



Iris Kronauer

# Biography

Born in Skopje, Macedonia, Yugoslavia in 1959.

In 1973, a couple of months after his father died (his mother had died in 1966) Milcho Manchevski won the newspaper Politika's prize for young people's fiction, presented by the Nobel laureate Ivo Andric in Belgrade. Encouraged to continue writing (he could read both Cyrillic and Roman alphabets since he was four;<sup>1</sup> his first attempt at a novel, *Desert Blood*, came at age ten), Manchevski won several awards for short fiction. He was soon offered a full-time job as a journalist while still in high school and was writing a regular magazine column by the time he was seventeen. He published in newspapers, magazines and periodicals based in Skopje, Belgrade and Sarajevo.

In 1978, Manchevski attempted to enroll in the renowned Lodz film school in Poland. In spite of being the best student of his class, he failed to get a state scholarship. Without it, Lodz would not accept him. Nevertheless, he traveled to Poland, visited the school and looked up the Polish directors Krzysztof Zanussi and Andrzej Wajda in the phone book. This resulted in a magazine interview with Wajda<sup>2</sup> and in Manchevski's first day on a film set, Zanussi's.

The following year, with the help of a professor he had met at a lecture at the Macedonian Cinematheque, Richard Blumenberg, he won a scholarship from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. The focus of the SIU film school was on hands-on production and on experimental film. His encounter with experimental film turned into a life-long love affair with the form and strongly influenced his future narrative films. His professor Mike Covell and his colleagues (including the future Academy-award nominee Steve James) immersed themselves in experimental film and Manchevski – in addition to narrative films – directed several conceptualist pieces, including the so-called film without title (*The Black Film*), *Wednesday Morning at Five O'clock as the Day Begins*, *Paths of Glory*, *The Wire*, *The Working Class Goes to Heaven* and *Beautiful Blue Danube*. He officially graduated in 1983.

Manchevski spent the years 1982-1985 in Skopje. He wrote several essays – on the Hollywood horror film of the 70s, on the American avant-garde cinema, on art history – *Towards Total Art* – and, most importantly, in 1982, the screenplay *Mousaka*. The script was praised by several prominent Yugoslav filmmakers and playwrights, including Dusan Makavejev and Goran Markovic, and was picked up by Makedonija Film and put on a fast track. It was a story of a young punk photographer who moves between different social circles, eventually falling victim to a drug deal gone awry. The bleak social commentary was not, however,

1 A parent of a classmate recalls Manchevski doing the crossword puzzle in Nova Makedonija on the first day of school.

2 Published under the heading "19-yr-old Milcho Manchevski interviews Andrzej Wajda."







welcome in a Macedonia then run by the communist oligarchy. Manchevski's unorthodox appearance and cocky interviews<sup>3</sup> didn't help with the old guard, and the project stalled. Makedonija Film soon gave up and Manchevski tried the state-owned production company Vardar Film. The cast and crew offered to make the film with fully deferred payment, but the directors of Vardar Film turned it down anyway; a member of the Central Committee received the delegation, but never responded to their plea. After almost three years of trying, the 24-year-old Manchevski found a home for *Mousaka* at Macedonian TV.<sup>4</sup> The script was praised again—especially the topicality, the dialogue and the pacing—and a date was set. He completed the pre-production—full scouting, crewing up,<sup>5</sup> a thousand-drawing storyboard, costumes and art direction—even most of the music for the film was ready.<sup>6</sup> Shortly before principal photography, the commissioning editor abruptly canceled the project without an explanation. This came on the day after Manchevski submitted the cast list: the list did not include the actor who starred in most Macedonian TV productions of the time overseen by the commissioning editor. The actor had previously approached Manchevski with an offer to help get the project financed.<sup>7</sup>

During the three *Mousaka* years in Skopje, Manchevski also formed the art collective 1AM and staged two art performances, exactly a year apart. The first complex performance revolved around (1) the interplay of several theoretical statements, (2) the fulfilling of a long list of promised simple actions (unlocking the gallery door, turning the art towards the audience, observing a melting block of ice, etc) and (3) a number of elements: hand-made invitations, the statements, the promises, the simple actions, his conceptualist films from Carbondale, variations on the theme of the alphabet (a song where the alphabet is sung, a recital where it is recited), the conceptualist manifesto (which includes 20+ signatures under only one sentence, "This is the manifesto of the conceptualists"), his Polaroid project (*Face*), etc.

The second performance was titled *How to Explain to a Live Rabbit the Joseph Beuys' Performance "How to Explain Art to a Dead Hare"*.

Manchevski's interest in performance art met his filmmaking in a piece (he called it film) titled *1.72* (which he performed two more times as *1.73* in Croatia and *1.74* in Brooklyn). Performed at Belgrade Alternative – where it won an award in **1984** – the work consisted of exposing a length of film (1.72 meters) on stage, projecting it, slicing it into pieces, stapling them onto a questionnaire asking questions such as "Does film have to have a story?", then distributing the questionnaire and the bits of film to the audience.

In **1983**, he also helped put together the techno-band bastion!, wrote the lyrics for their songs and directed the seminal music video *Hot Day in Mexico*. The ambitious video – following the lyrics that speak of a subject unusual for a pop song – reconstructed the 1940 assassination of Leon Trotsky in Mexico, cross-cutting with a contemporary assassin who gorges on violence in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. The video was banned after one airing, but became a cult classic.

3 "My goal is to poke my finger in the eye of those who've spent tons of public money and created shit [films]," Manchevski in a 1983 interview in Mlad Borec.

4 Three music videos for the band Leb i sol he directed for Macedonian TV the previous year were banned without explanation and never aired.

5 He had to hire mostly Macedonian TV employees and thus had to give up on the services of his professor Mike Covell, who had agreed to come to Macedonia to shoot the film.

6 The hard-rock band that was doing the music for *Mousaka* had no place to rehearse, so Manchevski invited them to work in his living room, much to the consternation of his elderly aunt.

7 Dancho Chevreviski would eventually officially become a film producer, but at this juncture he was officially only an actor. He was also 20 years too old for the part of *Mousaka*.







After the collapse of *Mousaka* in 1985, the 25-year-old Manchevski moved to New York. He made a living as a production assistant, editor of documentaries, teleprompter operator, videographer, video-conversion operator, and assistant art director on in-house Wall Street videos, court interpreter, house painter and hat check clerk. For five years he took his showreel to numerous production companies on a daily basis. He also wrote several screenplays: a madcap nuclear-end-of-the-world comedy (*How to Save the World (and Why)*), a sci-fi about people for whom film has become more real than life, a horror script, a *First Blood*-inspired script, etc.

The New York adaptation of *Mousaka*, titled *Puma*, got some traction, but it was the screenplay for a thriller, *Possession*, that garnered several offers. In an effort to prove his directing ability, he raised a small amount of money in order to film the first seven minutes of *Possession*. But instead of getting *Possession* off the ground, the sample landed him a deal with a music video production company, exactly five years after moving to New York. A year later, the company did not renew the contract, and he signed with a new, smaller company. Their first project together was a low-budget video for *Tennessee* (1991), the debut song of the emerging hip-hop band Arrested Development. The video flew in the face of the current rap trends: instead of the brutal urban gangsta rap of the day, *Tennessee* focused on a rural community where children and old folks were seen side by side with the band members, living in a harmonious community. The video ended with a contemporary reworking of an old real-life photograph of a double lynching.<sup>8</sup> Shot in black and white and inspired by Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank and depression era photographs, the video became an instant hit, earning an MTV Award in 1992, a Billboard magazine award, and a platinum record. It became an MTV Buzz Clip and was eventually included in Billboard's list of 100 best videos ever.

As a result of the success of *Tennessee*, Manchevski directed dozens of music videos and commercials in New York and San Francisco the following year, becoming one of the most sought-after new music video directors in New York.

In the summer of 1991, Manchevski went back to Macedonia for the first time since moving to New York and severing his ties with his home country in 1985. The aunt who had raised him had fallen ill, and he flew to Skopje to visit her and arrange for her care. Yugoslavia was falling apart and fighting had erupted in Slovenia and Croatia and would eventually lead to a bloody civil war. Macedonia declared independence three months later. The situation and the atmosphere Manchevski encountered inspired him to write a five-page synopsis. The melancholy "tale in three parts" told three love stories set in Macedonia and London against the backdrop of impending inter-ethnic violence. As a metaphor for the idea that violence begets violence, the story had a circular structure, but with a subtle quirk in the circular chronology.<sup>9</sup> Because of the sense of impending change that permeates the story, he named it *Before the Rain*.

Upon his return to New York, a director of photography he was working with suggested he send the synopsis to two London-based companies: Aim Productions and British Screen. Aim turned it down, as the producer Sam Taylor felt the three part concept did not work. Tessa Ross of British

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8 When *Tennessee* was shown on the Virgin flights, the end was re-edited to eliminate the double-lynching references.

