CLOSE UP: Milcho Manchevsky

A Conversation with Nancy Keefe Rhodes

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The Palace Theatre, Eastwood, Syracuse, New York
Before and after the screening of his film: *Dust* (2001), at a special presentation by the Syracuse International Film & Video Festival

MILCHO MANCHEVSKI, born in Skopje, Macedonia, is the winner of numerous awards for his film *Before the Rain* (1994): Oscar nomination for best foreign film in 1995; thirty awards at international festivals; a place in *The New York Times* book *Best 1000 Movies Ever Made*. He also received the Golden Lion Award for best film at the Festival in Venice, the Golden Charlie Prize at the Festival in Mons, as well as Grand Prix at the Festival of Festivals in St. Petersburg. *Before the Rain* was also the first film made in Macedonia following its peaceful secession in 1991 from Yugoslavia. Manchevski lives in New York City and teaches directing in the Graduate Film and TV Program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

Before screening:

Nancy Keefe Rhodes (NKR): *Since tonight we're showing your film, Dust, here at the Palace Theatre, could we talk just a little bit about that film, to start with? In the interview on the DVD, you said: "What happens to your voice when you are no more?"*

Milcho Manchevski (MM): Well, that's one of the themes of the film. It is, you know, the question of facing what happens when we are gone. Where does your voice go when you are no more? What do we leave behind? Do we leave pictures, do we leave children, do we leave memories? Do we leave the voice? And it is a question that is being asked in different ways by different characters in the film. This film ultimately is about story telling. It's about the thirst to tell stories and to hear stories. And I think we are all, as members of society, storytellers, even if we are not professionally doing that. And somehow that is how we learn about life, about society. So the film deals with various aspects of story telling, with history and how the winner writes the history and shapes the history, shapes what we think is the truth. It's about family history, you know, about myth and legend, about jokes and anecdotes, which are also story- telling. So, the film is about those few things.

NKR: *I was stuck in this film that there are so many pictures of so many kinds. There's the photographer, and the old photographs that the old woman has, and there are, kind of flashbacks into old style, as though you were transported back one hundred years ago. This seems to me that it's also a history of photographic images and how people use them.*

MM: Absolutely. It is. The films I make are very personal, so in a way I'm re-examining what it means to be a filmmaker, and what it is to deal in images with images, and especially today, when image-making is so accessible and everyone has a camera. Still cameras, video cameras, cameras in the

telephone, in the cell phones. We are all creating images, yet at the same time those same images can be very deceiving. They are not necessarily and not always documents. They can be part of faking history, which is another theme in this film. Also, the film covers roughly the period of the 20th century, which is the century of film and photography. So that is another reason why there are so many photographs. It was a lot of fun to play with images, to treat them as sources for collages. Some of the images were manipulated. For example, we had contemporary characters who were placed in old photographs from the turn of the century, in the American Wild West or the Ottoman Empire.

NKR: *Yes, there's that wonderful scene where one of the characters doesn't like the way the story's being told so you go back to the story and remove all those soldiers. It's really comic.*

MM: Yes! I mean, the film is funny, brutal and sad at the same time, and this is one of the funny moments. Which just illustrates how stories are told and how they are passed from one storyteller to the listener and to the next listener and so on. Also it illustrates the fact, as I mentioned before, of how the winner, the victor, shapes history, and how it is that so often things are erased from history. And this happens in times when everything is supposed to be so well documented, and we think that everything is objectively told. I mean, we are facing an interesting moment when so many people think that movies tell history. Movies cannot tell history. They are re-creations. And they are re-creations made by people with various levels of knowledge, or various levels of interest in the stories they are telling, in the historical stories. How can I be the authority on an historical moment if I wasn't there? If I'm re-creating it, I'm re-creating it from my point of view, from my perspective. And even with all the best intentions, I could be making mistakes. So we shouldn't take films as historical facts. However that is what is so often happening these days.

NKR: *In **Before The Rain**, one of the characters is a journalist, a photographer, who decides to go home. Are you sort of expanding on that idea in this new film? Because he really decides he has to be back in his homeland during this time, and not trying to be so objective, I guess.*

MM: Yes, there are ideas and themes, which are repeated or reflected in *Dust*. I played with them in *Before The Rain* and in my shorter films, made prior to *Before The Rain*. One of those ideas is the homecoming, the return home. It's such an archetypal moment a lot of us can directly relate to. I personally feel very connected to that moment of coming home, because it's a nostalgic moment. It's also a moment when we try to understand something about who we are and what we're doing on the planet. But the fact that it's an archetypal moment makes it very usable in film and in story-telling media. But when elements develop in those stories, when scenes are born, they are never premeditated. I never say, "Oh this is what I would like to say." They just sort of happen and then I go through them and I say this looks really good and this should stay and I should emphasize this and this just doesn't belong here, let's chuck it out. It's an irrational process. But then when I look back, it seems very consistent and that's probably the result of being very true to how you feel about the things you put in your art.

