Edition

FILMOSOFIA

book 3

Publisher:
PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY OF MACEDONIA
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www.fdm.mk

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This publication is issued in cooperation with
the Philosophical Film Festival

Република Северна Македонија
Министерство за култура

This publication is supported by the Ministry of Culture
of the Republic of North Macedona

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Milcho Manchevski

MANCHEVSKI: FIVE ESSAYS

Philosophical Society of Macedonia
2023, Skopje

Content

PREFACE
THREE IN ONE: THE SCREENWRITER AND DIRECTOR AS ESSAYIST
— Ivan Djeparoski 7

I. ART, VIOLENCE + SOCIETY:
A FEW NOTES (TONE AND FUNCTION: ART AND RITUAL) 13

II. WHY I LIKE WRITING AND HATE DIRECTING:
CONFESSIONS OF A RECOVERING WRITER–DIRECTOR 25

III. BASED ON A TRUE STORY:
TRUTH AND FICTION, ART AND FAITH 47

IV. TOWARDS TOTAL ART:
NEGATION AS MOVEMENT 63

V. GREAT EXPECTATIONS:
WHEN A FILM IS “NOT MACEDONIAN ENOUGH” 69

PREFACE

THREE IN ONE:

THE SCREENWRITER AND DIRECTOR AS ESSAYIST

Echoing the historical tensions and conflicts between philosophy and poetry (which, in antiquity, encompassed epic, lyric and drama) – conflicts that, as attested to by Plato himself, trace their origins to the very birth of Western culture and civilizationand revolved around the question of whether poets or philosophers were inherently better suited and possessed a greater prerogative to study and interpret the world, ultimately evolving into a new and fruitful collaboration – with the advent of film as an art form, a fresh conflict emerged, concerning the predominance of the literary foundation, the film script, on one hand, and direction on the other, as the two pivotal and dominant elements determining the success of the final product: the art of cinema and the cinematic artistic work. The trajectory of this conflict, likewise, eventually elevated the importance of collaboration above the clash of egos between screenwriters and directors, making the sought–after synergy between the screenwriter and the director the *conditio sine qua non* of any successful film product.

All of this is rather nonchalantly addressed by Milcho Manchevski himself, right at the beginning of his second essay which bears a surprising title for a director, "Why I Like Writing and Hate

Directing"; with a generous dose of humor and a subtly rhetorical confessional tone, he elucidates:

> I don't really hate directing. But I want to share a few thoughts and personal experiences which — I would hope — might shed a bit of light on how I go about making films. It would be great if any of it were useful in your research on how some writer–directors work.
> I'll try to focus on the give–and–take between the writer and the director, highlighting the tension and synergy when the two tasks are performed by one artist.

The complexity, nevertheless, deepens notably with the tacit introduction of yet a third element in this "give–and–take between the writer and the director" — namely, the essay, a literary form straddling the boundary between fiction and non–fiction. It might be contented that, in this manner, Manchevski's triple authorial identity is almost self–referentially unveiled; but let's not delude ourselves: things do not become any simpler this way. For the very materialization of this "three–in–one" presence practically necessitates a hermeneutic analysis, a particularly spectral hermeneutic undertaking, to achieve the desired delineation of these three distinct authorial pursuits.

The annals of film historyand cinematic scholarship, fortunately, bear witness to numerous successful "two–in–one" fusions of *director–screenwriters* — to name but a few iconic figures: Federico Fellini, Akira Kurosawa, Jean–Luc Godard, Orson Welles, Ingmar Bergman, Stanley Kubrick, Woody Allen, or Quentin Tarantino. However, when it comes to the "three–in–one" amalgamation of *director–screenwriter–essayist*, the ranks of such auteurs remain genuinely scarce; in fact, only a handful examples spring to mind, all hailing from the European cinematic tradition, such as the essays of Luis Buñuel, alongside his autobiography (*Mi último suspiro,* 1982 [*My Last Sigh*, 1983])[1], Andrei Tarkovsky's essays (*Запечатлённое*

[1] I'd like to draw attention to Buñuel's casual admission here: "Everyone wants to think of me as a dedicated intellectual but, truthfully, I don't really like making films." This statementby Buñuel appears to resonate with the second part of the title of Manchevski's introductory essay "Why I Like Writing and Hate Directing," which

время, 1985 [*Sculpting in Time*, 1986]), and Ingmar Bergman's essays dedicated to his own cinematic oeuvre (*Bilder*, 1990 [*Images: My Life in Film*, 1994]).

Manchevski: Five Essays is thereby a notable addition to a rare and dedicated lineage of outstanding directors–screenwriters who, finding even the duality of directing–screenwritinginsufficient, enthusiastically seek to approach their own cinematic creations from a literary–essayistic standpoint.

This is why the book by our eminent director and screenwriter, Milcho Manchevski, emerges as an exceptional — and particularly successful — foray into the mysterious realm of creative expression (in its broadest sense), as well as a deep, introspectiveplunge into the specific (individual) experiences that underpinthe director's most remarkable cinematic achievements. Furthermore, Manchevski's nuanced interpretations of the dual role he has assumed in the process of crafting cinematic art — fulfilling both the roles of screenwriter and director — coupled with his self–referential exploration of this dual function, establish themselves as distinct hallmarks within the five essays featured in this book.

All of them — titled, I. "Art, Violence + Society: A Few Notes. Tone and Function: Art and Ritual", II. "Why I Like Writing and Hate Directing: Confessions of a Recovering Writer–Director", III. "Truth and Fiction: Notes On (Exceptional) Faith in Art", IV. "Towards Total Art: Negation as Movement", V. "Great Expectations: When a Film Is 'Not Macedonian Enough'" — not only immerse us in the ever–exciting world of the author and authorship but also constitute an indisputable contribution to the theory and history of cinema in general, and the theory and history of Macedonian cinema in

could be perceived as merely a delightful coincidence, but also hints at a particular spiritual kinship between these two auteurs. It's also worth noting that Buñuel's aforementioned book was recently translated into Macedonian: Луис Буњуел, *Мојот последен здив* (translation by M. Cvetkovska, foreword by A. Chuposki), Skopje: Cinematheque of RNM, 2022.

particular; and they do so both from the perspective of the general aesthetic theory of creation, as well as the particular category of "aesthetic experience."

On one hand, the world of cinema, as well as the author's distinct engagement with this world, find their meaningful point of origin in these palatable, reader–friendly essays; on the other hand, the essays also offer a profound and immediate interpretation of the process of shaping a film's ultimate form within the context of the author serving as both screenwriter and director; as a result, they provide readers with the much–needed synthesis of theory and practice.

After numerous interpretive strategies, primarily undertaken by esteemed global film critics and theorists in their efforts to analyze and fully appreciate the enigmatic formal elements of Milcho Manchevski's films, the author's self–referential essays come across as a delicate refreshment. They not only provide further insights into understanding and immediately experiencing the mysterious world of creation but also seem to bring this world perceptibly closer to all of us, unadorned, in what may seem to be a "desacralized" manner. Nonetheless, before delving into Manchevski's essays — where the pleasure of reading surpasses any assumed pleasure from introductory interpretations — it's worth reiterating that Milcho Manchevski's cinematic work undoubtedly enjoys a remarkable and nuanced reception worldwide.

In this context, among the multitude of film critics, theorists and film historians who have written about Manchevski's films, I will mention only the renowned French philosopher and aesthete Dominique Chateau, one of the most significant philosophers and aestheticians of film today, known for his numerous studies dedicated to the philosophy of film and film aesthetics. In his recent paper, titled "The Film Is Not Round," Chateau interprets, with vast knowledge and dedication, the philosophical and aesthetic (mainly formal) features of Manchevski's most significant film,

Before the Rain[2]. I will quote only the first sentence of Chateau's nuanced interpretation, as it is filled with undisguised admiration for the greatness and importance of this iconic film by Manchevski: "It is a great pleasure for me," says Chateau, "to write on Milcho Manchevski's *Before the Rain*, perhaps because I particularly like films whose very structure is enigmatic."

It's not just the films: Manchevski's essays are enigmatic too.

Because when Manchevski discusses the paramount importance of storytelling in shaping and sustaining both film and literature — that is to say, when he asks, "Isn't pretend play in earliest childhood an early way of telling stories?" — he transports us back to childhood and the realm of "make believe." In doing so, in a subtly philosophical manner, he appears to champion the theory of art as a form of play, as proposed by Roger Caillois and Hans–Georg Gadamer within the domain of continental aesthetics; simultaneously, his ideas align with Kendall Walton's theory of "make–believe" representation in analytical aesthetics, particularly within the context of mimesis and aesthetic expression.[3] Central to this discussion are the so–called "make–believe games." In Macedonian — and particularly in the Debar Maalo* children's slang, via the Turkish term "bayağı" — these games have long been known as "kobayagi" games (just–as–if, play–act, quasi–games). It's not surprising that even in the English language, synonyms for "make–believe" games include terms like imaginary, envisioned, fictional, fantasized, and so on, similar to their counterparts in the Macedonian language.This clearly locates the connection between

[2] Chateau, D. (2022) "The Film is not Round: Milcho Manchevski's *Before the Rain* (*Pred doždot*, 1994)", in *Philosophy and Film: Conference proceedings*, Skopje: Philosophical Society of Macedonia, 2022, pp. 41–51.

[3] Walton, K. (1990) *Mimesis as Make–Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

* Editor's Note: Debar Maalo (Дебар Маало) is one of the oldest neighborhoods in Skopje and the birthplace and lifelong residence of Milcho Manchevski in Macedonia.

representational arts and “make–believe games” in Walton’s work and the concept of “pretend play” in Manchevski’s essay.

Naturally, even from this sole and seemingly casually provided example, it becomes apparent that Milcho Manchevski’s essays unveil additional layers of aesthetics and theory, artfully concealed behind the facade of simplicity and unpretentiousness in his expressions, as if in a rich palimpsest. Should one desire to offer a more profound analysis of these layers, it would necessitate an entire book dedicated to the concealed intertextual and intermedial elements within Manchevski’s work — in his directing, screenwriting, and essay composition.

Then again, it is precisely in this aspect that we find one of the core values of this work and these thoroughly thought–through essays, drawn from the author Milcho Manchevski’s firsthand experiences. It is for this very reason that their publication stands as an undeniably significant contribution to Macedonian cinema, our field of film studies, and the broader tapestry of Macedonian culture.

Skopje–Ohrid, August 2023 — Prof. Ivan Djeparoski

I.
ART, VIOLENCE + SOCIETY:
A FEW NOTES (TONE AND FUNCTION: ART AND RITUAL)[1]

violence

Function: *noun*

1 a : exertion of physical force so as to injure or abuse (as in warfare effecting illegal entry into a house **b :** an instance of violent treatment or procedure

[...]

3 a : intense, turbulent, or furious and often destructive action or force <the *violence* of the storm>

b : vehement feeling or expression

ritual

Function: *noun*

1 : the established form for a ceremony; *specifically* : the order of words prescribed for a religious ceremony

2 a : ritual observance; *specifically* : a system of rites **b :** a ceremonial act or action **c :** an act or series of acts regularly repeated in a set precise manner

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[1] First published in *Interpretations, European Research Project for Poetics & Hermeneutics*, Volume No. 1, Violence & Art, Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Skopje, 2007.

