

After the War?

A Historical Reflection on the Film Before the Rain

By Erik Tängerstad

Her daughter has disappeared and she suspects the worst to be taking place. In her desperation, she begs him for help. He stretches himself on the bed. “Don’t you see what is happening to our people?” she asks. He grunts a “Yes”, but she snaps him off by stating “No, you’re just looking at it”.

The scene is taken from the film *Before the Rain* (1994) and it describes how (Albanian-Macedonian) Hana begs (Slavic-Macedonian) Aleks to help her find Zamira, her Albanian speaking daughter who is hunted by a Slavic speaking mob. Here, in a compressed manner, three sets of questions — questions that have recently been dramatically actualised — are being put forward.

When it comes down to the politics of everyday life, what does the expression “our people” mean? We are used to talk in terms of nations and states, communities and peoples, but what do we mean when using these concepts? How does a mass of different human beings organise themselves as a community, as “a people”? And what does it take to break up such a community? In the aftermath of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union this problematic has been drastically emphasised throughout the 1990s. Parallel in time, however viewed from another angle, the integration of the European Union and the more or less outspoken politics of creating a “European identity” raise the same issue. If democracy means that the people is its own sovereign and that the people can autonomously rule itself through the system of parliamentarism, then it becomes important to know what we mean when uttering things like “the people” and “our people”. Oddly enough, however, in democracy-debates during the era of the Cold War this important question has been strangely forgotten, and when it now returns into open debate it seems to strike down on both policy making and collective self-understanding with full and somewhat unexpected force.

A second problematic that the scene makes explicit is a distinction between passive observation and active seeing. In the film, the character Aleks is an internationally

recognised photo-journalist who has taken as his job to be a neutral observer that uses his camera to fix images of events and have them spread all over the world. The implicit idea is that a documentary photograph does not just depict a true representation of reality but that it also contains objective knowledge of the world as such. To take a photo from a dramatic event and have it published world-wide would then be the same as spreading the objective knowledge of that event to the rest of the world. But to what extent can a photograph be regarded as a true representation of reality as it really is? And how independent of the situation, which the observing photographer believes him- or herself to cover, can s/he really be? Does not the presence of the photographer actively influence the event that s/he tries to passively observe? And if that would really be the case, does this active influence then not undermine the whole notion of there being neutral positions from which one could passively observe the event in question, or, for that matter, the world at large? The film *Before the Rain* shows how Aleks, in the face of this problem, decides to give up his work and withdraw from what he thought to be his vocation. However, as is demonstrated in the scene mentioned, by simply giving up his work as a photographer, he does not free himself from the fundamental problem. Is it at all possible to take a neutral and passive position in order to truthfully observe a specific event or the world at large, or are all positions always inseparably interwoven with the events in question because they are always embedded in the world at large? This question tends to challenge the traditional notion of realism, of the idea that we could assimilate true knowledge of reality by producing representations that resemble what we see. Furthermore, such a challenge does more than just put realism into question; it is a challenge to that very foundation on which the notions of truth, knowledge, and moral action are grounded.

This epistemological problem opens for a third set of questions. In the film Aleks tries to escape the trouble of how to justify his work as a documentary photo-journalist by simply quitting his job and then returning to his childhood village, which he has not been seeing for sixteen years. However, back in the village he suddenly finds himself caught up within the ongoing dissolution of his native society. So when Hana begs him for help, it is not only a question of finding the disappeared Zamira; she asks him to hinder their society from falling apart and to prevent the outbreak of an openly violent confrontation that could rapidly escalate to a civil-war like situation. But it is more at stake than one individual sacrificing himself for the unity of the collectivity and its future common good. From the story of the film we know that the two have been lovers and when Hana pleads for his help to find her sixteen year old daughter "as if she was his own", Aleks

realise that he also has to take the responsibility for consequences of his past actions. Instead of being what he thought he was, namely an independent individual who knows no other responsibilities than to his own person, Aleks finds that he is interwoven into exactly that intricate web of past, present, and future collective actions that he thought himself to have distanced. Apparently, whatever he decides to do, or not to do, his decisions will have direct consequences on both his own personal future as well as on the future of the collectivity in which he once came to being as a person. Nevertheless, it is equally apparent that there are no unambiguous solutions that he simply can follow. Instead, Aleks, like all the other characters in the film and indeed as all of us watching it, has to decide what to do without having neither full overview of the situation in which he is acting nor any clear-cut principals of moral guidance to follow when he decides what to do next. What is he then to do?

So this film, which is conceptualised within the explicit context of the dissolution of the old Yugoslav federation, puts forward three fundamental questions, all of them being compressed in this scene: Who are we? What can we know? What shall we do?