NKR: *I have kind of a different experience of the American West after watching this movie. You use two British actors to play the two American brothers. . .*

MM: One Australian, one British.

NKR: *Okay, and this whole notion – "the West" – was not only occurring in the United States, it was occurring in many other parts of the world during that period. It kind of upends our notion of "the West."*

MM: Yes, I love doing that! I love making all of us question the clichés that we have been operating with most of our lives. And a lot of clichés are based on fact and then bastardized through time. The American Wild West is one of those. I grew up on stories of the American Wild West, as tales, as comic books, as movies, as television shows. And they were part of who I was as much as my Macedonian history. So I wanted to make a film about that, about the whole concept of the American Wild West. Once I started doing research and I did – I mean, core research for this film consisted of about one hundred sixty books and articles, most of which were written at the time. And they were dealing either with the American West or with the Ottoman Empire, at roughly the same time. I started discovering that a lot of the things we took for granted, either when talking about the American West or about the Ottoman Empire, were actually myths. It was interesting to discover how everything was so much more complex than it felt when you're watching *Bonanza* or *Gun Smoke* or Clint Eastwood, for example. Things like – I had no idea, for example – Billy the Kid was from Brooklyn and General Custer was the worst student at West Point, or the fact that there were a lot of Black cowboys or even American Indian cowboys, or that the last stand at Little Big Horn was not the last stand at all, but just a very quick massacre while people were running away. So, questioning myths, I think, is very healthy, and the American West was part of that, questioning myths based on historical research, based on what we found in those old books and articles. You know, there was – the West was populated with immigrants, for example, and we seldom see that so plainly, so obviously in films about the American West.

NKR: *It's interesting that you didn't go to old movies about the West; that you went to books written at the time, which is similar to what David Milch did when he researched for his show* ***Deadwood*** *(HBO). I don't know if you're familiar with that, but in his research he also completely avoided the United States Western movie genre.*

MM: Well, the genre is packed with inaccuracies and outright forgeries. And I mean, there's the opening of John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), which a lot of people like as a piece of art, but it's interesting to see, I think, the very first thing you see after the titles, if I'm not mistaken, is "Texas 1865," and then there's a fade-out, and we're in Monument Valley, which is not in Texas! [laughs] It has bigger implications. The treatment of history, and the treatment of the West in the American history has bigger implications in how we think of ourselves, as a nation or as people in general. So I was really interested in going back to the source material and looking at the gritty reality, which is both much grittier, much – much uglier, if you wish, but alas! more heroic.

NKR: *It is more heroic, yes, and people had much more to say*!

MM: Yes! Just picture yourself being part of that wagon train, going out West where there was no communication, no turning back really, and saying, this is not a week-end, this is not a vacation, this is life. And it all happened relatively recently. You know, another thing, another element I'm trying to deal with in *Dust* is how various clichés actually overlap in reality. We think of the American Wild West as something that happened in the 19th century, and the Ottoman Empire in the Middle Ages! Cubism and airplanes as things of the 20th, almost 21st century. Actually all of these things literally overlapped. The film covers a period of roughly 1901 and 1908, and that is when Picasso painted *Demosielles d'Avignon*,

in 1907. The first flight of the Wright brothers was 1903. Freud traveled to New York in, I believe, 1909, if I'm not mistaken, and there is a little funny scene in the film where our cowboy meets Freud on the boat: Luke meets Freud. These are all, in our mind, things that belong to different pigeonholes, to different files, different drawers, but they were happening at the same time.

NKR: *And when Joseph Fiennes looks up, holding the baby in his arms, and sees a plane…*

MM: That is a surreal moment, with that plane – and her ashes are on that plane – and he's holding her as a baby in his arms at the very same moment. So that's how the various strands of the story come together at the very end.

NKR: *And when the young man finds the gold, gushing out of the refrigerator door like a slot machine.*

MM: Yes, well, I was thinking about it the night before the shoot. In the original idea and in the script – the twenty-plus drafts of the script that I wrote – the gold is always hidden in rolls of film which Angela, the old woman, the photographer, keeps in the freezer, as a lot of photographers do. And the night before we were going to shoot that scene it just felt like… I thought it was too passive. Somehow we needed the gold to come out in a more graphic kind of way. At one point I just had this idea, I think I was going to sleep, and I woke up and like, it could be inside the fridge door, hidden in the door, and as Edge is pounding on the door he breaks the handle, and everything falls out as out of a slot machine, but the slot machine was almost an afterthought.

NKR: *Yes, it's sort of a fairy tale.*

MM: Yes, and it looks like water coming out. Fairy tales are so important. We just don't hear enough of them. The corporate way of thinking is taking over the story-telling media.

