Interview

Milcho Manchevski

On September 19, a committee of Macedonia's filmmakers chose Milcho Manchevski's new feature film, *Shadows*, as that nation's official entry in the 2008 Oscar race for Best Foreign-Language Film. The story of a young physician named Lazar Perkov (Borce Nacev) who survives a horrendous car crash only to be visited by a cadre of the dead, who insist he must return their stolen bones from an abandoned grave in his mother's remote village, *Shadows* is a horror story without the usual gore. Indeed, Lazar's evolving intimacy with the mysterious girl Menka (Vesna Stanojevska) becomes very loving. It's also a film that references history but insists on an intensely personal stance and it's Manchevski's most straightforward narrative yet. His first feature film, the triptych *Before the Rain*, was among the top five Oscar contenders in Best Foreign Language category in 1994, and did win the Golden Lion in Venice that year and an Independent Spirit Award in 1996. In 2001, *Dust* spanned the 20th century and shuttled between Kansas, Macedonia, and Manhattan.

Shadows premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in early September. Returning to New York City, where he heads the film directing program at New York University's Tisch Graduate School, Manchevski said he was glad to get back to teaching. There are some screeners abroad in the US now and *Shadows* has found distribution in a handful of European countries. It's now on the festival circuit, heading next to Sao Paulo and Taiwan, with a regular theatrical opening in Skopje, Macedonia in early November. Manchevski and I spoke by phone on September 28th.

I've just watched all three of your feature films again and I noticed that they all start with tomatoes.

[laughs] Yes they do!

Watching them so closely together I noticed other things as well, but I'm wondering about starting all your films with images of tomatoes. Does that mean something?

I really like tomatoes! [laughs] Actually when I was storyboarding *Before the Rain* I was thinking of what a teacher back in film school told me that stayed with me ever since. She said the first shot, the first frame of the film, sets the tone for the rest of the film. So when I was storyboarding *Before the Rain* I thought, what would capture in one image my experience of Macedonia? First I thought of grapes, but no, that's not really…Then I thought of tomatoes, because that's probably the only thing that I know of that Macedonia makes better than anyone else in the world. So it was a personal, almost sentimental reason, translated into a frame. Then I was doing *Dust*—I thought that it would be funny to sort of quote, but in a distorted context, as the whole thing was like Cubist storytelling. So it was tomatoes in a fruit stand, in front of a little bodega in downtown New York City—in November. It's not the same as like tomatoes on a plant in the middle of the summer. It became a small, semi-private joke. So for *Shadows*, I thought what would be the appropriate way to continue the joke? I thought the computer is synthetic, more impersonal than the previous two cases so now it's tomatoes on a computer screen that our main hero is playing with, looking at, while he's arguing with his wife.

Then there's that watermelon on the computer screen that Lazar is watching, and it's hard to have seen *Dust* without noticing all the watermelon chunks in that final shootout scene!

Again, I personally like watermelon—I tried to put my take on things in these films and I think that's one of the things that makes them personal. But also, *Dust* was about the dryness of being alone and the wetness of being with others, so the watermelon was a place where those two meet, and we have that in the middle of this battle. The battle is like a meeting of all the characters and it's birth and death, also at the same time.

Is Lazar's mother's village the same village in the other two films? It

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seems to me that monastery is the same one where the young monk Kiril was in *Before the Rain*, and when Lazar goes into that village and looks around, I think I saw the balcony where Luke was sitting when Neda was taking care of him in the second film, in *Dust*. There's a set of steps in a lane in the village that characters seem to climb in all three films, a barn doorway that looks out on a same meadow hillside in *Shadows* and *Before the Rain*.

It's some of the same—it's a combination. It's the same region. So it would be even some of the same locations. You know, I have to admit that when I was scouting for *Dust* I would go to the same place. I really like these images, these frames and this texture. Then, am I repeating myself? Actually I was really thinking it over for a couple years. Then I realized John Ford kept going back to Monument Valley all the time. [laughs] And actually that's part of this texture that connects the films. So yeah—the wide shot of Lazar's mother's village is a different place, but the balconies and the walls and some of the textures are the same, yes.

I also noticed that some local actors are the same—the Turkish Major in *Dust*, the multi-lingual gourmet with his linen tablecloths and crystal goblets in the midst of carnage, is the same actor who plays Gerashim in *Shadows*, the old man with the baby at the elevator?

Yes.

And Lazar's mother's driver, who takes Lazar back to the capital, is in the other two films as well?

Yes.

And several others. The older monk who loves Kiril and the Albanian girl's father in *Before the Rain* show up again—so I'm seeing a lot of faces as they and we are getting older throughout your films. I'm just thinking how you're creating a body of work with many of the same faces and many of the same landscapes.

