

## **Milcho Manchevski: "We Were Explaining Joseph Beuys' Performance to a Live Rabbit"**

*The interview was conducted by Sonja Abadziewa*

**Milcho Manchevski's personality unifies his well known film creativity and his less well known artistic skill. In the early 1980s, with part of the alternative artistic avant-garde, Manchevski as a member of the *1 AM group* participates in the new artistic practice of Macedonia: the conceptual art, the happening, the performance. "I treat the objective as one of the essential elements of the creative (artistic) process because of art's direct links to the objective. I think the creation is a second essential element in this analysis, and I consider creation a product of the idea and the presentation. And I take all four (the idea, the creation, the presentation and the objective) to be the atomized structure of what is called art... Art is not to be put on the same footing with a living thing (with its transient, physical manifestation in art, limited in time, space and concept). Once created, art may exist independently from the living thing, which means that the denial of the living thing's existence may represent culmination, absolute art." The previous quotes are Manchevski's views of 1983 published in the daily newspaper *Nova Makedonija* (December 4, 1996). Having secured his place in the history of the Macedonian fine arts, Manchevski later becomes the leading name of the Macedonian film and its most recognizable trade mark across the world, adorned with a *Golden Lion* from Venice. In this interview, we are trying to connect more closely his feature films, primarily "Dust", to his (first or second) GREAT love: fine arts.**

**Sonja Abadziewa:** *You were part of the new artistic practice in Macedonia in the 1980s. Then your solo exhibition of photographs, "Street", went on to circle the globe. Your relation to the fine arts is explicit in "Dust". How do these two discourses correspond?*

**Milcho Manchevski:** Those are intuitive processes. I think this is the case with most of the artists because these processes are not pre-conceptualized, they are not programmed. I started making films not as visual art activity, but rather as an extension of writing, as a way of telling stories to a wider audience. First, it's a mass medium: people go to the movies much more than they read books, unfortunately, and second, when writing in Macedonian you address a very limited audience. Before and during college, when I went into filmmaking, I was constantly searching for ways to visualize the narrative (which, in fact, is part of the director's job description) and to tell the story with images. I thought as early as then that the less dialogue there is, the better job the director did. But the experimental film is another story. It's a greater challenge for me. Image and time there don't have to serve the narrative and the story, and it's precisely because the narrative film is a slave to the story that I constantly envy painters and musicians. They can express ideas, concepts, feelings in a more abstract manner, being less dependant on the narrative. I guess they were dependent on the narrative once (as in the time of painting portraits), but in the last 100 or 200 years they broke away. The experimental film is equivalent to the poetry or the painting of the 20th century. When I was first introduced to the works of Stan Brackhage, Michael Snow and Bruce Conner at the film academy, I was absolutely shocked, as if my brain exploded, and I'm still getting over that shock. The approach to the medium as exercised by the experimental film, the structuralist experiments in particular, influenced both "Dust" and "Before the Rain".

**S.A.:** *You are often seen at art exhibitions. In those moments, do you manage to free yourself of the film, or, on the contrary, you put them in film context?*

**M.M.:** Well, I like them better than film. It's like entering a more interesting world. They don't depend on the storytelling, which means they don't serve a story, or they don't serve a rigid story.

**S.A.:** *But installations today often explicitly contain a story in a form of text: parallel display of an image and a writing as in a film. Without text, the story may not be accurately read.*

**M.M.:** Yet that is up to the author: he or she decides whether to use text in that particular art piece. The text has not been imposed by the nature of the medium, nor by the conventions of the particular medium. You see, film doesn't have to be the way we see it today: to last 2 hours, to have a beginning, middle and end, leading and supporting roles, three acts, a closed, defined ending, with catharsis and happy ending. But the convention is so strong and we have so clung to it - like little children - that we expect to see all of this. If the film lasts one hour, we feel as if something is missing.

**S.A.:** *How do you surpass, go beyond cliches?*

**M.M.:** Myself? With creative ease, but also with a lot of hard work within the constraints of the film industry. It's very easy for me to function within those cliches. I believe I've mastered them,