9 In subsequent interviews, Manchevski has described the quirk as an optical illusion in time.





With Simon Perry



Screen, however, liked the synopsis. British Screen commissioned a screenplay and Manchevski hand-delivered the first draft in London on **March 1, 1993**. The head of British Screen, Simon Perry, and the head of development Steven Cleary, greenlit it immediately. A British producer was a requirement for a film supported by a state entity such as British Screen. The project had no producer at all and Perry asked Manchevski to propose one. He suggested Judy Counihan, whom he had met in New York, but had never worked with. British Screen accepted Counihan, but since she had no experience and was unknown to them, they proposed a production company they were familiar with – Aim Productions. Manchevski did not mention that Aim had already turned down the project.<sup>10</sup>

Noe Productions, a French subsidiary of Polygram joined the project with Cedomir Kolar as producer, as did Channel 4 in London. Vardar Film from Macedonia also got involved with Stevche Acevski, and later, Gorjan Tozija as producers.

Pre-production commenced in London and Skopje, with additional casting and crewing up in Paris. Lack of experience (this was the first film for Taylor, Kolar, Counihan and Cat Villiers of Aim), the limited budget (originally around 1 million British pounds) and co-production issues (Macedonia had never been a party to a co-production before; Great Britain and France had yet to recognize the new country) soon became issues. The Yugoslavian actor Rade Serbedzija was cast as Aleksandar. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, he became a target for both Croatian and Serbian nationalists and had since moved to London.<sup>11</sup> The Macedonian high school student Labina Mitevska, who had come to volunteer in the production department, got a chance as Zamira. The 18-year-old French actor Gregoire Colin was cast as the young monk Kiril.<sup>12</sup> It was not until a couple of weeks after production had started that Katrin Cartlidge was cast as Anne.

During pre-production, the Macedonian Ministry of Culture shocked everyone by suddenly withdrawing its support. Influenced by several established Macedonian filmmakers,<sup>13</sup> the Ministry had started to doubt whether the foreign partners' commitment was real. The Ministry was contributing only 7% of the budget, but they were essential in the co-production structure. This could sink Manchevski's attempt to make a film in Macedonia again. Simon Perry lobbied the Ministry, providing a letter from the British Foreign Office to a country Britain ironically had yet to establish diplomatic relations with. Manchevski requested meetings with the Prime Minister and with the President. The Ministry eventually rejoined the project only near the end of principal photography in Macedonia.

As pre-production moved to Macedonia, the crew, led by the production designers David Munns and Sharon Lomofsky, continued scouting the countryside. The remote mountaintops and deserted villages would provide a spectacular backdrop for the story. Access though was difficult: the equipment had to be hauled by tractors and Russian Lada SUVs. On a few occasions a bulldozer was even required.

<sup>10</sup> Manchevski also offered the project to New Line Cinema in New York, ZDF TV in Germany and Macedonian TV. New Line and ZDF turned down *Before the Rain*. Macedonian TV has yet to respond.

<sup>11</sup> Vanessa Redgrave invited Serbedzija and his family to live in her house.

<sup>12</sup> The young English actor Jude Law was the runner up.

<sup>13</sup> The Minister of Culture later named Chevreviski and Stole Popov.

Production was scheduled to begin on **September 20, 1994**,<sup>14</sup> but some of the locations were yet to be found, many of the actors were still to be signed and the camera truck was more than a week late. It had gone from Paris to London, instead of coming to Macedonia, and this caused a delay in the start of principal photography by half a week. This delay, combined with a number of pre-production issues, put the project behind schedule and thus over budget before principal photography had even begun. Disregarding the conflict of interest, the producers hired the bond controller, Paul Sarony as line producer, and he immediately got down to business. He declared that the film should be treated like a made-for-TV movie and tried to make up for lost time by applying pressure on the director to shoot faster. He insisted they leave locations as soon as possible, sometimes before the filming had even been completed.<sup>15</sup> At one point, scenes were removed from the shooting schedule without the director being informed of the cuts. When he realized this, Manchevski resigned. He rejoined his own film once the scenes had been reinstated in the script.

Two weeks into production both Channel 4 and the director of photography, Darius Khondji abandoned the project. Khondji's departure<sup>16</sup> meant a new D.P. – Manu Teran<sup>17</sup> who picked up on the day Khondji was flying out. Teran sometimes had to complete scenes begun by Khondji, including reverse angles of shots already



<sup>14</sup> The director was shown the budget and the schedule only a few days before the filming began.

<sup>15</sup> The crew did not receive the following day's schedule until after 11p.m.; this made preparation and purchases for the following day difficult.

<sup>16</sup> Khondji had hard time working under constant pressure and was not happy with the lack of control over the lighting of the many exterior shots.

<sup>17</sup> Manchevski met Teran when Teran replaced Khondji on a music video in Paris a few months earlier. Ironically, Manchevski accepted that video in order to work with Khondji in preparation for *Before the Rain*, but Khondji turned it down nevertheless.



filmed weeks ago, occasionally on locations a couple of hundred kilometers apart. The rush at the beginning sometimes meant that important shots were missing, and the editor Nic Gaster helped by directing the second unit. Gaster also picked up some missing shots, while Manchevski picked up

some more – mainly closeups from incomplete scenes – while shooting new scenes on the side. They even filmed missing close-ups against the sky or on a patch of grass months later in London, or on a return trip to Skopje in April 1994. Manchevski's thorough preparation – storyboards for all his films usually consist of more than a thousand drawings; the acting rehearsals last three weeks in prep – and his ability to keep the continuity in his head prove invaluable, as the filmmakers faced a daunting task: shooting most of the Macedonian section without seeing any dailies,<sup>18</sup> and without a continuity person.<sup>19</sup> The withdrawal of Channel 4, however, was more serious. It meant both a big hole in the budget and organizational problems that could sink the entire project. It was early in the process, however, a fact which made it possible for most parties to abandon the film without a major financial loss. Simon Perry went in front of the board of British Screen and got a permission to increase their involvement in the film, even without a British broadcaster involved, until the film was completed. This ultimately was what saved the project.

The plan called for the exposed film to be sent to the London lab

three times a week. In order to save money on shipping, Sarony and the producers kept it piling up in Macedonia for almost three weeks. When it eventually arrived at the lab (the sound followed



18 Cedomir Kolar would say: "Milcho had a fantastic ability to shoot out of continuity. He also had an incredible drive to push things forward."

19 The continuity person, Biljana Mirkovic left midway through the shot for another, bigger project.



Cinema/Chi è il trionfatore della 51ª Mostra di Venezia

# Milcho il Macedone

Incontro con Manchevski, l'esordiente di 34 anni che ha sconfitto Stone e Amelio.

di PAOLA JACOBI

**S**alottino del Blue Bar dell'hotel Excelsior al Lido di Venezia: la Mostra del cinema è in corso. Il via-vai di festivalieri è frenetico. Si chiacchiera continuamente, ossessivamente di cinema. Tra gli altri, si notano due giovanotti stravaganti. Uno, alto, massiccio, in bermuda e camicia rosso san-

gue, è Quentin Tarantino, regista americano iconoclasta. L'altro è Milcho Manchevski, 34 anni, nato a Skopje, in Macedonia. Veste in jeans e maglietta, porta miniorecchini e capelli biondi spennacchiati. La Mostra ha appena presentato il suo film *Before the Rain* (Prima della pioggia). Tarantino l'ha vi-

SEMPLICE E TERRIBILE. Sopra, Lubna Mitrevska in «Before the Rain». Sotto, il regista Milcho Manchevski con il Leone d'oro alla premiazione. A destra, Rado Ristovski e Katerina Cvetkovic in un'altra scena del film.



several days later, while the continuity reports never made it), the lab discovered that some of the footage had been ruined due to a camera fault. The late discovery meant that the small problem had now ballooned. Eventually, Gaster had to cut around the problematic shots, sacrificing many, and some footage was stabilized with an optical printer. Some of it was finally fixed 21 years after the release of the film, during the digitization at the ARRI labs in Munich.

The difficult six-week shoot in Macedonia was followed by an additional week of pick-ups with a crew of four and a three-week London shoot. When Manchevski went to his first acting rehearsal in London instead of going to a technical recce,<sup>20</sup> Sarony gave him a second 24-hour notice (the first one he delivered to the director in Macedonia). After Perry heard of this, he replaced Sarony.

Manchevski envisioned a score based on traditional Macedonian and Byzantine music. Polygram suggested the Bosnian star Goran Bregovic, but the director had already picked an unknown Macedonian band, Anastasija. He asked Anastasija to record an audition tape for Polygram, then convinced Polygram to pay for the recording session. One of the three songs Anastasija recorded as part of their audition was the soaring closing number, *I Was Born in Pain*.

The almost-finished film was submitted to the Cannes Film Festival, but all three programs rejected it. A couple of months later, the director of the Venice Film Festival, Gillo Pontecorvo screened the French productions and co-productions in Paris. Because of the ongoing feud between Macedonia and Greece,<sup>21</sup> an employee of Unifrance tried to keep the film off the screening list, but Pontecorvo did see it – without subtitles. He invited *Before the Rain* to show in Venice, and then asked to see it again the next day, this time with subtitles.

It was Manchevski's first real festival – and it was a sensational launch.<sup>22</sup> *Before the Rain* won the **1994** Golden Lion for Best Film (*ex aequo* with *Vive L'Amour*), the FIPRESCI (The International Federation of Film Critics), UNESCO, Leoncino d'oro and Kodak awards – among others – for a total of 10 Venice awards.<sup>23</sup> Manchevski thanked the cast, the crew, the people of Macedonia, and Simon Perry “without whom this film would never have been made.”

