

**LADIES' CHOICE: WOMEN IN NEW BULGARIAN CINEMA**

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In the fall of 2008, I was invited by Slobodan Sijan, a great Serbian director and now one of the people on the board of the Belgrade International Film Festival, FEST, to take part in a round table on female filmmakers from the Balkan region. This was to be put together and moderated by veteran Ron Holloway. Part of the project included the compilation of a comprehensive listing of our 'subject of study' – female directors from across the Balkans. The participants of the round table entered lively exchanges with one another through November, December and January, and the list came together as a result of a collective effort.<sup>1</sup>

On the day of my arrival in Belgrade in February 2009, Ron Holloway told me of the press conference he had attended earlier in the day to present our list to journalists. He had been asked why there was such a staggering number – seventeen – of Bulgarian female directors on that list. After all, there were only a few names each for the other countries like Serbia, Croatia or Bosnia. Seventeen female filmmakers from Bulgaria appeared somewhat too many. This large number – Holloway had responded – was probably due to the fact that Dina Iordanova, one of the people compiling the list, was Bulgarian.

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<sup>1</sup> See the list posted at my blog, *DinaView* (<http://www.dinaview.com/?p=923>). Also see Ronald Holloway's report on the event at *Moving Pictures Magazine*, 24 February 2009 (<http://ron.movingpicturesmagazine.com/blog/default.aspx?id=92&t=SEE-Women-Film-Directors-at-Belgrade-FES>). Ronald Holloway is the author of an authoritative study of Bulgarian cinema from the 1980s: *The Bulgarian Cinema*, Rutherford, N.J. : Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986.

Was this the case, however? Had I, indeed, pushed through with a disproportionate number of Bulgarian names while neglecting others? The list, which was a work in progress and constantly expanded, contained the names of one female director from Albania, Montenegro, two each from Kosovo, Slovenia and Macedonia, four from Croatia, seven from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. That there were only three female filmmakers listed from Turkey, five from Romania and six from Greece – clearly far from complete – could probably be explained away with the fact that no one in our group specialised particularly in these countries. However, our colleagues from former Yugoslavia could have added further names to the list at any time. Yet it did not happen. And even if it had happened, quite a few more names would have need to be added to reach the figure of seventeen. So, the fact of my Bulgarian origins only partially explains the seventeen Bulgarian female directors' names on the list. If there were comparable numbers of female filmmakers in any of the former Yugoslav republics, they could have easily been added to the list by the local participants, who allegedly would be as knowledgeable as I were about Bulgaria. There must have been something more than a desire to have one's compatriots listed in my production of these seventeen names, especially as I do not think of myself as a special chauvinist of the cause of Bulgarian cinema.

Still, already later that same day, I heard myself making repeated praising references to the work of remarkable feminist director Binka Zhelyazkova, documentarian Nevena Tosheva, one of the first filmmakers in history to venture into making films about female prisoners, and prolific director of photography Svetla Ganeva, while talking to Silke Johanna Rübiger of the women's film festival in Dortmund/Cologne. No wonder, a specialist who had spent twenty years of her life promoting female cinema, she did not know of any of them. It was not a particular surprise to me; I am used to encountering the same 'blank' reaction when mentioning the achievements of Bulgarian cinema. It is more or

less up to people like me to correcting the record and bringing these achievements to the attention of a wider public.



Binka Zhelyazkova (1923-2011)

Yet, the occurrence with the list of multiple Bulgarian female directors in Belgrade, was an eye-opening experience. I knew for certain that these seventeen names had ended up on the list not because of my alleged chauvinism. I had listed them because these female directors existed, had done work that was seen and known, and that, most importantly, had enjoyed visible public presence in the country as well as internationally. Could it be that Bulgaria was, in some respect, somewhat different from the general perception that the Balkans was a place of limited opportunities for women? As a Bulgarian growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, I certainly had never felt constrained in my interests and professional choice. So could it be that Bulgaria was worth studying as a case study of female creativity in cinema?

It most certainly appeared so now, when I was intentionally looking back, provided the country had produced a remarkable feminist director like Binka Zhelyazkova (1923 -

2011), who, unlike her Central European counterparts Vera Chytilová (Czech) or Mártha Mészáros (Hungarian), remains internationally unknown in spite the acclaim and the awards that her films have fetched over the years and whose work is still to be rediscovered, re-distributed, properly assessed and re-integrated in the annals of film history.<sup>2</sup>

So, I decided to focus this study on women. Rather than a general survey of recent film, I thought I would present the same material through a different prism: women in Bulgarian cinema.<sup>3</sup> After all, even if the scrutiny had been only on female filmmaking, with such a significant number of female directors working in the context of this national tradition, the main industrial, aesthetic, and thematic trends that a survey would reveal would still come across. Other studies covered predominantly the work of male directors in Bulgaria – this was the case, for example, with the four Bulgarian films selected for inclusion in the anthology on *Cinema of the Balkans* that I edited a few years ago<sup>4</sup> – and the complete absence of women did not seem to ever become an issue. So I thought this time around we could focus on the women, for a change.

