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## THE DIRECTOR INTERVIEWS

Friday, January 30, 2009

**MILCHO MANCHEVSKI, *SHADOWS***



Writer-director Milcho Manchevski has only made three features over the course of his 15-year film career, yet the multi-talented Macedonian rarely allows himself a moment to catch his breath. Born in 1959 in the Macedonian capital of Skopje, Manchevski studied History of Art and Archeology at his hometown university before going to film school at Southern Illinois University on a scholarship. Following his graduation, he relocated to New York and began making commercials, music videos, documentaries, shorts and experimental films. In 1992, he won several major awards for his video for Arrested Development's "Tennessee," which is considered one of the great pop promos of the period. With the release of his debut feature, *Before the Rain* (1994), Manchevski shot from relative obscurity to international prominence as the film, a triptych of overlapping, ill-fated love stories, won the Golden Lion at Venice and was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the Oscars. Manchevski did not immediately capitalize on his success, and it was not until 2001 that he returned with his sophomore feature, *Dust*, a century-spanning double narrative encompassing a Macedonian western and an NYC crime story. In addition to his cinematic activities, Manchevski continues to make commercials and music videos, has directed an episode of HBO's *The Wire*, teaches film at NYU, and is also an acclaimed photographer, performance artist, and writer of short fiction, essays and journalism.

Manchevski's previous films have both been set in multiple countries but in his latest feature, *Shadows*, the action is entirely set in Macedonia. The film begins with Lazar "Lucky" Perkov (Borce Nacev), a handsome surgeon with a gorgeous wife and young son, getting into a near-fatal car crash. A year later, his rehabilitation is complete but his marriage is disintegrating, he sees strange people in his apartment building – including an ancient woman spouting a warning in an obscure dialect – and he is becoming drawn to the mysterious and alluring Menka (Vesna Stanojevska). *Shadows* is a curious patchwork of genres, organically

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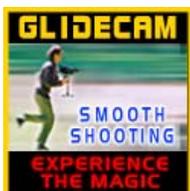
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mixing together ghost story, film noir, romance, social allegory, folk tale, psychological horror and erotic thriller, and its visual style owes as much to Hollywood as it does to arthouse cinema. Manchevski's idiosyncratic approach, though, is oddly charming and rich in cinephilic pleasures. The cinematography is particularly outstanding, as *Shadows* has a bold, distinctive palette and cinematographer Fabio Cianchetti skillfully uses reflections and foregrounded objects throughout to create striking and original compositions.

*Filmmaker* spoke to Manchevski about the unusual genre collisions in *Shadows*, the problems of working with Harvey Weinstein, and how Mick Jagger nearly made him retire.



MILCHO MANCHEVSKI, DIRECTOR OF *SHADOWS*. COURTESY MITROPOULOS FILMS.

**Filmmaker:** What was the initial inspiration for *Shadows*?

**Manchevski:** I wanted to do a scary film, a visceral kind of film. Part of it is because I like watching scary films, but I'm talking about a really interesting scary film and that varies from person to person. When I was growing up, it would have been vampires and then when I went to film school, I thought *Halloween* was one of the most effective films made – not the best but the most effective. I really like *The Tenant*. It was really making the kind of film that I would like to see, and then as I started working on it, it became a little more complicated, a little denser than just a scary film, because just to manipulate somebody into getting scared is a little easy. As I started investing of myself into it, it became more about trying to find some peace with death, and that for me was the personal aspect of the film. And then everything else like the social and the political aspects sort of happened later, and to me they're relatively minor in the film.

**Filmmaker:** You wrote somewhere that people got confused about *Shadows*, that just because it was set in Macedonia did not mean that it was a film *about* Macedonia.

**Manchevski:** I keep going back to shoot there, even though I don't want to, [laughs] and I don't want to for several reasons. One, everybody is trying to watch it as a film *about* Macedonia, and all these films are partly about Macedonia but I believe their essence is not about the place, it's about people anywhere. Another reason why it's difficult to go back is that things are relatively inefficient and that makes it difficult. But, at the same time, it's a major joy for me to go back and probably has to do with being with people I've known since I was a child and the recognition element – recognizing places, the language, ways of behavior. It somehow puts you at ease and helps make it comfortable. So I end up going there, and on this one, if you ignore the fact that it's in Macedonian, I'm convinced you could set it anywhere. It looks closer to a film set in the States, but that's also because cities are so similar to each other anywhere in the world, more similar than the countryside of the country they belong to, so it's kind of cosmopolitan.