perfected them, and there's no challenge in them. It's something you can do for a salary, which, in fact, was the case during those few years when I functioned within the Hollywood system, when I was offered screenplays to direct. The first meeting always came down to analyzing the text: talks with the studio head, the scriptwriter and the producer about how to turn the text into a film. Those development directing jobs proved to be really easy. And judging by the producers' reactions, I realized that I had truly become an expert in this. This was a fact, not an illusion of mine. Hollywood, in fact, and not just Hollywood, but also the European and all of narrative filmmaking, is mannerism of sorts: there are some very narrow frames and everything you do, you do within those frames, things are being repeated, fine-tuned and you seldom get out of the box. But the frame could easily be wider, much wider, and still remain a narrative frame. A story may be recounted in millions of ways and not in the 2-3 ways offered by the existing narrative film format. Who says films should last two hours, who says characters should evolve along a straight line? The entire story could be told through shadows, or through photographs (as some have done), the entire film could be told in voice-over, or the storyteller may lie to us, play with us, or there could be a story within a story, or we could begin with one story and then switch to another, eventually getting back to the first one, or even leaving it unfinished in the conventional sense, but finished thematically or emotionally.... In a way, I'm trying to put face to face these two notions in one and the same work: on one hand, the experimental and structural, or conceptual, and on the other hand the classical narrative. It is a very delicate line because every film should function as a normal narrative film, where the classical structure is observed as far as the emotional flow of the viewer is concerned, but at the same time the undermining of that structure must remain consistent.

**S.A.:** *I suppose that viewers should first recognize the model/cliche and concurrently become aware of the modalities of departing from it. The passage should be such so as to make the seam impossible to notice.*

**M.M.:** Right. Those accustomed to cliches should not be completely alienated. But a road must be opened for them towards a non-cliched reading. In fact, it is very easy to make a film like "Last Year in Marienbad" if you have an art vision of your own, if you follow your own intuition. The film is simply made and offered to viewers as such, some agree with the vision, some not. It is much more difficult to meet the viewers' expectations (who recognize the bounds of the format by intuition and stick to the frame), and at the same time to make something that shatters the cliché. Yet there lies the challenge; if you don't face a challenge, why bother making the film at all? Both in "Dust" and in "Before the Rain" the link to the experimental film and fine arts is more in the structure of the film than in the frames themselves. The link is closer to the fine arts of the 20th century than to the classics. Quite expectedly, all my images, all my frames were infused with what I know and what I like, whether in painting or photography. When I'm preparing the

storyboard, I go to museums and galleries a lot. Sometimes, when I'm writing - for a change - I get to spend half a day in a museum.

**S.A.:** *Those memorized images, do they come back to you afterwards projecting themselves onto the film structure, or perhaps you manage to control them in a way?*

**M.M.:** It's interesting how these subconsciously recurrent paintings you've seen (and probably everything you see in life), other works of art, had imprinted themselves somewhere in the brain, so that when you pull them out - whatever you call that: stealing, performance, coincidence or synchronicity - they attach themselves to your original idea, to what you have to say. We can only pretend the films we saw, the music we heard or the events we experienced did not exist. I don't know if anyone can be absolutely pure. And who indeed wants to see such sterile films?

**S.A.:** *Can you consciously bring to the surface these unconsciously remembered things?*

**M.M.:** You can not, even if you tried, and there's no reason why you should do so because that's part of our human experience. Part of my experience is John Ford and Kieslowski, as well as Michelangelo and Joseph Beuys. There's no reason why we should try to bury these experiences in our head. If we try to eliminate them, we are shortchanging both our work of art and the viewer, and ourselves as well. However, it is important what you do with these experiences.

**S.A.:** *Does that mean that how is the key?*

**M.M.:** Well yes, absolutely, because art is never *what*, but always *how*. If we were all to paint Gioconda, every one of us would do it in their own way. When a film is being made in Hollywood, it is *what* that is always being discussed, although the essence is *how*. The oppression on art in that system is carried out through the oppression of the *how*. People have got so used to someone else's meddling in their own work, that oppression is not even put on the agenda. It's somehow implied that people who are not competent, who are not creative, who lack that credibility and that history of creation, but who have the financial power will affect the *how* in a major way. These people don't perceive this creative layer of *how*, but take decisions that determine and define it. When I work with the heads of departments on a film, I insist we sit down together and in a laid-back conversation leaf through monographs, collections of photographs, works of painters, things which don't necessarily have to relate to the film or the scene we are working on. We simply look at them and let them open our minds and shape our thoughts as when you go to a sauna to have your pores opened. At the beginning when I made music videos, there were some direct quotations, homages. "Tennessee" for example. Although it is about African-Americans in Atlanta (we shot it in Atlanta, but it talked about Tennessee), we decided to link it to the black-and-white photography from the period of the American depression and the 1950s (Dorothea Lange, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frenk) to provide a visual context. There were some direct quotes, but none of this was directly connected to the video itself. Watching strong pictures opens us to conversation, relaxes us, sets us going. When we start working, everybody's bringing lots of books (the designer, the director of photography, the choreographer,

the make-up artist). In the beginning they are all suggesting books directly referring to the scene or the film, and then they get used to the idea that they can play with that material. We see works of Cartier-Bresson and Vermeer, of Winogrand, or Jeff Wall or Louise Bourgeois or Joseph Beuys, even fashion magazines - things that can't possibly be directly found in the film.