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<sup>2</sup> While I intend to focus this text on more recent developments, this is the place to mention Binka Zhelyazkova's classics such as *Privarzaniyat balon/The Attached Balloon* (1967) and *Poslednata дума/The Last Word* (1973). Forthcoming work from scholar Lilla Töke explores the work of the director, and her oeuvre is also featured in Bulgarian-American Elka Nikolova's documentary *Binka* (2007; see the site for the film at <http://www.binkadoc.com/The%20Film.htm>).

<sup>3</sup> A more comprehensive survey of Bulgarian cinema since 1989 is found in my monograph *New Bulgarian Cinema* (College Gate, 2008). For a discussion of the situation with Bulgaria's film industry since 1989, see my chapter in *The Cinema of Small Nations* (eds. Duncan Petrie and Mette Hjort, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, pp. 122-137). Also see the special issue of *Kinokultura* on recent Bulgarian cinema that I edited in 2006. Special Issue 5: December 2006. ISSN 1478-6567. Available: <http://www.kinokultura.com/specials/5/bulgarian.shtml>.

<sup>4</sup> The Bulgarian films selected for this volume included *Kradetsat na praskovi/ Peach Thief* (Valo Radev, 1964), *Koziyat rog/Goat's Horn* (Methody Andonov, 1972), *Lachenite obuvki na neznayniya voin/Patent Leather Shoes of the Unknown Soldier* (Rangel Vulchanov, 1979) and *Mera spored mera/Measure for Measure* (George Dyulgerov, 1981).

Certainly, there were not only the film directors that marked the contribution of Bulgarian women to the arts. Many other women need to be mentioned here. An improvised listing will probably not manage to include all deserving names, but I would still like to include important cultural figures from different generations, such as writers Dora Gabe, Elisaveta Bagryana, Fani Popova-Mutafova, Blaga Dimitrova, Vera Mutafchieva, Sevda Sevan, Lilyana Stefanova, Liana Daskalova, Vessela Lyutzkanova, Rada Moskova, Teodora Dimova, Fedya Filkova, Miryana Basheva, Petya Dubarova, Mirela Ivanova, Sylvia Choleva, or theatre directors Yulia Ognyanova, Margarita Mladenova, and Vazkresiya Viharova. In the realm of cinema, a number of female writers were active in producing screenplays (e.g. Svoboda Buchvarova, Lilyana Mikhailova, Malina Tomova) whereas others acted mostly as screenwriters (Nevelina Popova, Valentina Radinska, Neri Terzieva), while film scholar Vera Naydenova enjoyed a robust media presence. Remarkably, at least two highly professional Bulgarian camera-women worked here, a rare breed in what is still a male-dominated profession at large. Svetla Ganeva (b. 1951) has over thirty titles to her credit, of which about fifteen are full-length feature films. Her main commitment to the tradition of women's filmmaking is revealed in the enduring collaboration with feminist director Roumyana Petkova for whom she shot important features over a period of more than twenty years (1982-2004).<sup>5</sup> Eli M. Yonova (b. 1953), yet another director of photography, made a name for herself as a competent camerawoman with several features.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The daughter of feminist director Binka Zhelyazkova and screenwriter Hristo Ganev, Svetla Ganeva studied camerawork at Moscow's VGIK and begun work in 1980, adding titles to her filmography at the pace of about one a year. The difficulties of the post-communist period do not seem to have brought slowdown in the oeuvre of this respected and competent professional, who has managed to expand her work throughout the 1990s and 2000s, at a time when many directors would claim the downturn was affecting them adversely.

<sup>6</sup> Known for her work on *Dom za nezhni dushi/ Home for Tender Souls* (1981) and *Sezonat na kanarchetata/Canari season* (1994), she seems to have emigrated to Canada after 2001 where she has worked for television. In the late 1990s Yonova was involved with a hybrid production that had been shot in Italy and is billed as an Italian



R. Petkova, *A Conversation with Birds*, 1997

This is probably the place to mention also those women of Bulgarian descent who are not necessarily known in the country itself, but who work in occupations related to film in the diaspora at large. These include award-winning screenwriter Doriana Leondeff in Italy, documentarian Zlatina Rousseva in Belgium, experimental filmmaker Maria Koleva in France (owner of the intriguing private screenings site *Cinoche* in the heart of Paris), director Christina Andreef in Australia, as well as the popular author Kapka Kassabova, based in Edinburgh, whose autobiographical novel *Nameless Street* is in the process of being turned into a film.

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film, *L'assicurazione* (1998), but is almost entirely made by a crew of Bulgarian émigrés. Later on she worked on the PBS feminist documentary *A Woman's Place* (1998) by Indian-Canadian director Paromita Vohra, a film about domestic abuse of women in the Indian diaspora.

