



# Orestes in Skopje: The Macedonian Oresteia of Milcho Manchevski

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# Orestes in Skopje: The Macedonian *Oresteia* of Milcho Manchevski

David F. Elmer

## *Prologue*

Largely as a result of the support and encouragement of Greg Nagy, I spent about a year, from mid-1998 to mid-1999, in Croatia. The scars from the recent war were still fresh, but by the time of my arrival there was a palpable sense that the new nation was at last leaving behind the turmoil of the early '90s. Still, there were reminders that the questions raised by the collapse of Yugoslavia were not entirely settled. During an otherwise idyllic stay in the quiet town of Hvar (in 1999 still largely devoid of tourists), I lay awake each night listening to the menacing drone of NATO bombers as they flew from their base in Italy to their targets in Kosovo and Serbia, and was awakened each morning just before dawn as they returned. At the time, it was easy to see NATO's Kosovo campaign as the final act of the Yugoslav tragedy, but in fact even 13 years later, Kosovo, recognized by some nations as an independent state since 2008, faces persistent existential questions. Meanwhile, the situation in Kosovo contributed to the outbreak of ethnic violence in a neighboring state, the Republic of Macedonia (henceforth simply 'Macedonia'), in 2001, and may still exert a destabilizing influence on what remains a precarious situation next door.<sup>1</sup>

The possibility of ethnic conflict in Macedonia has been a source of anxiety since the beginning of the Yugoslav crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> While some nations and international organizations refer to the country by the provisional designation "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia," the majority of UN member states, including four of the five permanent members of the Security Council (the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, and China) now recognize the country under its constitutional name, "Republic of Macedonia." For a recent discussion of the situation in Macedonia, see ICG 2011, which reports polling indicating that "two thirds of the residents of Albanian-majority areas in western Macedonia support the creation of a common Albanian state (with Albania and Kosovo), and more than half think it is likely to happen 'soon'" (20).

This anxiety found eloquent expression in a prize-winning 1994 film by Milcho Manchevski, *Before the Rain*.<sup>2</sup> Since my time in Croatia—which led to many subsequent trips to the Yugoslav successor states, including Macedonia—was a formative experience for me, and since I know Greg to be as enthusiastic and gifted an interpreter of films as he is of texts, I would like to mark the occasion of his birthday by offering a few reflections on Manchevski’s film. In particular, I would like to explore the film’s resonances with another powerful dramatization of cyclical violence: Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*. Aeschylus’ trilogy, I claim, provides a vital intertextual framework for *Before the Rain*. Read as a paradigm for the kind of tale the film unfolds—a tale of murderous, self-perpetuating violence within the group—the *Oresteia* guides the viewer’s understanding of the film’s involuted *fabula*, with consequences that may, in some cases, be surprising. More importantly, however, by Aeschylus’ light the viewer may trace both obstacles to and opportunities for escape from the vicious circle of violence depicted in the film.

### **Before the Rain and the Oresteia**

I would like to stress at the outset that intertextuality is as much a matter of the reading or interpretation of a work of art as it is of its composition. The question, accordingly, is not whether Manchevski intended his film as a reworking of the *Oresteia*, but whether an awareness of the *Oresteia* may enrich one’s understanding of the film (and vice versa). In the interview and commentary included on the Criterion Collection DVD edition of *Before the Rain* (released in 2008), Manchevski describes his film as “cathartic” in the manner of tragedy, but he has never, to my knowledge, connected it explicitly to Aeschylus’ trilogy.<sup>3</sup> (Manchevski both wrote and directed the film.) But for a viewer who has been put in mind of Aeschylus’ trilogy by the film’s thematization of revenge and cyclical violence, it is difficult not to notice a number of

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<sup>2</sup> *Before the Rain* was an international production, made with support from production companies in Britain, France, and Macedonia. It won the Golden Lion at the 1994 Venice Film Festival (among other prizes) and was nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Manchevski 2008 (at 1:46').

correspondences, some more significant than others. The correspondences, in turn, draw attention to those places where Manchevski's film meaningfully diverges from the Aeschylean paradigm.

The film's structure provides a case in point. Composed in three parts, titled "Words," "Faces," and "Pictures," the film adopts the form of a trilogy. This may be understood as an evocation of the formal characteristics of Aeschylean tragedy.<sup>4</sup> In the *Oresteia*, however, the trilogy form is deployed in such a way as to emphasize both the cyclical, self-sustaining nature of violence (the repetition of the act of murder in *Agamemnon* and *Libation Bearers*) and the possibility of its transcendence (the escape provided by the institution of the law court in *Eumenides*). The three plays succeed one another according to a clear logic of consequence and, ultimately, progress. Manchevski, on the other hand, has designed the three parts of his film—which he has described as “an optical illusion in time”—in order deliberately to frustrate such a logic.<sup>5</sup> Taken separately, each part depicts a chronologically coherent sequence of events. Put together, however, the three parts fold back on themselves, in the manner of a Mobius strip or, as Manchevski has said, an Escher drawing, so that the end of the film loops back to the beginning. With each of the three segments culminating in a killing, the trilogy form becomes an expression of repetition without progress. In *Before the Rain*, apparently, there is no escape from the endless cycle of violence.

Here is a brief synopsis of the film:

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<sup>4</sup> In an interview published in 1995 (Horton 1995:45), Manchevski acknowledges the 1965 film *Three*, by Yugoslav filmmaker Aleksandar Petrović, as a model for his three-part, non-chronological structure. In the same interview, however, he states, “I don't believe that *Before the Rain* has its esthetic roots in the Balkan tradition of filmmaking, either in terms of the story or the form.” Even if the tripartite form is modeled on Petrović's film, it may still be invested with other intertextual associations.