**The film was a favorite with audiences and critics. Manchevski was compared to Tarkovsky and Bergman, and *Before the Rain* was called a masterpiece. The film historian and critic Annette Insdorf called it one of the greatest first features in history of the cinema, The Miami Herald goes on to say that if Manchevski never makes another film he'd already earned a footnote in film history and The New York Times included it on its “Best 1,000 Films Ever Made” list.<sup>24</sup>**

20 The production scheduling ignored the planned rehearsal.

21 Greece objected to the name of the new country and blocked Macedonia's accession to NATO and EU membership. Negotiations between the two countries have been going on for more than 20 years under UN auspices.

22 During the two days after the official Venice premiere, the young director gave dozens of interviews, before leaving Venice. The festival asked him to make himself easily accessible, the implication being that he might need to return to pick up an award. Since travel to Macedonia was complicated at the time, Polygram sent him to London. A couple of days later, a festival representative called early in the morning, asking whether Manchevski could return to Venice to pick up an award and asking what name he would use. Manchevski needed to travel under an assumed name, to keep the press from discovering who was returning to the festival for one of the main awards. Manchevski picked the name Vasco Gonzalga. Two days later, a driver waited for him at the Venice airport with a sign that reads: “Vasco Gonzalga”.

23 At the official festival dinner after the closing ceremony, Manchevski was awarded the final, tenth Venice award, Kodak's award for best first film, which came with 10,000 meters of film stock for the director. Gillo Pontecorvo presented it with the words, “Basta, signor Manchevski.” (Kodak never delivered the 10,000 meters of film.)

24 Roger Ebert included it in his book *Reel Views: The Ultimate Guide to the Best 1,000 Modern Movies on DVD and Video* and the Swiss film center Filmpodium put it on its list of 500 breakthrough films in history.



*Before the Rain* also became a global phenomenon – it is film of the year in Argentina and Turkey, wins a total of 30 international awards from Brazil to Russia, including David di Donatello. In the United States, it wins the Independent Spirit Award and gets an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign-Language Film, when the Greek objection to the use of the name Macedonia causes a scandal.<sup>25 26</sup>

This film from “a country that does not exist” and which almost didn’t happen, played at more than 100 festivals, was distributed commercially in close to 50 countries, was included in numerous film encyclopedias, and became the subject of numerous essays. It was taught at hundreds of universities and in the Italian high schools, was the subject of a multi-disciplinary academic conference in Florence and was eventually released by the Criterion Collection alongside Bergman, Godard, Rossellini, Ozu, Wilder, Cocteau, Truffaut, Fassbinder, Lean.<sup>27</sup> The former Macedonian president, Kiro Gligorov would say years later: “*Before the Rain* is the most beautiful thing that happened to Macedonia.”<sup>28</sup> Most notably, years after seeing *Before the Rain* viewers still talk about the emotional experience.

The film turned Manchevski into a celebrity. He traveled from Brazil to Japan,<sup>29</sup> from Stockholm to Sarajevo,<sup>30</sup> where he screened the film while the city was still under siege.<sup>31</sup> In 1995, the Cineteca di Bologna organized a retrospective of his work<sup>32</sup> (and another one in 2011). He gave hundreds of interviews, took meetings with studio heads, powerful producers and movie stars,<sup>33</sup> lectured at Ivy League schools, was stalked by paparazzi, attended receptions by the presidents of Italy and Macedonia, and Madonna’s and Mick Jagger’s birthday parties.

Manchevski was offered scores of projects – a Hitchcock remake (Warner Brothers’ *Dial M for Murder*<sup>34</sup> with Nicole Kidman<sup>35</sup>), Hollywood blockbusters with Brad Pitt (*The Devil’s Own* for Columbia Pictures) and Jean-Claude Van Damme, films based on best-selling books (Patricia Cornwell’s *From Potters’s Field* for Universal Pictures), scripts by Krzysztof Kieslowski, a project about a Sarajevo zookeeper, Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*<sup>36</sup> and dozens of others.

**Between 1995 and 1998, Manchevski started to develop several projects. He hoped to cast Sean Penn and Morgan Freeman in *Three Kings*, but abandoned it after disagreeing with the studio over where to shoot it – he preferred Morocco, as it resembles Iraq and Kuwait, where the action takes**

25 Manchevski refused to attend the ceremony since the Academy had unexpectedly changed the way it was addressing his home country to the (for most Macedonians offensive) “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.” A compromise was finally reached two hours before the start.

26 The Greek Embassy lodged a similar objection in Venice. Later that year, *Before the Rain* was invited then and then disinvented to the Thessaloniki Film Festival. When it eventually screened in Greece, it received glowing reviews.

27 A wine in Italy and two restaurants have been named after the film. A special award in the 1998 Venice Film Festival program CinemAvvenire was named after the central line in the film, “Il cerchio non e’ rotondo – Cinema per la pace” (“The circle is not round – Cinema for peace”). Graffiti with lines from the film still pop up on walls in Macedonia and students demonstrating against the government in 2015 carried placards with a favorite line from the film, “Shoot, cousin, shoot!”

28 When Gligorov learned of the 1994 Venice invitation, he requested a screening. The filmmakers obliged. After the film ended, the 77-year-old president stood up and started to applaud in the empty 600-seat movie theater. After a few moments, the two translators and the bodyguards joined.

29 In Tokyo he was photographed holding Kurosawa’s 1951 Golden Lion.

30 The UN transported him from the coastal town of Split to Sarajevo. Once a four-hour trip, now took 14 hours in an armored military vehicle. Even though the guns were silent at the time, the visit to the besieged and war-ravaged city was a sobering experience. The film screened to a packed house.

31 Manchevski eventually got Ingmar Bergman, Nagisa Oshima, Milos Forman and Martin Scorsese to help the new Sarajevo Film Festival by becoming its honorary directors.

32 Even though he’d directed only one feature-length film at the time.

33 Warren Beatty was his sponsor when Manchevski joined the Directors Guild of America.

34 Under the headline “Dial M for Milcho,” Daily Variety reported that Manchevski was working on the Hitchcock remake, but also that he was “being courted for *Dean* and *U.S. Marshals*.”

35 When the producer Arnold Kopelson wanted to rush the film into production, Manchevski resisted as he felt the script needed more work and found seven weeks insufficient to rewrite and prep a big studio film. Kopelson was concerned that Kidman would become unavailable for a very long time once she started Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut* and pressured Manchevski, who then promptly walked away. Kidman did indeed spend the following year and a half working on Kubrick’s film.

36 Sydney Pollack called, trying to convince Manchevski to take on the project.



With Chamo

# Hollywoodland

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## Fine Young Cannibals

A studio exerts its pound of flesh by bouncing an award-winning director from the set of *'Ravenous'*

**E**VERYONE LOVES THE story of the pitiful—if prickly—director who battles heads with a over-zealous studio as he struggles to realize a vision. But not all of these tales turn out like *Titanic*. Case in point: Milcho Manchevski.

In February, Manchevski, whose 1994 *Before the Rain* garnered festival awards

and an Oscar nomination, was in Prague, starting principal photography on *Ravenous*. His first film since *Rain* had all the makings of a sure project, starring two of today's hottest actors: The Fall Movie's Robert Carlyle and L.A. Confidential's Gene Hackman. Two weeks later, Fox 2000 had Laura Ziskin was on a plane to film him.

The project had gotten rolling in the fall of 1996 when an unknown writer named Ted Griffin sold Fox his first screenplay, *Ravenous*—a shiver-inducing tale of flesh and fear. Set at the end of the Mexican-American War, the story revolves around a hapless group of soldiers, stranded in a snowbound fort in the Sierras, who get sucked into the cannibalistic world of a psychotic (Carlyle). Griffin's concept landed onto the studio's hot-desk again type, and Fox bit. Two days later, the studio bought Griffin's second script: *Fast Last First* (see page 32).

While Griffin's star was ascending, Manchevski's would-be Hollywood career was going amiss. "There are reports of Hollywood bleeding that I know," Manchevski had said after *Rain*.

"But I don't know if Hollywood will like me." In the months that followed, he'd be slated to write and/or direct six films for six studios and would complete none of them. For various reasons, Manchevski had walked away from *The Perfect Murder* (Warner Bros.), *The Devil's Own* (Columbia), and *Are You Still There* (Fox). From Hollywood, he'd been production began.

"After *Before the Rain*, I was offered a lot in Hollywood," he says from his home in Macedonia. "I read more than 300 scripts, but very few promised to deliver on both creative and commercial. I want to make films that I will be

**Black & Meat** Carlyle (top) stars in the cannibalism thriller from which Fox 2000 head Ziskin (center) gave Manchevski (bottom) the ax.



proud to view fifteen years afterward."

But Manchevski had a reputation for being difficult and demanding luxuries inconsistent with either his clout or a given film's budget. He had originally envisioned *Alas Smithers* as a "guerrilla production." At the time, the film's producer, Ben Myron, said, "We disagreed over the meaning of 'guerrilla production.' Milcho's definition was a casting director's flying with six first-class tickets. This is not our definition."

Cur to September 1997, Ziskin signed Manchevski to direct *Ravenous*, despite knowing his reputation. "I made a mistake," she says now. "I should have listened." Manchevski and Ziskin struggled to find common ground with their visions, Ziskin says, but they appeared to be in agreement by the time production began. Even so, there were hints that this would not be a smooth ride. "Milcho seemed more interested in creating dramas than in directing them," a source familiar with the production says. "He threatened to quit a hun-

ded times, and everyone begged that he be fired a hundred times, and the only thing that's unfortunate is that it took so long."

