

Rainmaking and Personal Truth

The embryo of the idea for *Before the Rain* came to me in 1991. I was living in New York at the time (and I still do half - time), and I had not gone back to Macedonia in six years. My aunt - who raised me - fell ill that year and I went to see her in Macedonia, which then was still part of Yugoslavia.

What I saw (or, rather - what I felt) there were two things: a sense of heart - felt homecoming and a sense of impending doom. I am not sure doom is the right word, because it was more a feeling of impending something promising and optimistic. Nevertheless, these potential sensations which I felt hovered in the air, combined with the reports from other parts of Yugoslavia - which I mainly read in *The New York Times* before and after my one - month trip home - certainly created an impression of something bad about to happen. It was a matter of a feeling rather than rational analysis. It felt sort of like the pressure you feel on the inside of your mouth before it rains. I decided the best way to describe this feeling was by calling it before-the-rain feeling, like when you wait for the skies to open and bring down something hard, but also-potentially-something cleansing. Like rain.

My aunt died the next year and I went back for the funeral. This time I went to the same town, but not it was in a different country. The land where I was born and raised-Yugoslavia-was disintegrating, and Macedonia was one of the small countries emerging out of Yugoslavia. A two-fold sense was in the air-the end of something, and the birth of something new. I did not know what was going to be stronger and more defining-birth or death, even though the optimism of something new, something all your own seemed to be stronger.

I went back to New York and quickly wrote a three-part six-page story, which I kept to myself. Three love stories-one in a monastery in Macedonia, one in a village near the monastery, and the middle one in London-intertwine and become one big love story. This story is of cyclical nature with-and this was very important-a carefully designed quirk in the chronology. It seemed that the story and subject matter were too esoteric. So esoteric-it seemed to me-that no one-I thought-would want to spend big bucks to commit it to the screen. So, I did not show it to any potential producers or backers.

Several months-or perhaps even a year-later a cameraman I was working with at the time suggested I mail it to British Screen. I followed his advice and sent it to them, misspelling the names of the people there. Yet, they liked it, commissioned a screenplay, and then put the first money towards the production. British Screen and its head-Simon Perry-were instrumental in getting *Before the Rain* made. It would never have gotten off the page had it not been for their enthusiasm and perseverance. We got more money from France and, finally, from Macedonia, so in the summer of 1993 we were in Macedonia, ready to shoot. A crew from Britain, France, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Croatia, Bulgaria, South Africa and Macedonia assembled in the mountains.

During the two years between the embryo of the film idea and the crew assembling many things happened in Macedonia. For one-she was no longer a part of Yugoslavia, with its own government, President, constitution, borders, flag etc. More dramatically-war (or wars) was (were) raging in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It had begun to rain.

So, there we were in Macedonia with full-scale war going on nearby. We had a hard time financing and then insuring the film, getting equipment and people to the locations. Most people felt that Macedonia, Bosnia, Serbia was all the same. Even the paperwork was difficult to do, since the baby country was yet to be recognized by Britain and France as we were planning the production. The film was no longer a co-production with a Yugoslav republic, but with the country of Macedonia.

Yet, there was no war in this country. And, as history would have it-no war come to Macedonia in the coming years-fortunately. Perhaps it was poetic justice

after the first two Balkan Wars (of 1912-13) and World War I brought on so much suffering to these parts.

The film I set out to write was inspired by the events unfolding in my then-homeland: Yugoslavia. The film I was about to start shooting was now about another country: Macedonia; a country with different reality than Bosnia or Croatia, for example.

Before the Rain is not about a particular country. It is about people caught on the verge of wider violence that is about to erupt around them, the birth and course of which they could possibly affect in one way or another. Can an individual really affect the big canvas, or is it more dialectical than that-do things happen no matter what you do? I guess dialectics sound a bit fatalistic when put in those terms.

The story was inspired by the events unfolding in Yugoslavia, but it was not about them. It was about people in any country who stand in front of large events that are about to engulf them. When I first wrote it, the story was taking place in an unnamed country. I even toyed with the idea of setting it in a newly-independent country which had used to be part of the Soviet Union. Armenia, perhaps. Yet, I know nothing about these places, and film is a very concrete animal: the characters speak in a certain language, the costumes, the landscape, the customs, the relationships, the faces, the architecture-they are all very concrete when on the screen.

