
in the Films of Milčo Mančevski

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Summary

The Macedonian filmmaker Milčo Mančevski is adamant that there is no such thing as Balkan cinema and he is not “a Balkan filmmaker”. He has repeatedly stated that his films are about people and not place, and insists that it is a fundamental mistake to read a film that is *from* somewhere as necessarily *about* somewhere. In this paper I argue, to the contrary, that Mančevski’s films are deeply rooted in a specific geopolitical space. Mančevski’s films range across genre, time and place, their experimental form disrupts narrative conventions and presents the past as discontinuous and open. The films engage in complicated and often indirect ways with our relationship to the past and how the past can be represented. Mančevski’s films, I contend, struggle with the “founding trauma” of national identity, that is to say, with the creation of the modern Macedonian state out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century and more recently the expulsion of the Slavic population from Northern Greece after the end of the Second World War. Furthermore, his films deploy elements of a *national imaginary* to construct a unique “timeless” and “mythical” Macedonian national identity.

Keywords: Milčo Mančevski, Balkan Cinema, The Founding Trauma, Macedonia, National Identity

Introduction

In an on-line symposium of Balkan filmmakers and critics in 2007, hosted by the journal *Cineaste*, the editors asked the participants to what degree we can speak of Balkan cinema and what is the single most important issue that makes the biggest professional difference in their life as a Balkan filmmaker. The Macedonian filmmaker Milčo Mančevski was adamant that there is no such thing as Balkan cinema and the biggest difficulty he faced in his career was “[b]eing branded ‘a Balkan film-

maker' as opposed to just a 'filmmaker'".¹ Mančevski has repeatedly stated that his films are about people and not place, and insists that it is a fundamental mistake to read a film that is *from* somewhere as necessarily *about* somewhere, in Mančevski's case, to read his films as *about* the Republic of Macedonia just because they come *from* the Republic of Macedonia (2015a: 340). With a background in conceptual and performance art, as well as photography and fiction writing, Mančevski sees himself as first and foremost an artist, his place of origin is irrelevant.² Whilst I agree that Mančevski's films are about people, they are almost invariably love stories that end tragically, they are at the same time, I want to argue, deeply rooted in a specific geopolitical space. Mančevski's films deploy elements of the *national imaginary* to construct a unique "timeless" and "mythical" Macedonian identity.

Mančevski's four major films to date – *Before the Rain* (1994), *Dust* (2001), *Shadows* (2007) and *Mothers* (2010) – have all been shot, in large part or in total, in Macedonia. As Mančevski's biographer, Iris Kronauer, puts it, these four films "feel like a complete opus, an opus one can call Mančevski's Macedonian phase – from a nostalgic homecoming to a sobering question 'How will we die?'" (quoted in Kostova, 2015: 27).³ His films have all been financially supported by the Macedonian Ministry of Culture and in the late 2000s Mančevski produced a series of advertising spots, "Macedonia Timeless", for the Macedonian Government.⁴ After the international success of *Before the Rain* Mančevski was one of the most popular public figures in Macedonia. More recently he has fallen foul of the Macedonian government over his film *Mothers*, which the government actively tried to suppress for its portrayal of contemporary Macedonia (Kostova, 2015: 27; Abadzieva, 2015). Mančevski's films range across genre, time and place. They are unquestionably about people and relationships, emotion and tone, story-telling and truth, but at the same time they engage in complicated and often indirect ways with our relationship to the past and how the past can be represented. These films, I contend, struggle with the trauma of the past, more specifically with what Dominick LaCapra (2014) has called the "founding trauma", that is to say, a "trauma that is transformed or transvalued into a legitimating myth of origins" (*ibid.*: xii). In Mančevski's case

¹ "Is There a Balkan Cinema?: A filmmakers' and critics' symposium" organized by Andrew James Horton with Dan Georgakas and Angelike Contis, was originally posted on the website of the journal *Cineaste* 32 (3), but is no longer accessible.

² A selection of Mančevski's fiction and non-fiction essays can be found in Kostova, 2015.

³ In the summer of 2016 Mančevski completed the shooting of his first film in the US, *Bikini*. Previously none of his major US film projects have come to full fruition.

⁴ Mančevski also created the "Macedonia Timeless" website, but the government has since taken it over, changing its concept and content, and Mančevski has pulled out of the project (Kronauer, 2015: 543 fn 82).

this trauma is the founding of the modern Macedonian state out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century (*Dust*) and more recently the expulsion of the Slavic population from Northern Greece after the end of the Second World War (*Shadows*).⁵ If the nation-state is an “imagined community”, as Benedict Anderson (1991) has argued, then all nations could be said to undergo such a trauma insofar as all “myths of origin include something like a founding trauma through which people pass and emerge strengthened” (LaCapra, 2014: 161). Although LaCapra urges caution in this respect, noting that it is not clear that all societies and traditions have trauma as a crucial component of their founding myth or, indeed, that societies need a founding myth of origins in the sense that we are speaking of it. For LaCapra, the founding trauma forms the basis of collective identity, not in the sense of the founding of a national identity but rather through raising the question of the nation and identity itself (*ibid.*: 162). In the Balkans the questioning of origins and identity is all the more fraught, as nation-states within the region, Macedonia included, are relatively recent formations. Up to the late nineteenth century the largely peasant population of this region was indifferent to abstract notions of the nation and nationality. There was no “national consciousness” as such in the Balkans prior to the late nineteenth century (Mazower, 2000: 89; Danforth, 1995: 57) and ethnicity was simply not an issue, as the population defined themselves as Christians, a “community of believers”, rather than as distinct ethnic or national groups.

