



Conor McGrady

Fragments, Layers and Temporal Disruption: Observations on Milcho Manchevski's Work in Film

*"Everything in life is memory,
save for the thin edge of the present"*

Michael Gazzaniga

In his early performance and conceptual work, Milcho Manchevski embraced a radical and experimental approach to engaging his audience. Working in the context of conceptualism and across a number of disciplines, his embodiment of experimentation coalesced in his film work, and continues to underpin its evolution and development. As with his early performances, his films dispense with compromise, and eschew the conventional tropes of predictability that continue to dominate narrative structure in contemporary filmmaking. Instead, in the tradition of the avant-garde, his films play with the elasticity of narrative structure while not completely forgoing the importance of storytelling. While his films play with time and complex narrative frameworks, they remain underpinned by his ability to immerse the viewer in a particular time and space through the power of storytelling.

Much has been written about Manchevski's first film, *Before the Rain*, with its labyrinthine weaving of interlocking narratives and twisting of time into a cinematic Moebius loop. It is in *Mothers* though, his 2010 film, that he pushes structural experimentation furthest. Shortly after its opening sequence, which consists of a close up of a burning photograph, the viewer is offered the statement that, "No real life story can surpass a film story". Encapsulated in this deceptively simple phrase is the idea that film, as the manifestation of a particular reality, appears to transcend the banalities of everyday life. Yet the narrative threads that underpin historical and contemporary contexts, even the seemingly banal, remain fundamental in film. The idea that film surpasses real experiences also alludes to the depiction of illusion, one of the key concerns of *Mothers*. Manchevski states that, "*Mothers* is about the nature of truth, but we deal with this issue through the very structure of the piece - by directly confronting a dramatic segment with a documentary segment in the same film. We as viewers inhale drama and documentary in different ways, and when we are made to inhale the two at the same time, something interesting happens".¹

1 Conor McGrady & Dario Solman, "Macedonian Mythmaking" Brooklyn Rail, December 7, 2010



Narrative

Constructed as a triptych, each section of the film gets progressively longer than the sequence prior to it, and moves from a fictional short story, to that of a film (also fictional) about the making of a documentary, through to an actual documentary that constitutes the longest sequence. The visual language of documentation pervades each of these three sections, particularly through multiple references to the recorded or photographed image. As previously stated, the film opens with a photograph, and photographs anchor the seemingly disparate and shifting structural approaches contained within the film. In the first section two girls who have identified the wrong man as a flasher take photos of their shoes with their cell phones. Identification, evidence and the question of culpability link this segment with the documentary focusing on suspected serial murderer Vlado Taneski and his mysterious death in prison. In this sequence the concentration of photographic images escalates, from the forensic to family photos; and newspaper images to those taken by surveillance cameras. In the centerpiece of the triptych, which introduces the documentary process (a film about the making of a film) the opening image of the burning photo is given a contextual framework as we witness the old man in the village burning family photos.



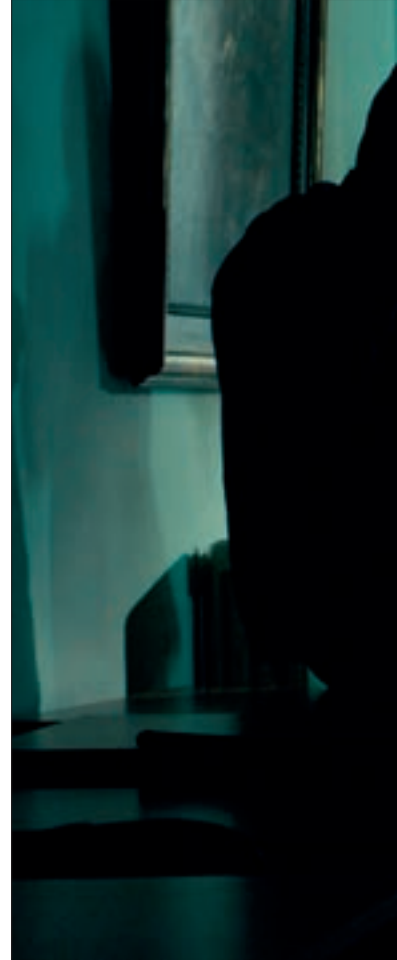
Stylistically, all three sections of the film are handled differently, and while they initially appear to clash, are bound together not only through the underpinning references to photographic representation and documentation, but to ideas of verity, and most strikingly, the exposure of the darker side of contemporary life in Macedonia. The threat of sexual violence permeates the first fictional short, with the violent treatment meted out by the police on a yet to be convicted suspect for overshadowing the violent death of Vlado Taneski in prison at the end of the film (though whether his death was suicide or murder remains a mystery). Bitterness, harshness, division and entropy pervade the centerpiece, the isolation of the village and its two remaining inhabitants echoing a sense of alienation that pervades the film in its entirety. The documentary shifts the pace and tonality of the overall film, and elements including jump cuts and cinema verite echo the darker underbelly of society in any context. Animals appear at various points in the film, wandering street dogs and cats adding feral undertones that foreground a heightened sense of vulnerability. This is echoed most clearly in the sequence where a turtle is found on its back during a night in the remote Macedonian village. The following morning the helpless creature is righted and sent on its way by one of the documentary filmmakers, his simple intervention alluding to a sense of fragility yet hope. On the layering and mixing of genres and the dichotomy between objectivity and emotion, Manchevski states:

“At the same time (while making a structuralist or conceptualist piece), it is important that the piece function on an emotional, on a gut level, not only on a cerebral level. With Mothers, I was not interested in narrative devices where one story neatly dovetails into another. I was more interested in a Spartan, austere piece, where the connections are made in the mind of the beholder, and they are not necessarily narrative, but rather tonal and perhaps thematic. I love Beuys, Rauschenberg, Tehching Hsieh. I’m still fascinated by structuralist and conceptualist work, but I’m also trying to see how and whether it can be made richer, what happens when you marry something that is austere and structuralist and conceptual to something that is very emotional or almost sentimental? All of this has been done in contemporary art and literature and even in music, but not so much in film and definitely not so much in narrative cinema. So it was sweet and funny how people were talking about how Before the Rain was groundbreaking, but this film was doing what has been done in other arts many times (but not so much in film). Dust, and, especially Mothers take this further.”²

Memory

If photographs provide entry and exit points in *Mothers*, as they do in all of Manchevski’s work, they also operate as signifiers of memory, permeating the constructed sense of time and narrative structure that embody our notions of the present. In *Before the Rain*, the central character Alexander is a war photographer, a profession associated not only with risk and bearing witness, but with the presentation of objective truth. The relationship between war and photography surfaces again in *Dust*, the archival images of the Macedonian Revolution in the early years of the twentieth century hovering between the interweaving narrative strands of past and present. In *Mothers*, as with *Dust*, the photograph alternates between the residual, haunted power of the past, and the capturing of evidence in the present. Embodying the dictatorship of time, film is always inherently about the present, even if it deals with the past. In playing with time, compressing, expanding and layering it, it is also about the relationship between pictures, between photography and film:

2 *Ibid*









"I am fascinated by the ability of film as a medium to play with time. The filmmaker converts time into space: one second becomes 24 frames. In editing, when you move a piece of film, you are moving time. Who knows, this rearrangement may be more accurate to how time really operates than our standard concept of time as a straight arrow."³

This non-linear approach to narrative highlights history as a social construction, or a cultural artifact that is multi-layered, contextual, highly subjective and contested. The technique of the cut-up, or collage, originating in cubism and developed in literature through the work of William Burroughs, for example, alludes to the clashing of competing or complimentary narratives, particularly in situations of conflict, while presenting them simultaneously. This layering affect references the work of Rauschenberg, whom Manchevski admires:

"Placing archetypes in new contexts means questioning them as elements in how you tell a story. They can become richer, or they can deflate. It is sort of like a Robert Rauschenberg print: a piece of it could be found-art and another piece made from a photograph, some of it is an actual brushstroke, but what really matters is what these pieces tell you as a whole—when you step back—rather than what they tell you on their own".⁴

Non-linearity also disrupts control, and interrupts our perception of an unbroken narrative historical flow. It's an approach that Manchevski first used in *Before the Rain*, where a circular story is divided into three chapters. In *Dust* two parallel stories unfold sequentially, one told in flashbacks. In *Shadows*, the context is contemporary, but history, violence and trauma continually leak through, punctuating the veneer of present time to call attention to the repressed and unresolved traumas that form the building blocks of most modern nation states and which

3 Necati Sonmez, "The Rain Comes Again: Milcho Manchevski Interviewed", *Central European Review*, April 30, 2001. Online at: http://www.ce-review.org/01/15/kinoeye15_sonmez.html Accessed October 31, 2014

4 Roderick Coover, "History in Dust", *Film Quarterly*, University of California Press, Vol. 58, No.2, Winter 2004, revised and clarified by Manchevski in November 2014



continue to haunt them. With the triptych anchoring the structure of *Mothers*, Manchevski again borrows from painting, yet subverts its formality through asymmetrical sequencing and shifting stylistic approaches to narrative. This sense of innovation and irreverence, and the desire to play with form and structure question and challenges the relationship between the filmmaker and the viewer.