As has already been suggested, these three existential questions have recently made a forceful re-entrance in collective consciousness and public debate. The film *Before the Rain* can indeed be seen as a historical artefact from the time-period when the return of these questions took place. On the other hand, the contemporary reception of the film (and not the film itself) — *Before the Rain* became an international box-office success around 1994-95 — can advantageously be made subject to a cultural historical study. And of course, the film can be taken out of its historical context and be seen as an independent artwork in its own regard. In the following, I will sketch all three of these different perspectives: I will try to place *Before the Rain* in its historical context; to say something about the first international reception of the film; and present my own interpretation of it.

Bridging Different Historical Disciplines

Because the scope of historical studies is continuously becoming both broader and more diversified, and because new source materials are constantly being employed in historical research, there is a risk that different historical sub-disciplines tend to lose connection to one another. In order to counter-act this trend of lack of communications between different historical research fields, a workshop called “One Film — Many Histories: An Inquiry Into the Film *Before the Rain*” was held at the European University Institute,

Florence, in April 1999.¹ The idea behind the workshop was to bring together researchers from different disciplines — cultural-historians, political scientists, film-scholars, anthropologists, Balkanists etc. — and then together focus on one specific feature film that could be related to the field film and history in order find a common denominator for an interdisciplinary discussion. The reason for choosing *Before the Rain* to be the common point of departure was that this film crystallise so many different themes that it can be made subject to both a debate about the relationship between filmmaking and history-writing, as well as a discussion on the current development on Balkan, or different narrative structures in storytelling. The workshop became, I think it is safe to say, a positive experience for all participants.² Not being a Balkanist myself, but rather coming from the field of film and history, I will in the following draw on the learning I made during this workshop.

Before the Rain was written and directed in the early 1990s by Milcho Manchevski, who was born in Yugoslavia and trained as a film director in the United States. As a moviemaker, Manchevski had previously been doing pop-videos and short films. *Before the Rain* was his debut as a feature film director. Manchevski's first impulse to make the film came as a result of his return in 1991 to his hometown Skopje. In the 80s he had spent most of his time in USA and he was not prepared to confront the magnitude of the changes that had occurred in Yugoslavia. The tension during the spring of 1991, shortly before the outbreak of the war, was strongly felt and Manchevski decided to make a film in order to work out this experience. In 1992 French and English film-producers decided to develop the script and the film was shot on location in Macedonia and London in 1993. Meanwhile, the Yugoslav State fell apart and its former republic Macedonia was declared an independent and sovereign state. In 1994 the film *Before the Rain* was awarded the Golden Lion for Best Film at the Venice Film Festival. It then became an instant international success, both by critics and by paying audiences. The film was awarded on several occasions in 1994-95; it was also Oscar-nominated for Best Foreign-Language Film in 1995.³ In this sense, *Before the Rain* is not an obscure and seldom shown film, but

¹ The workshop — which was organised by Robert Rosenstone, Bo Stråth, and Erik Tängerstad within the framework of the research project "The Collective Construction of Community" — took place 22-23 of April 1999 at the Robert Schuman Centre of the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. Invited participants were, Keith Brown, Robert Burgoyne, Ian Christie, Thomas Elsaesser, Victor Friedman, Bengt Holmen, Dina Jordanova, Anton Kaes, Reinhard Koselleck, Hayden White, and Milcho Manchevski, who is the script-writer/director that made the film. Also members and researchers at the European University Institute took active part in the workshop.

² The forthcoming issue of the journal *Rethinking History* (Routledge) will collect the contributions made during the workshop.

³ For a full coverage of Manchevski's work until 1999, including the list of awards for *Before the Rain*, cf. Manchevski, Milcho (1999) *Street, Skopje: Playtime*.

together with Hollywood made movies it is recognised and seen world-wide. What makes this particular film interesting is, however, that its mode of narration differs substantially from the conventional mode of Hollywood filmmaking. To fully grasp how *Before the Rain* challenges conventional narrative structures, some of these conventions should be sketched.

Story, Plot, Diegesis

One common way of analysing film is to differ between story and plot.⁴ If the story of the film tells what it is about, then the plot of the film is the way this story is told. The story of *Before the Rain* can be summarised as follows: An awarded photojournalist, specialised on covering war-zones, decides to quit his job at a London based agency after a traumatic experience in Bosnia. He turns back to his native village in Macedonia with the intention of finding the love of his youth. Back in the village he finds that the community has been broken up and a line of demarcation between two groups has been drawn. Roughly, the groups are structured according to cultural and linguistic features so that the distinction between Albanians and Slavs has become over-emphasised. The photographer finds himself in the Slavic group, while his beloved is in the Albanian one. When attempting to save her Albanian speaking daughter from a Slavic mob, and at the same time de-escalate the conflict, the photographer is killed by his Slavic cousin. Also the daughter is killed, but by her Albanian brother.

