing still photos. The part ends with the bloodied dead face of her estranged husband.

Part 3, "Pictures", centers around Aleksandar, early forties, a somewhat brutish, egoistic, jaded, mid-life crisis case, ready to abandon his highly successful career as a front-line photographer in trouble spots all over the world because he has learned that taking pictures, far from harmless and morally neutral (or even extremely admirable) acquiesces in, indeed batters on and often aggravates, deadly conflict. Aleksandar's search for personal salvation leads him down a path which is the inverse of Kiril's retreat to the monastery: Aleksandar renounces the "neutral observer" viewpoint of the man behind the camera and seeks out his teenage beloved. Aleksandar thus tries to reverse time, return to his own past; his character in the film begins to overlay Kiril's (their names are similar - Kirilov/Kiril); but both men end by sacrificing a facile vision of salvation in their compassion for Zamira.

Each of these "tales" could be considered complete in itself. Within each, common sense chronology prevails. Moreover, each strictly adheres to the classical

unities of time and place - the action unfolds within a single delimited setting and duration. And each story has a beginning, middle, and culminating denouement releasing tension and leaving the viewer disturbed but satisfied. Thus each of these stories could have existed as a short film, just as their individual characters might seem autonomous, free to live out internal dreams of well-being. But the three internally unified stories splice together in the context of *Before the Rain* as a whole. They are not separable or autonomous, and none of the characters in them is free to pursue a private path to "salvation". Kiril meets Zamira inside his bedroom cell, his only personal space, and immediately his destiny becomes enlaced with hers, and, beyond her, with that of the ethnic (and religious) conflicts in Macedonia. Anne shares her bed with her husband and Aleksandar, and is torn between them, but ultimately loses them both due to the internecine Balkan violence. Lastly, in Part 3, Aleksandar discovers that his personal integrity requires him to return to a home and homeland he had left years earlier in quest of greater glory. He learns that he (probably) fathered a daughter before leaving (namely, Zamira), and that his duty to her (and to himself) demands that he die for her.

In this way, the three parts are intertwined through their characters, their violent denouements, their background of collective conflict, and their essential thematics. But they each have surface chronological unity - which brings us around again to the question of the meaning of the violation of the law of unidirectional temporality in the movie as a whole.

In the first speeches in the first Part, the old, seemingly benign, seemingly wise monk refers to the impending rain, and asserts that "Time never dies. The circle is not round" - which is of course, taken literally, self-contradictory. (These words later appear as graffiti in Part 2.) The rounding out of time, we suppose, would be the end of human history, its replacement by eternity. The round of time and the coming of the rain: the film's title had already connected temporal flow with rain, but only when the film ends with rain and blood darkening the clothing of the dead Aleksandar and then with the repetition of the first scene of Part 1, including the words about the circle not being round, do we begin to appreciate how the coming of rain is not the end of history, not a permanent resolution or relief.

The movie ends with a succession of three climaxes: the shooting of Aleksandar, the rain, and the repetition of the first scene of Part 1. Each stuns us. But by the end, the "round of time" has taken on an entirely concrete meaning for us: it is the film as a whole, which we find will endlessly circle back on itself like a Moebius strip (as Manchevski has said). Events, indeed, can repeat themselves identically only in an imaginary or artificial domain - e.g., in a movie. (Actually, in the scene at the end, instead of repeating the identical words, "Time never dies. The circle is not round", the monk says, "Come on, It's time. And time doesn't wait. Because the circle is not round". This variation may suggest, among other things, that we will re-experience the movie, in a re-viewing or on reflection, differently from our first exposure to it; and also that our "waiting" - as in the verse appearing before the opening credits - for rain or respite will continue in the foreseeable, and unforeseeable, future.) Yet the imaginary and artificial world we live in during the movie's showing does not swallow up the rest of our lives. We still live in history. We still await release into eternity. The film only foreshadows that final completion, that true unity.

The time is thus not yet round in two senses: we find ourselves trapped in the filmic universe of an endless cycling around of acts of violence, bereavements, dissolutions of human bonds, betrayals of love and trust; and we are trapped also in human history, where war is the rule, peace the exception, loss of faith and trust are the rule, sacrifice and enduring love the exception.

But are we hopelessly trapped in the cycles of history? This is a fundamental issue in *Before the Rain* - as well as a fundamental European, if not international (Buddhism, Hinduism, mysticism, etc.) issue. But here is where the breakdown of chrono-logic gives a glimmer of hope. For even to force this issue on us opens up the possibility that there may be salvation from history, from the tragic repetitions of violence and death.

Is death final, irrevocable? Not in *Before the Rain*. Aleksandar is dead in the second scene of Part 1 but alive later. Zamira is dead by the end of Part 1 but alive at the end of Part 3. Along with the binary either/or logic of before-or-after and cause-or-effect, life-or-death dissolves into the impossible possibility of resurrection.

