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Just a Moral Obligation

Many consider Milcho Manchevski to be one of the most original and innovative artists of our time for his unique blend of experimentation, poetry, emotion and a demand for the active participation of the viewer in the construction of meaning¹.

His acclaimed *Before the Rain* (1994) is considered one of the greatest debut feature films in the history of cinema² and one of the most important films of the decade³, while *The New York Times* included it on its "Best 1,000 Films Ever Made" list. Manchevski's work—which also includes award-winning films *Dust* (2001), *Shadows* (2007), *Mothers* (2010) and *Thursday* (2013), as well award-winning short films *Tennessee* (1991), *Macedonia Timeless* (2009) and *1.73* (1984)—stands out in world cinema for its unique way of playing with space, time and emotion⁴.

Director, photographer, conceptual artist and writer Milcho Manchevski demonstrates superior control both of form and of the emotion his art induces. He reaches outside conventional narrative strategies in every discipline, breaking the format of linear storytelling (sometimes through the use of his concept of cubist narrative). He does this not only for the sake of formal experimentation—which is valuable in itself—but also in order to engage a transcendent, unrestrained communication and experience of sheer emotion. His work is masterfully calibrated and shared in a way that makes the viewer feel emotion deeply, value the work immensely, and trust Manchevski implicitly—as it befits rare, real art.

Manchevski constantly reviews the relationship between the individual person and both reality and spirituality. His films are not easy to watch; he is always confounding the expectations of the viewer, and his work acts as a provocative counterpoint to complacency⁵. Each work functions as an active dialogue with the viewer, immersing the viewer into deep introspection from which its meanings are created. This fascinating reflexivity culminates in *Mothers*, where it is the choice of the viewer to believe that one thing is fiction and another fact; that is the connecting tissue that brings together the two features and the documentary that constitute the film into an emotional whole.

The power of Manchevski's films, the Irish artist and art critic Conor McGrady says, truly lies "in their ability to challenge the viewer, and open a discourse not only on film, but on our relationship to the complex construction of the social and historical fabric in which we reside⁶."

1 Conor McGrady, *Time, Narrative and Representation: Milcho Manchevski's Work in Performance and Photography*

2 Annette Insdorf, Audio commentary, *Before the Rain* DVD, Criterion Collection

3 Ann Kibbey, "Theory of the Image, Capitalism, Contemporary Film and Women", Indiana University Press, 2005, p.203

4 Keith Brown, An Interview with Milcho Manchevski, *World Literature Today*, 2008, 82/1: 12-15

5 Conor McGrady, "Fragments, Layers and Temporal Disruption: Observations on Milcho Manchevski's Work in Film".

6 *Ibid.*

But equal to his creative innovativeness, Manchevski stands out as an author because of his almost religious faith in his work along with a fierce commitment to defend his artistic integrity against (non-creative) outsider break-ins. This defense is held as a moral obligation, no matter if threats to artistic integrity come from film studios, other corporate interests, producers, investors, the political establishment or the expectations of film critics and festival directors.

This fascinating dedication characterizes all the phases of his career, from the mid 1980s, when he unsuccessfully tried to make his first feature film in Macedonia, to his beginnings as a director in New York, his years in the Hollywood industry, and the making of *Before the Rain*, *Dust, Shadows* and *Mothers* in Europe. Manchevski was born in Macedonia, but educated abroad and his career has mainly taken shape in New York and Europe. The fact that he lives and works on two continents, without a permanent stable base, places him in the challenging role of an artist who is in a sense outside the system, which also affords him additional artistic freedoms. As an independent artist he is in a position to constantly assess the system and confront its elements that threaten artistic integrity, often with the high accompanying cost of exhausting personal emotional engagement.

In a personal note (published in this book) he says that he is questioning the very fabric of the film industry – its reliance on manufacturing obedience to clichés, myths and pre-fabricated patterns of behavior and thinking; questioning the wisdom of the existing political world order; lastly, running afoul of the film industry hierarchy, rejecting the authority of the pyramid, fighting many authorities directly.

