

# *Free Style* by Dagmar Benke

Part II Chapter 5.

## **Film Analysis: *Before the Rain***

“A real bonus; a masterful film of great emotional impact, told in an extraordinarily modern way and appearing suddenly and without warning from the No-Man’s-Land of Low Budget and Debut movies.” So wrote the German publication *Blickpunkt: Film* when the first feature film by Milcho Manchevski was awarded the Golden Lion at the 1994 Venice Film Festival. “Macedonian film-maker Milcho Manchevski’s debut feature was a bombshell for European critics... An absolute Must for lovers of real cinema!”, declared *Video Woche*, with characteristic hyperbole.

When the film opened German theatres in Summer 1995, only 64,997 cinema lovers made the pilgrimage. Maybe the rest of them were on holiday. Or maybe at that time they had had enough of the real bombshells raining down in the former Yugoslavia and didn’t want to see any more films about how things could reach such a pass. Whatever, they missed one of the most outstanding films of recent years.

### **Content**

*Before the Rain* is an episodic film which recounts three stories – or, as Milcho Manchevski subtitles it – a ‘tale in three parts’. Each episode is introduced with a Chapter Heading.

Chapter One bears the Caption: 1. *Words*

This chapter tells of Kiril, a young monk who lives in a Greek Orthodox monastery and has made a vow of silence. One night Kiril finds a panic-stricken Albanian girl in his cell, her hair shorn short. Kiril cannot understand a word the girl – Zamira – says, as she speaks only Albanian, but he gives her sanctuary. Even when, the following day, a band of armed Macedonians shows up claiming that the girl has murdered one of their number, Kiril does not betray Zamira. He confides in no one, not even his Abbot. The Macedonians search the monastery, ransacking it as they go, and then billet themselves there.

When the monks discover Zamira’s presence, Kiril decides to break his vow of silence and leave the monastery with her. They are now technically able to converse, but Zamira does not speak Kiril’s language. So she has no way of knowing that Kiril is planning to flee to London, where his uncle is a famous photographer. Despite the communication problem, the two of them become close. Finally it is not the Macedonians, but Zamira’s Albanian relatives who track down the young lovers in the mountains. Zamira’s grandfather berates his granddaughter for being a whore, slaps her, and sends her Christian lover

Kiril packing. Zamira runs after him. Beside himself with rage, her brother brings up his rifle and shoots her dead.

Chapter 2 bears the Caption: 2. *Faces*

This chapter tells the story of Anne, an English photographer. Anne works for an agency, and every day she is involved in selecting pictures of war and human misery. They show the faces of violated, brutalised, unhappy people. Anne's lover, a Macedonian guy named Aleksander, is a war photographer who has won the Pulitzer Prize for his work. Aleksander wants to give up what he does and go back to Macedonia, taking Anne with him. She has to make a choice, but she can't, not this fast. She also doesn't tell Aleksander that she is pregnant. Aleksander leaves London with out her.

Anne meets with her husband Nick in a restaurant. She tells him about the child she's expecting, how she wants to split up with him, and about the love she still feels for him. Nick can't handle all this, and demands that she make a decision one way or the other. But Anne can't make the choice. While the two of them are wrangling fruitlessly, a quarrel is brewing in the background between a waiter and a customer, both from Eastern Europe. The owner throws the troublesome customer out. Soon after afterwards he returns, armed, and embarks on a killing spree among the restaurant's customers. Anne searches desperately for Nick. When she does find him, he is unrecognisable; his face has been shot away.

Chapter 3 bears the Caption: 3. *Pictures*

This recounts Aleksander the photographer's homecoming to Macedonia. .But where he had hoped to find peace and quiet in the familiar surroundings of his youth and childhood, hatred and enmity are already rife. Albanian and Macedonian neighbours, once on good terms, are exchanging swingeing curses. Violence is everywhere. Small children and volatile teenagers armed with guns prowl the area.

When Aleksander tries to visit his teenage sweetheart Hana, he realises that the Albanian enclave in the village has become enemy territory. Only when Hana's father has given the go-ahead to the armed sentry is Aleksander permitted to deliver the presents he has brought for the family. Shortly afterwards The Shepherd, a cousin of Aleksander's, is killed. That night, Hana visits Aleksander in secret. Her daughter has fallen into the hands of Aleksander's Christian relatives. They insist she is a murderer and want to kill her. Hana begs Aleksander to help her. "As though she were your own daughter."

Aleksander goes to the shepherd's hut belonging to his cousin and leads the girl out. He's shot by his relatives. The girl escapes.

Just the order in which these three stories unfold makes them rich in conflict and emotion. They pose questions and provoke discussion. But *Before the Rain* does not owe its unique power to the order in which the stories are

recounted, but to the form that connects them. Milcho Manchevski has achieved an exemplary balance of dramatic and epic elements.

