CANARIES AND BIRDS OF PREY: THE NEW SEASON OF BULGARIAN CINEMA

Cinema after 1989: a marginalized existence?

In 1996 I was spending my summer holiday at a remote village in Bulgaria. In the village, there was a self-styled video rental place run by an old woman whose children had supplied her with videotapes from the city, about 100 of them. All tapes were bootlegged ones, with black and white photocopied covers and hand-written labels. Some of the titles were Hollywood features recently released for the big screen in the United States, like Last Dance or The Rock. The videos were of extremely poor quality, with several layers of voice-overs — Russian, Ukrainian, and Bulgarian on top.¹ The copies, shot from the big screen with a hidden camcorder, had been made during sneak previews of the films in Hollywood: at the end of each on the bottom of the monitor, one could see small silhouettes of people rising to leave the theatre.

The village “video store” carried not a single Bulgarian title, nor did the video stores in the nearby city of Kystendil, the population of which is 50,000. In the local theatre, one could see Get Shorty, Copycat, and Eye for an Eye, all new American releases. Not a single Bulgarian film played at the theatre for the whole summer.
In the capital, Sofia, I was only slightly more fortunate in finding recent Bulgarian productions. During the winter of 1995 some Bulgarian features played in almost empty and poorly heated arthouse theatres. In June 1996, a screening of Bulgarian documentaries was first advertised and then cancelled, but no organizer showed up to announce the cancellation to those who had gathered in expectation of a rare chance to see such films. Indeed, many new Bulgarian productions have had a single screening altogether — to see them, one needed to be in Sofia at the time they happened to be shown for specialized audiences. The production of Bulgarian filmmaking can only be seen during the festival *Golden Rose* in Varna, which takes place biennially and showcases features, documentaries, and animation. The “depository” of the *National Film Centre* contains only a few videocassettes of recent Bulgarian films. The remainder can be obtained only personally from the filmmakers themselves if they would oblige showing their own copy.

Filmmakers, however, seem to distrust display suspicion people expressing interest in their works; they are afraid of being cheated in some way, as they have had many similar experiences in the past. Protection issues for Bulgarian authors seemed to have been resolved with the passage of a copyright bill in August 1993, but the law has not been yet efficiently enforced. In February, 1995, National Television was still airing Bulgarian movies without paying royalties to authors, claiming that copyright protection is not retroactive. Until recently, in fact, the formerly state-run enterprise *Bulgaria Film*, which had been occasionally selling movies abroad, had been transferring royalties not to authors, but to the Ministry of Culture.

In such a context, then, it is not surprising that filmmakers and film lovers alike agree that they are experiencing a difficult period. Describing it, some speak of “misery,” others of “crisis,” and a 1996 television program wondered whether Bulgarian cinema was still alive. Those involved in Bulgarian filmmaking today look upon the future with moderate optimism. The only issue they cannot agree upon,
however, is how long the difficult times will last; some expect conditions to improve in five to ten years, others are more skeptical, predicting that the difficulties will last for the next 25-30 years.

The most problematic aspect of the crisis is that, in the 1990s, Bulgarian cinema is increasingly a cinema without an audience. The years when Bulgarians would go to the cinemas to see national film productions seem to have gone forever. Filmmakers cannot readily identify whom they are addressing in their works: When they try to appeal to the volatile mass taste, they face the overwhelming competition of imported mass culture. Were they to address a more sophisticated audience, they would be doomed to failure, as in an underdeveloped market economy distributors and exhibitors have little interest in researching and targeting scattered pockets of potential viewers. Producer Assen Vladimirov has claimed that most films in Bulgaria are now made for an audience of thirty people — usually filmmakers’ own friends.6

This inability to reach an attentive audience is a consequence of a complex crisis in the cultural industries. The atmosphere is one of political instability, lacking basic legislation and enforcement of the existing one, and of deepening economic crisis. The abolition of centralized management of culture divorced the domestic film production from exhibitors and distributors. The new distributors chose to abide by market rules and to work with Hollywood box-office winners rather than play the losing card of domestic ones; moreover, there is a decline in the overall number of admissions purchased, as ticket prices become not affordable for many.7 During the season 1998/99 Boyanafilm occupied a permanent slot on BNT — Monday nights at 8:30 p.m. The programme, called 8 1/2 features older Bulgarian films, preceded by documentaries discussing the process of making of the film and the respective period in the film industry. The programme is realized under the overall direction of Evgeni Mikhailov, a director of Boyanafilm during this same period. Most of the documentaries are carried out following a ‘dirty laundry’ approach — to revisit Bulgaria’s film history and to preferentially
discuss previously undisclosed episodes of censorship or interference in the work of filmmakers. The programme is said to attract a good-sized audience and thus to be the only mass forum for Bulgarian cinema. 8

The audience vacuum is supplemented by essential discrepancies in the reception of the films that are shown and seen. Often, critical opinions expressed in mainstream media differ substantially from those that appear in specialized film publications. These discrepancies suggest the degree of alienation between the average Bulgarian and the intelligentsia. Having enjoyed a privileged and well-respected position during under communism, today’s Bulgarian intellectuals are openly at odds with what they consider to be “deplorable dominant mass taste,” one which was suppressed under communism but is now unleashed and commands the market. Even those who were vocal in opposing the communist government today have little popular authority over such “low culture.” Some dissidents, such as screenwriters George Danailov, Konstantin Pavlov, Stefan Tsanev, director Evgeni Mikhailov, and critic Svetla Ivanova, had set out to become outspoken civil society leaders but did not, instead succumbing to the overpowering tendency of growing alienation between intellectuals and the masses.

Whereas during the years of communism (1945-1989) a total of 594 feature films were produced, and production peaked at around twenty-five features annually in the mid-1980s, in the 1990s, with varying degrees of success, the yearly number of films has been between five and ten.9 In 1994 film critics were asked to name the best Bulgarian films of all times. Not a single film made after 1985 made it in the top dozen. Most films voted for were from the 1960s and 1970s, and Methody Andonov's Koziqt rog (The Goat's Horn, 1972) scored most votes.10 Ironically, it seems that filmmakers had better conditions to work during the times of government-controlled film production. They may have had to adjust to specific political requirements, but still enjoyed the chance to work and reach out to audiences.
In a study devoted to the recent cinema of former Yugoslavia, Andrew Horton outlined several tendencies he had observed. He noted the proliferation of smaller production companies, many consisting only of a few filmmakers, which work in conjunction with larger studios on a film-by-film basis, and an increased commerce between film and television production and the development of a made-for-video film market of cheap, swiftly shot genre movies. Horton also refers to an increased number of international co-productions and a stronger emphasis on ethnic themes and stories.\(^{11}\) All these characteristics also apply to the Bulgarian case; indeed one might claim that these are typical of the situation in more Balkan countries and might well describe the cinema industries of Macedonia, Albania, and Romania.

In the 1990s the Bulgarian film industry is characterized by suppressed government funding, empty studios eager to attract foreign film crews,\(^{12}\) disappearance of domestic films from the wide screen, and armies of idle film professionals. The re-structuring of the film industry mostly took the shape of reallocation of funding powers from the ministry of culture to the newly created *National Film Center* (NFC), and a public commission of filmmakers that allocates funding to selected film projects.\(^{13}\) During communist times it was more or less matter of personal politics for filmmakers to secure the funds for their films. In the times of transition that followed, many found themselves unprepared to deal with the new funding situation, which made the figure of the producer more important. Film professionals now learn with varying degrees of success to adjust to the new reality, how to do their homework before taking their projects to the funding bodies.\(^{14}\) The funds for filmmaking are so scarce that a film can only occasionally be shot without foreign funds. In most cases financing comes from Eurimages, still more rarely secured through private channels.\(^{15}\) A new type of dependency — the market one — is replacing the political dependency of the past.

The shrinking funds for filmmaking triggered a generational conflict between older filmmakers who have to adapt to the new workings of the system, and some
young filmmakers who have no other choice but to enter the scene in these difficult
times. Who receives funding and who gets the chance to do creative work is an important
issue, and it cannot be denied that there are instances of preferential treatment.16
Struggles over alleged unfairness in funding awards re-emerge in the media nearly every
year. The issues of funding are also debated during stormy meetings of the Union of
Bulgarian Filmmakers.17

Still, it is difficult to judge who is doing better — the veterans or the newcomers.
The older filmmakers are bitter about the new market realities but nevertheless continue
to fight hard. The younger filmmakers, on the other hand, claim that the same people who
were making movies in the mid-1980s are making movies again in the 1990s and that it is
not possible for recent graduates to break through and to make their first features. Indeed,
it is hard to speak of a new generation of directors, as even the “young” ones are people
who made their debuts before 1989, such as Lyudmil Todorov (Bqga\ji kuheta, Dogs on
the Run 1988), Ivan Cherkelev (Parcheta lyubov, Pieces of Love, 1989), Krassimir
Krumov (Ekzitus, Exitus, 1989), and Docho Bodzhakov (Zla pamet, Evil Memory, 1988).
There are only a few really new names — the gifted “child-prodigy” Marius Kurkinski
with Dnevnikat na edin lud (Diary of a Madman, 1995), the directorial tandem Ilian
Simeonov and Khristian Nochev with Granica (Border, 1995), the Germany-based
director of Golgota (Golgotha , 1993) Mikhail Pandurski, Nidal Algafari, the director of
La dona e mobile (La Donna e Mobile , 1993), and Andrei Slabakov, the director of
Vagner (Wagner, 1998). None, however, has an established presence yet. The generation
of well-known cameramen — Venetz Dimitrov, Radoslav Spassov, Victor Tchitchov, is
complemented by younger ones — Emil Hristov (who seems to be en vogue with most
directors), Nikolay Lazarov (Klaneto na petela, The Slaughter of the Rooster,1996), and
Ivan Tonev (Sirna nedelya, Day of Forgivenesss, 1993). Some active and respected
women-DPs work in Bulgaria, such as Svetla Ganeva (Bashtata na yayceto, The Father
of the Egg, 1990; Gori, Gori, og=nhe, Burn, Burn, Little Flame, 1994; Razgovor s ptici,
Conversation with Birds, 1996) and Eli Ionova (Sezonat na kanarhetata, Canary Season, 1992). The new faces of Bulgarian cinema — male actors Petar Popyordanov (Border, Koziyat rog, Goat’s Horn, 1994), Ivailo Hristov (The Father of the Egg, Neshto vav vazduha, Something in the Air, 1993; Chernata lyastovica, Black Swallow, 1996, Priyatelite na Emilia, Emiliya’s Friends, 1996), Marius Kurkinski (La Donna e Mobile, Border, Diary of a Madman), and Alexander Morfov (Day of Forgiveness, Goat’s Horn) — appeared so often in the features of the first half of the 1990s that critics started complaining about their constant presence and wondered where all the other actors have gone. It is hard to speak of new female stars, however, despite the fact that some actresses have been cast in leading roles, such as Paraskeva Djukelova (Sulamit, Sulamit, 1997, Canary Season), Elena Petrova (Goat’s Horn, Border), and Ernestina Shinova (Wagner). And whereas new names do appear on the roster of Bulgarian cinema, there have been also untimely deaths — of directors Lyudmil Kirkov, Edi Zakhariev, Zakhari Zhandov, and Borislav Punchev, of cameramen Dimo Kolarov, Milen Nikolov and Georgi Karayordanov, of film critic Todor Andreikov, and the particularly painful one of actor George Georgiev - Getz.

Marked by the obvious signs of a crisis, the cinema nevertheless continues to yield works that in one way or another express the feelings, the frustrations, and the hopes of the community of filmmakers. It is a community that is by no means unanimous in understanding what is taking place and how are filmmakers to confront it, but which is nonetheless trying to make the best of what the times have to offer.

