

RELIGION, ETHNICITY AND VIOLENCE IN BEFORE THE RAIN

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In *Violence and the Sacred*, Rene Girard writes: "Religion in its broadest sense ... must be another term for that obscurity that surrounds man's efforts to defend himself by curative or preventive means against his own violence."¹ Furthermore, religion, or 'that obscurity', as he calls it, is the holy, legal and legitimate side of violence as opposed to the unjust, illegal and illegitimate. Within this framework, religion keeps people safe from violence as it legitimates a certain kind of violence. Furthermore, he argues, the importance of preserving some semblance of transcendence, whether it be humanistic or theological, is to assure that the difference between sacrifice and revenge, justice and vengeance is maintained.²

Before the Rain, a film written and directed Milcho Manchevski, poses a challenge to Girard's analysis of the relationship between religion and violence. In what follows, I argue that Manchevski describes a world in which the legitimate side of violence, what Girard calls religion, is indistinguishable from the illegitimate side blurring the line between sacrifice and revenge, justice and vengeance. Set in Macedonia and London, the film recounts the effects of war several individuals whose lives are connected either by choice or fateful coincidence. Religious and ethnic

differences shape both love and politics. Christian/Muslim, Slavic/Albanian tensions grounded in centuries old religious and ethnic discords effect not only the lives of contemporary Macedonians but spill over into the lives of Londoners. In the words of the village doctor, the violence of war is a virus that does not recognize borders but spreads and destroys lives indiscriminately.

Manchevski's story is essentially simple. Set in contemporary Macedonia and London, it concerns the lives of two main characters, Aleksander Kirkov, a Pulitzer Prize winning photographer and his lover Anne, a photo editor. He believes that while on assignment in Bosnia, he caused the death of a Bosnian prisoner of war by asking to take his picture. Overcome by horror, he resigns and decides to return to Macedonia after a 16 years absence. He asks Anne to go with him. Anne, already estranged from her husband and having just discovered she is pregnant, asks Aleks to give her time to decide. He leaves without her.

In a village in Macedonia torn apart by ethnic strife, a young Albanian girl, Zamira seeks refuge in a monastery from a mob of Macedonians who claim she killed a shepherd. The abbot finds her hiding in the room of a young monk, Kiril, and the sends them both away. Despite differences of religion and language, Kiril falls in love with her. He promises to ask his

uncle Aleksander, a famous London photo-journalist, to help them. When Zamira's family find them, she is beaten by her grandfather, then killed by her brother. Unbeknownst to Kiril, his uncle Aleksander had recently returned to the village. Zamira's flight to the monastery was precipitated by Aleksander's attempt to save her from Macedonian mob. In the process, Aleksander was shot to death by his cousin.

For Manchevski, religion, like ethnicity, is about politics and power.³ By positing absolute claims about the values it holds sacred, religion creates the conditions under which violence, in the name of righteousness, is perpetuated from generation to generation. Under such conditions, Manchevski asks, is it possible to take sides against violence and to live as though the weight of patrimony could be overcome? In effect, if religion and violence are indistinguishable; if the line between sacrifice and revenge, justice and vengeance is blurred, where does one find the moral imperative to resist violence?

My exploration of *Before the Rain* focuses on violence informed by religio-ethnic factionalism and on the theme of 'taking sides'—of becoming politically committed—in response to the horrors of war. Furthermore, I consider the effect of religio-ethnic violence on the three women who are at the very center of the story. Manchevski's treatment of these characters

suggests that they suffer the violence wrought by the civil war as well as the gendered violence of religio-cultural constraints that circumscribe their lives.

The simplicity of the story told in *Before the Rain* belies the complexity of Manchevski's vision. Ostensibly the story is about individuals related by love, blood and/or geography whose lives are transformed by choices they make or by merely being in the wrong place at the right time. However, Manchevski creates a tripartite narrative structure, titled "Words," "Faces" and "Pictures," respectively, that challenges the viewer's assumptions about the linearity of history. Images at the end of Part Three are the same as those seen at the beginning of Part One. Furthermore, within each part, characters and narrative elements appear out of chronological sequence. Early in Part One, "Words", for example, Anne appears standing at the edge of the village during the funeral of Stojan, who was allegedly killed by Zamira. Nearby, a young boy crouches taking pictures of her with Aleks' camera. Not only does her presence challenge the narrative's chronology but her response, "Oh my God," leaves the viewer wondering who is being buried Stojan or Aleks who was killed trying to save Zamira. In Part Two, "Faces," which takes place in London, Anne takes of phone call intended for Aleks. The caller is Kiril who want to ask his uncle for help.

