

## Manchevski's SHADOWS at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival

By Dinane Sippl  
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Cinema Without Borders

Red carpets ribboned through the week at the 23rd Santa Barbara International Film Festival, spanning oohs and ahhs, yelps and squeals for Julie Christie, Cate Blanchett, Javier Bardem, Ryan Gosling, Tommy Lee Jones, and Angelina Jolie, in that order. And stars shone brightly as well on the faux black-sky ceiling of the 2,000-seat Arlington Theater, walled with real gold and amber lanterns and façades of the old Spanish mission town that the city once was. This site for the endless tributes was nearly as packed for a new film from Kazakhstan by Sergei Bodrov, *Mongol*. A glorious old-style action film devoid of character development and heart-felt conflict (even with narration delivered in first-person voice-over), it offered plenty of blood and bodies and land-and-skyscapes, a rough-hewn exotica when compared to, for instance, a glittering Zhang Yimou palace epic.

Yet in smaller theaters and some uniquely pleasant mid-size venues (the city offers several, patchworked through its downtown), very astute and committed cineastes streamed into half a dozen new films designated as “Eastern Bloc” in the catalog and filled the houses. I never saw so little popcorn (nor food or drink of any kind) consumed in movie theaters (though it was generally available) or heard so much conversation in the lobbies afterward. At this mid-fest writing moment, I haven’t seen all of these films (Fatih Akin’s *The Edge of Heaven* is yet to come and gaspingly anticipated), but so far Alexander Sokurov’s eloquently enigmatic *Alexandra*, Andrei Zvyagintsev’s striking and engrossing *The Banishment*, and Milcho Manchevski’s singularly compelling *Shadows* are enough to call any festival a success. Together they bring an aesthetic and socially conscious edge to this eleven-day event that is perhaps not so pronounced in any other particular segment of the program. And a crime it shall be if they don’t soon make it into local art-house theaters across our country. If only because it takes so long to encounter a new work by him, even though he now lives and works in the U.S. (heading the Directing Department at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts’ Graduate Program), this review will focus on the latest by Milcho Manchevski.

Following his much fêted debut, *Before the Rain* (1994), and his second feature, *Dust* (2001), writer-director Milcho Manchevski has once again provided us with the perfect festival film: a visual tale of dramatic substance, with historical depth and contemporary thrust, adroitly told with innovation and élan. And once again Manchevski returns to that place he cannot leave behind, his beloved Macedonia.

It all begins, at least the film itself, with a crash. It looks like a fatal car accident. But Lazar Perkov — his friends call him “Lucky” — miraculously survives it, or so he thinks. After a year of convalescing, he returns from his parents’ villa in the lakes region to his apartment in Skopje, the capital, and his position at the hospital where he is a physician. Sad that his wife has remained behind with their little boy, and she is flirting with someone, at that, he feels even more uneasy because his forgetfulness, nightmares, and absent-mindedness tell him his recovery is not yet complete. And there are those strange faces: an old man taking care of a baby, a perhaps even older lady tattooed with a cross between her eyebrows and muttering an ancient dialect, and then a mesmerizing young woman who holds a secret.

Lazar manages to find someone to decipher the words of the old woman, Kalina, who is there waiting for him on his couch when he arrives home at night, sometimes with an eerie wolf. “Return what’s not yours. Have respect,” is what she presses urgently. But what has he stolen? Without knowing this, how could he possibly return it? The linguist who translated the words notes the Biblical connection of Lazar’s name to the story of Lazarus, and by coincidence, the young woman he meets in that office, Menka, is the survivor of a suicide by hanging — or is she? Perhaps it’s not by chance that the old man, Gerasim, a refugee, turns up on a gurney in the hospital. His brother nailed a spike into his heel before he placed him in the coffin, to keep him from wandering after death. Yet there he is, dying once again, leaving behind the unbaptized baby in a limbo not unnoticed by Kalina, herself a long-ago displaced Aegean Macedonian.

The repetition of their violent deaths in the story haunts Lazar all the while these people draw his compassion and even compel his attraction, in the case of Menka. But Lazar is consumed with the overbearing presence of his mother, a highly successful doctor and ambitious woman who once scavenged a box of old bones from the sacred cemetery when she needed them for her anatomy class. “It’s not a real grave,” she rationalized in her home town of Gluvovo. Yet an early scene in the film feels like part urban legend and part folk tale as local Macedonians pull up, turning off their car stereos and cell phones to celebrate the Night of the Dead. In a sprawling cemetery under a black sky, myriad candles light the graves where visitors lay plates of food or pour drinks for their deceased and spend the night.

To live through these moments in this setting allows for an uncanny intimacy — a face-off with personal fear that leads, strangely enough, to a celebration of life. But Lazar has yet to make that journey, for his “shadows” are walking among the living, indeed, through every step of his life. Cinematographer Fabio Cianchetti generates this foreboding trajectory visually through the use of double images, often reflections, broken spaces, the mirroring of each persona in another, and characters who either drop out of the frame mysteriously and just as suddenly reappear or, surprisingly, vanish before our very eyes. The rope marks on Menka’s neck appear, disappear, and re-appear, just as “superstitions” are visualized (a woman explains a birthmark on her arm as the consequence of her mother eating stolen grapes while she was pregnant). Much as Lazar resists the matriarchal rope of his own mother, his curiosity and conscience allow him to fathom the waves of intruders in Macedonia over centuries, their theft of the land and its people, and the unpaid debt at stake for Lazar regardless of the degree of his personal complicity.

Audiences familiar with the history of the region recall that Greece together with Serbia, Bulgaria, and Montenegro declared war on Turkey in 1912. No sooner did this act liberate Macedonia from occupation under the Ottoman Empire than it precipitated Macedonia’s being parceled out to its neighbors. Greece seized upon Aegean Macedonia for ethnic cleansing, sending hundreds of thousands into exodus, appropriating their land, banning the use of their languages and the renaming of places, plundering villages and destroying homes. Ethnic Greeks from countries further east were brought in to re-populate the region. The Greek Civil War of the 1940s only exacerbated the problem, allowing internments to continue as late as 1974 (the year Lazar’s mother excavated the bones for her anatomy class in the film). “Covering up past genocide is only expanding it,” Manchevski has commented, “and I felt that this story should find a place in *Shadows*, which talks about the responsibility of the individual in the face of family and history.”

In 1991 Macedonia emerged from the “ashes” of the former Yugoslavia. Milcho Manchevski then began to approach filmmaking through fractured, overlapping, and circular narratives, interspersed with historical passages and ellipses, to tell the tales of his homeland. *Shadows* departs from this approach, opting for a more straight-forward development of the story, but adds to it a dreamscape of personal torment. Call it a “ghost story” but know that it feels more like Bergman or Polanski, or even Shakespeare — *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* come to mind. Retaining an ensemble of actors from one film to the next, Manchevski used two first-time film actors in *Shadows* for the lead roles, Borce Nacev as Lazar and Vesna Stanojevska as Menka, who both deliver remarkable performances. As for the director, if we view Lazar as a visionary not unlike the filmmaker himself, pursuing the artist’s journey, that journey is also an allegory of cinema when its task is to lead us to see — at whatever price — and to dream.