

Roderick Coover

History in *Dust*



Left: the filmmaker; Right: Nikolina Kujaca and Davis Wenham in *Dust*.

Dust (2001), Macedonian filmmaker Milcho Manchevski's second feature, is an anachronistic and iconoclastic crosscultural "baklava Western" that explores what happens when West meets East in the violent history of the Balkans. The film takes viewers on a wild ride across time and space that begins in contemporary New York City, goes back to the American Wild West, and then to the Macedonian revolution of 1903, where two American cowboys find themselves caught up in a battle between Macedonian revolutionaries, Greek and Albanian bandits, and the ruling Turkish military. *Dust* opened at the Venice Film Festival in 2001 and has since spurred essays, articles, and even a major conference. The film offers one of the first cinematic presentations of regional history from a Macedonian perspective. Incorporating the filmmaker's historical research, it paints a visceral and violent picture of how alliances between the Turkish oppressors and Greek clergy, and terrible acts committed by

Albanian and Greek bandits, shaped Macedonia's history and sense of identity. The film was made independently with European funds following Manchevski's falling out with Miramax over control of the picture and, despite its Western themes and international recognition, it had difficulty finding American distribution. It was only introduced to a few American markets in 2003, when Lion's Gate purchased the U.S. distribution rights.

Dust is a long-awaited successor to Manchevski's Oscar-nominated debut feature, *Before the Rain* (1994), which presented a tragic set of stories about love and violence in modern Europe. In the wake of an infamous outburst of violence in Macedonia, the segmented narrative of *Before the Rain* follows three love stories that take place in war-torn Macedonia and far away in London. In both features, Manchevski uses diverse characters and a fragmented narrative structure to create a mosaic in which the details of history are

An Interview with Milcho Manchevski



Left: Labina Mitevska in *Before the Rain*; Right: Katrin Cartlidge and Rade Serbedzija in *Before the Rain*.

subjective, contradictory, and illusory, and recollections are repeatedly altered to suit the desires of the storytellers or the narrative structures of the stories that they want to tell. In *Dust*, Manchevski carries this approach to abstract and surreal dimensions. The histories that the characters present seem to change at whim, and the characters even insert themselves into events that would have occurred long before they were born. The surreal qualities of their stories are enhanced by dream sequences, bizarre anachronisms, faux archival recordings, and strange settings. Manchevski also combines black-and-white and color film to play with audience expectations about what is past and present. In these ways, the filmmaker intentionally undermines “a basic author-viewer contract,” as Manchevski describes it, “that the film will maintain a unified tone and surface like an old-fashioned painting.”

The Macedonian-born Manchevski studied film in the U.S. at the University of Southern Illinois and is

now a professor in the Graduate Film Program at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts. Manchevski, who has also created performance works, paintings, documentary photo exhibits, and written novels and stories, frequently draws on visual and literary models for his cinematography. In *Dust*, he moves between painterly styles, saturating some scenes in the textures and colors of dust and blood, while making other scenes sparse. The filmmaker also plays with the authority of documentary photography; in *Dust*, photos are records of a past which, as the stories unfold, we realize might never have happened. The photographs are only as true as the tales in which they reside.

Audiences enter Manchevski’s world of *Dust* as intruders. The film begins with a break-in: Edge, a young criminal, searches through a dark apartment for loot, but instead finds a gun-toting old woman named Angela, whose quickness on the draw already suggests an unusual past. Holding Edge at gunpoint, Angela tells

a story of two brothers, Luke and Elijah, who live in the Wild West around the time of Angela's birth. After Luke sleeps with his brother's wife, he flees to Macedonia (then under the rule of the Turks as a part of the Ottoman Empire), where he becomes a bounty hunter and pursues a revolutionary warrior known as "The Teacher." Elijah pursues Luke. Arriving in 1903 Europe at the end of the cowboy era, they are characters caught out of time.

Despite his faithfulness to his research, Manchevski says he is more concerned with how differing versions of the same past are constructed (and what they tell us about the individuals caught in such moments of conflict) than with any particular historical or political overview. He questions the nature of cinematic evidence: "Once I set the film where I set it, I felt it was my responsibility to portray the times and the human elements—behavior, language, costume, relationships, attitudes, body language—with as much accuracy as possible, since, for better or worse, film is way too often taken as a record of the times. Sort of the way paintings and frescos were treated hundreds of years ago—people thought, if we see it painted here, it must've happened. So, the paintings were used to tell a lot of lies."