The reason I did not want to set in Macedonia was the following: people were going to view the film as a documentary analysis of the current political situation in these parts. And Before the Rain was not that.

For starters, I was not familiar enough with the intricacies of the political workings here (which raises an interesting question-is the one who lives at the site of the crime more qualified to talk-about it, or is it the one who sees it from some distance). Furthermore, the film was not dealing with politicians at all. The conflict entrepreneurs were only sketched in the film. Yet, the politicians were crucial to the unfolding of the Yugoslav drama-from the big bad guys whom we see shaking hands with other politicians and whose names we hear on the news, to nutcases raping and killing anonymously. (The raises an additional issue-is it a real ethnic conflict we are dealing with in Yugoslavia, or is it old-fashioned thuggery and land-grabbing masked as ethnic conflict (by the participants) and explained away as ethnic conflict (by the complacent world). Is this the core of all local wars in the Balkans-and perhaps elsewhere-in the last century?)

More to the point, there was no war in Macedonia, and everyone here was happy and proud of that fact, even though there was real apprehension. To talk of people tooting machine guns and on the verge of shooting their neighbors off different ethnic background in Macedonia was in a way like describing your hard-working father as a drunk. It could even be seen by some as a dangerous provocation. At one point I was even going to omit any references to Macedonia-and there are not many. Still, the film was (partly) Macedonian, shot mainly here, spoken mainly in the Macedonian, and there was no way around the fact the people will see it as an expose of the current situation. On top of it all, the writer-director (myself) was Macedonian and has spent his adult life in New York. I was talking about one aspect of ethnic relations in these parts, which is reality-based. (Remembering better times, it was not a coincidence that the characters advocating tolerance and mutual understanding between different ethnic communities are of the older generations, while the hotheads are young.)

In order to reinforce the fact that this is not a documentary about contemporary Macedonia, I treated the film-to a point-like a fable, stylistically. The country was made to look like a fairy-tale land in the way it was photographed. Blues and visuals suggestive of Byzantine art dominated the first third; the middle section was glassy, gray and milky; the third part was brown, warm, even hot, pagan: sticks, mud and grass.

Special effects were utilized (moon, stars). The music was quite dramatic. We even created new film geography of the country. Most films do, but here we wanted to create even more heightened reality composed solely of wonderful landscapes, a place obviously unreal, closer to a mythical land than to current-day Macedonia. (Kiril, the monk comes out of a monastery near Prilep, and runs to a church on a cliff in Ohrid, some 100 km away; Aleksandar dies at two places at the same time -under a solitary tree near Prilep and outside a sheepfold near Stip-which we then edit to make look like unified landscape; Zamira dies near Prilep, but her close-ups were shot in Ohrid and Skopje, and Kiril's closeups were shot in London).

On the other hand, we insisted on the realistic detail. Weeks were spent getting the costume right. We hired a dialect coach who was present during the shoot to make sure the dialect fits a particular, somewhat undefined part of Western Macedonia. The landscape, the architecture, the costume, the dialect had to fit a realistic picture, which matters only to (some) people in Macedonia and to very few people elsewhere.

So, we were somewhere between the real and the general, and insisting on making both worlds happy.

Indeed-as expected-even though the film was generally very well-appreciated in Macedonia, there were people objecting to the sight of machine guns in tranquil Macedonian villages. (For that matter, viewers reading this film as their extension representing them in the big wide world complained of the choice of village setting at all. They thought we should highlight an urban area which would-in their mind-mean Macedonia is catching up with the industrialized world. This would-in their opinion-be more desirable. The beat-up bus used by Aleksandar Kirkov, the protagonist rated especially poorly with them.)

Then, within a year of the premiere, in October 1995 an assassination attempt was made on the President-in broad daylight (9.30 am) and on the very main street in the capital, Skopje. A car bomb killed two people, including the President's driver, and injured a few more. The President lost an eye and was seriously injured, shrapnel still lodged in his brain. Later on, the police started seizing truckloads of arms, a lot of them coming from Albania or Kosovo. Three violent clashes during street demonstrations claimed the lives of several Macedonian citizens. Several terrorist bombs exploded in the streets and even in the front yards of police stations, as border patrols were fired upon. Not to mention the Kosovo war literally across the border and the refugee crisis spilling over into Macedonia. In a way, reality was catching up-and being more brutal and definitely more imaginative than the fiction my characters were living in.

Yet, peace prevailed.