## WOMEN AND MEN IN FILMMAKING

What do I expect to reveal by focusing on the work of women? More or less the same things that are revealed by any standard exploration (only such explorations routinely fail to make proper references to the work of female filmmakers). Industry and generational trends related to the profession are more or less the same, yet provided the women are often more vulnerable to adverse trends that affect funding sources and distribution, the focus on women allows to reveal key aspects of the overall decline in Bulgaria's post-communist cinema, during a period when production numbers for feature films fell drastically from about twenty five to only a few per annum. Aesthetically, there are both achievements and failures; the female films reflect the same tendencies like those made by their male counterparts. Thematically the range is similar, yet there seem to be some spheres that are specifically linked to the work of female filmmakers (who often focus on specific women's concerns, minorities, and hushed histories. Ultimately, I would like to believe that even if focusing on women only, Bulgarian cinema is treated comprehensively in this text.

If one focuses on women-directors retroactively, one discovers that over the decades their position has not differed substantially from the position of male directors. Like their male counterparts, women working in the 1960s and 1970s have had the chance to try themselves in feature film, and, likewise, they have seen some of their films shelved. Binka Zhelyazkova had suffered difficulties with her feature debut *A byahme mladi/And we were Young* (1961); later on, her 'esoteric' *Attached Balloon*, based on Yordan Raditchkov, got an extremely limited release. Likewise, Russian-born Irina Aktasheva saw her film *Pondelnik sutrin/Monday Morning* (1965) shelved; it was released only in 1990. Both women, however, were able to make other films over the years and the censorship they suffered did not affect them permanently, a situation similar to the fate of many other male directors working around the same time.



Binka Zhelyazkova, *The Attached Balloon*, 1967

Female directors who entered the profession in the 1970s had, like their male counterparts, the same level of access to decent funding and were able to make films much more frequently than they could in the post-1989 period, during which the financial downturn affected both men and women. The end of state socialism brought difficult times for the whole industry, so women-directors who happened to be at the height of their active careers during this time, inevitably suffered – precisely like their male counterparts – from the reduced levels of centralized funding, the chaos in the industry, and the identity crisis that came along. Women were able to complete projects much less frequently now, few and far between. Those younger female filmmakers who were set to enter the profession after 1990 had, like their male counterparts, to wait for much longer for their debut features, and managed to release feature debuts only in their late 40s; members of this group are often referred to as ‘lost generation’ of Bulgarian cinema. Most recently, alongside with

promising young male directors, a robust group of active young women is making for a convincing presence in the context of Bulgarian cinema of up to date.

In line with other female filmmakers from across Eastern Europe, most of these women do not consider themselves feminist. High profile directors like Mártha Mészáros or Judith Elek have been outspokenly distancing themselves from ‘feminist’ agenda – yet there have been others, like Hungarian Ildikó Enyedi, who have made clear cut feminist films (*Az én XX. századom /My 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 1989) or Polish Dorota Kedzierzawska who systematically work on female topics.<sup>7</sup> The typical feature of the status of these women is that they openly declare they do not really mind men (evidently, feminism is perceived as equivalent to men-hating). For one, most of these emancipated and highly professional women are married and, in many cases, they work in close collaboration with their partners, as husband-and-wife teams. They live lives of ‘double burden’ (as feminist literature would have it), with responsibilities related to raising children, feeding the family, driving the car, taking care of household chores, and, often, carrying for elderly parents or in-laws. Binka Zhelyazkova, the quintessential feminist author, has always worked in close collaboration with scriptwriting husband Hristo Ganev. Their daughter, prolific director or photography Svetla Ganeva, was married to animator and director Anri Kulev. Veteran Irina Aktasheva, a Soviet citizen, ended up in Bulgaria due to her marriage to director Hristo Piskov (they made films together over several decades). Mariana Evstatieva-Biolcheva is married to a well-known intellectual, academic Boyan Biolchev; Milena Andonova, besides being the daughter of famous theatre and film director Methody Andonov, was married for many years to film director Ivan Cherkelov. Director of photography Eli Yonova made a name for

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<sup>7</sup> I am not aware of what public statements on this same matter have been made by equally high profile female filmmakers from Greece and Turkey, such as Tonia Marketaki (who died in the 1980s) and perceptive young Olga Malea, or acclaimed Yesim Ustaoglu and Pelin Esmer in Turkey.

herself as a competent lenser working on features directed by husband Evgeni Mihailov. In short – if there is a Bulgarian woman in cinema, it is most likely to find another film person nearby, be it in the capacity of a father, brother or, most frequently, spouse. With filmmakers it is more or less along the lines of women working in other professions -- Margarita Mladenova, an acclaimed theatre director, has been running the independent theatre company *Sfumato* along with husband Ivan Dobchev for more than 20 years. Writer Fedya Filkova was married to poet Nikolay Kanchev, poet Mirela Ivanova – to novelist Vladimir Zarev, and so on. Maybe it is a version of feminism that also needs to be acknowledged, where the professional woman is not necessarily at odds with male colleagues. Indeed, if one opts to see patriarchy in this set-up, it would not be difficult to find it. Yet there is also evidence that even in such apparently unfavourable context these women have managed to develop sustained creative record.