**S.A.:** *Do coincidences happen somewhere along the line?*

**M.M.:** Yes. As if some creative cloud hovers above all of us, a cloud from which we all get ideas, and sometimes we even touch. It's interesting when a coincidence occurs, I suppose it's a coincidence. For example, the Polish play "The End of Europe" (1982/83) and the Polish animated film (I think it was called "Tango"): a hypnotic incremental repetition of a few motives that eventually turn into big themes. And again, this *how* is beautifully done. Just the other day, someone asked me about the connection between "Pulp fiction" and "Before the Rain" because of their structure, their release in the same year and their almost concurrent premieres (being only three months apart). It's a hell of a coincidence because I only got to meet Tarantino after the premier of his film, and he didn't know me before either. And I don't believe we have grown our inspirations in the same place. It's interesting, though, that they emerged at the same time.

**S. A.:** *There are similar examples also in the figurative art. The renowned critic Thomas McEvilley found that in Shemov, who in a way anticipates the discourse of the American artist Pat Stair. Anyway, we are witnesses of similar ideas simultaneously arising at different geographic points and culture centers. When were you closest to the fine arts?*

**M.M.:** That link with fine arts is very interesting in the performances, the installations, the happening, etc. My film "1.73" shown in Belgrade, Split and New York consisted of the following: I appear on the stage and I hold a piece of film 1.73 m long, in complete darkness, which is then exposed to 24 flashes. Then I take the same piece of film upstairs and project it (short projection). The film, is in fact, exposed, but not processed, so that there is nothing to see on it. Then I take it downstairs, cut it into pieces, staple each piece onto a questionnaire (questions about what art is, what the nature of art is: is it this film or that piece of film we performed as a happening, or these pieces that I'm now distributing?). In all of my experience, that is the point I was closest to the fine arts.

**S.A.:** *In the 1980s, as a member of the group 1 AM, in the Youth Culture Center, you made a Joseph Beuys' performance referring to his social plastics. Did you make that direct entrance into alternative art forms in order to stand up to taboos?*

**M.M.:** Yes, we had two performances of what we called *appearance art*. They were defined by *what they were not*. We had a long list of all we were not (performance art, conceptualism, happening, dadaism, etc, etc, etc.) and then a paragraph followed saying that a negative definition is not a definition. The performance was basically about keeping promises. And a whole lot of conceptual, and not just conceptual, things were promised that were also carried out at a given point in time. (We had exhibits, projections, a recital and a performance). That was the first

appearance. The second appearance was exactly a year later and it was a paraphrase of Joseph Beuys' happening, "How to Explain Art to a Dead Rabbit", only we had a live rabbit and we were explaining to it Beuys' performance.

**S.A.:** *You often mention cubism in interviews, which is basically inspired by the art of the primeval cultures. Does it refer only to gluing times in space, to the segmentation, to the focus on the form and the black-and-white, to the multi-projections, or to the fragmentation close to the de-constructive feature of the world today? What exactly does it refer to?*

**M.M.:** All the elements you've mentioned can be applied to "Dust". For me "Dust" is close to cubism mostly in how it deconstructs the material when re-presenting it. But, whereas in painting cubism refers to visual material, in film, or in "Dust" at least, we have narrative material, decomposed and recomposed in time whereas time is a category used in the artistic expression. This was not planned. I did not set off with idea of making a cubist film. But, I did intend to play with time and structure, and after having walked three quarters of the road, I realized that "Dust" is maybe transposition of a cubist view to film-making. And this can be presented or interpreted very simply in a tabloid way by saying that this is a film that is supposed to shock viewers much the same way as cubism shocked the public in the past (and we truly shocked some across Europe). But what I find more important is that the way in which the material is processed is similar - I suppose - to how the cubists processed their material, what they saw: the wine, the guitar or the still life. All of the real objects are still portrayed in a relatively representative way, but still – not quite. It's not Malevich, and it's not Rembrandt either. And, in fact, the challenge rests in this ambivalence, to recognize the bottle in something that is not a bottle. All of this, of course, is irrelevant if we don't find it beautiful. The picture is supposed to be beautiful to us. How we understand it and interpret it later is less important. What's important is that we find it beautiful, which is all the more so because film always sees itself as a narrative medium. It doesn't matter if the movie-goers understood the story, the message, but it does matter if they liked it, if it warmed their heart, if it prompted a reaction. The reaction may well be negative, people might say: Oh, that was bad. But even a reaction like this is good for a work of art. It happens to me often that after I see a Hollywood film, I get out of the theater feeling so deceived because the film was so empty. Perhaps I it was engaging in the first ten minutes, but offered nothing afterwards, I feel as if I'd eaten cotton-candy. Then I have this desire to go to a video store and rent a good film to rinse that taste off. It's as if someone is selling you design for art. I mean, the design is nice, but it serves a different function.

