

GREAT EXPECTATIONS: WHEN A FILM IS NOT MACEDONIAN ENOUGH

Most of the films I made are considered Macedonian. I am not sure what that means.

Several years ago I was developing a film about a young Macedonian doctor who goes through a near-death experience. The distributor's blurb for the film went like this: "Lazar is young, good-looking, has a beautiful wife, lovely little boy, great house and a good job as a hospital physician. In fact, everyone calls him Lucky. Nothing's missing – except maybe Lucky himself." As is common with most European films, this was going to be a co-production. Most films made in Europe over the last 30 or 40 years are collaborations between two or more parties, where filmmakers and financiers from several countries join forces. This helps spread the risk, but more importantly, it also opens venues for creative collaboration across countries and cultures. People learn from each other and this mixing of genes often results in a better film.

Ultimately, five countries teamed up on the film about the young doctor: Macedonia, Italy, Germany, Bulgaria and Spain, and they all contributed to different aspects of the film: the cinematographer was Italian, the color grading German, the visual effects Bulgarian, etc. But, before we put it all together, while still developing the film, I spoke to a number of producers across Europe about partnering up. One of them was a producer in Austria who was eager to join the project. We spoke on the phone and then I sent her the screenplay.

We spoke again a few days later, and this time the Austrian producer sounded evasive. She liked the script, she said, but she had a problem with it. "The script is not Macedonian enough," she told me.

"Not Macedonian enough?", I asked. "What do you mean?" "Well... ", she responded, a bit confused or hesitant. "Just... not Macedonian enough," she repeated.

"Excuse me," I was curious, "When was the last time you were in Macedonia?" "I have never visited Macedonia," she responded. Then I asked the obvious, "How do you know when something is Macedonian enough then? Or too Macedonian? Or just the right amount of Macedonian?"

This kind of dialogue is something I learned to take like cold weather in the winter – I don't like it, but there is no way around it. (Unless you move to the tropics, but that's another story.)

Some viewers want to see Macedonia in my films, even when the story stretches across countries or continents. My experience has been that these viewers who want to see Macedonia in my films are disproportionately film professionals who are not directly involved in the hands-on process of filmmaking, but rather sit on film fund boards, festival committees or are film critics. In other words, they control the flow of funds to a film and of a film to the public. Indeed, I have heard more delicately phrased versions of the Austrian producer's sentiment from some great festival directors over the years.

Since this expectation on the part of the film fund officials/festival selectors/Western critics is not difficult to discern, many filmmakers from developing countries/South/underrepresented regions (or as a Macedonian film critic friend of mine calls ourselves, "the charming cannibals") prick up their ears and come back with films that are "more Macedonian". The career of many a filmmaker from the developing world has been built upon the filmmakers' eager fulfillment of the expectation contained in the blasé Western gaze.

I am sometimes asked in interviews about Macedonian cinema. This is along the lines of what I learned in film school – that Kurosawa represented Japanese cinema, Satyajit Ray Indian, Fellini and De Sica Italian, Truffaut and Godard French (even though Godard is Swiss), Chytilova and Menzl Czech, Makavejev Yugoslavian, Wajda Polish and on and on. I tell them I don't know enough about it, as I don't watch movies. Sometimes I get more ambitious and tell them that I don't believe in national cinemas – Iranian cinema, Taiwanese cinema, Danish cinema... Instead, I believe in good films and bad films by individual filmmakers. Sometimes I elaborate and say (in a hyperbole) that I am convinced Bergman could have made his films in Hong Kong or Kiarostami could have made his in Argentina – with some adjustments and variations. What makes their films great is not the geography.

The first film I made, *Before the Rain* did well internationally – it was distributed in many countries, won 30 awards, including Golden Lion in Venice and an Academy-Award nomination, it was film of the year in Argentina, Turkey and Italy, the New York Times included it in on its list of 1,000 Best Films Ever Made... It is being taught at hundreds of universities and even high schools in some countries, essays and books have been written about it. An interdisciplinary academic conference in Florence was dedicated to *Before the Rain*, as well as a tome of the academic journal Rethinking History.

Before the Rain told a story set in Macedonia and London. When the film was opening in Paris, I was interviewed by a French reporter who told me, "Unfortunately, your film does not have Eastern European aesthetics." I don't remember whether I asked him to describe

Eastern European aesthetics to me, since I didn't know what exactly that was. I could speculate that to him this meant slower rhythm, longer takes, crappier sound, but it could also have meant a different kind of a story, a different outlook on life or a different cinematic handwriting. Either way, I was surprised that the reporter had that much of a pre-conception of what an Eastern European film *should* look like, nor that this was important.

I should not have been.