Manchevski mixes old photos, film clips from the silent era, and faux historical clips he has created, to show how history is an anachronistic product of the imagination. In one scene, Luke unknowingly steps between a movie projector and the screen to become a spectacle of the fading world of the Wild West from which he comes, and in another scene, he reappears almost 50 years after his death to haunt his aging brother. Viewers soon discover that Angela is an unreliable narrator who will place herself in scenes occurring before she is even born. Her subjectivity helps draw into question the value of archival evidence in judging the past. Historical referents are continually mixed, remixed, and altered in the act of storytelling: events are comically and tragically exaggerated, and at times even retold with entirely different endings.

By way of Angela's tale-telling and through the adventures of two American gunslingers, Manchevski offers a distinctly Macedonian perspective of Balkan history. Viewers enter into what Manchevski represents as a heroic (if also tragic) period in Macedonia's struggle for independence, violently quashed by the Turkish, Greek, and Albanian players in the region. Their violence is widespread and indiscriminate. The groups of bandits and bounty hunters seem to attack each other as much as the guerrilla fighters they are

meant to be pursuing, resulting in, literally, a bloody mess. This violence is equaled only by the fighting between the Turkish soldiers and the revolutionary warriors; the Turkish responses to guerrilla attacks are ruthless. Manchevski shows the Greek complicity with the brutal practices of the Turks: an Orthodox priest even accompanies the Turkish major during one of the film's most violent scenes. Meanwhile, only one negative image of "The Teacher" moderates the Macedonian's otherwise heroic image, and the other Macedonians are shown as noble but powerless. Yet out of this free-for-all come unexpected discoveries as the protagonists make choices about how to survive and what to fight for; mercenary ambitions are challenged by acts of brutal violence, courage, and love.

For as much as *Dust* is a story about war and violence, it is also a film about different varieties of love. In the frame story, Angela becomes a kind of mother figure for Edge, just as she is also mother to the story. When her health falters, Edge cares for her, and eventually adopts her story as his own, carrying it forward to a new generation. *Dust* is a story about brotherly love, in this case of love gone wrong, corrupted by Luke's ultimately tragic act of having sex with his brother's wife. In Macedonia, *Dust* also becomes a story about selfless love, and about societal or patriotic love. But perhaps *Dust* is most significantly a film about Manchevski's love for the act of storytelling, which passionately endures despite violence and loss.

RODERICK COOVER: *Dust is a film about storytelling and history that takes place in worlds not usually thought of together—contemporary New York City, the American Wild West, and the Macedonian revolution. What did you learn from the contrasts between those different worlds?*

MILCHO MANCHEVSKI: Contrast is good. It's good for drama, and good for art. I learned that there is more in common than you would think, and this is probably the result of our need to create little or big clichés, since life seems to be easier to explain away that way. In addition, in *Dust* I was aiming for a story which incorporates the structure of the story itself as a crucial element of the story.

On paper, Macedonia under Ottoman rule and the Wild West sounded like an outrageous combination, but when I started doing the research and then filming, the two places felt like they could go together. The original inspiration came when I saw there were com-

Joseph Fiennes as Elijah and
David Wenham as Luke.



mon elements in the iconography of the Macedonian revolution at the turn of the century that are visually similar to that of the Wild West and of the Mexican revolutionaries and bandits, with their long beards, bandoliers, and white horses. It is as if they all shopped in the same boutique. The warriors seemed to draw on many of the same ideals of a warrior code, at least visually.

I discovered things that seemed surreal when seen through the eyes of somebody who frequently watches Western movies, things like the fact that Billy the Kid was from Brooklyn, the fact that cowboys and Indians rarely fought because by the time the cowboys came into being there weren't many Indians left in the area—Texas and Oklahoma—or the fact that General Custer was one of the worst students ever to attend West Point.

In doing research, I also discovered that there were actually Americans coming to Macedonia. The American writer Albert Sonnichsen, who had previously been in the war in the Philippines (like an earlier and lesser-known John Reed), fought in the Macedonian revolution for a period of six months and returned to San Francisco to write a book about it called *Confessions of a Macedonian Bandit*. He even carried a camera with him, and traded processing chemicals with the leader of the rebels. Sonnichsen (or a nastier version of him) could be the prototype for Luke, had not Luke been written before I found out about him. Reality did its best to support this piece of fiction. Contemporary New York felt like the right third side of the triangle—it is equally different from each of the two. On a more personal level, all three are integral parts of who I am.

What happens as the story of a battle between brothers in the Wild West is told in the East, in Macedonia? The only difference is the fact that both brothers are away from home. When you are in a familiar environment it is softer. There in Macedonia, the brothers' conflict became harsher. Placing the archetypes in new contexts means questioning them as elements in how you tell a story. They can become richer, or they can deflate. It is sort of like a Robert Rauschenberg print: a piece of it could be found-art and another piece made from a photograph, some of it is an actual brushstroke, but what really matters is what these pieces tell you as a whole—when you step back—rather than what they tell you on their own.