There is another aspect of the specific female presence in Bulgarian cinema that merits mention: the important role of male mentors. The person who fits the bill most closely is benevolent and supportive director Georgi Dyulgerov (b. 1943), who is often found to play a special role in the careers of many of the women-filmmakers, especially those from the younger generation, many of whom have been his students, while others have been cast in his films or have acted as assistant directors; for others yet he has acted as a producer.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Dyulgerov's own films made in the post-1989 period focus almost exclusively on complex female characters, often tortured souls like the Gypsy protagonist of *Chernata lyastovitsa/ The Black Swallow* (1997), the female prisoners interviewed in *Hubava si, mila moya/You Are So Pretty, My Dear* (2004), or the trafficked girl from *Leydi Zi/Lady Z* (2005).

## GENERATIONS

Largely speaking, one can distinguish three generations of Bulgarian female filmmakers active today, not counting the members of the venerable oldest generation that include directors such as Binka Zhelyazkova (b. 1923), Irina Aktasheva (1931), or documentarian Nevena Tosheva (b. 1922).

**The older generation** of those still active in filmmaking includes women born around 1940, who entered the profession in the 1970s and completed a variety of state funded projects before 1989; like the men who worked in the same period (Dyulgerov, Plamen Maslarov, Kiran Kolarov), they sometimes took advantage of certain privileges, and sometimes suffered censorship. After the end of communism, they had varying success in securing funding for new projects. For the most part they remained active in making films even if at a significantly retarded pace and, when competing for scarce funds, were occasionally faced with hindrances coming from the newly-found vigorous chauvinism of some of their male counterparts. Directors from this generation include Mariana Evstatieva-Biolcheva (b. 1939), Ivanka Grybcheva (b. 1946),<sup>9</sup> Roumyana Petkova (b. 1948),<sup>10</sup> as well

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<sup>9</sup> Ivanka Grybcheva studied directing at VGIK in Moscow. Coming from a well-positioned communist family – daughter of the veteran partisan, General Mitka Grabcheva, a celebrated heroine of the anti-fascist resistance and one of the few senior women within the leadership of the Communist Party – she had the chance to begin making feature films already at the age of twenty four. In 1984, she directed the TV series *V imeto na naroda/In the Name of the People*, based on her mother's memoirs. Throughout a career, which now spans over four decades, Grybcheva has been committed to making films on contemporary topics and continued working regularly with writers such as Georgi Danailov (responsible for the scripts of her *Hirurzi/Surgeons*, 1977, and *Edna kaloriya nezhnost/One Calorie of Tenderness*, 2003), and Dragomir Assenov (*Nay-tezhkiyat gryah/The Gravest Sin*, 1981).

<sup>10</sup> Petkova studied at VGIK in Moscow, graduating at the age of 25, in 1973. She spent the first decade of her career working as second director of projects of male colleagues like Hritso Hristov or the tandem Irina Aktasheva/Hristo Piskov, and then made her feature debut in 1982 with *Otrazheniya/Reflections*, an outspokenly feminist film about coming of age, starring young actress Jana Karaivanova, written by Nevelina Popova, lensed by Svetla Ganeva and based on the poetry of acclaimed young poet Petya Dubarova (who had committed suicide at the age of seventeen, in 1979). This was followed by *Prizemyavane/Landing* (1987), yet another film that reflects feminist concerns, as well as by the important anti-nationalist TV mini-series *Burn Burn Little Flame* (1994).

as documentarian Adela Peeva (born in 1947, she came to fame later than the others, mostly after 1989).<sup>11</sup> In line with the generally prevailing moral concerns of the cinema of the 1980s, women from this generation, particularly Grybcheva and Petkova, have been committed to making films engaged with specifically female concerns, such as divorce, empty nest, abortion (e.g. Grybcheva's *Eva na tretiya etazh/ Eve of the Third Floor Ward*, 1987, based on the novel by Darina Gerova), or general soul-searching matters like love, emancipation, independence, and careers, and casting popular actresses such as Eli Skorcheva, Plamena Getova, Iren Krivosheva, Marija Kavardzjikova. Romyana Petkova, whose films are usually realised with the participation of female-only team, and deal with women's themes, is the director who probably comes closest to the idea of a feminist director.



Adela Peeva (b. 1947)

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<sup>11</sup> Adela Peeva studied film directing in Belgrade, under Serbian director Zika Mitrovic; her Serbian husband acts as a producer for most of her films today. Working in documentaries in the 1980s, she made a feature debut in 1988 with *Sasedkata/The Neighbour*, a popular comedy of life under socialism.

After the change of the regime in late 1989, these women have continued working on a much slower pace and, in general, have only been releasing new films once every five or six years: Grybcheva, who in 1989 was at the height of her career at the age of 46, has since made only two features (in comparison to the fifteen feature films she made before 1989), Petkova has released three films; her most recent work is *Drugiyat nash vazmozhen zhivot/The Other Possible Life of Ours* (2004), a film that offers sensitive but gloomy commentary on the realities of post-socialism, addressing the difficulty of reconnecting and restoring the desire for life and optimism, featuring actress Vanya Tsvetkova<sup>12</sup>.

