BEFORE THE RAIN: ETHNIC NATIONALISM AND GLOBALIZATION

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The extraordinary reawakening of ethnic nationalism and the powerful xenophobia that fuels it has become one of the most costly and perplexing problems of late twentieth century life. Even in stable, multi-ethnic states like Canada and the United States, the resurgence of ethnic antagonism -- seen most dramatically in the U.S. in the white militia movement and in Canada in the Quebec separatist movement -- and the call for reconfiguring the nation based on ethnic cores appears to be on the rise. As Eric Hobsbawm has written, 'xenophobia looks like becoming the mass ideology of the twentieth century fin de siecle. What holds humanity together today is a denial of what the human race has in common' (Hobsbawm 1996: 265). This tendency toward fragmentation along ethnic lines, however, is matched by an equally powerful countercurrent: the rise of an international, global culture, a phenomenon especially visible among the young people of the world, who are now, regardless of their ethnic or national affiliation, also part of an international youth culture joined by fashion, music, cuisine, modes of entertainment and communication.

In this paper, I would like to explore the intriguing connections the film Before The Rain makes between the deadly resurgence of a kind of ethnic primordialism and what would appear to be its opposite, globalization, seen most clearly in the emergence of an international youth culture, visible in the common cultural vocabulary shared among the youth of different nations portrayed in the film. I will argue that these two powerful vectors of contemporary life -- the allure of ethnic identification and the global penetration of certain mass cultural styles of dress, music, entertainment, and communications -- are recapitulated in the film's own style and mode of production, which renders an

ancient ethnic conflict in a cinematic idiom drawn from the genre of the international art film. A style of filmmaking commonly identified with the 'Young Cinema' movements of the world such as the French New Wave and the New German Cinema, the international art film has often served as the vanguard expression of new national consciousness, and has come to be identified with emergent forms of national identification, as in the emergence of the New Polish Cinema, the New Hungarian Cinema, and the New Australian Cinema. In Before The Rain, however, the film's art cinema narrative style -- characterized by a complicated temporal order, gaps in causality, weak or inscrutable character motivation, ellipses, psychological interiority, dream sequences, and the pronounced use of parallelism rather than cause and effect linkages -- conveys a set of messages that are quite distinct from the nationalist projections that frame the Young Cinema movements of the 1960's and 1970's (Bordwell 1985: 203-233). In fact, Before The Rain might be seen to empty the art cinema genre of its original content in order to convert it to the expression of a very different set of messages (Jameson 1981).

As Mikhail Bakhtin has written, genres function as forms of cultural memory, capable of both recalling past usages and responding to the present in a new way. Genres are best understood, he argues, as repositories of social experience, crystallized forms of social and cultural perception, 'organs of memory' that embody the worldviews of the periods in which they originated, while also carrying with them the 'layered record of their changing use.' In his view, they are the principal vehicles for shaping and carrying social experience from one generation to another, the connecting 'drive belts from the history of society to the history of language and literature.' Through the process Bakhtin calls 'genre memory,' aesthetic forms both 'remember the past, and make their resources and potentials available to the present.... redefining present experience in an additional way.' This leads to the concept of 'double-voicing,' which occurs when an older genre is adapted to a new context (Morson and Emerson 1990).

In my view, Before The Rain exhibits this kind of double

voicing. The film clearly rehearses many of the generic characteristics of the art cinema, including a loosening of cause and effect, complex temporal organization, rhyming images and sonic motifs, a pronounced use of symbolism, and an emphasis on psychological interiority. The film also reprises, to some extent, the typical plot trajectory of the genre. The art film's plot, focused on character psychology, frequently takes the form of what Horst Ruthrof describes as a boundary-situation story, in which the character, 'in a flash of insight, becomes aware of meaningful as against meaningless existence.' In the boundary-situation story, 'the causal chain leads up to an episode of the private individual's awareness of fundamental human issues ... a recognition that he or she faces a crisis of existential significance' (Bordwell 1985: 208). In Before The Rain, the boundary-situation is clearly a dominant organizing principle of the text, with all three main haracters, Kiril, Anne, and Alexander, confronting crises of conscience. But the use of the formal vocabulary of the art cinema produces a new and very particular effect in Before The Rain:: it comes to express, I believe, a kind of cognitive or perhaps imaginary mapping of contemporary geopolitical life. In its use of formal devices such as parallelism, temporal circularity, and its insistent use of rhyming images and sonic motifs, the film attempts to model a relation between the global media environment and the resurgence of ethnic identity, serving as a striking instanciation of what Fredric Jameson calls the 'geopolitical aesthetic' (Jameson 1992). The film continuously suggests some connection between globalization and the reawakening of ethnic desires. An example can be found in the scene where Alex Kirkov, the Pulitzer Prize winning photographer, is sitting in a London cemetary with his lover, Anne. As he tells her of his imminent departure for Macedonia, and asks her to come with him, he explains his desire to return to the land of his birth in terms that foreshadow his impending death. Saying 'My bones ache to go home; like the elephants,' he hops off the tomb where they were sitting, and hands her an envelope which contains what I interpret to be a photographic record of the future, of events which have yet to take place, events which will unfold after his death. As Alex walks away from the camera into the deep recesses of the frame, a teenage girl appears and begins walking toward the camera, carrying a radio turned up loud. The song that she is listening to is the same rap

