

The Mote and the Storm: Milcho Manchevski's 'Dust' (2001) and the Coexistence of Centuries

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[The following post has been updated with regard to the question of whether Manchevski's *Dust* should be considered a Balkanist text.]

The phrase 'Centuries Coexist', the title of this blog, comes by way of Milcho Manchevski's movie *Dust* (2001), a complex film which begins in turn of the millennium New York, then through the narrating character's memories, launches the viewer into a western set at the beginning of the twentieth century. This story soon changes form as well, when its main characters leave the United States altogether, finding their way to Ottoman-ruled Macedonia.

The narrator describes this journey from the U.S. to the Balkans as going from the Wild West to the Wild East, where "The centuries do not follow one another. They coexist."

This description of the local time's unorthodox arrangement could be an example of the sort of sentiment that Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek indicted in Manchevski's widely honored, earlier film *Before the Rain* (1994) and also in Emir Kusturica's celebrated film *Underground* (1995):

"What we find here, of course, is an exemplary case of "Balkanism" that functions like Edward Said's "Orientalism" — the Balkans as the timeless space on which the West projects its phantasmatic content. *Before the Rain* ... although politically the opposite of *Underground*, participates in the same attitude. It offers to the Western gaze what it likes to see in the Balkans — a mythical spectacle of eternal, primordial passions, of the vicious cycle of hate and love, in contrast to the decadent and anemic life in the West..." (See the rest of Žižek's discussion [here](#)). [1]

The idea of a place where centuries do not follow one another, but coexist, plays into the associations that Žižek describes: timelessness, mythic spectacle, the primordial, and so forth. In fact, Manchevski imports this epigrammatic characterization from the first page of an early twentieth century western account of Macedonia, which is contemporary with the events of the film: H. N. Brailsford's *Macedonia: Its Races and their Future* (1906) (See the digital edition [here](#)):

"That nothing changes in the east is a commonplace that threatens to become tyrannical. Assuredly there is something in the East that is singularly kindly to survivals and anachronisms. **The centuries do not follow one another. They coexist.** There is no lopping of withered customs. No burial of dead ideas. Nor is it the Turks alone who betray this genial conservatism. The typical Slav village, isolated without teacher or priest in some narrow or lofty glen, leads its own imperturbable life, guided by the piety of traditions which date from pagan times." (Brailsford, 1).

It is certainly interesting that Manchevski chooses to link his narrative to the Balkanist gaze of a western journalist who dissects Macedonian culture, as he encounters it, and constructs a portrait of it in his own western terms. In so doing, does Manchevski complicate, or adopt Brailsford's essentializing caricature?

'Dust' borrows heavily from Sam Peckinpah's 'The Wild Bunch' (1969), a bloody epic about aging, brutal outlaws who flee the American southwest. Their erstwhile U.S. hunting grounds locked down by the security forces of the banks and railroads, they leave for Mexico, which Peckinpah depicts in terms akin to those Zizek cites above: mythic, primordial, living through cycles of national sorrow and release. This suggests that Manchevski is comfortable appropriating aspects of the hegemonic gaze in order to tell a new story, drawing words and images from its storehouses.

It is of course possible that he has not succeeded in his attempt and instead has told the same westernized tale without significantly modifying or complicating its Balkanist (and generally 'othering') perspective. 'Dust' depicts the journey of protagonists through a continuum of wildness, from West to East. Rather than try to answer this question, I wish to consider the implications of his model (i.e., the coexistence of centuries) for thinking about 'the West'.

Maria Todorova discusses the passage from Brailsford in the context of Balkanism [here](#) in her book *Imagining the Balkans*. Even as Todorova finds connections between Orientalism and Balkanism, she also identifies essentialism at work in Said's definitions. Said posits in his notion of 'Orientalism' a system of western cultural production in which participants at myriad levels and stations in society — artists, teachers, artisans, policy makers, etc. — contribute to notion of the East, or 'Orient'. Thus, paintings, films, plays, novels, academic histories, decorated objects, news articles, and a host of other modes of communication cooperate in producing an East of the western imaginary.

What Todorova questions in particular is the historical scope of Orientalism, which Said sees functioning in almost every era from the 5th century BCE onward. She writes ([here](#)):

"Despite his later strong declarations against attributing essentialism and ahistoricism to his category, Said overgeneralized in speaking of a generic Orient that accommodated Aeschylus, Dante, Victor Hugo, and Karl Marx. Maybe he could not resist the show of literary erudition, but the treatment of Aeschylus' "The Persians" or Euripides' "The Bacchae" at the beginning of a European imaginative geography articulating the Orient, brilliantly insightful as they were, were not helpful in protecting from charges that he was essentializing Europe and the West. The appropriation of ancient Greek culture and its elevation to the founding status of Western civilization was only a gradual and controversial historical process, whereas Said's sweeping account of the division of East and West suggests a suspicious continuity."