Cinema of Moral Concern

Up until a few years into the transition, many believed that the crisis of moral values was caused by communism itself, with its suppression of religion and overlooking basic issues of human rights and the individual. This was the message of the gloomy
films that appeared at the end of the 1980s -- like Vchera (Yesterday, Ivan Andonov, 1987), Margarit i Margarita (Margarit and Margarita, Nikolai Volev, 1989), Az, grafinqta (I, the Countess, P. Popzlatev, 1989), Pieces of Love, Lyubovnoto lyato na edin liohman (The Love Summer of a Schlemiel, L. Todorov, 1989), and Exitus. These films had appeared as a continuation of an earlier trend in which Bulgarian cinema followed a pattern similar to that of Polish “cinema of moral anxiety.” Works such as Edna zhena na 33 (A Woman of 33, Hr. Hristov, 1982), Ne znam, ne chuh, ne vidyah (I Do Not Know, I Did Not Hear, I Did Not See, L. Kirkov, 1986), Vsichko e lybov (Everything is Love, 1984), Skapi moy, skapa moya (My Dear, My Darling, Ed. Zakhariev, 1986), and Petak vecher (Friday Night, L. Kirkov, 1987) observed and registered the moral decline that ‘mature socialism’ brought along. The unpronounced indictment of all these films was that communism was dangerously undermining traditional values and was mercilessly destroying the grounds for moral integrity.

In this line, many of the recent films continued exploring the moral devastation as a legacy of communism. The debut feature of young filmmakers Khristian Nochev and Ilian Simeonov, Border, focused on the story of a young man (Petar Popyordanov) serving at the Bulgarian-Greek border who, mentored by a corrupt colonel (Naoum Shopov), gradually loses sound moral judgement and becomes a ruthless killer of people who try to cross into Greece illegally. His personal gain is minimal, but the real effect of his compliance is his moral downfall, his alienation from friends, and his irreversible expropriation by the totalitarian regime. While the protagonist gradually becomes a violent and unscrupulous villain, his friend, who preserves moral integrity, is humiliated and victimized.

A subtle portrayal of resistance to the moral degradation seen as arriving with communism is offered in Ti, kyo to si na nebeto (Thou, Who Are in Heaven, D. Bodzhakov, 1990) based on the popular novel Balada za Georg Henih (Ballad of Georg Henich) by Victor Paskov. Set in the 1950s, the story is told from the viewpoint of a boy
who accidentally gets acquainted with an old Czech violinist displaced to Bulgaria (Josef Kroner) who has now remained without a support network of family and friends. The boy’s family gradually befriends the old man and his bonding with the boy provides a nourishing ethical environment which counters the overwhelming lack of morality in the political backdrop of the times.

More and more, however, filmmakers choose to focus on exploring declining morality at times when social freedom prevails and blame cannot be easily attributed to totalitarianism. In the post-communist environment new dimensions of a lack in moral responsibility come into focus. Attention to the handicapped, for example, is the topic of La Donna e Mobile. The protagonist, Ani, is a beautiful young girl confined to a wheelchair who lives through a series of personal and professional disappointments. She is lucky enough to miraculously recover and become a top-model at the end. Along the way, however, she witnesses the destruction of others who are not as fortunate, and she vows not to forget the ordeal of her disadvantaged friends. Parallel subplots in La Donna e Mobile critically address a whole range of problems concomitant with the times of post-communism — deepening class distinctions, lack of tolerance, and destructive religious fanaticism.

Zakasnyalo palnolunie (Belated Full Moon, 1996) by director Eduard Zakhariev is another of the moral tales that seem to be preoccupy filmmakers, also developed against a backdrop of post-communist moral devastation. Slapped by his son at the beginning of the film, a father (played by the remarkable Itzhak Fintzi) decides to withdraw from his home, overtaken by alienation and bitterness. His leaving home is like a symbolic Christian gesture — turning his face to be slapped on the other side as well. His voluntary withdrawal into homelessness bears parallels to classical plots, from Simon of the Desert to King Lear. His existential submerging into the lower depths is an analogue of the desperation felt by so many in Bulgaria after the end of communism.
The only film of the “moral concern” series released before the end of the centralized system of film distribution is *Thou, Who Are in Heaven*, and thus the only one to be seen by more than a handful of Bulgarians. In the other instances the films discussed barely managed to make the point they intended, as they never reached their target audiences. Nevertheless, the films were discussed in the media, and these discussions displayed the trend mentioned above — of discrepancy in the opinions of mainstream journalists and film critics. *Border*, for example, became an object of controversy and was fiercely criticized in the press, particularly in publications affiliated with the military — the claim was that it intentionally and maliciously misrepresented the role of border guards who were depicted as bloodthirsty villains rather than proud defenders of the national territory. *Border* was beautifully shot in the Rhodopi mountains and revealed the superior cinematographic taste of its authors. But the criticism it received in the press caused its cinematographic achievements to remain unnoticed.

*La Donna e Mobile*, an attempt to engage issues pertaining to the physically handicapped and the gay community, was received indifferently by mainstream criticism.22 Whereas mainstream journalists did not challenge the attitude of attentiveness to the handicapped, they did not consider it a really important subject. The indifference to *La Donna e Mobile* again revealed discourse discrepancies — whereas intellectuals tended to be sympathetic to the marginalized ones, the mainstream media downplayed this message.

**Ethnic Difference and Moral Discourse**

The discrepancies between the intended ethical message and the mainstream reception found their most extreme manifestation, however, in the instances of films that explored the moral dimension of inter-ethnic relationships. Filmmakers that addressed these complex relationships were singled out by nationalist-minded journalists and other social commentators with an active media presence. Their situation was in many respects
compatible with that experienced by Serbian intellectuals who opposed the nationalist tendencies dominating in their own society.

The film probably seen by most Bulgarians is Lyudmil Staykov’s *Vreme na nasilie* (*Time of Violence*, 1988). A lavish adaptation of the 1966 novel *Vreme razdelno* (*Time of Parting*) by Anton Donchev, it dealt with the forced conversion of parts of Bulgaria’s population to Islam during the years of the Ottoman Empire. The film had been commissioned by the communist government, and its release coincided with the assimilation campaign of mid-1980s, an important part of which was the drive to create works of art that would back the so-called “revival process.” *Time of Violence* was an impressive super production, shot beautifully in the Rhodopi region, and could easily be considered as a masterpiece of Bulgarian cinema if it was not for the unfortunate context in which it was commissioned and executed. The very fact that a blockbuster like *Time of Violence* was made and released amidst growing hostility to non-Christian minorities and at a time when nationalistic passions were about to peak made the film indirectly endorse the mass human right abuses that were committed concurrently. If the film is considered out of this context, it possibly would receive a different and much more favorable reading. I believe, however, that it would be a wrong approach to ignore the depressing circumstances under which *Time of Violence* was made — as I believe that we cannot consider Leni Riefenstahl’s films independently of the Nazi propaganda context in which they were made or Emir Kusturica’s *Underground* independently on the intricacies of the Bosnian conflict. 24

In post-communist times, the new Bulgarian governments took various political measures to correct the damage of the past. Since 1989, Bulgaria has maintained a moderately good record in suppressing the ethnic tensions between Bulgarians and ethnic Turks and has managed to avoid further deepening of the ethnic conflict. 25 At the same time, some ethnic Bulgarians are more nationalist-minded then ever. In this context, intellectuals set out to promote inter-ethnic peace.
A group of filmmakers came up with a film that was to counter the message of *Time of Violence*. Screenwriter Malina Tomova and director Roumiana Petkova worked on *Burn, Burn, Little Flame*, a TV production, that tells the story of mistreatment of Pomak minority members in a remote village in the Rhodopi region. The protagonist is a young Bulgarian girl who volunteers to teach Russian in the fictional village of Mogla. Immersed in their simple and beautiful life, she gradually learns to value the archaic lifestyles of the isolated population. She also becomes an accidental witness to a number of human rights abuses, starting from small acts of coercion and culminating in a violent assimilation campaign.

As a teacher of Russian, Marina is primarily engaged with the Pomak children. She teaches them to sing *Pust’ vsegda budet sol’nce* and to confess allegiance to the great USSR. Her own presence in the village is part of the assimilation to which the locals are subjected: the Russification forced on them is as alien to their traditional culture as any other imposed foreign influence would be. In one scene Marina asks the kids in the classroom - *Kak tebq zovut? (What is your name?)* — and gets their answers — Aishe, Fatme, Mustafa, Ahmed. The combination of the Russian question and the Muslim names sounds so unnatural, that it echoes in Marina’s mind at the time when she witnesses gross human rights violations of these same helpless pupils.

*Burn, Burn, Little Flame* offers abundant images of helplessness and humiliation. Village women who wear *schalwar*, the loose Turkish trousers, are not allowed to buy bread at the store. In the fields they are chased by the Comsomol secretary and some militia men, scissors in hand, who are after their *schalwar* again. Militia men come to collect the Muslim headwear of the old men who sit on the square. The villagers do not resist, they are humiliated and helpless. Further, the humiliation grows into violence, which is rather hinted at than shown. The village doctor, a dissident, is arrested, then released in a catatonic condition. The store is closed, the streets — empty, the public address system plays military marches, and soldiers are stationed all around the village.
Marina’s sweetheart is shot in the back under mysterious circumstances. The school is set on fire. A helicopter sent by the authorities takes Marina away, and while ascending she watches the lonely remote villages from above: soldiers circling the forsaken towns, and small crowds of villagers gathering in dismay on the hilltops nearby. What can they do but passively wait for the violence to strike?

In the mid-1980s intellectuals had not interfered with the brutality of the “revival process:” they had suffered the humiliating fate of staying silent when injustice was done. Malina Tomova, the writer, said in an interview that her film was a “metaphor of the metaphysical guilt which the Bulgarian intellectuals have decided to take responsibility for.” It was her intention to use the film to evoke a genuine remorse for the human rights abuses that Bulgarians had committed against their Muslim compatriots.

At the October 1994 festival of Bulgarian film *Burn, Burn, Little Flame* received the award of the critics. It was shown on TV only four months later — over several evenings in February 1995 — and triggered a noisy scandal in the mass media. The fact that *Burn, Burn, Little Flame* was considered worthy of an award only served to widen the gap between intellectuals and nationalist-minded mass audiences. It had now become clear that the mass ethnic Bulgarian viewer was not ready for repentance. Moreover, there were reports of unrest of Pomaks at the shooting location and in nearby villages. Reportedly, the Pomaks had found the depiction of their lifestyles as archaic grossly exaggerated, and some of them felt so offended that they spontaneously broke their TV sets. The most outspoken critic of the film was Boyan Sariev, a Christian priest from the Rhodopi region, an active promoter of converting Muslims to Orthodoxy. According to Sariev, the movie incorrectly depicted the Rhodopi population as a wild tribe, and thus enhanced suppressed ethnic tensions. In his opinion, the film served foreign (allegedly Turkish) interests. *Burn, Burn, Little Flame* gradually turned into the most discussed film of the past several years. Although film critics were sceptical about its artistic
values, the criticism came primarily from nationalists who were more preoccupied with its message than with its artistry.

