

SCRIPT

On Milcho Manchevski's *Mothers* (2011)

Featuring a [trailer](#), [production stills](#), and a [script excerpt](#) courtesy of Milcho Manchevski

ANDREW HORTON

Jeanne H. Smith Professor of Film & Video Studies, University of Oklahoma & SCRIPTjr.nl editorial board member

Two young girls with cell phones report a male flasher to the local police even though they never actually see him. A young documentary film team enters an isolated country village to film the only two remaining residents: an elderly brother ("Grandpa") and sister ("Grandma") who haven't said a word to each other in sixteen years. Finally, a group of retired cleaning ladies, all of them mothers, are discovered raped and murdered, and an investigation of the crime commences.

What do these three seemingly disparate tales have in common, and where do documentary and fiction begin and end?

The award-winning writer/director Milcho Manchevski invites us to answer these questions and unify the three narratives in his latest (film)script *Mothers* (2010).¹ Manchevski built a career in the United States where he made numerous short films, published books of fiction and photography, staged performance art, taught at the NYU film school, and directed episodes of HBO's *The Wire*. *Mothers*, however, which recently premiered at the 2010 Toronto Film Festival, is set and was shot entirely in his native Macedonia.

Also set and (partially) filmed in the former Yugoslav republic, Manchevski's Oscar-nominated feature debut *Before the Rain* (1994)² liberated mid-90s audiences from a surplus of CNN-style Yugoslav War coverage. In place of dry reportage, *Before the Rain* offers picturesque Macedonian landscapes and thrusts audiences into the lives of complex Christian and Muslim characters and their dysfunctional family dynamics. Both film(scripts) present three narratives that have no direct link to one another, but *Mothers*, unlike *Before the Rain*, doesn't focus on the clash of Islamic and Christian cultures or on politics or family feuds. Instead, as Manchevski suggests, it's a film(script) "from Macedonia" rather than one "about Macedonia."³

By presenting three autonomous narratives in the same film(script), Manchevski allows the viewer to build his or her own bridges between them. This highly-personal process of generative linking partially explains his latest film(script)'s title, as well as its feminine atmosphere, and challenges audiences to view *Mother* through a feminine lens. While Hollywood, like most other worldwide cinema, routinely creates "male-centered" film(scripts) without women at the center, Manchevski's latest effort also illustrates ways in which mothers, daughters, grandmothers, and wives find ways to survive in a contemporary post-war culture.

The construction of reality is as thematically important to *Mothers* as gender issues are. The film(script) effectively erases the the lines that divide documentary and fiction and explores how and why different forms of reality are recorded and destroyed. As producer Christina Kallas suggests, *Mother* "blurs the lines between fiction and documentary stylistically. But this ... has to do

with our perception rather than with the director's intention to manipulate you ... [*Mothers*] is completely devoid of such intentions."

For example, the first story merges fact and mendacity in a particularly contemporary, YouTube-age way: nine year old girls Bea and Kjara take photos with their cell phones and invent stories about what they see, including one about a fictitious male flasher. The three young filmmakers try to create a record of a bygone culture before it disappears but record Grandpa burning his photographs and thereby destroying his past. In the final story, investigators -- ignorant of circumstances and contributing factors -- must invent reasons why a group of mother-maids were raped and killed.

Manchevski's film(script) also presents excellent characters and performances. Emilija Stojkovska and Milijana Bogdanoska play the blithely innocent and devilishly cunning pair of nine year old girls. The would-be documentarians, Ana (Ana Stojanovska), Kole (Vladimir Jacev), and Simon (Dimitar Gjorgjievski) negotiate a love triangle, and Grandpa (Salaetin Bilal) and Grandma (Ratka Radmanovic) each give "old age" new life. Lending *Mothers* a final sense of *vérité*, the actual residents of Kičevo are interviewed as part of the third narrative's murder investigation.

Manchevski's latest also avoids the easy "happy ending" offered by film(script)s such as Niki Caro's *Whale Rider* (2002).⁴ Instead, Manchevski, who admits to the influence of Dostoevsky and Gogol, prefers tempering the positive aspects of life with the more unpleasant: "I made *Mothers* as an attempt to figure out how to live and not be on the losing side -- at least for the moment. Perhaps we need to embrace our sadness and our fears."

NOTES

¹ Produced by Christina Kallas, *Mothers* was written and directed by Milcho Manchevski (Banana Film, *et al.*, 2010). For more information on *Mothers* and Manchevski, see <http://www.manchevski.com/> (22 October 2010). "Milcho Manchevski - Home Page," n.d.).

² *Before the Rain* was produced by Marc Baschet and written and directed by Milcho Manchevski (Aim Productions, *et al.*, 2010). For more information on *Before the Rain*, see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0110882/>.

³ All quotes have been taken from the *Mothers* [press kit](#) (.pdf).

⁴ *Whale Rider*, written by Niki Caro and Witi Ihimaera; directed by Niki Caro (South Pacific Pictures, *et al.*, 2002).