## **Analysis**

*Before the Rain* has a Prologue which is of central importance for its structure and theme.

## **Prologue**

Strictly speaking, the film has two Prologues. The first shows a dramatic, stormy skyscape, on which a caption appears, read out by the narrator: "Birds screech as they flee across the darkened sky. Human beings are silent. My blood aches from waiting." Then the title comes up. The first images show a young monk tending tomato plants in the monastery garden. An old monk emerges from the monastery buildings and addresses him; "The midges are biting, it's going to rain.. Come on in. It's raining over there already." The young monk walks off with the older monk. They look up at the lowering sky. The older monk continues to speak in short sentences. "Our conversations are too one-sided, Kiril." Or: "It smells of rain. The thunder always shakes my bones to the marrow. I fear that they have started shooting." But Kiril makes no reply.

The two monks pass a group of children who have made a circle out of twigs and are staging a fight between two tortoises. The kids goad the tortoises on. "Come on, Ninja Turtle, finish him off."

Again, the older monk addresses Kiril. "Time never dies. The circle is not round."

In the distance, we see the approaching storm. Thunder and lightning. From the clifftop on which the monastery is built, they gaze out at a stormy sky over a turbulent sea. And the older monk says, "I almost wish I'd taken a vow of silence, like you. But this sublime beauty deserves words to describe it."

This prologue lasts for three minutes. In those first three minutes, much exposition takes place. First of all we meet Kiril, the monk. We learn his name, and notice that he does not speak. The older monk reveals the reason; a vow of silence, which is not part of the rule of the order. Kiril seems to be a particularly devout, dedicated monk. We become acquainted with the main setting, the clifftop monastery.

The older monk introduces other important motifs which will acquire greater importance during the course of the film. We learn that it is already raining close by, and that the older monk regards this natural phenomenon as a threat. He refers to thunder in the same breath as his fear that "they" may have already begun shooting. We see that there is a clear reason for this assumption. The kids are already staging a miniature war in their little arena. And we're alerted to the fact that the circle will have some special significance. "Time never dies. The circle is not round."

Even though the older monk's remark sounds very enigmatic at this stage, the audience are primed for a large story, in which Rain, War, The Circle and Time will all play a part. The gateway to the film is open. Now the first episode starts with the Caption:

## 1. *Words*

Each of the three episodes is to all intents and purposes constructed like a standalone short film. Each has a protagonist, and central story arc and a structure. This is most apparent in *Words*.

### **Kiril's story: Construction.**

The main character in this episode is Kiril. His character is established via the Prologue. The beginning of this first episode shows Kiril together with the other monks at mass in the chapel. He relishes this. It makes him happy.

In parallel, we see the children igniting the twigs forming their combat arena and throwing live rounds into the flames which detonate loudly. The racket makes the monks start. A tortoise lies helplessly on its back in the middle of the ring of fire.

Kiril's ordered daily routine, his status quo, is disrupted when he returns to his cell at night and there discovers a girl with roughly shorn hair in his bunk. She appears beside herself with terror. Kiril lays a finger on his lips and shushes her. This is the first time we meet her. She goes on her knees before Kiril and begs him in Albanian, "Don't hit me. Don't tell anyone I'm here." And when Kiril makes no reply; "Talk to me. Can't you speak?" Then she realises, "You don't speak Albanian. I can't speak Macedonian." Kiril, to be sure, is well enough disposed to the girl, but he does what he considers necessary; he makes for the older monk's quarters and prepares to knock on the door. But the girl stares at him pleadingly, and Kiril, poised to knock, cannot bring himself to take that final step. They lock eyes. Then the old monk opens the door, sees Kiril standing there and asks, "What are you doing here?" All this happens 6-8 minutes into the film.

Kiril's problem is now set up; he knows that the girl is afraid and is asking him to hide her, to save her. He also knows that he should not do so. He's in a dilemma – divided loyalty – and must make a decision. No easy task. The story is rolling now. We've seen the 'point of attack', the 'call to adventure' and we've seen that Kiril doesn't really want to heed this call. He wants to give the girl up. But he can't.

Kiril does not answer the old monk. The latter fills in the blanks. "Aha, you wanted to take a midnight walk. Fine. I need to pee too." And he accompanies Kiril to the latrine.

Kiril returns to his cell bringing some apples for the girl. She devours them hungrily, and tells him, "My name is Zamira. You're a good man." Kiril smiles. His goal is starting to take shape; he wants to save the girl. (Minute 12)

The following morning a band of armed Macedonians arrives at the monastery, disrupting morning prayer and demanding that they hand over the Albanian girl. "She has killed our brother. The children say she is hiding here." The Abbot retorts, "We have had only Bosnian refugees staying here. Muslims. Before God, all are equal." But a young guy counters, "What about five hundred years of Albanian history?" This also sets up the background to the conflict. The band wants to search the monastery and their leader, who tells the Abbot his name is Mitre, says, "An eye for an eye." "Turn the other cheek," the Abbot offers. Mitre tells him, "We already have."

