

Binka Zhelyazkova

Bulgarian filmmaker, 1923 - 2011.



Привързаният балон/ The Attached Balloon, 1967

Along with Czech feminist director Věra Chytilová (1929-2014), Zhelyazkova is a pioneer of women-made cinema in Eastern Europe yet her work remains little seen and known.

Throughout her high profile career Zhelyazkova enjoyed the reputation of a quasi dissident. Zhelyazkova's first film, *Life Flows Quietly By* (*Животът си тече тихо*, 1958), was disapproved by the board of the Feature Film Studio in Sofia and only released in 1988; her 1967 *The Attached Balloon* (*Привързаният балон*) had an extremely limited release and was shelved. All her other films, however, were not only released but also sent to represent Bulgaria at international festivals, and Zhelyazkova was considered to be one of the main figures of Bulgarian new wave cinema, along with Rangel Vulchanov and Vulo Radev. She was probably

the best decorated female filmmaker in communist Bulgaria — in 1962, after winning the gold prize at the Moscow Film Festival for *We Were Young* (*А бяхме млади*, 1961), she was awarded the prestigious Bulgarian state prize “Dimitrov.” In 1974 she received the title “merited artist,” and a decade later the highest possible title, “people’s artist” (1984).

This is not to suggest that Binka Zhelyazkova is a conformist filmmaker who, twice affected by censorship, took note and turned into an obedient artist. Things are much more complex — Zhelyazkova, herself idealist communist believer, is a director whose genuine dedication to the communist ideal has at times put her work in full harmony with the official line, and at some other times made her films inconvenient for the powers that be. “Her reputation as a director of integrity, nevertheless, kept her in the forefront of Bulgarian cinema up to the present, a spotlight shared by her scriptwriter husband, Hristo Ganev” (Holloway, p. 64). Ganev, who wrote the scripts for most of Zhelyazkova’s films, is an inseparable part of the wife-and-husband creative tandem. A graduate of Moscow’s VGIK class of 1950, Ganev pursued a leftist intellectual credo and worked on documentaries on socially committed subjects. In the 1970s and 1980s Zhelyazkova, Ganev, writer Yordan Raditchkov (who wrote the script for *The Attached Balloon*), and some others, formed a loosely associated group of Bulgarian critical intelligentsia in a country which did not have outspoken political dissidents. They were all members of the communist party, often occupying well paid sinecures and involved in personal friendships with communist dignitaries, but were nevertheless considered to be dissidents, mostly based on their commitment to preserving independence of judgment, moral integrity, and disapproval of corruption and favoritism.

Zhelyazkova herself had been associated with the communist movement as of early on and had been an active participant in the anti-fascist movement during the World War II. She graduated in 1953 from VITIZ in Sofia and started as an assistant to Anton Marinovich for his film *Adam’s Rib* (*Ребро Адамово*, 1956).



In 1957/8, Zhelyazkova made her directing debut with *Life Quietly Flows By...* from a screenplay written by Ganev. The film tells the story of a former member of the anti-fascist resistance, who now, ten years later, is corrupted by privilege and power, and is near the verge of giving up his sound moral judgment. The protagonist, Zhelyo, has abused his power and has suppressed critical voices, has then gradually grown estranged from his comrades and spends time drinking with decadent bourgeois elements. In the course of the film, he is reproached by his comrades, and after an attempted suicide he profoundly reevaluates his position and comes to taking decisions appropriate for a real communist, who is supposed to be a morally superior human being.

The board of the Feature Film Studios in Sofia, working under the close supervision of officials in the Ministry of Culture and Politburo of the ruling Communist Party, did not grant the film the approval needed for its release. *Life Quietly Flows By...* did not stand up to the rigid conventions of socialist realism. Rather than a positive hero it featured a weak and controversial character, hinting of moral instability and corruption amidst highly placed members of nomenclatura.

The hold on *Life Flows Quietly By...* did not seem to have had much repercussion and Zhelyazkova was soon given another chance to direct. In 1961 she released her second feature, the anti-fascist drama *We Were Young*, again written by Ganev. The film, which explored the high moral standards and self-sacrifice of participants in the anti-fascist struggle, brought international and national recognition for the director and facilitated the approval for her next film project, *The Attached Balloon* (1967), a rarely seen masterpiece of Bulgarian new wave. Unlike the straightforward message of *We Were Young*, *The Attached Balloon* was deemed too cryptic (and thus carrying the potential to be read in unpredictable and uncontrollable ways) and was shelved shortly after its release. Packed with absurdist humor and featuring an all-star cast of Bulgarian comedians, the film is a parable in which the appearance of a drifting barrage balloon during World War II touches off a whole range of reactions and emotions within the little universe of a god-forsaken mountain village. The absurdity of the balloon chase that follows gives ample opportunity for self-examination and insights into the peculiar features deemed to constitute the Balkan social character.