"Whether deliberately or not, we were not on the same page about the movie," Ziskin says. "If a director does something better than what he said he was going to do, I'm the first one to say okay. That was not the case." Manchevski wouldn't comment directly on his firing, saying, "I thought I knew how the system operates."

The sacking solved one problem but created another. Fox needed to find a new director quickly. Initial reports had *Home Alone 3* director Raja Gosnell flying to Prague. Within a week, however, Fox had signed Antonio Bird, the idiosyncratic director of *Mad Love* and the controversial *Priest*. Gosnell raised eyebrows for artistic reasons. Bird for commercial ones. And it's been said that Carlyle's hand may have been in the final choice, because he and Bird had worked together three times before, including on *Priest*. "Carlyle just made

Fox a hundred-something million dollars in *The Fall Movie*," says a source. "Do they really want to shove him into a movie he doesn't want to do anymore?"

Ziskin insists the move was her own. "Certainly, the fact that he'd worked with her had an influence," she says. "But I made the decision. She's an unusual choice, but it's a very unusual movie." Although Ziskin didn't say what was wrong with Manchevski's footage, her opinion about whether she wanted Bird to reboot his work was definite: "I certainly hope so."

For his part, Manchevski says he has no regrets about the films he's backed out of and is not concerned about how this firing will affect his would-be Hollywood career. "I must the whole experience as [a] university," he says. "I just need a little time off to really think about [it]." Reminded of his 1994 prediction that Hollywood might not like him, Manchevski laughs. "Well," he says, "now you have the answer."

SEAN M. SMITH



## Caffeinated Clint : Milcho fights back!

You'll recall about a week ago I wrote an article titled "Creative Differences" exploring the various reasons and consequent repercussions of filmmaker/studio disparagement's.

In addition to tackling the much-discussed exit of Sam Raimi from the "Spider-Man" series, I spoke of some lesser-known on-film brawls like, the incident between then-Fox2000 prez Laura Ziskin and "Ravenous" director Milcho Manchevski, which resulted in the allegedly "difficult" filmmaker getting the boot from said film.

One thing I couldn't help but notice, when searching the web for further information on the case, was that everyone but Manchevski had spoken out on the situation; we'd never heard his side of the story. Some might say that's simply choosing a no-comment approach in the hope that everyone soon forgets about his wrongdoings on the film, but others might be of the assumption that the all-powerful studio has bullied him into keeping quiet fearing the truth might get out.

Lo-and-behold guess who I heard from earlier this week? One Milcho Manchevski!

After a decade of keeping dead quiet about what sounds like an inequitable discharge, the Macedonian-born filmmaker is now ready to open up about the prickly experience of working with Fox2000 on "Ravenous" and hopes he'll be judged more fairly than he was by the entertainment rags, who were quick to label him "the bad guy" when news got out that he'd split from the production in 1999.

Rather than ease into the conversation, and keep it fairly ambassadorial, Manchevski gets right to the point:

"Ziskin wanted to micromanage the project and to direct vicariously. She was vetting the smallest non-speaking bit of cast, rejected Tom Waits - who had agreed to act in the film, rejected a brilliant composer (Zbigniew Preisner who scored Kieslowski's films) and insisted on turning this intelligent, dark, quirky script into a scream knock-off."

(Star Robert Carlyle would back up those claims, stating in an interview that "[his] vision of the whole thing was an awful lot darker than they had bargained for; that's basically what was going on there. He's seen very very dark. In simple terms, Manchevski was looking at Deliverance, and Fox were looking at *Scream*.")

For those who never caught it, "Ravenous" was a dark comedy, originally intended to be a horror flick, about a group of military misfits in Sierra Nevada following the Mexican-American War in 1847. A madman turns up at their outpost and it isn't long before the troops learn he's a cannibal.

Manchevski had recently directed "Before the Rain", a drama about ill-fated love affairs, that'd won the Golden Lion for Best Film at the Venice Film Festival when he was hired to direct "Ravenous".

Manchevski says when it became he didn't want

to direct a popcorn film, but something a little more meaningful, he was let go (just two weeks into production).

"I refused to be told how to direct by a suit - and I told her that she didn't have the creative credentials to tell me what to do, so she brought instead the director of Home Alone 3 to replace me! When the crew and cast rebelled, the studio brought in their lawyers and yet a third director (Antonia Bird). The director of photography and the editor walked, but the actors had to complete the film."

Manchevski suggests I get in touch with the film's star Guy Pearce, who he said will gladly back up his claims. But no need, Pearce has said plenty of times that it was Hollywood who ruined that experience for him and the consequential film.

"That whole experience was a nightmare, an absolute nightmare for about four and a half months," Pearce said. "We did two weeks of filming and then the studio came over and said, 'The director's not doing what we want him to be doing,' and we actors said, 'Well, he's doing exactly what we thought he'd be doing...' the studio wanted to make Brain 3, a good teenage horror movie that would sell for billions of dollars. There was a clash of idea."

Manchevski says he was shocked to read, shortly after the "Ravenous" experience, that he'd been let go from the film because he was far too demanding, hard on his cast, and couldn't get along with the studio.

"I come from a school that believes that creative authorship cannot be bought with money. The studio planted articles (most notably in premiere) full of lies - for example, I spent weeks rehearsing and hanging out with the actors and crew, which is the opposite of saying that I only allowed them to talk to me during certain hours; I had no car while on location, so the story about expensive cars is a fabrication.

"I was offered a lot before *Ravenous* - dozens and dozens, read hundreds of scripts. I started working on "Three Kings" but we disagreed over locations, *A Perfect Murder*, *The Devil's Own*, *The Quiet American*.... but I didn't like the lack of creative freedom, and was more interested in making dust, a film I did with another Aussie, a brilliant actor, David Wenham."

Manchevski doesn't sound like he's in hurry to return to Hollywood - and not just because he'd find it hard to get a job.

"*Ravenous* did damage as far as getting another studio film off the ground, but in a way it was a mute point, as I decided that Hollywood has nothing to offer except money - no creative results, no creative process, no honest people nor friendships..."

Though based in New York, Manchevski has been working in Europe ever since.

And "Ravenous"? The film went on to gross \$2,062,405 domestically, far less than its reported \$12 million budget.

Guess nobody came out a winner.



place, but Warner Brothers changed the original location to Australia. He also briefly worked on the bio-pic *Dean*, written by Israel Horovitz and produced by Marvin Worth<sup>37</sup> with Leonardo DiCaprio as James Dean; and Joe Eszterhas's *An Alan Smithee Film: Burn Hollywood, Burn*. In addition to developing *From Potter's Field* for Universal Pictures, he also rewrote the script. In Europe he was offered and started developing the *Heaven and Hell* portions of the trilogy written by Krzysztof Kieslowski and Krzysztof Piesiewicz.<sup>38</sup>

However, during this time Manchevski's real focus was on *Dust*, a complex script which continued his exploration of the non-linear narrative. The story – which switches, sometimes smoothly, sometimes jarringly, between New York City today, the American Wild West, Paris at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Ottoman Empire in its final years – is first told at gunpoint by a 90-plus-year-old woman to a robber who breaks into her apartment. The storyteller and the story spanning one century and two continents eventually merge in an intricate emotional and narrative puzzle.

Manchevski himself wrote the script after being approached by Robert Redford, who offered to produce his next film. Even though Mike Medavoy's<sup>39</sup> Phoenix Pictures and Michael Kuhn's Polygram were vying for the project, it was eventually set up with Redford's South Fork, and Miramax as financier and distributor. Manchevski insisted on a final cut.<sup>40</sup>

Harvey Weinstein, the head of the independent giant Miramax, greenlit the project as soon as the script was delivered two months ahead of schedule, but ended up reneging on the budget as specified in the contract.<sup>41</sup> Manchevski then refused to



37 Responsible for *Lenny*, *The Rose* and *Malcolm X*.

38 Kieslowski and his writing partner Piesiewicz wrote the treatments and some of the script material in the months before the Polish director died in 1996.

39 Medavoy was responsible for the United Artists' golden era in the 70s, when films like *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Rocky* and *Annie Hall* were produced at UA.

40 Since his agent at ICM shied away from negotiating the final cut with the powerful head of Miramax, Harvey Weinstein, Manchevski did it himself, telling Weinstein that it was an absolute deal-breaker. Weinstein eventually consented, adding: "Just don't tell anyone."

41 In a detail highly unusual for a screenwriter's contract, Miramax agreed to a specific budget figure for the film before the script was even written.







work with Weinstein, since he viewed the breach of the contract as inherently a breach of trust. He tried to take the project back, but it was not until Redford intervened that Weinstein would release it.

Manchevski, initially aided by Redford's partner Michael Nozik, and then on his own spent the following five years (1995-2000) trying to get *Dust* financed. Including the writing and the actual making of the film, it took almost seven years to make *Dust*, at a time when Manchevski was being offered a number of other projects instead.