The Abbot dismissed the armed band and asks the monks, "Have any of you seen this girl? If she is here, I want to know." Everyone says no, and one of them says, "It is a sin." The Abbot addresses Kiril directly; "Father Kiril, have you seen a girl here?" Kiril awkwardly raises a finger to his lips. Glances towards a painting depicting Judas betraying Christ with a kiss. "So, she is not here?" And Kiril shakes his head. This is the turning point, the moment when Kiril decides to go against his loyalty to the Abbot, and to be loyal to the girl. A point of no return. The middle section of the episode – the Second Act – begins. We have reached Minute 16.

The armed band starts to ransack the monastery, but no girl. Kiril's cell is searched too. We stay with Kiril on the stairs outside, feeling his fear, and the relief he experiences when Mitre and his men return empty-handed. While they are searching the other cells Kiril sees one of the Macedonians, a trigger-happy idiot, spark up as he sees something through the window. He raises his weapon. Kiril knocks his arm aside and is beaten up for his pains. The idiot then shoots a cat (Minute 19). The band has become suspicious, and Mitre becomes aggressive to Kiril. "You're hiding a Muslim woman. Talk!" But the Abbot defends Kiril, points out that he's under a vow of silence. The antagonists are now shown in action – and Kiril does what he has to in order to achieve his goal, saving the girl. It becomes clear what is at stake if he doesn't do this. Zamira will be summarily shot, like the cat. As for Kiril, he is risking not only his identity as a monk, but his very life.

The band billets itself in the monastery overnight. They drink and carouse. But during the night Zamira reappears in Kiril's cell, unharmed. Kiril goes to sleep a happy man. But he is woken by the Abbot and the old monk, who discover Zamira in his room. "You should be ashamed. You have broken your vows, and renounced the Lord. You have turned away from our God." Kiril is obliged to pack up his belongings and leave the monastery. He has been unable to keep Zamira safe from discovery. But at the last moment the Abbot brings out Zamira. He deals Kiril a slap round the ear; then he embraces him. "Good luck to both of you." And, "Forgive me." This ends the middle section (second Act) of this episode. The arc of suspense – will Kiril be able to hide Zamira in the monastery? Ends in a negative. A new tension

arises; will their flight together be successful? The film has reached Minute 27.

Kiril and Zamira walk through the night. When day breaks, Kiril explains to Zamira what he has in mind. "We'll go to my brother's in Skopje. He'll help us. Then on to my uncle in London. He is a famous photographer."

Zamira replies, "I can't understand what you're saying." And Kiril replies, "No one will find you. No one. You can't understand me, can you?" He gives her a tender kiss on the cheek, and the two of them come together in an embrace. Kiril says it again, "No one." This is the most tender moment of the story, an emotional high point (Minute 30). Then a hand descends on Zamira's shoulder and the two lovers freeze. Zamira whirls in alarm, she smiles in relief; "Grandfather!" But her grandfather, standing there with around twenty armed Albanian men, gives her a clout round the ear. "Where were you yesterday? The sheep-pen? Did you kill the shepherd? Blood calls out for blood. You're driving us into another war." So saying, he carries on striking her, calling her a whore and lists the disciplinary treatment he's lavished on her; locked her up, cut off her hair. Kiril is obliged to look on helplessly, and is roughed up by the others. Zamira's grandfather's gaze alights on him. "Who's this?" Zamira replies, "He's saved my life,. He loves me." Her grandfather strikes her again. "Love you does he? We'll see about that." He dismisses Kiril. "Get lost."

Kiril walks hesitantly away, then turns once more to gaze at her, as he did at the beginning of the film when he couldn't bring himself to betray her to Abbot. Zamira cannot bear it. She calls out, "No!" and runs after him. Her brother raises his rifle, calls out, "No, sister!" He shoots Zamira (Minute 32) This is the sad climax of the film. Kiril has not achieved his goal. He has not managed to save Zamira.

Kiril kneels beside the dying girl. He strokes her face, tells her, "I'm sorry." She places a finger on his lips and shushes him. Then she dies. Kiril subsides onto his suitcase, next to the body. Fade to Black. It's the end of the episode, Minute 36 of the whole film. The running time of the episode itself was 32 minutes.

