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Freedom and Art

Interview with Milcho Manchevski

1) Ever since Before the Rain many of your films, like Dust, Willow for example, in one way or another featured interlinked storylines. Would you agree that it's a "signature" aspect of your cinema? What interests you in this type of storytelling?

-Yes, I guess you could say so. I love storytelling as much as I love more unconventional, post-conceptualist art. For better or for worse, most of narrative cinema is storytelling-centered. Which is fine because storytelling (and story-hearing) is an essential human need, something that teaches us things, something that links us, that makes us feel part of a bigger, better whole, something that produces enormous pleasure. As much as I love everything connected to storytelling, I find the constraints of linear storytelling stifling. This especially since one approach to storytelling has come to dominate narrative film and is almost being understood as a law of physics. You have all those script breakdowns and script doctors and genre celebration as if it is a major achievement to fall within a given framework, as if being a mannerist is more important and satisfying than being innovative and good. There are all these narrative rules (two hours in length; main and supporting characters; the characters must develop; beginning, middle and end; cathartic ending…). Playing with them, questioning them, repositioning them… all of that opens up new possibilities. Innovative storytelling and even more satisfying art often await at the other end. Not to mention the sheer joy of playing like a kid. There is no art without playing, without a child's game. I don't claim to be inventing hot water, but I am baffled by the religious adherence to and fear of this 19th-century-novel structure and sentiment. Some great films are made clinging to this approach, but there is a whole wide ocean out there and I dabble my toes in it.

2) In Mothers (Majki) and Bikini Moon you also explored the relations between fiction and documentary and the representation of reality. Do you believe that reality can be represented without alteration by cinema?

-I don’t think so. I have always been very interested in the representation aspect of filmmaking. I wrote two essays about this (one of them was presented at a conference in the Vatican and published as a book) – *Truth and Fiction: Notes on (Exceptional) Faith in Art* and *Great Expectations: When a Film Is Not Macedonian Enough*. In addition to Mothers and Bikini Moon, I also directed two shorts that explore the relationship of truth, fiction and perception, Thursday and The End of Time. I have always been interested, but now I spent about twelve years working on this very seriously. In the past (and still) I was often approached to direct scripts or to adapt books based on real people and real events, and I always turned them down. I have a serious ethical problem with that – I don’t want to talk about real events as if I am delivering scientific truth if I was not there when those things happened. Yet most viewers will think they are watching “the truth”.
You alter reality the moment you turn on your camera. Not to mention the other hundreds or thousands of decisions you make in the process. As a filmmaker you are both altering the reality you are talking about and – whether you admit it or not – manipulating the record of it. We filmmakers are like the primitive archaeologists who would break into a tomb, smash things around, extract the jewellery and claim to have recovered part of the past. I have a problem with the arrogance that a lot of the documentary film world operates with – “We are telling the Truth! (capital “T”)” A bit more humility would be nice. Often the truth is elusive or multi-faceted, or really complex, or complicated, or fluid… Which is not to say that we live in post-truth times. On the contrary, the ease with which some filmmakers assign recipes and maps to the truth which has often been determined before the process of making the film was even under way is dangerous. It seems to me there are more dogmas in full swing today, dictating what and how you can say than at any time since McCarthy and Stalin. As part of the same paradigm, we often witness the following: a subject or a theme or a cause is being confused with the work itself. This approach, which is often very forceful, seems to ignore a simple truth – you can make a bad film about a worthy cause, but a good film is a good film, no matter the subject.

3) You belong to the plethora of filmmakers that won a Golden Lion with their directorial debut. How did this affect your career, 28 years later? Was it something you felt pressured to live up, did it help?

-Of course, both. One day, my scripts were being returned by producers in the envelopes unopened; the next day, I was being offered adaptations of Barrico and Graham Greene, studio projects with Nicole Kidman, Leonardo di Caprio and Brad Pitt. This was because my talent came in the open, but also payback for eleven years of working in the dark, writing every day, sending scripts to producers, putting up with rejection, shooting tiny projects with my own money or with borrowed money, while working as a court interpreter and house painter, delivering balloons or unloading production trucks in New York, carrying film equipment on shoots all over the US. So, all of a sudden, my work is being recognized, people analyse every foley in the sound design, every line of dialogue, they recognise the inside jokes, chase me for autographs… It was good to have the opportunity to work, since film is a f*cked-