Nozik approached the Hollywood studios, but they were reluctant to take on a relatively expensive and unusual film without a star attached. Manchevski saw Tommy Lee Jones as the gunslinger from Oklahoma, Luke, and they hit it off. In 1995, Richard Gere contacts Manchevski, expressing interest in working with him. Manchevski's agency ICM and Nozik take him up on it and try packaging the film with Gere attached. However, while Gere was rehearsing the part of Luke with Manchevski, his agent refused to negotiate a contract. Gere soon filled his summer with other work, but maintained that he will return to *Dust* in the winter. Since it was impossible to shoot exteriors in Turkey in the winter,<sup>42</sup> Manchevski rewrote the screenplay, setting it in Mexico instead. He did extensive research and substituted an uprising in an Ottoman province with the Mexican Revolution. "I make films about people, not about places; people are the same everywhere in the world," he has often said. The Hollywood studios declined to make the film with Gere, but the world sales company Moonstone Entertainment did strike a preliminary deal. Still, as Gere and now his agent were telling Manchevski that Gere was on board, his lawyer was unreachable for the production lawyer to make a deal – despite the fact that both lawyers worked at the same firm. Nine months into the game, Gere changed his mind back and forth once again, and eventually walked away<sup>43</sup>.

Disappointed by the inability to get *Dust* off the ground, Manchevski considered one of the several studio offers: *Ravenous*, a strange cannibal-vampire-themed Western set in the snow-covered Sierra Nevada Mountains, inspired by the Donner party events of 1847.<sup>44</sup> Manchevski liked the dark humor and social commentary undertones and in 1998 he accepted the Fox 2000 offer. He set up production at the Barandov studios in Prague and assembled a stellar cast: Guy Pierce, Robert Carlyle, Jeffrey Jones, Neil McDonough, Jeremy Davies, John Spencer, Stephen Spinella and David Arquette. Initially the writer Ted Griffin and the director recruited Tom Waits, but the head of Fox 2000, Laura Ziskin, nixed the idea and brought in Arquette instead.

This was just one of the many disagreements between studio and director.<sup>45</sup> Ziskin also nixed the composer Zbigniew Preisner and attempted to micro-managing every aspect of the production. The essence of the conflict boiled down to two issues: (1) the tone of the film (Ziskin was aiming for the teenage audience who went to see *Scream*, while Manchevski spoke of a dark and ambivalent film along the lines of *Rosemary's Baby*), and (2) the creative control of the film. Manchevski did not accept the fact that a financier would have the right to get heavily involved in the creative process<sup>46</sup> and famously told the studio head that she "do[es] not have the creative credentials to tell [him] what to do."<sup>47</sup>

42 Redford's South Fork was already scouting Eastern Turkey.

43 Gere visited Macedonia in 1999, where Manchevski took him to his favorite restaurant

44 Manchevski did extensive research on the period, on the Native American tribes, on cannibalism, on supernatural beliefs, etc. He used the under-utilized Fox research department – the only studio that still had such a department at the time – assembling more than 1,500 pages of research material, much to the excitement of the Fox research staff, and to the derision of the Fox head of production, who said: "Why bother? It's a film about people eating other people."

45 Months earlier, she had fired the director Carl Franklin from another Fox 2000 project over creative control.

46 Manchevski had a meeting with the head of distribution of Twentieth Century Fox who requested a different beginning and end, saying this would help the sales of the film. Ziskin promptly pressured the writer, Ted Griffin, and Manchevski to do a rewrite. During pre-production, in October 1997, Ziskin flew to London with a studio creative executive and Griffin, where they met Manchevski and the producer, David Heyman, who came from the set in Prague. There, Ziskin insisted on a much bigger re-write. Huddled in her hotel suite for 20 hours straight, they went through the script line by line and made numerous changes to her liking. Years earlier, Ziskin was one of the producers on *Pretty Woman*, which was initially a dark drama about prostitution in Los Angeles. Ziskin turned the script into a romantic comedy about a beautiful innocent prostitute and a charming rich businessman played by Richard Gere.

47 He had also said: "I come from a school that believes creative authorship cannot be bought with money."

Ziskin replaced Manchevski with Raja Gosnell, the editor of *Home Alone* and *Home Alone 2* and director of *Home Alone 3*. The crew and cast rebelled. The director of photography Peter Sova and the editor (Nic Gaster in his second outing with Manchevski) were allowed to leave, but the cast was threatened with lawsuits and this crushed the Prague revolt. They eventually completed the film under the directing guidance of Antonia Bird.

Manchevski flew directly from the set of *Ravenous* to Rome to meet Francesco Tagliabue, the producer who held the rights to Kieslowski's *Heaven* and *Hell* stories. As they started developing the projects and it became clear that Tagliabue was – in spite of claiming he was eager to go into production right away – not ready to proceed, Manchevski received an offer from Amedeo Pagani,<sup>48</sup> another Italian producer, this time about *Dust*.

Pagani introduced Ovidio Assonitis<sup>49</sup> as a financier. Pagani and Assonitis then brought in Paris-based Pandora Films as a sales company and counted on the substantial pledge by the Macedonian government, since the location had now shifted to Macedonia. They too insisted on securing a name cast and made offers to Uma Thurman and Ben Affleck, unauthorized by the director. Assonitis eventually skipped town, his hotel bills in Skopje and Ohrid unpaid. Tagliabue then entered the fray, shifting his attention from *Heaven* to *Dust*. He was looking for a French partner, and – in spite of the difficult experience on *Before the Rain* – Manchevski introduced him to Cedomir Kolar. The new producers assumed pre-production with the crew that had already been at work in the Macedonian mountains for weeks, but several weeks later Tagliabue canceled everything, via fax.<sup>50</sup> Kolar was unreachable.

It was eventually Domenico Procacci of Fandango in Rome and Chris Auty of the London-based Film Consortium who got *Dust* made. Auty's expertise was financing big European films;<sup>51</sup> Procacci<sup>52</sup> was one of the hottest young producers in Italy. They put it together as a British-Italian-German-Macedonian co-production, not dependent on stars – if one does not count the script and the director. *Dust* was finally ready to fly in 1999, when the Kosovo war began, just across the border from Macedonia. Some 300,000 hungry and terrified refugees poured in, adding 15% to the population of Macedonia, as bombers flew overhead and unloaded on neighboring Serbia.<sup>53</sup> No bond company was willing to insure a film shooting next door to a real war, and the filmmakers started scouting Morocco, Italy and Greece as replacements.

While in development limbo, as a creative outlet, Manchevski had been photographing every day for years. In 1999, as he was waiting for *Dust* to go into production, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Macedonia put on an exhibition of his work titled *Street*, accompanied by a book of his photographs. That same year, he was approached by a then 29-year-old junior minister in the Macedonian government, who he didn't know. The minister was planning a commercial campaign to stimulate the

48 Pagani is known for his collaboration with the Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai, the Greek Theo Angelopoulos, the German Wim Wenders and the Japanese Takeshi Kitano, among others.

49 Assonitis is infamous for his handling of a low-budget knock-off he produced, *Piranha Part Two: The Spawning* in 1981. When he decided to replace the young American director, instead of simply informing him that he has been fired, he presented the man with a fake call sheet. The following morning, while the director was waiting for the crew that would never turn up, Assonitis was already filming with them elsewhere in Rome. The director's name was James Cameron.

50 Tagliabue's company went bankrupt soon thereafter.

51 Auty spent a long time working in that capacity for Jeremy Thomas.

52 Procacci has since produced more than 100 films, including, *Gomorrah*, *Silk*, *The Last Kiss*, *We Have a Pope*, etc.

53 Some NATO bombs missed entire countries, landing instead in Bulgaria and Macedonia.







The Turkish ambassador to Macedonia visiting the set of *Dust*, 2000

public to buy Macedonian products<sup>54</sup> and he wanted Manchevski to direct the first commercial. His name was Nikola Gruevski, the future and longest-serving Prime Minister in Macedonian history. Manchevski was inspired by the charitable concept behind the campaign. The spot he would create centered on a wrinkled filigree artisan who makes a meticulously crafted butterfly brooch, then takes it over seven mountains to a merchant in Dubrovnik who is stunned by its beauty. On the choice of an old artisan as the hero, Manchevski has said: “I didn’t want to promote a killer on a horse waving a sword or a gun as a national hero; instead I thought that a hard-working man with a heart of gold should be a national hero.” The commercial was immensely popular and became a template and benchmark of sorts in Macedonia.

As the war over Kosovo drew to a close, the work on *Dust* continued. David Wenham, Joseph Fiennes, Adrian Lester, Rosemary Murphy,<sup>55</sup> Anne Brochet and Nikolina Kujaca were cast, and principal photography began in New York in **April 2000** with Barry Ackroyd as director of photography, David Munns as production designer, Nic Gaster as editor, Kiril Dzajkovski as composer<sup>56</sup> and a crew from more than a dozen countries. In June, the big production started filming<sup>57</sup> in Macedonia.<sup>58</sup> The art department built a stone church, a Wild West brothel and a sheepfold, before moving on to construction in the Cologne studios. The summer of 2000 was extremely hot, but the project managed to chug along.

