

The "Wild West" of the Balkan

Stilian Yotov (Sofia)

" Dust " by Manchevski is a movie that strikes into the heart of the 'cultures in conflict' topic. The movie provokes a series of questions about our readings of history and our cultural self-awareness and drives us to re-think our values. In an interval of ninety years in "Dust" the clash of cultures takes place twice. Firstly, persons with a questionable reputation in the American society clash with peoples, living in the backyards of Europe. Secondly, in the heart of American civilization cross the ways of two persons, for whom it seems that there is no place of their own in the whole world. The interpretation of the meeting of two derailed cultures in "Dust" raises the curtain for us to see cultural conflicts not in the field of hypothesis but in casual everyday contacts. We happen to take part in such kind of contacts all the time without necessarily realizing their conflict nature, mostly because of the determined ideological historical views we are used to hold.

"Dust" offers a new 'Balkan' interpretation of the western genre, that is not just a topological transfer of the Wild West norms and action to the Balkans scene, but sets up a dimension for direct juxtaposition of the Wild West and the Wild East. Manchevski creates a story in which standard 'western' characters freely fit into a completely different geographical region. The capacity of the 'western' genre to hold the continuity of the action and the commensurability of the topoi is beyond doubt. But in this case it turns out to be quite a challenge for Manchevski, because this story is not just a fantasy, but it has happened. The history textbooks give us enough support for the reality of that frame in the historical events in the Balkans that start with armed revolts in Bosnia and Bulgaria in 1876 and ultimately culminate in the Berlin congress in 1878. The European society shall react explicitly against the Ottoman atrocity in bringing under control the uprisings and shall express strong sympathy for the new Balkan nations. At the same time, June 1876, near Little Big Horn, several squads of General Caster's cavalry are destroyed, and later on, in September 1876, the band of Jessie James attacks the National Bank of Nortfield, only Jessie James and his brother Frank survive. The European society hardly demonstrates any interest to these events in America. Nevertheless the difference what is significant in the reaction of the civilized world is that from a certain common European point of view both the regions seem similarly wild.

"Dust" combines an easy transition between the wild historical topoi with a kind of tension between the cultural messages from the Wild West of America and the Wild East of the Balkan. This is well demonstrated in a reconstruction of the 'special turn' (topical turn) in the movie. This reconstruction starts with a comparison between America and Macedonia as myths. In an imaginary map-making America comes out with an ambivalent function. On one side, the American national history is construed by the analogy with the Holy Bible that not only gives the name of Klinton's program "New Covenant " but also overflows in Bush's political language. On the other side, the Wild West has an irrevocable reference for the map of America, but it is assumed only as an episode in the American history, as part of the past that doesn't anchor into the future. If we go further to the myth of Macedonia we'll find two interwoven mental projects - the idealization and the trauma. The heart of Macedonia gives shelter to the religious center of Orthodox Church (Ohrid). The legend points at Macedonia as the birthplace of the "slavonic" emperor Justinian who gives the name of the civil code and who builds "St. Sofia" cathedral. At the same time, it is Macedonia that

remains under Ottoman rule until 1912 and inflames the passions among the reborn and regenerating Balkan nations - Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria and Albania. It turns into a battlefield in which not only peoples but also legends are confronted in a way that not only shakes the foundations but also threatens to blow out the identity of Macedonia. The dream of Macedonia turns into a nightmare.

While the myth of the Wild West in America crystallizes in an age, the Wild East of the Balkans takes the shape of a stigma. In "Dust" the myth of the Wild West perpetuates in the "western" genre but is topographically transformed to convey new cultural meanings in the Balkans. The specifics of the Balkan challenge a number of intellectuals and politicians who are trying to uncover the secret of that "past, which does not pass". They draw the map the "kernel" of the Balkans - Bulgaria, Serbia, Monte Negro, Macedonia, Bosnia, Hertzegovina, and... Greece. However, these boundaries are incessantly changing because indefiniteness is an intrinsic characteristic of this region that might be localized in many directions. Through a magnifying glass the substance of the Balkan is a Byzantine-orthodox and Ottoman-islamic mix with a slavonic component. And it is remarkable that the West Balkans (especially Yugoslavia) that in the times of the real socialism used to be part of the West for most of the Balkan peoples now could turn out as a Wild West.