**S.A.:** *So, how you deal with the category of time is related to cubism, right?*

**M.M.:** One dimension that film has, and painting lacks is time. Playing with different times, times intersecting and overlapping in the story of this film was the most interesting equivalent of cubism.

**S.A.:** *I dare say your cubism is a very abstract, metaphysical one. Time is in fact a meta-category, beyond the reach of the senses.*

**M.M.:** I like this formulation a lot, I think it's very applicable. This poses even greater difficulty to the viewer because he can't grasp right away where the angle is, where the plane is, where the cube is, where the problem is because the film time in "Dust" moves in a regular manner, until the story suddenly takes a turn in time. This is yet another game, children's fun. Film is the most adequate medium to play with time because even when making the most regular, most linear film, we translate time to space: a second becomes 24 images (30-40 centimeters). Almost always we shoot out of sequence, and the sequence is reconstructed later so as to create false chronology (when compared to how we shot and what happened when). So, in a film the illusion refers primarily to time. If you take those 24 images and shift them to some other position, suddenly that second in time occurs in another place and the thought crossing the viewer's mind is: there you go, I've been deceived. Well, yes, I'm being deceived from the very moment I enter the cinema. In the case of this film, the goal was to see the structure of the deceit and the discovery of the deceit, of the illusion, and this becomes part of what you try to say as an author and that is that we take illusion for truth. Who else writes history, but the victor himself. At my film school, there was a fellow student who shot a banal story and instead of editing it in a chronological sequence, he cut everything at 52 frames, pieces of around two seconds. All his takes were of the same length, 52 frames, and the way he chose to put the pieces together was quite unusual. He put all his takes in a brown paper bag, took the bag to his grandmother and asked her to pull the pieces out of the bag. Then he edited the film in the order his grandmother picked the takes, which means he was guided by pure coincidence, absolute dadaism.

**S.A.:** *This takes me back to cubism and your insisting on flat presentation, clearly displayed in certain takes shot in Mariovo: horizontal cubist spectacles presented on the screen in a collage technique.*

**M.M.:** When making movies, I treat takes as frames or framed photographs. I like it a lot when something looks like a collage and deceives the eye, and we are not quite sure what we are looking at. It takes us one, two or more seconds to realize what is what, what the perspective is and what is shown. Matisse does this a lot, or at least I find it in Matisse. Suddenly you are not sure where the wallpaper ends and where the figure begins. Clearly, Rauschenberg does the same in a different, but as beautiful a way.

**S.A.:** *When you say this, do you have in mind Matisse's painting "Conversation" of 1908/9, where the painted window in the interior make us wonder whether we see a painting within a painting (closed ambience) or a window with a view (extension of the painting) considering that the perspectives are equal?*

**M.M.:** Yes, that and other paintings too. That deceit of the eye is so beautiful. I think you become one with the viewer then because you have agreed that you are playing together, that this is really a canvas, or a film, that this is not a reconstruction of reality.

These are only films, they cannot reconstruct truth. It's terrible when people try to learn about the present or the past from films. Films are made by liars: scriptwriters, directors, actors.... Any work of art deals with a different, maybe more essential truth. This is the case with "Before the Rain", and also with the videos I make in close cooperation with David Munns, the designer, as well as with Barry Ackroyd, the director of photography (who worked only on "Dust", David was the production designer on both films). They already know that I demand to see a lot of collage elements in the frame. There are also other collage elements waiting outside the frame. When we start framing through the camera, we say: "Here on the left, there should be something in the foreground to fool the viewer", and there are a couple of guys waiting to be help the composition, to insert a visual element, a vertical line or a surface... Using a telephoto-lens also helps in creating partial illusion, because, in fact, if viewed through a long lens the picture is different from what the eye sees and you create mild abstraction. The long lens is also interesting because it's voyeuristic; furthermore, the relation between the objects in the frame becomes a bit distorted, everything is packed and the focus is shallow. In the 1980s and the 1990s, the tele-photo was much abused by a whole generation of English directors who came out of commercials and went into making Hollywood films, such as Ridley Scott, Tony Scott, Adrian Lynne or Allan Parker. They were abusing it for the sake of design, rather than putting it in service of the story or idea.