Having suffered censorship for some of her documentary projects in the 1980s, and even though she also only manages to release a film once in a few years, Adela Peeva is probably the only one of this generation who seems to thrive. She has been successful in financing her work from independent sources and is particularly conscious of the importance of international networking, of securing proper exposure for her films and of entering the right festivals at the right time. Traditionally a sceptic, Peeva prefers to explore controversial subjects: her *Kashta varhu kamak, kashta varhu pyasak/ A House on a Rock, a House on Sand* (1998), for example, investigated the awkward split within Bulgaria's Orthodox Church, while her widely-known *Chiya e тази pesen?/ Whose is This Song?* (2003) became one of the first films to address Balkan-wide topics, a trend that was continued in her *Razvod po albanski/Divorce Albanian Style* (2007), where she investigates the policies of Enver Hodxha's regime that forced the foreign wives of Albanian nationals to return to wherever they had come from.

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<sup>12</sup> Vanya Tsvetkova, a member of the 'lost generation' that was affected by the social transition and saw their promising careers vanish into thin air along with the overall reduction in filmmaking, had emigrated and was working in a casino in Las Vegas. Reportedly, she returned to Bulgaria for this role: in the film, she plays a University graduate who works as a tram driver in order to make ends meet – until one day she meets an old friend (actor Ivan Ivanov) who has returned after many years in emigration.

Thus, even the most successful women from this generation, cannot maintain the fast pace of work that some had in the 1980s, and only release new films once or twice in a decade. These reduced levels of activity are due to a combination of factors. On the one hand, there are the difficult conditions in Bulgarian cinema that characterised the 1990s. The work of directors like Grybcheva, who was perceived as darlings of the communist regime, may have been affected by an unspoken reaction to the alleged preferential treatment she had enjoyed before 1989. In any case, even at a severely delayed pace, the women of this generation have been able to continue making films and, in some instances (like Adela Peeva) have been widely acclaimed. The more serious issue is that when writing the history of Bulgaria's national cinema, the work of these women is often ignored and rarely makes the final cut.

The female filmmakers **from the middle generation** are born around 1960, and, even though they just have or are about to turn fifty, are still being referred to as 'young.' They have been mostly educated in the context of the film directing programme that was introduced at VITIZ in Sofia in the late 1970s; normally not having made a feature debut before 1989, their films have materialised during the post-communist era and carry all features that reflect the scarcity of funding that dominates the period. They have spent more than a decade in the 1990s working on shorts and documentaries, have suffered large gaps between films and have had to rely heavily on international programmes for the financing of any ideas. They have finally managed to make a full-length feature film debut around their mid-40s and have difficulties pulling off further projects. The best-known members of this

generation include directors Iglia Triffonova (b. 1957)<sup>13</sup> and Milena Andonova (b. 1959),<sup>14</sup> and producer Rossitsa Valkanova (b. 1958). Other women-filmmakers of this generation include Boryana Puncheva (b. 1956)<sup>15</sup> or respected documentarian Eldora Traykova (b. 1956), another graduate of the Film and TV directing programme at VITIZ, who has made over fifty films on minorities and current concerns. Male directors of this same generation include Lyudmil Todorov, Andrei Slabakov, Tedi Moskov, Aleksandar Morfov, Ilian Simeonov, and others.

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<sup>13</sup> Educated in the directing class of Geogri Dyulgerov at Sofia's VITIZ, Triffonova entered the profession through a string of assistant directorships on a range of films in the 1980s, with directors Dyulgerov, Rangel Vulchanov, Ivan Nichev, Kiran Kolarov, and Plamen Maslarov. She also had smallish acting roles in various productions in the 1980s, until, in the early 1990s, she entered the profession with five documentaries made at the pace of one per year, usually focusing on topics of post-socialist life, and receiving particular acclaim for her *Razkazi za ubiystva/ Stories of Murder* (1993), a treatise on the psychological causes of violent crime in the aftermath of communism.

<sup>14</sup> Daughter of the late director Methody Andonov, who is responsible for Bulgaria's most beloved film of all times, *The Goat's Horn* (1972), Milena started off as child actor. (See Yana Hasamova's 2006 review for a discussion of Andonova's indebtedness to her father's cinematic style.) She then studied directing in Sofia under veteran director Hristo Hristov, graduating in 1982 but only made a feature short, *I reche oslitzata na Valaam/ Valaam's Ass Speaks* in 1993 (a contemplative film full of biblical references, produced by director Georgy Dyulgerov). As many other female directors, she was married for a while, to director Ivan Cherkelov, who, himself descending from a well-known artistic family, managed to complete several feature projects with French backing in the 1990s and 2000s, which were generally well received but never became widely popular. Most recently, she directed a television feature, *Vatreshen glas/Inner voice* (2008), which is written by director Krasimir Kroumov and lensed by Ivan Tonev – a psychological treatise of a male protagonist who ponders over the humiliating features of his post-communist existence.

<sup>15</sup> Born in Warsaw, she is the daughter of cameraman Borislav Punchev. Puncheva studied film and TV directing in Sofia, then worked for television for many years and, capitalising on her pretty face, appeared in numerous supporting roles, usually in comedies like *Dami kanyat/ Ladies' Choice* (1980, dir. Ivan Andonov). Currently married to Bulgaria's ambassador to the US, Puncheva authored documentaries like *Genko* (1994) about expressionist painter and well-known Sofia maverick Genko Genkov and *Detska gradina/Kindergarten* (1981).