NKR: *We're going to have to stop here because I bet they want you downstairs, but thank you so much.*

MM: Absolutely, and you're very welcome.

After screening:

MM: The U.S. distributor of the film, Lion's Gate, for some reason unknown to me, released the film without subtitles for those few scenes that are not in English. There was a monologue in German, a monologue in Turkish, and there are a few little bits in Macedonian and Greek. So, for those scenes, there are no subtitles and we decided to play the closed caption so people here wouldn't miss those few scenes. And this is a DVD screening, so we had the choice to play with or without closed caption. So I understand it's a little distracting, but the choice was either that or no subtitles for those few scenes.

Audience: *Would you discuss the fragmented narrative, the different stories going on here?*

MM: Well that was part of how I decided to tell the story. And I used it once before in *Before the Rain*. I didn't invent it. You know it was done in other films including Resnais' *Last Year in Marienbad* and *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. But it's interesting how film is so conservative as a medium – so conservative in how it tells a story. You can actually fragment a story or play it out of order much more than it's

usually done. So in a way film as we know it – mainstream film – is still stuck where the 19th century novel was. In other arts, there is a little more adventurous approach to how things are told.

Audience: *You spend a lot of time developing an environment, especially the scenes in New York when you go into the city. Is there significance to that?*

MM: There's nothing that… I mean, it's not something that I do consciously. It's not like, okay, I have to do this in order to achieve that. But I like that. I like putting things in context, especially in visual context. And also, giving them a documentary texture. Somehow they become – the scenes and thus the film – the big picture, more alive and more convincing. And it's always sort of interesting to interweave documentary stuff with fiction. I treat it as a bit of a game. It's not like I'm recreating real documentary film. And another reason is that it makes it visually much richer. So rather than focusing specifically only on the backbone of the story, I would start a little bit outside and then come in. It's just a style of filmmaking, which is not conscious. It just feels right.

Audience: *Can you comment on the use of music, sound effects?*

MM: Yes, well, it's much easier to create a scene or create a mood with music, but if you manage to deliver a scene or an entire film without music, I think it probably stays longer with the viewer, which I'm obviously not doing here but I might in the future. That's one of my favorite elements in movies, the sound, because you can be highly abstract and you can also be highly subversive. I think everyone's savvy to what we see, as viewers, but we are much less aware of what happens in the soundtrack. And as a filmmaker you can achieve more, you can manipulate your story and your audience more and that is our job. I mean, our job is to manipulate, in a good way, to manipulate in telling the story. So you can really achieve a lot by playing with the sound – having it very thin or having a lot of layers, bringing in something that's not in the picture at all. In a few places, there was a lot of subliminal sound.

Audience: *A lot of crickets.*

MM: Yes, because crickets are summer to me. And *Dust* is summer, like Macedonian summer. In *Before The Rain*, for example, speaking of sound, I had sound *leit-motifs* for the four main characters. Very often when I had a particular character that was a young monk who had taken a vow of silence, you would hear pigeons, even though you never saw pigeons. Or, there was a woman who was pregnant and several times when you saw her you would just hear babies crying. And you can justify that. I mean, you can say those are the neighbors' babies. But when it works on that subliminal level, there is just so much more in terms of richness for the scene, and for the film. And somehow it feels more like tapestry, when you play a lot with the sound. We spent a lot of time playing with sound on *Dust*, so much that the producers went crazy. Among other things, because like basic, elementary things, and dust is very basic, like air or fire. Also, it's very much a Western title. There are no Westerns without dust! And finally it is one of the things left behind when we're gone. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and that is one of the things that the film asks, what do we leave behind? Do we leave photographs, children, memories or just dust?

Audience: *Can you fit this film in a particular genre? In which genre do you feel that it belongs?*

MM: I'm really interested in exploring what genre is, to me as a filmmaker and I hope to the audience as well. Because on one hand we all grew up on genre – not only genre films, but genre – you know, like

the fairy tale. That's a genre. Or certain kinds of jokes, or myths and legends, all aspects of genre. So I was interested in exploring what it means. On one hand, it gives us a lot of comfort. Okay, along comes some cowboy, who walks into some town. There's probably a good guy and a bad guy in a black hat. On the other hand, it's all very confining and evil. Because it makes us think only a certain way. And then it's not a big leap from buying genre clichés to applying clichés in real life. And if you take it far, I mean, you can talk about racism, which is another way of applying clichés.

Audience: *Do you mean to say that genre, like cliché, can be boring and predictable?*

MM: Yes, I mean it becomes boring. It's really easy to sort of follow the pattern. Yet that's what most mainstream cinema does. It's like, how do we follow this pattern to the "T." You know, maybe just a little change here and a little change there and that's what we're going to advertise. It's basically, how do we stick to the cliché? And I mean, why do it? Why spend a couple years making a film? So I am taking a point and then go for a surprise, hoping the audience will go with that irreverent moment. Some people like it, some don't.