**S.A.:** *You make an abundant use of the contemporary visual diversity: comics, video, spots, commercials. It's clear that not only do you not try to avoid them, but on the contrary you stress them. Is their mix the venue where the refreshing processes of your film aesthetics happen?*

**M.M.:** Pop-artists too were asked why they painted soup cans rather than landscapes. All of this is part of us, of our modern sensibility. And it should be accepted, it should be announced that it belongs to us. Again, it's a matter of how you use it, rather than what you use, as you said before. It's not whether you use red or blue, but how you use it that matters.

**S.A.:** *You've just mentioned voyeurism. Considering that in the film the realistic, the fantastic, the surreal, the oneiric function simultaneously, I connect certain scenes, especially the erotic ones, even to a Duchamp's procedure, such as the love scene between the Teacher and Neda, observed by Luke, which resembles a lot Marcel Duchamp's "Etant donnees" in the Museum of Philadelphia. The innocent and the vulgar here seem as though they intertwine. Do you invoke that work of art?*

**M.M.:** I haven't seen it, but again, it's a matter of plasma, a coincidence. There is something very much defined in that scene, very concrete, as if this is it, and as if this is the only way of doing it, the only way of shooting it, of showing it. I had no dilemmas at all how to shoot this scene. We didn't shoot much film for this scene, because it was defined in itself, given simply as a fossil. First and foremost, the scene is very organic: beams, dust, a rug, water. It's very incestuous, obscene, because after all, Neda is a pregnant woman. Second, the man is not recognized immediately, and a complete stranger appears who is a voyeur, and not just that he is not part of



the family, but also he is not part of the culture, not even from this continent. And they are shameless enough not to mind his voyeurism. There's a Macedonian psychiatrist in New York, who thinks that the erotic scenes in the film, depending on how every viewer reads them, will provoke people because of the nature of the film's sexuality.

**S.A.:** *This passionate scene somewhat stands out.*

**M.M.:** Yes, it does stand out, or we may say, it gets out of the boring cliché film standards made us so accustomed to. However, it was my intention to break up the classical and familiar interpretation of sex on film (covering with sheets, soft filter, violins, candles). I wanted it to be the way it is in life most often, without any mimicry and hidings. But this takes us back again to my, maybe naive, understanding of cubism which is irreverent in relation to both the themes and to how they are treated.

**S.A.:** *There is irony and cynicism in the film at the same time, which is so characteristic of surrealists and cubists. Where do your generous usage and public demonstration of them come from?*

**M.M.:** Well, they are great, pivotal. That's also a way to keep on fiddling creatively with what you do. Otherwise you turn into a walking monument. On the other hand, there are a lot of approaches and technologies - like these you mention - which are normal in some other arts, but in film they are either strange or an anathema. The film is, in fact, entertainment, a circus. It probably has its roots in jugglers, entertainers swallowing fire, and the artistic has hard time entering the film world.

**S.A.:** *Can we formulate this in a Freudian manner, like a witticism? The whitticism is entertaining too because it derives from the familiar, but in any case it is a distortion.*

**M.M.:** The narrative film regularly served to us entertains in a much more boring way, which eventually means that it does not entertain. It's supposed to be entertaining, but that does not mean it should be stupid. I tried to make "Dust" entertaining, rather than "art film" torture; yet I didn't want to give up on the artistic ambition. A film should and can be both entertaining and artistic.

**S.A.:** *What makes you make cuts and insert whitticism and funny scenes in most serious and tense situations, like the scene when the number of the Turkish army shrinks, the simulation of Angela's death, eating watermelon in the midst of skirmishes, etc?*

**M.M.:** A creative game. Displacement is very important. When I go to the movies, I want to be surprised. I don't want to know how the film ends before I even started watching it. Because if I know the end, I may as well do something else during those two hours. But, mind you, the witticism has to be integral and consequently performed. Little game causes a lot of work.