The plot in which this story is told can be broken up into four distinct parts: a prologue, and three individual, however inter-linked, episodes: "Words", "Faces", "Pictures". In the prologue, a young orthodox monk, Kiril, who has sworn an oath of absolute silence, is picking tomatoes while listening to an elderly monk's reflections on the coming rain and about how children incarnate the hope for the future. However, the children shown are playing with fire.

⁴ Cf. Thompson, Kristin (1988) 'Neoformalist Film Analysis: One Approach, Many Methods' in Kristin Thompson *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. Here I have however relied on the Swedish translation: Thompson, Kristin (1995) 'Neoformalistisk filmanalys: ett perspektiv, flera metoder' in L.G. Andersson and Erik Hedling (eds.) *Modern Filmteori 1* Lund: Studentlitteratur. In this article, Thompson refers this methodological approach back to the Russian formalists of the 1920s. They spoke, however, of *sujet* and *fable* — not of story and plot — and because the concepts "story" and "plot" have a wider range of meaning than "sujet" and "fable", Thompson make use of the latter terms in order to gain precision. Nevertheless, in this case I have decided to stick to the terms "story" and "plot" which both seem to be precise enough for this discussion, but not strange enough to cause unwanted confusion.

In the episode “Words”, a Slavic speaking mob is searching the monastery where Kiril lives, in order to find an Albanian speaking girl. They do not find her, although she has hidden in Kiril’s cell. When Kiril discovers her, he does not reveal his knowledge of her existence to the others. Therefore, when the monks eventually find the girl, Kiril is dismissed from the monastery: he and the girl are shown leaving the cloister together. Later they are found by a group of Albanian speaking men and the girl is shot by her brother. Kiril is left helpless, sitting next to the dying girl.

The episode “Faces” is set in London. A young woman, Anne, works in a photo agency. Aleks (Aleksander), who is a photojournalist, returns to the agency just in order to resign his work there. He has suffered a traumatic experience in Bosnia, which made him reconsider his whole life. Now he wants to return to his childhood village in Macedonia and start over. Although she is married to another man, Anne and Aleks are having an ongoing love affair. When Aleks wants her to follow him to Macedonia, she is in jeopardy. Aleks leaves London and the same evening Anne has an encounter with her husband in a restaurant. Suddenly a quarrel between two Serbo-Croatian speaking men in the same restaurant escalates to shooting, and Anne’s husband is accidentally shot dead.

“Pictures” shows Aleks’ return to his native village. He wants to meet Hana, an old classmate of his, but also the love of his youth. However, Aleks seems to have misconceived the profundity of the antagonism between the propagators of the different groups that has rapidly developed during his absence. When Aleks’ cousin Bojan is mysteriously murdered, Hana’s daughter, Zamira, is accused for the killing. A Slavic mob, armed with machine guns, starts looking for the girl and Hanna comes to Aleks and begs for his help. Aleks tries to find Zamira and detects her being held prisoner by the mob. When he attempts to liberate the girl, another of his cousins kills him. However, Zamira manages to run away and hide in the monastery where Kiril (who is also a relative of Aleks’) lives.

The film ends where it begins, showing Kiril picking tomatoes while listening to the old monk speaking about the rain that will fall. The narrative structure of the film can therefore on one level be said to be circular — it ends where it begins — instead of linear, which would be the conventional narrative format of a feature film.

Shortly before the opening of *Before the Rain*, Quentin Tarantino’s film *Pulp Fiction* had become a box office success. Also in the latter film the narrative structure could in this sense be called circular instead of linear, and in the reviews written around the mid-90s

Before the Rain was often compared with Pulp Fiction. The narrative structure of Before the Rain is, however, more intricate than the one of Pulp Fiction. In the former film, and unlike the latter one, the chronology of the story is not supported and confirmed by the plot. For example, in the agency in London Anne is shown looking at photographs depicting Kiril sitting by the dead Zamira. This would not be possible, according to the chronology of the story, because at that time Zamira would still be alive, and moreover, Bojan would not yet have been murdered and therefore no mob would be out looking for the girl in the first place. In the film there are other such details — telephone calls are made before they could have been made, people show up on places where they could not be, etc. — which make the plot undermine the chronological order of the story.

Different Collective Interpretations

Beside the distinction between story and plot, another conventional means to analyse film could here be introduced. When the plot outlines the story a narrative universe is created. Such universe is called the diegesis, and the elements in the narration that are used when composing this universe are called diegetic. Claudia Gorbman has defined the diegesis as the spatial-temporal world of actions and persons that is produced by the narration.⁵ According to the norms of realism, the diegesis should correspond and resemble the notion of the (extra-diegetic) “real universe” in order to make the narration realistic. When audiences identify what they see on the screen with what they already possessed as common knowledge, a “reality-effect” is collectively perceived.⁶ Since the prevailing belief-structure of the audience is reinforced through this effect, the individual viewers collectively think that they have gained knowledge of the past by watching the film.