Milena Andonova, b.1959

It was not until 2001, nearly two decades after graduating, that Triffonova finally managed to direct her first feature, *Pismo do America/Letter to America*, a film produced by her fellow-student Rossitsa Valkanova in cooperation with Dutch, Hungarian and Czech partners. Andonova's debut did not come until 2006 when she was 47 years old. In both cases the filmmakers acknowledge that their success is due to the solid international contacts they have managed to put in place. But even then, with international co-production funds clearly identified as a key factor, Triffonova had to wait five years before making a second film, *Razsledvane/Investigation* (2006), a project involving co-producing partners from Germany and the Netherlands, as well as with the participation of Bulgarian National Television (again produced by Valkanova). Andonova, whose first feature was produced by younger sister Nevena with the participation of German partners, recently turned fifty but is

still to make a second feature film. Thus, even though the women of this generation see acclaim at festivals (like is the case with Bulgarian cinema in general, their films are mostly exhibited at the narrow circuit of East European specialisation festivals in Central Europe in Germany – Cottbus, Karlovy Vary, Wiesbaden or Moscow), they do not enjoy proper circulation or international fame. The range of awards is usually limited to prizes at the aforementioned specialist East European festivals, the distribution in the country is extremely limited, international distribution does not happen even where there are sales companies involved, and the best bet for the films to be seen is when they screen on television. Andonova said: ‘Perhaps the situation of ‘a woman making sad films in Bulgaria’ sounds not only risky but also absurd for the majority of film specialists. For me, however, this situation has entirely worldly dimensions and is completely natural. It is sad and funny, absurd and wondrous; it is just like any human life – it is unique’.<sup>16</sup>

Like those of the previous one, the women from **the young generation** – Zornitsa Sophia (b. 1972), Nadezhda Koseva (b. 1974), Sylvia Pesheva (b. 1976)<sup>17</sup>, Svetla Tsotsorkova (b. 1977) -- enter filmmaking after 2000, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and begin working directly with the new financing structures and within the new policy environment. Luckily, they do not need to wait until they are in their forties to make a debut feature. Still as students, they normally take on a wide variety of roles – as writers, producers, editors, second directors, actresses. In the overall, members of this generation are skilled in all sorts of professions, as their careers are likely to evolve as patchwork of various projects that

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<sup>16</sup> In: Tehrani, Bijan. Milena Andonova talks about "Monkeys in Winter". *Cinema Without Borders*, 2 December 2007; Available: <http://www.cinemawithoutborders.com/news/127/ARTICLE/1179/2007-02-12.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Sylvia Pesheva has to her credits a feature film, *Shantav den/ Crazy Day* (2004). A feel-good little tale of the loving embrace between generations, it features an improbable but lovable relationship between a carrying granddaughter (popular newcomer Vessela Kazakova) and a generous and high-spirited grandfather (veteran Kosta Tsonev).

come along. Those who have studied under director Georgi Dyulgerov, have had the chance to work on an omnibus film called *Ekzekutziya/Execution* (2000), an adaptation of Russian playwright's Ludmila Petrushevskaya's eponymous play, and an exercise co-directed by four women. Well into their thirties today, these women are still mostly engaged in making shorts: Svetla Tsotsorkova directed two films with talented actress Svetla Yantcheva (*Life with Sophia*, 2004; *My Mother*, 2006), Valentina Donrintcheva made *Red Riding Hood* (2002), Maya Vitkova -- the documentary *Mothers and Daughters* (2006), and Nadezhda Koseva, most prolific so far -- *Sadbata na Veronika* (2002; about the dream of a group of orphans to become *chalga* singers), *The Ritual* (a segment of the international omnibus production *Lost and Found*, 2005), and the short *Omlet* (2008, addressing the post-communist poverty). The most successful male counterpart of this generation is theatre director Yavor Gardev (b. 1972) who made a feature film debut with the heavily promoted mock-up noir *Dzift/Zift* (2008).



Zornitsa Sophia, b. 1972

By far the most successful one of this group is Zornitsa Sophia, who already several features and a full-length documentary to her credit – (*Mila ot Mars/Mila from Mars*, 2004; *Death and All the Way Back*, 2005; *Modus Vivendi*, 2007; *Prognosis/Forecast*, 2008), all preoccupied with the lives of young people in Bulgaria and the Balkan region. With background in fine art and design, she has taken advantage of the chance to spend a period of study in the US, followed by a course of specialised studies in directing in Sofia. Benefiting from her good international connections (including access to some new Balkan-wide funding initiatives), the women of this generation are in possession of good sense of editing and new digital technologies. Thematically, their work is geared toward the concerns of the new generation of Bulgarians.