And we see how they change through time. Yeah! It was never a conscious decision but somehow I think if you're doing personal work as opposed to something that—that just re-creates, to make money or whatever?—then this kind of lucky streak, lucky coincidences, or lucky mirrorings, are bound to happen. And then they're a lot of fun. And I think they make sense, creatively—both to create and to enjoy. It's like with the actors. I would just go back and start casting from scratch, almost as if I didn't know these actors. I tried a lot of people in a lot of parts and finally they found their places. There is probably something in their energy and in the craft of these particular actors that's just appealing to me for these films.

Before The Rain

It creates—particularly because I'm an American and I haven't been to Macedonia—it creates a familiarity that makes it very easy to enter the films. Even though you may not plan it, the outcome—in terms of people being able to connect with your art –, is it makes it much easier for people outside that culture.

Well, you know, that's probably what archetypes are about.

Yes.

You know, like going back to successful themes or characters or faces or plots, so that people can relate to it easier.

You've said that really you come back again and again to archetypes, that we need to hear these stories again, that really the job is to make a new story but to appreciate that we're going back to the archetype.

I think we deal with archetypes, especially in narrative film, all the time. Pretending that's not the case is disingenuous. The real issue is what do you do with the archetype? Do you fracture your vision of it? Do you put it in unfamiliar environments? Do you question our comfort with a familiar story or with a familiar

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face? Everything about narrative film is—if you want to be kind—you'll call it archetypal. If you don't want to be kind, you'll call it clichéd. But it's two hours with a plot that has a beginning, a middle and end, with main characters, supporting characters, subplots. So you know, to say that an action films deals with archetypes but an art-house film doesn't, is not true. It's just different kinds of archetypes. I'm interested in what you do with them and I recognize by now that it's not always easy or comfortable to re-examine them as a viewer. But I just have to go there, I just have to pick that scab.

We were talking the other night about all of your films being about giving the dead their due. In *Shadows* this young man is told he needs to give back what's not his, to return it, to show respect. And he winds up doing that and there's a reference to the Aegean Macedonians.

Right.

But even at the end, when Lazar and Menka reach the cemetery, the reference is very slight. I wonder how much Americans need to know that history to be helpful in watching this film. Because even at the end, they seem to blur that—they seem to say it was abandoned peoples, in a more general sense. His mother says that about the graves—they were abandoned, they were refugees, they were suicides, people who drowned, an unbaptized baby—it wasn't even a real grave, she says—which seems to make the notion of the Aegean Macedonians recede further. How much do Americans need to know that history?

I don't think they need to know anything at all. This is where we go back to the archetypes. These are archetypes of abandoned peoples, people who are suffering because of circumstances, and in the bigger picture, when talking about the human condition, it's almost beside the point whether they're Aegean Macedonians or whether they're Native Americans or—something else! Of course the sketch is there for those who know more or those who will be compelled and invited to learn more about it. But this is not an historical or sociological or scientific explanation of what happened. I'm really more interested in the human condition, in the feelings—thus in archetypes. I think that is what connects us as people. We don't need to know anything about the Montagues and the Capulets to appreciate that play! [laughs] When it works, you can apply it to a lot of places and times. Often it doesn't really work but because it illuminates—because it teaches us something specific—we tend to like it. Which is fine, but that's, you know, that's not really art.

You've had some trouble with your other films with people trying to reduce them to political films or propaganda films. Even when one might want to make those connections it's I think gotten in the way of people being able to see your films as stories. I think part of what's courageous about this film is that you don't rely on that history to get the story told, that you really insist that we look at what's happening to Lazar as a human being. Has that been an evolution in your own filmmaking?

Yeah, I guess so. I guess so. Exactly as you say, I've had this experience where people have misunderstood some of my work, out of just mistaken reading or sometimes I think even intention. I didn't want to leave even that much—or that little—room for manipulation of what I was dealing with. It's really easy to ride on the coattails of expectations of a film coming from a particular region. Like, this is what I want to see from a film coming from the Balkans, or from a film coming from Iran, or from Scandinavia, or—I don't know—Taiwan. There are some fantastic films made in these places, but that should not make us expect to see the same kind of film over and over. Or even worse, we shouldn't be expecting to see the life there portrayed in those films as we want to see it portrayed. I really wanted to avoid that, even though it would be easy and convenient to exploit it with the kind of films I make and then with how those films are positioned for festivals, for distribution, for what critics want to see, or the Academy wants to see. But that's the kind of manipulation that's not really worth it. Then you're just wasting your time. You're back to film as an industry—just a different kind of industry. When I was preparing this film, I was negotiating with some European co-producers and they were, like, okay, we like the story but it's not Macedonian enough. This is somebody from Austria. And I'm, like, well, excuse me, how many times have you been to Macedonia anyway? None! [laughs] So why does it need to be Macedonian anyway? It's good or it's bad; if you don't like it, you don't like it. You know—because that's prejudice, ultimately.