<sup>5</sup> Manchevski 2008 (at 1:34'-1:35'). In this context, Manchevski likens his film to an “Escher drawing.”

Part 1, "Words," focuses on a young Orthodox monk, Kiril, whom we first see as he is picking tomatoes in the monastery's garden. In the aftermath of a murder in the nearby village, which is divided between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians who have become increasingly hostile towards each other, Kiril discovers an Albanian girl, Zamira, hiding in his cell.<sup>6</sup> She is being pursued by a group of armed Macedonians who accuse her of murdering their relative and seek revenge. Although Kiril and Zamira are unable to communicate verbally—Kiril has taken a vow of silence, and neither, anyway, speaks the other's language—they gradually fall in love.<sup>7</sup> Kiril is expelled from the monastery when Zamira is discovered by the other monks, and the two depart together. They manage to escape Zamira's Macedonian pursuers, but are apprehended by Zamira's relatives. When Zamira attempts to continue on in the company of Kiril, she is shot and killed by her brother.

Part 2, "Faces," shifts to London, where we meet first Anne, who works as a photography editor at a press agency. Later in the segment, Anne examines a set of photographs of Zamira's corpse and Kiril after the killing; just then the phone rings, and we hear Kiril's voice asking for Aleksandar Kirkov, a former employee of the agency (in Part 1, Kiril had spoken of seeking

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<sup>6</sup> As an ethnic designation, the term 'Macedonian' refers to the Slavic-speaking, predominantly Christian population of Macedonia. The term may also be a political designation, referring to any citizen of Macedonia. The potential for slippage inherent in the term, as well as the asymmetry between, for example, Albanian Macedonians and 'Macedonian Macedonians,' points to a major component of the challenges facing contemporary Macedonia, namely, the lack of a stable identity for ethnic or national Macedonians. As noted by the International Crisis Group, "Macedonians' fragile sense of identity . . . is challenged by three neighbours: Greece, which disputes the country's name; Bulgaria, which has questioned the existence of a Macedonian nation or language; and Serbia, which denies the autonomy of its church" (ICG 2009:1).

<sup>7</sup> As noted by Friedman 2000:136-37, the lack of a common language is "a comment on the disintegration of Macedonian life," and points both to the failure of state institutions (compulsory primary education and its emphasis on national unity) and the rise of divisive nationalisms.

refuge with his uncle, a “famous photographer” in London). These shots establish the events of Part 2 as subsequent to those of Part 1. Anne, we learn, is estranged from her husband and romantically involved with Aleksandar, who has returned to London from an assignment covering the war in Bosnia in order to resign from his position and ask Anne to go with him, that evening, to Macedonia. Anne declines, and Aleksandar departs for Heathrow. During a tense conversation with her husband at a restaurant that evening, violence erupts when a Serbian visitor to the restaurant argues with a Serbian waiter, and finally sprays bullets indiscriminately at diners and staff. Anne’s husband is killed (along with the waiter and others).

Part 3, “Pictures,” follows Aleksandar as he arrives in Macedonia and returns to the village in which he grew up. A later scene, in which Anne, distraught, telephones looking for Aleksandar, establishes this segment as the sequel to Part 2. Aleksandar finds his village divided between Macedonian and Albanian enclaves, both of which are well armed and mutually hostile. Aleksandar is treated with suspicion by both groups, although he is eventually welcomed by his Macedonian relatives, including Bojan, a shepherd, and Zdrave. He attempts to reconnect with an Albanian woman he once loved, Hana, but is able to exchange only a few formalities during a tense visit to her father’s house: her family is unremittingly hostile, and her son threatens to kill him.<sup>8</sup> When Bojan is murdered under mysterious circumstances, Hana visits Aleksandar to tell him that her daughter, Zamira, has been apprehended by Bojan’s relatives as the culprit. Hana pleads with Aleksandar to help, “as though she were yours.” (It is implied that Zamira is in fact Aleksandar’s daughter, conceived during a brief visit sixteen years previously.) The next morning, Aleksandar goes to the sheepfold, where armed men are holding Zamira. As he departs with the girl, he is shot and killed by Zdrave. Zamira flees. The camera cuts to Kiril, picking tomatoes in the garden, as Zamira is seen running to the monastery. The repetition of key

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<sup>8</sup> Friedman 2000:139-40 provides an astute analysis of the way in which this scene illustrates the breakdown of traditional systems of value and social order.

lines from the beginning of the film (“Time doesn’t wait. And the circle is not round”) returns us to the starting point.<sup>9</sup>

Where are the seams in this “optical illusion in time”? As I have said, each of the three parts is internally consistent. If not for the cross-references, the three parts could be viewed as a continuous, linear sequence beginning with Part 2 and ending with Part 1. In fact, there is really only one cross-reference that constitutes a serious obstacle to such a strictly linear understanding of the film: the photographs viewed by Anne showing the aftermath of the killing of Zamira. (The caller seeking Aleksandar in London does not identify himself, and the voice is not immediately recognizable as Kiril’s; Anne’s call to Macedonia is consistent with a linear chronology.) The photographs, handled by an employee of a British media agency, are the suture that binds the film’s events in an endless circle. This is meaningful. One of the film’s major themes is the way in which supposedly objective, disinterested observers—including both media organizations and international bodies such as the UN—not only do nothing to interrupt the cycle of violence, but may even contribute to its perpetuation. Aleksandar seeks to retreat to Macedonia because, as he explains, “my camera killed a man.” (His presence as a photojournalist incited a militiaman in Bosnia to kill a prisoner for the camera.) He comes to recognize the need to “take sides” (against violence). By implication, those who, like the media and the UN, merely observe are partly to blame for the violence that unfolds before them.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In fact, there is a small difference in wording between the beginning and the end of the film (“Time never dies” becomes “Time doesn’t wait”), which illustrates the principle that “the circle is not round.”