**S.A.:** *Your film lingers in the memory in many ways and forms. I can tell you that a great many people were enchanted exactly by those unusual and peculiar scenes. And not just that. The film induced unbelievable hunger for conversation, either in a positive, or a negative sense. As far as*

*the dialogues are concerned, it is being decomposed (artistically, thematically, compositionally) down to tiniest parts and long discussions are conducted over it by people of different age, different social or educational provenance. This has long since happened in this cultural area. The film is luxuriant and very amenable to analysis.*

**M.M.:** Great, that's very important, the most important, to be entertaining, memorable and to make people think.

**S.A.:** *Now, I would relate the reductive feature of cubism to the aesthetics of minimalism. It's evident that "Dust" is laconic, its language is elemental: voice, cry, gesture, image, tone, color contrast, very short takes. I experience it as some kind of a revival of the Source, as in "Viva Mexico". To what extent and where have you made reductions?*

**M.M.:** You know, I like minimalism, but I think it goes against the grain of narrative film. I like to have it put in context, to have it as an extreme of something larger, to be able to say: minimal on one hand, but at the same time very rich. At one point, when I was writing the screenplay, after having written several versions, I put it aside for some time, and when I got back to it, I wasn't rewriting the last version, but I started from a scratch. And when I compared the text to what I wrote before, I realized I had thrown out 30 pages out of total of 120. The sentences were shorter, the descriptions too... The text became very minimal, and that's how it is being read. Joe Fiennes called the dialogue/screenplay "fat free". And a very strange thing happened during rehearsals. Actors competed with each other in throwing out lines as if saying: "I can do this without even saying my line." Actors usually ask for more lines. There was not much dialogue in the screenplay, and the actors made it even more minimal, which was a compliment for me. I think this is part of that collaboration with the imaginary viewer, a proof that we are not underestimating him. On the other hand, I think it's amazing if you can express yourself with very few words, and still be crystal clear, precise and accurate. There's a short story by Andric about a dignitary who is building a bridge and wonders what to put on its sign, two or three quotes or just one. He hesitates for a while, in the end he decides not to put anything at all. I love Andric's silence.

**S.A.:** *This reminds me of Eisenstein's dilemma: is it possible to make a film without a story?*

**M.M.:** That's the avantgarde film. We can all agree to read tomorrow's issue of the daily newspaper as if it were a book of poetry. If the reader agrees and makes the effort, we may end up with a conceptual work of art. In this particular case, much of that minimalism was in the screenplay, but later, when directing the screenplay I was seeking the counterpoint, the underlining richness. The counterpoint emerged in the process of directing, of staging the minimal.

**S.A.:** *It is felt like some kind of baroque or chiaro scuro against the minimalism. For example, the New York scenes are somber, dense, compared to the Macedonian ones, where the sun flare reduces figures to contours, outlines or sketches.*

**M.M.:** Yes, like in Caravaggio. The piece comes out through the contrast. I think the contrast is very suitable, at least for the dramatic arts. Basically, the minimalism alone, Philip Glass alone, is too little.

**S.A.:** *With respect to minimalism, parallels may be drawn with the Japanese poetic forms, such as haiku or tanka, in the sense that concrete items are put together to convey meta-language forms. I presume your film has something in common with the Japanese aesthetics? Maybe this is why, the Japanese are so fond of you.*

**M.M.:** Excellent. We said there are very few lines. Likewise, there are high-profile or relatively high-profile characters saying very little, almost nothing, throughout the film. The Teacher says little, Elijah merely quotes, he has but 4 or 5 lines in the whole film that are not from the Bible. The Japanese like when a work has plenty of free space letting the viewer fill the gaps on his own, like in their "No" theater.

**S.A.:** *Do you leave many blank pages that everybody may fill up, keep the story go or make their own interpretations?*

**M.M.:** Leaving blank pages is a matter of having manners, like when you greet people you meet. Similarly - as an artists - you have to leave a blank page. It means you respect the viewer, and you make it possible for him to enter and take part. But the blank page has to be surrounded by sufficient amount of words, sufficient amount of beautiful words in order to make it stand out. On the other hand, if you overstress things you end up in kitsch, like in a Hollywood film, or applying make-up in Macedonia.

**S.A.:** *The Japanese poetry is in the same spirit, right? A language rendered into a film, a visualized alphabet?*

**M.M.:** To what extent language is streamlined, to what extent everything is aerodynamic... In fact, you have the picture of what the poem says and you have a much broader picture of everything around it because of the way it was presented.

**S.A.:** *It reflects the whole context with a few words. Everything is clear.*

**M.M.:** When I was 15, I read haiku and Zen Buddhism books a lot, which I did not understand then, and I even tried to write a few haiku poems myself. There is a tremendously strict discipline there. Primarily towards yourself. The discipline towards your own ego is incredible: to say the minimum of what you have to say! Both in "Dust" and in "Before the Rain", the beauty of the minimum is in something metaphysical, it's not in the story, or the human relations, or the take, but rather in something beyond them all.