Dust

Nevertheless this film has been nominated as Macedonia's entry for the Oscars, for Best Foreign Language Film. And that was also the case with an earlier film– I think *Before the Rain* was also an Oscar entry?

Yes, *Before the Rain* was, and *Dust* didn't qualify as it was not in a foreign language.

Not enough in a foreign language, I guess!

[laughs] Yeah—well, most of it was in English.

So this happened rather rapidly, pretty soon after you showed the film at this year's Toronto Film Festival, where it premiered.

I guess within about two weeks. Yeah, that was good. I'm glad they liked it in Macedonia. It had to have an initial run—a very short run just to qualify—and some of the feedback has been great. We're doing like the real, big opening for hopefully more audience the end of October.

How did the film go over in Toronto?

I think it was very good. What I got from the energy the audience was projecting and the questions in the Q and A, and the rest of the feedback was very nice. It was really good, but I'm in a strange place now. I'm just, like, beginning to question this whole notion of doing something so that it will be—watched and judged?—by people you don't know. Of course it's essential to the job I do. But if you think about it, it's so bizarre. I wish I were a doctor or something. [laughs] Maybe there was something in this story that made me start thinking about it.

Lazar says that he didn't want to be a doctor, he wanted to be a "water expert."

[laughs] Yes!

And there's water everyplace in this film—from the rain-slicked road that Lazar's car slides on when he goes out and gets in the accident. The first words his son says—"I want water"—when Lazar wakes him up. Down to the end when he's looking out over the fields and in the distance you can see the plumes of spray from irrigation pipes among the crops.

A lot of it ended up in the film just on an unconscious or subconscious level. It's like, oh, this looks good, this sort of fits. Like a note that fits the melody. Some of it obviously was planned but a lot wasn't. When things start to resonate with each other, you know you've done something that works.

Yes.

And water is then another thing that runs through—a continuation. In *Before the Rain* I even have it in the title. Then in *Dust*, at one point while working on it I became aware that dust is ashes—you're really alone and you dry out and shrivel up and then you die alone. Water is like being in the womb, swimming. Maybe that's what Lazar means when he says he wanted to be a water expert. He just wanted to be with people that feel for each other rather than, you know, the current group of living souls—[laughs]—that he is with.

You have said that if Lady MacBeth were alive today she would be like Lazar's mother Vera.

She's a very strong woman, a good physician, very ambitious, very smart, very good at what she does, and really well-meaning in so many ways. But she goes too far. Her being so driven as a person—not as a woman, just as an ambitious person, like Lady MacBeth—becomes the reason for her downfall, if you want to call it that. I mean, she's ruthless, she doesn't really want to stop for a second to see what it feels like walking in the other person's shoesVery materialistic, very driven, very self-centered. Then by extension she pushes that on her son. She runs his life, she tells him how to behave—does really good by him, you know, helps him get through college, gets him a job, probably buys him a lot of things, probably gets

him into seminars, but that's too much. I was half-joking when I said it's what Lady MacBeth would be like had she lived and had adult children. But it's also part of the Macedonian culture or possibly even the Mediterranean culture, essentially where the woman runs the show, if not in society, then so much in the house. I saw this with some relatives of mine. Some of it reminded me of *Portnoy's Complaint*.

When I think about how the Ottomans treated the women in *Dust* and how some of the women are locked up in *Before the Rain*, I'm wondering if the legacy of the Ottoman Empire in Macedonia is a coarsening of relationships between men and women? Had they not been there, would the Macedonian relationships be very different?

Hmmm—good question. I don't know. In a way, it depends on what part of the relationship you look at. Sometimes they seem harsher. Sometimes they're actually more flexible and there's more understanding and more playfulness than in a place like New York City. There is more unspoken understanding. Of course it varies from person to person. It's a relatively—relatively I would underline—a relatively old-fashioned place and the current minister of police is a young woman in her, I think, early 30's. I think it wouldn't be at all unusual if a prime minister were a woman there. You just take it for granted. Nobody even cracks a joke about it. Which is really interesting when you've got Hilary Clinton running for president here and all the talk! Like, you know, well—so? [laughs]

Milcho Manchevski

Maybe there are things we're still too backward for in the US.