The Founding Trauma

LaCapra’s conception of the founding trauma is, as he acknowledges (2014: xiv), indebted to Freud’s notion of the “primal scene” and “primal fantasy”, as he elaborated it in the case study known as “The Wolf Man” (1979 [1918]). Primal fantasies are not original in the sense that they are “originary”, the origin of all subsequent fantasies, but rather they function as fantasies of origins. Freud’s myth of the primal horde and the slaying of the primal father in *Totem and Taboo* (1985 [1913]) as the origin of religion functions as just such a fantasy. For Freud, the status or “reality” of this primal scene, the killing of the father by the sons, remained ambiguous and he could not decide whether it was a real historical event or a fantasy construct. Finally, he suggested that readers provisionally accept the reality of the primal scene, just as he described it, on the basis of the subsequent explanations he advanced.

⁵ I should stress at the outset that this is a particularly tendentious reading of Mančevski’s films, only one of which, *Dust*, directly engages with history. It is also a specifically partisan reading of the films and Balkan history, as I am emphatically anti-nationalist, what ever form, benign or virulent, that nationalism may take, and interested in retrieving a specifically revolutionary and socialist narrative of Balkan history, that is singularly unpopular today.

In other words, the primal scene is retrospectively posited in order to endow subsequent narratives with coherence. The primal scene initiates a particular fantasy structure, it is “structuring” rather than representing a fixed structure or content. The primal scene or fantasy, thus, provides a framework through which subsequent material can be processed. What must be kept in mind here is that a given event is not necessarily traumatic, particularly at the time that it takes place, the trauma is retrospectively constituted through the symbolic repetition of the event, as the subject attempts to integrate the event into his or her subjective experience.

As Jeffrey Alexander reminds us, at a collective level cultural traumas are “socially mediated” (2004: 8) and in terms of national histories: “these collective beliefs often assert the existence of some national trauma. In the course of defining national identity, national histories are constructed around injuries that cry out for revenge” (*ibid.*).

National or collective traumas, such as the founding trauma, involve a struggle over meaning and how events of the past are perceived (Eyerman, 2004: 62). This is what Alexander calls the “trauma process” (2004: 11), and it involves a fundamental gap between the event and its representation. The cultural construction of a founding trauma often begins with the claim of a particular injury inflicted upon the nation and the social purchase of this claim will depend upon how compelling a narrative is constructed to support it.⁶ The representational process, therefore, “creates a new master narrative of social suffering” (*ibid.*: 15), but this master narrative is always in tension and struggle with competing narratives. I will suggest in this paper that just such a struggle for meaning can be identified within Mančevski’s films, between their form and content. While these films formally present a view of history as open, discontinuous and potentially inclusive, there are, at the same time, recurring motifs in his films that suggest the contrary. On the one hand, Mančevski’s films disrupt conventional notions of narrative, time and space, and on the other, the past persistently ruptures the representational frame producing a very specific narrative of place and national identity. As Conor McGrady writes, the “non-linear approach to narrative highlights history as a social construction, or a cultural artefact that is multi-layered, contextual, highly subjective and contested” (2015: 35). Mančevski’s narrative technique “interrupts our perception of an unbroken narrative historical flow” (*ibid.*: 35) but, at the same time, he creates an image of Macedonia that is mythical and “timeless” (Christie, 2015: 56), that subverts the more radical aspects of his formal experimentation. History intrudes in these narratives to create a very specific image of the nation and its past that sits uneasily with the constructivist view encapsulated in the form.

⁶ For example, at the beginning of the film *Before the Rain* the leader of the Macedonian paraimilitaries reminds the priests that they are avenging “five centuries of Turkish rule”.

Narrative Construction and Cubist Cinema

Mančevski has described his form of narrative as “Cubist” storytelling:

I am interested in Cubist storytelling – when the artist fractures the story and puts it back together in a more complex (and, thus, more interesting) way. More importantly, when the artist keeps shifting the emotional tone of the film, bringing a narrative film closer to the experiences of modern art. ... I like films that surprise me. I like films that surprise me especially *after* they’ve started. I like a film that goes one place and then takes you for a loop, then takes you somewhere else, and keeps taking you to other places both emotionally and story-wise... (2015b: 311)

Particularly in his first two features, *Before the Rain* and *Dust*, Mančevski deconstructs his narratives, foregrounding the potential multiplicity of perspectives on a single event. These experiments with form and content culminate in *Mothers*, where we are presented with three short stories, two fictional and one documentary, that appear to have no direct connection between them whatsoever; it is left to the spectator to construct the conceptual and emotional threads that link the three stories together. Mančevski’s “stories” are essentially love stories that end tragically. *Before the Rain* is a series of love stories, each story is a tale of unfulfilled love, which ends with a tragic and pointless death. *Dust* is a tale of two brothers in love with the same woman and ends with the suicide of the woman and the death of one brother. *Shadows* is the story of a man who falls in love with a woman who, it later transpires, is dead. Mančevski’s stories, then, are rather conventional; it is the form, the plot, that undermines our expectations and opens up the possibility of alternative readings.

The three sections of *Before the Rain* – Words, Faces, Pictures – are bookended by a Prologue and an Epilogue. Initially, the epilogue appears to be a repetition of the prologue, suggesting that the film has a circular structure. The dialogue, however, is slightly different, reinforcing the *leitmotif* of the film “Time never dies. The circle is not round.” Indeed, there are a series of spatio-temporal inconsistencies in the film that we cannot reconcile. These inconsistencies are not resolved within the story and underscore the fundamental gap between an event and its representation. It is precisely this gap between event and representation that the narrative structure stages that facilitates alternative or multiple readings of the same story.

Similarly, *Dust* has a complex, perhaps even more complex, narrative structure, that ruptures linear notions of time and homogenous conceptions of space (Filipčević, 2004/2005). The narrative consists of two parallel stories. The tale of Edge (Adrian Lester), a thief who breaks into an apartment building and is held at gun point by Angela (Rosemary Murphy), who insists on telling him her story. She then proceeds to tell the story of two Oklahoma brothers, Luke (David Wenham)

and Elijah (Joseph Fiennes), who are both in love with a prostitute named Lilith (Anne Brochet). The brothers end up moving from the “Wild West” to the “Wild East” of Macedonia at the turn of the twentieth century. Angela will die before she concludes her story and, as Edge flies from the US to Macedonia with an urn of Angela’s ashes on his lap, he begins to recite the story again to a fellow passenger. He does not stop, however, at the point at which Angela was forced to conclude her narrative but elaborates his own ending to the story. We have then two stories: Edge and Angela in New York in the present and Luke and Elijah in Macedonia in the past. As with *Before the Rain*, these two stories do not add up to a single coherent narrative. The temporal distinction between past and present and the spatial distinction between East and West are disrupted and undermined within the film.

Mančevski employs a number of formal techniques to blur spatio-temporal distinctions within the film. Scenes in the present (New York) are shot in colour, while the flashbacks to the Wild West are in black and white. This distinction holds when Luke travels to Paris and in numerous flashbacks. But once he arrives in Macedonia, although the scenes take place in the past, the image is in colour, suggesting visual and narrative continuity with the scenes in New York. The narrative does not follow the familiar convention of a story within a story, on the contrary, both stories seem to co-exist on the same temporal plain. Indeed, *Dust* frequently hints at visual continuity between the past and the present, New York and Macedonia, through the manipulation of our expectations of visual and spatial continuity. The soundtrack further disrupts our sense of time and place, as Mančevski plays with diegetic and non-diegetic sound. *Dust* appears to inscribe a clear distinction between East and West in terms of music but as the film progresses this demarcation breaks down. In the central sequence of scenes, where Luke is captured by Ottoman forces, the diegetic sound of Ottoman soldiers hysterically laughing is abruptly interrupted by (non-diegetic) rap music, “Straight Outta Compton” by NWA. There is a clear disjunction between the visual and the aural here, but a jump cut to the present reveals Edge shouting out of the hospital window to someone to turn the music, “Straight Outta Compton”, down. The music is indeed diegetic; it is just in a different story. As Edge’s sympathy for Angela develops, the musical score correspondingly shifts towards the Macedonian side of the scale and the scenes set in New York and the flight to Macedonia are overlaid with ethnic music.

As with *Before the Rain*, the disruption of narrative boundaries between past and present in *Dust* is emphasised through a series of narrative inconsistencies. These inconsistencies are not resolved within the diegetic frame and are left for the viewer to speculate on and perhaps, like Edge, elaborate their own scenarios and endings. Scenes from the film are repeated and restaged a number of times, underlining the different ways in which an event can be told. For instance, Angela recalls

Luke's capture with a different number of soldiers present each time: 20, 200 or 2000. When Edge points to the inconsistency, Angela rebukes him: "It's my story and I will tell it anyway I want". The past is a construction and the constructed nature of this past is continually foregrounded within the films.

Shadows would at first appear to be a much more linear narrative, recounting the story of a young man, Lazar (Borče Načev), in present day Macedonia, who is involved in a car accident, in which he nearly dies. After a year of recuperation Lazar returns to his apartment to find it occupied by an old woman, Kalina (Ratka Radmanović), who we later realize is a ghost. He then begins to see a number of ghosts. It is not quite that simple though. As the ghosts have a physical, material, presence and as Lazar's marriage crumbles, he develops a romantic liaison with a young woman, Menka (Vesna Stanojevska), who, again we slowly realize, is also dead. The enigma of the film turns on the saying of the old woman, "Return what's not yours. Have respect", which Lazar must first translate, as it is in an old dialect that he does not understand, and then decipher its meaning. *Shadows*, then, is another doomed love story, but it is also about the guilt of the living towards the dead and our responsibility to the past. The real of the past once again erupts in the present and shatters Lazar's symbolic world. The dead live in the present and stand in judgement of that present. I will come back to this below.

Finally, *Mothers* would appear to bring us, full circle, to Mančevski's debut with a three-part structure that does not add up to a single whole. *Mothers* explores notions of genre, of documentary and fiction, fact and fantasy. The film focuses on women moving from childhood, through young womanhood, to elderly mothers and grandmothers in the final section. It progresses from pure fantasy, to a fiction about documentary film-making to an actual documentary about a "real life" serial killer. Above all, it is the relationship between truth and the image which is the thread that links the various sections together (Crnković, 2015). As Mančevski himself has noted, the first two (fictional) sections of *Mothers* are based on real (true) events, the stories derive from accounts given to him by friends, but each section is treated differently (2015c: 566). *Mothers* is not about what is true and what is false but about the nature of truth itself and what is the relationship between truth and representation (Mančevski, 2015d: 582).