## THEMATIC TRAJECTORIES

In the overall, films made by women move within the same thematic trajectories as all other films, yet several areas can be considered as specifically linked to them. One is cinema for and about children, which dominates the work of several female filmmakers from the older generation, most notably Mariana Evstatieva-Biolcheva. Like Romanian Elisabeta Bostan, most of her films have been for children (her only finished project since 1991, is *Printsat i prosekat/The Prince and the Pauper*, released 2005 – a film that follows a filmography of twelve films made before 1989). Ivanka Grybcheva has also shown persistent commitment to making films exploring the gentle psychology of children. Working with well-respected screenwriters such as Georgi Danailov (for *Detza igrayat van/Children Play Outdoors*, 1973, *Pri nikogo/To Neither One*, 1975, *Golemite igri/Large Games* 1999) and Mormarevi Brothers (for *Izpiti po nikoe vreme/Exams at Odd Time*, 1974, *Voynata na taralezhite/Porcupines' War*, 1978, *13-tata godenitsa na printsa/Prince's 13<sup>th</sup> Bride*, 1987), most of her children's films were realised also before 1989.

Roumyana Petkova has also made a contribution to this genre, with the sensitive tale of a lonely child, *Razgovor s ptizi/ Conversation with Birds* (1997).

Even though some of the best-known Bulgarian films about women, like *Edna zhena na 33/A Woman at 33* were made by men, the women-filmmakers maintained routine interest in the theme of female lives. Roumyana Petkova's films from the 1980s come closest to the concept of a feminist film. More recently, it is Milena Andonova's *Maymuni prez zimata/Monkeys in Winter*, that is closely focused on women. Based on Andonova's own script, the film tells the three stories of Bulgarian women, each one of whom lives in a different period and social context. The first one features a single Gypsy mother in the 1960s; the second one – a young student from the 1980s who, desperate to marry her French boyfriend, ventures into a risky abortion attempt; the third one – a housewife from the 2000s who gets to obsession in her attempts to conceive a child. Even though it was criticized for criticized for a certain degree of melodrama simplification, the film won the award for a best film from Eastern Europe at the 2006 Karlovy Vary Film Festival and was reviewed alongside other female films that were in the centre the attention in that year at Berlinale, Locarno and Sarajevo (Jasmila's Zbanic's *Grbavica/Esma's Secret* and Andrea Staka's *Das Fräulein*). Reviewing the film for *Variety*, critic Leslie Felperin made the perceptive remark that 'The use of 40-year time span lightly underscores how women's lives in Bulgarian society have both changed and not changed with the fall of Communism.'<sup>18</sup>

More than women's concerns, however, female filmmakers in Bulgaria have shown a persistent commitment to maintaining a critical stance to various manifestations of the nationalist tendencies that have frequently dominated the public discourse in the country

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<sup>18</sup> Felperin's review is available at <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117931067.html?categoryid=31&cs=1>. See also Yana Hashamova's review for *Kinokultura*'s s issue on Bulgarian Cinema, 2006 at <http://www.kinokultura.com/specials/5/monkeys.shtml>.

since 1989. It is mostly in the work of female filmmakers that the awkward hushed histories related to minorities and uneasy relations between different religious and ethnic groups have been openly addressed and where most clear anti-nationalist positions have been adopted. Such work can be traced back to the early 1990s, when, in the face of a looming nationalist war in neighbouring Yugoslavia, Bulgarians had to reassess their own stance on nationalist matters and had to revisit the tensions that had remained unresolved since the assimilation campaign against the Muslim population of Bulgaria of the mid 1980s.

One of the most important films that openly addressed these hushed matters was Roumiana Petkova's *Gori, gori, oganche/ Burn, Burn, Little Flame* (1994),<sup>19</sup> a TV production based on the work of Malina Tomova, set out to promote inter-ethnic peace and to expose the faults of the 'revival process'. Even though the film is set in an unspecified period, it clearly refers to known (or rather rumoured) facts of the mistreatment of Pomak villagers in the Rhodopi region as witnessed by a young Bulgarian girl, Marina, who has taken on a teaching assignment to a far flung village school. With its scrutiny of muted aspects of the government's nationalist policy of the recent past, *Burn, Burn, Little Flame* gradually turned into the most discussed film of the mid-1990s; it was widely acclaimed by critics yet criticized by the nationalist media. Tomova (the writer) and Petkova (the director) had to take an outspoken public stance in its defence: the miniseries, they maintained, was a metaphor of the metaphysical guilt for which the Bulgarian intellectuals, who had stood by silently during the human rights abuses of the Muslim population in the 1980s, needed to assume responsibility.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For a detailed discussion of the production and reception history of this film, my chapter "Canaries and Birds of Prey: the New Season of Bulgarian Cinema" in: Bell, John (Ed.) *Bulgaria in Transition*. Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1998, pp.255-281.