. Ingmar Bergman is quoted as having said that film is a perfectly legitimate way of ritualizing violence in society.

. Mind you — *ritualize*, not glorify.

. [Bergman is also quoted as having said: “When we experience a film, we consciously prime ourselves for illusion. Putting aside will and intellect, we make way for it in our imagination. The sequence of pictures plays directly on our feelings.”]

. The ritualistic aspect (among other things) has to do with creating a substitute, a mock–up, a representation of a particular experience.

. This representation, re–creation provides the experience of the real thing without the necessity to face the consequences. More importantly — it also allows one to deal with the meaning of the real thing, the thing that is being represented.

. For example, riding the roller–coaster is a mock–up of a particular experience — falling down. The fear is real, but the danger is not, as we know the contraption is supposed to be safe.

. Film is often like a roller–coaster for the mind, the gut and the heart: experience without the danger, experience without the consequences. (“...we consciously prime ourselves for illusion.”)

. Even though the viewer knows perfectly well that the film/painting/story/play is a lie (“When we experience a film, we consciously prime ourselves for illusion.”), she still desires to respond as if it were real. This is simply because the lie is — at the same time — a truth.

. As the hero fires his gun, he really does fire a gun, even if it is one loaded with blanks.

. As an actor at the receiving end of this shot falls down, playacting, we know that he is pretending he has been hit. Yet, we also know that he really fell down, cried in anguish, writhed in the dust.

. Playacting or not, all of these actions really did take place. And they suggest what the filmmakers wanted to suggest and what the audience has agreed to assume — that the actor is dead.

. The meaning has been put together.

. That is part of the contract ("...we consciously prime ourselves for illusion.") — the viewer knows full well that the actor is not dead; yet the viewer accepts that these more–or–less realistic symbols and gestures say "I am dying/dead."

. More importantly, the viewer's heart and gut respond to these as if they were real.

. Ultimately, as the piece wraps up, the viewer has accepted the emotional, narrative or philosophical point; the meaning that the artist wanted to communicate has travelled via the work of art.

. One aspect of contemporary rituals is not that different from ancient rituals. Experiencing it without really doing it.

. How much do we fill in the blanks? Is the actor's death realistic without our participation and without our acceptance of the rules of the game? Will an unsuspecting viewer who doesn't know that this is a piece of fiction think the actor has really died?

. Is this any different from the experience in the syncretic art?

. Is it different from the experience during a ritual around the bonfire thousands of years ago?

. Is it different from what the audience of the oral storytellers experience? The audience of Homer, bhopas (bards and shamans, oral storytellers in Rajasthan) or guslars (musician/storytellers of the Balkans)?

. Society's survival depends on its ability to pass on information.

. In other words — to teach.

. What would happen if every generation had to discover anew the fire? Or the wheel? Or electricity?

. Society facilitates the transfer of information from the teacher (the one with the experience or knowledge) to the pupil (the one without the experience or knowledge).

. The cornerstone of this activity is the potential for the pupil to absorb information without having to personally experience it.

. The narratives are one way to teach.

. The Bible teaches its students how to behave.

. Even the less overt instruction manuals do so by providing templates of behaviour (if Zeus can cheat on his wife Hera, why shouldn't I?)

. The narratives were only oral at first.

. Speech, written language, mental concepts.

. Art is non–verbal conscious communication. ("Putting aside will and intellect, we make way for [art] in our imagination.")

. Rituals — and, by extension, art: experiencing (and exploring) it yourself without the consequences. Participating and experiencing the emotional impact. Learning — or at least feeling.

. Do the technological developments make the experience more convincing? Is a bhopa listener in Rajasthan less convinced of the "realness" of the story he's experiencing than a kid at an IMAX theater in New York with its gigantic screen and sophisticated surround sound? (A standard IMAX screen is 22 m wide and 16 m high (72.6 x 52.8 ft), but can be larger.)

. Were the 3–D films too realistic, or were they irrelevant?

. Is the intensity of the experience relative to the personal investment, or do the technical attributes add to the experience? Is it relative?

. I remember reports of adults in cultures unexposed to film who were confused when they had their first experience with film. They were confused by many conventions of the form that we take for granted: editing — changes in shot size, time compression, parallel action...

. The movie theatre obituary had been composed several times — with each new technological discovery affecting film exhibition — and always prematurely. The film industry itself has certainly contributed to this with its own paranoia. (Anyone who uttered the word "television" on a Hollywood movie set in the 40s was fired on the spot; Universal sued Sony over the invention of

the Betamax video recorder. Today film studios make more money off TV or video than at the cinema box office)[2].

. In spite of the convenience of TV, pay–per–view, video, ti–vo, people still go to the movie theatres by the millions. Is it the collective experience?

. Film is experienced alone — we usually don't talk much while watching a film, we don't chant, don't boo, nor hiss (unless in Cannes). Still, we usually prefer company while engaging in this solitary experience. Even when we rent a film, we often invite friends or significant others to see it with us.

. Does the collective aspect of this solitary experience resemble the experience of participating in a ritual?

. In this respect, how much does a movie theater resemble a temple?

. The first time I saw John Carpenter's *Halloween*, I was blown away by the effect the film had on its audience. It was profound and it was visceral. The viewers were so terrified that it was almost palpable. I saw the 6 o'clock show, and then decided to stay for the 8 o'clock as well. The new audience reacted in much the same way, screaming, shrieking, shouting at the screen and covering their eyes — at the same places.

. *Halloween* kick–started the renaissance of a venerable old genre (going back via Hitchcock, *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* to *the Cabinet of Dr. Caligari and beyond*). There were half a dozen sequels to *Halloween* alone, as well as a series of other scary sequel–spinning films. Over the following couple of decades these scary films evolved into films of gore. Horror no more, gore now.

. Yet, there was not a drop of blood nor gore in the first *Halloween*. Only masterful manipulation of the cinematic elements and the Freudian subtext to cause a pure visceral reaction in the viewers.

[2] The paper was written before streaming.

. All of this on top of a rudimentary narrative. A strategy that only enhanced the mastery and the subtext.

. Marshall McLuhan has reportedly said that the characters at the movies are like gods — big and powerful, while the characters on TV are like friends — accessible.

DIALOGUE: OF DONKEYS AND ZOOLOGISTS

. The emotional, visceral and intellectual responses to art are only personal. They are ultimately in the eye of the beholder.

. It seems absurd to discuss the experience of experiencing art. It is like discussing the experience of experiencing love, or fear.

. In spite of how absurd it seems, we do discuss those, as we are social animals. It may even help us deal with the experiences themselves.

. Art provokes what's inside the beholder.

. The force of the emotions stirred is an indication of the powerful effect the work has on the beholder. The root is often in the taboo and is triggered by the tone of the work of art.

. If the beholder lies to himself/herself, then a reminder of the lie in the form of art feels like a provocation.

. Art functions on a personal level. It is a proto–emotional, sur–philosophical one–on–one metacommunication.

. The arts deal with the personal needs — and by extension with the social needs — of the society as reflected in the individual (as no man is an island). The plane of communication of the arts is personal: emotional, by extension philosophical, sometimes conceptual.

. The social reaction to art has everything to do with society, and nothing to do with the art: Guernica, the Wild Bunch, Lolita, Damian Hirst...

. A public debate of the personal experience is bastardization of the experience; yet the impulse to discuss and judge is understandable as homo sapiens is zoon politicon.

. The public re–telling of the beholder's personal experience with art is not unlike pornography.

. This public re–telling may be relevant to the teller or even to some listeners, but it is irrelevant both to the work of art, and to future works of art.

. The loudness of the voice debating the work of art has no correlation to the work of art. Even its relation to the experience itself is often doubtful. Yet, it has everything to do with the societal structures.

. Mass–media treatment of the arts (film, but also other arts).

[. Picasso is said to have said: "Computers are useless. They can only give us answers."]

. Society responds/reacts to art that deals with taboos.

. Art is equipped (and indeed expected) to deal with taboos.

. The representation of violence is a taboo in contemporary society.

. The hypocritical nature of social attitude towards art is reflected in society's attitude towards the representation of violence.

. The reactions to works of art in other representative arts (painting) and narrative arts (literature) dealing with violence seem less vitriolic nowadays. This might be due to the fact that film (rightly or wrongly) appears to be more convincing. One often hears that film is the most "realistic" art.

. What is realistic? It is often taken for granted that what we find convincing or what "seems" realistic or "reflecting reality" is realistic.

. Is a real–time eight–hour film of a man sleeping realistic?

. And what if there is a cut in the middle? Does it make it less realistic?

. What if the eight–hour experience has been condensed to two hours? Five minutes? Ten seconds? Do these interventions make the film less “real”?

. In film is it realistic to hear music as the hero and heroine finally consume their relationship on the beach (more music preceding this at their first encounter, perhaps)? Where is the orchestra?

. Realism is just another form of stylization.

. Like Expressionism or Cubism or Impressionism.

. Realism is a form of stylization which convention has declared closer to our desired perception of the physical reality outside the plane of the work of art (outside of the movie theatre).

. What is realistic changes with the times. Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desir*e was once deemed too realistic/ naturalistic. His acting today feels highly stylized, not gritty.

[. It is said that a graduate student once asked Daisetz T. Suzuki whether he spells reality with a small or a capital “r.” professor Suzuki nodded, then closed his eyes, went on nodding, and — it seemed — thinking. Ten seconds passed, then a minute, then five. As it started to look that he fell asleep, he finally opened his eyes and answered the student’s question. “Yes,” he said.]

. Still, if the artist wants to have a dialogue with society or with those who have declared themselves its spokespersons, s/he is compelled to take the art critics into account. As inspiration and as the object of (sociological?) (anthropological?) analysis, not as a guide in creating art.

. The artist needs the critics as much as the donkey needs the zoologists.

. Debates about art often centre on the “representation” of the world, as perceived in a work of art.

. There are several issues here:

. The artist deals with her or his world, not with the world outside. The outside “real” world comes into play as something

to be refracted through the artist and the work of art, and as the host of the final result, the work of art.

. The way the beholder sees the world "portrayed" has more to do with the beholder's perceived (or ideal) world, not with the aspects of the scraps of reality refracted through a work of art.

. It is more likely that a disturbing "portrayal" is disturbing or undesired not so much because it "shows" an outside world that the beholder does not like/appreciate, but rather because the "portrayal" awakens an inner world in the beholder which disturbs the beholder, upsets him/her, angers her/him, leading him/her where s/he consciously would not want to go, regardless of whether the work of art is dealing with a taboo at all or not.

. It is not that important what/how the work of art "portrays." It is much more important what is the goal and — even more importantly — what is the tone.

. Ultimately, the dialogue about and through art is an intimate experience and it has to do with the individual's experience of him/herself and the universe around.

TONE, OR GOD IS BETWEEN THE LINES:

. Thousands of painters could have painted Mona Lisa. Some possibly did. Including Leonardo. It is his touch that made her "portrayal" what matters, not the thing/person he was painting.

. Picasso and Braque painted the same still lifes in the same studio, often painting together, each on his easel. Even though the paintings were executed in the same style (Cubist), they are very different.