**S.A.:** *In the fluid?*

**M.M.:** Yes, and if that metaphysics works, then everything is OK. The key is not in the story, or the message, or the politics, or the history.

**S.A.:** *I believe your film has first and foremost an transcendental dimension that puts the documentary and factual aspect in the background and aims at film phenomenology.*

**M.M.:** Absolutely. The narrative film is not CNN. By way of lying, the narrative film tells a truth, which is sometimes more relevant than facts, as opposed to CNN which tells lies through facts. When I was making "Before the Rain" I was asked: "Where did you see machine guns?" And now here they are, in Sipkovic and Matejce. When making "Dust" we were digging into archives around the world, we conducted extensive research, recruited ethnologists and historians, we enjoyed sifting through (both the Macedonian and the cowboy) language to reconstruct that period at least partially, although proper reconstruction is not necessarily what makes a film good. We didn't show 1 percent of the horrors we read about in witnesses accounts of the time.

**S.A.:** *I used to believe that intuition suited more independent artists (painters, sculptors, writers) and that filmmakers and drama people, and all those involved in a team creation, were slightly more constrained to stick to a single concept, and were less entitled to the coincidence*

**M.M.:** Of course. Therefore I envy them. But there were cases when I wanted to kill a given character, and he refused to die. You just can't program this. So he lived. For example, all along I intended to kill Kiril in "Before the Rain", but I failed. And now, when I'm looking at it from a distance I see I made the right choice. My writing is truly intuitive and when I set out to transform it into a film, it remains relatively intuitive, but because of the nature of this profession, because I have to explain it first to 200 people, because of the organizational, technical and financial constraints, I have to rationalize what is abstract or irrational.

**S.A.:** *However, in the course of the shooting, were you driven by the moment to choose between what was already conceptualized and some new more interesting situation, in terms of what Eisenstein says that "the screenplay is only a mould that holds the form of the shoe until someone's foot gets inside?"*

**M.M.:** Exactly. You combine both. But the main form is already there. Besides, there's a lot of outside pressure to preserve the form or to preserve certain needs (financial, technical, organizational). As for working with actors, Bergman puts it differently. He says: "Rehearsing is creation, and shooting is re-creation", i.e. repetition of the created. My experience with actors taught me that this is 90% true, because when we, 5 or 6 people, sit down at a table in a relaxed atmosphere, and for two weeks probe, rearrange and play with the script, what comes out of it is usually the best, much better than what comes out when gaffers, make-up artists and location managers buzz around you. This goes for working with actors, which is not necessarily true in other departments.

**S.A.:** *There's a powerful visual rhythm in how the moments of struggle and death are edited, which reminds me of the dripping technic in the action painting. I had the impression that at times you were wandering the screen like Jackson Pollock with a bucket of paint in your hands in a kind of artistic trance. Those swift moves of the film brush raise the viewers' level of adrenaline. Do you make this to blend the viewer with the notion of death, in other words, to terrify him, or for some other reason?*

**M.M.:** The first and most trivial reason is that this is mimicry of the dynamics at such moments of battle. Usually, the fast bits happen right before death. I don't refer here only to the very act of dying, but to all that's happening when our heart pounds rapidly and the adrenaline goes up. It reflects the dynamics of the scene. The narrative itself imposes this and vice versa. Maybe I feel an adrenaline rush, so I write the scene accordingly and those are beautiful moments. I like the quick editing that is not just quick in itself, but in the dimensions it imposes. This ought to have a reason and an inner rhythm. I've seen quick editing which is idiotic. Nothing happens in the shots, but the director thinks we've been made so sensitive (or insensitive) to MTV that we need awfully fast cuts. I think that fast editing was not invented by television, nor by MTV, nor by films over the past 15 years. Eisenstein used takes shorter than a second. This is a means of expression that existed long before sound came into the picture. Sometimes it suits the author, sometimes it's out of place. I think that in Europe, especially the older critics are used to slow-paced films because this kind of films was a reflection of their makers wanted to do. However, some films are slow because people didn't know how to edit.