Words has a classical dramatic structure. It has a beginning, a middle and end, and a protagonist who pursues a clear goal which sustains the arc of suspense throughout the action. There are antagonists who are pursuing a diametrically opposed goal, and several highly effective culminations and turning points lined together (see diagram p. XXX)

### **The Whole Truth or, The Circle Is Not Round**

But that's not quite the whole picture. I have left out a sequence. This sequence start in Minute 14, and shows a Christian burial. For a brief moment, we glimpse the corpse in an open coffin. A middle-aged man with a beard and long hair. Among the mourners are the members of the armed band who during the next sequence will go to the monastery and demand that the Albanian girl be turned over to them. And off to one side, there stands a

woman in a black dress, wearing dark glasses. She doesn't seem to belong here. She removes the dark glasses and says in English, "Oh my God." Kiril, who has been watching the interment from a distance, makes for the monastery at a run and arrives just in time for morning prayers.

This sequence stands up the armed band, and it makes sense when later, at the monastery, the men say, "The Albanian girl has killed our brother." Despite this, the scene seems a touch strange; extraneous, peculiar. Perhaps it has to do with woman in the dark glasses. But ensuing dramatic events soon make us forget about her.

### **Taking Sides**

The *Words* episode is also the first variation on the central theme of the whole film, which I would term *taking sides*, i.e. 'make a decision' or more exactly, "make a decision to take the right side, adopt the right position, in a violent situation." Kiril has to choose between loyalty to his Abbot and his Christian Faith on the one hand, and his desire to save the Muslim girl Zamira on the other. Kiril wants to do the right thing. He opts for Zamira. His whole existence is at stake. And still he is unable to save Zamira from death at the hands of her own relatives. *Words* shows an explosion of violence, but without explaining it to the audience. The first episode ends in emotional turmoil and asks the questions; How could this happen? Why does a brother kill his own sister? Has Zamira killed someone? Did she kill the man in the coffin? Is the victim also a perpetrator?

### **Silence**

At the beginning and end of this episode – entitled *Words* – is Silence. At the opening, Kiril is not permitted to speak, and at the end Zamira's death leaves him speechless. In between times, Kiril tells a lie when he nods, and finally, because of Zamira, he breaks his vow of silence. Zamira and Kiril cannot understand each other because they speak different languages. But their eyes, and their bodies understand, and the nascent love between them might have stood a chance. Zamira and her grandfather have no common ground, despite the fact they speak the same language. When Zamira tells him, "He saved my life. He hid me." Grandfather answers her with, "Whore!" Understanding using words is impossible, here. They no longer have any meaning for Zamira.

### **A Transition**

Zamira's death is followed by a Fade to Black, accompanied on the sound track by the sound of rain and thunder. We fade up from black to a woman under a shower. She is weeping bitterly. She might possibly be weeping over what has just transpired, and the scene works as a classic coda.

Then read the Caption:

## 2. Faces

### Anne's Story: Construction

The woman whom we have seen weeping in the shower works in a photo agency. We learn that her name is Anne. She is looking at photos from war zones; shots of the violated, the starving, the tormented and the dead – many children among them. Anne takes a call from a Dr Perry. "I'm what? Am I really? I will. He'll be thrilled." She resumes examining the photos of dead kids, then runs for the toilet and throws up.

While all this is going on, Aleksander, a photographer, arrives at the agency and greets the lady on reception with a curt, "Everyone still alive, then?" He goes inside as Anne is leaving. The two just miss one another. Anne stands out on the street surrounded by the chaos of London's traffic.

Anne meets with her mother, who reproaches her for staying away from her home and her husband Nick for a week. Anne explains that she is going to meet Nick that evening. Then Aleksander turns up out of nowhere, kisses Anne on the cheek. He glances upwards and says, "A hard rain's gonna fall..." It's an awkward moment for Anne. She introduces him to her mother as the 'photographer from the agency' who 'won a Pulitzer Prize last month.' Her mother replies, "No problem is so great that one can't run away from it." Then she takes her leave. We're in Minute 42 of the film and it's clear that Anne has a problem.

Anne and Aleksander get a cab. He tells her that he wants to jack in his job. Anne doesn't believe him. "You're a born photographer." She believes that you have to take sides in life. Aleksander insists "he won't take anyone's side, anywhere." He counts off all the current war zone. He wants to return to Macedonia, and he wants Anne to go with him. And realises that he means it. "You're really in earnest." Aleksander: "Deadly earnest." This is the Inciting Incident – in Minute 42.

Then Aleksander tells Anne that he has made a shit farm of his life. ("I fucked up. I killed.") Anne weeps. They're both distraught. They kiss, and their kisses become more and more passionate.

In a cemetery, Aleks takes some airline tickets for Macedonia from his pocket. They're for that same evening. Anne can't. Not this very evening. She begs Aleks to understand why. "Understand me. Be patient." Aleks kisses her. "Have a good life. Don't forget to write. Take sides." And he walks off. This is the turning point for Anne. There's no way back. She has to make a decision. It's Minute 45.