**Filmmaker:** Yes, *Shadows* is stylistically more like an American film. Were you intentionally trying to alter the usual visual vocabulary of the "foreign arthouse movie"?

**Manchevski:** It's my big picture fight against the windmills of clichés. I hate clichés because they're a sign of intellectual oppression, but I have also felt them on my skin and I think clichés are very dangerous. They're the first step into racism and a lot of other bullshit. I consciously wanted to say, "Look, that's the vocabulary you can use anywhere in the world." But I didn't invent it: you see Asian films that look like they could have been made in Hollywood. In a good sense. There are some really good things about Hollywood. One is that it's very legible – there's no fudging what the writer wanted to say, so it's very viewer friendly. The problem is that it usually has nothing to say – it says it beautifully, but it has nothing to say. [laughs] The other reason why it's done this way is that's my style, that's who I am. I cannot make a film out of mimicry, trying to make it Eastern European or whatnot. I did have somebody in France object to me about *Before the Rain* not looking Eastern European enough – him being French, he probably had a good idea of what an Eastern European country looked like... [laughs]

**Filmmaker:** One thing I loved about the film was how it brought together so many different genre elements into one place. Was it very instinctive how these things came together?

**Manchevski:** I had the fortune of working in a system where the [financiers] do not impose themselves on what you're doing, so it became more complex and more like a collage that fits together in a synchronous way, like a Robert Rauschenberg painting fits together. It's a collage, but it's not about just putting things together, it comes from inside. It was really about following what the film itself wants to say and not what the genre parameters are. I know that makes it more difficult to sell, and for some people to watch, but if you just repeat the genre parameters it just becomes sort of boring. It becomes an exercise. There's a little bit of lots of different films that I've liked in this one, some on purpose, some not on purpose: Oshima and Polanski and Bergman. I mean, Bergman makes scary films! [laughs]

**Filmmaker:** You've said that this is the most personal of your films so far, that you "feel personally connected to Lazar's hypnotic nightmarish journey." In what way exactly?

**Manchevski:** It's personal only in that it deals with death, and I've had periods in my life when I was strongly influenced by that. Not by choice. Also this idea of how one works within society, and person responsibility. It's something I'm interested in in all my films, but here's it sort of more blunt. There are also some funny parallels that are not essential, like that my mother was a doctor.

**Filmmaker:** And, like Lucky, you love watermelon.

**Manchevski:** [laughs] Yes. We actually have a watermelon club in Macedonia; there are only two of us so far. Two and a half. We haven't officially accepted [the third member], but have T-shirts for the rest of us.

**Filmmaker:** The film's cinematography is fantastic, not only because of the rich palette that you use but because each shot is carefully composed and so many of them employ reflections, often shooting through glass to create more layered and interesting shots.

**Manchevski:** I try to handcraft everything I make, to be involved in every aspect of the development of the visualization and obviously the story, and I get involved in the editing all the way through to the last. In the end, it takes a long time and that's why I don't shoot so often, but on the upside, I do achieve exactly what you've described. Everything there is handcrafted and hopefully it works – but if it doesn't, it's my fault and no one else's. And I prepare and do a lot of homework: I still carry the burden of having been a straight-A student.

**Filmmaker:** You're also a photographer, so does that mindset affect the way you see each shot and its composition?

**Manchevski:** It's does, but my interest in and knowledge of photography came

after I started to make films. At first I was purely a narrative-driven filmmaker and as I started doing films, I had to educate myself in photography. I had a background in writing and a little bit in art, but once I started doing films, I picked up on photography and now I'm liking it more and more, almost more than film, because it's instantaneous, you don't need the money and the other people, and you don't need the story, which is really interesting. It's almost like music – there is no story, which is what makes it so free.