. Several directors have worked from the same scripts, most notably from the classics. Each film is distinctly different. Do Polanski's, Welles's and Kurosawa's *Macbeth* even have similar tone? How about Zeffirelli's and Luhrman's *Romeo and Juliet*?

. So, it's not the text.

. It is between the lines.

. Humanistic, reflective...?

. An often–heard complaint about the mainstream studio and independent films is that the stories are all the same.

. I don't think that this is the main problem with the mainstream studio and independent films.

. I think the main problem with them is that the tone is almost always the same.

. Open endings, mixed feelings, fractured feelings, shifting feelings, unpredictable tone, tragedy, and especially — doubts are big no–nos.

. Even though the outside ("corporate," "committee," "money", "state") control over the film works of art centres on the story, it is actually more concerned with the tone of the work. This control, however, is more subtle and involves several layers of controllers and middle–men.

. If the tone is what's between the lines, what kind of tone does the social art critic like in his/her work of art?

. What about violence in art?

. Does s/he like gleeful violence?

. Is it supposed to be dismissive and easy? Like Arnold Schwarzenegger? (In one film, his character promises a minor movie villain that he would let him go if he gave him the information he needed; once he gets it, he drops the petit villain into the abyss, saying "I lied.") Like Sylvester Stallone (the vehicle for the stunning transformation of the bottled–up Rambo from *First Blood* into a killing machine in *Rambo 2* and *3*)? Like Michael Bay, Simpson/Bruckheimer + Co, the Hollywood blockbusters of Ronald Reagan's 80–90s?

. Sadism might be an explanation for this tone, but somehow that doesn't seem to be the real answer, as these films seem to suggest an emptier, less affected, less involved tone than that of a sadist.

. The tone of psychopaths?

. It is easier for the suburban and the politically correct latter–day transfigurations of the Mayflower and Salem judgmental spirit to focus on measurable quantities like minutes than on empirically imperfect elements like tone and intention[3]. Tone is not a scientific, nor a statistical category.

. Professor Charles Harpole mentions in his lectures that in Hollywood films of the 40s and 50s, a character would shout "Darn," after being shot in the knee. Not "Damn!" or more appropriately "Fuck!" After his knee has been shattered by a bullet.

. Desensitizing the viewer to the impact of (both real and filmic) violence has more adverse social consequences than portraying violence in its full glory.

. Types of violence: which is worse: a wounded soldier, a dead dog or an employee laid off after 20 years of service?

. How influential is film?:

. On one hand, little Roma kids coming out of the Napredok or Karpos Cinemas, jumping and air kick–boxing a'la Bruce Lee.

. On the other hand neither Genghis Khan nor the Inquisition watched violent films.

. Check a report that the U.S. Air Force pilots watched porn films before going on air raids.

. Press briefings from the NATO bombings in Kosovo and Serbia.

. Ditto the First Gulf War.

. The view of real death and destruction as seen from 30,000 feet eerily resembles the gleeful victory accomplished in a video game. A cloud of white smoke. Game over.

. Detached, fun.

. Getting desensitized to violence.

. If one hopes for a work of art to have a social function (and it is not meant to have a direct social function by any stretch of

[3] The piece was written before the identity politics iterations of Salem swept over publishing, academia and Hollywood/film festivals.

the imagination), then one should certainly hope that exposing violence in its despicable and repulsive brutality — if not absurdity — is one of the socially beneficial side–effects of art.

. Thus, society is better served by gross "portrayal" of violence than by sanitized studio fare. A matter of tone.

. What is the tone of snuff? Real–life violence. Does it begin to matter only if we *know* that this is portrayal of real violence?

. Yet, it has been mediated/transfigured to a new place/new meaning.

. The God is in the detail.

. The art is between the lines.

. It is not the "what"; it is the "how."

II.
WHY I LIKE WRITING AND HATE DIRECTING:
CONFESSIONS OF A RECOVERING WRITER–DIRECTOR[1]

I don't really hate directing.

I do, however, want to share a few thoughts and personal experiences which might shed a bit of light on how I go about making films. I hope this provides a bit more insight in the working process and operational dynamics of some writer–directors.

The relationship between the screenwriter and the director lies at the crux of the filmmaking process.

When both tasks are performed by the same person, the inner contradictions could be quite intriguing.

That thought is what inspired and provoked me to reflect on my own experience from the perspective of someone who might want to understand this dynamic a bit better.

Here, I'll try to focus on the give–and–take between the writer and the director, highlighting the tension and synergy when the two tasks are performed by the same artist.

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[1] Keynote presentation at the 7. International Conference of Screenwriting and Directing Audiovisual Media, Screenwriting Research Network, Film University Babelsberg Konrad Wolf, Potsdam, Germany, Oct. 17–19, 2014.
Published in: *Journal of Screenwriting*, Volume 6, Issue 3, Sep 2015, 275–286, https://intellectdiscover.com/content/journals/10.1386/josc.6.3.275_7

1.

People usually chuckle when I say that I became a film director in order to make sure a bad director did not ruin my screenplay. It's a joke, but as with many jokes, there is some truth to it.

Still, deciding to start directing was not purely self–defense (or — script–defense). The decision also involved offensive–minded thinking — a strong desire to engage in creating works of syncretic art — film. Which is what a director does.

Film employs tools developed or derived by other art forms (visuals, drama, music, words), as well as uniquely cinematic modes of rendering (such as film editing). Still, it seems self–evident that — at least as far as the conventional narrative film is concerned — the centrepiece of any individual film is the story.

I don't mean the plot. I mean the story.

People like stories, they like hearing and telling them.

Why? Why do humans like stories? Why do we *need* them?

Is it because hearing and telling stories brings us closer to other people? Or is it because we like hearing how other people (even if they are invented) behave? Do we like learning how gods, or movie stars, or neighbours, or geniuses behave? Do we then learn from those stories how to behave ourselves? Or do we learn answers to important questions from stories? Answers such as — is love worth it?, or what is left behind when we are gone?, or is sacrifice a good idea?, or does good always triumph over evil?, or does the strong guy always get the girl?, or should I be pretty and faithful if I want my prince on the white horse…? Do we like the fact that stories are better ordered than our lives?; or is it because our belief in cosmic or poetic justice is reinforced, as most stories have happy or satisfying, cathartic endings. Or do we simply like the experiences we get out of hearing stories which attempt to parallel real experiences — except we don't have to suffer the real consequences as this is *only a story*.

Really — is storytelling and storyhearing a form of human interaction on the par with the intercourse? Why are many of us addicted to soaps, or jokes, or history, or memoirs, or gossip, or movies….?

Whatever the reason, fondness for stories cuts across generations and cultures.

Are we hard–wired to need stories? Isn't pretend play in earliest childhood an early way of telling stories? I've heard people find stories in Jackson Pollock's squirts and dribbles or in Mike Rothko's soft squares and rectangles. (Personally, I love Rothko and admire Pollock, but I see them as pure non–narrative form, like music. Which doesn't make them any less enjoyable and profound. On the contrary.)

2.

As a film director, it is my job to tell a story.

I don't think that directing narrative film is about the visuals or the fancy shots or even about good scenes that stick in the mind of a critic. It is the director's job to truly, deeply understand the screenplay — and I don't mean only the plot or the characters; I mean the meaning, the themes, the relationship to our experience and even to our subconscious that go beyond the pure mechanics of the plot. The good director gets to the essence of the story, then makes sure this essence is communicated, amplified, shaped and defined by all cinematic means at his or her disposal: casting, performance, blocking, framing, pacing, color, music, tone, sound… they all work towards one goal.

Towards telling a story well.

So, the director tells a story, but he or she is not the one who puts it on paper. The director is not the originator. The big bang has already taken place by the time there is a director on board. It has taken place months or years earlier at the humble keyboard

of the writer. (Of course, the big bang could be a big whimper if there is no good direction to amplify the bang.)

3.

I am a writer–director. I tell my students that while I write, I — the writer — don't let near me the other part of me that is the director.

I want to protect the freedom of the writer, I want to be free to fool around, and that is why I need to avoid Milcho the director. He always worries. He worries about how to bring things in front of the camera, whether we can find an actor who can deliver such a difficult role, how to convey the foreboding feeling while keeping the pacing brisk, how to shoot a convincing battle scene on the inadequate budget, how to get the crew to the best–looking locations… Milcho the director is much more responsible, restrained and concerned than Milcho the writer.

In other words, while I write a screenplay, I try to stay with the writing. I try to do the things writers do (fantasizing, conceptualizing, inventing or playing), and avoid thinking of things directors do (casting, visualizing, blocking or pondering the music in the future film).

As a writer, I try to balance things between the fun of creation and the requirements of the piece I am writing. I am not talking about the practical requirements. I am talking about the requirements that stem from the responsibility the artist has to their work. I don't think the artist has a dialogue with the audience or with the film critics or historians — he or she has a dialogue only with the work of art itself. The audience can always be bribed, something well illustrated by the success of the formulaic blockbusters. The critic or the historian can be bribed too, as illustrated by the art–house genre or the Sundance genre or the humble–film–from–an–exotic–country–at–a–major–festival genre.

Working within the expectations of the viewers is a way of bribing them. It is the artist's job to go beyond the viewer's expectation, to expand them, to subvert them, to help the viewer reinvent their expectations.

(On a related subject, I must quote the wise man who described the relationship between the artist and the art critic as similar to the relationship between the donkey and the zoologist.)

While I write, I simply write. I keep the dialogue with the work itself going, and I try to have fun. I often start with a feeling or with a formal concept, then move on to the plot.

The plot is the real deal–breaker — it needs to excite me, to hold promise.

Creating a plot is easy, something I've learned from the stories I've loved all my life: comic books, serious books, historical research, good jokes, television, folk tales, other films….

I am aware of the fact that — in spite of the prevailing opinion among film funds, critics and studios — the story is usually not the reason we care for a film. We care for it for other, more intangible reasons — its taste, its smell, the feelings that get inside your joints or stick to the roof of your mouth, how the film treats you — the viewer… These things are partially created by the writer, but the director is the one who creates most of this magic dust. Of course, the magic dust would have nothing to stick to if there was no good story to sprinkle it on (so it would turn to just dust).

I write as if writing for another director, someone competent who will understand and appreciate the screenplay for its plot, characters, themes and depth, another director who does not need too many words or details in the screenplay, but who will occasionally appreciate an incisive sketch of the proposed visuals, or a fun twist of phrase in stage direction. Someone who will further develop the written word into a full–blown film.

I focus on:

. The plot (the *skeleton* I hang everything else on);

. The people in the film (also known as *characters*, who are sometimes versions of people I know in real life — twisted, re–imagined, combined, complicated or simplified — but more often entirely made up in the process of writing and — to a smaller degree — rehearsing);

. The dialogue (keeping it fat–free, while aiming to have the characters speak, rather than sound as if they were trying to deliver plot points or suggest emotions on behalf of the filmmaker),

. but most of all, I take great pleasure in the wonderful *surprises* that can happen only when creating art from scratch, when writing or painting or composing…. When imagining and inventing.

These irreverent surprises are why I write.

I try to enjoy the great sense of freedom that comes with creating from scratch.