However, the call relates to events that take place in both Part One and Three again leaving the viewer without a logical explanation.

Manchevski's introduction of narrative ambiguity and anachronicity displaces the viewer's assumptions about history as a progressive unfolding with a sense of discomfort that history, in the end, repeats itself. However, Manchevski's focus is not on the repetition of nationalist ideologies that rise and fall throughout history, nor on the continuum of religion and violence in culture. Rather, he focuses on human behaviors and choices. In relation to the theme of taking sides, he reflects on how and why people choose to respond violently or a non-violently to conditions of oppression and injustice. The circularity of the narrative structure takes on a mythic significance insofar as it pertains to taking sides. To this extent, it is suggestive of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence of the same. In Nietzsche's analysis of the human condition, the will to power is the will to create. What recurs eternally is not a specific moment in history but rather the will's engagement in the process of creating values. For Nietzsche, at the center of this endeavor is an ineluctable ambiguity that creation and destruction are two sides of the same coin.

A similar ambiguity is reflected in Manchevski's vision of the human condition. He invests his characters with the creative will to overcome the

sheer horror of violence by choosing to “take sides.” But “taking sides” is ambiguous at best. When Anne exhorts Aleks to take sides – she seems to forget that the origins of ethnic conflict are precisely in the act of someone taking sides! As Elaine Scarry reminds us in *The Body in Pain*, a body on a battlefield is both hero and the enemy depending on the perspective of the observer.⁴ Taking sides carries no promise of justice.

By choosing to focus on violent death, Manchevski underscores the ambiguity of human action. The challenge to live ethically—to take sides—is not as simple as choosing between good and evil. The violence in *Before the Rain*, including deliberate and/or random killing for allegedly highly principled reasons grounded in religious faith and nationalist pride, may be morally repugnant to some but an act of bravery to others. Manchevski's reflections on violence have implications for making moral judgments and raise questions about taking sides. Is it possible to take sides against violence and killing without becoming a victim or a perpetrator of violence? Is it possible for religious institutions to remain apolitical, to resist taking sides yet retain some degree of moral authority? Is it possible to overcome historically and culturally defined hatred among ethnically and religiously distinct groups and retain a national identity?

The moral complexity of Manchevski's vision that gives *Before the Rain* a mythic quality has global implications. Currently war, genocide and other forms of violence thrive amidst what appears to be a relatively peaceful time of history. Manchevski encapsulates his perception of history and the human condition in words that reappear at intervals throughout the film: "Time never dies. The circle is not round." An old Macedonian monk first gives voice to this mantra in Part I "Words" as he walks through a village that appears to be at once timeless and scarred by the current outbreak of ethnic violence. In Part 2, "Faces," these words are scrawled on the side of a London building where Aleks, having left Anne, waits for a cab go to the airport and then to Macedonia. Time and the circle provide the metaphoric templates that sustains both form and content of the film. Furthermore, they symbolize aspects of human and temporal interdependence. What happens in Macedonia has implications for London, and vice versa.

Technological advances and the current valorization of the global community give the appearance of progress. However, globalization comes at a cost. Ethnic violence can no longer be contained within national borders as evidenced by the scene in which a Balkan nationalist enters a London restaurant. He first attacks a waiter to whom he speaks in his own language.

After being thrown out, he returns armed with a gun and randomly kills many of dinners including Anne's estranged husband, Nick. In this new world order, globalization means that sophisticated cosmopolitan centers may suffer the effects of imported ethnic violence and nationalist extremism from geographically distant sources. Balkan violence extending to London, a city habituated to IRA bombings, gives the scene a certain degree of irony. A further example of globalization relates to the proliferation of rock music. In Part One, the mentally unstable Macedonian who machine guns a cat is listening to the music by the Beastie Boys on his walkman. In Part Two, the woman who is walking through a cemetery in central London where Anne and Aleks sit discussing their future is listening to the same Beastie Boys song on her walkman. Perhaps in this instance Manchevski is less than subtle.

The images of violence unfold, mirror and amplify one another in "Words," "Faces," "Pictures"—the three parts of *Before the Rain*--providing theme and variation on the cycle of destruction. Each part deals with violent death that results from religio-ethnic differences. In "Words," Manchevski introduces the visual vocabulary and the themes that give shape to the film. The connection between religion, violence and moral authority emerges at the beginning and remains constant throughout the three parts. Insofar as this

paper is a preliminary stage of a longer analysis, I will focus on the first part and introduce elements of the second and third parts where pertinent to support my argument.