I have been lucky – my films played in more than 50 countries and I was invited to present them at numerous festivals, universities, cinematheques and conferences on four continents. I got to see how people reacted. I have also been humbled to receive many letters from people I don't know who respond to my stories and characters. They say that they have been touched by what they experienced watching the films. Sometimes they describe the emotions my work arouse in them or want to discuss philosophical questions raised by the films. Occasionally, they would ask about Macedonia; some people even went to Macedonia to see the places where the films were shot – a woman from Brazil, a fan from China, a composer from Italy, the National Geographic...

In spite of the interest in Macedonia, it's obvious to me that the real reason why people respond to my films are the things they could relate to, regardless of the culture they themselves come from – the emotions my art provokes, the human experience, the universal message (for the lack of a better word), the reflections on the human condition... A viewer in Italy approached me after a screening and sad, "This is the second time I watch your film. The first time I saw it 25 years ago. I vividly remember the feeling I had after that first viewing. I don't remember anything else, but the emotion has stayed with me, and I was happy to have the feeling confirmed."

These two – the local and the universal – seem as intertwined when some people experience (or judge) my work as strands of DNA.

My second film, *Dust* tells two intertwined stories – one is set in contemporary New York City, while the other one begins in Oklahoma at the turn of the 20th century and moves to Macedonia under Ottoman rule. When *Dust* opened the Venice film festival in 2001, we held a press conference. The second question at the conference was asked by an English reporter. Among other things, he asked whether one of the goals of the film was to prevent Turkey from becoming a member of the EU. Turkey was never mentioned in the film – explicitly nor implicitly. The only link I could see was that the Turkish ambassador to Macedonia came to the set while we were filming *Dust* to tell me that they were concerned about the film. I did not think much of this attempt to censor a work in progress, since the

film does not as much as mention Turkey, and we are equal opportunity offenders – Macedonians, Ottomans, Albanians, Greeks, Americans... they are all indiscriminately brutal in the film, as was common practice at the time.

A German reviewer wrote something else. *Dust* opened during a short-lived civil war in Macedonia between the government forces and separatist para-militaries. The German critic saw a metaphor in the film – he thought the Ottoman forces in turn-of-the-century Macedonia represented the separatists (both being Moslem) and the American gun-slinger symbolized my desire for the West to intervene in the local conflict. Never mind the fact that the film was written and filmed before the civil war even started in Macedonia. He was still convinced I was trying to send a clunky political message.

The political message that I wanted to send I summed up in an opinion piece I published in *The Guardian* two months earlier. In the article, I argued that the blowback from NATO's 1999 war in Serbia was causing a spillover in its peaceful (and NATO-aligned) neighbor Macedonia and that this was going to have grave consequences for the tiny nation. I felt that those who waged the war in Serbia had a moral obligation to prevent this. I tried publishing the article in the *New York Times* and on NPR. NPR asked me to make a number of changes which did not correspond to the facts on the ground, so I refused. *The Guardian* published the article and changed my title "Just a Moral Obligation" to a sexier "NATO Gave Us This Ethnic Cleansing". They never asked me nor warned me. The piece was picked up by *Belgian Standard*, *Russian Pravda*, etc.

Later, an American professor wrote a long essay about my films, claiming a nationalist intention in my work. One of his arguments is that the main character in *Before the Rain* is named Aleksandar Kirkov, presumably after Alexander the Great. Had he reached out to me, I would have told him that the character was named after my father. The last name of the character was my mother's maiden name – thus Aleksandar Kirkov.

This reminded me of when the revered English film magazine *Sight and Sound* reviewed *Before the Rain*. In their attempt to quote the original title of the film (as is their practice), they wrote that the Macedonian title is *Po dezhju*, never mind the fact that this means "After [not before] the rain", never mind that this is in Slovenian, a totally different language, unrelated to the film. I wrote to *Sight and Sound* and asked them to correct this. I also remarked that their reviewer was writing about events that were not in the film as if they were. They never published a correction.

An award-winning colleague from another small country recalls his experiences with film critics:

“At a festival, I gave about 10 interviews in about the span of 2 hours. It went like this: an Iranian journalist told me it's clear I was influenced by Iranian cinema; an Austrian journalist told me my film is a metaphor for the rise of the right political movement in Europe; an Italian journalist told me that my film is a critique of Catholicism (no Catholics in my film); a French journalist told me I wanted to shock the audience in a certain scene, on purpose, glorifying violence even more with my camera moves; another Italian journalist told me I was kind to the audience in the same scene, because I moved the camera to spare them the shock. And so on.

“The comments are focused on some social, political, para-text component... never on how good or bad the actual drama is, the human nature explored in the film, the character's choices and so on,” he continued.

My films play in front of at least two completely different audiences with very different needs and expectations – the international audience and the domestic audience. Of course, there are viewers who look at the art, at the philosophy, at the emotions, at the human experience... and need no national labels. If we exclude those viewers, we are left with two groups who have specific expectations from my films – the foreign audience and the domestic audience. Both groups talk – directly or indirectly – about representation as they perceive or require it.