song heard earlier in Macedonia, a song that one of the gun-crazy Macedonian teenagers who had been hunting down the Albanian girl Zamira had been listening to with great enthusiasm. In the next scene, Anne is shown looking at the photographs Alex gave her, photographs that depict the dead Zamira, Alex's nephew Kiril, the Orthodox monk who ad tried to help her, and the Macedonian police. A phone call then comes through from a man asking for Alex Kirkov. The voice on the other end may be Kiril's, whose photograph we had just viewed. The English woman asks where the call is coming from, and the man on the other end says 'Macedonia calling.' These scenes create a very strong impression of different worlds converging, brought into intimate contact by the global media of music, photography, and telecommunications, and of different temporal regimes, premodern and postmodern, colliding together in a violent new configuration in which the most archaic human impulses are latticed together with postmodern media forms that seem to supply a necessary but indeterminate connection.

Although many theorists have considered the phenomenon of ethnic nationalism and its resurgence around the globe, only Tom Nairn, to my knowledge, has attempted to link globalization, or what he calls internationality, to the growing fragmentation of society into ethnic enclaves. As Nairn writes:

In fact, the overwhelmingly dominant political byproduct of modern internationality so far has been nationalism ... the nonlogical, untidy, refractory, disintegrative, particularistic truth of nation-states. Not swelling or supine unity but 'Balkanization,' a world of spiky exceptions ... All those Big Macs and IBM salesmen must have actually (materially) fostered or created this result, no doubt unintentionally. 'Balkanization' must not be a doomed and mindless resistance to the advancement of progress, but that progress itself. It must be what actually happens .... Ah yes, we always thought we knew that the poor Macedonians would have to resign themselves to progress -- to the erosion of their antique and colorful ways, to becoming more like everybody else. Now, we also know that progress must resign itself to being Macedonian (Nairn 1996: 270).

Nairn's striking observation, however, falls short of a diagnosis or explanation. Despite his conviction that the simultaneous appearance of these two phenomena -- the rise of a global popular, communications, and economic culture and the resurgence of ethnic nationalism -- 'cannot be an accident,' he is unable to explain this connection except in terms of the breakup of the Cold War superpower relationship, which had kept ethnic desires and antagonisms in a state of suspended animation, while also constricting the flow of communications, commodities, and technology. Indeed, the connection Nairn sees between global culture and the resurgence of ethnic nationalism is difficult to pin down: from most vantage points, these two potent forms of identification -- that of 'blood and belonging,' on the one hand, and the affective communities called forth by a global culture -- appear to be radically distinct, to refer to completely different libidinal economies -- one having to do with a collective political struggle of life and death, with a community of memories, with a cycle of revenge; the other with the 'expansion of an intersubjectively shared world' defined and created by the global media, with badges of membership consisting of rapidly changing trends and fashions (Habermas 1996: 292). From a historical perspective, they seem to be especially disjunct. In the case of ethnic nationalism, historical memory is typically set forth as the most significant justification for claims on territory and for cultural and social homogeneity. Contrarily, the appeal of global, international youth culture, or the appeal of the Young Cinema movements of the world, for that matter, is based precisely on its rejection of traditional, parochial ways of viewing the world in favor of a new, utopian modernity. Yet, I tend to agree with Nairn when he writes that he 'fails to see how one can avoid suspecting that there is some kind of connection here' (Nairn 1996: 271). Another writer, from a very different perspective, has given a particularly optimistic account of the role of the global media in this regard. Claiming the global media can serve as an agent of national conscience, Martha Minow in a book entitled Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence, understands it as a medium that promotes reparation and atonement. In a review of her work, Jeremiah Creedon writes: 'in the age of CNN, when history has a photographic memory, [t]he power of the mass media is surely one of the reasons that so many countries around the

