The Conformists

The Conformists: Creativity and Decadence in the Bulgarian Cinema 1945-89

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This work is dedicated to my father, Gueorgui Stoyanov, and in memory of the late filmmaker, actor and director of the Bulgarian Film Archive, Plamen Maslarov. (January 1, 1950 – June 8, 2010)

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INTRODUCTION

> It is not exactly the presence of a thing but rather the absence of it that becomes the cause and impulse for creative motivation.[1]
> —Alexander Archipenko

> We know nothing about death. We never thought about it.[2]
> —Vasil Popov

During the Cold War era, all countries in Eastern Europe created an array of cinematic works, which distinguished themselves by superb aesthetic quality, profound intellectual depth, and erudition. The Communist Parties took Lenin's phrase, "cinema is the most important art"[3] very seriously, recognizing the vast propaganda potential of film.

This book addresses many of the complexities and paradoxes in the functioning of the Bulgarian cinematic world during 1945–1989. It focuses on the development of Bulgarian film in that period, as the youngest and most dynamic medium. Several forms of subversion are explored, such as decadence, silence, grotesque, and irony, among others, which fostered the creative imagination of the intellectual elite, and made the film art successful. Resilience is sought in the *oeuvres*, in the operation of the institutions, and by looking at the views of the filmmakers and the works of the film critics. