

Home

by Tanja Milicic-Wagner

"I started to yearn for the grayness of Eastern Europe...The smells...the steam engines, the cabbage, the sweat: it is hard to explain, but I had to go." (Kratochvil, Afterword).

There is nostalgia that flows through the words by Antonin Kratochvil, a Czechoslovakian born photographer who set out to document life in Eastern Europe to show the people in his adopted homeland USA, where he comes from and who he is. Home is a projection and basis of identity, a staging of personal memory.

According to two of many definitions in the Oxford Reference Dictionary home is 1.the place where one lives; the fixed residence of a family or household, and 2.one's native land; the district where one was born or has lived for a long period of time or to which one feels attached. Margaret Morse points out that in relation to computer games, in Oxford English Dictionary, home is "the place where one is free from attack, the point which one tries to reach, the goal." (Morse ,72) Home is the place we come back to when we are lost. As well as being a symbol of protection and order home can also stand as a metaphor for loneliness and rejection. The concept of 'home' is a complex one since each individual has different thoughts and feelings that associate with it. It is interesting to note as Doreen Massey points out: " how frequently the characterization of place as home comes from those who have left." (Massey, 11). The aim of this essay is to explore the notion of home in relation to nostalgia, which is most commonly a result of one's life in exile (voluntary or forced). This will be specifically discussed in regard to the film *Before the Rain* (Pred Dozhdot, 1994) by Milcho Manchevski's, a Macedonian born filmmaker, now living in USA.

First coined by a Swiss physician in the late seventeenth century nostalgia means 'a painful desire to return home', derived from Greek nostos, 'to return home', and algia, 'a painful condition'. It also suggests powerful longing to return to some gone by period, when our idealized image of the past prevents us from living in the present. The fortunate immigrant passes through a mourning period, which is also a process of liberation, so there can be a sense of belonging to the new culture without giving up one's cultural heritage. The unfortunate immigrant is trapped by memory, as Atom Egoyan notes: " I think when you maneuver your way, or when you find yourself in the middle of the culture you do not feel at home, you have to reconstruct your personality to some extent...These people have a tremendous sense of nostalgia for that time or period in their lives or in their fantasies when they don't have to put on that cap or that disguise..." (Naficy, 195).

For Dubravka Ugresic nostalgia, that sharp and undefined feeling, is as complicated as one's memory. It can not be controlled, it is subversive working of the brain. Its strategy is treacherous, capricious, surprising and shocking. Smell, touch, melody or any other sensory experience can stimulate it. In his *Remembrance of Things Past* Marcel Proust beautifully described how taste could take one into the realm of childhood "...I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual detached, with no suggestion of its origin." (Morse citing Proust, 65-66). It is clear that home is not an object, a house, but a complex web that brings together memories and images, desires and fears, the past and the present.

Many artists looked at the concept of 'home' from different perspectives. Andrej Tarkovsky's film *Nostalghia* (1983) is a touching record of the loss and grievance for home. Throughout the film the central figure, the poet Andrej Gorchakov, keeps fingering the keys to his home in Russia in the pocket of his overcoat as an

unconscious reflection of his longing for home. All of Tarkovsky's films, in fact, seem to deal with nostalgia for an absent domicile. Milcho Manchevski's *Before the Rain* portrays one of the most archetypal stories relating to home, that of Ulysses' return. However, it is important to note that exploring the concept of home is not central to *Before the Rain*. A storm is brewing in Macedonian Mountains, but so is the civil war. Manchevski himself stated that the film is neither about Macedonia nor Yugoslavia, but about the feeling of waiting for something to explode, which is suggested in the title itself. The whole narrative, which is universal and could have happened anywhere else in the world, unfolds just before the drops of rain are to wet the soil.

But what makes this film unique is that it was set (apart from the central part) in Macedonia where its main character Aleksandar Kirkov, played by Rade Serbedija, was born and is returning to after living in exile for sixteen years. If one reads between the frames one realizes that *Before the Rain* is indeed about Macedonia, too. If the story took place in Palestine or Pakistan or anywhere else, the central message would remain, but those less obvious ones, under the surface, which played important role in creating the mood and atmosphere, would certainly change. I am not referring to facts or data, but emotions and thoughts conveyed through nostalgic portrayal of landscape, grizzle-bearded European hero, touching soundtrack by Anastasia and so on and so on. This is what Hamid Naficy refers to as accented style of filmmaking. He gives an example of Atom Egoyan films: "Even though Egoyan's films are not explicitly about Armenians, they have inscribed certain ethnocultural, exilic, and authorial sensibilities and structures of feeling that give his films accented style." (Naficy, 183)

The circular plot in *Before the Rain* is divided in three chapters. After *Words*, which shows the aching beauty of the Macedonian landscape with its monasteries, churches and people who appear to be living in a different century, the modernity of the second part *Faces*, set in London, comes as a shock. The third episode *Pictures* takes the story back to Macedonia and brings the treads together. We arrive where we started and know the place for the first time. The symbol of circle does not only stand as a metaphor for a circle of violence and hatred, but also as a circle of life, of one's return to one's origins. This return is a complex process and is echoed through the 'imperfection of circle' that flows through the narrative, beginning and end meet and merge, but the closure is broken by one very unsettling flash-forward; and the repeated line: "Time never dies. Circle is not round.", which in turn also refers to other 'circles' in the story. The story is enclosed in itself, without opening to the past or the future. Aleksandar, a London based photojournalist, longs to return home, which in his thoughts will soothe him, offer refuge and security, where he will forget about the horrors of taking photographs on the front-line in Bosnia. Nostalgic and melancholic portrayal of the landscape is related to how Aleksandar sees his birthplace when returning, it is the reflection of his point of view. His return is fueled by guilt. "I killed - my camera killed - a man", he explains. But on his return he finds that what he once knew as home no longer exists. This relates to Caroline Knowles argument that: "...As an emotional activity, belonging is liminal feeling or sense which erupts around the loss and nostalgic longing created by (different forms) of migration. The irony of this sense of belonging is that it is always a mirage which disappears in the act of traveling to it." (Knowles, 64)