up art – you need a lot of money and other people and technology in order to even start making your piece. I spent the previous eleven years after graduating from film school *trying* to get in a situation where I can make my art. On the other hand, the pressure was enormous. I remember this lady in Bologna, she saw me at the door of the Cineteca when they were screening Before the Rain and some of my previous shorts, recognized me and said, "Don't let Hollywood steal you away!" There was also pressure from the Hollywood system who wanted me to make *their* films and not mine, even if I were signing them; there was pressure from the Macedonian audiences who wanted to see me *represent* them to the world (meaning, make feature-length adverts about "life" in Macedonia). And of course, there was pressure from political parties who wanted their version of reality (or even history) on the big screen, usually depending on whether they were in power at the moment or in opposition. I spent nine years on the black list in spite of being the nation's most sought-after cultural brand abroad. In hindsight, I am immensely grateful and heartened that I went through the experience of Before the Rain exploding out of nowhere (the film almost did not happen when Macedonia pulled out of the co-production before we started shooting and when Channel 4 withdrew from the project two weeks into production). I would not trade it for anything in the world – the people I met, the people I got to work with, the things I saw and the things I did… However, I also feel that the work I did since Before the Rain – even though not seen as widely – is more complex, more relevant and more fun.

4) Another peculiar aspect about your film career is that you have been able to work in the industry throughout several countries: North Macedonia and UK, but also the USA, etc. How was it different to make a film in each of these countries? Also, were there differences between working with an anglophone cast (for example in Dust) and European actors?

-Please allow me to correct you, if I may – the official new name of my country indeed is North Macedonia, but no one in Macedonia likes it, so we just call it what we have always called it and what our grandparents called it – Macedonia. As for working in different countries – of course there are differences, but if you focus on the essence, and that is the art everybody is making, then you discover that there are more similarities than differences. Macedonia is a tiny country, but it has a film industry bigger than the size of the country. Still, it is not easy for people to get the kind of film experience or film education one would hope for. I have always had the luck of working with dedicated crews. Sometimes they were working under difficult conditions, but they are people who really care for the final result. I had a similar experience in Cuba. I have also worked with dedicated people in the US, the UK, France, Germany and Russia, but I have also encountered mercenaries, people who spend a lot of energy on things that don't help the film itself. When I was getting started, and for a long time after, I focused on the result and did not enjoy the process. Partly this was a result of the bad luck I had with some of the producers at the beginning of my career, partly lack of wisdom. I now also enjoy the process and part of the reason I am making these films is the joy of working with some of the

wonderful people around me – David Munns, Milka Anchevska, Jane Kortoshev, Ivana Tasev, Ulrik Boel Bentsen, Nik Gaster, Mishko Chunihin, Ian Prior, Nikola Ivanovic… It took me a lifetime, but I finally have a team, hahaha.
As for actors – working with actors is one of my favourite phases of filmmaking. The Macedonian actors are world-class, they are often better than Hollywood stars, they just don't get the vehicles and publicity the star get. I had the good luck (or the persistence and tough criteria) to always work with great actors. Never accepted the studios' or the distributors' pressure to work with bankable names if they were not really, really good actors. As far as differences, I guess British actors would be more precise in communication during the process, which I appreciate every much.

5) You also worked in television, you directed an episode of The Wire. How was that experience compared to cinema?

-It looks like a duck, it walks like a duck, it quacks like a duck… but it's an owl, ha-ha-ha. The process is similar, except that in tv production there is very little time to contemplate the creative side of things, very little time to get to the complexity of things. Of course, I had the good luck of working on The Wire, which is arguably one of the best things on tv ever, mostly because of David Simon and his script. I thought it was my job to make sure that this rich, fun, truthful and complex script gets on screen unadulterated. Which was as well, since the director does not have that much power when working on American TV, even for HBO. This is not that dissimilar from the old studio system. I spent time in preproduction creating deliberate, yet elegant blocking and managed to get the DP to use longer lenses than was standard on the show before. I also managed to get rehearsal time with the actors, which they loved and it was invaluable, even though it's something unheard of in TV production. We had to shoot extremely fast, and I appreciated that aspect – it was like a military operation. The director of the episode is dropped in with a parachute – the crew and the cast are working on the previous episode – and he or she shoots for nine days, then good-bye. You edit for four days and you are done. Meanwhile, they are already shooting the next episode. It's a real military operation and your creative juices need to be flowing, your focus must be very clear. In cinema you usually have much more time, but that does not guarantee better results. For me the big difference was that I did not have the creative control I usually require – the script was not mine, most of the casting was not mine, I was not involved in the crewing process… but I accepted this because I trusted the producer, Bob Colesberry.

6) Speaking of Dust, it has the peculiarity of being shot on location in North Macedonia to represent the Wild West, which reminds a lot Italian audiences of how Spaghetti Westerns such as Sergio Leone or Sergio Corbucci's films were filmed in Italy and Spain. Was this a nod to that genre?