<sup>20</sup> Petkova has sustained interest in matters of ethnic minorities. In 1995 she made the documentary *Mezhdinen svyat/A World In-Between* (about the Pomak minority) and

Further aspects of the same controversial and hushed ‘revival process’ were also addressed in the made-for-TV work by Tanya Vaksberg. Adela Peeva’s documentary *Izlishnite/The Unwanted* (1999) features interviews with women inhabiting these same (now depopulated) border regions who bitterly reassess the role they themselves have played in the renaming campaign. Today they acknowledge that they suffer from the adverse effects of their own complicit actions. It is an intelligent, subtle film that gradually reveals how, long after those who were abused have found closure (in most cases, by migrating to neighbouring Turkey), the local perpetrators have fallen victim to themselves, as they are directly affected by the ensuing depopulation of the region.<sup>21</sup>

Driven by the anti-nationalism that marks most of her films, in *Whose is This Song* (2003) Adela Peeva goes a step further and leaves the confines of Bulgaria to explore the damaging dimensions of the nationalism that affects each country in the region and to assert a message of togetherness within the disconnected space of Balkan multiculturalism.

Last but not least, there are the films that address current social concerns as they relate to identity issues. Even if these themes are traditionally preserved for the documentary domain, feature filmmaking has also maintained interest in them. Iglia Triffonova, for example, routinely deals with matters of contemporary morality and psychology. The protagonist of her *Letter to America* (2001) is a young man who travels to the remote and beautiful Rhodopi mountains in search of a lost folk song. He is hoping to be able to send the record of this song to a friend who is in critical condition in an American hospital. The

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in 1998 – the documentary *Bari Bogoroditsa/Bari Virgin Mary* – based on the poetry of Roma poet Hristo Hristov and featuring Gypsy Christian rituals.

<sup>21</sup> The female films about the ‘revival process’ were released alongside films made by men, such as Krassimir Kroumov’s *Pod edno nebe/ Under the Same Sky* (2003), which revisited the depopulated region and focused on the plight of a teenage girl who desperately seeks reunion with her father who has migrated to Turkey, or Radoslav Spassov’s *Otkradnati ochi/ Stolen eyes* (2005) based on a script by journalist Neri Terzieva (herself an ethnic Turk renamed in the context of the ‘revival process), a compelling inter-ethnic love story.

journey intertwines contemporary themes of emigration, displacement, urban and village roots. Triffonova's other film, *Investigation*, features a female attorney (Svetlana Yancheva) who attempts to comprehend the difficult psychological condition of a silent prisoner who has murdered his own brother; the film attempts to allegorically chart the spiritual ordeal that contemporary Bulgarians live through. The director, who enjoys a respected 'auteur' position within the new Bulgarian cinema, wrote both features.

Identity concerns are in the centre of the films made by the youngest generation, yet these films are also marked by some desire to retain a certain degree of 'cuteness'. A case in point is *Mila from Mars* (2004), one of the most acclaimed Bulgarian features of recent years, which screened at a number of festivals, won some awards, was promoted via a website (<http://www.milafrommars.com/>), and secured distribution in Bulgaria and abroad. For a few years it was the most seen recent Bulgarian film, having attracted an audience of about 20,000 to theatrical screenings. Made for an estimated 40,000 Euro, the film marked a new stage in the use of video and choppy editing, thus finally returning to attention to form, yet critics were somewhat uneasy over its shortage of realistic plot<sup>22</sup>.

Shot with a shaky digital camera, dynamically edited, and accompanied by a funky techno punk musical score, the films tell the story of Mila, a sixteen year-old who emerges pregnant from a situation of sex trafficking. Still wearing the black S&M-type outfit of a prostitute (black-leather-and-fishnet-stockings), she finds refuge in a remote mountain village populated exclusively by old people. Here, she soon gets to wearing white robes and is immersed in an idyllic carrying atmosphere that allows her to build up strength and to

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<sup>22</sup> Writing in *Variety* (Sep. 28, 2004), Deborah Young mocked some of the implausible aspects of Mila's cartoonish characterization that she found to be leaving abundant 'loose ends' and criticized the film's political references that she found to 'seem irritatingly gratuitous' (<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117925065.html?categoryid=31&cs=1&p=0>). For a perceptive dissection of the film's latent nationalism, see Temenuga Trifonova's insightful article in the *Cineaste* (Summer 2007).

give birth to her baby and be transformed into a white sunshine-in-hair Madonna-like mother. Mila also gets involved in a somewhat improbable affair with an unlikely protagonist – a hunky former schoolteacher who has also escaped civilization for the village idyll and now inhabits a nearby cave as a hermit. The social commentary of the film relates to the presence of the new mafia who have not only controlled Mila’s life so far, but have also enslaved the old people of the village who are coerced to grow cannabis in their gardens, which is then harvested and trafficked across the border into Greece. Described by critics as a typical representative of the new Balkan ‘ethno-punk’ genre, this apparent film of social concern can ultimately be traced to the exuberant and self-exoticizing style of influential Balkan director Emir Kusturica.

## **CONCLUSION**

Seventeen women working as film directors in a small country like Bulgaria is a significant fact in itself. It is even more remarkable that many of the films discussed here have been produced in a period when the film industry has been volatile at its best. Conditions have often been adverse and opportunities – limited. Yes, it seems that the production and distribution context is in process of stabilizing. Having persistently demonstrated strength and creativity, the women of Bulgarian cinema are most likely to thrive.