world lately have been driven to apologize for past sins. At a time when no atrocity can be forgotten and every victim lies in a shallow grave, the need for a new politics of atonement may be greater than ever.' Minow, in an interview conducted by Creedon, says that 'For the first time ever, the global use of peer pressure has become an important moral force. With no sovereign to insist that individual countries obey this code, the only threat is the possibility of shame, of holding out for everyone to see, here's what they did' (Creedon 1999: 96-99). The connection the author draws here between the global media's coverage of ethnic violence and the activity of witnessing as an act of historical documentation leading to collective, global moral judgement is precisely the dilemma, the crisis of conscience embodied in the character of Alex Kirkov, the Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer of the film. Part of a long cinematic tradition of photographer-witnesses who come to be implicated in moral crises – I am thinking here, particularly, of the David Hemmings character in Blow Up, the James Woods character in Salvador, the Nick Nolte character in Under Fire, and perhaps even the James Stewart character in Rear Window -- Alex Kirkov finds that the act of tnessing leads directly to a murder. Far from serving as an agent of collective conscience and atonement, the act of witnessing in a global media market, Alex discovers, may actually trigger atrocity. On assignment in Bosnia, Alex had idly complained to a soldier in charge of a prisoner detail that nothing was happening here, that he wasn't getting any good photographs. The guard responded by pulling an innocent man out of the line of prisoners, forcing him to kneel, and then, after making sure Alex was ready with his camera, shooting him in the head. This event provokes a crisis in Alex that leads him to return to his home village in Macedonia, to atone for his mistake, and to find his own death in the process. The global media, in this view, is transgressive, rather than reparative. Alex Kirkov, the cosmopolitan Pulitzer Prize winner, points a guilty finger at himself, and decides to return to Macedonia, where the crimes and persecutions of the historical past seem to resonate with his own sense of guilt: 'Macedonia, where the Byzantines put out the eyes of 14,000 people. 28,000 eyes.' By renouncing his role as professional witness and embracing his identity as a Macedonian, Alex embodies the tension, the contradiction that runs throughout the film between the power and reach of the global

media, for good and for ill, and the emotional pull of ethnic modes of belonging. The film makes clear, however, that there can be no separation of these dual aspects of contemporary life, that somehow, the allure of ethnic identification goes hand in hand with the global penetration of a mass media culture. In my view, the complex temporal order that distinguishes the film is one of the key ways the film recodes elements of the art cinema to express a very different set of messages than those typically associated with the art film. The circular temporal structure of the film, reminiscent of the films of Alain Resnais, Chris Marker, Bernardo Bertolucci, and Andrej Wazda -- filmmakers who employed complicated temporal forms as a way of expanding the representation of subjectivity -- here creates a kind of forward and backward movement in the text that thematizes the contradictory dynamic of the present historical moment, in which the furious forward momentum of global communication and technology is matched by an equally powerful social regression to a form of ethnic primordialism. In Before The Rain, the past appears to be interchangeable with the present and the future. This idea is also expressed in the complex overlay of temporal regimes that marks several sequences, creating a sense of the co-presence of premodern, modern, and postmodern cultural forms and modes of life in the historical present. This sense of simultaneity of past, present, and future is made explicit in the opening scenes of the film. In a series of crosscuts between children playing 'Ninja Turtles' with two actual turtles and scenes of Kiril, the young Orthodox Christian monk, gazing at the frescoes in the Medieval monastery, Before The Rain sets forth what appears to be one of its principal themes. As the children begin their game, in which two turtles are used as toy soldiers or toy tanks to combat each other, the film cuts between Kiril, looking upon a serene painting of the Madonna and Christ child, and the violent game played by the children. As the game becomes increasingly cruel and ominous, the film cuts from the painting of the Madonna and Child to a series of increasingly bloody scenes painted on the monastery walls, beginning with the crucifixion and progressing to scenes of martyrdom, torture, plague and persecution. Here, the crosscutting between the children, who end up killing their 'Ninja Turtles' by putting live bullets into the flaming circle of twigs that surrounds them, and the scenes of persecution depicted in the frescoes, can be seen

as a kind of Eisensteinian intellectual montage that calls into question the notion of progress or modernity: the children's barbaric treatment of the turtles, and of each other, appears to recapitulate the barbarism of the earliest centuries of Western civilization, despite the children's affiliation with the global media and their familiarity with the iconography of popular culture.

