

TRUTH AND FICTION, ART AND FAITH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It does seem impossible. Even after two years, the official investigation has not uncovered what had happened that night. The coroner reported that the death was caused by drowning; he reported no signs of violence on Taneski's body or traces of any

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

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

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

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

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

Why?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So, the trust is essential for a work of art to:

- (1) Be created, and
- (2) Be consumed.

We are talking here a high level of trust.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Both of us are taking a major leap of faith.

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

I approach the film I am creating with faith. The viewer approaches the film she is watching with faith. There is no film and no art without this faith.

This is it: faith in the art piece itself to transcend the moment.

A perverse question floats up to the surface here:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So *Mothers* is comprised of three unrelated stories – two of which are drama and one a documentary. These stories never really come together on the narrative level. The fact that they remain unconnected plot-wise, and – more importantly – the fact that I mix drama and documentary (or as some people would have it “truth and fiction”) is not very common. Documentary and drama usually don’t mix. When they do, the drama is often just a re-enactment of what happens in the documentary.

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

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

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

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

Why?

I am not sure.

Several years ago I screened my first film, *Before the Rain* at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. That film consists of three love stories set in London and Macedonia against the backdrop of tension and potential violence which is about to erupt – both in London and in Macedonia. Some of the tension is caused, “excused” or enhanced by ethnic intolerance. However, there was no violence in Macedonia at the time. The film was made eight years before an ethnic conflict – or what was being explained as an ethnic conflict – erupted in Macedonia.

Yet, since *Before the Rain* came from Macedonia, and Macedonia had only recently declared its independence from Yugoslavia, which itself was right then torn apart by wars of disintegration along ethnic lines, many people looked for clues about the nature of the actual war in this film.

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

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

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

Relying on whether something “really happened” or valorizing documentaries over drama only because they are documentaries, or praising a film because of the

subject matter it treats and not because of its essence, soul, mind and muscle feels like a cheat. A crutch.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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