Interrogating the Image

Mothers explores the act of story-telling itself and the relationship between the image and that which is represented. The film interrogates the image and representation through foregrounding the filmic process in each of the three sections: the use of mobile phones, juxtaposing selfies and advertising images in the first part, the documentary film-making in the second and the pre-record material and

photographs of the dead that we are shown in the final documentary. Indeed, all of Mančevski's films are preoccupied with image-making in terms of both form and content. Aleksandar in *Before the Rain* is a Pulitzer prize winning war photographer and Anne is a picture editor for a London-based magazine. *Dust* opens with an old photograph of a man and a woman, who we will later learn are "The Teacher" (Vlado Jovanovski) and Neda (Nikolina Kujaca), his wife. We will see that image a number of times throughout the film along with other photographs of Luke, Elijah and Lilith. What we can never be sure of is if these photographs represent the "real" characters behind Angela's story or if she is constructing the story on the basis of images she has found. When Edge retells the story to a fellow passenger on the plane to Macedonia, bringing Luke back to life and constructing an alternative ending, the passenger challenges Edge on how he can know the ending when Angela is dead. Edge produces a photograph of Luke, Elijah and himself and responds "because it is my story". Is, then, the film a simulacrum, a copy of a copy, for which no original exists? The image deceives, it captures a moment, but the real Barthes' (1981) *punctum* of that image always escapes us. We are invited over and over again in these films to question what we are seeing and being shown, we are invited to see the past as a construct and narrative as fractured and fragmented, open to multiple perspectives and readings.

The structure of *Before the Rain* presents a past which is neither linear nor circular, it incorporates a temporal sense that is disjunctive and impossible. It is a kind of helix or spiral that turns back upon itself and repeats itself, but never in the same way twice. History may repeat itself but it is never the repetition of the same, it is the repetition of difference. History is not predetermined, in the sense of the fatalistic cyclical repetition of violence, as in Emir Kusturica's *Underground: Once upon a time there was a country* (1994), but open to the possibility of change. Robert Rosenstone famously described *Before the Rain* as a film that creates a new category of history:

[A] history of what has not yet happened. The history of the future created to warn against that future in order to prevent it happening. (2000: 191)

The parallel narrative structure of *Dust* would also seem to point in the direction of alternative histories. *Dust* not only undermines conventional notions of narrative cohesion, time and space but suggests that narrative itself lies, that the truth of narrative is only accessible through its deception, that, as Lacan says, "truth draws its guarantee from somewhere other than the reality that concerns it, truth has the structure of fiction" (2006: 684). *Dust* questions whether or not we can ever know the truth of events of the past, of history. The past lives within the present in both *Dust* and *Shadows*, as Mančevski's narratives present us with a fusion of past and present. It is here, though, within this constructivist view of history, embedded in

the form, that we can begin to see another, more essentialist, view of history, history as myth. A mythical view of history is represented through specific recurring motifs in the films and it is here, I believe, that we can locate the tension of the founding trauma of national identity. Mančevski creates a certain image of Macedonia as mythical and “timeless” that I will analyse through three specific motifs – landscape, religious iconography and music – before turning to history in a broader and more conventional sense.

Landscapes of the Past

International critics have noted how Mančevski created a new geography of the country for *Before the Rain*:

I only learned later how much Mančevski had actually created the landscape we might take to be typical Macedonian, patching up roads to inaccessible places and bringing together very different spaces to create a composite, as in the monastery around which the first episode is set. But what matters is not its authenticity as a place; rather it is the image of an apparently timeless pastoral landscape, as a contrast with a London that is, in reality, just as historic – and how he creates links, especially through churches and cemeteries... (Christie, 2015: 61)

Aesthetically and stylistically the film is a fable, it creates a mythological landscape rather than an actual one, a “timeless pastoral landscape”, as Christie puts it. The film historian Dina Iordanova observes that Western European audiences, if asked about Macedonia, were “likely to have exclusive images from this film flashing in their minds, as they simply have never seen another one from the region” (2001: 79). Keith Brown (2004) also testifies to the fact that North American reviewers were seduced by the visual beauty of the film, appearing to wallow in the paradox that extreme acts of violence could take place in such a beautiful place. The paradox, however, is not that extreme violence can take place in these beautiful landscapes but rather that the landscapes themselves do not exist on the ground. Many of the scenes from the film are shot in locations that are spread across the republic and, furthermore, these sites “constitute the historical legacy of Macedonia – a legacy that most of its inhabitants recognize” (Brown, 2004: 41), even if an international audience does not. For instance, we see frequent shots of a small church, St. John at Kaneo, on the shore of lake Ohrid. Why might this be important, rather than just a visually seductive scene? The formation of nation-states in the southern Balkans was inextricably bound up with the emergence of national, autocephalous, churches out of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. A person’s allegiance to a particular church, Bulgarian, Greek or Serbian, became in the late nineteenth century a sign, not the only one, to be sure, but a crucial one, of one’s ethnic identity. The symbolic importance of Ohrid, where the church is located and the first

Macedonian Archepiscopate, is that it projects back the notion of nationality, of national or ethnic identity, beyond the age of nation-states and implies a continuity between the past and the present, between the ancient territory of Macedonia and the modern nation-state, a continuity that, I have argued above, the narrative form disrupts.

In a climate where national symbols have been, and in some cases still are, contested both externally, by Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia,⁷ and internally by the different constituent nationalities of the country, especially the Albanian Muslims, national identity has been heavily invested in the idea of a unique Macedonian landscape (Brown, 1994). In contemporary Macedonian historiography rural culture and ways of life have been central in establishing historical and cultural continuity with the past. As Brown writes, Macedonians “see their past, and their national ‘essence’, as firmly rooted in the countryside” (*ibid.*: 791). The visually stunning and seductive rural landscapes of Mančevski’s films are one of their most frequently cited features by international critics. As noted above, *Before the Rain* is usually signaled out in this respect, but *Dust* contains no less spectacular landscapes. We could also cite the slow languid aerial tracking shots along the river Vardar and of lake Kozjac in *Shadows*, or the almost deserted village in the region of Mariovo in the central section of *Mothers*. These rural landscapes are clearly sites of tradition and cultural heritage but, at the same time, they are seen to be in Mančevski’s films sites that are dying. The two communities in *Before the Rain* can no longer communicate with each other, although the older generation can. The mother’s village in *Shadows* is deserted and in ruins, the cemetery overgrown with weeds. In the Mariovo section of *Mothers*, the only two remaining inhabitants of the village, a brother and a sister, have not spoken to each other for 16 years. There is a sense of nostalgia here, to be sure, but also a recognition that something has changed, that contemporary urban Macedonians are distanced from this legacy of the past. If national identity is to be located in this landscape, then it will require people to start listening to it again, in Kalina’s words from *Shadows*, to “have respect”.⁸ The dilemma for modern Macedonians, observes Brown (1994), is that when they turn to the material landscape today and attempt to re-invest it with symbolic significance, they find it inhabited by different groups and different histories. Today the majority of the Slav-Macedonian population live in the urban centers. The Albanian population lives in the countryside and the mountainous region of the West and