Even though I treat the screenplay like a game of chess, I sometimes do not have a rational explanation, no good reason (nor rhyme) for the way things go in my story. The overall structure is there, and I stick to its common sense diligently, but on the ground — where it matters — I follow my nose, fancying myself a prairie hunter. Even though perfectly sharp and sober, I sometimes act as if drunk and dare to take a wrong turn. I try to listen to the story the way one listens to jazz: “This twist *feels* right, that one just does not.” My criteria are sharp and precise (to me at least), but by no means *rational*. Often the rational explanation is not obvious at first. Sometimes it never is.

In other words, if something feels right, I will put it in the screenplay, but I won’t necessarily have a good rational explanation as to why. It will just *feel* right. Still — and I want to underline this — it must feel right, it cannot be haphazardly thrown in, it should not be driven by exhibitionism or lack of discipline or — even worse — laziness, or — heaven forbid — narcissism.

As a matter of fact, the answer to the *why* question must be rock solid — it just does not have to be a *rational* rock solid answer.

I play in the sandbox with my keyboard, but I am aware that I am now a responsible adult.

(With this issue of intuition vs. the rational in making films, one could argue that experience in telling and hearing stories can make you internalize the rational, so then it comes out as intuition.)

At the beginning of the process there is the plot — the bread–and–butter of the script, the humble, but strong skeleton upon which we will hang the flesh, nerves and handsome face of the screenplay. Its gallop toward an emotionally satisfying conclusion is driven by common sense, but not by the need to have rational clarity.

This is one of the disagreements I have with the Hollywood script doctors and studios. We do not have to understand everything in the script to like it. I've seen many films that I fully understood, but I was still sorry that I wasted two hours of my life. I've also seen films that I do not understand to this day, but the thought of them fills me with joy. (I guess I prefer the script witch doctors to the Hollywood script doctors.)

Then, once Milcho the writer has completed the final draft, he delivers it to Milcho the director. The director in me usually accepts the script. He doesn't need many meetings, pitches or rewrites.

Then Milcho the director fires Milcho the writer.

4.

Let me repeat — I don't really hate directing. After all, directing is when you take the story to another level, add fantastic new dimensions. You are creating or re–creating worlds and landscapes, especially mind landscapes.

When I — as director — sit down to do the director's work — casting, storyboarding and blocking, location scouting, acting rehearsals — that is when I begin to get into the script, analyze, dissect, and expand upon the themes and tone of the screenplay. This is when

I begin to understand some of the surprises the writer in me had put in the script.

However, I dare not change things on paper, except for details that help clarify and refocus the ideas, themes, characters and plot.

When making directorial decisions on things that seem unrelated to the story — such as visual direction (the blocking, the mood, the colors, the lighting, the lenses) or even casting–I often get back to what the film is about. What is it that the writer wanted to say, as my grade–school teacher would put it?

I will make decisions guided by the discovery of what the film/ the script is really about. Of course, not all decisions are dictated by the big picture, but the important ones should be. The big picture should be hidden in the detail. God is in the details. It is up to the good director to decide which detail is hiding God in its nucleus, and which detail is simply detail.

Early on, I analyse and discuss the intentions of the script with the production designer. We come up with visual expansion on the screenplay, while at the same time I create the storyboard and discuss the approach with the director of photography.

Regardless of how well–written a screenplay is, the characters are incomplete until the actors and the director put their fingerprints all over them, internalizing and then spitting them out. I believe that a good actor will know more about his or her character than the writer or director.

I continue with this process of dissecting the screenplay and putting together the outlines of the film through pre–production. If there are changes in the script at any time during pre–production, we put them on paper, and distribute them to everybody. For example, while rehearsing with the actors, there is always a continuity person present, and she will amend the script.

And on towards the goal of actually shooting the film as closely to the script as possible.

5.

Everything I said might sound as if I have a well–defined way of writing and then translating the written word into a film. It is only partly true. My experiences have been all over the map. Thank god.

For example:

I toyed with the five–page synopsis for *Before the Rain* for about a year and a half before I felt ready to write the screenplay. Then, once I sat down, it took me about two weeks to write the first draft. What you see in the finished film is basically what was in that first draft. In the meantime, in development and while we were prepping, UK's Channel 4 (one of the co–producers) asked for a number of changes which had mainly to do with script doctoring by the book. I fought them, but consented to some. When Channel 4 pulled out of the film two weeks into production, thinking we would never finish the film, I promptly threw out the changes they demanded. Once we started shooting, I stuck to the script as to a gospel.

(This religious dedication to the gospel of the screenplay brought to a head my conflict with the producers of *Before the Rain*, a conflict that started when they unwittingly undercut the project in its infancy by wasting two precious months of development trying to figure out how to budget and schedule a feature film, quickly escalated over their vetoing my usual collaborators and over their insistence that a 1st Assistant Director needs only two weeks to prep an ambitious film shooting in two countries, one of which is perilously close to a war area, and came to a full bloom after the start of principal photography was delayed by almost a week because of extended haggling between the co–producers that resulted in shipping the camera truck to the wrong country. After weeks of pressure on the director to magically make up during the shoot the time squandered in development and prep, one day I discovered that several scenes were missing from the shooting schedule. They had simply vanished. When I confronted the producers, they admitted

that they had removed them from the shooting schedule to make up for lost time without consulting or informing me. The scenes were short, but their removal would nevertheless affect the screenplay — and the film. I resigned from the project on the spot and walked away. I was off the job in my hotel room for several hours before the producers reinstated the missing scenes. I called off the one–man strike. The gospel remained intact.)

On *Dust*, by contrast, I did many drafts. The script really came together only when — at one point during the long financing and development process — I wrote it from scratch. I didn't look at the old draft while writing the new one. I ended up with a simpler script, slimmer by more than 20 pages, more manageable structure and more laconic characters.

We did extensive historical research as half of the film was set in the Ottoman Empire and the American Wild West (and the other half in contemporary New York City). Our bibliographical list consisted of more than 160 entries. All of this data and the ambition of the film guided the director in me to include a lot of detail in the film. This contributed texture to the tissue of the film, but also stood in contrast to the lean nature of the text.

Example three: At one point, I took on directing a film for 20th Century Fox, *Ravenous*. It was written by a young Hollywood writer and it held the potential of a dark vampire–themed film about cannibalism in the snow–covered mountains of the Wild West. I saw it as a dark but humorous tale along the lines of *Rosemary's Baby*. The studio saw it as *Scream 5*. Shortly before we were scheduled to start filming, the studio head flew to London from Los Angeles; the writer and a creative executive came with her. The producer and I were summoned from Prague where we were prepping the film. Over a 20–hour session at a nice London hotel we went through the script line by line and the studio head changed a number of things before we went into production. The thing I missed the most after the excision and plastic

surgery was a surreal adrenaline–fueled cannibal chase scene in the snow which saved the studio some money, but left a gaping hole in the middle of the story. I disagreed with the studio interfering in the creative work, and that caused conflict. Predictably, *Scream 5* won and *Rosemary's Baby* lost, and I was soon off the project.

On *Three to Kill*, example four, I had the opposite task — I was writing a script for another director. I was adopting a noir book by the French writer Jean–Patrick Manchette for a young Italian director. The book had previously been made into a film with Alain Delon, but I had not seen it and insisted on not seeing it. The book was lean and mean, to the point, and verb–driven. It was easy to turn it into a screenplay. What was more demanding was trying to discern what the first–time director wanted, what would excite him and what would highlight his strengths.

6.

I'll zero in in greater detail on three specific examples from my writing–dash–directing experience. I will try to break down the key decisions made when directing these three scenes as an example of one writer–director's approach to the dynamic between the writer and director when both tasks are performed by the same person.

In my film *Before the Rain*, there is a sequence consisting of three scenes featuring Aleksandar, the protagonist, and his extended family and friends: (1) feast, (2) wedding and (3) bedroom.

Aleksandar has just returned from London to his remote village in the Macedonian mountains, and the family throws a feast for him. His cousins and aunt have gathered around a table, drinks and food keep coming, people chat and joke. It is a scene of warmth with a whiff of threat hanging in the air. The overall feeling is that of familial comfort. In the screenplay, this first scene

of the sequence — the feast — peters out, ending on a mild joke. Then the merry family hears the heavy sound of drums and music approaching — a wedding party.

Next — in the second scene — the initial group is observing the village wedding from a little knoll. In the merry group's P.O.V., a glorious wide shot resembles an old master painting: a river of people cascades down the steep village streets. The bride in heavy traditional costume is riding a horse astride, guests dance and wave a flag as the drummer and musicians play syncopated folk music. The portrayal of an ancient ritual helps establish the context and the contrast. A few lines of drunken dialogue from the group observing follow, one of the characters falls off a chair. End of scene.

Then a hard cut takes us to Aleksandar's bedroom. He is hung–over and an old flame comes to pay him a visit. Scene three begins.

That was what the writer in me wrote.

However, the director in me was not entirely satisfied. I didn't want to be rude to the writer, but it was not working. Yes, the necessary information was delivered, the relationships within the family and the community were established. The characters were sketched out for further development. The tone of this new portion of the film was set up.

But, the inner dynamics of the sequence were creaky. We were already almost two thirds into the film and languid introductions would be counterproductive. We needed to be thrusting the action along at the same time as we were introducing new characters (two thirds into the film) and establishing new relationships. In addition, we were recently coming off two long montage sequences that got us from London to the remote village, and now needed to get going.

Of the three scenes which constituted this family sequence, I felt that the problem was with the first two. They were slowing us down, and we couldn't afford that. Yet, we needed the information and the tone that the feast scene provides, as well as the wider

context provided by the wedding scene. There was also the added bonus of serious production value in the wedding scene — beautiful tableaux, wide shots, dozens and dozens of extras, exotic costume, fascinating music…

I did two things to try solve the problem. One of them I seldom do, but the other one I sometimes employ, even though not extensively.

I made a change to the script on the spot, while filming. That is the thing I very seldom do. Not that the script is sacred, but by the time I start filming, I usually have gone through several drafts, extensive analysis while storyboarding and scouting, and weeks of rehearsal. All the changes that I may feel are necessary would have already been implemented.

This change to the script while filming involved the end of the feast scene. I felt that as it was written it was ending with a whimper. I asked for a few moments to think, something the director was not supposed to do on this film, considering how tight the schedule was. I decided to add a little coda. The family has been eating and drinking for some time when — according to this change — a white–bearded grandpa says in an improvised non–sequitor: “C’mon, Alex, take a picture of us.” So, Aleksandar — who is a Pulitzer–winning photo–journalist — sets the camera on automatic and runs to join his family for a group portrait. As they face the camera with smiles, a fly lands on his forehead. He smacks it dead at the very moment the shutter clicks and he is posterized with the hand on his forehead and a silly grin on his face. Everyone laughs and we have one of the iconic moments of *Before the Rain*[2],

[2] I riffed on this moment in my next film, *Dust*. An Ottoman major is having a photo taken. He and his soldiers are posing with the severed head of a local rebel, when a fly disturbs the major. He slaps it at the very moment that the photo is taken. His sudden movement causes the head he's holding in the other hand to exit the frame of the photograph. Flash! The photo captures the soldiers and the major on a white horse, his hand on his forehead, the trophy head in the other hand out of frame. History registers the mundane and misses the historic.

a still that ended up accompanying many newspaper articles about the film, and at least one about the Balkans in general.