In spite of the noble intentions of its creators, *Burn, Burn, Little Flame* is constructed around an idealized portrayal of defenceless minority members. Initially the film was supposed to be based on oral history materials gathered by screenwriter Mailna Tomova who had worked as a young teacher in the Rhodopi in the early 1970s. However, in the course of the filming the original intention to create an ethnographic portrayal of the Pomaks had changed and the focus had shifted to the clashes from the mid-1980s. The intention now was to stress the political guilt of Bulgarians. Demonizing Bulgarians, however, would barely make the point; thus the film ended up depicting the Pomaks instead as helpless and humble people. They were shown as if living before the original sin, inhabiting an idyllic uncorrupted world. Almost all the Muslims portrayed in the film bear childlike innocence. It is not by chance that, of all Pomaks, a little girl called Raime is given most individual screen presence — a child, free of evil and sin, is chosen to represent the group and suggest uncorrupted purity and innocuous chastity.

On a background soundtrack of Rhodopi folk songs, the film ends with a quote by Albert Schweitzer: “I am life which wants to live, among other life, which wants to live.” It condemned the violence and engaged in an all encompassing pacifying effort. The attitude, however, was patronizing. The story is told by ethnic Bulgarians to others of Bulgarian ethnicity and is thus more about “us,” and it is “us” only that the filmmakers are concerned with, while “they,” the minority members, remain a passive and humble herd.

The same attitude characterized *Mezhdenin svyat (A World In Between, Roumiana Petkova)*, a documentary that premiered in 1995. A Bulgarian-French production by the authors of *Burn, Burn, Little Flame*, it uses ethnographic material shot during the filming of the feature and was meant to pay tribute to the beautiful handicrafts and to the idyllic unspoiled lifestyles of the Pomaks. Viewers are shown a mixture of elements of Muslim
and Orthodox cultures — the Pomaks dancing horo and kyutschek, celebrating pagan Bulgarian rituals and the Ramadan. The idyll is well rounded, with images of respectful extended family, of peaceful coexistence of animals and children, and of young brides on swings and merry-go-rounds. Only occasional sobering hints point to the serious preoccupations of this population. The destruction of the tobacco industries that provides their livelihood is briefly mentioned, and a premonition of trouble floats in the air. How are they going to earn their daily bread from now on? The young ones go to the cities, and the tightly knit community disintegrates from within through migration and impoverishment.

A caressing female voice-over concludes in a patronizing tone: “Is the Other really so different that we are unable to see the commonalities?” The message leaves an overwhelming sense of tutelage and suggests that the filmmakers are trying to challenge an allegedly adverse public opinion that sees minorities as threatening and hostile. But the portrayal which they offered was not much more than a reassurance that Pomaks are harmless innocents living in a state of primitive oblivion. No wonder then this portrayal was seen as offensive by many minority members themselves.

The complex and often troubled relations of ethnic groups have been a topic of Bulgarian cinema since the early 1960s. Vulo Radev’s classic Kradecat na praskovi (The Peach Thief, 1964) tackled a love story between a Bulgarian woman and a Serbian prisoner of war during one of the Balkan wars. Georgy Dyulgerov’s three-part Mera spored mera (Measure for Measure, 1984) offered an original (and inevitably controversial) treatment of the Macedonian question. In more recent years, Bulgaria’s minorities have prominently been in the focus of filmmakers again. Hristo Hristov’s Sulamit dealt with the life of a Jewish actress in the first half of the century. Numerous documentaries tackled inter-ethnic relationships. Nyakade v Bulgaria (Somewhere in Bulgaria, 1993) by Maria Trayanova documented the problems of an ethnically mixed

Georgy Dyulgerov’s *The Black Swallow*, a film focusing on the story of a young Gypsy girl, Magdalena (played by the beautiful Lyubka Lyubcheva), was much anticipated, mostly because it was expected to deal attentively with the problems of this vilified minority group. Respected ethnologists Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov had worked as consultants of the project to make sure that the film was true to the ethnography of this underrepresented group. And indeed, the film contained unique insights in Romani lifestyles, and exquisite sequences of a Romani bride-market and a wedding. Most of the film was shot with a skilfully led hand-held camera and featured beautiful colors in dresses and landscapes.

The story of the protagonist Magdalena, an independent spirit who accidentally gets involved with too many men and eventually in small time crime, is meant to reveal the controversial and complex reality of the lives of any member of the Romani minority. The film fails to do so, however, because the script itself suffers from a trying-to-tell-too-much syndrome. Besides portraying the Roma through Magdalena’s story, the filmmakers tackle too many other issues — patriarchy and violence, crime and emigration, greed and profiteering, racism and skin-heads, paganism and pantheism — resulting in a twisted conundrum of subplots with too many characters undertaking too many things in too many directions.
Due to director’s Dyulgerov perfectionist stance on editing the film, which was started in 1992, was not released until 1996, and only played at a limited number of festivals. The director seemed to believe that improving the quality of the editing and of the soundtrack would make *The Black Swallow* much better, but it was the script, overburdened with detail, that diminished the director’s editing efforts. *The Black Swallow* does not make the point about Gypsies that it had intended and, like many other films, remained largely unseen by Bulgarian audiences.

Released in 1998, director Ivan Nichev and screenwriter Angel Vagenstein’s *Sled kraya na sveta (After the End of the World)* casts a sympathetic glance at interacting minorities and attempts to tackle the gentle and complex inter-ethnic balance of multicultural Bulgaria. The film is set in one of the oldest neighborhoods of Plovdiv where Bulgarians, Armenians, Turks, Jews, Gypsies and Greeks have lived alongside each other for centuries. It is a bittersweet and nostalgic Romeo and Juliet type of story telling of the idyllic relationship of a Jewish man and an Armenian woman who are again attracted to each other many years after they have separated in their youth.

In tackling issues of ethnicity, filmmakers have been trying to focus on moral problems and refine the moral judgement of their audiences. They have rarely, however, enjoyed the support of mainstream media in this effort. A prevailing perception in the Bulgarian public discourse sees any attention to minorities as diminishing the importance of the average Bulgarian citizen.

**Islam and Christianity: Reducing Ethnic Relations to Religious Ones**

In some instances, filmmakers seem to believe that the tensions between Orthodox Christians and Muslims can be resolved by reducing ethnic difference to its religious dimension (based on the premise that many of Bulgaria’s Muslims define themselves as ethnic Bulgarians of the Islam faith). If such reduction was carried out
convincingly, then it would be much easier to overcome the religion-only difference by offering a specific pantheistic view.

This approach was already present in *Time of Violence*, in which the clash between Turks and Bulgarians is presented in the context of an eternal conflict between Islam and Christianity. The original 1966 novel on which the film is based does not stress very much on religion. The literary text spoke of “poturchvane,” of “turning into a Turk,” of giving up an ethnic identity and accepting another one. The change of religion was a leading element, but did not encompass it all. The novel, further, was not discussing the advantages of any one faith. The parting of Bulgarians and Turks was not only by religion, but rather by a complex set of factors making up the national ideology, religion being only one of them. A common language, common dress, common songs and the shared past were the complex marks of a community. The film, on the contrary, stressed on the religious differences, and reduced the difference to its religious dimension. Various film language devices are used to juxtapose the two religions — dark versus light colors, heavy Oriental music versus melodic Slavic, grim adult faces of the Turks versus a peaceful innocent mood of Orthodox childhood.

Although happening along religious lines, the “parting” unraveled as a complex confrontation. In the 1988 film, however, the religious difference is stressed, and narrative elements are added that are not present in the novel. The protagonist-janissari Karaibrahim, for example, is depicted as a religious fanatic as he swears that he will have any Bulgarian draw a cross and then spit on it. The most important change, however, is the added pantheistic illumination experienced by the Christian monk Aligorko: around two thirds into the movie, with the violent Islamic conversion campaign going on a full blown scale raging outside, the monk ends up in a dark cave into which light enters through two holes, transformed into mystical fumes. These holes resemble gigantic eyes fixated on the monk, and the light coming through them is so intense as to be almost unbearable. This mystical moment becomes one of revelation for
Aligorko: “Oh, Lord, who are you, and what is your real name?” he exclaims, “Isn’t it all the same whether they call you Allah or Christ? Are you in every man’s heart? Doesn’t the Earth feed Muslims and Christians alike? Is not the blood shed all in your name, dear God, not enough?”

In this scene, a culmination of the narrative, the complex confrontation which the film is supposed to explore is reduced exclusively to religious fault lines. Once the relativity of any religion is shown and particular faiths brought together in such higher pantheistic revelation, it is believed that difference is dealt away with. But it is an illusionary solution. The difference in faith is, of course, a relative one, and it is one that is easy to overcome if rationalized. Precisely for this reason many converted to Islam throughout the Balkans—they were coerced, and they accepted the new faith only because they knew that the difference between old and new faith was only a relative one. But changing one’s faith is not the end, it is only the beginning of the process of differentiation. Once the difference in faith has come about, it is followed by decades of practicing difference and thus a long-standing and complex tradition of disparity comes into being, one which cannot be overcome by simply proclaiming that entrenched ideas of religious difference are all imaginary.

If we look back at the fault lines along which the schism of Orthodox and Western Christianity occurred in the eleventh century, we come across a series of dogmatic disagreements which in today’s context look unessential and even ridiculous. Imagine we expose these and show how shaky is the ground on which the split in Christianity has occurred. Would such deconstruction be enough for us to claim that we have found a viable way to overcoming difference within the Christian world itself? Would it help us to deal away with the centuries long tradition of building up such difference? Barely. But this is precisely what the creators of *Time of Violence* are trying to do — to reject the difference by attacking its precarious conceptual grounds in the realm of religious discourse. It cannot possibly work. The difference may have
come about as a result of the religious split, but it has since unravelled in many other dimensions which need to be dealt with as well.

In the concrete case of *Time of Violence* such conceptualization was even more unacceptable, provided that the relativization and cancellation of religious difference was used as an excuse for the concurrent violent campaign of changing the names of the Muslim population throughout the country to Christian-sounding ones. This relativization was coming at a time when historians working within the “revival process” framework were stressing on the fact that many of Bulgaria’s Muslims were successors of Christians coerced to convert into Islam centuries ago and therefore the whole process of name-changing was to be seen as one of bringing back to these people an identity that had been violently taken from them back in history.

A similar reductionism and substitution of complex tensions with religious ones can be found in the 1994 remake of *The Goat’s Horn* directed by Nikolay Volev. Considered a Bulgarian classic, the original film version of *The Goat's Horn* was made in 1972 by the late Methody Andonov from a short story by Nikolay Haytov. The plot bears the simplicity of a Greek tragedy: During the time of the Ottoman yoke, the wife of Karaivan, the protagonist, is brutally raped by three Turks and dies. Devastated, Karaivan retires into the wilderness, taking along Maria, his young daughter. For years they live in complete seclusion, rarely seen by anyone and considered savage and unruly by the local community. Karaivan becomes so protective of his daughter that he raises her as a boy. He wants her to become as strong as a man so she can avenge her mother's death. Years later Maria realizes her father's dreams of vengeance, killing one by one the men who raped her mother, using a sharpened goat's horn as a weapon. One day, however, Maria falls in love with a young shepherd and discovers her feminine nature. When her father finds out about the lover, he kills the shepherd. Desperate at the loss, Maria commits suicide, leaving her father devastated and alone.
The first film adaptation of *The Goat's Horn* contained almost no dialogue, depicting tongue-tied people living in harmony with the sounds of the wilderness whose loneliness hints of a deeply suppressed urge for love. The remake, in contrast, stressed the unconsummated incest relationship of father and daughter. British-educated director Volev consciously exploited the psychoanalytically charged plot to create a movie falling within contemporary discourse on sexual identities.