⁷ At the time of independence Greece refused to recognise the name of the country or its flag, claiming both as Greek symbols, Bulgaria recognised the country but not the Macedonian nation or language, Serbia refused to recognise the independence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, claiming it to be a branch of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

⁸ On the ethics of listening in Mančevski’s films see Crnković (2011).

North-West, precisely the region most frequently seen in Mančevski's films. I will come back to this below.

Before the Rain created a certain image of Macedonia and launched both the country and its director onto the world stage (Christie, 2015: 61). While the film was praised internationally for its postmodern, hybrid, transnational and boundary dissolving qualities, it was actually read in Macedonia itself rather differently (Brown, 2004). *Before the Rain* was the first film to be partially funded and made in the newly independent state of the Republic of Macedonia and this beautifully elegiac film created a mythical fairy-tale landscape that became indelibly linked to the newly emerging nation-state. As Brown writes: the "film's identification as Macedonian, in the international sphere, preceded or anticipated that of the country. In some sense it could be argued to occupy an active role in the transition of the republic from part of Yugoslavia to a sovereign state" (*ibid.*: 41). The name of the protagonist, we might also note, resonates with that of Alexander the Great and the ideological significance of his "home" coming at a time when the country's own name is in dispute is very strong indeed.⁹ In short, the film's open and disjunctive form, rupturing our conventional sense of time and space, has been transformed from a work of international co-operation and bicultural hybridity into "a product of a single nation and a director from that nation" (*ibid.*: 42).

The Iconography of the Nation

Ian Christie notes, in the quotation above, that the sense of "timelessness" that Mančevski evokes derives "especially through churches and cemeteries" (2015: 61). Indeed, I would go further and argue that if Mančevski's films are concerned with the (post)modern production of images, they are no less suffused with the pre-modern production of religious iconography. Mančevski's camera, in the first section of *Before the Rain*, lovingly dwells on the murals inside the church on the shores of lake Ohrid.¹⁰ Crosses, churches, cemeteries and symbolic crosses appear repeatedly throughout the films. The main narrative of *Shadows* begins on the "Day of the Dead" and it is in the cemetery that Lazar sees Menka for the first time. In the mountain village in *Dust* we also see multiple images of the cross and the church as well as villagers celebrating the Day of the Dead, reminding us that this is an Or-

⁹ I am fully aware that Aleksandar is one of the most common male names in Macedonia and its usage within the film could be entirely innocent, but given the significance of names in Mančevski's other films – for example, Elijah in *Dust* resonates with St. Elijah or St. Ilinden in Slavic; Lazar in *Shadows* resonates with Lazarus who rises from the dead – I believe that the name was selected for its mythical resonance, suggesting a continuity with the past.

¹⁰ The interior shots of the frescos are from the church of Saint Mother of God the Wisest, also on the shores of lake Ohrid.

thodox community.¹¹ Similarly we see families mourning their dead relations on the Day of the Dead in *Mothers*. In *Shadows* in particular there are numerous cut-aways to crosses, the church at Ohrid, and the illuminated cross on the hill above Skopje. These cut-aways, as with the music, which I will discuss below, are crucial to creating the emotional tone of the film and the sense that one is in an Orthodox Christian country. Religiously based practices and rituals, like the Day of the Dead, have been reanimated in modern Macedonia and are clear “expressions of Christian solidarity in post-Yugoslav Macedonian identity” (Brown, 2003: 219). The observance of these rituals and practices has also increased, as the Macedonian Orthodox Church has come to play a significant role in the remaking of the symbolic landscape of the nation. What binds one community together, however, can also be seen to alienate and exclude another. Religious rituals and excessive Christian iconography may well create a strong sense of collective identity and national belonging for Orthodox Macedonians, but they do so at the expense of Christians of other denominations and above all of the Muslims of the country. We rarely see mosques or Islamic practices in these films.

The depiction of Muslims in Mančevski’s films has been highly controversial. When *Dust* premiered at the Venice film festival in 2001, it was greeted by a chorus of criticism (Kronauer, 2015). The film was accused of being racist for its portrayal of Ottoman soldiers as “gibbering hyenas in red fezzes”, in the words of one British critic. After the critical mauling the film received, it was pulled by many distributors. On the one hand, this criticism completely misses the point regarding the film’s visual style. The highly stylized violence is indebted to Sam Peckinpah and the spaghetti westerns of Sergio Leone.¹² On the other hand, we might also note that the bandits Luke joins, who are described by Angela as “the worst of the worst”, tend to be wearing white woollen hats which resemble Qeleshes, the traditional headgear of the Albanians. Dress, headgear and the colour palette within the film are all carefully encoded to signify ethnic distinction. In *Shadows* we see only two scenes of Muslims in Skopje and one shot of a Muslim village. In one of these scenes two Muslim mothers walk their children to a park, and then the film cuts to a shot of a (non-Muslim) mother holding her child while it defecates in public. This juxtaposition can clearly be read in diametrically opposing ways but I, for one, remain completely uncertain just how I should read it. The issue for me is not the

¹¹ A clear distinction is drawn, however, between Macedonian Orthodoxy and Greek Orthodoxy, which is shown in the film to side with the Ottomans.