That evening Anne meets with her husband Nick in a restaurant. They try to reach an understanding, each apologising to the other. Anne tells Nick that she's pregnant. He's happy. "Is it mine?" "Yes." He's even more happy, orders champagne. They drink to the baby's health..



While they have been talking, a foreign-looking restaurant customer has been doing his level best to provoke a waiter. The two of them speak a Balkan-sounding language. When the 'foreigner' starts pelting the waiter (George) with bank-notes, the owner throws George out. "And take your pal with you! Right now!" George tries to defend himself – in vain. He deals the foreign man a clout round the ear. The quarrel escalates into a vicious fight. Finally the 'foreigner' is overpowered and slung out on the street.

The customers settle down once more. Anne tells Nick that she wants a divorce. Nick doesn't get it. "But I forgave you for that thing with the photographer." Anne gets miffed. "I don't want you to forgive me for that thing with the photographer." And them; "I'm sorry." Nick's at the end of his tether. "So why did you want to meet, in that case? You've already made up your mind." He makes to leave. Anne grabs him. "I haven't made up my mind, not yet. I do still love you, you know." Nick seizes of hope. "All we need is a little time. This is another important Turning Point (Minute 55) and it ends the middle section (2<sup>nd</sup> Act)

Then the 'foreigner' comes back into the restaurant. He has a gun, and opens fire indiscriminately. George the waiter falls across Anne, dead. When the carnage is over, Anne gets to her feet and searches for Nick. He's lying motionless on the floor. Anne turns him over. His face has been shot away. "Your face..." Anne stammers. This is the climax. The film is in its 57<sup>th</sup> minute and the second episode is over. It ran 21 minutes.

The *Faces* episode also has a dramatic construction. The arc of suspense is generated by the problem facing Anne, to choose between two men, Nick and Aleksander, between two worlds, and two ways of life. (see diagram on p. XXX)

### **The Whole Truth? Or, The Circle Is Not Round II**

And once again, I have intentionally left out a sequence. When Anne returns to the Agency after the scene in the cemetery and Aleksander's ultimatum, she looks at some photos, which show Kiril seated on his suitcase, the dead Zamira beside him, with police and photographers on the scene. And while she is looking at these photos, a call comes through for Aleksander Kirkov. A young voice – and if you listen very carefully it could be Kiril's voice – demands to speak to Aleksander Kirkov. The caller declines to leave a message. Anne asks where he's calling from. "Macedonia calling."

The next image shows Aleks against a brick wall. He looks at his watch. Graffiti on the wall read, 'Time never dies. The circle is not round.'

It all seems logical enough. Some photographer or other has taken the photographs of Zamira's death and sent them in to the agency. Kiril, homeless now, calls his uncle, Aleksander. But something odd is going on. Why are same two enigmatic sentences spoken to Kiril by the old monk written on a wall in London? And if you had look closely, weren't Aleksander

and the dead man in the coffin very similar in appearance? So the woman in the dark glasses was Anne. Something's definitely amiss. But caught up as we are in the ensuing dramatic events, all that is – once more – quickly forgotten.

### **Taking Sides**

There are variations on the theme of taking sides in this episode as well. Anne too has to make choice, between two men, two worlds, two ways of life. But, unlike Kiril, Anne can't bring herself to make the choice. She does not choose in favour of Aleksander, and she does not reject Nick. So she loses them both.

*Faces* also shows that violence isn't something that just happens 'down there' in the Balkans, but also intrudes into our 'civilised' European lives.

### **Faces**

Faces are a defining motif of the second episode. The first thing we see Anne looking at are the faces of the tormented, the violated and the dead. Faces of people somewhere in the world to whom war has brought terrible misfortune. And the last thing Anne sees is the dead, ruined face of her husband Nick, gunned down in an expensive London restaurant. In the interim Anne says to Aleksander, "What's happened to you? Look at your face." And Aleksander recounts, "Macedonia is where the Byzantines took 14,000 Macedonians prisoner. They gouged out their eyes and sent them home. 28,000 eyes." Again, Aleksander no longer wants to use his eyes to document horror. He no longer believes that violence can have an end. "Peace is the exception, not the rule." He no longer believes that the faces of suffering human beings give insight to other human beings. But he does believe that Macedonia is a 'safe' place.

### **A Second Transition**

We hear the devastated Anne stammering out, "Your face.... Your face..." on the sound track over aerial shots of wild, mountainous terrain. Then the sky enters the frame and the Title of the next episode is superimposed on the clouds:

### **3. Pictures**

#### **Aleksander's story: Construction**

The third episode tells Aleksander's story. The film takes time out to let us see how he arrives by plane and then travels on by bus to more and more remote areas. From a conversation with a soldier we learn that Aleksander left the country 24 years ago and has only been back to Macedonia one since then, 16 years ago. The soldier cautions him, "Why have you come back?"