Before the Rain distances itself from these norms of realism because its diegesis does not resemble the popular notion of the “real universe”: the universe constructed in this film does not obey the rules of causality and chronology. Nevertheless, outside Macedonia the

⁵ Cf. Gorbman, Claudia (1987) ‘Narratological Perspectives on Film Music’ in Claudia Gorbman Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music London and Bloomington: BFI Publishing/Indiana University Press. In this case I have relied on the Swedish translation: Gorbman, Claudia (1995) ‘Narratologiska aspekter av filmmusik’ in L.G. Andersson and Erik Hedling (eds.) Modern Filmteori 1 Lund: Studentlitteratur. Because I have re-translated Gorbman’s definition back to English its exact formulation may differ from her original. But I only sketch the theory around the diegesis concept, such treatment of the definition may be forgiven.

⁶ About the concept “the reality effect”, cf. Ankersmit, F.R. (1994) ‘The Reality Effect in the Writing of History: The Dynamics of Historiographical Topology’ in F.R. Ankersmit History and Topology. The Rise and Fall of Metaphor Berkeley - Los Angeles - London: University of California Press, pp. 125-161. The concept was originally coined by Roland Barthes, who used it in order to describe an effect that could be perceived when confronting different interlinked texts. When reading and experiencing the tension in and between texts, one can perceive a sense of reality, and this sense is “the reality effect”.

film was widely received and interpreted as a realistic description of still present or recently past events. The social-anthropologist Keith Brown has compared the reception of the film outside and inside Macedonia.⁷ He points out that in the United States and Western Europe the film was seen as a depiction of the ethnic hatred that was collectively understood, outside Yugoslavia and the Balkan region, to characterise the downfall of Yugoslavian State. In this sense, the film was seen to illustrate the newsreels and the reports from the war in Bosnia, and thus as a description of still ongoing or recently past events. In the reviews that were written outside Macedonia two features were constantly refrained. The first was the “ethnic hatred” that was understood to characterise the Balkan region. The second was the beauty of the landscape. In general these reviewers “did not doubt the beauty or the authenticity of the images (...) they appear to wallow in the tragic paradox that was created; that such violence could exist in a landscape so beautiful”. (Brown 1998: 166) The diegesis of the film was therefore collectively interpret according to the rules of realism, hence the reviewers (and the audiences as a whole) took for granted that the landscape that was shown in the film corresponded to a fixed location set in Macedonia, and they presupposed that the action of the film resembled action that had taken place in the country.⁸ In short, audiences in North-America and Western-Europe seem to have projected their understanding of the down-fall of Yugoslavia onto this movie, hence interpreting the non-realistic film according to the notion of realism. Therewith they collectively perceived the film as a “reality-effect” which was producing something that they assumed to be documented knowledge of still present or recently past events.

Nevertheless, contrary to the other republics that constituted the former Yugoslav State, Macedonia has during the 1990s not experienced war directly on its territory. The kind of armed gangs and bands of warriors that emerged in Bosnia during the war were unseen in Macedonia when the film was first shown. Therefore, in Macedonia *Before the Rain* was seen as a warning for a possible near future, and not as a documentation of a recent past. This reception was also reinforced by the fact that the landscape shown in the film is not to be found on the ground. It is a composition of images from different localities in

⁷ Brown, Keith (1998) ‘Macedonian culture and its audiences. An analysis of *Before the Rain*’, in Felicia Hughes-Freeland (ed.) *Ritual, Performance, Media*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 160-176.

⁸ Or in Brown’s words: “The actuality of the landscape thus confers actualité on events”. He also recalls how a colleague of his, Jonathan Schwartz, when confronting a group of Dutch university students had to convince these students that the film was “not an actual documentary but a dystopian nightmare”. The point to be underlined in these quotes is the inability of a Western audience to differ between the diegesis of the film and the extra-diegetic condition beyond the frame of the film. In other words, a confusion between the “reality-effect” and “reality” can here be sensed, a confusion that creates the ground-work of realism.