¹² Indeed, Mančevski pays tribute to Sam Peckinpah in the opening scene of *Before the Rain*, where we see a small group of children torturing tortoises before setting them alight, while the elderly priest ruminates about children being the future. The scene is a direct quotation from the opening sequence of Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969).

accuracy or fairness of the representation, but the general absence of Muslims and Albanian culture from the landscape of Mančevski's Macedonia. We can, I suggest, begin to see the contours of a national master narrative emerging, it is Slav and Orthodox Christian, although nearly one quarter of the population of Macedonia today is Albanian and Muslim.

Aural Landscapes

The visual landscape of *Before the Rain* is complemented by an equally seductive score, for which Mančevski selected the "ethno-rock" group Anastasia. The music is a combination of Byzantine and traditional Macedonian music. The critic Sašo Lambevski has pointed out that the music brings to the film that "elusive quality of the Macedonian Thing to the forefront, where symbolization fails" (2015: 110). Ideologically speaking, Anastasia "belong to a group of music and art bands loosely connected in a Macedonian retro movement interested in reconstructing the spiritual and intellectual heritage of Macedonia" (*ibid.*).¹³ This particular form of ethno-rock, continues Lambevski, was developed in the 1980s and is heavily encoded, creating an aural landscape that Macedonians immediately recognize as their own. That is to say, Macedonians have been taught by "the ideological apparatus of the Macedonian state (the family, the Orthodox Church, the educational system and the media)" (*ibid.*, fn 16) to recognize certain performing styles and traditional dances as their own. Lambevski acknowledges that contemporary Macedonia is very different from eighteenth and nineteenth century Macedonia, however, "the reproduction/remake of these traditional folk songs and dances constitute a convenient vehicle through which a direct link between the Macedonian past and present can be imagined, thus establishing a connection between the affective landscape of contemporary Macedonia and that of their pre-modern ancestors" (*ibid.*: 111).¹⁴ Once again Mančevski's films assert a sense of historical continuity with an ancient past that the more experimental form belies. There is, needless to say, no Albanian music in the film, Albanians are very much the "other" of this mythological landscape.

The music for *Dust* was composed by Kiril Džajkovski, a long time collaborator with Mančevski and widely known in Macedonia and the Balkans for his fusion of electronic dance rhythms with traditional Macedonian ethnic music. As with *Before the Rain*, there is a very distinctive elegiac and religious tone to the music in *Dust*. Džajkovski is also credited with composing additional music for *Shadows*.

¹³ The lead singer of Anastasia, Goran Trajkoski, has since the making of the film become an Orthodox priest.

¹⁴ For an alternative view to this national reading of folk traditions see the documentary *Whose Is This Song?* (2003), which traces a song across the region, with people in each country believing the song to be their own traditional heritage.

The master narrative of national identity that we see emerging is, then, clear: the modern Republic of Macedonia is ethnically and culturally Slav Orthodox Christian and has been so since time immemorial. “Others” exist within this landscape, but they do not constitute its “essence”. I will now turn to history in a more concrete sense and the founding trauma of modern Macedonia.

The Trauma of the Past

Dust was released at a very particular historical conjuncture for the newly independent state of Macedonia and this impacted upon its reception. From personal experience, it is not a film that works on a single viewing; the interweaving of its two parallel narratives requires multiple viewings for the spectator to have a sense that he/she grasps what Mančevski is aiming for. According to Erik Tängerstad, the attempt to represent the unrepresentable, “of knowing past events that never became part of recorded history” (2015: 238), is precisely what *Dust* is about. For Tängerstad, Mančevski’s film is conceived “at the rupture between the past and history” (*ibid.*), that is to say, in the gap between what actually happened and the present historical record of what happened. As the historical record can never be fully identical to the event itself, the truth of what happened lies somewhere in this gap. What Tängerstad calls the test case for the film were the atrocities that took place after the Ilinden uprising of 1903 against the Ottoman Empire. Tängerstad’s reading is important, as he acknowledges Mančevski’s support and help in writing about the film, especially its history.¹⁵ “Behind the Ilinden uprising”, writes Tängerstad, “stood Macedonian nationalists, who wanted to break loose from the Ottoman Empire and to form a sovereign Macedonian nation state” (*ibid.*). If the atrocities, ethnic cleansing and genocides (plural)¹⁶ that followed the Ilinden uprising were acknowledged today, continues Tängerstad, “it would be in the format of unresolved guilt complexes and questions of how later generations would deal with these guilt complexes” (*ibid.*). Another way of putting this might be, of coming to terms with the founding trauma of national identity.

Dust is a film about the Ilinden uprising, an uprising that was led by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), which has now been canonized within Macedonia as a nationalist movement seeking the formation of a nation-state. What this nationalist narrative of the Macedonian struggle leaves out is the revolutionary character of the organisation, that is to say, the socialist and anarchist

¹⁵ Mančevski notes that for *Dust* he did extensive historical research with a bibliography running into more than 160 titles (2015c: 558).