Audience: *I did notice, I'm curious, could you tell each story separately?*

MM: Well, the origin of this story idea was, I wanted to do a remake of *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and set it in the Ottoman Empire. Because these were two things that felt so different, yet there were visual similarities. You know, the Macedonian revolutionaries, you know with the bandolier and the white horses. So that was the original idea. And then I wanted a counterpoint that would be about as different from those two as possible, and that was New York City today. But then I didn't want that to be only the framework, the beginning and the end of the film like bookends, but to be an integral part of the story. While you're in New York you want to go back to Macedonia, and when you're in Macedonia you want to go to New York. I wanted that to be almost half of the film. And then there was an old guy telling the story, and I'm like, why not an old woman? Why, why would it have to be a guy? Because most characters in those films are men, and there is no particular reason for that. So that was the process, but then once that structure was there, the rest was just putting things together and moving them around. And then once it clicks, a lot of extra layers sort of just happen, and it works. And you know when it doesn't work, because you're just pushing it and pushing it and it just doesn't work. Then it's time to just drop that particular moment. So most of it was just writing and rewriting but not much of it was a conscious effort to deliver an idea. It's about taking risks, you know, drastic changes in mood are not something we're used to. Usually it's like, okay, I go to a comedy, and it's a comedy.

Audience: *How do you feel as a viewer of your own film? How do you react to it?*

MM: This film? It's too soon, too soon. I would need longer. Yes, I mean, at least ten years. You know, to stop being emotionally involved. To just see it as a viewer, I mean, I'm just beginning to be able to look at my films from film school! *[laughs]*

Audience: *Has it played in Turkey?*

MM: In Turkey, no. No, they wouldn't show it in Turkey.

Audience: *And in New York City?*

MM: In New York City, yes.

Audience: *I'm surprised they wouldn't show it if it showed in New York City. I mean, the cops, the Turkish Empire, you know, the soldiers… it's a great comparison.*

MM: Different places, it seems.

Audience: *Could you speak a little bit about the violence in the film? I know that's something that caught the attention of at least one of my students who's here tonight. And I noticed, in the battle scenes for example, how the sound track kind of abstracted who was getting shot when,. I mean, you would hear the "kapow!" but you wouldn't see it.*

MM: Yes, with the soundtrack we tried to create a bigger picture than just the frame, just what you see. And the sound mixers, they were a little confused because they're used to just focusing on what is on the screen most of the time. Um, the violence – I mean, there are certain kinds of violence in the movies that I like very much. I think violence in films should be disgusting, should be a turn-off, should be ugly. Should be a, a conversation-starter. I mean, it shouldn't feel easy or glamorous or fun, the way it feels in Sylvester Stallone. And I think Sylvester Stallone films are actually dangerous because they – not only him, I'm using it as a metaphor – they keep sending this message that violence is easy and it's fun, like playing a video game. We just dropped a bomb and there are people down there. They're in a video game. And I like very much what Bergman has to say about violence in films. He says something like this. He says it, uh – he finds violence in films a perfectly legitimate way to ritualize violence in society. Which is something I guess society has always done in various ways. Not glamorized it. Ritualized it. And the way I approached it here was – you know, we wanted to make it ugly and realistic. People don't just get shot and drop out of the frame and they're gone. Unless you're shot in the heart or in the brain, you die for two minutes, twenty minutes, two days. You cry, you vomit, you laugh, there's probably a whole variety of reactions and feelings. You can't believe that it happened. In going with realism and picking apart the genre presentation of things, including violence in films, we went for that. And there are four battle scenes, two of which are really long. But it felt like that had to be part of it. It was in life.

Audience: *Another question. Did you film any rape scenes and then edit them out?*

MM: There was one rape that was sort of in the background.

Audience: *Well, there was the presence of rape, because I saw it. I mean, I saw just before that one shot of that woman who – oh, a couple minutes before the birth – He was standing, he looks back – he can see the blood down her leg.*

MM: Yes, I mean, we had it more explicit and then I decided that we didn't need it, that this would be enough, and it would be more disturbing. I mean, that was part of the loot, actually.

Audience: *Two questions, one is short. Is it Jimi Hendrix' **Star Spangled Banner** in the opening scene? Is there a snatch of it?*

MM: Yes.

Audience: *That's just, that's very striking, as kind of a first presence of the flag, if you will. The second thing is, could you tell us what you're working on now?*

MM: I wasn't working on anything for a while. I just was very exhausted. I just started working on a thing called *Bones*. And it's a love story. It's a very simple love story about a doctor who falls in love with a woman but he's married. And it's a story with ghosts. It's a love story with ghosts.

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