*Dust* was an ambitious, textured and intricate film. The shifts in tone – from heartfelt to comical, from brutal to absurd make it a tough, but entertaining and fulfilling piece. It opened the Venice Film Festival in **2001** and was instantly and perhaps surprisingly attacked by the British critic Alexander Walker, who called it racist at the press conference, as he felt the film made the Ottoman soldiers look bad.<sup>59</sup> Manchevski refused to respond to Walker’s assertions, later saying that he did not want to dignify the fabrications with an answer, but the wire services and reporters repeated and amplified Walker’s claims of racism. Some reviews, notably in Germany and the UK, analyze the film in the context of an opinion piece Manchevski published the previous month in *Süddeutsche zeitung* and *The Guardian*,<sup>60</sup> in which he called for an end to the 2001 violent conflict in Macedonia between the Albanian guerrillas and the government, calling it a war for real estate and political gain rather than for human rights, while putting some blame on NATO whose local allies were the backbone of the insurgency, and insisting on the applicability of a Western-style rule of law. These Venice reviewers saw in *Dust* metaphors for Manchevski’s purported take on the current conflict in Macedonia (March-August 2001) and anti-Islamic sentiment.<sup>61</sup>

54 Modeled on earlier examples in several European countries.

55 At an earlier point, Manchevski approached the legendary New York actor and acting teacher William Hickey (known for his role in *Prizzi’s Honor*), and asked him to play Angela. Hickey accepted wholeheartedly, but died before the financing came together.

56 Dzajkovski was the creative force behind the 80s band *Bastion*!.

57 On the first day of principal photography in the Macedonian town of Stip, the production changed so much foreign currency for their petty cash needs that by 10a.m. all foreign currency exchange offices in town ran out of local currency and closed for the day.

58 Meanwhile, after the 1998 elections, the government in Macedonia changed, and the contribution to the film shrunk by four-fifths. The filmmakers had no choice but to accept the lowered amount. *Dust* and *Before the Rain* are among the cheapest Macedonian films ever in terms of Macedonian contribution.

59 The Turkish ambassador to Macedonia visited the set of *Dust* in the summer 2000 to communicate his concern with the portrayal of Turkey in a film that had not been made yet, citing the problems his country had had with *Midnight Express* years earlier. He also complained to the Macedonian government about *Dust* while the film was in pre-production. It took more than a decade for *Dust* to be shown in Turkey, at the Izmir International Film Festival in 2012.

60 Both newspapers changed the title of the piece, shifting the tone of the article to NATO-blaming. The article was picked up by *De Standaard* in Belgium and *Pravda* in Russia.

61 A German reviewer called the film “(Neo-)fascist”.



Even if one disregards the fact that the reviewers misread the original article (which is *opposed* to ethnic discord), and if Manchevski's life-long anti-discrimination work and statements and his insistence on separation of his art and politics are ignored, it would be hard to see how a film seven years in the making could comment on the specifics of current political events. Never mind the general message of the film itself, which is essentially humanist.

While some of the reviewers have since revised their initial criticism, but the damage had been done. After the Venice scandal, *Dust* never got the distribution the filmmakers were hoping for. The distributors cancelled or changed their plans. It did play in a couple of dozen countries,<sup>62</sup> but the reception was unenthusiastic, except in Macedonia, where it is considered a classic. When the film opened in Europe, the US and Japan, the reviews became more kind as the reviewers shifted their focus to the film itself, rather than politics real and perceived. Some in fact were very good: "Milcho Manchevski's stylized western, *Dust*, is a potent, assured and ambitious piece of filmmaking. Mr. Manchevski suavely shuffles his various narratives, sometimes smoothly presenting the juxtaposed tales and on other occasions cutting violently from one story to another." ... "High-end surreal western" ... "Part tragedy, part farce, quirky melodrama and buddy flick; *Dust* is a very strange film. [...] It does make sense, but you have to be wide awake to catch it." ... "This extraordinary TransContinental, TransCentennial epic plays like a cross between a savage Leone Spaghetti Western and an arthouse experiment in temporal narrative structure. [...] The clever ending keeps you guessing right up to the last moment. By juggling past and present in what might be described as a cubist mosaic editing style, the whole grapples at some length with the meaning or futility of human existence begging questions long after viewing. Director Milcho Manchevski is a real original and *Dust* (a Feta Western?) unlike any other film you'll see this year."

Just like *Before the Rain*, *Dust* was the subject of a two-day academic conference (in Leipzig) where a number of scholarly papers analyzed the film from different perspectives. Scores of essays over the following years examined the film's "cubist narrative" and other aspects. Fifteen years after the film was released, online discussions point to a small, but appreciative audience.

Just like *Before the Rain*, *Dust* is the subject of a two-day academic conference (in Leipzig) where a number of scholarly papers analyze the film from different perspectives. Scores of essays over the following years examine the film's "cubist narrative" and other merits. Fifteen years after the film was released, online discussions point to a small, but appreciative audience.

In 2002, Manchevski was invited by the producer Bob Colesberry to direct the *Game Day* episode of the HBO series *The Wire*, written by David Simon. The quick and efficient shoot took place on location in Baltimore; the series eventually received two Emmy nominations and became a television classic.

The same year, Manchevski was invited to teach at the New York University's Graduate Film Program.<sup>63</sup> What at first was meant to be a brief visit at the Tisch School of the Arts grew into a seven-year

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62 In addition to the co-producing countries (the UK, Italy, Germany, Macedonia), the film was presold to most of Latin America, Spain, Poland, and Japan before it premiered. The global success of *Before the Rain* made it easier to sell Manchevski's second film. But after the Venice 2001 scandal it was difficult to sell the film. Deals were canceled or altered; in the UK the number of screens was cut down to only three in London. In Poland, *Dust* opened six years later, in 2007. The sales team did not capitalize on the controversy.

63 NYU boasts one of the most prestigious film alumni lineups: Martin Scorsese, Oliver Stone, Joel Coen, Spike Lee, Ang Lee, Chris Columbus, Marc Forster, Jim Jarmusch, etc.









engagement, with Manchevski heading NYU's directing program.<sup>64</sup> In 2013, the US Department of State organized a project for Manchevski at VGIK, the Russian state film university. He instructed and directed 60 VGIK students in an extended hands-on educational project; after the project, VGIK bestowed an honorary doctorate on Manchevski. He has also taught, lectured and held workshops at the London Film School, **Cambridge University, University of Chicago, Yale, Hanoi Cinematheque, Cineteca di Bologna**, Binger Film Lab (Amsterdam), **Temple University** (Philadelphia), **Tisch Singapore, Columbia University**, his **alma mater Southern Illinois University**, the state film school in Sofia, Elon University, Marubi Film Academy in Tirana (Albania), **Oxford Brookes**, the German state film school Film University Babelsberg Konrad Wolf, University of Tsukuba (Japan), FDU (Belgrade), University of Oklahoma, Bielefeld University (Germany), University of Texas at Austin, Multimedia Museum in Moscow, Pratt Institute, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil), Brown University, several festivals (Venice, Goa, Trieste, Aruba, Manaki Brothers, Madrid Experimental, SEEfest in Vienna...) among others. He was also invited to lecture in Macedonia – not however by the film school, but by the English department.

He published several short stories in *New American Writing* and other periodicals. His 1985 tri-lingual post-conceptualist piece *The Ghost of My Mother* was published as a book. He wrote introductions to two historical books,<sup>65</sup> translated Annie Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain*,<sup>66</sup> designed album covers, toured with his photo exhibition *Street*<sup>67</sup> and researched and put out a CD-ROM with a collection of 2,285 New York Times articles on Macedonia, published 1851-1922. He was never part of the film world – always more of a curious observer – but after *Dust* he withdrew even further from the business and from the festival circuit. He stopped reading the trades and turned down all festival and opening invitations.

In 2004 the Minister of Culture of Macedonia, Blagoja Stefanovski<sup>68</sup> approached him with an offer: for the first time, the Macedonian Ministry of Culture would be the leading producer on a Manchevski film.<sup>69</sup> The new project, titled *Bones*, and, eventually renamed *Shadows* went into production in the summer of 2006.

*Shadows*, an old-fashioned ghost story about debt, responsibility and redemption was described by Manchevski as a work "about death and sex and a few things in between." It trades in discomfort and atmosphere rather than shock and gore; corruption (literal and moral) is central to the story.

<sup>64</sup> Perhaps remembering the invaluable boost he received from Blumenberg and Zanussi as a youth, and more importantly from Simon Perry in 1993/94, Manchevski has an open-door policy for young filmmakers, who can observe his work on the set for as long as they wish. He has also given first jobs to dozens of filmmakers, including the three premiere film producers in Macedonia, and hired newcomers as storyboard artists, casting directors and composers. He managed to bring five young Macedonian filmmakers to work and learn on the set of a Hollywood movie (*Ravenous*).

<sup>65</sup> Covering the period he researched for *Dust*.

<sup>66</sup> He also gave a copy to Gus Van Sant when it was first published, urging him to direct it.

<sup>67</sup> It was shown in close to a dozen countries.

<sup>68</sup> The seventh Macedonian minister of culture Manchevski was dealing with in ten years.

<sup>69</sup> In addition to the 7% contributed to *Before the Rain*, Macedonia participated in *Dust* with less than 5%. The participation in *Shadows* was closer to 50%.



For the first time a Macedonian production company was the main producer, but the project was plagued by poor pre-production and a difficult production process. The original producer<sup>70</sup> quit when he couldn't raise any international funds to match the substantial pledge by the Ministry. Manchevski undertook some of the fund-raising tasks. Amedeo Pagani returned to Macedonia as part of the Macedonian-Italian-German-Spanish-Bulgarian co-production, supported by Eurimages. This was the first film production for the new producer Ivo Antov, yet he hired his younger brother Ognen as line producer. In spite of the substantial budget and Pagani's and Manchevski's international connections, the Antovs had a hard time assembling an experienced crew and producing a proper cash flow and production schedule<sup>71</sup>.