Macedonia that have been edited together to one picture. For example, the monastery in which Kiril lodges is a composite of footage from four different cloisters. Anybody being familiar with Macedonian surroundings would immediately see that the diegesis produced in *Before the Rain* does not correspond to an actual locality in Macedonia, but that it is constructed upon a mixture of footage taken from different places all over the young country. For example, in the above mentioned workshop, the Balkanist Victor Friedman said that when he first saw the film he was initially confused because he could not make sense of the film's settings. But as soon as he understood that the film was "not realistic" he could make sense out of it. For a Macedonian audience, the bringing together of different well known places and buildings through the composition of a virtual landscape made possible a collective erection of a visual monument over the new republic of Macedonia. Manchevski did not recreate Macedonia on film: he created an image of Macedonia as a nation. And when the people of the new republic of Macedonia not just accepted and approved this image, but actively identified themselves with it, a new "national identity" was in the making. Brown has also concluded that the film could be "argued to occupy an active role in the transition of the Republic, from a part of Yugoslavia to a sovereign state". (Brown 1998: 171)

The international recognition of the film helped reinforcing this collective construction of a national monument. Ironically, when audiences outside Macedonia identified the diegesis of the film with their vision of Bosnia, the same diegesis was used within the new republic to create a difference between Macedonia and Bosnia. Nevertheless, the international recognition of the film helped forming a Macedonian "national identity", although this international recognition was based on blurred notions of Macedonia and the rest of the Balkan region.

Not just in Western Europe but also among different countries within the Balkans *Before the Rain* was seen as a film about the war in Bosnia. The Ljubljana based film- and literature scholar Slavoj Žižek saw the film in connection with "the trauma 'Bosnia' (ethnic cleansing etc.)". He also draw a parallel between it and Emir Kusturica's film *Underground*, which was released in 1995, and which was received more or less at the same time as was *Before the Rain*. Žižek meant that these two films were generally viewed from the same perspective and that they both were understood to confirm a Western notion of the wild, uncivilised, and above all incomprehensible Balkans, a notion

that he called “Balkanism” (in parity with Edward Said’s concept “Orientalism”).⁹ In this article, Žizek focused primarily on the film *Underground* and referred only once to *Before the Rain*. His reference is however troublesome, because from reading his article one gets the picture that *Before the Rain* would to a high degree resemble *Underground* and that both films would be depictions of the Bosnian war.

Apparently, in and around the institute in Slovenia where he works, there has been an ongoing discussion about how to interpret movies dealing with the down-fall of old Yugoslavia. In the debate the two films *Underground* and *Before the Rain* have been equalised in the same manner as in Žizek’s above referred argument.¹⁰ It seems that most of the Slovenian critics view both these films as naïve and simplifying, describing the conflict through ethnically and historically tinted stereotypes. However, when they were working out a Slovenian and/or Central European discourse around these two films, also a Slovenian intellectual and/or “national identity” could be said to have been in the making.

It might be that from a Slovenian point of view, the films *Underground* and *Before the Rain* could be compared in an equalising manner — both of them dealing with the aftermath of the collapsed Yugoslav State, but non of them referring to Slovenia, which therefore could construct some sort of a “Central European Yugoslav Sonderweg” that would differ this new country from the others that emerged out of old Yugoslavia. Seen from a Macedonian horizon, however, these two movies are regarded as most different. When *Underground* — a film made in Serbia/Yugoslavia — focus the war in Bosnia as some sort of prolonging consequence of Tito’s Yugoslav project, then *Before the Rain* — in this respect a Macedonian film — could be said to outline the conflict as a fundamental break with Tito’s project, not as its inherited consequence. Moreover, in the diegesis of *Before the Rain* the war in Bosnia is turned into a somewhat peripheral event, while it is central in the diegesis of *Underground*.¹¹

⁹ Žizek, Slavoj (1997) ‘Undergrund oder: Die poesie der etnischen Säuberung’ *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 4/1994, 587-593.

¹⁰ Cf. Slosar, Irina (1997) “Du lügst! Du lügst! Ah, wie schön du lügst!” *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 4/1994, 594-598. In this article Slosar both reflects arguments made in this debate and gives a contribution to it. Form her references in the article, which is written in German, one can conclude that most of this discussion has been conducted in Slovenian.

¹¹ For a recapitulation of the debate around *Underground* cf. Andersson, Ulf B (1998) ‘Bosnien, kriget och filmerna’ *Filmhäftet* 101 (1/1998) 68-72. In this article on how the war in Bosnia has been refelcted in feature films *Underground* (1995) is compared to *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997). However, *Before the Rain* is not mentioned once, which in a sense is logical since the latter film does not really deal with the war in Bosnia.

The actor playing the role of Aleks, Rade Sherbedzija, was one of the most popular actors in old Yugoslavia. The presence of Sherbedzija in the film alongside with other references to old Yugoslavia, including the image of Tito (a framed old photo on the wall, an old newspaper cover) has reportedly triggered a kind of "Yugo-nostalgia" around *Before the Rain* in Macedonia. (Brown 1998: 170) That kind of interpretation of Yugoslav history lies far away from how this history has been portrayed in *Underground*. In the latter movie the Yugoslav people (foremost the Serb people) are depicted as having been collectively deceived by the communist party under Tito.