¹⁶ Tängerstad does not specify what he means by “genocides (plural)”; he appears to be referring to the mass expulsion(s) of populations following the two Balkan wars, but strictly speaking this is not the subject of the film.

factions within the organization that were profoundly anti-imperialist as well as anti-nationalist and fought for a pan-Balkan federation.¹⁷ IMRO was split between the left, the Narrows, who opposed nationalism and supported the idea of an *autonomous* Macedonia for *all* nations within a pan-Balkan Federation, and the right, the Broads, who supported a sovereign state.¹⁸ The left of IMRO, including Goce Delčev and Jane Sandanski, was opposed to the Ilinden uprising, arguing that it was premature and the organisation was too weak to prevail. The right believed that if an uprising was staged, then it would force the Great Powers to intervene. They were right in this, the Great Powers did subsequently intervene, but on the side of the Ottomans in order to restore stability to the region.

In a central scene from *Dust* Luke is taken to a Macedonian village to recover from his injuries and there he encounters an idyllic peasant community. Angela's voice-over recalls how the people may not have had very much but what they had they shared. It is here that Luke encounters Neda, the Teacher's wife, and the domestic historical references start to overwhelm the film's narrative. The Macedonian revolutionary movement was never a mass-based national liberation movement but was a "consequence of the emergence of a new class of Slavo-Macedonian school teachers and their students" (Perry, 1988: viii). It was through this emerging intelligentsia, and above all through the schools, that notions of national belonging were introduced to a largely peasant population, who previously defined themselves in religious terms. Neda was taught English by a Boston missionary called Miss Rock, a rather obvious reference to the Miss Stone affair, one of the most notorious incidents of the period. Ellen Stone was an American missionary who was kidnapped and held hostage for over six months by a *cheta* (band of irregular paramilitaries) led by Jane Sandanski. After her release Ellen Stone became an outspoken supporter of the Macedonian cause (*ibid.*: 103-105). I take this utopian community to be a reference to the Kruševo republic, one of the pivotal historical events of the Macedonians' sense of a distinctive history. The establishment of an independent republic in the town of Kruševo in central Macedonia was one of the highpoints of the Ilinden uprising. The republic was short-lived, however, and after ten days the town was recaptured by the Ottomans. Kruševo is significant, as the last time a regime had its capital within the borders of the modern republic was under Tsar Samuel in the eleventh century (Brown, 2003: 2).

¹⁷ For an excellent collection on the debates within the revolutionary left on the Macedonian question and a Balkan federation see Živković and Plavšić, 2003.

¹⁸ The first article of the 1902 statutes of the organization read: "The aim of the SMARO is to unite in one whole all discontented elements in Macedonia and the Adrianople region, irrespective of nationality, to win full political autonomy for these two provinces through revolution" (Perry, 1988: 109-110). The second article called for an end to "national dissensions".

Mančevski's film creates a rural idyll that the voice-over and mise-en-scene encourage us to identify as traditionally Macedonian and this is in accord with the nationalist narrative that portrays Kruševo as unified uprising of the Macedonian people. The difficulty, as Brown (2003) explores in his fascinating account, is that the competing narratives of the Republic – “nationalist”, “socialist”, and “localist” – sit uneasily together. Kruševo was prior to and after the uprising a predominantly Vlach village (*ibid.*: 4) and the Vlach have long seen themselves as ethnically and culturally distinct from their Slavic neighbours. The search for ethnic origins is a zero-sum game, but it is clear that the leaders of the Republic came from a variety of backgrounds including Vlach and Albanian (*ibid.*: 200), while others had clear Bulgarian sympathies (*ibid.*: 207).¹⁹ In the former Yugoslavia the Ilinden uprising and the Kruševo republic were seen in relationship to the Partisan struggle of 1941-1944, and Kruševo was portrayed as a proto-socialist republic that embodied the spirit of “brotherhood and unity” (*ibid.*: 49). With the emergence of Macedonia as a sovereign state in the early 1990s this history was rewritten, as Delčev, Ilinden and Kruševo became key signifiers of a new national identity (Frusetta, 2004). The socialist credentials of Delčev and Sandanski's anarchism had to be played down and subsequently written out of the narratives of national formation.

The Past as Present

Shadows similarly explores the unrepresentability of the past, the unsayable, and the guilt of the living towards the dead, the dead in this case being the Slavs of southern and central Macedonia, which is today a region of Greece. The film's central protagonist, Lazar, recovers from a near death experience to find himself haunted by ghosts from the past. As I mentioned above, an old woman he finds in his apartment keeps repeating a phrase, “Return what's not yours. Have respect”, which he does not understand, as it is in an old dialect. The apparitions cannot explain what must be returned, this is for Lazar to discover himself. Lazar's mother (Sabina Ajrula-Tozija), a doctor at the University hospital, has dug up bones from her village cemetery in order to use them in her anatomy classes. It is these bones that Lazar must return in order for the dead to rest in peace. In one sense then, *Shadows* is about the need to bury the past and move on, of not being weighed down by the trauma of the past. But it is also a film about the need to respect the past. Dr Perkova is dismissive of her son's concern to rebury the bones of the dead because they are nothing but “Aegeans, refugees, and suicides”. In order for Lazar to “return what is not his”, he must first learn something of his own history, the history of a

¹⁹ The legendary Macedonian revolutionary leader Goce Delčev referred to both himself and the Slavic population of Macedonia as Bulgarian (Perry, 1988: 23).

“people forced out, their houses burnt down”, in Menka’s words. Or, as Lazar’s father, Ignjat Perkov (Dime Iliev), puts it in more biblical terms, “Exodus, forced out of their homes by bayonets and napalm”.

