

THE PHANTOM COUNTRY

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Broken circle: Before the Rain endures not for its literal depiction of interconnectedness but for the jarring disconnect of its spasms of violence



Milcho Manchevski's feature debut *Before the Rain* (1994) operates around a tripartite structure, each strand offering a distinct narrative—one set in England, the other two in Macedonia—that connects in unexpected ways to a whole that comes full circle only in the closing scenes. Thanks to Criterion's new DVD, I've just seen the film again for the first time since its release, and it seems to me now that what's more important, and certainly more durable than the ways in which these threads literally connect are the ways in which each thread poses a variation on the same build-up toward an act of senseless violence, eviscerating whatever assemblage of order previously existed. Though made during the spike of international awareness of the chaos of the war-torn Balkan states, *Before the Rain* isn't really a commentary on that particular political trauma or even on civil war in general. It's about eruptions and the normally invisible geometry that links them.



An Orthodox Christian monk (the beatific, rather opaque Grégoire Colin) hides an Albanian teenage girl accused of killing a local shepherd. A London photo agent (the late, always wonderful Katrin Cartlidge) having an affair with a famed photojournalist discovers she's pregnant. A Macedonian (a zesty, deeply watchable Rade Serbedzija) returns home after years abroad to discover a homeland where he's considered an outsider each time he attempts to apply some moral logic to the madness of tribal disputes. Each of the major players make some sort of an appearance in each of the individual parts, a technique striking in its day that has since been exploited in some of the most awkward, overbearing and self-important films of the last several years, reaching its nadir with the likes of *Babel* (2006) and, worst of all, Paul Haggis' *Crash* (04).

These later movies talk down their audience, straining to emphasize the theme of global interconnectedness by literally connecting their characters in risible feats of dramatic irony, as though we wouldn't be able to sense the figurative connections without such guidance. If Manchevski's spin on this feels less schematic, it may come down to simply having origins in a genuinely organic approach to dealing with a story that's ultimately more about generating a specific feeling than hammering home an outsized message. More problematic are Manchevski's use of rhymes or echoes throughout the film—a cryptic proverb, a turtle, vomit, the swatting of a fly—something meant to be subtle but actually has the opposite effect, drawing far too much attention to moments and gestures that start to feel awfully banal when trapped under the spotlight of Manchevski's camera.



Still, it's a privilege to criticize a movie for such details. While things might not quite mesh with the grace and quiet provocation intended, while certain events, such as the first killing, feel very forced, the poetry of *Before the Rain* is essentially of a fairly unimposing sort—I love the scenes of people dreaming of someone's appearance right before the actually appear—while the performances are at times nothing less than sublime. I also feel more endeared toward Manchevski after hearing the audio commentary he does with scholar Annette Insdorf. While Insdorf keeps aligning Manchevski's work to that of Kieslowski (a comparison that does Manchevski no favours), Manchevski unabashedly and unpretentiously points out the film's obvious relationship to *Pulp Fiction*, which came out the same year, while pointing out little homages to *Psycho* (60) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969). In the essay included in the DVD package, Ian Christie takes this one step further, wisely seeing *Before the Rain's* true lineage as being in late period westerns. With readings like this one, *Before the Rain*, unlike the movies it's most obviously influenced, may actually just look better and better with age.

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