While I agree that it is anachronistic to describe the fifth century Greek tragedies as orientalist works, I also would not deny (and neither, I think, does she) that they become so for later centuries, after the "gradual and controversial historical process" of retroactive Greek cultural hegemony has gotten underway. The essentialism that Todorova finds at work in Said's thinking mirrors a common self-essentialism regularly committed by Europeans and North Americans who think and speak of 'the West' as something timeless, distinctive, and rooted in ancient Greece (via Rome).

The metaphor of Manchevski's title 'Dust' is wide-ranging as to the themes it evokes. Certainly the image speaks to the theme of mortality (e.g. "dust to dust," "dusty death," *vel sim.*), but beyond that to the byproducts of time's passage: fragmentation, the illusions of form and formlessness, the tiny mote of the passing second and the vast storm of epochal transformation. The essentialism to which the classicist is prone often fosters the illusion of a continuous tradition. As a consequence, classicists may conceive of their roles as being limited to advertising the presence in other times and places of traditions rooted in ancient Greece and Rome. While

this sort of investigation is important for documenting the inventory of reception history, if one restricts oneself to it, it is a weak model with which to work. It tends to put its advocates in the position of having to persuade an audience that older versions of familiar questions are as relevant or more so than the ones to which they are already accustomed. Depending on the stakeholders involved in the question, the simple fact that something has occurred before, in however venerable a context, may not necessarily prove interesting or compelling. That said, notions of a continuous classical tradition need not be simplistic. Sigmund Freud famously uses the city of Rome as an analogy for the human mind, in which multiple levels of historical experience (the archaic, the classical, the late antique, etc.) sit atop one another. A slightly different model, favored increasingly in the field of classical reception [2] looks to the model of the palimpsest — a piece of material which has been written upon multiple times, the previous writing erased to make room for new writing, yet leaving discernible traces behind. On this model, the traces of earlier texts (with their thoughts, influences, inspirations, etc.) are detectable ‘beneath’ the surface of more recent texts (i.e., in its past), but also along side them.

Somewhat akin to this last approach, Brailsford’s early 1900s model presents a non-vertical, non-linear model as a qualification to what he considers a cliché — that ‘nothing changes in the east’. There, so the cliché runs, history as a dynamic reality is either absent or invisible. In a sense, Brailsford introduces an important modification. History is indeed there, merely in a different configuration from what westerners are used to seeing and therefore, it is located in their blindspot. The model of centuries in co-existence acknowledges change. The past remains always present, but with an accumulation of interruptions and additions, as new centuries join the mix. Yet, this is not to say that Brailsford escapes the traditions of cultural analysis that he criticizes, or that he manages not to continue Orientalist and related Balkanist perspectives. I would argue that he does seed his model of the East with the possibility of productive transformation insofar as he reframes the question of historical change in terms of visibility to the western viewer.

I would argue that Manchevski, in choosing to frame his protagonists’ journey to ‘the wild East’ in terms that, in their original context, question what westerners do and do not see, adds significant a nuance to the film and makes it far more difficult to pronounce it a Balkanist text without further qualification. Apart from this question, I find myself drawn to what Manchevski is attempting and how he frames it. The co-existence of centuries represents an important model for those of us concerned with the significance of such terms as (Greek and Roman) ‘Classics’ and ‘the West’. To visualize the centuries side by side, as they have unfolded in Europe or anywhere else, enables us to see connections otherwise obscure to us. It helps us to find new questions for ancient sources.

As a coda to this post, I mention an article which I believe demonstrates well the sorts of dialogue that becomes possible when we consider the the present century alongside other centuries — rather than as inheritor of a legacy — is Mallory Monaco Catarine’s “[Finding the West in ISIS Propaganda](#).” Catarine examines Xenophon’s 4th century text, the *Oikonomikos*, on marriage and household management with ISIS’s own manifesto on these issues. She finds startling similarities, and in the process deconstructs both sides of an essentializing East/West dichotomy. Films are potentially a vital forum for such dialogue as well, but in whatever ways we seek meaningful historical dialogue, the essentializing of the west remains a perilous blindspot for those engaged in discovering and advocating for the relevance of Greek and Roman antiquity.

[1] Although it may not necessarily exculpate him from the charge of Balkanism, Manchevski is not naive in his deployment of the motifs that Zizek highlights. Anyone interested should consult his director’s commentary on Criterion edition of *Before the Rain*.

[2] The field of reception examines how Greek and Roman civilization and its artifacts are reimagined in later historical periods up to the present.

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