The scene ended with what it was about — the family, but it also ended on a completely unexpected, humorous note. This coda made the scene more human, and it also provided a micro–crescendo which set the table for a hard transition to the next scene.

The second thing I did in trying to make the sequence work better is something I sometimes do — I changed things in the cutting room. This is not the infamous “We'll fix it in post.” It's rather a re–write.

I often tell my students: the director who does not exercise the possibility of refocusing, recalibrating or outright reworking the story in the editing room is passing on a mighty storytelling tool.

What you have on film or on your hard drive as you begin the editing process is *always* different from what you had on paper. That's the nature of the medium. It is your duty as a director to assess what you have in the can, to see the new strengths and weaknesses of the material you have in the can and to find the best way to exploit the former and underplay the latter.

Like it or not, the editing room is where you write the final draft of the film.

So, I killed the wedding scene. It wasn't adding enough to the film to justify eating up valuable time so late in the game. The buildup was too slow.

And as for the production value and the ritual? Most of it I threw away. But not all of it.

I moved several shots — the beautiful painterly wide shot of the village with the many extras, and a couple medium shots of the backlit drummer and musicians — to an entirely different place in the film. We moved them to the moment after Aleksander has decided to take action and is on his way to the sheepfold. In the new cut, he hears the distant sound of drums. I actually used a casual off–screen glance by the actor. I added music a couple of seconds before he looks off screen, so it looked as if he was reacting to

the distant music, and I then cut to the few wedding shots from the other scene, as if they are his P.O.V. from a hilltop down at the wedding in the village.

This gave the moment a different meaning. The lively wedding was not only establishing the social context, but it was now being contrasted with the tense action unfolding at the finale of the film. It was put more firmly in the service of the story.

Back to the original three–scene sequence — here is what we had in the film after rewriting the script on the set and in the editing room: a warm family gathering overlayed with hints of danger that ends on a seemingly goofy high note (which becomes iconic once the film is released), then a hard cut to the bedroom scene which proceeds as written.

The wedding shots, severely truncated, slide to a later point in the film, enriching that later scene.

The combination of a small, but important re–write during filming and another intervention in the editing room helped fine–tune this portion of *Before the Rain*. It helped establish the relationships and propelled the plot, while moving the film at a clip.

This type of rewrite on the set and in the editing room is not my first choice, but is by no means uncommon. It can also be very effective and can be an exciting element in the filmmaking process.

7.

Here is another example from the same film of how the writer and director in me collaborated:

At another point in *Before the Rain*, a couple is on the run. He is a young Macedonian defrocked monk, she is an Albanian teenager in distress. A gang of Albanian men — her family — surrounds them. They are looking to save her from an opposing clan. Still, when the armed band lays their hands on the couple, her grandfa-

ther punishes and humiliates her publicly for her transgressions, beating her brutally, albeit reluctantly. Then her brother erupts in a fit of jealous rage and shoots her dead.

Now, in all the drafts of the synopsis, the brother killed both the girl and the monk. This was a befitting tragic end to the modern–day civil war Romeo and Juliet. They are both dead.

Yet, Kiril, the monk, refused to die. It didn't feel right to kill him. I don't know why. I could claim a number of rational explanations why not to kill him, such as that in *Before the Rain* different ethnic groups always kill their own, making thus the point that any war, and especially a civil war is in fact fratricide. The girl's brother and the monk are not related.

However, the real reason was that Kiril, the character, simply refused to die. I tried killing him on paper, but he wouldn't budge. And I followed his wishes.

The fact that Kiril did not die on the mountaintop gave me the opportunity to bring him back to the film, later in London. It also allowed me to have him sit on the tattered suitcase next to her body, looking on in silent shock as the life drains out of her. It allowed for a final exchange between the lovers: he says, "I'm sorry," she — referring to their inability to understand each other's languages and to his now broken vow of silence — puts her finger on her lips, "Shhh."

The tone of the silent goodbye scene was developed *after* I completed the screenplay. The director contrasted wide shots of a sole human in a vast, spectacular landscape with tight close–ups of the dying girl and the stunned ex–monk[3]. These close–ups turned out to be an important tool at this point in the story.

[3] Since we were running out of time during the main shoot, we picked up the closeups of Kiril and Zamira against sky and neutral background on several later occasions — a few weeks after we filmed that particular scene, in a different location in Macedonia; and during post–production, in London, some six months after we initially shot the bulk of the scene.

As for the wide shots — we invested a lot of time and energy in finding the most appropriate locations. We ruthlessly combined different places, creating cinematic space that does not exist.

I also filmed the gang walking away in silent procession after Zamira's death, passing by the heart–broken Kiril seated on the brown suitcase. In the editing room, though, I decided to eliminate that part of the scene, as it felt at odds with the quiet and intimate way the scene was building to a crescendo. In the end, he and she are important, not the gang. The music suggests a fleeting moment and the scene ends with a single flute accompanying the image of a lone boy under a solitary tree. He is alive, but alone. On the wings of the solo flute, we travel from the Macedonian mountains to a claustrophobic shower stall in London, where a woman breaks down in tears under the shower. Part 2 begins.

I remember watching this moment with an audience at the Cineteca di Bologna. I somehow managed to view the film as a viewer, not a maker, and I was excited by the leap, the emotional crescendo that is irreverently cut off, so we can now dart towards a completely new story and new emotions. Or so it seemed.

This became one of the most important (and I dare say, poignant) moments in the film, a pivotal point when the cheeky leap from a place to a distant, seemingly unconnected place happens right after an emotional high note. It almost feels like a leap in time. The lift off and the landing together create new quality, presenting the director with an opportunity for a subdued (or an operatic) tour–de–force.

The writer thought up this jarring, radical leap in the story (leaving behind everything we had developed up to that point — the story, the characters, the setting and the atmosphere in Macedonia), writing this cheeky moment and disjointed (but ultimately elegant) structure. However, the tone of this transition was developed by the director, not by the writer: the pacing, the music, the contrasting colors, the contrasting shot size, the timing of the change…

In other words: the potential for this moment of directorial fireworks emerged from what was on the page and from the writer's freedom to be irreverent, but it was duly amplified and given depth by the disciplined directorial work.

8.

The final example from my experience as writer–director which features different collaboration patterns, rhythm and methods between the writer and director residing in the same person is probably most challenging, but so was the film.

At the very beginning of the process of creating *Mothers*, I had a real–life story. A series of rape–murders of retired cleaning women in a small Macedonian town leads to the arrest of a journalist who was reporting on the very same crimes. He is then found dead in his prison cell, his head in a bucket of water. The authorities declare it a suicide by drowning. I was interested in this unusual story, but I was also very interested in the background — the suffocating life in a small town.

People often approach me with their life stories or some incredible events they believe are worthy of turning into a movie. I have been offered a number of serious bio–pics ranging from James Dean to 9th Century Macedonian saints to Nikola Tesla or Mother Teresa. I always politely decline, explaining that I never work from real–life events. I have an ethical problem with it. I wasn't there, so — in spite of all the research — how could I know what really happened? It is a big responsibility, knowing that most people will treat even the most frivolous biopic as a textbook or a gospel. I guess that is the power of cinema[4].

[4] On a related subject: when I started developing *Dust*, I asked my assistant, a recent Yale graduate to compile a list of research material on the Wild West. She came back the next day with a list of five John Wayne movies and nothing else

Nevertheless, I knew right away after reading this story[5] — a journalist accused of the rape–murders he was reporting on, who then drowned in a bucket of water — that it had to be a documentary because: (1) The story was too fascinating to pass up; (2) It's so unbelievable that a film with actors would have a credibility problem.

So, in spite of my general suspicion of the documentary idiom, I decided to tell this story in a documentary format.

More importantly, tackling a documentary was a challenge. For me, it's easy to make a documentary, to tell a fact–based story in an idiom related to journalism (I used to work as a journalist).

I knew this story, told as a documentary, was going to be only a part of a feature–length film. I did not see the documentary as a full–length film. Instead, I saw it as only one segment in a film consisting of three parts. These three parts would contrast and complement each other to create a bigger whole.

I was not interested in telling a story of crime and punishment, but was instead interested in telling a story about telling truth and lies.

Early on, I didn't know what the other two parts would consist of. I started experimenting with various conceptual approaches. One of them involved both a real and a false documentary, plus a reenactment — all telling the same story, but coming to different conclusions — in one and the same film.

As I was developing the other two parts, I realized I had to start filming the doc while the iron was hot. I did not want to run the risk of the real people involved in the story getting too far from it. There were also practical considerations — what if the story in their heads started to fade away or even change, as stories in our heads always do, or what if some of the people became unavailable?

So, I started filming the documentary portion, while I was still writing the other two parts of the script — and thus the big picture.

[5] For source citation see footnote 2 from the next essay p. 47.

I went to the small town, shot establishing and mood shots, found a local collaborator and started putting together the puzzle. We interviewed the families of the victims, the family of the journalist, and then the investigators who broke the case, the judge involved, the forensic pathologists, neighbors, observers, etc.

The information I was putting on film (or, rather – on hard drive) was in turn informing the big picture. Influenced by what we were already shooting, I dropped the initial elaborate idea of making three versions of the same events – the fictionalized version, the fake documentary and the real documentary.

At one point I had a tiny revelation – why not go with your instinct the way you'd do it in a jazz piece or an abstract painting? Don't think of a unified, unifying story. Think only of a unifying feeling. The manner of the film would still be realistic, but the big picture would make sense only on a non–narrative plane.

Instead, add two fiction portions to the documentary part. Feel free to develop stories that have nothing to do with the journalist story, connecting only on a different – non–narrative – plane.

Mothers was always intended as an experiment of sorts. Now with the decision to make two parts of the film fiction, and the third a documentary, and with the decision that the three stories do not have to be linked plot–wise, the film gained interesting features.

I started searching for the two fictional stories. The three stories needed to get along, to suit each other, to live in harmony next to each other in one and the same film, even if they have nothing to do with each other in terms of the narrative.They needed to be connected by thematic echoes and amplifications, by the tone and by the big picture itself: the nature of truth and how we tell it.

This is a fairly unusual combination – fiction and documentary. We perceive the two in a completely different way; our expectations and the way we experience them are different. And therein lie the experiment – what will happen if we just treat both (doc and fiction) as simple means or tools in telling a story, the way

an artist like Rauschenberg mixes photographs or even a blanket within an old–fashioned painting, or Picasso pastes a newspaper clipping on an oil painting?

For parts one and two of the film — the fiction parts — I chose real–life stories told to me by friends. The event underlying part one had happened some eighteen years ago; the one underlying part two more than thirty years ago. One happened to a little girl in a big city, the other to old folks in a deserted village. They had seemingly nothing in common with the documentary about a serial killer of retired cleaning women and an alleged suicide in a bucket of water.

Yet, they felt like they fit perfectly together. The contrast and the resonance felt just right. I had my three sides of the triangle–film.