The start of principal photography was postponed twice, yet it still started without a First Assistant Director<sup>72</sup> and a proper line producer – despite the crew swelling to over 200<sup>73</sup>. The ambitious project called for construction of nearly two dozen big and small sets in an abandoned factory. The drama student Borce Nacev and the harpist Vesna Stanojevska were cast in the lead parts after seven call-backs. Fabio Cianchetti was the D.P. and David Munns returned as production designer<sup>74</sup>. More than 50 reporters, Minister Stefanovski and the Mayor of Skopje visited the set on the first day; the Italian Ambassador and the Prime Minister-Elect Nikola Gruevski with several incoming ministers visited some time later.

The editing started in New York in **September of 2006**, but by **mid-March 2007** it stopped. The funds stopped coming and the post-production company seized the project. It took almost eight anguished weeks for the editing to resume.

*Shadows* eventually premiered in the Special Presentations section of the Toronto Film Festival in **September 2007**, then played at a number of other festivals, winning three awards. Bavaria International sold the film to more than 30 countries on four continents. *Shadows* broke all domestic box-office records in Macedonia with a higher audience than all other films distributed in Macedonia the previous year – including Hollywood blockbusters – combined. The film was considered the cultural event of the year in Macedonia. One reviewer summed up the reaction by noting that with *Shadows*, Manchevski had finally returned home.

The international reviews were also good: "Call it a 'ghost story', but know that it feels more like Bergman or Polanski, or even Shakespeare – Macbeth and Hamlet come to mind. [...] To live through these moments in this setting allows for an uncanny intimacy – a face-off with personal fear that leads, strangely enough, to a celebration of life." ... "*Shadows*' style runs between hypnotic and frantic, which will surely set hearts racing. The film is unique in its ability to have a hand in multiple genres, horror, psychological thriller, and also somehow, a love story, too. It is refreshing to see an uncensored, stripped-bare European film that embraces its lying, cheating antihero with such brutal clarity that most American films wouldn't dare." ... "A visual tale of dramatic substance, with historical

70 Robert Jazadziski had climbed the ranks from location scout. *Shadows* was going to be his first film as producer.

71 They also handed control of the negative of the completed film to a minority partner, accepted an in-kind contribution from the Bulgarian partner that was much smaller than the cash pledge by the Bulgarian government and paid the composer Zbigniew Preisner a substantial amount before the filming had even begun. As – after the two postponements and the shutdown of the editing suite – the production was late to send a rough cut to Preisner, he walked away without writing a single note, keeping the advance.

72 Akin to writing a book without a hard drive.

73 Jazadziski, who made a comeback as line producer, responded to the international co-producers' requests to reduce the crew by shrinking it by a single person. Tom Woodrow, who succeeded him, didn't realize he'd gone over budget until the last day of production and was surprised to find out that the production-related overages kept ballooning after the shoot had wrapped.

74 Munns serves as production designer on all Manchevski projects since *Before the Rain*.







depth and contemporary thrust, adroitly told with innovation and élan.” ... “An unusually smart entry in the supernatural cinema genre, Macedonia’s Oscar submission.” ... “Evocatively works its theme of forces beyond the pale, with reflections and shadows taking a primary role in the narrative, along with an erotic subcurrent.” ... “Manchevski is building a body of work that will shine in retrospective programs.”

Still, the German producer, Blue Eyes Fiction submitted an altered version of *Shadows* to the broadcaster Bayerischer Rundfunk. Manchevski’s lawyer promptly responded to the clandestine attempt to intrude on his work<sup>75</sup>, and the unauthorized version was shelved<sup>76</sup>.

The years following *Shadows* were Manchevski’s most productive period: he created an inventive series of commercials, *Macedonia Timeless* (2008-2010), the film *Mothers* (2010), the short film *Thursday* (2013), the *Five Drops of Dream* (2010) exhibition and book of photographic pentptychs and two small books on the theory of art and film, *Truth and Fiction: Notes on (Exceptional) Faith in Art* (2012)<sup>77</sup> and *Why I Like Writing and Hate Directing: Confessions of a Recovering Writer-Director* (2015),<sup>78</sup> as well as the paper *Art, Violence + Society: A Few Notes* (2007).<sup>79</sup>

In 2008, he made his second commercial for the Macedonian government, this one advertising it as a tourist destination. “Macedonia does not heave beautiful beaches or great cities. However, it does have rich and unique historical past. It is at a crossroad, a place where numerous civilizations left their trace – people in Neolithic times, ancient Macedonians, Romans, Eastern Orthodoxy, Ottoman Islam.... Yet, it is a modern state which welcomes the visitor with a warm smile,” Manchevski would say. The crew used real archaeological artifacts and shot on locations for a week. Peter Mostert edited it in New York. A variety of techniques were employed, resulting in a striking, syncopated 60-second film. Some shots are only a couple of frames long; a shot of film lights and filters on the set that lasts only one sixth of a second is included, along with gorgeous shots of the Macedonian countryside at sunset and aerial landscape shots. This juxtaposition of contrasting images and concepts is reinforced by jagged music based on a traditional folk song.<sup>80</sup> Manchevski had complete creative control and used it to create a unique piece of filmmaking, talking about ancient and not-so-ancient civilizations in an utterly modern manner. The spot won four international awards and was highly regarded. In addition to the viewings on CNN,<sup>81</sup> half a million viewers saw the ad on the website alone during the first week.<sup>82</sup> It was also caught in a political crossfire, both in Macedonia<sup>83</sup> and internationally.<sup>84</sup>

75 Some 20 minutes of the film had been eliminated by the German producers Corinna Mehner and Nermin Gladers in breach of the explicit final cut clauses in Manchevski’s contract. Manchevski learned of the attempt to violate his rights from a German voice-over artist.

76 Bayerischer Rundfunk aired the film in its original shape several times, but under the working title *Bones*.

77 Presented initially in a different form at a conference at the Pontifical Lateran University in the Vatican.

78 Presented initially in a different form as a keynote speech at the 2014 Screenwriting Research Network conference at HFF Babelsberg.

79 In the periodical *Interpretations*, published by the Macedonian Academy of Arts and Sciences.

80 As is the case with all Manchevski’s work since *Before the Rain*.

81 BBC, TF1, Fox, and the main broadcasters of Germany, Russia, China, Spain, etc. were added later.

82 In spite of the existence of the Ministry for Information Technologies, Manchevski and a friend created the *Macedonia Timeless* website as a homemade project. This was the first time various sites and information sources were translated into English and pooled together for a potential foreign (or domestic) traveler to Macedonia. The government has since taken over the website and changed its concept and content.

83 An anonymous online campaign attacked the spot; the controversy was picked up by opposition media; the former Prime Minister from the main opposition party, Vlado Buchkovski, declared the spot a plagiarism on the parliament floor, then accused the government of waste and corruption in buying airtime on CNN. The philosopher and columnist Katerina Kolozova would comment: “The position of an independent intellectual or artist seems impossible here, because even if you don’t choose to belong to one or the other political camp, the public is going to place you somewhere.” Manchevski has said: “I work for this country and for the people in it, not for this or that party. It turns out that [in this country] you are not allowed to have an opinion if it’s not approved by a party or a gang.”

84 At the U.N.-sponsored talks, Greece accused Macedonia of appropriating its history, but the Macedonian ambassador produced a map of his country showing the excavation sites of all artifacts used in the commercial.







The subsequent commercials (*Temples*, *Archeology* and *Mountain Sports*) continued some of the formal experiments.

Manchevski's second photographic solo exhibition *Five Drops of Dream* is a show of photographic pentptychs, a further exploration of the boundaries between narrative and abstraction. In the introductory notes, Manchevski writes: "In the collection of compositions *Five Drops of Dream* I am interested in two things:

- 1) The explosion of the visual in the mundane moment; and
- 2) The wrestle and embrace of the narrative and the formal.

These photographs live only when they are together and when they form compositions [pentptychs]. Like notes in a song." He had spent ten years photographing and almost a year working out the pentptych arrangements. He combined complementing and contrasting photographs within a pentptych, focusing on the form and emotion, rather than on the narrative.

*Five Drops of Dream* was curated by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje and traveled to Novi Sad and Belgrade (Serbia), the National Gallery in Sofia (Bulgaria), the gallery of the Croatian Academy of Arts and Sciences, the GRID Photo Biennial in Amsterdam, Normandy and Solyanka State Gallery in Moscow. The Miyako Yoshinaga gallery in New York exhibits a tighter, more intimate edition of the show.

Further examining film structure and film form (as in *Before the Rain*) and exploring in more depth the delicate relationship between truth and fiction (as in *Dust*) in 2009 Manchevski set out to develop *Mothers*.

He created a filmic triptych again. This time the plot does not "neatly dovetail" – instead, the stories remain stoically separate. Two of them are dramatic – scripted, with actors – while the final, longest episode is a straight-forward documentary.<sup>85</sup> Even though all three segments are based on true stories, there are no plot connections. Manchevski notes that the style is Spartan and austere in terms of plotting. His most radical experiment on fact and fiction until today, the three parts are only connected by tone and theme.