Don't you realise what's going on here? It's going to hurt when they chop off your head." Aleks tells him, "Well, it's about time it happened anyway."

No sooner has he arrived at his home village, Aleksander is threatened by a young guy with a gun. "Where are you going? Stop or I'll shoot." Sharp eyed members of the audience will recognise him as one of the band of Macedonians who were searching for Zamira at the monastery in the first episode. Aleks takes the gun away from the kid, who threatens to report him to his uncle – Mitre. The village seems silent, desolate. Aleksander's family home is dilapidated. The following morning, Aleks is awakened by giggling children. A three-year-old boy filches the gun from him and threatens him with it. Aleks has a hard time taking the gun back. A man shows up. "Let the kid go!" Then Aleksander and his cousin Bojan recognise each other. There ensues a hearty reunion and a welcome home party. Also attending is Mitre, whom we recognise as the leader of the band of Macedonians at the monastery. Aleks has given Mitre the gun he took off his nephew. Aleksander asks after Hana, his first love. Mitre cautions him, "Forget about Hana. She's an Albanian." "Is that really so important?" Aleks wants to know. "Her father will cut off your prick." Aleks learns that Hana is now a widow and has a pretty daughter who hangs around the sheep pen. Bojan the shepherd, busy surreptitiously goosing a woman under the table, leers, "Don't be greedy. Bring her over why don't you?" When Aleksander informs everyone that he is back for good, it's the cue for much good cheer. He takes a group photo, using the automatic shutter release.

Aleksander sets off for the Albanian part of the village, bearing a bagful of presents. He's challenged by armed sentries. "Where are you going?" "To Hana Halili's house." "Why?" "We're friends. We've known each other since school. I have some gifts for her children. I mean no harm to anyone." With great difficulty Aleksander manages to persuade one of the sentries to go to seek out Hana's father. The old man, Zekir, bids him welcome. Attentive members of the audience will recognise him from the first episode as Zamira's grandfather. "Bad times," he tells Aleks, "There's the smell of blood in the air." It's hot in the room. "It's going to rain," Zekir says. Aleksander unpacks his gifts. Hana comes in, silent, eyes downcast, bring refreshments. Zekir calls for his grandson Ali. Wants him to kiss Aleksander's hand. But Ali is incensed. "He doesn't belong here. I'll slit his throat." Aleksander leaves. From the window, Hana watches him go, and the two of them lock eyes for the last time.

Anne tries to call Aleks from London, but is defeated by language difficulties and the local post-mistress's disinterest.

The vet is helping Bojan the shepherd deliver two lambs. Aleks comes over, and while Bojan goes off to get schnapps, Aleksander discusses the threat of war with the vet. Aleks is adamant. "There'll be no shooting. The people round here are peaceful. There's no reason to fight one another," But the vet knows better. "They'll find a reason. War is a virus." We're in Minute 84. In the third episode, the film takes time out to dwell on the countryside, where everything

seems so peaceful, but is about to go up in flames. It takes time out to weave variations on Aleks's stance. He won't adopt a position, declines to take sides.

During the course of the night we finally learn the reason why. Aleksander writes letter to Anne. In it, he tells her how he killed, in a camp in Bosnia. He was talking to a militia-man, complaining "Nothing's going on here." "No problem," said the militia guy, hauled a prisoner out of the ranks and shot him. "Get shots of that?" he asked Aleksander. And Aleksander had. While he is writing to Anne, he's looking at the series of photos of the execution. "I took sides," he writes at the end of the letter. "My camera has killed someone. I have never shown those pictures to anyone. Now they belong to you."

The following morning, the shepherd is dead, stabbed with a pitchfork. "Now there'll be trouble," the vet tells Aleksander. We're in Minute 88 and the story is gathering pace. Aleksander and the vet come upon a band of Macedonians arming up, Aleksander's cousin Zdrave among them. "Those cursed Albanians are going to rot on the end of a pitchfork..." That "slut with the pitchfork" is reported to have been seen with the shepherd. The leader of the band is Mitre. He presses a rifle into Aleks's hands. "Take it. The time has come. For five hundred years our blood has been spilt..." Aleksander won't take the rifle. He still won't opt for one side or the other. (Minute 91). Mitre hands the rifle to the village idiot.