"Words" begins with an epigraph from a poem by Mesa Selimovic. Cast against an ominous storm-threatening Macedonian sky, words appear and a voice is heard as though from on high: "With a shriek birds, Flee across the black sky, People are silent, My blood aches from waiting." As the voice-over fades and distinctly ethnic music begins to play, the camera cuts to a close-up of hands picking tomatoes in a vegetable garden. Gradually the face of the young monk, Kiril, emerges. He turns his head and, with an enigmatic smile, looks toward a magnificent blue sky as thunder is faintly heard in the distance. The sound of thunder contrasts with the serene and prayerful setting of the monastery perched on a steep rugged mountainous promontory and adumbrates the gunfire that will punctuate the narrative. An old monk appears and announces that it is already raining in the next village. The camera follows the two monks as they walk toward the monastery. Underscoring the separation between the monastery and life in the village, Machevski cuts to a group of children playing war using live turtles as tanks and yelling "Go Ninja turtle, kill him." The tension accelerates as the monks approach the monastery while the children gather

twigs and encircle the turtles. The monks arrive at the monastery chapel as the abbot swings the incense burner. An icon of Christ Crucified fills the screen as the monks chant, God have mercy on us. Outside, the children set the twigs on fire and throw bullets into the flames. The camera lingers on the image of the turtles dying surrounded by burning twigs that resemble the crown of thorns on the head of the crucified Christ.

Through this powerful sequence of images and, ironically, very few words, Manchevski introduces viewers to the central themes of the film: violence, religion and taking sides. The sense of defeat and powerlessness is pervasive. The old monk walks by the children playing at war without comment. During vespers, Kiril, who took a vow of silence, stares transfixed at the icons of Mary and Christ. He appears entirely disconnected and unmoved by the realities that surround him. Images of the vulnerable and unprotected children playing at war by the side of a monastery wherein monks sing vespers in an enclosed and protected space underscores the inequity and injustice that Manchevski finds so troubling. By not taking sides, the church offers no solace to the villagers who suffer harsh realities of religio-ethnic wars and abrogates its moral responsibility. This point is persuasively made with regard to the village children and is reinforced when the abbot refuses to protect the young Albanian Muslim girl, Zamira, from

the Macedonian militia. Effectively, he becomes morally complicit in her death. Whether his decision is based on the fact that she is a woman or an Albanian is never made clear. In the end, neither the Christian church nor her Muslim family protect her.

Manchevski's criticism of the church and of organized religion recurs throughout the film. He portrays religious rituals such as funerals and weddings as taking part along side of the civil war but not tainted by it. In Part One, Stojan's funeral melds ancient religious ritual and ethnic strife. As the priest sings and the women wail, a band of militia armed with AK 47's stand among the mourners. Other men hold very old, discolored, bullet-ridden and tattered religious and nationalist banners. The responsibility of the clergy appears to extend only to the ritual of burying the dead not to creating the conditions for peaceful coexistence. After all, at the heart of the civil war lies ancient religious and ethnic hatred between Christians and Muslims. The co-existence of violence and ritual is also evident in Part Three, "Pictures," where a wedding procession attended by priests weaves its way through mountain roads as armed Macedonian militia guard the perimeter of the village.

Manchevski sees in religious rituals and ethnic violence a mindlessness that permits their perpetuation from generation to generation.

The baptisms, wedding and funerals, like killings, murders and violence become normative. Events such as children killing turtles, a mentally unstable man machine gunning a cat, an unnamed intruder randomly killing diners in a London restaurant, a guard killing a prisoner of war merely for effect, Zekir killing his sister, Zamira, and Goran killing his cousin, Aleks, all have something in common. They reflect a startling level of acceptance of violence as a natural and expected occurrence--as an ineluctable element of culture. Insofar as religion is implicated in the ethnic violence as one of its root causes, it remains part of the problem rather than part of the solution. (A very recent example of this was the support the Serbian clergy gave Milosovic.)

Ethnic violence remains rooted in the ancient tribal belief that justice and vengeance are one and require an eye for an eye. Mitre, the leader of the Macedonian militia, makes this claim to the abbot, in Part One, when he comes to search for Zamira. He claim that he has five hundred years of history to support his right to avenge the death of one of their own underscoring the primacy of vengeance and revenge over justice and sacrifice. In Part Two, "Faces," Manchevski comments graphically on the notion of an eye for an eye with the death of Nick who is shot in the eye by the Balkan nationalist. In Part Three, Aleks is shot trying to save Zamira by

offering to have the accusations against her taken to a court of justice. The story comes full circle.