The tragic confrontation provoked by the murder of Maria’s lover was intensified by the added dimension of ethnic and religious differences. In the original story, Maria’s lover was a Christian, and in the first film version he is shown taking her to an Orthodox shrine. For the 1994 remake, however, the lover had been turned into a Muslim, whom we see diligently engaging in prayers to Allah. Apparently, it was the writer Khaitov himself suggested the change, thus bringing the topic of "the Other" in line with the Bulgarian nationalist discourse of which he himself had meanwhile become a major proponent. At a sublime moment in the new version of *The Goat's Horn* the now Muslim lover utters: “It seems that God is one, but we all call him by different names.” After this ecumenical revelation, however, he leaves Maria’s embrace to take his prayers to Allah.

Why does religious difference matter so much lately? I see it as an indication of the desire of filmmakers to cope with difference by rationalizing it. First, the complexity of the problems is reduced to or substituted by a one-dimensional religious difference. From there on, the second step is to speculate on religious difference, which is now quite easy. This speculation may take the shape of the pantheistic revelation of Aligorko in *Time of Violence*, or a pantheistic reverence for life in Albert Schweitzer’s quote at the end of *Burn, Burn, Little Flame*. Or the shape of specific interfaith tendencies, as in *A World In-Between*, where the filmmakers show villages with mosques and churches in peaceful co-existence.35 Whereas under communism the tendency was to downplay the
importance of religious difference, now the prevailing trend is one of overestimation of the significance of religion in the complex conceptualization of difference.

In all fairness, there have been attempts to make films reflecting the complexity of ethnic co-existence. In 1993, influential Canadian scholar of Bulgarian descent Assen Balikci gathered representatives of three ethnic groups—Pomaks, ethnic Bulgarians, and Roma—in the village of Breznitza in the Pirin mountain for a unique exercise in visual anthropology. The participants were taught ethnographic research methods and video shooting techniques, then they were supplied with camcorders and left over a period of three weeks to film whatever they considered of interest and importance. Contrary to the expectations—Balikci noted—the selection of themes did not lead to overt ideological controversies, and ethnic tensions practically never transpired in the film agendas of minority members. There were numerous problems in the region at the time, with overwhelming preoccupations such as impoverishment and unemployment, rising Bulgarian nationalism and a corresponding rise in Islamic influence, as well as a general rejection of the Rom, but no trainee had made an attempt to confront any of these. Most participants had chosen to film their own ethnic group with no interest in the others. Thus, their perception of regional society had proved to be “that of ethnic units who live close by, interact daily, but remain separate.”

The Quest for a European Identity

The events of a Bulgarian film from 1967, Privurzaniyat balon (The Attached Balloon, 1967, dir. Binka Zhelyazkova), are situated entirely in a remote Balkan village. The opening scene, however, features a drummer who reads aloud announcements to the villagers: “As of today, in order to coordinate the local time with the Axis powers, European time will be introduced in the Kingdom of Bulgaria. Everybody is to set their clocks an hour back.” Then the camera shows the early morning routine in the village —
ducks and hens, goats and cows waking up, and a rooster crows — it is now 5 a.m. European time. From there on everything will be taking place within the small universe of the village, and is only the crow of the rooster that makes the claim of admissibility to Europe.

Another Bulgarian film, the 1979 *Lachenite obuvki na neznainiya voin (The Patent Leader Shoes of the Unknown Soldier, dir. Rangel Vulchanov)*, the events of which are also situated in a small Bulgarian village, positions the whole story in relation to Europe at its very beginning as well. The filmier, Vulchanov, is shown in front of the Buckingham palace where he shoots the majestic change of the guard. Three minutes into this sequence, all of a sudden, the footage of the Queen’s guards intercuts with scenes from Bulgarian peasant life, and the sound of a prolonged Bulgarian folk song gets mixed with the sounds of the British brass band. The images of the British soldiers start overlapping with the images of the Balkan peasants dancing at a wedding, and the action is gradually taken to the native village of Vulchanov. From there on the filmier will be telling a story from his childhood and all events will be taking place in his native Bulgaria. But for an opening he chooses *Europe*.37

References to Europe are to be found in many Bulgarian films, and some newer ones are entirely devoted to exploring the shattered European identity of the Bulgarian. In these films, the relation to Europe is not shown within the same cinematic frame but constructed through juxtapositions which automatically renders the very construct questionable. More, the ‘Bulgaria in relation to Europe’ construct heavily relies on mediation of selected images and concepts, and thus opens up space for misperceptions. Nevertheless, the self-image of Balkans is always constructed within a conditional *European* framework, and this is the framework which needs to be examined. *Being part of Europe* has become an extremely sensitive topic. On the one hand, there is the geographical proximity, the common historical background and the extended political rhetoric of *belonging to Europe*. On the other, there is the implicit, rarely articulated but
effective exclusion from *European* political and economic structures. The realization of renewed marginalization drives Bulgarians to insist even stronger on their European identity.

This contested European identity is the central topic of Ilia Kostov’s *Traka-trak (Clickey — clack, 1996)* in which a runaway-train plot provides an allegory of the present status of the Bulgarian society. Taking off from a remote Bulgarian town near the Turkish border, a group of people get on an international train with the intention to travel only to a nearby destination. The train, however, never stops and leaves the country, taking on a full speed toward the West. It passes through Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, to reach Paris and beyond. For the duration of the film one observes the reactions of the trapped passengers and listens to their discussions of the absurd situation in which they find themselves. It is a metaphor of post-communist Bulgaria — headed to the West, but entrapped in an accelerating train which is out of control. The whole menagerie of “new” post-communist types is here — Gypsy small-time smugglers, Ukrainian go-go dancers, Russian diplomatic workers trading in Kalashnikovs, a Polish pimp with two prostitutes, one of which eventually turns out to be a transvestite, and Rambo-like paratroopers. In their seemingly plain dialogues the characters touch on most of the concerns of contemporary East Europeans — troubled vernacular economies, Schengen restrictions, black marketeering, racism, growing differences within the once monolithic East block, violence, crime, and nationalism. The attempt of the runaway train to penetrate in the West serves as a metaphor of the attempted and failed effort of Bulgaria to enter Europe. In a symbolical move some passengers on the train try to sneak into the special car carrying a group of European *Phare* experts, but a UN blue helmet rudely pushes them out. 38 At the end it turns out to have been a nightmarish dream; the protagonists have actually never left their remote little town, thus the concluding message of the film reads as a reassuring relief “East, West, home is best.”
Traditionally, Bulgarians consciously make fun of the isolation of the country: “There is no higher mountain than Vitosha, there is no deeper river than the Iskar, and there is no bigger city than Sofia,” is an all-favorite way the Shops, a group living near the capital make fun of their self-confidence, blown out of proportion. The most popular Bulgarian literary character, Bay Ganyo, was created by writer Aleko Konstantinov around the end of 19th century. Bay Ganyo’s travels are meant to critically question the civilizational efforts of Bulgarians after the liberation. A simpleton rose oil merchant, Bay Ganyo was “sent” by writer Konstantinov to travel to Europe where he is to encounter the refined European mores of Prague and Vienna, and in most cases to end up ridiculed. Bay Ganyo himself realizes that he is often quite inadequate and admits that “We are Europeans, but not quite.”

Within the context of today’s of inferiority complex-driven re-examination of the Bulgarian European identity, there is a renewed interest in the Bay Ganyo plot. In 1992, director Ivan Nichev worked on an adaptation of Bay Ganyo, casting one of the most popular Bulgarian comedians, Georgy Kaloyanchev, in the role. The film shows Bay Ganyo travelling by train to Europe and getting involved in various amusing occurrences along the way — making a noisy presence in a Vienna bathhouse, or displaying questionable table manners during a visit with a Bulgarian advocate in Prague. *Bay Ganyo trugva po Evropa* (*Bay Ganyo Goes to Europe*) is a literal adaptation lacking brilliance in directorial or cinematographic approach. The film, however, gave Bulgarians a good chance to laugh again at their favorite literary hero and to think over their relation to Europe, which nowadays is very similar to that of 100 years ago. The film attracted nearly a million viewers, was then shown on TV and thus became the most popular Bulgarian feature since 1990.

The Bay Ganyo topic inspired another recent and more thought-provoking film discourse, entitled “BG”(1996). This loose experimental adaptation uses elements of the literary Bay Ganyo and introduces in the film text the creator of the novel, Aleko
Konstantinov himself. Authors Georgy Dyulgerov and Svetoslav Ovcharov intended to make a movie that would list all pro’s and con's in Bay Ganyo’s case. They change the protagonist’s gender and turn him into a woman, then they split the character in two, played by two actresses — a younger one and an older one (Margarita Gosheva and Meglena Karalambova). In so doing, the filmmakers suggest that Bay Ganyo is a part of each and every Bulgarian — man or woman, young or old — and that in post-communist times one observes “a new redistribution of the image of Bay Ganyo across the social space.”42

**Reconciling Historical Memory**

Soon after 1989, a wave of films depicting the traumas of the Stalinist years seemed to be setting a trend in Bulgarian cinema. Initially, these films represented an important tendency in post-communist filmmaking. They played the function of "a mass psychoanalytical séance" in parting with the past.43 Yet, this wave faded away fairly soon.

The series opened with George Dyulgerov’s *Lagerat (The Camp, 1990)*, a film that was started under the previous regime and critically explored the spirit of the 1950s. Set in a pioneer camp, the film combined a coming of age subplot and a story concerning corrupted political loyalty. Although an original first work in the Bulgarian context, *The Camp* falls within the category of many other 1950s works of East European filmmaking of the mid-1980s (e.g. Janusz Zaorski’s *Mother of Kings*, 1985, the 1980s Marta Mészaros’s diary trilogy, and Emir Kusturica’s *When Father Was Away on Business*, 1985). Dyulgerov’s own earlier films set in the 1950s, namely *Avanta (Advantage, 1979)* were more complex and much better realized cinematically. Nevertheless, *The Camp* became a cornerstone for an entire series of cinematic readjustments of the collective memory about the 1950s.
Earlier, it had been impossible to work on film projects dealing with the legacy of totalitarianism. Soon after 1989, in contrast, many filmmakers eagerly ventured into plots exploring this period of post-war history. Critics observed, however, that filmmakers often tailored their 1950s stories to fit current ideologies, and as a result many recent films about the period ended up serving only *ad hoc* political needs without really providing deeper explorations of social psychology or political history.\(^{44}\)

In *Kladenetsat (The Well, 1992, dir. Docho Bodzhakov)* and *The Canary Season* (dir. Evgeni Mikhailov), for example, the clash between good and evil surfaces as a clash between the sexes, with good women, passive and submissive, and evil male members of the new class of communist rulers. Both films spanned the 1950s and 1960s, and both dealt with family tragedies. In *The Well*, mother and daughter fall victim to the sexual appetites of the protagonist, who was so corrupt and amoral that he ruthlessly destroyed everybody close to him, including his own brother and son. Imposed and accepted victimization, endurance, and passivity characterized all positive characters in the film. The previous work of Bodzhakov, *Thou, Who Are in Heaven* also dealt with the same period, but its story of the tender friendship between the boy and the old violinist was not as contrived as the one in *The Well* and managed to pass on a message about bonding that counteracted somewhat the heavy and hostile atmosphere of the 1950s.

*The Canary Season* \(^{45}\) tells the story of Lili, a forty-year-old single mother whose 20 year-old son confronts her in the 1970s, requesting to know the identity of his father. The battered woman accepts the challenge and tells the story of her ordeal in flashbacks set the 1950s. Back then she becomes the rape victim of a Comsomol activist, is then forced to marry him, to only be subsequently subjected to humiliation by her husband. She tries to protest, but is sent to a concentration camp, where she witnesses the myriad horrors of communist "correction" efforts. Eventually she is locked up in a mental hospital and becomes the object of sexual advances by the
guards. Finally released, Lili comes to the conclusion that most of her fellow citizens have become servants of the system that destroyed her life.