However, I think all films are about people and not about the grand ideas underpinning the films. This became a film about a very old woman, almost 100 years old, telling a story—and we don't know how much of it she is making up—about a thief who is, in a way, us (the listener), about two brothers in the Wild West who travel to Macedonia, about an immigrant prostitute, about a revolutionary, and about his pregnant wife. *Dust* is about the thirst to hear stories and, more importantly, to tell stories. We seem to learn a great deal about how to behave from the stories we hear in life.

Edge is us, the viewer. He is also the character who changes the most. In the process of storytelling, Angela becomes the mother to Edge and to the narrative. She doesn't have any children, but the story is hers. She adopts the thief as if to pass her story on in the few days she has left. In both *Dust* and *Before The Rain*, the women are the strong characters despite the male posturing and guns. The women support the infrastructure of what is going on. Just as in life. Edge is



Nikolina Kujaca as Neda.

the listener of the story who then takes it on as his own. The story is a virus, I guess. You give it to someone else and change it in the process. Edge is us.

At first Edge shows ambivalence to the past Angela talks about. His ambivalence seems to reflect that of the audience, who must learn the value of history.

There is incredible resistance to hearing history today. I don't know whether it was that way 100 years ago. But today history is almost a dirty word. Somehow anything older than the moment now is not interesting, is not cool, is not sweet. It goes with being more selfish, less embarrassed. I find that sad. Research is so much fun and at the same time it can be really dirty, perverse, unexpected, and yet somehow true. It can confirm what Tolstoy said: "History would be a great thing, if it were only true."

In Dust there are different approaches to storytelling, including the use of surrealistic images, movements across history, and seeming anachronisms. At one point an airplane flies over the gunslingers, at another Freud appears as a side character.

We cannot ignore the knowledge of new movements in art, pretending as if film is just technology. We can stay stuck in pseudo-realism, but then we cheat ourselves out of great possibilities. However, part of what we see in *Dust*, which seems surreal, is actually historical. Time has compressed itself, and it's only our perception of time that tries to separate the past into different drawers and files. The end of the Ottoman Empire still seems like the Middle Ages, we think the Wild West is the nineteenth century, the airplanes are twentieth century, and Freud, well, he's almost twenty-first century . . . but they all exist at about the same

time. 1903 was the year of the first flight of the Wright brothers, it was when the Macedonian revolution against the Ottoman Empire happened, the time that the Wild West was just becoming history. That's the year that *The Great Train Robbery* was filmed. It is only a couple years after the Spanish-American War in Cuba, yet only four years before the first Cubist painting and only five or six years before Freud came to visit America. So, all of this was happening at the same time.

It is just our perception of history that these events belong to different worlds—it is as if we have a need to turn things into clichés. Having said this, there is the additional compression of time because Angela, the storyteller, is a contemporary of the twentieth century; she was born at the beginning of the century, and she is nearing death at the end of it. There is also a little scene which takes place in 1945, just after the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima.

Film is ideal to play with time—on the most physical level you can convert time into space. One second of time becomes 24 frames—which is a length of space. Whenever you edit, you shuffle it in order to create the illusion of continuous time. In *Dust* I explored that basic effect, but while keeping it still playful and easy to watch. Because when I go see films I would like to think there is a silent contract between the viewer and the filmmaker by which the filmmaker is not going to be too overbearing and I as a viewer am going to have fun while we go on this strange ride.

Is there also a political reason why you found it interesting or important to mix genres the way that you did?

Rosemary Murphy as Angela
and Adrian Lester as Edge.



The delineation of different cultures in our heads is very often only prejudice and racism. People are very similar and they behave in similar ways—it is only our fear and ignorance that speaks of “French this” and “Japanese that” and “Macedonian that.” So in trying to confront and crash several genres, several places, and several times, I was hoping to awaken the critical eye in the beholder to the possibilities of trans-cultural similarities and prejudices in reading human behavior and art.

More importantly, I was also trying to work with a synthesis of what we’ve learned in storytelling so far. Perhaps film never fully tried to explore the roads pointed to by James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Schönberg, or Picasso and Braque, but we cannot ignore these ideas anymore, we cannot pretend we live in the nineteenth century. Yet, that is precisely what most mainstream film today does: stuck with a retelling of a cheap version of a nineteenth-century novel.

You show a great attention to fluids, which draws attention to the title of the film.