<sup>10</sup> It would require considerable space to explore these themes fully and to connect them with accusations and anxieties over the share of responsibility for the Yugoslav conflicts born by media organizations, governments, and international organizations. For a discussion of some of the relevant issues, see Burns 1996 (esp. p. 96 on “the impact of immediate forceful images in film and photograph”). With regard to the way in which the UN is represented in the film, I note the shot in Part 3 that intervenes between a sequence depicting Aleksandar among

Implicated in this critique of institutional bystanders are also those mechanisms of the state that might be charged with defusing reciprocal violence. Several of the photos of Zamira's killing show police officers standing around in postures of idleness; the last frames Kiril between the half-visible figure of a police officer and a photographer (who in fact appears to be none other than Manchevski himself).<sup>11</sup> The implicit message is that state authorities are to be paired with the media in the class of observers who are unable or unwilling to intervene directly. Later in the film, as he attempts to free Zamira from her captors, Aleksandar pleads with Zdrave to make use of the state apparatus rather than resorting to self-help: "How do you know [she's guilty]? There's the police and the law. Let them decide." To which Zdrave replies: "You left long ago. You don't know how it is here now."<sup>12</sup>

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his Macedonian relatives and friends and the sequence in which he visits Hana's home: A UN vehicle with the words "military observers" displayed prominently on the hood climbs into view. Three unarmed soldiers emerge and look idly across a landscape that is devoid of any other human figure or sign of habitation. The observers, pointedly, do not seem to see anything. On the way the film reflects the inherent contradictions of the UN mission in Macedonia, see Friedman 2000:141. On the special meaning of the "taking sides" motif among former citizens of Yugoslavia, see Iordanova 2000:148. Marciniak 2003:77 comments on the photographs as "the site of ambiguity, the ontological 'puzzle,' of the film," albeit from a perspective that is slightly different from the one outlined here.

<sup>11</sup> Manchevski's inclusion of himself in those photos would seem to be a reference both to his role as filmmaker and his work as a photographer in other contexts. (Manchevski also appears in the traumatic photos Aleksandar made in Bosnia, as the man Aleksandar's camera "killed.") The police make only one other appearance in the film. After the murder of Bojan, a single officer, looking bewildered, emerges from Bojan's house. He seems just as helpless as the officers in the photographs.

<sup>12</sup> Manchevski's representation of the police should not be seen as a direct commentary on the real effectiveness of Macedonian state institutions, but as part of the film's artistic program. (Manchevski has routinely denied any intention to comment directly on Macedonian realities.) In the last section, I suggest that this program may, however, point to the



I have just quoted the subtitles as they appear on the Criterion Collection DVD. The word translated there as “law”—*sud*—means more properly, however, “court” or “the courts.” I stress this point because it marks one of the film’s most significant moments of engagement with and simultaneous divergence from the *Oresteia*. The institution of the murder court on the Areopagus is of course the mechanism by which Aeschylus breaks the circle of reciprocal violence. But the mechanism of the courts is unavailable to the characters in *Before the Rain*. This is, in a sense, a major reason why the end of the film must loop back to the beginning: there is, within the world constructed by the film, no possibility of an Aeschylean escape from the self-perpetuating cycle of violence. Even if it is not round, the characters are still trapped within an endless circle.

I will return to the question of why the film cannot avail itself of an *Oresteia*-like break in the cycle of violence. For the moment, I want to review a few other resonances and points of contact between Manchevski’s film and Aeschylus’ trilogy. Again, these correspondences need not be intentional: they may be due simply to the fact that the two works have many themes in common, or to the fact that the culture represented in Manchevski’s film has many similarities to the culture to which Aeschylus belonged. A good example of the possibility of cultural similarity is the scene in which Mitre, leader of the Macedonian vigilantes, pours out a glass of *rakija* (brandy) on his parents’ grave as he invites them to participate in a wedding that will be held the next day (the day on which, as it turns out, Aleksandar dies). This is an authentic Macedonian custom still practiced by some. The similarity to the libation scene in *Libation Bearers* may be accidental (if an unintended resonance between two such carefully executed works of art can fairly be called “accidental”). A viewer wishing to read Mitre’s actions against Electra’s and Orestes’ prayers to Agamemnon will be rewarded by sensing an ominous ‘back-channel’ message about an impending murder. Even without recourse to such an approach, however, it remains clear that, in both cases, the act of

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difficulties confronting Macedonia at the time of the film’s making.

devotion to deceased ancestors is part of a cultural system that, in privileging reciprocity between the living and the dead, also licenses revenge.

Certain features of the plot of *Before the Rain* bear comparison with the *Oresteia*. The film's narrative arc hinges on the murder, under mysterious circumstances, of Bojan, who is, literally, the "shepherd of his people"—to use Agamemnon's Homeric epithet, which Aeschylus, too, evokes (προβατογνῶμων, *Agamemnon* 795). This killing of a man held in high regard within his community may be called the "Agamemnon motif." Coupled with it is the "Orestes motif": the return of an exile, Aleksandar, to his home after many years abroad. Aleksandar is at one and the same time the Orestes of *Libation Bearers* and of *Eumenides*. He is the returning exile, but also the murderer seeking purification from blood-guilt. It makes sense, then, that Aleksandar should be the one to give voice to an Orestean yearning for the adjudication of a court of law.