Later on, in the second section of the film, set in London, we view a series of photographs of what appears to be scenes of ethnic persecution in Bosnia or Romania. The photographs of starving prisoners, children who have been maimed, scarred, and shot in their sleep, preening neo-Nazis and anguished parents and grandparents rehearse the scenes depicted in the Medieval frescoes, as if the medium for representing history had changed somewhat but history itself had not. The agency photo editor, Anne, who is viewing these photos, has on her desk other photographs as well, including shots of what looks to be a fashion show featuring fetish wear of some kind, with a topless blonde smiling into the camera. As the radio in the editor's office broadcasts news of Romania, and other foreign crises, the photo editor spills coffee over the photograph of the smiling blonde model, coffee which in the lighting of the scene has the appearance of blood. This temporal layering of past, present, and anticipated future, and the parallels the film establishes between the Balkans and Britain appears to assert a linkage between global media culture and ethnic violence. It also seems to assert a non-teleological concept of history, in which the progressive forward momentum of transnational economies and communications, far from massively erasing the fabric of ethnic life, seems somehow to revive it. What is the real motor of history, the film seems to ask: national mobilization in ever smaller battalions, or the progressive expansion of world media, communications, and economic structures? And what is the connection between the two phenomena? In the art cinema, deviations of temporal order, such as flashbacks and flashforwards, and odd, rhyming juxtapositions of dissimilar spaces -- such as the cut from Macedonia after the murder of Zamira to Anne weeping in the shower -- are usually read as a form of authorial commentary, underlining the author's or the narrator's control of the world presented in the film. The profilmic world may thus come to be seen as a construct, a filmmaker's

stylized restaging of the real, or of history. This is evidently not the case with Before The Rain, despite the strong sense of authorial commentary running throughout the film, and the pronounced use of expressive techniques. The film, with its causal looseness and gaps, creates the uncertainty and ambiguity associated with the art cinema, but the political and historical material the film deals with is never really appropriated or entirely transformed by its use of formal conventions. Instead, the film seems to offer a case study in the activity Fredric Jameson calls cognitive mapping. It attempts to articulate the local and the global, linking the most intimately local events and the features of the global political environment. The film thus brings together the journalistic activity of reporting with the project of cultural analysis (MacCabe 1992: ix-xvi). And it argues for a comparative form of analysis in which the local political context and the global context in which film is situated -- for all films must now be considered as global, as participating in the global distribution of cultural power -- are articulated together. As Colin MacCabe writes, it is now crucial 'to understand film in its global complexity if one is to hope to understand it in its local specificities' acCabe 1992: xv). Questions about the relation of politics and film, form and history, global and ethnic identity, are placed in relief in this text. Nevertheless, the global success and visibility of the film, ensured by its circulation in international film festivals which have assumed a new importance as modes of exhibition in the late twentieth century, can be attributed, at least in part, to its stylistic borrowings from the art film. In soliciting the genre memory of the art film, Before The Rain stakes out a position that is at angles to both the ethnic particularities it deals with and the cultural and political dominance of Hollywood and the United States. In a world defined, on the one hand, by proliferating nation-states and fantasmatic nationalisms, and on the other, by the ever-widening reach of the superstate and the world system, Before The Rain stands as a striking attempt to critique both the descent into what appears to be an ethnic abyss and the global media and commodity culture. The use of art cinema formal techniques, forged in opposition to Hollywood conventions, serves as a reminder of an alternative way of charting our path through a world that seems increasingly to be defined by one extreme or the other.

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore the intriguing connections the film Before The Rain makes between the deadly resurgence of a kind of ethnic primordialism and what would appear to be its opposite, globalization, seen most clearly in the emergence of an international youth culture, visible in the common cultural vocabulary shared among the youth of different nations portrayed in the film. I argue that these two powerful vectors of contemporary life -- the allure of ethnic identification and the global penetration of certain mass cultural styles of dress, music, entertainment, and communications -- are recapitulated in the film's own style and mode of production, which renders an ancient ethnic conflict in a cinematic idiom drawn from the genre of the international art film. A style of filmmaking commonly identified with the 'Young Cinema' movements of the world such as the French New Wave and the New German Cinema, the international art film has often served as the vanguard expression of new national consciousness, and has come to be identified with emergent forms of national identification, as in the emergence of the New Polish Cinema, the New Hungarian Cinema, and the New Australian Cinema. In Before The Rain, however, the film's art cinema narrative style -- characterized by a complicated temporal order, gaps in causality, weak or inscrutable character motivation, ellipses, psychological interiority, dream sequences, and the pronounced use of parallelism rather than cause and effect linkages -- conveys a set of messages that are quite distinct from the nationalist projections that frame the Young Cinema movements of the 1960's and 1970's. In fact, Before The Rain might be seen to empty the art cinema genre of its original content in order to convert it to the expression of a very different set of messages.

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KEY WORDS FOR INDEXING

Global Media; Balkan Cinema; Art Cinema; Historical Film; National Identity; Ethnic Nationalism.