Because I had to start filming the documentary before things on the ground changed, I started filming while I was still writing. By the time I felt I had shot enough of the doc, the script for the fiction parts was almost completed. After we filmed those, we turned to editing them. Once we were almost done, we returned to the doc portion and started editing it. When that was done, we went back to the real–life small town and filmed the missing links in the documentary portion.

The day–to–day writing of the fiction screenplay was not affected by the developments in making the documentary, but shooting the doc had opened the doors to more inspired thinking about the rest of the big picture.

The writing and the directing did not exactly happen at the same time, but I came as close to interweaving the two in the same span of time as I would ever dare.

Thus, in *Mothers* I wrote, then filmed, then edited, then wrote again, then filmed some more, then edited, then filmed yet again, and then edited the whole. This is very different from the way I usually work and from the way the industry operates.

On this project, the writer and the director in me interwove their work. The writer let the director shoot before the entire script was

finished, and the director allowed the writer to write a lion share of the script after the filming had already started. This was new and it was different. It was going on a limb.

And, in a significant way, it was also liberating. It allowed for freshness that is seldom possible when making a film. It allowed a certain level of spontaneity that the necessarily bulky process of filmmaking restricts. This freshness and freedom marked not only a new approach for me, but also new quality in that I was able to let the instinct have a bigger part in the final product. I wasn't writing lines of dialogue on the set, nor letting the actors improvise, nor re–shooting the ending after testing the film with audience, but I was writing big portions and shaping the structure of the overall screenplay *after* I started filming. This was an experiment in a somewhat different film form, yet I was very happy with the experience and with the result.

I don't know whether I'll ever have a similar experience, but it certainly opened new possibilities. It demonstrated that it is possible to make intuition play a bigger part in the creation of this bulky cyborg animal called film and still come up with a terrific film.

It also illustrated the fact that the process does not have to be linear — if you dare go there. Mixing it up does sound like a sacrilege in the industry, but there is a possibility — however dangerous — that it might yield unexpectedly good results.

I think that I would be more open to other experiments where strong intuition or a well–thought–out framework would allow for a different schedule or a different kind of give–and–take between the writing and directing. If this means more fun (while still effectively managing the overall practice of making a film), and especially if it results in a good film, I'd be game for it.

III.
BASED ON A TRUE STORY:
TRUTH AND FICTION, ART AND FAITH[1]

Three years ago I read a fascinating article in the *New York Times*[2]. The article told of Vlado Taneski, a Macedonian journalist. He was a correspondent for two major Macedonian newspapers from a small town, Kichevo. Taneski had been covering the case of several missing women in the town. They were all elderly, some of them used to work as cleaning women, and they all lived in the same neighborhood. They could almost see each other's houses from their windows. Taneski wrote that the retired women had all gone missing over a period of three years. Their bodies were later found in plastic bags, discarded in illegal dumps, after having been raped and strangled.

No sooner did Taneski finish writing his most recent report on the unknown serial killer than he was arrested and charged with rape and murder. His DNA was found inside the victims, his wife's

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[1] Presented at the Film and Faith conference, Pontifical Lateran University, The Vatican, 2011. Published in: Milcho Manhevski, *Truth and Fiction: Notes on (Exceptional) Faith in Art*. Brooklyn, NY: punctum books, 2012.

[2] See Dan Bilefsky, "Murder Mystery in Macedonia," the *New York Times*, June 23, 2008: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/23/world/europe/23iht-macedonia.4.13924930.html

hair was found on the clothes the victims' bodies were wrapped in, and the evidence started accumulating.

Taneski was a neighbor. He lived in the same neighborhood as the victims; one of them lived only three houses down from Taneski. All the victims knew him as a friendly neighbor. Their children went to the same schools. They shopped in the same stores. They chatted when they met in the street. Sometimes they would help each other. He may have asked one of them to help him clean his house — his wife lived in the capital, and he was a man alone. He was well–respected as a solid citizen, a journalist, a pillar of his community.

I read the article and pictured Kichevo. It is a small town where people know each other and most live quiet and conservative lives. Many businesses, most of them industrial plants, have closed their doors over the last twenty years. Unemployment is high. Macedonian and Albanian peasants from the countryside come to town on market days to sell fruit, vegetables and their wares. Children play basketball right next to a car wreck left to rot in the school yard. Attractive women socialize in the downtown cafes.

It was hard to believe that these hideous crimes took place there. We are used to serial killers in America, not in the sleepy Macedonian countryside. And this was not just any serial killer, but a rapist who preyed on retired cleaning women. This is not something one associates with the country I know.

To make things stranger, Taneski not only wrote the articles about the serial killer (including one titled "The Investigation Stalled," where he chides the police for shoddy investigative work), but he also went to see the families of the victims after the women had disappeared and before the bodies were discovered. He went to the families asking for statements, information, and for photographs of the missing women to accompany his articles. The families kindly obliged.

The Vlado Taneski story went around the world: a crime reporter who allegedly killed by night, and wrote about it by day.

Three days later an even more bizarre twist of events was reported. Vlado Taneski was found dead in his prison cell, his head in a bucket of water.[3]

"Now, this is impossible," many readers exclaimed.

It does seem impossible. Even after two years, the official investigation has not uncovered what had happened that night. The coroner reported that the death was caused by drowning; he reported no signs of violence on Taneski's body or traces of any mind–altering substances in his blood.

The press from as far away as Korea, Argentina, and the United States had a field day with the story: a crime reporter — suspected of the serial rapes and murders of retired cleaning women whom he was reporting on — ends up dead in a bucket of water in his prison cell.

"Now, *this* is impossible," is the way many would describe this string of events. "It can't be true," others would say.

I myself read this story in two articles in the *New York Times* in the summer of 2008. I am a storyteller and filmmaker, and I often look at things in real life, or read books and stories, thinking what they would look like if one tried to convert them into films. This story stood out. It was one of those stories that are unbelievable, yet true.

"But, it really happened" — this is something a student of mine once told me after I remarked that his idea for a film did not hold water dramaturgically. His reaction is typical of a common belief which holds that if a film is based on events that really took place the film itself should be believable and believed.

Yet, we have all seen bad and unbelievable films based on real events. And we have all seen great films that were entirely the product of someone's imagination.

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[3] See Dan Bilefsky, "Macedonian Murder Suspect Found Dead in Cell," the *New York Times*, June 24, 2008: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/24/world/europe/24macedonia.html, and Helena Smith, "The Shocking Story of the Newspaper Crime Reporter Who Knew Too Much," the *Guardian*, June 23, 2008: http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/jun/24/pressandpublishing.international crime

Still, just like my former student, most of us do look at films differently or accept stories in a different way if we believe that they are true. We watch a documentary film in a different way from the way we watch a drama. We read a magazine article in a different way from the way in which we read a short story. Sometimes, we even treat a film with actors differently than another film with actors if we are told that the first film is based on something that really happened.

Why?

What is it that makes us value a work of artifice (an art piece) differently depending on our knowledge or conviction of whether that work of artifice is based on events that really took place?

Mind you — this is not a case of actually observing reality. We are not watching events as they unfold. We are not observing *the truth happen*. What we are observing in a film based on a true story is a highly artificial construct. We are observing actors delivering lines written by a scriptwriter; actors and landscapes and objects filmed in a way determined by the director and by the director of photography and by the production designer. What is left out of the film is determined by the director and the editor.

What we are observing is a work of art — or sometimes just a movie — with its own inner logic, rhythm, development, and feel. These are all created by the filmmakers, usually deliberately and in line with numerous conventions established between the filmmaker and the viewer, and following the concept or idea the filmmakers had in mind all along.

The same applies to a documentary.

When we watch a documentary we are not observing reality happen in front of our eyes. What we are observing is a film. A documentary film. With its own set of rules and conventions, with its own conclusions as to what exactly happened. These conclusions will sometimes depend on the point of view or on the context the particular film establishes. It will depend on the conclusion

the filmmakers have come to while making the film, or — quite often — before even setting out to make the (documentary) film. Regardless of how faithful the filmmakers want to be to the events they are talking about (and which most of them have not witnessed firsthand), such a film is a reconstruction. Or a construction.

In addition, the *feel* of the documentary will depend almost entirely on the filmmakers, and this may remove the film one more step from reality — and sometimes even from the truth. Quite often the feeling we'd have when we walk out of a film, even if it is documentary, will be very different from the feel we'd have if we were to observe reality instead of watching a film about reality.

The feel is what lies between the lines, what hides behind the story; yet, the feel is precisely what makes us buy the story or discard it; the feel is what makes us like a film or not.

The film will tell its story from a particular point of view, sometimes an "objective" point of view. Yet, reality is never "objective"; it is simply reality. Furthermore, the tone of the film will be determined by the filmmakers: they will choose how the story unfolds (the order might be chronological, or may follow a particular character, or perhaps it saves the surprises for convenient moments in the film, thus creating turning points), the way in which the story is presented (what moment does the film linger on, who are we asked to root for?), the voice–over narration (if there is narration, is it "the voice of God," is it outraged, or ironic, or funny?), the music (if there is music at all), etc. The filmmakers will of course determine the order and length of every single shot, the color grading, the background sounds. All of these elements will shape the film in a way desired by the filmmakers.

All of this (and much more) should make the film an expression or a reflection of the filmmakers. It will also help make the film a richer experience for the regular viewer. More importantly, it would also shape what and how the viewer sees as the story and the "message" of the film.

Yet, it will remove the film one more step from reality — and sometimes even from the truth. Quite often the feeling we would have when we walk out of a film, even if it is documentary, will be very different from the feeling we would have if we were to observe reality instead of watching a film about reality.

In other words, the film — any film — will be different from *the reality of the truth* it is talking about.

Why then insist on the "faithfulness" or "truthfulness" of the film? No one has ever said, except on advice of their lawyer, "This film was entirely made up. Nothing in it is true." On the contrary, filmmakers often highlight their film's connection to real events or real people, usually at the very beginning of their film. "Based on a True Story."

Does it make a film more truthful if it is based on a true story?

Or do we insist on the "faithfulness," the "truthfulness," the "based on a true story" as a way of giving the film more credibility? In the sense of, "This is not just something I dreamed up. It really happened, I am reporting it, and that — handling the truth — makes me a serious member of society." Is that why a lot of serious people prefer documentaries?

As the former student of mine would put it: "But, it really happened!"

Do we use it because the tagline "based on a true story" helps the viewer suspend their disbelief? A viewer walks into a theatre and she is supposed to enter the filmmaker's world. It may be a world she likes or a world she doesn't like; it may be a world she believes, or a world she doesn't believe (a world of constructed connections and artificial feelings, instead of a world of coherent vision and compact drama).

The filmmaker needs to gain the viewer's trust. And this is where the filmmaker may reach out for some help and declare: "What I am saying makes sense because it really happened. Trust me."

As every artist knows — or, at least, feels in his or her bones — it is essential to gain the viewer's trust if you expect the work to resonate with the recipient. It is not easy to establish the *field of reality* in a dramatic piece, so using the "true story" crutch may be helpful in gaining the viewer's trust.

Of course, every work of art has to *earn* the viewer's trust.