Zhelyazkova's next project, *The Last Word* (*Последната дума*, 1973), continued daringly experimenting with the film form. Highly abstract and visually unconventional, *The Last Word* had the potential to follow in the footsteps of *The Attached Balloon* and to be shelved as well. This danger was circumvented cleverly, however, as the film was a loose adaptation of the autobiography of anti-fascist fighter Tsola Dragoycheva, who was, at the time of production, the highest placed female communist official in the country. Featuring an all-female cast, the film follows a group of women-prisoners during the anti-fascist resistance. *The Last Word* is a work of feminist filmmaking and remains one of the masterpieces of Bulgarian poetic cinema.

In the 1980s Zhelyazkova grew preoccupied with the moral problems of the younger generation. In the center of her attention was the gap between the younger consumerist-oriented generation and the aging group of devoted idealist communists, to which Zhelyazkova herself belonged. Three films — *The Swimming Pool* (*Басейнът*), *The Big Night Bathe* (*Голямото*

нощно къпане), and *Nighttime on the Roofs* (*Нощем по покривите*)— were scripted by Ganev and were well received, but had little impact. In the 1980s Zhelyazkova also worked in documentaries. In the 1990s, in spite of difficulties in obtaining funding due to an overall economic crisis, she managed to release two impressive socially committed documentaries tackling the problems of female prisoners.

The case with the two censored films by Binka Zhelyazkova well illustrates the main paradox of communist censorship in cinema — rather than prevent films from being made, the communist state would often commit the funds that could have easily been withheld, and then decide to shelve the final product. Under the economic logic of capitalism such waste of funds would not be allowable and these films would never be made in the first place, let alone be censored.

Zhelyazkova passed away in 2011 after a prolonged illness. Bulgarian diasporic director Elka Nikolova made a documentary about her in 2007 which remains the most focused and sustained exploration of the director's oeuvre.

Bulgarian film historian Neda Stanimirova dedicated extended sections of her 2012 monograph *The Cinematic Process -- Temporarily Frozen: Bulgarian Feature Films 1950-1970 in documents, memoirs, analyses* to casting detailed light on the censorship discussions that had evolved not only around *Life Flows Quietly By* and *The Attached Balloon*, but also around *We Were Young* and other of Zhelyazkova's films. In the preface to the book, Stanimirova explains that her manuscript was already completed in 1989. However, she decided to hold on to it until a more suitable time came to make it public. The book is an extremely rich exploration of the workings of censorship from the early Cold War period, mainly in the 1950s and 1960s. It is a transnationally positioned text that references not only Bulgarian players but also Soviet and European figureheads who had a say in the process. In

the introduction the author also talks at length about the difficulties in deciding if she were to reveal the names of the participants in the censors' discussions, the minutes of which she is analysing, or not. She decided in favour of revealing the names. It takes enormous bravery for such decision, in the context of a small country where everyone knows everybody else.

More recently, numerous excerpts of Zhelyazkova's work were used in different segments of Mark Cousins' 14 hour-long analytical film *Women Make Film* (2018). This gave her work much wider exposure, and, as a result, there is growing interest in Zhelyazkova's work. There is significant likelihood that some of the leading restorers of films would engage with rediscovering her work and bringing it to global audiences.

In 2020, documentarian Adela Peeva released *Silence With Dignity* (*Мълчание с достойнство*), another brave film that chronicles the censorship ordeal of directors Irina Aktasheva and Hristo Piskov, probably the most heavily censored couple in the history of Bulgarian cinema. The film also contained references to the oeuvre of Binka Zhelyazkova and Hristo Ganev, who had maintained friendship with Aktasheva and Piskov over the years.

In March 2021 the Sofia International Film Festival featured a special screening of *The Attached Balloon*.

Films by Zhelyazkova

Life Flows Quietly By (*Животът си тече тихо*). 1958/1988. Feature Films Studios — Sofia. Written by Hristo Ganev. 120 min.

And We Were Young (*A byahme mladi*). 1961. Feature Films Studios — Sofia. Written by Hristo Ganev. 110 min.

The Attached Balloon (Привързаният балон). 1967. Feature Films Studios — Sofia. Written by Yordan Raditchkov. 105 min.

The Last Word (Последната дума). 1973. Written by B. Zhelyazkova. Feature Film Studios — Sofia. 85 min.

The Swimming Pool (Басейнът). 1977. Written by Hr. Ganev. Feature Film Studios Boyana. 145 min.

The Big Night Bathe (Голямото нощно къпане). 1980. Written by Hristo Ganev. Feature Film Studios Boyana. 152 min.

Nighttime on the Roofs (Нощем по покривите). 1988. BTV. Written by Hristo Ganev.

Face/Off (Лице и опак). 1992. Documentary.

Lullaby (Нани-на). 1992. Documentary

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“Binka Zhelyazkova’s Digitally Restored *The Tied Up Balloon* with Premiere at the 25th SIFF.” *TransMedium News*, 14 March 2021. Available: <https://transmedium.news/binka-zhelyazkovas-digitally-restored-the-tied-up-balloon-with-premiere-at-the-25th-siff/> (Accessed 31 March 2021).

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Станимирова, Неда. *Кинопроцесът – „Замразен временно“: Български игрални филми 1950-1970, в документи, спомени, анализи*. София: Логис, 2012. *Животът си тече тихо*, стр. 93-135, *А бяхме млади* 180-190. *Привързаният балон*, стр. 241-256.