Tracing the central features of the *Oresteia*'s plot within *Before the Rain* has the potential to provide some tantalizing clues to the mystery at the heart of the film. The circumstances of Bojan's death are, as I have indicated, opaque. We observe on his chest several bloody wounds that were made, we are told, with a pitchfork. Earlier in the film, we have seen Zamira and another Albanian girl, who holds a pitchfork, standing on a hill overlooking Bojan's sheepfold. As the girls turn and walk away, Bojan seems to follow them. Earlier scenes have established that Bojan is a womanizer. (Several characters cast doubts on Zamira's virtue as well, although we never see anything to confirm these accusations.) The children in the village claim to have seen Zamira with Bojan the morning he was killed. Bojan's avengers therefore assume that Zamira is the killer. Manchevski himself has stressed, "what really happened . . . we don't know."<sup>13</sup> Seeing Bojan as an Agamemnon figure, however, leads

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<sup>13</sup> Manchevski 2008 (at 1:28'). Manchevski suggests several possibilities in this interview: Bojan may have tried to rape Zamira, and she may have killed him; someone completely different may have killed him; he may have "slipped on a banana peel."

naturally to the consideration of a possibility that, in retrospect, is suggested by certain shots and sequences. At the gathering at which Aleksandar is welcomed back to the village, Bojan's wife, Neda, observes Bojan groping another woman; the camera lingers for a moment on Neda as she watches with obvious bitterness. Just after Bojan walks off in apparent pursuit of Zamira and her companion, Neda arrives at the sheepfold looking for her husband—her look this time suggests suspicion. After Bojan's murder, while mourning women surround his bed, Neda alone remains silent, not crying or wailing like the others but merely crouching at the foot of the bed, watching alternately Bojan and then the mourners with an expression of shock and confusion. Is she wondering at the consequences of her own action? The film contains a number of suggestions that Neda is the true culprit, and that Bojan, like Agamemnon, may have been murdered by a jealous wife.<sup>14</sup> If so, this killing too would be consistent with the principle "each kills his own," which governs all the other killings in the film.<sup>15</sup>

One of the most striking connections between *Before the Rain* and the *Oresteia* concerns the metaphor signaled in the film's title. In each of the film's three parts, suggestions of an imminent rainstorm create a pervasive sense of foreboding. The rain that is continuously expected serves as a transparent metaphor for the threat of war. When an older monk says to Kiril at the beginning of the film, "It's going to rain . . . It's already raining over there," the symbolic reference is, within the film's *fabula*, to the chain of events that result in Aleksandar's death in the village below, but there is also a broader reference to the war that was, at the time of the film's release, raging in Bosnia. (Kiril has just been looking not at rainclouds but contrails in the sky, an unmistakable evocation of the full-scale war then underway just over the mountains.<sup>16</sup>)

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<sup>14</sup> Though Clytemnestra generally focuses on the sacrifice of Iphigenia as the justification for her murderous act, her words at *Agamemnon* 1438-47 suggest that jealousy is also among her motives.

<sup>15</sup> The principle is articulated by Manchevski 2008 (at 0:17').

<sup>16</sup> For the impression made on contemporary Macedonians by such traces of military aircraft, see Friedman 2000:144n2.

The rain at last arrives at the moment that Aleksandar is shot and killed. In this context, it is a very complex image. It has a cathartic aspect: as it soaks Aleksandar's blood-stained shirt, then, in the next shot, washes over Zamira's upturned face, it seems to cleanse both of these victims of violence at the (formal) conclusion of a traumatic narrative.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, through its correlation with botanical and agricultural imagery, it signals the cyclicity of violence, as a self-renewing, endlessly regenerative force. The first shot in which actual raindrops appear is a close-up of parched, cracked earth with a few desiccated blades of grass. Dark spots can be seen as the drops strike the barren ground. The shot dissolves into another showing a different patch of ground, more thoroughly saturated with water and more thoroughly covered with grass. The editing suggests time-lapse photography, as though we were actually watching the grass grow as a result of the rain. Another dissolve takes us to another, still more densely grass-covered section of earth, and the camera pans over to Aleksandar's corpse, now completely soaked and surrounded by the Macedonians who had been holding Zamira captive.<sup>18</sup> After a few more intervening shots, we return to the image with which the film began: Kiril picking tomatoes as an older monk tells him, "It's going to rain. . . . It's already raining over there." The first shot in the film was a close-up of Kiril's hands as they grasp and pluck several large, red tomatoes. Now, as the camera cuts from the monks in their garden (with Zamira in the background) back to Aleksandar, and zooms in on the two large,

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<sup>17</sup> Machevski 2008 (at 1:46') suggests the cathartic dimension; see also his comments at Machevski 2000:129. As a kind of purification, the rain can be thought of as a baptism of sorts, which lends significance to the apparent lie Aleksandar tells when asked where he is going by a soldier sitting next to him on the bus from Skopje: "'I'm off to a harvest. You?' 'A baptism.' 'Whose?' 'Mine.'"