**Filmmaker:** In addition to film and photography, you direct commercials, experimental shorts and music videos, write essays, short fiction and journalism, and are a performance artist. How do differing those creative facets fit together ultimately?

**Manchevski:** Well, I don't know. The way that film fits in with these other things is that it's the pragmatic, practical face of doing something creative, because a lot of people see it. As opposed to performance art or the kind stuff that I would write. And it's more regimented, so that's the practical side of the split personality. In the other, photography and performance art could be that instinct of the "real" art. In a way, I believe that film is a bastard art form, like opera: not pure enough, compromised by story and money. Writing, to me, is just very simple, very warm, and I can feel it like music, when parts of a sentence are right or wrong, and I have absolutely no need to publish any of that. I can write it and just keep it. Or, to answer your question another way, I could easily just not do one of those more pragmatic things, I could easily go without making films.

**Filmmaker:** When *Before the Rain* came out, I remember reading that you were already in pre-production on *Dust*, with Robert Redford producing. Why did it take another seven years or so before the film came out?

**Manchevski:** Redford was producing and Miramax was financing and distributing. I wrote the script in a few months, it was greenlit by Harvey [Weinstein], and then he reneged on the budget. He basically lied to me, and I didn't want to work with someone who had lied to me. In the end, it took me another five and a half or six years to get that financing. It's just difficult to finance ambitious personal films, and I'm very bad at compromising, and where there's a lot of money and egos involved, you just sort of need to do it. It was basically a blessing in disguise because I could have imagined there would have been fights down the road about the casting and the editing of the film. Harvey's so controlling about his films. I got final cut in the contract, but he said, "Just don't tell anybody." [laughs]

**Filmmaker:** I'm a big fan of *The Wire* and you directed an episode in the show's first season, "Game Day." What was that experience like, and why do you think the show was so exceptional?

**Manchevski:** Well, *The Wire* is just fantastic writing and the way it was being produced by Bob Colesberry and his people was just really good. What was also great was that it was the first season so we could all leave a couple of fingerprints about how it was going to continue looking and developing. Some of the people I cast in that episode were still on the show until the end. Just in terms of craft, it's a great exercise because you've got to shoot the whole thing in nine days and then the editor cuts it in four days, then you as the director get three days. It's a one hour film, so it's really fast. It's like the old days of Hollywood.

**Filmmaker:** How was that for you as a self-professed perfectionist to have such a rapid turnaround?

**Manchevski:** It was refreshing. [laughs] You sort of build it into the process, build it into what you're doing. And it helps. The goal is different, the medium is different, they work off the same sort of pacing in each show so a lot of the stuff is already built in. It's like working on frescoes in medieval Europe – you know where the Virgin is and the baby is. [laughs]

**Filmmaker:** If you could travel back in time and be able to make movies in a time and place of your choice, where and when would it be?

**Manchevski:** Either the beginning of the French New Wave, so in around 1960 in

Paris, or the early 70s in Hollywood, which feels sort of closer to home, both in terms of the films they produced and how they were produced. I'm a lifetime victim of the 60s, even though I never really experienced them. [laughs]

**Filmmaker:** Which classic film are you most ashamed to admit you've never seen?

**Manchevski:** *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I keep on missing it, which is a lame excuse because you can just rent it and watch it. What might be underlying is the fact that I really don't like Kubrick. I find his stuff overlong and unfocused and pretentious.

**Filmmaker:** Finally, what's the strangest experience you've had during your time in the film industry?

**Manchevski:** At one point, I would send a script to producers and they would send them back unopened, saying "We cannot read them because you do not have an agent." And then a few months after that, I was in receptions for the President of Italy and at Mick Jagger's birthday party and Robert Redford giving me script notes. At one point, I was at Mick Jagger's birthday party, I was introduced to him and he said "Oh, *Before the Rain*, yeah!" and turns to his producer, Don Was, and starts telling him the story of *Before the Rain*. I thought, "Here I am listening to Mick Jagger describe my film to his producer, it's probably time to retire." [laughs]

# posted by Nick Dawson @ 1/30/2009 10:58:00 PM

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