Lazar cannot communicate with the old woman, as she speaks in an old dialect of southern or central Macedonia, what the Slav Macedonians call “Aegean Macedonia”. The reference to Aegean Macedonia is something that resonates locally and regionally but tends to by-pass international audiences. The term “Macedonia” has a series of distinct meanings today (Danforth, 1995: 4-5; Brown, 2003: 37). As a geographical region it is defined by the area bounded on the north by the Sar mountains, on the East by the Rhodope mountains, on the south by the Aegean Sea, Mt. Olympus and the Pindus Range, and on the west by lake Ohrid (Wilkinson, 1951). Macedonia was a distinct geographical and administrative region within the Roman and Byzantine empires but, as the historian Mark Mazower notes, within the Ottoman Empire Macedonia was “a region with no clear borders and not even a formal existence as an administrative Ottoman entity” (2000: 98). After the Second Balkan War (1913) the geographical area of Macedonia was divided between Bulgaria (10%), Greece (50%) and the Kingdom of Serbia (40%). The last part subsequently became the Republic of Macedonia in 1944 within Yugoslavia. Contemporary Macedonians refer to these three regions as Pirin Macedonia, Aegean Macedonia and Vardar Macedonia respectively. Greece in particular takes exception to references to “Aegean Macedonia”, as the country sees in this designation territorial and cultural claims on its own sovereignty and past (see Danforth, 1995: 30-42; and Mančevski, 2015e for the counter-argument). What concerns me here is not futile discussions about who are the true Macedonians, but the way in which Mančevski’s film projects an image of Macedonia in which the nation-state (the Republic of Macedonia) is mapped onto the cartography of the broader region of Macedonia.

As Menka and Ignjat Perkov allude in *Shadows*, after the Second Balkan War a process of ethnic cleansing was undertaken, as the new nation-states sought to homogenize their populations. The forging of nation-states within the region involved the use of military conflict to pursue long-term demographic goals including forced conversions, mass executions and the displacement of tens of thousands of people by all sides (Mazower, 2000: 117).²⁰ Following the Greek civil war (1943-1950) a further purge took place, as the majority of the remaining Slavs in Greek Macedonia were driven from their homes. It is this history that Mančevski’s film alludes to and demands remembrance and respect for. There is another aspect of this past, however, that is left out of Mančevski’s narrative, that is to say, the narrative of the

²⁰ Interestingly there tends to be very little discussion of probably the largest population ethnically cleansed from the region; over 5 million Muslims were expelled from Europe at the turn of the century, 2 million of them from the Balkans alone (Mazower, 2000: xxxvii).

revolutionary left and the desire for a Balkan Federation to transcend ethnic and national differences.²¹

Lazar's father refers to the use of napalm to drive the Aegean Macedonians from their homes, and napalm was certainly used in Greece in the late 1940s, but not exactly in the sense implied here. As the Greek civil war drew to a close in 1949, a significant component of the Communist Greek Democratic Army (DSE) was comprised of Slav Macedonians, around 30% according to some scholars, the majority of the army according to others (Close and Veremis, 1993: 120). The DSE's principle backer in the region was Tito, who maintained the idea of a pan-Balkan Socialist Federation incorporating a unified and autonomous Macedonia (see Barker, 1987a, 1987b). Following Tito's break with Stalin (1948), the Greek Communist Party (KKE) sided with Moscow and Tito slowly reduced aid to the democratic army. On the 10th July 1949 Tito closed the border between Yugoslavia and Greece and the dream of a pan-Balkan Federation with socialist Yugoslavia at its center was finally laid to rest (Pirjevec, 1987: 316). In the same month the Greek National Army (EEA) dropped napalm on the DSE stronghold of Grammos in the Northern Pindus mountain range bordering Albania, inflicting a devastating defeat on the Democratic Army (Close and Veremis, 1993: 123).²² More than 12,000 fighters of the Democratic Army retreated and regrouped across the border in Albania, but the left had lost the war. The bombing of Slav Macedonians with napalm and the expulsion of tens of thousands of Greeks, Slavs, Chams and Vlachs as a consequence was not an ethnic cleansing of one nation by another, but a purge of communists and socialists by the victorious right. The expelled were victims of an ideological struggle and the dream of a pan-Balkan socialist federation, they were also the first casualties in what would become a global cold war against communism.

Re-signifying the Past

Mančevski's films challenge us to think about the past, to think about the nature of story-telling and how the past is represented. The formal experimentation of this body of work overturns our expectations and undermines filmic and generic conventions. At the same, I have argued, Mančevski constructs a mythical, timeless

²¹ On 1 March 1949 the Free Greek Radio, which was based in Yugoslavia, broadcast a resolution by the Popular Liberation Front (NOF) calling for "wholesale participation of the Macedonian people with the Greek people in their common struggle"; and further declared NOF's intention for "the union of Macedonia into a complete independent and equal Macedonian nation within the popular democratic federation of the Balkan peoples" (Barker, 1987a: 288-289).

²² The napalm was supplied by the United States of America and dropped by airplanes supplied by the British. This was not because of any particular animosity on the part of the US or Britain against Slav Macedonians, but to stop the spread of "Slavo-communism" in the region.

image of the nation around the key signifiers of Orthodoxy, the Ilinden uprising and the Kruševo republic and the “exodus” of Slav-Macedonians from Greek Macedonia. Mančevski’s “Macedonian films” in this sense play a significant role in the construction of a new national imaginary, as the Republic of Macedonia re-signifies its revolutionary and socialist heritage as a narrative of national emancipation. Whereas the narrative structure of these films suggests that the past is a construct and history is discontinuous, the recurring motifs of landscape, religious iconography and music suggest the contrary. These motifs suggest a continuity of national and ethnic identity beyond the formation of the nation-state and embedded in the very landscape of the region. This, I contend, is a response to the founding trauma of national identity, the need to construct an essential, reified, identity that transcends history through its very “timelessness”.

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