[laughs] There you go—again, it goes to destroy all of our clichés. With Vera, I was interested in these woman who are actually good mothers but then go too far when they're suffocating their children with guilt trips. Like, "Oh, you're killing me! You're eating my liver!" There is actually a phrase that literally means the kids are eating my liver. It's terrifying to say that to your children!

She says, "You're driving me to my grave!" at one point to Lazar.

Yeah! Yeah! And that's a throw-away line. She keeps saying it. That's why it reminded me so much of the mother in *Portnoy's Complaint*.

You're going to Sao Paulo with this in October—where is the film going to show next and do you have any idea about a US opening?

Well, Bavaria Film International is just beginning that work. The screeners just went out to festivals—technically the film just finished a couple weeks ago, so it went to Toronto and then Sao Paulo and the following month it will be the Golden Horse in Taiwan. Then it opens in Macedonia around November 1st. It has distribution in several European countries—in Italy, Germany, Austria, Spain, Bulgaria, the countries of ex-Yugoslavia, and Hungary. Bavaria has just started showing it to American distributors. It takes a while.

How about the whole notion of the horror film? I know that you've been watching some horror films, specifically some Asian films. Are you familiar with a Ukrainian film called *The Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors*? The director was Parajanov, in 1964.

No—actually I have heard the title but I haven't seen the film.

Some of the dead show up in that film and appear to people and I wondered if you might be familiar with it.

I should probably rent it—it sounds way too similar! [laughs]

This doesn't really strike me as a horror film because even when the old woman shows up in Lazar's living room, speaking this forgotten dialect, and he initially becomes frightened and throws her out, and he doesn't know what's happening—there's something about these dead people that seems very natural that they're walking among us.

[laughs] Well, they often do, don't they?

All of your films have somebody to whom someone dead appears.

Yeah.

But even in this film when some of the action occurs during the so-called "night of the dead"—the driver explains this to Lazar, so we understand this ritual and this mythology—there's something very matter-of-fact about these folks walking around.

That's what was interesting to me—that it's so matter-of-fact and then it's up to you to decide how horrified or how tickled you want to be by that fact. Ideally, both. "Horror" is a really bad description. Actually the way the word has been abused in the last 20 years—it's gone into gore, really. What used to be horror is now thriller. For all my talk about archetypes, I don't want to create expected kinds of films or deal with things in an expected way. I want to use that as a starting point. This is a scary film and scary in a slow simmering way.

Mmm hmm—you called it a slow burn.

Right. An old fashioned kind of film where because it's not about being jolted, it's more about slowly realizing and being terrified by your situation and then it stays with you and then for a while, it becomes more absurd and then goes back. There are films where the director and writer do something similar to this that I really like. But yeah, it's not horror per se, not like we've known them for the last twenty-thirty years. It's closer to *Rosemary's Baby* or *Throne of Blood* or even things like *Persona*, but it's the tone. I think what really matters in a film is the tone, the people and the relationships those people have, much more than the story or even the visuals. I'm trying to think of some others with dead people walking around. You have that in *The Sixth Sense*.

The dead girl Menka says to Lazar, "How will you live without me?" and he recalls that again at the end—there's a flashback of her saying that—after he's almost followed her into the grave and he scrambles back. There's this wonderful sequence of shots, where he looks down into the grave, then it looks like she's looking up at him, then there's a shot from above as though God were looking down—

[laughs] Yes.

But it's this rapid-fire from all points of view, and then he recalls that she has said this to him. I'm wondering if that's part of what makes us most fully human, righting the wrongs of the past, giving the dead their due. Do we need to have those connections in order to be fully human?

I think so. I think it's like connections that are—well, whatever you want to call them, feelings, memories or—morality? But connections that are not material at all and connections to a dead person are about as immaterial as you can get. Menka's line repeated has a completely different meaning. When she said it the first time, we had no idea what she was talking about, because we didn't know that she was gonna disappear. They were not "involved." It's like, well, why would it be difficult to live without you? You're just a stranger I met once in my life. And then at the end, it's one of those things that resonate, you get a little bit of a lump in your throat when you think of a line somebody said. To put it at the end of the film both is sad but also liberating. There's something liberating about sad feelings and maybe that's why we like tragedies? It feels good. Also I remember that feeling at the end of *Cries and Whispers*. It's a heavy film to go through. But at the end there's this little flashback when the sisters and I think the maid are all together and they're walking through this autumn forest and everything is beautiful—just the memory of when things were good, not corny at all. It was that kind of feeling at the end of a film that I wanted to replicate. So it really has nothing to do with that film except for that sense and then the tone of this last moment.

Milcho Manchevski's earlier films, Before the Rain *and* Dust*, are widely available on DVD for rental. See a review of* Shadows ***here***.

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Published on: 2007-10-09
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