Roughly speaking, when people outside the territory of former Yugoslavia saw *Before the Rain*, they resembled it with TV newsreels and thought that they saw a depiction of recent past. At the same time, when people in the new republic of Macedonia watched the film, they saw a possible near future. However, taking their vantage-point in footage from contemporary London or images of UN vehicles in Skopje, other people saw the actual present. For example, when the Slovenian critic Irna Slosar refers to the scene with the shooting in a posh London restaurant, she sees the film as a metaphor for how the present wars in Balkan threatened Western Europe. (Slosar 1997: 596) Others have seen the film-footage as documenting the present conflict. The Balkanist Victor Friedman has noted that the graffiti "Burek, da!" (which is to be seen in the film) corresponded to the graffiti "Burek, nein danke!" that was at the same time documented in Ljubljana. Since "Burek" is a dish that was considered typically Yugoslav, and since "da" means "yes" in Slavic languages, while "nein danke" is "now thanks" in German, Friedman reported that he used this scene as historical document over the mental break up of Yugoslavia during the first half of the 1990s.

Nevertheless, as has already been noted, since the plot undermines the chronology of the story, the film can also be seen as being set outside of the temporal realm of past-present-future. Accordingly, the film has been interpreted following these four different modes of temporality: the near past, the near future, the actual presence, and beyond temporal reality. It should, moreover, also be underlined that most viewers of the film have understood *Before the Rain* according to only one of these four temporal modes, without taking the other three into active consideration. Why is that?

The Limits of Photographic Realism

Two tentative answers can be given to this question. The first one is that since most people that went to see the film around the mid-90s expected to see something about the

conditions in Balkan after the down-fall of Yugoslavia, they did not, however, expect to have their notions of realism, history, and temporality challenged. Therefore, when making sense out of its complex diegesis, most people simplified the narrative structure and projected their own presuppositions upon it. Since different viewers had different presuppositions they also saw different things. Furthermore, they had their previous beliefs confirmed and therefore they were able to leave the cinema with a positive opinion about the film. The other way of answering this question is to point out how consciously and cautiously Manchevski has edited this film. It can be made subject to a vast number of possible interpretations without having its diegesis severely distorted or forced into a presupposed analytical framework.

In the film, Manchevski has in a gentle manner put forward the argument that no correspondence between the faculty of knowledge and the "real world" beyond this human faculty can be construed. Therefore, the notion of realism, according to which an artwork can be compared with the "real" motive it is set out to represent, cannot be upheld. Neither "reality as it really is" can be documented, nor can there be any direct connection between the past beyond human knowledge and the history written by human beings, because since we have no access to that kind of past we cannot claim that history could represent it. This epistemological break between the "real world" on the one side and human knowledge on the other is in the film illustrated by the photojournalist who suddenly rejects his earlier belief that he could objectively document reality by photographing it. Instead of his previous understanding of his work — from a neutral position he would transmit knowledge from one end of the world to another through his photographs — he suddenly realises that there is no such neutral position and that he is always taking active part in any situation in which he may find himself.

In the film, a key line marks out this shift in his understanding of the means of photography and of the notion of photographic realism. Aleks says: "I killed. I took sides. My camera killed a man", thus indicating that his notion of a neutral ground from which he used to take his photographs cannot be uphold anymore. As has already been noted, Aleks has decided to quit his job as a photojournalist after a traumatic experience in Bosnia sometime in 1992-93. According to the story told in the film, Aleks got friendly with a militiaman and complained to him that nothing interesting happened. The militiaman then randomly picked one of the prisoners he was set out to guard and shot him on the spot. Meanwhile, Aleks photographed the event. Thereafter Aleks drew the conclusion that it was actually he who had killed a man with his camera and he blamed

his earlier naivety for having caused the entire incident. On the bases of this conclusion he decided to stop working as a photographer. Apparently, he has at the same time given up his belief that reality can be documented through the means of photographic realism. This shift in Aleks' world-view signifies, furthermore, that the whole notion of realism should be reconsidered.

This latter conclusion could also be directly ascribed to the writer/director Manchevski, because in *Before the Rain* he is actually playing a small but significant role: the prisoner being shot in front of the camera.¹² With this Hitchcockian manoeuvre, Manchevski has more than just made an ironic remark to the theory of "the death of the author". To the film he has added a self-reflective remark — he is writing the script and shooting the film within a concrete context and he, no lesser than his imagined character Aleks, can find a neutral position from which he could objectively describe the situation. Instead, Manchevski has visually stated the moral of the film: that there is no neutral spot outside the temporal stream of events from which reality could be documented, hence the groundwork for both the notions of photographic realism and of conventional historical writing (the attempt to represent the unmodified past in the present) has collapsed. With this condition as point of departure, new conventions for the understanding of past and present realities have to be constructed.