That's how we reach the "Wild West" of the Balkan, and after being borrowed the metaphor easily finds its new referent. After part of the myth content of the Balkans and Macedonia has been taken away and the myth itself narrowed stigma shall rule. Auto-stigmatization is the only effective protection mechanism. Self-definitions do not reject the characteristics from outside but even accept and absorb them in order to start hazardous manipulations, the result of which might be fixing or blowing out identities. At the end, the outside definers might find themselves identically defined. On this mechanism exactly is based "Dust" that demonstrates and thematizes the "auto-stigmatization" of the Balkans. This is how I see the strategy employed by Manchevski - instead of making the story digestible and clarifying, he entangles it even more. He frees the culture of the Balkans to speak for itself in the way it looks in the standard attitudes and views. The hope is that this world obsessed by cliches is not completely locked, because self-denial is always a way out. Fetching some tricks from Odysseus, Manchevski, like a hunter, adopts the conduct manner of his opponents, and talks about the Wild West of the Balkans with the language used by the Wild West of America in its self-expression. Thus at the end, it turns out that...the differences are far from big. Without any impediments Manchevski processes the mutual translation of the myths of America and Macedonia, and this blocks the ideological cliché that determines their ways into diametrically opposite sides. It also deprives the myth of the Wild West from its exceptional being. The myth is no longer "made in USA" only.

I interpret "Dust" by Manchevski in the context of the "icon turn" that is quite popular in culture studies today. In 1881-1882, some five years after the Berlin Congress, the United States are no longer what they have been. The real "Wild West" persons have already turned into myths, but almost all of them found themselves used and no longer useful after the Civil War. The Wild West was left in the past and that's how their identity could sustain no more in America. They could be neither gangsters nor pioneers, and they appeared to be step-kids of their time that could no longer differentiate between factual and imaginary reality. In such a situation Lucke and Elijah from "Dust" have no living story of theirs at all, belong to nowhere and inhabit a world of desert. They lack roles and repertoire they could play. They feel without topos and without time. Brotherhood is the only relationship they have, and when it is broken as well, they find in the

Balkans what they subconsciously searched for. Hence, it is not just a story about greediness and revenge. It is a story about finding a life scene in Wild West of the Balkans.

"Dust" gives shelter to the heroes of the Wild West in order to demonstrate in the middle of the wild Balkan that their time is past. An intrinsic disbalance tears the characters and the action in the movie. The laughter coming from the people around is marked with a constant ridiculous untimeliness. Once the laughter sinks into rap music to signify a reaction of the one who does not comprehend but "strikes back". In contrast to the untimeliness of the American Wild West, the other (historical) characters - rebels and Turks, fit into the geographical and historical scene. The events in "Dust" take place just before the Balkan wars (1912-13), and from this time onward the fate of Macedonia will be at stake in the politics, rather than in the flames of uprisings. In the light of these historical changes the rebels look like a remnant from the past. However this is "the age of zulum", or the age of tyranny, as remains in the history of the Ottoman empire the rule of Abdulhamid II (1876-1909). Here it is necessary to mention how works the mechanism of resistance - the reaction to cruelty is multiplied cruelty. Being unmoral (estimation from aside) is then not only your characteristics but also characteristic of your enemy, and your message (by intention) to the enemy echoes in a wider context of interaction, in the whole environment. The problem is that evoking cruelty blurs the limits between aim and means, and the means remains aimless and turns into an end in itself.

In "Dust" people from different cultures either communicate while walking past each other (Lucke in the village), or clash those who have remained without a place of their own (Lucke and the Turks). In the first instance there is no talk at all and the words of the chatters pass each other. In the second instances arms talk.

The sources for Edge's life narratives are the culture of his upbringing, i.e. the westerns, and the clash with reality, i.e. policemen-blackmailers. This explains his own fictitious story that comes to put an end of the one-time history of Macedonia. Hence, the end, seen by the audience, is the end that could be given by Ed, a child of his own mass culture. The final battle in "Dust" is completely built on citation of *The Wild Bunch*: (a) the returning back (here I am tempted to emphasize the stylistics of such decision is well known in the Balkans, and the words of one of the greatest ideologists of the liberating movement of Macedonia is author of the phrase: « End in horror is better than horror without end »); (b) the order of shooting the enemies: firstly, the leader, and afterwards- the foreign representative; (c) the gunshots by the woman and the kid. However, the end is different. In *The Wild Bunch* everyone is losing (the friend and the Mexicans); only the headhunters are content. Dust spreads everywhere.

In "Dust", as well as in the "The Magnificent Seven", the values of the local people - the land and the kid - withstand. Moreover, in the movie by Manchevski the history itself gives birth to projections and turns into a source of identity for Edge. In this case, in a paradoxical way the characters without a place of their own mutually annihilate themselves so that to remain those who were all the time considered of secondary importance.

And while in the "The Magnificent Seven" the wind blows and passes on, in "Dust" the wind will disperse the dust of memories for ever.