The storyline of the film concerns (1) two nine-year-old girls who report a flasher to the police – even though they never saw him; (2) three filmmakers who meet the only residents of a deserted village – an elderly brother and sister who have not spoken to each other in 16 years; and (3) the case of small-town retired cleaning women who were found raped and strangled and the reporter who wrote about the murders, who is himself charged in the killings and eventually found dead in a bucket of water in his prison cell. More importantly, the film highlights the delicate

<sup>85</sup> Manchevski linked the use of documentary and fiction in the same piece to the way the visual arts have been using found objects; he points to Rauschenberg as an artist who uses found objects in the creation of beautiful art.

relationships of truth and fiction, of drama and documentary, becoming thus a meditation on the nature of truth. The film eschews neat narrative devices and pushes the viewer to confront their own definitions of filmic reality.

It is also Manchevski's first real – both filmic and anthropological – examination of contemporary Macedonia. Unsurprisingly, it led to blacklisting by the ruling party and brutal, personal attacks by the state-controlled media.

*Mothers* was a low-budget film, filmed almost clandestinely. A Macedonian-French-Bulgarian coproduction, it was produced by Christina Kallas, photographed by Vladimir Samoilovski, designed by David Munns, edited by Zaklina Stojcevska and scored by Igor Vasilev Novogradska. Shot entirely on location in Macedonia, it was made far from the *Dust* and *Shadows* media circus. The under-the-radar approach seemed to fit this quiet, but tough-as-nails, experimental film. Manchevski had unfettered access to judges, the police, state officials, police and court documents and video-recordings. The crew was streamlined and mobile, the management was young. The schedule was tight and precise, but the prepping and shooting are fluid and flexible. The film was unorthodox, but so as the way it is made. The usual order writing-filming-editing had been subverted for a looser and more organic style that combined firm planning with improvisation. The filmmakers filmed part of the documentary first; then Manchevski wrote the dramatic pieces and they shot the drama; then the editing started. While editing, the filmmakers shot more of the documentary and finally they completed the editing of both the documentary and the drama. In contrast to his previous three films, Manchevski has said, the process of making *Mothers* was harmonious and enjoyable for him.

*Mothers* had its world premiere in **September 2010** in the Special Presentation section of the Toronto Film Festival. Even though, as a rule, the Macedonian government always supports Macedonian films at international festivals (it is indeed a rare occurrence when a local film makes it to an A-list festival), this time the Macedonian Film Fund did not respond for three months. They responded only



once the festival was over, and then they rejected the request without explanation. This was the first time ever that a Macedonian film had been refused government support in a serious festival, and it was a harbinger of things to come for Manchevski. He was eventually blacklisted: his future projects were put on hold<sup>86</sup>, the state-controlled unions were instructed to boycott *Mothers*, TV stations refused to run ads for it, he was subjected to a smear campaign<sup>87</sup> in the local media and even to intimidation – this in spite (or possibly because) of the fact that he has been held in very high esteem by most Macedonians,<sup>88</sup> is one of the few Macedonians known abroad<sup>89</sup> and has been awarded a number of highest awards (October 11, Mother Teresa, Big Star, Ambassador of Culture and the highest honor – National Artist – of which there are only four in the country).<sup>90</sup>



A columnist wrote: “the man who was considered a national treasure until yesterday is now exposed to punches from both opposing political camps. They are both sadistically enjoying knocking down the icon in whose construction they themselves participated until recently.” Another noted: “*Mothers* is an artistic indictment against the Republic of Macedonia.” A TV show interviewed the director of the film fund and the topic was “Is Manchevski a Public Enemy?” Prime Minister Gruevski has stated that *Mothers* “does not represent Macedonia in a good light”.

The film, however, was the best-attended film of the year, and the guild selected it to represent Macedonia in the Oscar race.

In February 2011, *Mothers* screened in the Panorama section of the Berlinale. In an ostensible about-face, four years later an offer came from the highest levels of the Macedonian government for Manchevski to direct a big historical epic based on the lives of the Macedonian saints, Cyril and

Methoidus, the creators of the Cyrillic alphabet. Manchevski looked into the offer, but ultimately turned it down. As in Communist Yugoslavia in the 80s or during his Hollywood years in the 90s, Manchevski seemed to have determined that working without a complete creative control was not

86 The Macedonian government (five different administrations over 20 years) spent less on all four films directed by Manchevski – combined – than it spent on one 2014 Macedonian film, *To The Hilt*.

87 Pro-government columnists and TV personalities called him a traitor and verbally abused him with vulgarities and threats.

88 He is indeed one of the few *bona fide* celebrities in the country.

89 Manchevski has won more high international awards than the rest of the Macedonian arts community combined.

90 Even though Manchevski’s films were globally perceived as Macedonian, and were shot and mostly set in Macedonia, they were chiefly financed from foreign sources (the governments of Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Bulgaria, and Eurimages) on a ratio of almost 5:1.



for him. He has said as much in interviews: “I don’t see the purpose of making a film or a work of art if you are signing someone else’s ideas or working under a diktat. Some things are not for sale.”

In **2013**, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Venice Film Festival, Manchevski was invited by the festival to make a short film reflecting on the future of cinema – as one of the directors who have left their mark in the history of Venice, alongside Bernardo Bertolucci, Kim Ki-Duk, Abbas Kiarostami, Ormano Olmi, Todd Solondz, Atom Egoyan, Paul Schrader... All these little films would be assembled into one feature-length film to screen on opening night in the special program Venezia 70 – Future Reloaded.

Manchevski decided to explore the future-of-cinema proposition that people are getting sucked into their little screens, while ignoring the world around them. He underlined this dichotomy by using documentary footage.<sup>91</sup> *Thursday* continued his investigation of the relationship between fact and fiction which began with *Dust*, and grew more intense in *Mothers* and the short book *Truth and Fiction*.

It was a quick shoot on the streets of New York with a compact and mobile crew. Manchevski seemed to be defining a new phase in his work with films that do not employ many people or layers of artifact. True to the growing tendency in his aesthetic and philosophical interests, he deftly interwove real-life footage from the crowded streets of the Financial District and Mid-town Manhattan with found documentary footage of a horrific event in China and with performances by Laura Lassy, young Ewen Avery and bit players. *Thursday* does not raise the questions of mixing drama and documentary the way *Mothers* does, and in that sense *Thursday* is an old-fashioned piece of filmmaking. It is a visual (no dialogue) haiku of sorts, super-short, ultra-modern and old-fashioned at the same time.

The little film was produced by Aaron Levine, executive produced by Gery Herman, and photographed by Manchevski’s former student, Eun-Ah Lee. He worked again with the brilliant editor of *Macedonia Timeless*, Peter Mostert and the composer of *Mothers* and *Macedonia Timeless* Igor Vasilev Novogradskia.

After the Venice premiere, *Thursday* was invited to the German Short Film Program “Short Attack”, and toured some 15 cinemas nationwide in **November 2013**; it also won an award at the USA Festival in Texas in **2014**.

Meanwhile, in spite of being maligned by the Macedonian political nomenclature, *Mothers* went on to screen in numerous academic settings and at some 40 festivals, including Sao Paulo, Istanbul, Goa, Minsk, Syracuse, winning seven awards and garnering enthusiastic reviews:

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91 He has said: “This real footage of a gruesome accident in China, and – more importantly – the callousness of people brought human myopia and dichotomy into sharp focus. I laid another layer of contrast on top. On one hand we relate to something halfway around the globe, but do not notice things at our own feet.”

*"Manchevski's iconoclastic feature "Mothers" captures the heartbreaking state of contemporary Macedonia through the eyes of several mothers who are everything from dedicated, neglectful, loving and absent." ... "With this gradation Manchevski emphasizes that reality is more bizarre and crueller than any fiction. In addition to the very original directorial approach, the film is also dominated by a sharp critique of a system that supports police dysfunctionality and judicial inefficiency, leaving the citizens to live in insecurity and fear." ... "[A] devastatingly stark, yet ultimately compassionate portrait of mothers, violence and the state." ... "Mothers debunks the notion that documentaries can tell the truth." ... "Mothers offers a vision between truth and fiction." ... "Mothers is a film about moral courage." ... "Painfully beautiful." ... "A provocative and innovative film [...] An intensely engaging film, Mothers is not only a study on how reality is perceived and recorded, but also an examination of how women survive in a contemporary post-war culture." ... "Structurally unusual, almost experimental and a very exciting film. [...] A powerful punch in the stomach to the Macedonian society." ... "A really subtle exploration of truth and fiction in three deliberately diverse episodes, courageously pushing the boundaries between fiction and documentary in order to exert and negotiate a powerful feeling." ... "Original storytelling and courageous experimenting with the film language and genres. [...] Subtle and truthful storytelling." ... "While we watch, we start to doubt the documentary and trust more and more the artistic, the intuitive, the dramatic. The bonds between elements exist only in the mind of the spectator." ... "Such moments give Manchevski's film a special place in contemporary cinema" ... "Conceptually challenging and thoroughly satisfying." ... "Beautiful art about ugly reality." ... "[Mothers is an] operation completely extraneous to the conceptual and aesthetic codes of contemporary cinema. [...] Manchevski's epic humanism finally returns." ... "One of those authors who are not afraid to face the genres and to push the boundaries." ... "Macedonian director Milcho Manchevski continues down his distinctive artistic path." ... "His work stands out in the world cinema in its unique way of playing with space, time and emotions."*