Now to come back to this from a different direction. All stories, and all history, depend on what someone does leading to what someone else feels and then does in response. War is the rule. A young woman (Moslem, Albanian-speaking) stabs a Christian, Macedonian-speaking man with a pitchfork. His relatives and her relatives both vow vengeance on her. Another man interposes his body between her and her pursuers, and they kill him. She flees and hides out; resumes her flight but eventually is killed. This chain of events is inexorable. Such chains repeat themselves. They form a hopelessly binding circle. Yet some people find a way out: self-sacrifice through compassion, self-sacrifice for peace. They are willing to pay the price of death for not responding in a natural, normal, "rational", human way. That is, for not responding to violence with violence; not letting a universal cause produce a universal effect. This is of course "impossible". But *Before the Rain* aims at getting the possibility of breaking the chains of history across to its normal, healthy, cosmopolitan audience through the use of words, faces, and moving pictures, but, centrally, through the moral development of two characters, Kiril and Aleksandar. Kiril, however, goes only so far in the film: he drops out (returning momentarily later on merely in still photos and as a voice over long distance) because he is not willing to give his life for Zamira; he abandons her to her death; he is too naively confident no harm will come to her; he gives her only empty words ("everything's going to be all right"), in a language she doesn't even understand. The central figure in the movie is Aleksandar. He evolves as Kiril does and then takes several more, crucial steps: he commits totally to another; he gives up his life for her sake; he dies to the world. Aleksandar can forgive himself for his past failings, sins, and illusions only by accepting death. He functions in the film as an archetype of a savior communicating the possibility of redemption. His dead body and his living body complete the round of time. His conscious act of self-sacrifice makes us viewers aware of our own inadequacies and cowardice as on-lookers in the midst of worldwide violence and tragedy.

Who is Aleksandar? That is, why did Manchevski revolve the film around him? First we have the choice of his name. Far from being accidently hit upon, "Aleksandar" names the best-known (if not the only-known) Macedonian of history: the Greek-speaking King and Generalissimo, Alexander the Great, who conquered the entire world

as it then was, and died at age 33. Aleksandar in this movie is a modernized world-conqueror; he has been to all the wars; he has attained the pinnacle of success in his career (the Pulitzer Prize); he has lived in many lands and speaks many languages. Like his Hellenic namesake, he has tried to marry a foreign princess. His name, in its original Greek form, means "defender of men", or "guardian of humanity". In his personality he is imperious, male chauvinistic, self-absorbed, fearless. Yet he grieves deeply over the death of innocent people (some of whom he considers himself personally responsible for), and he eventually chooses not to acquiesce in the divisions, hatreds, and vendettas he discovers infecting his native community like a virus: so he gives up his life to save a woman, a member of the Albanian community hostile to him. This is a Christ-like act. In fact, in the late Hellenic world, Alexander the Great was viewed as a pre-figuring of Christ. Both were universal kings. Both died at age 33. (The age Manchevski was when he first conceived of *Before the Rain*?)

*Before the Rain* begins on monastic land. The Eastern Orthodox Church provides not only Kiril's first innocent promise of salvation but also the viewer's exposure to timeless archetypal and ritual images. Icons of the Crucifixion surround us as they do Kiril. Aleksandar says he is coming back home for a baptism; the movie ends with the baptismal water on his heart. But the Church itself does not live up to its redemptive myth. It has become ritualistic and legalistic. It rejects Kiril's enlightenment about what reverence for human life demands. The Church seems to drop out of the film early on (though it returns again at the end), while archetypal patterns in the quest for salvation persist, embodied in the issues Aleksandar confronts; issues requiring action in the midst of mortal danger.

The "message" of this movie cannot be expressed neatly in familiar concepts. All these rest on the linear logic of ordinary (and ordinary philosophic) discourse. Nor, however, is the message simply a despairing denial that life can be meaningful. Nor, on the other hand, does it affirm some mystical religiosity, let alone Christian orthodoxy. It insists that we cannot escape history; yet equally it insists that we must somehow rise above history in order to live authentic human lives. Probably the central affirmation of this work of art is not spiritual transcendence or even art, but faith that inexplicable events of release from the cycling chain of cause and effect occur through an intensification of our awareness that there is no possible release from this chain. It is as if we have to give up hope in history in order to discover hope in humanity. Our idea of history as a steady, mechanical progress of "evolution" is false. Not only is there no automatic social progress, but things seem to be getting worse in the Macedonia Aleksandar returns to. The younger generation learns only one of the two main languages spoken in the country (so much for increasing intercommunication in the modern era). Young people are more narrow-minded than their elders, and quicker to shoot. Very early in the film, images of beatific monastic ritual are cross-cut with children exploding bullets into a turtle trapped in a circle of burning sticks.

The film suggests that illusion of progress blind us to two facts of life: on the one hand, universal cycles that, with only superficial variation, repeat over and over; on the other hand, redemptive moments breaking through both cyclic patterns and linear chains.