Aleksandar's vision of home is naive, a utopian refuge, a Peter Pan's Never-Never Land, which is partly due to his traumatic experience. Reality is very different, he is an outsider, a stranger in his own home. His relatives express surprise at his return when he could be in "America or England where they don't shoot each other - that is where it is comfortable." Their vision of the 'outside' is not very different to Aleksandar's perception of his homeland as imaginary land, where longing surpasses reality. Life always seems to be better somewhere else, which brings us to the

question why Aleksandar left in the first place. We can assume to search for that 'western dream'.

It is interesting to note that both, the director Milcho Manchevski and the main protagonist Rade Serbedzija, live in exile, of course for different reasons. Manchevski left Macedonia to study film at Southern Illinois University, he later moved to New York which became his adopted home, but as he also considers Skopje, Macedonian capital, to be his home, he is a culturally split personality. Dubravka Ugresic would refer to him as someone with two lives, but one biography. Living in exile shaped him as a person and as an artist, his work and interests would have been different had he stayed in Macedonia. In one of the interviews Rade Serbedzija stated that while thinking how to play out his role as Aleksandar, returning home for the first time in sixteen years, he constantly had one situation in front of his eyes: "Can you imagine, in 24 years, just once, twelve years ago, he went to his country. No more than once...Macedonia was always his sore point." (Markovich, 4). Manchevski reflects some of the feelings and thoughts he experienced through Aleksandar's character. When we see the landscape with nostalgic eyes, we are really looking through Manchevski. It was him who realized that after a long absence one could never find what it was.

When he writes, the story happens, he is only a conduit, other than that the use of home as one of the pillars for the film was a conscious decision. "Home figured big in the feelings shaping the basic story and the film. The story came out of these feelings. In addition I wanted to make a film composed of simple elements, archetypal stories. The Ulysses story (returning home) was just one of these." (Interview). For Manchevski there is something very deep, and primal about home. "I think there is more at work than just social constructs, and I think this goes to the root of one's being. Belonging - belonging to a place, to a group, to images and memories...these are only few of the things which help us identify ourselves in front of ourselves. The rooting and comparison which takes place when juxtaposing home and non-home are, in my opinion, part of the basic definition elements of the self." (Interview). In many ways, Manchevski says, he feels like an outsider, a position he enjoys, since it provides certain freedom. Aleksandar was even more of an outsider, he was less in tune with what was going on in his birthplace. There is not much in common between Aleksandar and Manchevski himself, but it is certain that there would never be Aleksandar as such if Manchevski stayed in Macedonia. As David Morley noted: " 'Home' simply can not be understood except in relation to outside." (Morley, 153)

Rade Serbedzija, left in the midst of the war in former Yugoslavia. He still considers himself Yugoslavian, but not the 'new' one, he will never accept such Yugoslavia, but the 'old' one, which was once upon a time. He notes: "I heard my heart beat when we won in football or basketball, I felt sense of belonging, I thought to myself, that is my people. You can't forget that feeling overnight." (Markovic, 2). He could have left Yugoslavia long time ago, to search for fame and success. He stayed because he felt he could not leave his roots, his mother tongue, his people. He would be nothing without his people. He could never mean anything to anyone in a foreign language. What he meant to former Yugoslavia he could never mean to anyone else. "How can I touch the heights in a foreign language." (Markovic, 4). The concept of 'home' is founded in language; our first home is in the domicile of our mother tongue, as Predrag Finci writes: " Only in my homeland am I the master of my destiny, no matter how miserable it is. Wherever I go, I am a stranger who has to be subjected to the foreign, or at least adopt to what is not exactly familiar. I said: my own language tells me that only in it can I free myself, express myself fully; all the others are just translations." (Finci, 49).

According to Angelica Bammer, in the eighteenth century, homesickness was considered to be disease, which could be diagnosed and cured. It was linked to particular pathology of violence and loss experienced by those who left their homes to gain fortune in colonies. (Bammer, XI). Today, when migrating is fueled by globalisation and fast development in technology, displacement, exile, homelessness and nostalgia are common experiences. Wark notes that: "...we no longer have roots, we have aeriels...we no longer have origins, we have terminals." (Morley citing Wark, 158). Manchevski suggests that life in exile creates a sense of no longer belonging to one place. Aleksandar is outsider in both Britain and Macedonia, he cannot relate to either culture. Manchevski experiences the contradiction of feeling and not feeling at home in both New York and Skopje, he is somewhere in between. He proposes a debate on what happens when you grow a new home (in addition or instead the old one).

Serbedzija is at home in his imaginary world, since Yugoslavia that he knew and belonged to no longer exists, he is what Dubravka Ugresic would call Yugonostalgic. In *Before the Rain* Manchevski challenges the mythical concept of 'home' where one is taken care of, at ease, fulfilled, safe, secure, and happy; where one is free. Manchevski's story is one of self-exploration and self-statement, it is about complexities of life in exile. It supports the statement that home is not an object, a house, but a complex web that brings together memories and images, desires and fears, the past and the present. Don't we all long to feel what Andre Kertesz felt in Paris. "Paris became my home and still is. Paris accepted me as an artist, painter, or sculptor. I was understood there." (Kertesz 64).

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