[Dr. Kica B. Kolbe thinks the way the viewers react to *Before the Rain* derives from two fixations-or projections. Many in Macedonia, Dr. Kolbe says, have a mythological image of the world, an image they want to identify with when thinking about and evaluating themselves. Since they are already dealing with a mythological image, they experience the fiction and myth in *Before the Rain* as a disillusionment. They (the fiction and the myth of this film) unmask the fixation and the negative myth; the poetic fiction is thus scary, it could reveal their (the viewers') own real face underneath.

[On the other hand, the rest of the world, and Europe in particular, have their own mythological perception of the Balkans; unpredictable, explosive, archaic, Byzantine shrewd and dark, a powder keg. . . . , all mythological images. So, the world finds confirmation of their projections and mythology in their own interpretation of *Before the Rain*. They appreciate the fairytale quality of the film, but only because their experience of the Balkans-and in particular, Macedonia-is of something inexperienced and generalized.

[Yet, in Dr Kolbe's analysis, when an artist leaves the country s/he was born in, s/he often sees it as a fairytale land. This, then, is part of the personal experience

at the root of the creative process, which is different from the two projections employed by some viewers of the film, Dr Kolbe asserts.]

When the film opened it did quite well for a small film from an even smaller country. It was distributed in close to fifty countries and played dozens of festivals, winning the prestigious Golden Lion and nine other awards at the Venice film festival, earning an Academy Award nomination and thirty international awards.

More importantly, many people were genuinely emotional about *Before the Rain*, felt for the characters and ideas of the film. It was rewarding to see people walk out of the cinema with tears on their faces. Yet, when they started asking whether the situation in Macedonia was the way the film portrays it, and when newspapers began publishing little maps of Macedonia along the reviews of the film, the feeling of your hard-working father being portrayed as a drunk arose again.

The brought back the old film - school dilemma of the documentary in relation to fiction. Who is to determine what is real and what is fiction? Are we to learn about the Kennedy assassination from Oliver Stone's *JFK*? Are we to learn about American West from John Wayne, from Clint Eastwood or from Sam Peckinpah? Or from PBS documentaries?

Many people believe that there is no such thing as a documentary film. The moment you decide when to press the button and where to point the camera you are making a choice that affects the 'documentary' aspect of your creation. Not to mention editing or voice - over, that further enhance the filmmaker's manipulation of the story. Every film is a work of fiction, no matter how hard its makers try to be objective. That's the nature of the beast. What is 'being objective', after all?

Perhaps because film is so convincing, so successful at simulating reality, we are all inclined to believe the make - believe that has been created by people who - more often than not - have nothing to do with the facts. They often do not even have enough knowledge of the facts.

And sometimes they do not even care about the facts. (Two years ago I was preparing a film for 20th Century Fox, inspired by the Donner Party incident in California in the 1840s. The Fox research department was delighted that the director asked them for more than a thousand pages of research material. However, an executive at the Fox production department reprimanded me, "Why waste so much time? After all, it's film about people eating other people".)

So, what is left then?

The personal truth, perhaps. The film might be telling it the way it was - for this one person making the film. How s/he saw. Perhaps this personal truth will be more successful and even more objective in conveying a feeling, and thus - the facts. Does a sincere and well - told personal truth count as - or even become - an objective truth? Whatever objective truth is.

Furthermore, does a new way the facts have been experienced, and a new angle on the facts (or on what think the facts are) help establish a fuller picture? What happens if this new angle does not jive with the widely accepted interpretation of the facts? Stone's *JFK*?

Or, is there another, more interesting level to the historical film? Perhaps we should look at the filmmakers and their times more than we should look at the subject of their films and the time they are portraying in the films. John Wayne, his attitude, his wardrobe and his film partners tell us more about certain social standards of the 50s, 60s and 70s than about the Wild West itself. Then - if this is so - here is a new question. How do we watch these films, how do we separate Sean Connery from King Arthur? How do we separate our relationship to the past from our desire to know more about the past itself (and to learn it from the movies)?

Again - perhaps it helps being acutely aware of the fact that it is all an

interpretation of a personal truth masked as a realistic re - creation of fact, place and time; a ritual re - enactment.

It could be John Ford's personal truth helping us learn about his times. Or it could be Jack Warner's personal truth helping us learn about his times. Or it could be Jack Warner's personal truth.

Or it could be the personal truth of faceless ciphers at a Hollywood studio.

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