**S.A.:** *I had the opportunity to see the most recently made Iranian films which are now being much awarded and in which everything comes down to some Biblical passing of time and sprawling scenes. They appear fascinating though. Is this some sort of a counter-stream opposing the quick-editing film?*

**M.M.:** I've seen just two of them. It depends on both the author and the narrative. You see, the pace is mostly a matter of taste. For instance, "River" directed by the Taiwanese director Tsai-Ming Liang, has never-ending takes in which seemingly nothing happens, so that eventually a naïve viewer will think nothing happens in the film. But the film is beautiful, and a lot happens, and I wanted to see it again. I don't know. I think that after all it depends on the person and the actual film, it is a result of what you want to say. In a way, it's also a false image, an illusion. Bergman has scenes that are very quickly edited, although you have the impression that the action develops at a slow pace. I think that some directors employ long takes purely for the purpose of mimicry when they copy great filmmakers who use long takes. Mimicry has bones, but originals are pregnant, their takes are full of meaning and the meaning doesn't have to be narrative, so that you are really enjoying it while it lasts. I like quick editing, but not at any cost. It all depends on the take, whether it's good or not. If you have a bad take, you won't be able to deceive anyone, no matter how short you cut it. Even if it lasts two frames, you still end up with a bad two-frame take in your film. With me, even in the fast scenes, there is a narrative purpose, the set is thought out, the camera is moving, the object is moving, and if everything is edited quickly, you end up with three speeds. For example, the scene when Angela dies as Edge is looking on, is very quickly edited, and it might well have been the other way round.

**S.A.:** *Do you use postmodernist layering of a figurative language (explicit dialogue and forceful psychology in the relation between Angela and Edge in New York) and an abstract language (the*

*scenes in Macedonia reduced to an elemental dialogue/monologue, listening to movements or observing of sounds/cries)?*

**M.M.:** In this case too, we come to the issue of contrast. In "Dust", it is a result of two things: how I feel about Macedonia and about New York. The second reason for this, as you call it - postmodernist layering - is the context of the story. It starts in New York and all that happens in Macedonia is a back story, a fairytale, but also true.

**S.A.:** *Let me now mention globalism. Milcho Manchevski's film text seeks to fill up the white pages of the universal history of film and confirm our identity, our separate existence. Was this your intention?*

**M.M.:** Absolutely, yes. I illustrate that with the disappearing soldiers, with the story that, just like history, changes depending on the storyteller. We are not sure whether he/she lies to us or not. Anyway, the story of the original storyteller ends when she dies. This is the most somber part of the story. Neda and the baby are going to get killed, the Teacher has already been killed, Lilith has killed herself, Luke realizes he has ruined his life, that his brother hates him... So the other storyteller picks up the story, finishes it and modifies it to a relative happy end. Something similar to this happens in Macedonia too because we let it happen, we let someone else tell our story. Angela at least has unbending will to finish the story, to a thief if she has to (she conveys to him her warmth, thus helping him find a second chance and start over in life). Reality in Macedonia is, in fact, worse than the film. Reality is that we are not even noticing our story, never mind telling it. Not only do we not know the story of the past, but we also don't know the story of what's happening now. A lot of people in Macedonia got killed, thousands were driven out of their homes and no one is writing down their stories.

**S.A.:** *In the end, let me ask you: How did you experience the premieres of "Dust" in the world? I think in certain countries there was more ideology than anything else, probably because of your defense of the Macedonian cause in the world.*

**M.M.:** Unlike the Venice premiere, the response was great in other countries. In Japan, "Dust" was compared to a work by Marcel Proust. In Venice, the whole situation was politically vulgarized. It took me three months to accept the fact that such vulgarization could happen and that serious reporters could lack integrity to such a degree. In Venice, in fact, they tried to assassinate the film. In Germany, someone wrote that the critics debated the film before they actually got to see it. They had already assumed a stance as to how to welcome the film, mostly because of my political opinion piece published in *Suddeutsche Zeitung*, *The Guardian*, and *Pravda*, which called to task NATO for its (limited) part of the responsibility for what was going on in Macedonia. The article also tells the truth about those killing policemen in their "fight for language and human rights". As you say, the defense of the Macedonian cause and the cause of law and order caused such animosity. At the time, the Macedonians were simply not the "good guys". A critic projected his racism onto the film accusing the film of being racist. Well, the man

who said the film was discriminating against the Turks (and trying to block Turkey's admission to the European Union!!) turned out to be a member of racist police units in Northern Ireland. Such a projection is an old technology in these kinds of debate.

**S.A.:** *Isn't this a typical situation of neo-colonial behavior?*

**M.M.:** Absolutely. But the neo-colonialism draws its strength from the submissiveness of the colonized. And "Dust" did not let politicized critics patronize it. The nature of the film is such: it is obscene, it plays with the structure, with the viewer, it goes against stereotypes, and even against national stereotypes.

*Translated by Aneta Ilievska*

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