This general conclusion is underlined by the composition of the film's diegesis. As has been pointed out, the story of *Before the Rain* is not told according to a conventional linear plot. However, when scrutinised closely, the plot-line is not even circular. Although the scenes in the beginning and in the end of the film to a high degree resemble one another, they are far from being identical. It is not just that the camera-angles have been modified, but the monologue held by the elderly monk has also been substantially changed.

The film begins with the scene in which Kiril is shown picking tomatoes. Suddenly he kills an insect that had bitten his neck. Then the elderly monk says: "It will be rain. The gadflies bite." Thereafter he looks to the horizon and continues: "Over there, it is already raining." When returning to the monastery together, a distant sound that could be either thunder or canon-blasts can be heard. The elderly monk says: "There is a smell of rain. The thunder always makes me twitch. I fear that they will start shooting also here." Some playing children are shown, and the monk says: "Children... Time never dies. The circle

¹² On a direct question during the workshop, Manchevski admitted that it was he who played the prisoner.

is not round.” The children, however, have built a circle of pegs and weed, and they set this circle on fire.

The film ends with a similar scene, however shot from another camera-angle. This time the monk looks at the horizon and says: “It will be rain. The gadflies bite. Over there, it is already raining.” Then he turns to Kiril and continues: “Come on! Time does not wait... because the circle is not round”. In the background, the viewer can see the girl, Zamira, running towards the camera. The film ends with a shoot at the dead Aleks and the first drops of rain falling upon him.¹³

The difference between these two scenes may be considered subtle, but is however distinct. Especially the difference between the two lines “Time never dies. The circle is not round.” and “Time does not wait... because the circle is not round” clearly indicates that Manchevski did not intend to create a circular narration. Rather, these lines point out that he wanted to problematise the notion of time and temporality within the diegesis of the film. That Manchevski consciously has used the film to problematise time and narration is refrained once more in the film’s middle sequence. In a scene from the London episode the viewer is exposed to the following graffiti: “Time never dies/the circle/is not round”.

So, when examined closely, the plot proves to be neither linear nor round. Instead, the film produces a diegesis in which the presence of time is always underlined precisely because the chronology of the story is constantly undermined by the plot, and in turn causality is short-circuited throughout the diegesis. Therefore, this film can be said to have been made in an attempt to consciously challenge the tendency in conventional moviemaking to let the plot coincide with the story in order to help the audience experience the “reality-effect” that would confirm the conventional notion of realism. Furthermore, this film is obviously composed in a deliberate attempt to challenge the idea that historical writing could be a sort of documentation of the past “as it really was” produced from some presupposed neutral position beyond temporality.

Rain and War

Basically, *Before the Rain* is not set out to be a realistic film, but a tragedy. The experience he has made in Bosnia has taught Aleks, as it has taught most people in the

¹³ The translation is my own and is based on the Swedish subtitles of a video-print of the film. The original dialogue is in Macedonian.

1990s, that there are no clear-cut and easy solutions to this kind of conflicts. Above all, there exists no neutral position outside the conflict from which one could objectively document and rationally solve it. "You have to take sides against war", Anne tells Aleks in London. But to make war against war itself is, however, a paradoxical undertaking. The traumatised Aleks responds that "War is normality and peace the exception". Therefore, Aleks conclusion is that one has to take sides within war, but still the same he refuses to line up behind either one of the conflicting parties. Squeezed between the insight that he has to participate, but at the same time unwilling to do so, Aleks seems doomed to disaster.

As has been noted in the beginning of this essay, Manchevski made *Before the Rain* in order to work out the tense atmosphere he had experienced in Skopje in 1991. In the face of the wars between first Slovenia and Yugoslavia and thereafter Croatia and Yugoslavia, also Macedonia seemed to be endangered. In a situation of repressed hostility, when a majority of people expect and calculate with war in a foreseeable near future, can such an escalation of violence be stopped and de-escalated? Can a war be fought against the notion of war, so that the outbreak of expected violence and bloodshed could be inhibited? Most possibly, Manchevski conceived and made his film with the direct aim of counter-acting tendencies that could unleash armed conflicts and war in Macedonia the film. Nevertheless, Manchevski has confirmed that he made active use of Shakespearean tragedies when conceiving the script: themes from *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet* have been woven into the manuscript.¹⁴ The point to be underlined is that the film is made as a classic tragedy and not as a modern realistic drama. That being the case, after having seen the film, the viewers would then not be supposed to intellectually recognise their own everyday reality, but to have an experience of catharsis: a feeling of purification and relief after having confronted an existential dilemma and having had this dilemma conceptualised. In an interview from early 1995, Manchevski has said that some people in Macedonia complained after having seen the film: "Some people said, 'We don't all live in run-down villages, we also drive Mercedes cars. Why didn't you show that?' But most of them read the film just as I wanted them to, which is as a warning."¹⁵ But a warning against what?