Violence

Mothers shifts gears quite radically from considering innocence (in actions, consequences and culpability) to a poetic exploration of old age, decline and mortality to the clinical aftermath of violent death. The brutal and the banal coincide in the forensic examination of the alleged serial murder of three middle-aged women by journalist Vlado Taneski, who reported on the murders before his arrest and violent death in prison. The analytical approach to violent death in this sequence contrasts with the brooding threat of war in *Before the Rain* and the visceral guerilla battles and massacres of *Dust*, which appropriates the genre of the Hollywood Western to contextualize war and revolution in Macedonia in the early twentieth century. *Dust* opens with an image of tomatoes on a deli stand in November in New York, their fleshiness a surrogate for the sense of rupture, displacement, intrusion and bodily dissolution that takes place later in the film. Likewise, watermelons explode into a fleshy morass in a vicious gun battle, their fragility and obliteration visually echoing the broken bodies and extinguished lives around them. In referencing the use of violence in his films, Manchevski states:



*“Ingmar Bergman says something like this: “Violence in film is a perfectly legitimate way of ritualizing violence in society.” I’d emphasize ritualizing. Not glorifying. I like seeing good, adult action violence in movies. Not sadistic, passive violence. There is something exhilarating about action-violence precisely because it is the movies and not real life. I am terrified of any kind of violence in real life, but putting violence in film is a way of exorcising it. The violence in Dust also has a very strong counterpoint in the selfless actions and love that the film advocates”.*⁵

The aftermath of violence in *Mothers* is contextualized somewhat differently. It is unheroic and somewhat ahistorical, while remaining contingent on the contemporary context that produced a serial killer in Macedonia. This is not the violence of competing ideologies, wars of liberation or self-sacrifice, but horrific in its banality, it is the compulsive violence of the social misfit or the psychopath. The dehumanization and desensitization implicit in the murder of the women refers back to the actions of the girls in the police station in the first part of the film. Their deliberate identification of an innocent man in an unverifiable act of indecent exposure appears innocuous yet simultaneously cruel. While the interlocking communities of families and lovers experience war in *Before the Rain* and *Dust*, the intimate sense of loss experienced by the families of the victims in *Mothers* belies a tragedy that has no overarching meta narrative or broader political context to give it meaning. Of course, context is always political in what it reveals about social relations and power dynamics, but in this case the assaulted and murdered women are simply victims of circumstance. Elaborating further, Manchevski states that:

5 *Ibid*







“If one hopes for a work of art to have a social function (and it is not meant to have a direct social function by any stretch of the imagination), then one should certainly hope that exposing violence in its despicable and repulsive brutality - if not absurdity - is one of the socially beneficial side-effects of art. Thus, society is better served by a gross “portrayal” of violence than by sanitized studio fare.”⁶

Conclusion

The multiplicity of approaches to structure and narrative in Milcho Manchevski's films enable them to pose questions and create open-ended associations that deepen upon reflection and repeated viewing. His work as a storyteller shifts and mutates, proliferating his layering of fiction and documentary and continually interrogating the fabrication of reality as the confluence of fact and imagination. In his film work the viewer is challenged to draw out thematic connections and question the ideas of historical and subjective truth. This is particularly the case with *Mothers*, where fact and fiction operate within the limited temporal dimensions of the film, and the interplay between truth and lie eludes an easy point of identification. Manchevski is well aware of the tremendous power of film, and its ability to simultaneously operate as both truth and fiction. While the viewer knows that film is a construction they are still prepared to, and in fact, desire to, surrender their disbelief, particularly when it comes to conventional dramatic approaches to narrative. In continuing to imbue his films with the legacy of the twentieth century avant-garde, and confounding the expectations of the viewer, Manchevski's work acts as a provocative counterpoint to complacency. It is 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 reside, that their power truly lies.

6 Manchevski, Milcho, “Art, Violence + Society: A Few Notes”, *Interpretations*, European Research Project for Poetics & Hermeneutics, Volume No.1, Violence & Art, Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Skopje, 2007