In both *The Well* and *The Canary Season*, women are silently and gradually tormented, mostly through their sexuality. They become victims of violent sexual assaults, even in relationships that they seek of their own free will, since communism is shown to have created a "twisted kind of masculine bravery." As a result, several old clichés from the communist-era films persist, such as the cliché of morally superior communist women falling victim to the perverted and excessive sexual appetites of fascists. The only difference in the newer films is that the sexual villains are the communists, bestially promiscuous and lacking any moral values.

In readjusting the newer history of Bulgaria, filmmakers felt compelled to tell the depressing stories of people whose lives were destroyed by communist persecution. There is little innovation in the scheme of the contemporary scenarios: innocent and helpless women are victimized by brutal and amoral men, who are not only endowed with masculinity, but also have political power and control all possible forms of redress.

Looking at a wider range of works, the main preoccupation in exploring the legacy of communism seems to be the moral devastation it imposes. Whereas in *The Well* and *Canary Season* this devastation was conceptualized through female victimization, in *Mulchanieto* (*Waste*, 1992) and in *Day of Forgiveness* it is problematized through the exploration of the awkward gaps in father-son relationships, imposed by the necessity of taking sides in the troubled first years of communism. *Day of Forgiveness* is directed by one of the fathers of Bulgarian poetic cinema, cameraman Radoslav Spassov, and tells the tumultuous story of a young man entangled in overcoming the conflict with his own father. At different times the protagonist is associated with the communists, with the underground activists of IMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization), and, with a flock of travelling Gypsies, he also lives through periods of severe depression and
madness. *Day of Forgiveness* shows the clashes between the traditional society and the new values — Orthodox monks taken to a shock-working brigade, Gypsy travellers who are being settled, pro-Macedonian fighters in the woods who are locked up, and generally people whose moral ordeals, destroying their mental health. The plot, however, is convoluted and overburdened with insignificant details whereas many crucial elements of the narrative are only hinted in passing. Its beautiful cinematography cannot make up for the faults in the script, and the use of prominent shooting sites fails to overcome these limitations.47

The film’s plot was supposed to represent the complexity of the socio-political landscape of the 1950s and the 1960s, but it is overburdened with detail and the intended reconstruction of personal memory intersecting with the complex social tissue does not take place. Nor does it take place in the utterly personal film *Waste* by director Krassimir Kroumov.48 In both *Day of Forgiveness* and *Waste* there are abundant situations involving images of confinement — prison cells, labor camps, madhouses. *Waste* also deals with a painful personal reconstruction of memories affected by shattering social experiences and an alienated son searching for a missing father.49 Spassov, the director of *Day of Forgiveness*, belongs to the mature generation of filmmakers whose political beliefs are close to the reformed socialists. Kroumov, the director of *Waste*, is a representative of the younger generation of intellectuals and was known to be more critical of the communist regime. Nevertheless, the approach they pursue in this painful reconstruction of the dialectics of history and personal experience truth is quite similar.

Rethinking the legacy of the past has been the focus of other films. *The Father of the Egg*, directed by animator Anry Kulev and scripted by poet Boris Hristov, is an anti-utopian sci-fi-style vision of totalitarianism, which offers a fantasy elements in using 3-D and cartoon animation. *Iskam Amerika (I Want America, 1992)* of Kiran Kolarov re-evaluates history as well. *Vampiri, talasami (Vampires, Spooks, 1992)* of veteran director Ivan Andonov is a light-hearted attempt to cast a satirical look at the communist power
take-over in the 1940s. *Zhrebiat (The Lot*, 1993) of Ivanka Grabcheva looks back at the years between the two World Wars and chronicles the turbulent career of a banker (Kosta Tzonev) featuring a number of adventure-action elements.

Since 1993, the wave of films that focused on reconstructing the historical truth, in particular on the memory of the early years of communism, somehow lost impetus. The disproportionate attention paid to the 1950s, the darkest period in recent history, did not really provide remedies for any of the current concerns, and soon the topic of the human rights violations and the moral compromises of the 1950s was no longer attractive. Those who were concerned with issues of identity came to realize that reconciling personal memory with historical streamlining failed to provide answers to identity concerns, and the search for identity went on into an abstract existential realm.

Cinema of Anxiety

Near the end of the 1980s, expectation of social transformation was in the air but no immediate change was on the horizon. It was then when newcomer Ivan Cherkelov set the trend to exploring the identity crisis of the younger generation. In his *Pieces of Love* he used black and white gritty camera to portray a group of young people struggling to adjust to the alienating boredom of the mature state socialism. When the social changes came in the early 1990s Cherkelov withdrew from filmmaking for a few years to devote himself to Krishna and new age meditation. In 1995, backed by French funding, he made a return with *Tarkalyashti se kamani (Rolling Thunder*, 1995). In the film the director cast his father, the revered actor Georgy Cherkelov, who brought his impressive intellectual presence on the screen.

*Rolling Thunder* opens as a fable: an ageing surgeon gathers his three sons to announce that he is leaving for America while in fact he is just seeking seclusion and the viewers see him only going as far as his village residence. The father’s announcement
and subsequent departure triggers an intellectual re-examination among the sons who are quite different from each other and representing conflicting lines of thought. The sons get together in the deserted apartment of the father to sort out their own lives and relationships. At a later point, they encounter the father amidst the beautiful natural setting of his place of seclusion, bringing to him the unresolved concerns, hesitations, and quests for the ultimate truth. The father seems to be the only one among them who has managed to overcome all petty earthly concerns and is nearing the spiritual balance that they all long for.

Writer and director Cherkelev intercuts some magical realistic moments deviating from the straightforward narrative. The camerawork is particularly good when it comes to these magical moments, allowing the construction of an interesting imagery. Devoted purely to intellectual and religious quests, the film disregards traditional narrative canons and clearly gives up on any attempt to appeal to a large audience. In the Bulgarian context the film was regarded as pretentious and aloof, remote from the reality of the country in which not intellectual quests but concerns for everyday survival seem to have taken over the public discourse. With its austere style and fable-like structure, however, *Rolling Thunder* fits well in a wider European context of works of intellectual self-examination and clearly puts these issues on the agenda of new Bulgarian cinema as well.50

Rather than trying to mirror the reality of the contemporary Bulgarian other films focused on the state of mind, the prevailing angst insecurity. As critic Alexander Donev noted, these film abound with Biblical associations and metaphors, and their general realms of exploration are the existential boundaries of human freedom.51 *Something in the Air*, based on a script by poet Konstantin Pavlov and directed by Petar Popzlatev, features two men, named only called “First” and “Second.” The protagonists are shown in a resort on the Black sea coast after the tourist season is over. They take long walks along melancholic deserted beaches. The two men are very different but they both fall in
love with the same "woman in white," an actress (Svetlana Yancheva, the star of Popzlatev’s 1989 I, The Countess) and end up competing for her attention and hating each other. The real trouble with them, however, is that they are typical by-products of the totalitarian system that has made them incapable of loving. In a deepening state of paranoia they destroy each other. The film’s austere narrative focuses on details and unobtrusive metaphors encoded in the titles of the newspapers that the protagonists read, in the way they drink their coffee (with or without sugar), or in the clothes they choose to wear. It is a film of subtleties and understatements, a film that eradicates suppressed tensions and radical solitude, all considered a trademark of screenwriter Pavlov. 52

Mikhail Pandurski, who lives and works in Germany, brings into the Bulgarian cinema the topic of exile and emigration, extensively explored in the cinemas of Hungary (Love Film, Just like America, American Postcard) and Poland (Crossed Wires). His Golgotha features some of Bulgaria’s finest actors — Russi Chanev and Petar Slabakov. The two male protagonists, a younger and an older one, share a common dream — to leave the country for the West — which becomes feasible after years of confinement in the East block. As their relationship unravels, however, it becomes clear that their quest for new experiences is an undertaking much more complex than merely reaching the elusive excitement of the Western metropolis.

The constellation of intellectual actors — Swede Erland Josefson, Hungarian György Cserhalmi, and the Bulgarians Samuel Fintzi and Vassil Mikhailov — suggests the cerebral nature of Zabraneniyat plod (The Forbidden Fruit, 1994), Krassimir Kroumov’s film that followed his 1992 Waste. It is the story of a petty clerk who, while adjusting to the vicissitudes of everyday life fortune, gets entangled in a complex web of role-playing. The protagonist ends up under investigation and this triggers a reflection on the restraining nature of moral principles versus the concept of a superior absolute freedom.
Marius Kurkinski directed and starred in the one-man feature *Diary of a Madman*, a low-budget production based on Gogol’s novella. Kurkinsky himself describes it as a "work of passages — a person's passages from one momentary situation to the following one, from one thought to the another, from one second to the next, and from one room to the next." Gogol’s extremely rich text gives him the chance to demonstrate his dramatic talents, as Kurkinski is a new and impressive presence at the Bulgarian cultural stage appearing in theater, on entertainment TV, and now in film.

Other “existential” films take up questions of friendship and love. Some of the well received films of the late 1980s had depicted small groups of disillusioned young people in search of a true identity and a place under the sun (*Dogs on the Run, Pieces of Love, The Love Summer of a Schlemiel*). This line of filmmaking continued well into the 1990s. Ivan Balevski took up the trend and featured a group of young people, members of this same disillusioned generation, in his *Aritmiya (Heart Trouble)*, 1992. Lyudmil Todorov’s *Emilia’s Friends* and Ivan Pavlov’s *Vsichko ot nula (Everything from Scratch)*, 1996) examined the ethos of dedication in close friendship circles. Veteran Rangel Vulchanov’s *Fatalna nezhnost (Fatal Tenderness)*, 1992 explored love and thrust in the unique auteurist manner of the director. An all-encompassing and warming love may, indeed, be the counter-balance to the troubled quests and the prevailing feeling of disillusionment which is sensed in these works.

Young writer, director, and producer Andrey Slabakov returned after several years in Italy to make an auteurist feature debut. His *Wagner (Wagner)*, released in 1998, is another highly intellectual enterprise querying existential matters. Largely self-financed, *Wagner* is an original Kafkaesque absurdist comedy shot in black and white and featuring performances by many leading actors and theatre personalities. The story develops over one long night within the claustrophobic space of a huge and depressing apartment building, with the innocuous protagonist wandering between the floors and coming across a whole menagerie of weird characters and their even more bizarre
concerns, and experiencing a total fiasco in her efforts to engage in meaningful interaction. *Wagner* is a post-modernist collage which builds up on a wide range of influences — German expressionism, French surrealism, Russian formalism, and Scandinavian absurdism, and deploys cinematic language seen in earlier works of a variety of auteurs, from Buñuel to Syberberg and Lars von Trier. The film, however, was poorly marketed. Publicity materials described it as a comedy but failed to stress on its absurdist and intellectual dimensions, thus leaving the impression that it was yet one of the silly post-communist *chernukhas* which so many people are fed up with. A film critic at the 1998 Thessaloniki Film Festival even wrote that *Wagner* was a reflection on the housing crisis and food shortages in today’s Bulgaria. Had this critic bothered to see the film, he would know that such claim was completely irrelevant. But he was obviously basing his ‘review’ on the publicity materials in the catalogue. In the overall, *Wagner* fell victim of pre-conceived notions of Bulgarian cinema — a cinema which is expected to offer some visually stunning patriarchal tale or an anti-Stalinist diatribe but is not encouraged to venture into loftier metaphysical spheres.