<sup>18</sup> A large white rock nearly fills the frame at the beginning of this shot. Its color, shape, and size suggest the form of a human skull, as though to suggest that death is the fertilizer that prepares the soil for the renewal of violence. (The rock also responds, visually, to earlier images of the moon, although this rock is noticeably less round than the perfect circle of the moon as it appeared, for example, just after Kiril and Zamira left the monastery.)

red bloodstains on his rain-drenched shirt, we recognize the visual harmony that links the film's concluding act of violence back to the image of vegetal fertility with which the film began.<sup>19</sup> The message is clear: though it may, in part, suggest a cleansing lustration, or even tears of mourning, the rain, mixed with blood, signifies the cyclical, regenerative process by which violence begets more violence, as each killing fertilizes the soil for a new crop of violent acts, returning us always to the starting-point of the cycle. If it is not interrupted, the film suggests, this cycle may lead to the outbreak of general war.

It is the image of Aleksandar's blood- and rain-soaked shirt—the last diegetic image in the film—that, for me, provides the most poignant echo of the *Oresteia*.<sup>20</sup> I quote Clytemnestra's chilling description of the murder of her husband, first in the original Greek and then in the translation of Herbert Weir Smyth:

οὐτω δ' ἴπραξα, καὶ τὰδ' οὐκ ἔρνήσομαι,  
ὅς μήτε φεύγειν μήτ' ἔμυνοσθαι μόρον·  
ἔπειρον ἔμφιβληστρον, ἔσπερ ἔχθύων,  
περιστιχίζω, πλοῦτον ἔμματος κακόν·  
παίω δέ νιν δις, κὼν δυοῖν ὀμώγμασιν  
μέθοκεν ἄτοκ κῶλα, καὶ πεπτωκότι  
τρίτην ἔπενδιδωμι, τὸ κατ' ἕχθονος  
Διὸς νεκρὸν σωτῆρος ἔκκταίαν χάριν.  
οὐτω τὸν ἄτοκ θυμὸν ἔρμαίνει πεσὼν

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<sup>19</sup> The tomato-like stains on Aleksandar's shirt, coupled with the peaceful expression on his face, give in retrospect an ominous or ironic meaning to his earlier remark to Anne, meant to illustrate his intention to seek refuge in Macedonia: "I'll write a book, uh, 'Zen and the Art of Tomato Growing.'"

<sup>20</sup> The close-up of Aleksandar's shirt is followed only by two brief shots of clouds; then the credits roll over an image of a darkened Macedonian landscape.

κῶκφυσιῶν ὄξειῶαν ἀπματος σφαγῶν  
βάλλει μ' ὄρεμνῶι ψακάδι φοινίας δρόσου,  
χαίρουσαν ὀδῶν ὄσσον ἢ διοσδότηι  
γάνει σπορητῶς κάλυκος ὄν λοχεύμασιν.

Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1380-92 (ed. Page)

Thus have I done the deed; deny it I will not. Round him, as if to catch a haul of fish, I cast an impassable net—fatal wealth of robe—so that he should neither escape nor ward off doom. Twice I struck him, and with two groans his limbs relaxed. Once he had fallen, I dealt him yet a third stroke to grace my prayer to the infernal Zeus, the savior of the dead. Fallen thus, he gasped away his life, and as he breathed forth quick spurts of blood, he struck me with dark drops of gory dew; while I rejoiced no less than the sown earth is gladdened in heaven's refreshing rain at the birthtime of the flower buds. (Trans. Smyth)

Having just emerged from the palace after murdering Agamemnon, Clytemnestra constructs an explicit analogy between the blood spilled by the killing and the rain that prepares the earth to bear fruit. For her, the image expresses her sense of joy and relief at having exacted vengeance for an earlier act of violence (the sacrifice of Iphigenia). In the context of the *Oresteia* as a whole, however, Clytemnestra's metaphor—rain for blood—conjures the same cycle of fertility as the rain imagery in Manchevski's film. Her description of the murder in terms of the arrival of a spring rain in a farmer's field looks forward to the bitter harvest she will reap in *Libation Bearers*, when she is confronted by her son and the violence begotten by her own act of murder. Moreover, both Aeschylus and Manchevski deploy strikingly similar visual strategies to underscore the significance of rain imagery. Just as Aleksandar's bloody shirt provides the visual link back to the film's beginning, so in the *Oresteia* blood-stained garments index the cyclical recurrence of violence. The "dark drops of gory dew" were presumably visible on the garments worn by Clytemnestra in this scene. In the parallel scene in *Libation Bearers*, Orestes emerges from the palace after killing his mother and Aegisthus and displays the

“impassable net” his mother had spoken of in the earlier play, a garment that likewise bears visible bloodstains (cf. lines 1011-13). The chorus’ reaction to the sight of the robe reminds us of the way Clytemnestra had earlier described the fertilizing effect of drops of blood:

αἰαῖ αἰαῖ μελέων Ἰργων·  
στυγερῶι θανάτῳ διεπράχθης.  
αἰαῖ αἰαῖ,  
μίμνοντι δὲ καὶ πάθος ἴνθεοι.

Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers* 1007-9 (ed. Page)

Alas! Alas! Sorrowful work! You were done in by a wretched death. Alas! Alas! And for the survivor also suffering blossoms. (Trans. Smyth)

The “blossoming” of suffering points to the maturing flower of the seeds sown and spoken of earlier by Clytemnestra.<sup>21</sup>

There is an important difference, however, between the ways in which the *Oresteia* and *Before the Rain* deploy agricultural imagery. In the *Oresteia*, such imagery eventually signals the escape from the cyclical violence it had earlier referenced, as it becomes associated not with the destructive cycle of retribution but instead with a truly productive prosperity. After Orestes is acquitted, the Furies threaten to pour upon the land of Attica a poison that will render the ground barren (*Eumenides* 780-7 = 810-17). This venomous discharge is the counterpart and, in a sense, the continuation of the “fertile” drops of blood spilled by Clytemnestra. With the incorporation of the Furies into the city as the Eumenides, however, their poison is transmuted into a truly fertile distillation. Athena,

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<sup>21</sup> Smyth’s translations (“the birthtime of the flower buds” and “suffering blossoms”) emphasize the connection between these passages. In fact, Clytemnestra’s words (σπορητῶς κάλυκος ἴν λοχεύμασιν, *Agamemnon* 1392) suggest more the sowing of grain than flower buds (cf. LSJ<sup>9</sup> s.v. κάλυξ I.1). The verb *anthein* (“blossom”) is still appropriate to maturing grain, however: cf. Sophocles, fragment 395 Radt (ἴνθοῖντα στάχυ). The connection between the two passages would be evident in any case.

the city's "gardener" (ἄνδρ' αὖς φυτόποιμενος δίκην, 911), teaches them to sing a song that will enhance the city's prosperity, described in agricultural terms (903-10), and they do so (938-47). In *Before the Rain*, by contrast, the rain and the agricultural cycle to which it is connected do not lead beyond the cycle of violence. Rather, they close the circle, returning us quite literally to the point at which the cycle began. The only release the rain brings is for the victims, whose deaths exempt them from having to suffer through the consequences of violence—or would, if the film's Escheresque structure did not bind them in its endless loop.

### ***Dilemmas of self and other***

Why does *Before the Rain* remain locked in this loop? The kind of comparative reading I have undertaken here would be a fairly tedious exercise if it did not prompt this essential question. The answer, I suggest, has to do with the mechanism by which, in the *Oresteia*, the violence represented by the Furies / Eumenides is successfully incorporated within the city. These goddesses are the embodiments of retributive violence, an elemental force that, in Aeschylus' world as much as in Manchevski's, cannot be simply dispelled. Athena's task in *Eumenides* is to find a way to harness this force for the city's benefit. She does so by means of a calculated trade-off: internal peace for external war, harmony within the group for unstinting hostility towards outsiders. In her words:

σὺ δ' ἄν τ' ὅποισι τοῖς ἄμοισι μὴ βάλῃς  
μήθ' ἀματηρῶς θηγάνας, σπλάγχνων βλάβας  
νέων, ποίνοισι ἄμμανεῶς θυμώμασιν,  
μήτ' ἴσ' ἔλεος' ἴσ' ἴσ' καρδίαν ἄλεκτόρων  
ἄν τοῖς ἄμοις ἄστοισιν ἄδρῦσις ἄρη  
ἄμφύλιόν τε καὶ πρὸς ἄλλήλους θρασύν.  
θυραπὸς ἄστῳ πόλεμος, ὃ μὸλις παρῶν,  
ἄν πῖ τις ἄσται δεινῶς ἐκλείας ἄρως·  
ἄνοικίου δ' ἄρνιθος ὃ λέγω μάχην.



So do not cast on my realm keen incentives to bloodshed, harmful to young hearts, maddening them with a fury not of wine; and do not, as if taking the heart out of fighting cocks, plant in my people the spirit of tribal war and boldness against each other. Let their war be with foreign enemies, and without stint for one in whom there will be a terrible passion for glory; but I say there will be no battling of birds within the home. (Trans. Smyth)

This is the compact that permits the Eumenides to find a permanent abode in the heart of the city. The goddesses retain their retributive nature. Within the city that nature is put in the service of ensuring reverence for the city's laws. But the goddesses' fundamental association with violence is not thereby sublimated away; it is simply directed outward, toward those persons and groups who can be unambiguously classed as outsiders, and therefore safely targeted as enemies.

Athena's compromise, however, cannot be readily transferred to the Balkan situation represented by Manchevski's film. It is not just that foreign wars "without stint" would be an intolerable reality for any modern nation-state. The problem is that, in contemporary Macedonia, there are no easy distinctions to be drawn between insiders and outsiders, self and other. The governing principle of *Before the Rain*—"each kills his own"—underscores this point. In spite of the fact that the tensions the film depicts are driven by hostility toward perceived outsiders, all the violence ultimately redounds back upon insiders. This may be taken as a comment on the intractability of identity politics in a multi-ethnic state like Macedonia. Ethnic difference notwithstanding, Albanians and ethnic Macedonians are nevertheless partners in a national enterprise, at least for the time being. Consigning ethnic 'others' to outsider status is therefore, at a higher level, an act of auto-destruction.

A number of complicating factors render the problem of identity especially acute in Macedonia by comparison with other Balkan states. In Bosnia, for example, the "ethnic" difference between the combatants could be charted also in terms of

religious confession: Bosnians are virtually by definition Muslim, Croats Catholic, Serbs Orthodox. In Macedonia, however, there are Macedonian-speaking Muslims and Albanian-speaking Christians (both Catholic and Orthodox).<sup>22</sup> Ethnic Macedonians, meanwhile, bear an identity that is threatened by the claims of neighboring Bulgarians and Serbs, who maintain, respectively, that the Macedonian language is a dialect of Bulgarian, and that the Macedonian Orthodox Church is a part of the Serbian Orthodox Church. All of these identity questions are made still more fraught by the ongoing dispute with Greece over the establishment of a name and corresponding identity for the Macedonian state, to which I will return.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, even if the Macedonian state were to succeed in establishing a cohesive identity in which all of its constituent peoples may feel included (and it is to be hoped that it will do so), there would still remain a significant measure of ambiguity as to where the line between self and other is to be drawn. The dissolution of Yugoslavia is only the latest chapter in a long history of redrawn borders in the region. At one point or another in the past century and a half, the inhabitants of the territory of today's Macedonia would have called those on the other side of any given border their fellow-citizens.