To sum up, *Before the Rain* tries to intensify our consciousness of how humanity always lurches from one act of violence to another. History is the darkness before the

reign of the true king - that is, before an enlightened consciousness grounded in love, understanding, and peace. The movie's a-chronology tells the tale of the "king" dying and being reborn over and over until time becomes round. It makes us realize that we are always before his reign, waiting. We are also always before a rain. Rain merely marks a moment in the natural weather cycle. Then too, storms cleanse and revitalize but also destroy peace and quiet. Aleksandar's dying words, "It's going to rain", come across as affirmative and hopeful: there will eventually be an end of violence and suffering. And throughout the film rain is tensely awaited, as if it would bring some final release. But Aleksandar also refers (in Part 2) to "hard rain", and rainstorms in Macedonia are violent and brief. Rain ends up symbolizing both release from violence and its inescapability. We always either lack rain, and so yearn for it, or suffer its rage, and so dread it. Rather, we always both crave and dread. Life combines these mutually exclusive opposites. Before the Rain combines them.

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Built into some films is the urgency for a re-viewing - as a recent example, *The Usual Suspects* - since at the end we realize we have seen things from the wrong angle the first time through. But *Before the Rain* goes beyond this. It literally and physically forces us to begin re-viewing it by re-exposing us at the end to its beginning. Meanwhile, we realize that this physical re-viewing is only a metaphor for a reflective re-interpretation we need to attain, and which takes some effort on our part. In other words, this movie is not merely "thought-provoking" but was created primarily to induce reflection about things we usually take for granted. To achieve this effect, it uses narrative and cinematographic techniques that carefully move us beyond the dominant Hollywood mould - not discarding it or grossly violating it, but subtly melting it. Characters remain plausibly "natural" and psychologically intelligible; but their individuality fades into archetypes. Events unroll with surface continuity but jump cuts and cross cuts and irrational behaviors (such as the shooting of the cat) shock us again and again; tiny gaps and wide abysses open up in our sense of what's going on and how it all hangs together.

American reviewers predictably enough tend to prefer narratives which heighten momentary sensations (excitement, suspense, passions) while sustaining an unproblematic flow. Mainstream Hollywood techniques now function primarily for that purpose, not for the creation of multilayered or symbolic meanings - there's often no "meaning" except the immediate experience aroused in the theater. We and reviewers have learned the hard way how to take everything at face value. Otherwise we won't get our money's worth of entertainment. Some "foreign" or "art" films, however, have other aims (which apparently foreigners are willing to pay for!). Most American reviewers have treated *Before the Rain* as though it were the same kind of cinematographic event as, say, *Beyond Rangoon* or *The Killing Fields* or *Heaven and Earth*.

To highlight the contrast between his film and traditional Hollywood narratives, Manchevski includes three references to Westerns. While the opening credits roll, village kids are building a wall of twigs around a turtle. The opening minutes of Part 1 cross cut between monastic ritual and bullets exploding inside this little torture chamber. This sequence reproduces one at the beginning of *The Wild Bunch* (1969). While Peckinpah

emphasizes the natural viciousness of crabs and insects, Manchevski's turtle, meekest (and roundest) of reptiles, is killed by human weaponry deployed sadistically for sport. Both directors show "innocent children" relishing mindless violence, but in *Before the Rain* this points up the moral depravity of a younger generation bred on ethnic hostility and conditioned to guns, which has replaced the older generation's catholic sense of community.

Then there's the scene of Aleksandar whistling "Raindrops keep falling on my head" while riding a bicycle (the film's double circle/cycle motif?) which soon crashes - a light-hearted allusion to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* before things get bad.

Thirdly, Aleksandar brings Hana's father a cigarette lighter, saying, "like in American films", and the two of them laughingly connect this with *Sitting Bull* - perhaps suggesting Westerns involving ethnic massacre, like *Custer's Last Stand*, *Little Big Horn*, or *Little Big Man* - though what's funny about this remains unclear, especially since elsewhere in *Before the Rain* lighting fires (and cigarettes) has such ominous overtones. Significantly, however - and isn't everything in *Before the Rain* "significant"?! - the last two of these external references provide the film's only humorous seconds. Reminding us that humor, too, can be a release from tragedy, while also reminding us we're just watching a movie.

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All we experience in a movie are words, faces and pictures. These are real, absolutely real, and may very well entertain us. But in and of themselves they are no more nourishing than a barrage of bullets. Sometimes instead of such recreation we want to regenerate our affirmation of life. This requires opening up to kinds of meaningfulness which transcend the flow of filmic events, characters, and images, however enthralling. *Before the Rain* shows/offers us meaning born through words, faces, and pictures; and through terrible tragedy. Meaning incarnated in a violent world, and reborn after violent deaths. Offers. The camera can't make us see truth, which is invisible. Truth is living. So we are responsible.