**Seeking out the audiences commercially**

Concerns of attracting a mass audience came into Bulgarian filmmaking for the first time after 1989. A nearly invisible existence, deprived of glamor or influence, is not a dream prospect for those involved in filmmaking. Some believed that the secret to popularity was to cater to changing tastes of a mass audience and if one offered commercially sound entertaining works, all problems would be solved. Once entertaining and commercially sound films were made, however, box office numbers suggested that Bulgarian low-budget productions can barely compete with Hollywood. Nevertheless, there are filmmakers who have decided to follow the commercial path. Already in 1986, Plamen Maslarov made a Bulgarian Western — *Sadiyata* (*The Judge*, 1986). The first privately produced Bulgarian film, the action-adventure *Kurshum za raya* (*A Bullet for
Paradise, 1992), directed by Sergei Komitski and set in the turbulent Rhodopi mountains area of 1901, strictly deployed all ingredients that the genre prescribed. The film was, nonetheless, a box office flop. In addition, its release coincided with the crisis in the centralized distribution and exhibition system in the country, so it never reached the mass audiences for whom it was intended.

O, Gospodi, kade si? (Oh, Lord, Where Are You?, 1991) dealt with the legacy of the notorious Sixth Department of State Security and claimed to contain deep psychological insights. Set immediately after the end of the communist rule, the film followed the fate of a former officer (Stefan Mavrodiev) who gradually comes to realize that he has been a small wheel in a cruel machine that has exploited him, and organizes a self-styled resistance. Written and directed by theater director Krassimir Spassov, the film is preoccupied with “the moral damage that totalitarianism inflicted on the human mind.”55 These concerns, however, are watered down by the action-adventure elements that have taken the director’s attention and the film can correctly be described as the Bulgarian equivalent of Polish action-adventure success Psy (Pigs, 1992).

Some other directors tested themselves as well in the comedy genre. Director George Stoyanov, a well-known master of refined satire (Prebroyavaneto na divite zayci, The Hare Census, 1973), took absurdist elements to the extreme in Onova neshto (That Thing, 1990).56 Released in 1990, the film mocks existential fears and inner insecurities of totalitarian times. Kiran Kolarov worked on an erotic comedy of a much lesser degree of sophistication — Ispanska muha (Spanish Fly, 1997) — which came to be perceived as disastrous after its release.57 After the commercial success of Bay Ganyo Goes to Europe, Ivan Nichev, along with Italian co-producers, made a romantic comedy, Lyubovni sanishta (Love Dreams, 1994), based on Stefan Zweig, realized as a lavish period film and made with Austrian money. For the distribution Nichev entered a deal with Rainbow Films which regularly chooses to distribute American productions. Young director Lyubomir Hristov made his debut with a short, Nezhni ubiystva (Tender
Murders, 1991) which was marketed as “horror with erotic elements.” These films were expected to bring back audiences to the theaters but the hopes never materialized.

The compliance with mass audiences became a guiding principle of more than one filmier. Most symptomatic of these commercially-oriented features, however, was the case of the Bulgarian-U.S. erotic thriller Hishtna ptica (Bird of Prey, 1995). It was meant to set the Bulgarian cinema on a new track of Hollywood-bound cinematic ambition, with a total budget of $3.5 million (including 980,000 leva in Bulgarian state subsidies), directed by Temistocles Lopez (Chain of Desire, 1993), starring Richard Chamberlain and Jennifer Tilly, and shot on location in Bulgaria.

Set in the bleak reality of post-communism, Bird of Prey is the story of a man bent on revenge who kidnaps the daughter of his drug-dealer enemy, only to fall in love with her. The film was a brainchild of its good-looking scriptwriter, co-producer and actor, Boyan Milushev, and was realized due to his intense entrepreneurial vigor. A failure in Bulgaria, Milushev had moved to the West and had claimed despite the fact that he was potentially a major star, the communist government had plotted to suppress his exceptional artistic gift. Once in the land of opportunity, however, he was to show his extraordinary talent and deliver a masterpiece.

During the shooting period, probably due to the remarkable public relations skills of Milushev, journalists in Bulgaria wrote in very positive terms about the production, claiming that Bird of Prey was expected to gross at least among the top ten for the year and that Milushev would be the first Bulgarian to get at least a nomination for an Oscar®. Once the film was released, however, it came as grave disappointment to those involved in the production. In the U.S. the film was released direct-to-video, and its screenings in Bulgaria ended up being mocked by the media, most of whom made fun of the failed ambition of self-promoter Milushev. The reviewers were unanimously negative about Bird of Prey, no matter whether they were writing for the specialized press or for the mainstream media. According to Iskra Bozhinova, it made little sense to
imitate the genre of the thriller, a genre in the American and not in the Bulgarian tradition. Alexander Donev pointed out that in the film Bulgaria is mistaken by the director Lopez for a "banana republic." Margit Saraivanova underlined that the main evidence of the film’s failure was its rejection by audiences and that Milushev would not have a second chance to produce. 60

The Best of the Rest

In his study on Bulgarian cinema from the 1980s, Ronald Holloway paid a special attention to the variety of forms and genres in Bulgarian filmmaking — cinema for children, shorts, documentaries, and animation. 61 The variety is still preserved, although it is obvious that some fields have been badly hit by the financial crisis in cinema. It is indicative, for example, that most of the films focusing on the problems of children — a field in which the Bulgarian cinema has a remarkable tradition with films such as Ricar bez bronya (Knight without Pancer, 1966), or Taralezhit se razhdat bez bodli (Porcupines are Born Without Bristles, 1971) — were released at the beginning of the 1990s and had been in production while under the state film financing system. Directors who traditionally worked in children’s cinema chose to make films that directly address the wounds of society — growing pragmatism, abandoned children, violence. Mariana Evstatieva-Biolcheva made Zdravej, babo (Hallo, Granny, 1991), a lyrically narrated story of the complex and uneasy relationship between a lonely village granny and her grandchildren in the city. Dimitar Petrov made Toni (Toni, 1991), a sad account of a single mother’s lonely and neglected child. Plyontek (Plyontek, 1991) of veteran director Borislav Sharaliev featured meaningless violence among children whose world was a mirror image of the adult one, too violent as well. Impressive, but also depressing, all these films diagnosed a range of serious social problems. On a more optimistic note, director Roumiana Petkova’s (Burn, Burn, Little Flame) and DP Svetla Ganeva’s film
Conversation with Birds indicated the desire of the filmmakers to escape immediately political concerns and turns to exploring more endurable matters, such as beauty, nature, and harmony.

In 1996, concurrently with the cinemafest Love is Madness a children's film festival was organized in Varna. Critics hope that the festival will continue in the footsteps of the 1970s children’s movement Banner of Peace (Zname na mira) which involved a variety of cultural activities targeting children and encouraged children’s creativity and which was inspired and led by the controversial but still positively remembered daughter of Todor Zhivkov, Lyudmila Zhivkova. Attention to the diminishing younger population of Bulgaria is, indeed, something necessary in the rough times that the country is living through. Two new film events in Sofia are the festival of European co-productions and the festival of musicals. Both were launched in the mid-1990s, adding to the older cinematic event in the capital, Kinomania, taking place annually in November.

As an expensive cinematic form, animation is certainly most affected by the crisis. The new director of Bulgaria’s animation studios, critic Ivan Stoyanovic, argued for a special status for animation -- it should be subsidised by the state, but also needs to be allowed to try other possible forms of fundraising. For animators whose art is universal and not limited to the boundaries of a national language and ethos, the future seems to be in working transnationally. Many of the well-known animators of the younger generation chose to emigrate — Velislav Kazakov and Ivan Tankushev to Canada, Rumen Petkov to The US, others — to West European countries. But some stayed at home, such as Anry Kulev (who also worked in feature film), and veterans Donyo Donev and Stoyan Dukov. A new name is Tzvetomira Nikolova (Soupophonia, 1996), who works both in Bulgaria and U.K. The same cosmopolitan attitude is characteristic of internationally acclaimed Zlatin Radev (Canfilm, 1991).
In a study of post-communist filmmaking in Bulgaria, Homer Robinson claimed that the market was hostile to documentary. This, however, is an overstatement. The genre of documentary has managed more than any other one to yield works meaningful to Bulgarians. While in feature film critics voted among the top dozen only films from the past, in the documentary category many newer features made it to the top ten, such as *Neonovi prikazki* (*Neon Tales*, Eldora Traykova, 1992) and *Dom Nr 8* (*Home Number 8*, Nikolai Volev, 1988). With the return of renowned visual ethnographer Assen Balkci (who moved back to Bulgaria after retiring from the University of Montréal), the ethnographic genre seems to be gaining support and interest and a festival of ethnographic films took place in 1996. Along with the many documentaries dealing with ethnic relations within the country, documentaries that revisit the biographies of historical personalities of the past and critically re-evaluate their role in the country's history have been the favorite choice of documentary filmmakers. Documentaries were made about such important historical personalities as Georgy Sava Rakovski, Kosta Panitza and Stefan Stambolov, and the most acclaimed one, by director Svetoslav Ovcharov, dealt with the controversial monarch Ferdinand Saxe-Cobourg *Tzar Ferdinand Bulgarski* (*Tzar Ferdinand of Bulgaria*., 1995). Veteran director Nevena Tosheva worked on a film exploring past migrations in the Dobroudja, a disputed region at the Bulgarian-Romanian border, and after years of working on the film, veteran Binka Zhelyazkova finally released her documentary about female prisoners. Eldora Traykova made a film about Petar Dunov, a self-styled Bulgarian prophet and philosopher, Boryana Puncheva — about self-styled artist Guenko Guenkov. Kostadin Bonev offered a cinematic biography of religious composer Petar Dinev from the first half of the century, and Alexander Obreshkov made a film about the politician Nikola Mushanov, whose name was blacklisted during communist years. Filmmakers are mostly attracted to exploring various aspects of Bulgarian history from the inter-war period but some are also interested in tackling historical issues of the time around the Balkan wars (1912-1913) or of the big
migrations of the 1920s. At the same time many younger documentarians choose to make films diagnosing the status of contemporary society that surrounds them, such as the acclaimed works of Iglika Trifonova. Ilko Dundakov’s Skrito Huvstvo (*Suppressed Feeling*, 1997) is one of the first films to tackle the issues of homosexuality.

In spite some signs of slowing down forced by the overall economic situation, the film press and criticism maintain a visible presence. The old friend of Bulgarian cinema, Ron Holloway, is preparing to work on a new project featuring the cinema of the country. Within Bulgaria, a number of film scholars and critics work actively in maintaining the dialogue about identity and image as it comes across in the new Bulgarian cinema. Some of them are Kalina Stoynovska (editor of *Kino*), Bozidar Manov, Vera Naydenova, Lyudmila Dyakova, Aleksandar Donev, others include Genoveva Dimitrova, Alexander Grozev, Lyuba Kulezich. Many of them were of extreme help to me when researching for this chapter.

**Balkan Cinema**

Critical scholars foresaw the important changes in culture and cinema still early in the transition. During a 1991 British Film Institute conference in London preoccupied with issues of image and identity in the contemporary European cinema some spoke of a new set of margins that Europe had started constructing for itself. Nancy Condee pointed at the untenable heterogeneity of the popular unifying notion of “the other Europe,” which was no longer adequate for describing the dynamic cultural processes in the region. Stuart Hall claimed that "at the same moment as the east-west barrier, which seemed to give 'true Europeans' a sense of who they were, begins to fray and disintegrate, the north-south meridian begins to advance on Europe from the other side.” Ien Ang insisted that in this new situation European cinema would need to "learn how to marginalize itself, to see its present in its historical particularity and its limitedness, so
that Europeans can start relating to cultural ‘others’ in new, more modest and dialogic ways.”