The viewer comes to the piece with a level of trust, but the artist has to satisfy — or, if possible, expand upon — this trust. The viewer trusts that the film will be worthy of her expectations, that it will be an emotional, intellectual, and perhaps even a learning experience for her. She trusts that you will take her by the hand and rule her inner world for two hours. She has faith in your ability to deliver, but she also has expectations — she expects something to happen that will move her emotions and also provoke and challenge her intellect.

Now, what is interesting about this trust — or faith — is that it goes both ways.

Or, rather, it is something that happens twice: once when the artist creates the piece, and again when the viewer takes it in.

So, the trust is essential for a work of art to:

(1) be created, and,

(2) be consumed.

We are talking here about a high level of trust.

It involves strangers, people who have never met, yet people who feel they can communicate honestly on a profound level. This communication on the part of the artist involves putting his or her inner world on the line, working with one's heart on one's sleeve. It deals with most intimate aspects of one's personality, as art does come from the deepest place in a person.

This trust on the part of the artist does not necessarily involve the viewer at the other end. The artist's real dialogue is perhaps more profound when they communicate with the piece of art they are creating than with the potential inhaler of this art down the line.

Which does not make the requirement of deep trust less intense. On the contrary — it is probably easier to lie to the audience than to the work of art itself.

I need to trust that the film I am making is worthwhile in order for me to invest my emotional and, often, physical well–being, plus a minimum of two (and in one case, for myself, seven) years of my life.

Making this choice ("Is it worthwhile or not?") is a process that could involve practical issues (is the film financed, are there any "names" attached, who is distributing the film, is it based on a successful book, is this a popular genre, etc.?). For me, though, it is more important whether a film I am about to embark on making speaks to me. Does it excite me months or even years after I originally had the idea to make the film? This is not really something you can squeeze into a rational explanation — the simplest way to describe it is to compare it to falling in love. Both making art and falling in love are about translating impulses and feelings into actions in the material world.

Most importantly, I have to have faith in this undertaking in order for myself to strip down to the core and bare my soul, my real emotions, and my deepest thoughts on essential issues, such as "why love?" or "why live?" to name just two.

It is important that I strip down in order to reach the emotional and conceptual essence of what I want to say, even when my work does not necessarily seem personal. Yet, it is this personal involvement that provides the basis for art.

Again, I don't need to talk directly about my personal concerns, but I need to invest myself into my art for it to gain that breath of life. Craft alone is not enough.

Of course, every piece of art has to contain the truth. But, not the truth of "what happened." It needs to contain the truth of *how things are* — and the difference between "what happened" and "how things are" is what is important. Is it the events (and by ex-

tension, the facts) of what happened, or is it the emotional and conceptual underpinning and thus understanding of how things are?

While making my art, I am communicating with my piece, not with the audience or with myself. My commitment is to the piece of art alone. Nothing can make my faith in my work relative. The art piece is not negotiable.

It is a little bit like a musician on stage, playing his instrument with the light in his eyes. He is wrapped up in the music, and he becomes aware of the audience only when they start applauding.

The honesty of my relationship with my piece, plus my ability to communicate this onto the work of art, is what inspires faith in the viewer.

For her part, the viewer — as I've said — comes to the battlefield, or to the bedroom, or to the cinema theatre with herself also exposed, even if to a smaller degree. She comes and says, "I like this kind of film, I am investing my time, two hours of my life, and my emotional expectations in your work. I believe you to the point of crying because an actor on the screen pretends to be dying. Do this for me."

Both of us are taking a major leap of faith.

What the filmmaker does with this faith is essential. If the artist takes it seriously and repays it multiple times with his or her work, it becomes a type of *love*.

I approach the film I am creating with faith. The viewer approaches the film she is watching with faith. There is no film and no art without this faith.

This is it: faith in the art piece itself to transcend the moment.

A perverse question floats up to the surface here:

Did Vlado Taneski (if he was, indeed, the real murderer) need the reality of the rapes and murders so that he could write about them? It is as if he could not just write about them, or invent them, but he needed to report about them. Could that be part of what happened?

Not too long ago a viewer asked me why I decided to make the film about Vlado Taneski as a documentary?

Yes, I did make a film, *Mothers*, about the case of the Kichevo reporter who died in a bucket of water in prison, after being charged with raping and killing the retired cleaning women he was writing about.

However, the story of Vlado Taneski, told as a documentary, was only part of the film, only one of three completely unrelated stories that comprise my film *Mothers*. The other two segments are dramatic fictions, with actors and scripted dialogue. Yet, they are both based on real events. What unfolds in these two fiction segments of the film is based on what happened to two friends of mine. Thus all three stories were based on real events, but they were treated differently; I applied radically different cinematic approaches.

Truth is extremely important, and I fulfilled my obligation to it in *Mothers* by trying to get to the bottom of what happened in these complicated series of events, both in terms of facts and context. I also tried to give everybody involved a chance to share their experiences and perspectives. Yet, this attempt to tell the facts and to satisfy different perspectives was not the most important thing.

What was more important was the following: I was trying to ask questions about the nature of truth, rather than solve what was true and what was not in the particular case.

We see different permutations of truth and lies in the three parts of *Mothers*.

In a structuralist manner, we are finally faced with considering the medium itself, the font the poem is printed in, the texture of the canvas, the clash and marriage of the documentary and fictional approaches in one and the same piece.

So, *Mothers* is comprised of three unrelated stories — two of which are dramatic fictions and one a documentary.

In the first story, two nine–year–old girls report a flasher to the police even though they never saw him. In the second story,

three filmmakers meet the only residents of a deserted village — an elderly brother and sister who have not spoken to each other in 16 years. And in the third story, retired cleaning women are found raped and strangled in a small town. In a way, you could say that the fiction slowly turns into a documentary.

The film is intended to work like the triptychs you see in churches or museums, where the three paintings function as one unit and work and riff in relation to each other. The three paintings are complete on their own, but they really tell a story only when seen as a whole. When you put them side by side, their differences are emphasized, as are their similarities. We are asked to consider them in a new light.

The most obvious link between the three stories in *Mothers* is the fact that all three narratives portray dark aspects of life in contemporary Macedonia. Yet, these stories could easily take place almost anywhere in the world. What also links them is the interest in victims and perpetrators, and in lies and truth.

However, the more interesting link between the three is how they are connected by tone and theme. I am not interested in narrative devices where one story neatly dovetails into another. Been there, done that. With *Mothers*, I was more interested in a Spartan, austere film, where the connections would be made in the mind of the beholder, and these connections would not necessarily be narrative. In the end, what matters most is the complex *feeling* created in the mind of the viewer who is looking at all three, seemingly unrelated stories, together.

The stories are about the nature of truth rather than about truth itself. The more we learn about the truth, the less important the factual truth becomes, and the more important the essential truth and the emotional truth of a living person are. The facts are important, but in the end, experiencing the facts, the love and the suffering and what to do with them are more important than the facts.

These three stories in *Mothers* never really come together on the narrative level. The fact that they remain unconnected plot–wise, and, more importantly, the fact that I mix drama and documentary (or as some people would have it, “truth and fiction”) is not very common. Documentary and drama usually don’t mix. When they do, the drama is often just a re–enactment of what the documentary talks about, as if the documentary needs clarifications or as if it needs more convincing (or “entertaining”) ways of making its so–called “points.”

I wanted to combine these two approaches, two genres, two kinds of filmmaking. I felt there was no need to be restricted in the way I used the material, in the style and approach, the way we have been taught. Painting has been using found objects for about a century now. Many great artists have been incorporating found objects in their art pieces. The shock of seeing an unexpected other medium (found object) within a painting or sculpture adds a new level to the experience. Artists like Picasso and Rauschenberg have created beautiful works of art by using objects seemingly incongruous with a work of painterly art, such as a blanket, linoleum, bicycle handlebars, stuffed goat or newspaper photographs. Yet, what really matters in the final piece is not the shock that we are looking at unexpected material where we don’t expect it, but rather the fact that the found object has been incorporated into the art piece in a way that feels seamless in terms of the overall idea and result and contributes to a great piece of art.

In other words, the novelty of incorporating found objects in a work of art (or of mixing drama and documentary in a substantial way) is not enough. The art itself still needs to work. It needs to be good.

Why couldn’t film expand the technological and artistic means at its disposal by freely mixing documentary and fiction? Why do those two approaches (documentary and fiction) have to be considered mutually exclusive? Is it something in the nature of our

perception of the work of art, the work of telling stories, of creating something out of nothing that makes us treat the drama and documentary as separate animals? After all, a story is just a story, isn't it?

This is where we neatly circle back to an earlier point: We watch a documentary film in a different way from the way we watch a drama. We read a magazine article in a different way from the way in which we read a short story. Sometimes, we even treat a film that employs actors differently than a regular drama when we are told that the film is based on something that really happened. We treat these works based on truth or reporting on the truth in a different way.

Why?

I am not sure.

Several years ago, I screened my first film, *Before the Rain* (1994), at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. That film consists of three love stories set in London and Macedonia against the backdrop of tension and potential violence that is about to erupt, both in London and in Macedonia. Some of the tension is caused, "excused," or enhanced by ethnic intolerance. However, there was no violence in Macedonia at the time. The film was made eight years before an ethnic conflict — or what was being explained as an ethnic conflict — actually erupted in Macedonia.

Yet, since *Before the Rain* came from Macedonia, and Macedonia had only recently declared its independence from Yugoslavia, which itself was at that time torn apart by wars of civil disintegration along ethnic lines, many people looked for clues about the nature of the actual wars in this film.

I did not feel that watching *Before the Rain* would help anyone understand the facts of these actual wars in Yugoslavia. (For starters, there were no politicians in *Before the Rain*.) My intention was to talk about other human issues that concerned me, not to explain a particular war.

I conceived and perceived *Before the Rain* as a piece of fiction applicable to any place in the world. And, indeed, viewers from very different places did come up to me to tell me that the film had made them think of their respective homelands, that it could easily have taken place in their homelands.

With this in mind, I told the viewers before the screening at Brown University that the film they were about to see was not a documentary about Macedonia; nor was it a documentary about the wars in what used to be Yugoslavia. It is not a documentary at all, I told the audience. Satisfied that I helped frame the film for the viewers, I settled down.

After the screening I came forward for a Q&A session. An elderly woman raised her hand and asked the first question: “Did what we see in the film actually happen to you or to anyone in your family?”

Relying on whether something “really happened” or valorizing documentaries over drama only because they are documentaries, or praising a film because of the subject matter it treats and not because of its essence, soul, mind and muscle feels like a cheat. A crutch.

It seems that some of us need to know that something is “true” only because it would help our faith — our faith in the power of the piece of art. Yet, whether something is “true” or not is an external category. Sure, it can ease our way into trusting the plane of reality of the particular work, but it cannot substitute for the lack of heart and soul.

Did the woman in Providence like *Before the Rain* more because she thought it was “true”?

I don’t think so. As I stated above, we’ve all seen many “based on a true story” films that were no good. We didn’t like them. I would like to believe that the woman in Providence liked the film because of the film itself.

I believe that deep down our experience with a film does not really depend on whether the film speaks of events that truly happened

or not. Yes, both viewers and filmmakers often put a lot of stock in whether something is based on a real story. Still, I am convinced that the emotional charge we get out of a great work of art is mainly related to that particular work of art, to that particular piece of artifice, to that particular object, that particular sound or that particular image or that particular concept which we call a piece of art.