During the night, Hana comes to Aleksander. Things are terrible. Her daughter is missing. "Your cousin Zdrave," she tells Aleks. "Now do you understand what's happening to our people." "Yes." "You're just an onlooker." She and Aleksander join hands, tenderly, "Help me. As though she were your own daughter." Hana leaves. Aleksander gazes out of the window. In the distance, flashes of lightning. He gets out the photos of the executions and rips them to pieces. He has made his decision. (Minute 95)

The following morning Aleksander makes straight for the shepherd's hut. The village idiot is on guard outside. Aleks sneaks inside, and encounters Zdrave, who is shaken. "I could have shot you, cousin." Aleksander goes and fetches the girl. We see now that she is Zamira. "She's a child," Aleks says. "This child has killed my brother," Zdrave retorts. "How do you know? Let the police and the courts decide that." Aleksander takes Zamira by the hand and leads her outside. Zdrave calls after him, "Cousin, wait... Aleks... I'll shoot!" We feel Zdrave's anguish. "Coward!" hisses Mitre. Aleksander walks calmly onwards. "Shoot then, cousin. Shoot." And Zdrave fires. Aleksander is hit. He tells Zamira, "Run!" He takes a few steps, then falls to the ground. Zdrave hurries over to him. "Don't worry, cousin. You'll be OK." Aleks is still alive. He even manages to smile. "Look. Rain's coming." The other men shoot at Zamira as she runs away. The rain falls on the dry earth, on Aleksander's corpse, on Zamira. We're in Minute 102 of the film, and the third episode is over. It ran for 45 minutes.

Of the three episodes, *Pictures* is the least dramatic. It's construction is epic, one event recounted after the other; and then.... and then.... It is the longest of the episodes. It takes its time. But despite this, it is not without dramatic

tension. This tension is generated by the question, Will Aleksander take sides, as people keep telling him to? For a long time he declines to do so, because he doesn't see what good will come of it; because he knows by experience where it leads. From a dramaturgical standpoint, you could put it this way - Aleksander wants to maintain the status quo by hanging onto his youth, when he still loved Hana and the village lived in peace. He does not want to believe that this is to be impossible. The audience senses that Aleksander is making a mistake. And so despite the epic way in which the story is told, the tension slowly builds, intensifying unbearably like the close heat that precedes a storm, until at the very end an explosion occurs – all the more devastating because it has taken this long to build up to - and Aleksander is shot by his own people. (see diagram # xxx)

### **The Whole Truth, or, The Circle Is Not Round III**

Sometime during this episode at the very latest, each member of the audience will have noticed that something very odd is going on in this story. We have met the Macedonians and Albanians from Aleksander's village as early as the first episode. And Zamira, who died at the end of Words, has her life saved by Aleks (at the cost of his own) in the third episode.

But the very attentive viewer might have spotted something else. For a fraction of a second he was able to see something that Aleks couldn't during his visit to Hana's house – Zamira, her hair shorn short and standing in the living-room doorway hoping to snag Aleks's attention, being whisked away by her brother Ali.

And there was another glimpse to be had. After the two lambs are delivered, Bojan the shepherd leaves his hut. On the hillside near the sheep pen he spots a young couple holding hands. A girl with long, dark hair, holding a pitchfork. A young guy with short dark hair. We can't make out their faces. But we might notice that the girl is wearing the same type of trousers as Zamira. Bojan goes off to get some schnapps. En route, he comes up to the couple... But thereafter he apparently doesn't return home, as his wife appears shortly afterwards wanting to know where he is.

The end of the last episode leaves the audience with a plethora of thoughts and emotions. Aleksander's death is shockingly tragic. Once again someone has been shot by his own people, as Zamira was in the first episode. And this victim has admitted, I too am guilty. I have killed. At the same time his final act is to save a life – the life of an Albanian. Complicated stuff...

And about to get more complicated, because Aleksander cannot know what the audience already know at this point, that Zamira, for whom he has sacrificed his life, will also perish. In the film's chronology, she is already dead. The end of the film is not the end of the story.

### **The Epilogue**

But the film is not yet over. For now we see an image we have already seen; Kiril crouched down in the monastery garden, picking tomatoes. The old monk comes up to him and says, “The rain’s coming. The midges are dying. Look, it’s raining over there already. Come. It’s time. And time waits for no man. The circle is not round.” (Minute 103) We have already heard almost the same words in the Prologue. Almost the same.

Zamira comes running towards the monastery. She’s wet through, but no rain is falling. Aleksander lies dead on the ground, already soaked by the rain. The end credits start to come up, against a sky heavy with rain clouds. The film is over. It has run for 104 Minutes.

### **The Whole Truth or, The Circle Is Not Round IV**

Only when the epilogue is over does the audience understand that the end was not the end. The beginning was not the beginning. The story’s chronology, the time of the narrative, does not begin with Kiril in the monastery. It begins with Anne in London. (see diagram on p. xxx)

And at the end the circle is closed, and everything begins again – or does it? “The circle is not round,” the old monk says. And only now, at the very end, does one begin to get an inkling what that might mean. Only now are we in a position to understand that the photos of the death of Zamira in episode two are ‘false’. For this is where the chronology starts to expire. And Zamira is still alive.