When making sense out of this film, it is tempting to see the diegetic symbol "rain" as a metaphor for war. The title of the film would then be read "Before the War", and the film

¹⁴ Manchevski made this confirmation during the discussion at the above mentioned workshop.

¹⁵ Quoted after Brown, 1998, p. 169. The original interview was published in *Village Voice*, 21 February 1995.

would warn that war could soon strike down on Macedonia, like it had already hit other parts of former Yugoslavia. For example, the lines uttered by the elderly monk in the beginning of the film points clearly in that direction. Nevertheless, the metaphoric does not run as smoothly as that. When Kiril dreams that Zamira is smilingly standing by his bed, it is raining. But when Zamira actually stands by his bed, she is not smiling but hunted and frightened, and it is not raining. Later in the film, Aleks dreams that Hana enter his room and start, smilingly, to undress. At the same time, the falling rain can be seen through the window. But then again, when Hana really enters his room she is frightened and worried. At that time, no rain can be seen through the window. Here, "rain" appears to be not just a metaphor for war, but also for sexual fantasy, especially male ones.

Furthermore, the complexity and the ambiguity around the usage of the diegetic symbol "rain" in the film is also singled out through the strophe by Mesa Selimonovic that opens the film: "With a shriek birds flee across the black sky, / people are silent, my blood aces from waiting." With what would this frustrating waiting end? Would the relief come with ending of passivity and the outbreak of the awaited war?

After having seen the film *Before the Rain*, one would be disposed to answer this last question with a clear "No!". Even if an outbreak of violent action would disperse the tense atmosphere of frustrating passivity and therefore initially be perceived as a relief, it would rapidly prove itself to something more hideous than the earlier condition. Therefore, when the film was made within a discourse of escalating violence, and when its purpose was to de-escalate this tendency from within the discourse, then its means would not be to simply reflect the present condition but to present a substitution for the awaited eruption. In that case the means of conventional modern realism would not be sufficient and therefore it is not surprising that Manchevski has chosen to make a classical tragedy.

Unanswered Questions

In the beginning of this essay I remarked that the scene in which Hana asks Aleks for help puts forward a complex cluster of questions: Who are we? What can we know? What shall we do? The intricate connection within this set of question is emphasised by the fact that one cannot answer one of them without first having at least a tentative answer to the other two. Still the same, for a long time there has been a trend within Western thought that these questions could be separated from one another and answered independently.

This latter expectation can be said to format a tragic aspect in modern science. At least since the days of Descartes' philosophic endeavour modern science has been concentrating on the second of these three questions while taken the answer of the other two for granted. As is well known, however, during the 20th century, not just this Cartesian philosophy but also Kant's critique of it has been put into question. When Descartes problematised knowledge after having tentatively stated who we are and what we shall do, Kant criticised that project by re-raising the question "What shall we do?". However, Kant took his point of departure in a tentative answer to the question "What can we know?" but was later apparently deeply surprised by the profundity of the question "Who are we?". Typically, in vain the ageing Kant wrestled this last question in his writings on anthropology and he died without having it answered. Now, it can safely be said that after Kant and especially during this last century the question "Who are we?" has been troubling modern science on a profound level. It can also be said that the hope that the valid answer to this one question would provide us with knowledge of our "identity" has been scattered. If we would claim to know our "identity" then we most first have answered the question "What can we know?". But the answer to that latter question presuppose that the question "Who are we?" — the "identity-question" — has already been answered. And if we accept that answers to these two questions mutually determine one another, then "What shall we do?". However, answering this last question in a rational fashion requires that the previous two questions have been already answered. As rational beings we find ourselves trapped within a tragic paradox. When trying to use science in order to liberate ourselves from this paradox, we discover instead that science has contrary to our expectations brought us deeper into it. When discovering that we do not know how we are, that we do not know what we mean by knowing, and that we do not know what to do, then the tragic aspect of our undertaking becomes obvious.

Of course, the observation of this paradox and its challenge to rational science is nothing new. In a way, Descartes' science can be seen as a reaction to Shakespeare's dramatic works in the same manner as Plato's philosophy can be said to be a reaction to Sophocles' tragedies — and Plato's condemnation of art in general and tragedies in particular is notorious. Also, the fashion in which modern science has rejected art and fiction — as well as so-called "post-modern" thinking — can also only be called notorious.

With this background, the dissolution of old Yugoslavia at the close of the 20th century has anew emphasised the questions "Who are we?"; "What can we know?"; "What shall

we do?". Moreover, it has also underlined that answering these questions by simply proposing knowledge about "identity" is not sufficient. Instead, we have to re-think our answers to this set of questions. In this essay I have argued that the film *Before the Rain* has been made as a conscious attempt to provoke such a re-thinking. If this argument can be said to be valid, then the film can be argued to be both an interesting historical document from the 1990s, as well as a work of art that would have lasting value also in the 21st century.