The end of communism brought the end of a well-developed system of cultural relations within the Eastern Europe. The disintegration of what used to be called East block into the new geopolitical spheres of East Central Europe and Balkans rendered further research on East European cinema as an entity meaningless. ‘The cinema of Eastern Europe’ is gradually becoming a problematic concept. It is my feeling that our collaborative effort which explores the cinemas of the former East block countries still grouped together will be the last edited volume to discuss the cinema of “Eastern Europe” as such. The next logical step is to regroup the cinemas of the region to reflect the new geopolitical realities we see established ten years into the transition. As more and more thematical and stylistical affinities will be rediscovered to support the reconceptualization, I expect to hear more and more often of “Balkan cinema,” a concept which will include the long and rich cinematic traditions of countries such as Greece and Croatia, Turkey and Macedonia, Romania and Bosnia, Albania and Serbia, Bulgaria and Montenegro all of which have contributed sensitive and beautiful works to the cinema of the world. This stylistically coherent body of works is to be brought together by future scholarship. Balkan cinema is to develop as an area of study, and film scholarship is to recognize the affinities and overcome the prevalent one-country approach.

By the mid-1990s, Bulgarian filmmakers became painfully aware of the dynamically changing world of European cinema. If they needed an identity framework wider than the narrow national belonging, they could no longer place themselves within the realm of East European cinema as the entity itself no longer seemed to exist. At the end of the 20th century, Bulgaria is positioned at the cultural periphery of Europe — so marginal that it is often left outside Europe's semantic borders. More and more Bulgarian filmmakers realize that they are located beyond what used to be Yugoslavia, in the Balkans, cut out of the European realm to which they always believed to belong. They
realized that they could not escape the marginality and consciously decided to turn it into an advantage — stylistically and topically. Krassimir Krumov, one of the younger generation directors, argued this point in an article suggestively entitled *To Learn How To Be Marginal*.66

No matter how strong the ties of the imagined communities of the particular Balkan nationalities may be, the Balkans as a whole still share little feeling of togetherness. The culture of each Balkan country stands alone, and the artistic exchange among the nations in the region — Bulgaria, Romania, Bosnia, Greece, Serbia, Turkey, Albania, and Macedonia — is just beginning to intensify. This is probably due to language barriers, or to long-standing subtle hostilities. And yet, even though the cultures of these countries stand on their own, the cultural products themselves speak of a very similar mentality and carry shared thematic and stylistic features. The problems of many of these countries are the same — the burden of traditionalism and patriarchy, the legacy of communist regimes, the volatility of the post-communist reality — and they are tackled in a similar manner in the new cinema of the Balkans. The similarities are increasingly recognized and turned into an argument in favor of a growing closeness. An integrative process is taking place, clearly visible in the fact that throughout the 1990s films coming from the Balkan region have been attracting the attention of international cinema audiences as never before.68 There is a growing interest to Bulgarian cinema as well — as an intricate part of the Balkan one.

Balkan co-operation in the field of cinema is showing results already, and the position of Bulgarian filmmaking within the larger context of Balkan cinema is becoming clearly recognizable. Numerous recent examples speak of mutual recognition and of resolute assertion of a shared Balkan cultural space, and a series of co-productions involving various Balkan countries have come into being to confirm this coming together. These include films such as *The Slaughter of the Cock* (Greece/Cyprus/Bulgaria/Italy, Andreas Pantzis, 1996), *Urnebesna Tragedija/ Burlesque*
Tragedy (France/Serbia/Bulgaria, Goran Markovic, 1995), and Balkanizateur (Greece/Bulgaria/Switzerland, Sotiris Goritsas, 1997). The newly established Balkan film board is bringing more filmmakers together for forthcoming projects, the film festival at Thessaloniki specializes in showcasing Balkan cinema, Balkan film programs are a regular feature at the film festivals in Istanbul and Bitolya, and the Balkan Media magazine which is published in Sofia regularly reviews and compares the cinematic output of all Balkan countries. It may well be that Bulgarian cinema will make this new conceptual realm of Balkan cinema its home for the years to come.
Notes:


2. Only three newer Bulgarian films are in distribution on video in America — Az, grafînîyata (I, the Countess, 1989) from International Film Circuit, and Byj Ganyo trugva po Evropa (Bay Ganyo Goes To Europe, 1992) from Artistic Creations, and The Canary Season from Movies Unlimited. Occasionally new Bulgarian films appear at international festivals, but in general Bulgarian participation at the international cinema scene has been rare, and at international film markets — non-existent.


7. Airing on TV may not bring the expected royalties to filmmakers, but is still the only way to reach audiences of somewhat more than thirty, although Bulgarian films are usually shown past prime time on the second national TV channel. Plans were recently announced for the privatization of the Second Channel, which may bring to an end the non-profitable undertaking of airing Bulgarian films. “Bulgaria to Privatize National TV Channel.” RFE/RL Newsline. 18 August 1997.
8. Information on these and other aspects of the work of Boyanafilm can be found on their web-site at http://www.boyanafilm.bg


12. In a drive to attract more foreign filmmakers, in 1994 the National Film Center published a guide that includes information on locations, facilities, costumes, services and professionals for hire (Bulgaria: Shooting Guide. Bulgarian National Film Center. Sofia, 1995). Even if Sofia has not become as popular a shooting site as Prague, it nonetheless has managed to attract a number of international co-productions. The king of B-movies, Roger Corman and uses the Boyana Studios occasionally to shoot films such as Dracula Raising (USA, 1993, Fred Gallo) which stars a Bulgarian actor in the role of Vlad the Impaler and uses Bulgarian post-production staff and technicians. Crisis in the Kremlin (USA, 1992, dir. Jonathan Winfrey), an HBO production was shot in Sofia which was supposed to represent the capital of Lithuania, Vilnius. More movies are either in production or about to be shot on location in Bulgaria by foreign directors such as Italian Francesco Rosi, British Tony Palmer, Serbian Goran Markovic, French Alain Naoum, Israeli Menahem Golan, and Russian Vasily Livanov. The project that achieved the most publicity, however, was the gigantic set for the 1995 Cannes winner, Emir Kusturica's Underground, built in Plovdiv by Chaplain Films: a production that created temporary jobs for many unemployed workers at the city’s bankrupt plant for metal constructions. In the summer of 1998 Greek Cypriot Michael Cacoyannis filmed scenes
for *Varya*, an Onassis Foundation produced adaptation of Chekhov’s *Cherry Orchard* with English actors Alan Bates, Catherine Cartlidge in downtown Sofia. French Regis Varnier filmed here parts of *East-West* with Catherine Deneuve in the fall of 1998.

13. The reform of the industry started with the March 1991 closing of TSO Bulgarian Cinema which was directly funded from the state budget. In June 1991 a National Film Center was created as an alternative to centralized film production, although their funding still came from the state budget. In October the NFC adopted by-laws and regulations for producers, that were updated in 1994. For the period since its creation the seven-member expert commission of the Center has voted funding for more than 30 feature films, but only about half of these have been completed. In 1994 the total allocated to film projects was 54 million leva (less than a million $ U.S.). The 1995 budget for cinema was 80 million leva, and the average subsidy for a movie — 10-15 million leva (*Kultura*, 28 April, 1995). In late 1996 the average cost of a movie was estimated at fifty-two million leva, but this estimate could not have been relied on in a situation of soaring inflation. The original intentions were that roughly 75% of the subsidies that NFC awards will go to features, 13% to documentaries, and 12% to animated features. In animation the subsidy was supposed to cover around 75% of the production costs, and in documentaries around 55%. In feature film, however, the subsidy was only to provide for around 40% of the production needs (*Bulgarian Cinema*. Information Bulletin of the National Film Center, December 1992). Furthermore, the subsidy comes in leva whereas all costs are calculated in dollars, without taking into account the inflation rate. To the date the filming starts the subsidy depreciates, and the ability of producers to find matching funds turns of vital importance (*Kino* 1/1995).

14. As the role of the producer is growing in importance, many directors have also become producers (e.g. Plamen Maslarov, Ivan Nichev, Petar Popzlatev, Andrei Slabakov). Filmmakers realized that they have yet to learn the basics of fund-raising in their search for moneys, mostly from abroad. According to some, it is too early to speak
of really independent producers since out of over a hundred registered ones only about ten are really active (Carol Williams, “Bulgaria’s Cinema Struggles Toward a Comeback.” *Los Angeles Times.* (15 March, 1994: World report, 4). Yet, producer Pavel Vasev managed to secure international funds for several of his projects, which led to his election for president of the Union of Bulgarian Filmmakers in 1996. Director Petar Popzlatev claimed that the East European cinemas cannot attain the interest of Western viewers because they keep replaying the topics of existential fear and uncertainty of the recent past and do not come up with new subjects (Petar Popzlatev, An Interview. *Kino* 1/ 1995). He chose to turn producer, and worked on several Bulgarian-French co-productions. Director Ivan Nichev and his wife also turned producers for the Bulgarian-Italian co-production of *Love Dreams*. One of the most active companies is *Chaplain films*, a private enterprise of young producer Krum Chapkanov.

15. This is a tendency that applies not only to Bulgaria, and which has been analyzed Europe-wide by in Martin Dale’s *The Movie Game. The Film Business in Britain, Europe and America*, London: Cassell, 1997. Bulgaria joined Eurimage in early 1993 and a substantial dependency on this pan-European subsidy body is gradually becoming apparent (“Eurimages looks to the East with Europe.” *Screen Finance*. April 21, 1993). One of the eligibility requirements in Eurimage’s guidelines is that proposed films should reflect the pan-European interaction and integration which in its turn leads to some very curious twists that scriptwriters and directors resort to in adjusting their work to fit into the standards. A most obvious example is *The Black Swallow*, which depicts the highly unlikely presence of an adolescent Frenchman recovering at a Bulgarian hospital who falls in love with the protagonist, a vibrant Gypsy girl!

16. Those who feel affected by the restructuring, however, have not stayed silent. In a series of four publications in the newspaper *Bulgarski Pisatel*, Lyubka Zakharieva alleged a conspiracy aiming the deliberate destruction of the Bulgarian cinema (*L*[bka Zaxarieva, *Koj sasipa bulgarskoto kino* *Bulgarski Pisatel*. April 10-17, April 18-25,
April 25- May 2, and 2-8 May, 1995). She described a landscape of total devastation: a drastic drop in the number of movies produced and in the number of cinema theaters and spectators, a several hundred percent increase in ticket prices, no sales of films to foreign countries, problems with copyrights, financial abuses, and so on. Zakharieva questioned the methods and mechanisms of awarding subsidies and alleged that the ones responsible for the crisis in cinema industries were the new players close to the powers-that-be. Her allegations were reprinted by the popular weekly *168 Chasa*, thus reaching wide audiences. The weekly *Kultura* got involved in the conflict, opposing Zakharieva’s allegations mostly because her criticism seemed to call for restoration of the old communist-time system approach to cultural administration (Genoveva Dimitrova, ‘Mislete za nego kato za han. Za kogo e neudobna reformata v kinoto?’, *Kultura*, 28 April, 1995). Independent of this controversy, film critic Lyuba Kulezich scrutinized the die-hard habit of secured government funding for some and criticized the poor performance of movies that were funded preferentially (Lyuba Kulezich, ‘Na bulgarskoto kino obuvkata mu stiska, no to vse oshte varvi’, *Trud*, 10 January, 1994).


18. Kroner is best known for his role in award winning *Shop on Main Street*, 1965, dir. Elmar Klos and Jan Kadár. In 1995, the film was given a special award as best film for the period 1989 — 1994.