Only now does one start to wonder whether the girl with the pitchfork was actually Zamira, when she still had her long hair? But how can that be, if Zamira’s grandfather has already hacked off her hair? We recognise there’s a structure to all this, but we don’t know what it is. Does everything move ineluctably a circle, forever? Or are there elements that disrupt it? What is a circle that is not round?

(graphic)

For me, the answer to this question is to be found only in the Theme of the film.

### **Taking Sides**

All three episodes of *Before the Rain* are variations on the theme of choice. Each of the lead characters must choose to take sides. And each time that choice involves love and violence. Kiril has to choose between his Faith and Zamira. He decides for the girl, for his love, and to save her. He acts, and fails. Anne cannot decide between the two men she loves. She acts. And fails. For a long while Aleksander refuses to choose ‘his’ side. Finally he makes the choice, in order to help his first love. And he fails.

All three stories in *Before the Rain* depicts human beings striving to do the right thing. And three time over, it shows them failing. Word, Faces, and

Pictures have not helped them. They were unable to stop the spiral of violence they became in embroiled in. And this is where I see the key to the meaning of the circle that is not a circle. It could be a spiral which carries on turning, twisting forever upwards in a helical motion. And from which there is no escape.

At the end of the film, no one can remember how it all started. Was it really Zamira who stabbed the shepherd? Was she the girl with the long hair? Why has she done this? Has the shepherd - who as we've seen is a 'horny old goat' who has long had his eye on the 'Albanian slut' - pursued her? Was she defending herself? The film is not about to give the answer, just as it declines to explain the war in Ex-Yugoslavia. It 'merely' shows how violence begets violence, and that violence cannot be stopped once unleashed. It asks questions, and leaves the audience to find their own answers.

One could say, that Milcho Manchevski, as creator and director of this film, is presenting a despairing and depressing treatment of his theme. But one could also say, the circle is not round. Maybe it doesn't have to turn into a spiral, either. Maybe the pair of lovers on the mountainside are Kiril and Zamira. Maybe they are just 'visiting' from another version of the story, in which love and forgiveness have won the day. Perhaps sometimes all it takes is small changes to disrupt the circular progression of things. Who knows?

And now the true mastery of the film comes into focus. By adopting this circular form which is not round, Milcho Manchevski has not only found an apposite structure to treat his theme; he uses the form to generate large dramatic emotions and to furnish the audience not with answers but questions that go well beyond the scope of the narrative.

The right balance; dramatic and epic elements.

*Before the Rain* is a film which appeals to the emotions and the intellect in equal measure. It achieves this by combining dramatic and epic techniques.

### **Feeling With (Empathy)**

The audience empathy with the protagonist of each episode derives from the drama. We learn about their motives, their goals and their problems, and we want them to do the right thing. This is achieved through the construction, which is at its most dramatic in the first, and least dramatic in the third episode.

In order to make a true 'Story in three parts' out of these three separate episodes, many other dramatic elements are added. A central one is the motif of Rain, which gives the film its title, and from the start is repeatedly introduced as the precursor of a coming catastrophe – *foreshadowing*. Apart from the Rain motif, there are many greater and lesser 'plantings'. Every death has been announced. The cat the village idiot shoots in the first episode, flees from him at their first encounter. Its death serves as a foreshadowing of Zamira's. On several occasions Aleksander has a gun

pointed at him and he speaks more than once of dying, before he is shot at the end of the film. The Motif of startled birds, present in the very first image of the film, is repeatedly introduced as a harbinger of bloodshed. Manchevski incorporates other dramatic repetitions. Before Zamira turns up in Kiril's cell for the second time, he has a vision of her, in the rain. The same thing occurs in the third episode; first Aleksander has a vision of Hana, in the rain. Then there she is in his room, in reality. All these dramatic elements raise the tension, allow the audience to feel and to fear that something terrible is about to happen.

### **Thinking About**

But at the same time the film does not draw the audience totally in. It provides no reassuring answers, but poses questions which make them think. This is achieved first and foremost by allowing the audience to understand what they have seen - and indeed felt emotionally throughout the film - only in retrospect. *Before the Rain* shows us things we initially cannot understand. "What's happened here? And why?" we ask. Only at the end do we understand what we have really seen, and despite this, questions are left open. This is achieved through film's structure, that of the un-closed ('not round') circle. Other epic devices include dividing the narrative into chapters with captions, multiple plots which are not divided into main- and sub-plots, nor given greater or lesser importance, and the 'epic scope' of the action which leaves room for scenes which do not drive the plot forward, above all in the third episode.

Epic and dramatic elements are given a very strong cohesion by the Theme, Taking Sides, which plays out in each episode in novel and diverse variations.

It is these elements working together, balancing Feeling With and Thinking About that enables *Before The Rain* to have such a powerful impact on the hearts and minds of its audience.