Faith that needs some sort of outside support ("based on a true story") seems suspect to me. Seems like *faith lite*.

I think that when we like a work of art, we like it because of what it does to our body and soul while we are receiving it. We like it because it wakes us up, because it lifts us up and takes us with it, because it says, "this is what things feel like, this is what being on the face of this Earth is like, this is what things are like or can be like." In other words, because of what we are experiencing on a profound level while watching, reading or listening; we like it because we trust the *plane of reality created by the work itself*, we trust its inner logic and integrity, we have faith in what happens while we give ourselves to this piece of art.

It is beside the point whether a work of art is real or fiction. It is the quality of the work and the viewer's faith in the particular piece of art that it has earned that make it work.

We accept the artistic truth because we have faith in it.

In order to accept art, we need exceptional faith.

The rest is up to the art itself.

IV.
TOWARDS TOTAL ART:
NEGATION AS MOVEMENT[1]

So, change in art as a process of transformation of the relationship between creating and reality.

I take reality as one of the basic elements in the creative — artistic — process because of the direct connection between art and reality.

I take creation as the second basic element in the analysis, and I consider it a result of the idea and its externalization.

. . .

And all four (reality, idea, externalization and creation) as atoms in the molecule of that which is called art.

In spite of the my skepticism towards evolutionary theories in the arts, I am of the opinion that changes in art can be investigated as a process of movement; not a priori progress observed as a (linear, circular, elliptical or spiral) line in a distinct direction; but rather as movement in coordinates without dimensions.

In order to simplify the process (and because of the personal preference for the aesthetic of the visual arts and music), I will ob-

[1] Written in 1983; originally published in *Razgledi: umetnost, kultura, nauka i opštestveni prašanja* (Skopje, god. 37, br. 3–4, mart–april 1994, 134–137).

serve the changes in the relationships between these four atoms through the changes in the visual arts, hoping those observations might one day be extrapolated to the movement of art in general.

1. OBJECTIVIZED ART CREATION

The tradition of realistic painting: the tendencies (if not the achievements) from prehistoric (i.e. post–syncretic) to socialist realism and hyper–realism, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, etc.

The “similarity” of the artwork to “the original” is considered important, and theories of the “objective reflection” of reality emerge, which bring themselves to a sophism or to an absurd due to the susceptibility of these theories to subjectivity (which is incompatible with their basic concept).

Counter–point: “the original” is negated by the act of artistic creation itself, while for its part the act is itself crucified between re–creation of the reality and the subjectivization, which is a key driver of creation.

2. SUBJECTIVIZED ART CREATION

The Impressionists, Expressionist, Cubists, El Greco, Modigliani, Van Gogh, et al.

The reality is still important as a starting point for the artwork (which then goes through the phase of artistic processing), but externalization based on similarity yields to subjectivized externalization.

Counter–point: negated similarity with the initial (objective) object.

3. SUBJECTIVE ART CREATION

Abstract and non–representative painting, Malevich, Pollock, etc.

Reality is rejected as an art element. The roles and the possi-

bilities of the idea and of the externalization are liberated from some restrictions.

Counter–point: the importance of reality as a starting point of the art act is being negated or diminished.

But the same — reality — is still the final segment of the process: idea — creation — externalization. The externalization is still manifested in a physical (objective) object. One can do without reality only at the beginning of the art act.

4. NON–PAINTING, MEDIATING

The Dadaists, Marcel Duchamp, etc.

The creation boils down to idea–externalization. The art act does not highlight object creation, but instead object mediation; in this process (the artist's mediation), the object gains artistic meaning (a pissoir transported to a museum with no physical interventions). Reality (the object) passes through the act: idea — creation — externalization, without a classical (physically materialized) creative intervention.

Counter–argument: the creative process as a process resulting in the creation of a physical object is rejected on behalf of the idea (of mediation, in this case). A physical object still exists, but it is only mediated, not created or altered by the artist.

5. NON–PAINTING, NON–MEDIATING, HAPPENING

Alan Kaprov ("18 Happenings in 6 Parts"), Ben Vautier (who lived in the storefront of Gallery One in London for a week in 1962), Josef Honys (who organized a fake funeral for himself titled "Mystification Event", invited his friends, and then, unbeknown to them — killed himself, in 1969), Tehching Hsieh (who turns most of his life into a work of art by performing simple, but difficult projects, each one one–year long), Joseph Beuys (with a good portion of his oeuvre), etc.

The event, meaning — the externalization itself, is the artwork.

No material art is left behind the happening.

Counter–argument: nothing is left behind the art act, yet it is precisely the material remainder that is one of the destinations of classical art.

6. NON–PAINTING, NON–MEDIATING, NON–HAPPENING, IMAGINING

Dr. Charles Harpole (who insists there is a film inside a film can, but does not show it to anyone, insisting that the act of imagining the film in the can is what matters)...

The idea itself is the art, without the mediation of (physical) creation nor of (spatiotemporal) externalization in the classical sense.

The imagining of the art act, or more precisely — of the artwork — is the work itself.

Counter–point: no objective act exists behind the art, but only an act of imagining, which is deeply subjective and — for the first time — unexternalized. So, not only is leaving material remainder behind avoided, but so is the objective act of a physical (spatiotemporal) act.

7. NON–PAINTING, NON–MEDIATING, NON–HAPPENING, NON–IMAGINING, NEGATING

Achieving the state of non–imagining an idea of artwork is the act of art. So, not only state in which there is no material remainder nor an objective art, but also no imagining of the art, state in which there is no thought of art[2]. This state of absolute intentional absence of an idea of an artwork, in a situation when reality, physical creation and externalization have already been eliminated — is art itself.

Counter–point: negating the idea means negating the self as a being of ideas, which ultimately means negation of art as well.

[2] Tehching Hsieh followed up his one–year projects with a ten–year–long project of not thinking about art decades after this essay was written in 1983.

Potential counter–point to the counter–point: the self–negation does not have to mean negating art. Art is not identification with the being (with its temporarily physical, spatiotemporal or idea manifestation in art); instead, once created, it can exist independently of the existence of the being, which means that the negation of the existence of the being, could mean culmination — meaning, total art.

V.
GREAT EXPECTATIONS:
WHEN A FILM IS “NOT MACEDONIAN ENOUGH”[1]

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, a lovely little boy, a 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 have been collaborations between two or more parties, where filmmakers and financiers from several countries have joined forces. This helps spread the risk, but more importantly, it also opens up avenues 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

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[1] A version of this piece was first published in *Cineuropa*, October 14, 2022 (with interventions by the editor) https://cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/431919/?fbclid=I-wAR0H0GiWiSEErpcX5jMtfGeMq–_xlR3uh_Ey0I12fAybdRnJphb01qDKBf0

was Italian, the color grading German, the visual effects Bulgarian and so on. 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 said, as I was curious, "When was the last time you were in Macedonia?" "I have never visited Macedonia," she responded. Then I asked the obvious question, "How do you know when something is not 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 often film professionals who are not directly involved in the hands–on process of filmmaking, but rather sit on film–fund boards or 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/the South/underrepresented regions (or as a Macedonian film–critic friend of mine calls us, “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 fulfilment of the expectations 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, Satayjit 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 so on and so forth. 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 (using 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 of them.

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 it also garnered 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, and essays and books have been written about it. An interdisciplinary academic conference in Florence was dedicated to *Before the Rain*, as well as an entire 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 report-

er 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 exactly what that was. I could speculate that, to him, this meant a slower rhythm, longer takes and 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, and that this was important.

I should not have been.

I have been lucky — my films played in more than 50 countries and I have been invited to present them at numerous festivals, universities, cinematheques and conferences on four continents. I have got to see how people reacted. I have also been humbled to receive many letters from people I don’t know who respond and react to my stories and characters. They say that they have been touched by what they experienced while watching the films. Sometimes, they describe the emotions my work arouses 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, *National Geographic*…

In spite of the interest in Macedonia, it’s obvious to me that the real reasons why people respond to my films are the things they can relate to, regardless of the culture that they themselves come from — the emotions my art provokes, the human experience, the universal message (for lack of a better word), the reflections on the human condition… A viewer in Italy approached me after a screening and said, “This is the second time I have watched your film. The first time I saw it was 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 that feeling confirmed."

These two — the local and the universal — seem intertwined like strands of DNA in terms of how some people experience (or judge) my work.

My second film, *Dust,* tells two intertwined stories — one is set in modern–day 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 — either explicitly or implicitly. The only link I could see was that the Turkish ambassador to Macedonia came on 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 so 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 government forces and separatist paramilitaries. 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 Muslim) 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 that 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 Belgium's *De Standaard*, Russian *Pravda*, etcetera.

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 wont), they wrote that the Macedonian title is *Po dezhju*, never mind the fact that this means "After [not *before*] the rain", and regardless of the fact 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 the span of about two 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–wing political movement in Europe; an Italian journalist told me that my film is a critique of Catholicism (there are 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; and 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, paratextual 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 they need no national labels. If we exclude those viewers, we are left with two groups who have specific expectations of 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 — it's a bus I spotted driving around 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 is in spite of the fact that Macedonia is indeed 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 important 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 on its perceived or actual relationship to the real life supposedly underpinning it. I am not going to get into the psychology of people for whom the material wealth is a relevant criteria for someone's desirability.

At one point I realized that what the Austrian producer from earlier in this piece 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 despite the fact that 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, Orientalistic (in the sense of Edward Said's *Orientalism*) and that in their culturalisation of everything, the "civilizational margins" (we) are left to deal with our suffering and landfills, while they usurp the universal themes, teaching us all along that there are no universal themes, it was bad to think that, and 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 pre–existing bias.

If I were in academia, I would now probably refer 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 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 do — 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* them was more important to those who channel, present and interpret cinema. Where the filmmaker comes from seems more important than the film itself, as does where she/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 had 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, alas, am 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, Turks, 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 neglecting the essence of any form of art, it saps the life out of the work and leaves it as 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.

Proofreader:
Valentina Bachvarovska

Techical Editor:
Ljupcho Mitkovski

Cover Design:
Katerina Teri Nikolovska

Print:
Grafostil, Skopje

Print run:
200

CIP – Каталогизација во публикација
Национална и универзитетска библиотека „Св. Климент Охридски", Скопје

791.632/.633-051 Манчевски, М.(049.3)
791.01:111.852 Манчевски, М.(049.3)
821.163.3-4

МАНЧЕВСКИ, Милчо
Манчевски: пет есеи / Милчо Манчевски – Скопје: Филозофско друштво на Македонија ; Skopje : Philosophical Society of Macedonia, 2023. 83 стр. ; 78 стр. ; 20 см (Едиција Филмософија = Edition Philmosophy ; кн. 3)

Фусноти кон текстот. – Насл. стр. на припечатениот текст: Manchevski: Five Essays. – Обата текста меѓусебно печатени во спротивни насоки. – Текст на мак. и англ. јазик

ISBN 978-608-4849-04-9

1. Manchevski, Milcho: Manchevski: Five Essays
а) Манчевски, Милчо, 1959- -- Филмови -- Сценарио и режија -- Есеи

COBISS.MK–ID 62528261