-There are only two or three exteriors in Dust that take place in Oklahoma (in the B/W flashbacks) and we found locations that looked quite convincing. In addition, we constructed Cherry Orchard, the brothel, which later one of the producers sold on the

side to a resourceful local businessman who moved the whole building near the capital and opened a restaurant and an equestrian club in our brothel. The rest of the Macedonian shoot was for parts of the story taking place in Macedonia (and a couple of Paris interiors, plus the trans-Atlantic boat). The New York exteriors we shot in New York City and the New York interiors we shot on a soundstage in Germany. But the Western genre has transcended the physical location. Mad Max is a Western, even though it was not filmed in nor does it take place in America.

7) The conflicts in the Balkans (from all centuries and eras) make for an important binding aspect for your first films. Do you believe you were able to make a difference? Or that today cinema can raise further awareness about the atrocities of war? Especially in light of the current conflict in Ukraine.

-I don't think art can have that kind of pragmatic effect. The people making wars don't get influenced by art that easily. However, art – including film – can have a different kind of effect. It can talk to us (not necessarily in words or "messages") about the human condition, about emotions and concepts that are difficult to communicate in a conversation. It makes us richer and better, makes us feel and think and know. These are pretty big things and that's why I am saddened when one tries to use film or art in general as an educational tool or to press an agenda. Art is much bigger than your ideological agenda.

8) Your latest film, Kaymak, has just premiered in Tokyo (we hope it will soon arrive in Europe), and explores the erotic life of couples. What inspired you in making this film? Also, did the topic lead to difficulties in making this film? I can only imagine how complicated could it be to greenlit a film that is concerned with a subject that many consider taboo.

-I felt the need to make a grown-up love story. Most of the love stories on film are for kids – not for kids literally, but the approach to the complex world of love (including romance, lust, conception, responsibility and loyalty) is one-dimensional and conservative: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, then boy wins girl over and they live happily ever after. Even kids are not that naïve anymore (if they ever were). I was missing the complexities and contradictions of grown-up relationships. The more I delved into it, the funnier and sadder the story I started developing became. A big chunk of the film is inspired by a true story – and it is the portion of the film that is most far-fetched and most disturbing. Ultimately, the film became a story of complicated people (which makes them more real) – everybody is both a victim and a perpetrator. It also became a film about personal freedoms and sexual liberation. It was not too difficult to get the film greenlit – of course, we had our share of dogmatic scolds telling us what we can and cannot say and almost lost the support of Eurimages over this preventive censorship, but a bigger problem was scrambling for money from the Macedonian film agency whose director used the cover of the pandemic to spend half of its budget on films that never got made (one can only

wonder what kind of benefit the director saw in these decisions that bypassed all procedures).

9) Kaymak has a lot of comedy, compared to most of your previous films. Why this choice?

-I don't know. It just felt right. Maybe I laugh more in life now than I did before…

10) Something that really stands out is the difference between the two couples, both in age and apparently also in wealth. Is there a suggestion of class struggle? How does that relate to the erotic theme?

-Yes, there definitely is a class issue between the haves and the have-nots in Kaymak. They are not necessarily aware of it. It's 2022, and we've gone full force on identity politcs for some time now, at least in America, yet it's becoming more aparent that wealth inequality remains one of the most insidious causes of injustice in rich countries and in poor countries. I'll be curious to see 10 or 20 years from now whether shifting so much of the focus to other forms of injustice and away from class struggle has made society more just. When someone says that only trans people should play trans people on film, I feel that someone should also say that only poor people can play poor people on film. As for the class struggle and sex – I guess that's something I learned from Wilhelm Reich and Dusan Makavejev.

11) The ending seems to suggest that Kaymak is a cautionary tale. Is that so? An advice to the breaking of dangers of certain taboos? Or otherwise, what is the meaning of that ending – as much as you're willing to disclose it

-I didn't intend this to be a cautionary tale. Things in life and people too are way too complex for cautionary tales. As i mentioned before, I don't think art should be treated as an appendix to the classroom. It's difficult to talk about the ending of Kaymak without spoilers, but let's just say that it's a lot of fun.

12) There's a lot of frames and scenes that seem to emphasize the location (the city of Skopje), with construction sites and such. What's the intention?

-An inhuman city that pits its inhabitants against each other for the sake of status and profit is one of the characters in Kaymak. As it happens, it is also the way Skopje is – a city squeezed by the greed of its urbanistic mafia and corrupt politicians, where every square inch of the sidewalk is turned into a parking space so people in wheelchairs have to ride in the middle of the street and large SUVs honk at them for slowing down the traffic, where neighbours in two tall buildings facing each other can be only three meters apart, where the county and the city hide the actual density of population statistics, where the professors of urbanism design new plans that quadruple the density – and all of it is legal.

13) What’s in store for the future? What is your next project?

-It is about the beautiful love between a brother and sister who steal busts of national heroes and sell them by the pound.

Edited by Viktor Tóth