As far as the expectations of the domestic audience goes, I have been told that Macedonians root for my films the way they root for the national soccer team. In spite of this – or perhaps because of it – I have become used to the complaints, “How are you representing us?” or “Where did you find that bus?” (referring to a bus in *Before the Rain*, which some people felt misrepresented the Transit Authority and by extension, the nation, because of its ancient date of production, a bus I spotted driving in the center of the capital and found cute, before asking the art department to track it down). Some Macedonians object to the fact that the nation was “represented” by villages and villagers. They object to the fact that, according to them, the world would think that Macedonia is poor and everything there is tragic. This in spite of the fact that Macedonia indeed is poor and that things are indeed tragic in the genre of tragedy (the big drawback of Hamlet, in this reading, is that it makes Denmark appear tragic). I have yet to hear a discussion of the fact that some Macedonian characters in my films are driven by high moral values to the point of self-sacrifice. Or a discussion on the merits of the work as a work of art (and how this achievement represents the nation that produced it), not of its perceived or real relationship to the real life supposedly underpinning it.

At some point I realized that what the Austrian producer from earlier in this article meant was that my script about the Macedonian doctor did not conform to her *expectations* of what life in Macedonia should be like, nor to what a film coming from or talking about Macedonia should sound like. All of this while she has never been to Macedonia nor really

explored the culture much. She was looking for a script that would confirm her expectations, her knowledge, her – dare I say – prejudices of a terra incognita.

Another respected professor reacts to me recalling my experiences by saying that the diversity concept is colonial, orientalist (in the sense of Edward Said's orientalism) and that in their culturalization of everything, the "civilizational margins" (we) are left to deal with our suffering and landfills, while they usurp the universal themes, all along teaching us that there are no universal themes, it was bad to think that, everything, they say, is culturally specific – except that the Western cultural specificity is to be universal.

At a historic moment when identity politics has entered every pore of the public discourse and changed how many of us think and behave, it feels to me that one's identity is taken seriously only if one doesn't come from an unsexy region like the Balkans. Or perhaps it is similar with every outsider – it is not your identity, the differences as you experience them or your real thoughts that matter – rather, your identity, the differences and your thoughts matter only when experienced by the Western gazer – and even then only as part of their projection and only if they confirm the preexisting bias.

If I were in academia I would now probably go to Edward Said's *Orientalism* or Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans*. But, I am a filmmaker. I believe that my art speaks for itself and it doesn't need my explanation or clarification. It works or it doesn't work on its own merit. I hope that my films talk of the general human condition, not of humans specifically in Macedonia, Kigali, Taipei, Idaho, Patagonia, Lapland or Kandahar. My intention is for the story to be faithful to the local culture and society, but not to treat it as an exhibit for the eyes of an outsider. My intention is also to talk of issues relevant to any human – female or male, Black or white, rich or poor, Buddhist or agnostic. My intention is to tell stories that engage and inspire an open-minded viewer. My intention is to make films that do what art is supposed to – provoke profound feelings and thoughts and stay with you for a long time.

Judging by the reactions, my films have done precisely that.

At one point I realized that today the films themselves were not that important – the narrative *surrounding* the films was more important to those who channel, present and interpret cinema. Where the filmmaker comes from seems more important than the film itself. Where s/he/they live/s (I was once on a festival jury where another jury member tried to disqualify a good film by saying that even though the author has made a Romanian film and he himself was Romanian, he unfortunately lived in New York). Is he Black or white. Is he male or female (an analyst warned that a film I directed could face pushback because the

main characters are women and I am, alas, a man. In response to this, a friend in academia suggested – as a bitter joke – that I release the film under a female pen-name.) The narrative surrounding the work of art has taken over and the work itself has been overshadowed by other, ideological and tribal narratives. Part of this overwhelming external narrative has to do with geography, race and nationality – things that separate us, rather than things that unify us – and this is, I believe, essentially anti-artistic because all good art speaks of humans, feelings and ideas, not of places, genders or races. The tragedy of Emmett Till is above all a tragedy of Black people in America. But, it is also a *human* tragedy that should be felt by every human. The context and the specifics may be different, but the true essence is simply and universally human. When it is felt and understood by everybody its voice becomes louder. *Before the Rain* and *Dust* are not about Macedonians, Albanians, Brits or Americans, but about humans. If any film does not deliver on the human story, it has not delivered. It is – at best – a news reportage or a piece for National Geographic.

Like any other external narrative imposed upon a work of art – whether it be Soviet Social Realism or Hollywood commercialism – this violent external force suffocates the art it is exploiting, like a parasite that has become too big for its host. By making art conform to external needs and neglect the essence of any art, it saps the life out of the work and leaves an empty shell. It runs like a film, it feels like a film, it sounds like a film, but it leaves the taste of the synthetic in your mouth. And that makes us poorer for lacking in meaningful experience.

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https://cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/431919/?fbclid=IwAR0HOGiWiSEErpcX5jMtfGeMq-xIR3uh_Ey0l12fAybdRnJphb01qDKBf0