

BEFORE THE RAIN - AN AESTHETICS OF PARADOX

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Before the rain is not just a beautiful film that focuses on human conflicts and love relationships made impossible due to the radicalism and bellicose atmosphere which has spread through the Balkans during the last three years.

Divided into three different stories, Milcho Manchevski's first feature-length film also has a particular aesthetical approach. The structure of Before the rain relies essentially on an aesthetics of paradox. Instead of looking for logical coherence, Manchevski emphasizes contradiction and strangeness.

Words, Faces and Photos are indeed very simple episodes in themselves, and quite similar between each other, the script is basically the same for all of them: the announcement and the expectation of the rain, the apparent casuality of the meetings and the disagreements and, finally, the tragedy - which is symbolized by the rain. Together, they form an allegorical circle: each one can be considered the first, the second or the last in relation to the other two. The circle, however, is not perfect, "not round", because the stories present in a similar - not identical - way the same kind of facts. In spite of being linked, the parts also remain independent. Logically speaking, each part only makes sense when isolated. The group, that means, the circle as a whole is contradictory.

The contradictions regard the sequence of the facts when we try to establish a correct order between the episodes. The question is that there is no "correct" order of the episodes in Before the rain. All of the three orders are as possible as they are impossible, depending on the way one looks at them. Manchevski does not stop inverting the positions of before and after, establishing, therefore, a paradoxal temporality. Manchevski conceives time as a circular entity, without beginning or end, in such a way that one cannot know how long it takes from one fact to another. As a matter of fact, it is not possible to find out if any time passes at all: the end of Photos corresponds to the beginning of Words as a literal repetition and an indication of the circle.

These are the orders:

I. Words, Faces, Photos

In Words, the young Macedonian orthodox monk Kiril Kirkov mentions the possibility of escaping with the Albanese Muslim Zamira to London, where they could stay with his uncle Aleksander. In Faces, Kiril makes a telephone call to Aleksander, without succeeding in localizing him. In Photos, Anne goes to the Macedonian small village in order to meet his lover Aleksander Kirkov, after their sudden separation in Faces. All these connections justify the sequence.

On the other hand, we also have signals that make this order absurd.

Aleksander's funeral takes place in Words, but he is alive in Faces. In this story, we have Zamira's death confirmed by photographs. If that is true, how can she be alive in Photos?

II. Faces, Photos, Words

Photos comes after Words, since the things that happen to Aleksander in the village confirm his decision of abandoning the career as photographer, which was taken in Faces. The end of Photos is identical to the beginning of Words.

This order can also be considered contradictory. The monastery is in peace in Photos; nevertheless, Faces indicates, through the mentioned photographs, that Kiril has already left the place.

Aleksander dies in Photos and is buried in Words, but in this story his nephew says he is alive.

III. Photos, Words, Faces

Zamira's love affair with Aleksander's cousin and persecution corroborates Photos coming before Words. Faces follows this story because of Kiril's telephone call and the photographs.

More contradictions can be found: It definitely rains in Photos, on the other hand, in Words, people are still waiting for the rain. If Aleksander appears dead in Words, he could not be alive in Faces... but he is.

It is important to point out that the very titles of the episodes are denied by their respective content. Words is indeed an apology of silence, notwithstanding the sentence of the old priest, referred to the idyllic Macedonian landscape: "This beauty should be lauded with words".

According to Zamira's last gestures, we presume that Kiril will return to the vote of silence. In Faces, Manchevski shows how deformed human features can become. Madonna's face on a photo is deformed by a blur of spilled coffee. This event looks like an anticipation of the appearance of Nick's face at the moment of his death. Photos pictures the refusal of the profession by the famous photographer Aleksander Kirkov. In Bosnia, his camera "killed a man", as a result of his obsession in obtaining "scenes of action". So great is the contempt towards his Pulitzer Prize, that he utilizes the book written in his honor as a mere support for the leg of the table in his old house.

"Eye by eye", exposes the energetic Mitre in Words, who justifies his desire of revenge based on 500 years of Muslim control of the region. In the small Macedonian village, as well as for the Macedonian Catholics and for the Muslim Albaneses, the accumulated hate has just reached its point of ebullition. The "center" of the circle that symbolizes Before the rain is located in the middle of Faces; it is a sentence spoken by Aleksander, which works as an authentic historical portrait of the conflict Balkans: "War is the rule, peace is an exception". The sentence is central, equidistant from the points of the circular surface, not only in the sense of being legitimate to all the main facts showed in the film, but also because these facts converge towards it.

Before the rain is tuned to the sounds of disharmony, absurdity and pain - typical traces of the war. Peace is a mere exception. This becomes clear through the scenes of semi-anecdotal neutrality of the UN soldiers, restrict to crossing the disputed areas in their white cars, and "lending themselves only to the gathering of the corpses of those who die in the conflicts", as the village's doctor says.

The rain is an allegory of the tragedy. In all the stories, the tragical denouement is announced, expected and consummated. "Flies are already biting; it seems that it will rain; it is raining already over there", reveals the old priest, that "had almost

taken the vote of silence", to the young monk Kiril Kirkov. He refers to the rain that marks Aleksander's death, as well as the end of Photos and the beginning of Words. The same painful spectacle will happen again, because time cannot help circulating. In the paradoxal world of Before the rain, created and moved through the calamities that distinguish human existence, there is only one postulate that remains standing: it is necessary to rain.