

Before the Rain

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Between 1994 and 1997, world cinema had reached, in terms of quality, its highest peak since the 1970s. It was a thrilling time to go to the movies; you would have to be capable of a great deal of hateful cynicism to ignore that and still call yourself a moviegoer. There seemed to be something for everyone: *Pulp Fiction* for some, *Forrest Gump* for others, *Natural Born Killers* for those who despised the first two. During the period we also saw *Heat*, *Se7en*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *Fargo*, *To Live*, *Breaking the Waves*, *Lost Highway*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, and nearly a hundred other great or very good films. World cinema seemed to accrue restless ingenuity the way a large bank accrues interest -- filmmakers weren't being suffocated by the residual excesses of the 1980s, they were being freed. It was such a great period, in fact, that the shelves of video stores today are stocked with hidden treasures of the period, films that were lost in the media frenzy, waiting to be discovered.

One such film is Milcho Manchevski's *Pred dozhdot*, dubbed *Before the Rain* by the UK, a study of warfare and hatred in the Balkans that is stylistically similar to *Pulp Fiction* in its nonlinear narrative structure -- an interesting coincidence when one realizes that both films premiered overseas at about the same time. By the time Manchevski's film opened in the U.S. in 1995, *Pulp Fiction* had already earned more than a hundred million dollars, become a cultural icon, and earned an Academy Award for its screenplay. *Before the Rain* did not achieve even a hair of the recognition that the Tarantino film did (it did, however, get a Best Foreign Language Film nomination at the 1994 Oscars) -- its only two well-known cast members are Katrin Cartlidge, who is a regular actress in Mike Leigh films and played Bess' friend in *Breaking the Waves*, and Rade Seberdzija, who played the villain in *The Saint*, the costume store owner Milich in *Eyes Wide Shut*, had a small role in *Mission: Impossible II*, and has a part in the upcoming Clint Eastwood picture, *Space Cowboys*. Although I feel that *Pulp Fiction* deserved all the accolades and attention that it received, *Before the Rain* is very much worth seeking out in video stores or on one of the independent film stations on TV. It is as exciting, powerful, and thrilling as any of the other great movies made during the 1990s, and it gives a face to the ongoing conflict on the Balkan peninsula, and even dispels the notion that such strife is exclusive to that part of the world. This magnificent work is gripping, affecting, frightening, and always believable.

The plot, such as it is, consists of three chapters that form a circle, and is set in Macedonia (which at the time of this writing is called FYROM, or the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia) and London. The first section tells the story of a young, gentle-faced monk who harbors a fugitive girl on the run from the adjacent village. The peace and tranquility of the monks, who are content with their quiet, sequestered life and their daily prayers, is contrasted jarringly against the girl's hunters, who have machine guns and little respect for houses of God. This segment, like the two that follow it, seems to follow a predictable train of thought, until its shocking, all-too-real conclusion.

The second segment takes place in the UK, and seems to bear no relation to the first. It follows a journalist at a London newsmagazine named Anne (Cartlidge) who is having an affair with Aleksandar (Seberdzija), a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer who has just returned from Bosnia. They have a quick groping session in the back of a taxicab, after which he tells her he's quitting and returning to his home in Macedonia to settle down. By now the spectator begins to pick up on slight, recurring motifs in the film: a short remark on the nature of time ("Time never dies. The circle is round."), the Beastie Boys' hit song "So What'cha Want" being played on the radio, and, of course, rain. Manchevski is conscious of the audience's increased awareness and films the segment's last scene, set in a restaurant, in a hyperactive, nervous style -- darting to and from an incommunicative couple (Anne and her husband), an arrogant, well-dressed bar patron, and the other uneasy diners, he gives a visual voice to the room's increasing tension -- and brilliantly draws the wires taut until the scene literally explodes.

Aleksandar, the photographer, is the main subject of the third segment. With all the time spent in the region as a photojournalist it seems he's never left, but at the same time he's a foreigner in his own hometown, even in his own home. Some neighbors welcome him, and there is some humor in his reunion (as a family photo is being taken he slaps a fly on his forehead), but there is a strong undercurrent of tension and hate that he tries to ignore but cannot. He tells Anne the heartbreaking, infuriating reason why he left his post at the magazine. Seberdzija, the most famous movie star from the Former Yugoslavian Republic, has an awesome presence; the hulking, gentle-giant actor, with his salt-and-pepper beard and frizzled mass of hair, comes off like a weather-beaten war veteran with a youthful spirit, still capable of hope. (During the second segment it's easy to see why Anne fell in love with him, and why she wants to leave her husband for him.)

Manchevski's style in the last third stages the banal, provincial neorealism of movies like *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, while at the same time acknowledging the presence of terrorism and discord among and between almost everyone in the region -- as in the rest of the film, he lulls the audience into complacency and comfort before violently snapping them out. His screenplay takes the Muslim vs. Orthodox Christian schematic of the first

part and divides it into even smaller fractions, until it appears that there isn't more than five people with the same ideas, points of view, or values. As the film closes, its elusive structure reveals itself but continues to defy reason; as we replay the events in our head it's clear that *Before the Rain* provides no reassurances but only creates the illusion of life-goes-on optimism.

Manchevski's success is twofold: his film brings to life an event of global importance, one that has possibly been obscured by man's apathy in the face of constant reminders. (Herein lies the potential of drama to beat journalism at its own game: where the news merely shows images without depth, accompanied by the irritatingly redundant commentary of a foreign correspondent, drama re-imagines the subject in terms of achieving maximal audience impact.) *Before the Rain* is remarkably adept at bringing the Balkan conflict to cinematic life, but what makes the film unique is the way Manchevski demonstrates how the conflict is not self-contained, but is able to bleed into countries and social settings that would otherwise be inconceivable. "Well, no problem is so great that you can't just walk away from it," says Anne's mother at one point. Manchevski's response to that is clear.

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