In such a context, the kind of bargain struck by Athena is plainly an impossibility. The cycle of violence cannot be recalibrated to a larger scale because, even at that larger scale, there is no clear-cut distinction between self and other. Once again we find that the solutions proposed by the *Oresteia* cannot be employed within the terms set by *Before the Rain*, with the consequence that the film remains relentlessly circular.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Friedman 2000:144n6.

<sup>23</sup> See above, n6; also ICG 2001:i, noting that the aspiration to become a "civic state," as articulated in the Ohrid Framework Agreement, "makes Macedonia an anomaly in a region of emphatically 'ethnic' states, three of which uphold fundamental challenges to the Macedonian identity."

## ***The Oresteia in Macedonia***

There is another side to Athena's bargain that not only helps to pinpoint the ways in which *Before the Rain* and the *Oresteia* diverge, but also speaks to the difficulties facing contemporary Macedonia. The accommodation reached with the Furies / Eumenides works to reduce conflict within the city precisely by imposing a stable sense of citizenship as such. The promotion of foreign wars "without stint" goes hand in hand with the institution of a law court to fix a vision of a collective enterprise that is enshrined in a state with clearly delineated boundaries and enduring institutions. The ideological work of the *Eumenides* is, in part, to make Athenian citizens feel secure as citizens; the strength of the play's commitment to a robust collective identity is what enables it to transcend the cycle of internecine violence.

*Before the Rain*, by contrast, was made at a time when the collective project represented by the Macedonian state was very much in doubt, and when even the legal status of the state was in question. In 1994, Macedonia was a very young country. Wars in neighboring republics fostered doubts about its viability. It had been admitted to the United Nations under the provisional name "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (FYROM, a designation that many Macedonians find offensive), but, due to Greek objections to the use both of the name "Macedonia" and of the so-called Star of Vergina on the new nation's flag, it was still not recognized by most UN member states, the US among them. It was only after the new state changed its flag, in 1995, that it gained recognition from the US and other major nations (as well as a reprieve from a 19-month Greek embargo).

These existential uncertainties go a long way toward explaining the formal discrepancy between *Before the Rain* and the *Oresteia*. The lack of an Aeschylean resolution can be understood as a reflection of the unresolved situation of Macedonia itself. It is important to stress this point, since some viewers have felt that the film's circularity simply reinscribes an orientalizing fantasy of the Balkans as a place of endemic, cyclical violence.<sup>24</sup> Yet there is a hint of optimism

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Iordanova 2000:153, and the reviews she cites on p. 151.

in the notion that “the circle is not round.” Viewed against the *Oresteia*, the film’s lack of resolution acquires the force of a self-consciously critical absence: it points to what is missing from the Macedonian situation—confidence in the state—and, implicitly, to the potential for the cycle to be broken, if such confidence could be supplied. Far from simply repeating and reinforcing a stereotyped image of the Balkans, the film speaks to a very real problem still faced by Macedonia.

The problem is as acute today as it was in 1994, if not more so. The crucial factor remains the ongoing dispute with Greece over the country’s name. In 2001, following the signing and initial implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which put an end to violent clashes between ethnic Albanian separatists and state security forces, the International Crisis Group (ICG) warned that resolution of the name issue was crucial if Macedonia was to succeed in forging a “civic” state and in avoiding escalation of interethnic tensions.<sup>25</sup> They repeated their warning in 2009 and again in 2011, after Greek objections prevented NATO from issuing a membership invitation at its 2008 Bucharest summit.<sup>26</sup> This event caught many off guard.<sup>27</sup> It has

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<sup>25</sup> ICG 2001. The ICG report stresses that the dispute both increases the anxieties of ethnic Macedonians about threats to their identity (with the consequence that they are more likely to oppose concessions to the Albanian minority) and fosters doubts about the viability of the state. Cf. p. 15: “For Macedonians, ‘Macedonia’ serves as the sole name of both the state and the people. . . . the name of the state, Republic of Macedonia, is inextricably tied to the Macedonian people’s identity. Denying Macedonians the full use of their name necessarily exposes them to the charge that they, their state and their language are an ‘artificial creation’ (as some Greeks and Bulgarians argue) and exist only as part of the Bulgarian nation (as Bulgaria implies). . . . for Macedonians the name issue is a question not only of identity, but of existence”; and “the provisional name ‘former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’ . . . implies a provisional acceptance of the state, as if its present form were merely a precursor to a final status to be decided later.”

<sup>26</sup> ICG 2009, 2011 (esp. p. 21).

<sup>27</sup> In a verdict issued on December 5, 2011, the International Court of Justice found that Greece’s objections were in violation of Article 11, paragraph 1 of the 1995 Interim Accord,

been widely viewed as a major step backward, since integration into NATO and the EU (which now seems also to be impossible until the name dispute is settled) is understood to be the key to stability in the region. Admission to Europe and NATO would furthermore put to rest the lingering questions about the viability of the Macedonian state, and remove from the equation the argument of those Albanians who feel that they will never be able to join Europe as partners in a state that cannot secure full international acceptance.<sup>28</sup>

The name dispute has therefore cast a pall of uncertainty over the future of Macedonia since it declared independence in 1991. Manchevski's film appears to acknowledge, at least indirectly, the crucial link between the state's struggle to assert itself and the ethnic tensions the film depicts.<sup>29</sup> It is certainly significant that the only character in *Before the Rain* who actively seeks to transgress and transcend the Macedonian / Albanian divide, the protagonist Aleksandar, is also the only character in the village who bears a name that is neither Slavic nor Albanian.<sup>30</sup> The name is also highly suggestive as a potential evocation of one of the most hotly contested symbols of contemporary Macedonian identity: Alexander the Great. Another symbol of national identity is even more prominently displayed

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stipulating that Greece would not object to Macedonian membership in international bodies, provided that Macedonia would be referred to within such bodies by the provisional name, "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia."