Zamira is one of the most interesting characters in *Before the Rain*. She appears very briefly in the first and third parts. Yet her actions set in motion the cycle of violence at the center of the film. She is an Albanian Muslim, who unlike her mother Hanna, rebels against the expectations imposed on Muslim women, defies her grandfather and enrages her brother by challenging the norm. The events that lead to her death in Part One, unfold in Part Three. Zamira is accused of luring Stojan into the field behind his sheepfold and of killing him with a pitchfork. Manchevski provides no evidence to support such a claim since she is never seen with Stojan. There is an allusion to a sexual encounter in Part One when her grandfather, Zekir, reminds her that her head was shorn as a punishment for having been found with Stojan. Whether the encounter was voluntary or involuntary is not revealed but Stojan's legendary womanizing would suggest that Zamira could have been raped.

Manchevski's portrayal of Zamira is as much about generational differences as it is about expectation placed on women by religious traditions. Her mother, Hanna, who is a widow, lives in her father's house in the Albanian Muslim part of the Macedonian village. As a young woman,

she and Aleks fell in love but religious and ethnic differences kept them apart. When Aleks returns to the village and visits her, he finds that she lives under the strict Muslim rules that govern women's lives. Covering her head and lowering her eyes when she speaks with men, Hanna is imprisoned as much by the iron bars on her windows as by religious values.

Zamira, on the other hand, takes sides against the laws that punish or constrain her unjustly. Wearing a tee-shirt and jeans, she neither covers her head nor subordinates herself to her grandfather and brother. Hanna takes sides only when she tries to save Zamira. Risking her own life, she visits Aleks at night in order to ask him to find Zamira and take her from the Macedonian militia. She leaves him with the unspoken understanding the Zamira is his daughter. When Zamira escapes with Aleks' help and hides in the monastery, she demonstrates a remarkable degree of self-confidence and courage. Could it be that her brother kills her not so much for bringing shame on the family and defying the Muslim law but for the sheer power of her refusal to be subordinated? Did she die because she took sides against religious oppression and male domination?

The violence experienced by Zamira, and the subordination required of Hanna parallel the humiliation suffered by Christian Macedonian women. Neither religious tradition provides women parity with men, particularly

with regard to sexuality. In Part Three, Stojan's wife is forced to serve him and his family as he makes sexual overtures at their dinner table to the school teacher. The village doctor comments that Stojan values his sheep more than his wife. In Part Two, Anne's estranged husband suggests that she should simply resign her position as photo editor, have the baby and become a proper wife. Ironically, Aleks makes the same request when he asks Anne to go with him to Macedonia so that she can live in his village and have many children. Manchevski does not reveal whether or not Anne decided on an abortion or whether she decided to leave London for Macedonia. The image of her standing at the edge of the village in Part One is surreal—an illogical and anachronistic event—leaving the question unresolved.

The film ends where it began. The young monk is in the garden picking tomatoes and the air thunders with the anticipation of rain. The story has come full circle. The violence and death that define the events in-between provide little by way of hope or solace. Although large drops of rain begin to fall on a land devastated by religio-ethnic violence, there is nothing to suggest a redemptive cleansing. Kiril is returned to his vow of silence. The violence is about to begin again leaving the viewer without closure or resolution. Manchevski's hope remains with individuals who do take sides in spite of the consequences. Aleks's attempt to save Zamira's life

cost him his own. Taking sides was a compensatory act—a way of making amends for weight of responsibility he felt for the death of a Bosnian prisoner of war. Desiring to shoot pictures in order to document the horrors of war, he caused the prisoner to be killed—however indirectly. Whether or not Manchevski sees Aleks as a hero is not clear. He does suggest that choosing to act justly in a world where there are few external markers that separate sacrifice from revenge and justice from vengeance is in the end the only thing that matters and is worth dying for.

¹ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), p. 23.

² *Ibid.* p. 23-24.

³ John Bruilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 1-2. Quoted in Mark Bessinger, "How Nationalisms Spread: Eastern Europe Adrift the Tides and Cycles of Nationalist Contentions," *Social Research*, 63.1 (1996):97.

⁴ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). See IV. "The End of War: The Laying Edge to Edge of Injured Bodies and Unanchored Issues," pp. 108ff.