

MEN WITH MACHINE GUNS

Men with machine guns made me ill-at-ease three years ago while I was making my first film, BEFORE THE RAIN.

The film consists of three love stories, all ending in violence brought on by ethnic hatred. It's about heavy expectation of war, and takes place in Macedonia, a nation which had just declared its independence from war-torn Yugoslavia. For more than seventy years, Macedonia was within the same country as the areas now awash in blood, like Bosnia and Croatia. Yet, Macedonia was the only part of what used to be Yugoslavia not involved in this war; nearly a miracle, since two Balkan wars this century were fought precisely over her.

So, I felt ill at ease putting men with machine guns in my film: there were none in Macedonia at the time. While writing the screenplay, during pre-production, shooting and editing, one question haunted me: am I actually portraying my country in a funny mirror? Is my hardworking father seen as a drunk, even in a piece of fiction?

I was relieved when the film was applauded there, even beating all box office records. After a few viewers - both at home and abroad - asked me why there are men with machine guns in the film, I told them that BEFORE THE RAIN is not a documentary, that I would not dare make a documentary about a theme as complex as the Balkan war, that there is tension in Macedonia, but no men with machine guns, that it's a metaphor, that the story could take place in any country (including, but not limited to Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Russia or the U.S.), and that it should serve as a warning, not a testimony. And indeed, the Bosnian carnage went on, but over the mountain - in Macedonia - not even a single bullet was fired.

The following year I was in Bologna. The Cineteca was showing a retrospective of my works (the men-with-machine-guns film, plus music videos and spots I've directed), when on CNN I saw a body next to a burnt-out black Mercedes on a cobblestone road. The road was Macedonia Street, the main street in the capital. The body used to be the President's driver. The President was in a hospital, shrapnel in his brain, his right eye gone.

At the press conference after the screening, the Italian press asked me about the assassination attempt on President Gligorov. While answering, I realized that this was an event so unexpected, bold and simply unreal, that it could never make it as a screenplay. This was no simple men with machine guns. Life employs methods bolder and cockier than fiction.

Peace went on.

Last month I was in Gostivar, a town some fifty kilometers from Skopje, the Macedonian capital. On the main street, riot police with machine guns stopped us. A few armored cars and many cops were baking in the scorching sun. The town was unusually quiet, even for a July day in Macedonia. I saw bullet holes in a tin roof. At one point, tears filled my eyes, and my throat started to sting. Tear gas from yesterday.

The previous day, units of the riot police stormed the city hall and took down the state flags of Albania and Turkey, which the local authorities displayed in front of the building. A few hours later, a crowd gathered, rioting began, then erupted into an armed conflict. With both sides shooting, according to reports, three people died, and many - including cops - were wounded. The police were enforcing the state law and the Supreme Court ruling on the use of flags in front of municipalities in Macedonia. The protesters, considering the Albanian state flag a symbol of their minority, felt offended and reacted with rocks, bars, Molotov cocktails and bullets.

The day we visited, two of the casualties were buried, as peace went on.

In BEFORE THE RAIN there is a scene of a double funeral. This real one I didn't see. I was thinking about how difficult it would be to write a realistic screenplay about a car bomb assassination on the head of state in the main street in the

middle of the day, and about a bloody conflict over the use of flags.

I was thinking how to reduce the complexity of this, and many other realities to two hours. It felt that the truth which one film talks about could only be personal truth, the author's truth, told with fictional dialogue, actors, make up, repeated takes and music. So, when men with machine guns parade on film, they are only narrators of that personal author's truth, not men with machine guns from the real world.

There's plenty of those on CNN.

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