<sup>28</sup> The latter point was brought home to me by Victor Friedman (personal communication).

<sup>29</sup> I note, however, that, asked by an interviewer in 1995 about the film's possible relevance to the dispute between Macedonia and Greece, Manchevski replied, "in no way should the film be taken as a documentary or direct commentary on specific arguments today" (Horton 1995:45).

<sup>30</sup> Marciniak 2003:78 argues that both Aleksandar and the film's main female characters index "the reconceived notion of a nation as a multicultural community that can recognize and respect a multitude of otherness within itself" (emphasis original). Only Aleksandar, however, actively seeks to cross ethnic boundaries in order to interrupt the cycle of violence. "Aleksandar" is a very common name in Macedonia, but in Manchevski's film it seems deliberately chosen to set Aleksandar apart from the other villagers, who all bear obviously Slavic or Albanian names.

in a short but critical scene that occurs just as Aleksandar sets out to rescue Zamira from her Macedonian captors. As he mounts a hill overlooking the sheepfold, Aleksandar spots a wedding procession, at the head of which is the pre-1995 Macedonian flag, conspicuously bearing the Star of Vergina. For the viewer aware of the importance attached to the flag in the contemporary controversy over the recognition of Macedonia, the flag is a reminder that the characters are playing out the consequences of their group affiliations in the context of a state whose very existence is in question. For Aleksandar, it appears to be a reminder of the imperatives imposed by the assertion of an inclusive state identity. It is as if his encounter with the flag reassures him that the purpose he has set for himself—to rescue Zamira from his cousins and fellow Macedonians—is the right one. After gazing at the wedding procession, he strides to the sheepfold with renewed determination. The inclusion of this inconspicuous but nevertheless pivotal scene stresses that the assertion of an identity for the Macedonian state goes hand-in-hand with the interruption of the cycle of violence.

These oblique references to Macedonia's struggle to assert a state identity need not be interpreted as an endorsement of the classicizing language in which that identity is articulated.<sup>31</sup> If anything, they acknowledge such a language as one of the challenges the country faces, insofar as the dispute over Macedonia's right to employ classicizing symbols hinders its ability to forge a recognized identity for the state.

In the context of the ongoing name dispute, the reading I have proposed, juxtaposing the *Oresteia* and *Before the Rain*, is liable to seem like a provocation—potentially to people on both sides of the dispute. It may seem, for example, like a polemical appropriation of classical culture in the service of a

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<sup>31</sup> There are a number of problems with the “antiquisation” policy being pursued by the current Macedonian government, not least of which is the massive amount of money being spent on neo-classical monuments. (The “Skopje 2014” urban renewal project, which includes a large number of neo-classical buildings and classicizing monuments, will cost €250-300 million by some estimates: see ICG 2011:2.)

Macedonian discourse. Conversely, it may appear to privilege Greece at the expense of Macedonia by constituting ancient Athens as the site of an escape from violence, while condemning Macedonia to the endless retracing of a circle. Both of these reactions, however, would miss my point. If the classics are to have any use in the modern world, it is as a term of analysis, a discourse in which and against which to measure other discourses. This is the spirit in which I offer my observations: not as a provocation of either side, but as the application of a lens through which, hopefully, to perceive more clearly what is at stake in one recent formulation of a problem—the tendency of violence to repeat itself—that is by no means confined to Macedonia.<sup>32</sup>

### ***Epilogue***

My remarks have been deeply influenced by the research and teaching of Greg Nagy, even if I have not had occasion in this essay to cite his work directly. In the first place, Greg's commitment to comparativism as a method for exposing the range of meanings recoverable from a text (to say nothing of his fondness for exploiting films as comparanda for ancient works of art, especially in the context of his legendary "Heroes" course) has shaped my approach to literary interpretation in general, and the arguments I have put forward here in particular. More importantly, however, Greg has always impressed upon me, by his own example, the imperative that any adequate reading of a text, film, or other work of art should open itself to the human concerns that shaped it. That is, criticism should aspire to grasp its object not as "art for art's sake," but as an expression of the complexities of human experience, whether they be rooted in ritual, athletics, war, or any of the many other sources of joy and sorrow in ancient and modern lives. Among Greg's recent writings, I think especially of his discussion of Virgil's famous phrase *sunt lacrimae rerum* ("there are tears that connect with the real world"), which, in his reading, becomes a succinct expression of the principle that the human mind is able to make contact with the real sorrows (and joys) of

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<sup>32</sup> I think Victor Friedman for his help in formulating the ideas I have outlined in this section.

others through the medium of art.<sup>33</sup> The comparative reading I have offered here is an attempt to realize this same principle: by examining Manchevski's *Before the Rain* through the lens of the *Oresteia*, I hope to have brought into sharper focus a set of very real concerns. I stress, however, that when it comes to Macedonia today, I see more cause for optimism than for tears.

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<sup>33</sup> Nagy 2009:160-72; see esp. pp. 168-9. I have given Greg's translation of Virgil's phrase as it appears on p. 168.



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