Manchevski's uncompromising attitude comes out of his faith that the artist "has a dialogue only with the work of art itself"⁷ and therefore has "responsibility only to his or her work"⁸. So, when asked about how artistic integrity is defended he says:

"Integrity is defended with balls. And with work—works of art or human work—with openness, virtue, and most of all with sacrifice. The contamination of the human spirit, made by corporations and state bureaucracies, is worse than the pollution of the human environment, even worse than sorrow and poverty, because it leads to numbness, egoism and quiet death. It teaches you to hang on to manipulation that dehumanizes you and has no end. For me, the struggle against the corporations and the state bureaucracies is like a struggle against the enslaver from the school textbooks. All good art is, by itself, engaged, because it is against the status quo and against human stupidity."⁹

For Macedonia, Manchevski's oeuvre is of colossal, formative importance. From *Before the Rain* (1994) to the short *Thursday* (2013), his films have won more awards on a global scale and have been viewed and respected in more countries than anything else ever made in Macedonia. Manchevski's work not only has made the name of the young country well-known, but it also gave a face to Macedonia. The

7 Milcho Manchevski, "Why I Like Writing and Hate Directing: Confessions of a Recovering Writer-Director"

8 *Ibid.*

9 „Интервјетот се брани со мадиња“, interview in Vest, 12-13/06/2010

self-definition of the nation often consciously and unconsciously leaned on Manchevski's oeuvre (as well as his statements).

Yet, the question is whether contemporary Macedonian society, whose tissue has been systematically eaten up by two cruel decades of post-communist transition, and that almost pathologically avoids self-reflection, has a capacity to absorb the colossal nature of Manchevski's oeuvre and cherish it as a lasting heritage. Over the past 20 years, there has been a constant dichotomy in Macedonia's relationship towards Manchevski as an artist and intellectual: favored and respected by the audience on the one hand, and ignored, attacked, harassed by the cultural establishment on the other. At the heart of this dichotomy is Manchevski's refusal to compromise his artistic integrity and his readiness to loudly defend the public against political, partisan, and ideological interests, and this is a source of conflict with the establishment (a chapter in this book addresses this as well). Especially after *Mothers* (that with forensic precision reveals what is probably the only undeniable fact—the aggressive incompetence of the state system), a film the establishment openly viewed as an attack and thus attempted to suppress, the result is a reality that seems almost to be an irony of fate: the most well-known Macedonian artist could not work in his country anymore.

As Iris Kronauer, German historian (and author of Manchevski's biography in this volume), puts it: "His four feature films to date do feel like a complete opus, an opus one can call Manchevski's Macedonian phase – from a nostalgic coming home to a sobering question 'How will we die?' A pessimist would describe it as a Macedonian descent into hell, a painful confrontation with the dark side. An optimist would call it emancipation from the pull of the womb, a painful but cathartic liberation from cultural codependency."

Various aspects of Manchevski's work as filmmaker, photographer, conceptual artist and writer are explored in this book through in-depth analysis by nine renowned film theorists, philosophers and art historians.

In "Fragments, Layers and Temporal Disruption: Observations on Milcho Manchevski's Work in Film" Conor McGrady writes about the specifics of Manchevski's film expression. *Before the Rain* is analyzed by Ann Kibbey in "Theory of the Image", Ian Christie in "Never-Ending Story", and Sasho Alexander Lambevski in "Feeling the Paranoiac, the Schizzo and the Depressive: A Semiotic Analysis of Macedonia's Emotional Architecture in *Before the Rain*". *Dust* is explored by Erik Tängerstad in "When the Story Hides the Story: The Narrative Structure of Milcho Manchevski's *Dust* (2001)" and Iris Kronauer in "Wiping *Dust* in Venice". Katerina Kolozova is the author of "Manchevski's *Shadows*: Sexuality and Melancholy" and „On Manchevski's *Mothers*: An Anatomy of Misogyny". Conor McGrady's "Time, Narrative and Representation: Milcho Manchevski's Work in Performance and Photography" and Sonia Abadzieva's "Conceptual Practices in the Art Narratives of Milcho Manchevski" concern his work in photography and conceptual art.

A wide selection of archival facsimile—of production notes, storyboards, letters, personal notes, reviews and interviews—is also part of this book with the intention to shed light on Manchevski's work processes, as well as on how his work was received by the audiences and critics. This archival material, meticulously selected from a wealth of sources, is integral to understanding Manchevski's oeuvre.

Manchevski's own theoretical essays and fiction are also part of the book, completing this collection of diverse insights into his work.