19. The creators of the film, young screenwriter Lyuben Dilov Jr. and director Nidal Algafari, are well known in Bulgaria for their involvement with the most popular TV show *Canaleto (Kanaleto)*, thus quite naturally their film attracted somewhat wider audiences.
20. Director Eduard Zakhariev died shortly after the completion of the shoot and before entering post-production. In spite the difficult circumstance, *Belated Full Moon* was completed by the members of the team and was released in time to be shown at the festival of Bulgarian film in 1996 where it got the main prize. It also played at the festival in Thessaloniki, and was acclaimed at the special Balkan series which the Toronto International Film Festival organized in September 1997.

21. Itzhak Fintzi, who is mostly a theater actor, has also played in some international productions. A role that deserves mentioning is the one of Hungarian naivist painter Csontvari (*Csontvary*, Hungary, 1979, dir. Zoltán Huszárik).

22. The film critic's verdict was that the film was insufficiently realistic (Alexander Staykov, “‘La donna e mobil’: Modelut i realizacyata.” *Kino*, 2/1994: 23-25). The humanistic message of the film — to call attention to the weaker ones, plain and straightforward by itself, was additionally watered down by too many subplots.


24. For a discussion on Leni Riefenstahl’s case see the lengthy discussion in Roy Müller’s documentary *The Horrible Wonderful Life of Leni Riefenstahl*. (Germany, 1993). For a discussion of Kusturica’s see Iordanova, Dina. “Kusturica’s Underground: Historical Allegory or Propaganda.” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and TV*. 19:1 (March 1999)

25. Nonetheless, *Time of Violence* remains very popular among the wider film audiences, which was confirmed by the success of its 1995 TV showing.

26. Pomaks are ethnic Slavs who are Muslim by faith, whereas the majority of ethnic Bulgarians confess Orthodox Christianity. Pomaks are members of a group that converted the Islam during the years of Ottoman rule in Bulgaria.

27. The nationalist critics claimed that repenting was not the right thing to do. If Bulgaria was to repent, Milena Boycheva asserted that Turkey must first come up with works of
are that show repentance for its 500 years worth of oppressive rule in the country [Milena Bojheva, ‘Ogunche, podhvarleno v senoto’, Bulgarski Pisatel. 6-13 mart, 1995. str. 1 - 4].

From the provinces, the reactions against the film spread to the capital as well. The chair of the Parliamentary security commission Nikolai Dobrev had reportedly said that the movie posed a threat to national security. (Petya Georgieva, ‘Film vzrivi Rodopite.’ 24 Chasa. 17 February 1995. p. 21). Socialist deputy Klara Marinova, then Chair of the Parliamentary media commission, took a stance against the film as well (Teodora Enheva, ‘Socdeputatka narehe prezidenta … ‘, Standart. 27 February. 1995. p. 2.). According to other critics, while many movies focus on the problems of the minorities the problems of the majority of ethnic Bulgarians remain ignored (Valentin Xad’iev, ‘S Mugla politicite ni pak se pravyat na delikatni.’ 24 Chasa. 17 February, 1995. p. 21).

The President Zhelyo Zhelev engaged in the debate about the film and defended it (Petq Aleksandrova, ‘Dr. Zhelev obvini BNT v gruba cenzura’, Standart, February 25, 1995). So did Evgenia Ivanova, an intellectual engaged in a fierce public battle against nationalism. According to her, the scandal around the film was manipulated by nationalist-minded political circles (Evgeniq Ivanova, Intervew, ‘Rana, koyato e zatulena, ne mozh da ozdravee’, Standart. 25 February 1995: 18).

Allegations of a conspiracy followed. Funding for Burn, Burn, Little Flame was provided by Bulgarian TV, NFC, Foundation 13 Centuries Bulgaria, and Open Society - Sofia. The involvement of Open Society, however, became a cause celebre for the nationalist critics who suggested that this organization’s goal is to promote hostile Islamic interests in the Orthodox Balkans. They pointed out that in Macedonia it was Open Society again that financed the creation of the controversial Albanian language University in Tetovo, which was supposed to prove the conspiracy allegations. The activities of the foundation were compared to a growing cancer. In April 1995 the Bulgarian parliament withdrew its financial commitment to Open Society (same was
done in June by the Serbs), and during a May 1995 visit of George Soros in Bulgaria the media were openly speculating about Soros's attempts to interfere with the internal affairs of the country.


30. The first part of Measure for Measure featured a famous incident of the kidnapping of a female English missionary at the beginning of the century by the IMRO. The same incident is the topic of another classical film, the Macedonian production Miss Stone (Yugoslavia, 1958, dir. Zika Mitrovic).

31. This neglect of religion was probably due to the fact that the novel Time of Parting was originally published in 1966 — a time when explorations of religion were not admissible in socialist literature.

32. Very similar stylistic devices are deployed in the 1989 TV Belgrade production The Battle of Kosovo, featuring the clash between Islam and Orthodoxy at Kosovo polje in 1389.

33. Throughout the film one can see a number of Christian services and hear many prayers. In the novel the name of Christ is mentioned for a first time only on p. 339, and a church appears on p. 362.


35. In Burn, Burn, Little Flame a peasant is shown building a shrine with a cross and a crescent on the roof. Ethnographers and cultural historians in today’s Bulgaria are preoccupied with discovering and promoting sites where both Christians and Muslims pray, which they call places of “utilitarian sacrality.” An example is the popular shrine Krastova Gora in the Rhodopi (See for example Evgeniya Ivanova, ‘Rana, koyato e zatulena, ne mozhe da ozdravee’. Standart. 25 February 1995: 18). At the same time, in March 1995 Bulgarian national TV cancelled a scheduled documentary featuring a shared
worship of Christian and Muslims in an ancient Thracian shrine since it was feared that it may deepen the conflict which had unravelled around *Burn, Burn, Little Flame*.


37. In another one of his films, the 1984 *Posledni zhelanya (Last Wishes)*, Vulchanov chooses to place *Europe* and the Balkans face to face. The film opens with scenes of clashes of soldiers on the battlefields of the First World war. A cease-fire is announced, and European dignitaries appear in glamorous attire on the battlefield. It becomes clear that a short-term truce has been negotiated to allow for the annual golf match of the European excellencies to take place. Further in the film Balkan terrorists clash with the European aristocrats, and even argue over politics. *Last Wishes*, however, is an exception to the general conceptualization of Europe in Balkan filmmaking where the encounter is rarely face to face, but rather occurs as a conceptual relationship.

38. Negative depictions of “blue helmets” can also be found in recent productions from former Yugoslavia — *Before the Rain* (1994), *Underground* (1995), *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* (1996). Alienation from the West is also commented upon in *Belated Full Moon*.

39. Bay Ganyo is such a popular character that one of the chapters in Ron Holloway’s 1986 book on Bulgarian cinema is entitled *Bay Ganyo Country* (pp. 76- 81). *Bay Ganyo* was one of the first film productions in Bulgarian cinema -- its earliest screen adaptation is from 1922.

   In his personal life Aleko Konstantinov, the creator of Bay Ganyo, has been perceived as an embodiment of European-style education and enlightenment and as a representative of the exact opposite of everything that Bay Ganyo stands for. In 1895, Konstantinov fell victim of a political assassination. In Bulgarian national memory, Konstantinov’s tragic end has been perceived as symbolizing the alienation between the intelligentsia and the masses resulting in the destruction of the intelligentsia by the likes
of Bay Ganyo. In a wider context, the topic of the barbarian destroying the enlightened one has often preoccupied Bulgarian writers and filmmakers. In 1996 established screenwriter Georgi Mishev and director Ivan Andonov applied to the funding body for Bulgarian cinema with a script entitled *Aleko, Aleko...*, dealing with the faith of writer Aleko Konstantinov and its relations with the famous literary personage. They were not successful in securing a subsidy, however.

40. Kaloyanchev had played Bay Ganyo for years in a stage role at the *Satiric theater* in Sofia.

41. “BG” can be taken as the abbreviation of the initials of the Bay Ganyo, but it is also the abbreviation appearing on the stickers for Bulgarian cars travelling abroad.

42. ““BG.” Incredible stories about a contemporary Bulgarian.” An interview with George Dyulgerov and Svetoslav Ovcharov. *Kino* 2/1997 : 7-11.


45. *The Canary Season* was made almost entirely with state funding, and was the official Bulgarian entry to the Academy Awards in 1993. The special treatment of this film project was due to the special reputation of its director — Evgeny Mikhailov, who was responsible for the notorious 1990 footage that led to the resignation of the last communist PM, Petar Mladenov. Under the government of UDF Mikhailov enjoyed the privileged status of an “active fighter against communism.”


47. Whereas for a foreign viewer the stunning landscapes in the film would seem new, for anybody who is familiar with Bulgarian cinema the film looks like one continuous *deja vu*. In *Day of Forgiveness*, director Spassov uses shooting locations which he has filmed as a cameraman for earlier films -- sites like the picturesque village of
Kovatchevitsa (where Spassov shot many films, mostly with Rangel Vulchanov), or like winding mountain paths (as if taken from director’s George Dyulgerov’s Measure for Measure), or the shining eyes in the cave first seen in Time of Violence, (directed by Lyudmil Staikov).

48. Waste is indebted to Tarkovsky’s film vocabulary, making it difficult to watch it without referencing familiar images from The Mirror, Sacrifice, Nostalghia, or Stalker.

49. The search for an authoritative fatherly figure is characteristic also for Day of Forgiveness and Waste. Remotely reminiscent of Szabó’s 1966 Father, Kiran Kolarov’s I Want America tells the story of a film director returning to his native place in order to shoot a film about his father who perished in the resistance. In the course of his investigation he realizes that the myths he has grown up with no longer hold for him, and gives up the project altogether. A complex relationship between father and son is explored also in Krassimir Spassov’s Oh, Lord, Where Are You.

50. The latest project of Ivan Cherkelov is the story of two friends who get involved in the fight of rival business groups in post-communist Bulgaria and end up in a confrontation. The topic of problematic male bonding preoccupies the minds of more Bulgarian filmmakers. Explored in Golgotha (M. Pandurski) and Something in the Air (P. Popzlatev), it is also in the center of forthcoming Izlishni tipove (Expendable Guys) of director Anry Kulev telling the story of two friends. Their life paths diverge to intersect ten years later bringing them back together, this time as enemies.


52. Besides being hailed as one of the most sophisticated poets in Bulgarian literature, Konstantin Pavlov has an extensive screen writing record with poetic films which includes A Memoir of the Twin Sister (Spomen za bliznachkata, 1982, dir. Lyubomir Sharlandzhiev), Iron Ferri (Feri Zhelezniyatt, 1982), Illusion (Hyuziya, 1983), Hear the
Rooster (Chuy petela, 1985), White Magic (Byala magiya, 1982, dir. Ivan Andonov) and Evil Memory (Zla pamet, 1988).


56. In the 1990s director George Stoyanov also lived an active life in cultural administration. In the early 1990s he was president of the Union of Bulgarian Filmmakers, then became deputy minister for culture, and subsequently — a minister in the socialist cabinet of Zhan Videnov. In 1996-1997 he was a short-lived Bulgarian cultural attaché in Washington, D.C., replacing another filmier, screenwriter and documentarian Boyan Papazov who had served in that capacity in 1993-1996.


66. Krassimir Krumov, “To Learn How to Be Marginal.” An interview. *Kino* 2/1997: 3-6. "I myself am learning how to behave in a marginal way, I am doing my best to get used to it."; “We have to get used to the idea that everything is marginal. Today there is no center from where it all originates, but rather various cultures that occupy a shared universe."

68. See my discussion on these in Dina Iordanova, “Conceptualizing the Balkans in Film.” *Slavic Review.* Winter 1996.