Well, the film is called *Dust* because there is no Western without dust and also because it asks, “What do we leave behind when we are gone?” There is a line in the film that says, “Where does your voice go when you are no more?” So, what do we leave behind? Do we leave children? Or photographs? Or recorded moving images? Or stories? Or ashes? Dust? You will notice that the film is very dry. It is very yellow and very dusty. We used tons of dust and flour to get that look. That dryness was also a symbol of being alone, of being ashes. And, wherever there are moments of communal life or communal happiness, it happens around water—around a river or people who are washing each

other. Being with someone is like being in water; it is comfortable and brings life. By contrast, if it is too dry, you die.

Dust is a very violent film about a male world; men cause death not only to other men but also to the women they meet, which is something we saw in Before the Rain. How does this male aggression play out in Macedonia or, for that matter, in the contemporary story in the film?

Ingmar Bergman says something like this: “Violence in film is a perfectly legitimate way of ritualizing violence in society.” I like seeing good, adult action-violence in movies. Not sadistic, passive violence. There is something exhilarating about action-violence precisely because it is the movies and not real life. I am terrified of any kind of violence in real life, but putting violence in film is a way of exorcising it. The violence in *Dust* also has a very strong counterpoint in the selfless actions and love that the film also shows.

On a smaller, purely cinematic level, action-violence presents such cinematic potential because it is very kinetic. There is so much movement—and there are many aspects as to how you can portray action-violence, including what happens to the characters just before and just after. The real issue is not what, but how. I find the portrayal of violence in movies questionable when it is treated as easy. Perhaps it is a question of what you are left with at the end of a violent scene or violent film. Do you walk away with a complex feeling or a simple one?

When there is violence in a Schwarzenegger or Stallone film it is very easy and clean, which I think is problematic. People are shot, and then gone. The hero takes real pleasure in it. Unless you are shot in the brain

or the heart you don't die on the spot, so what happens during those 20 seconds, or 20 minutes, or two days, while you are dying on the spot? Are you shocked? Do you cry? Do you puke? Do you curse? Do you beg for mercy? Do you get a hard-on? Do you think about the separation of church and state? What happens? When I see a guy stepping on a mine, flying through the air, then standing up and picking up his own arm with the other hand—and he's not even aware of the fact that it is his own arm he is holding—that is a different kind of thinking.

There also seemed to be a fluid movement between the conscious and unconscious—between the seemingly natural and the surreal. After people die, their spirits live on with the other characters for a period, or a character on the edge of death might enter briefly into some other world before returning to the world of the living.

Yes, it's fun to weave shadows and documents into one—again, as in a Rauschenberg print. It is the cumulative effect that counts, the overall tone, and not the elements. The jolt between different tones in the film (from a comic moment to pathos, from violent to absurd, from documentary to surreal) is more of a shock to the system, I believe, than the jolt one experiences between different genres within the same film. It is the shifts in tone, not the shifts in narrative, that dislodge us.

This is where *Dust* becomes difficult to the conservative viewer: the shifts in tone are not something mainstream and art-narrative film endorse. On the contrary, the tone is sacred. You should either laugh, or be scared, or be inspired: Don't confuse me.

Yet, because of my temperament, and perhaps because I consider film to be such a narrative thing, the free-wheeling and fluid movement between the document and the surreal, between the subconscious and the historical, are meticulously mapped out. They should feel like music, and the process of initial creation is irrational, like when I listen to music,

but the actual construction is a lot of hard building-work. . . .

At this point I feel like making a film would be worthwhile only for the process of writing. Shooting would be worth it only as observing in disguise, observing how things are and how things do, rather than creating from the outside. I am very ambivalent about making films. I am not sure it is worth the trouble. On one level there is the pragmatic pressure because film is very expensive. It takes a long time to raise the money. It's technological, and there are a lot of people and a lot of egos involved in making a film. Since it seems so easy and so glamorous, film attracts some of the worst characters, people with the morals of Medusa.

On another level, there is the issue of having to tell a story in a certain legible way with certain types (and number) of characters and certain kinds of endings—even when you are not working in Hollywood. That's a lot of pressure on something that pretends to be a creative art. In actuality, we are all employed in the circus industry, and we pretend we are Shakespeares.

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Dust is distributed on film, video and DVD by Lion's Gate Films (<http://www.lionsgatefilms.com>) and is commonly available at major video and internet outlets. Information about the film is available at the website, <http://www.realitymacedonia.org.mk>, and on Milcho Manchevski's own website, <http://www.manchevski.com.mk>, where readers will also find excerpts of Manchevski's fiction, photography, art, and links to essays and conference papers generated by his films.

Abstract Macedonian filmmaker Milcho Manchevski reflects on the nature of history, story-telling, and photographic evidence in a discussion of *Before the Rain* (1994) and his latest feature, *Dust* (2001/2003), a genre-crossing "Baklava Western" that explores what happens when West meets East in the violent history of the Balkans.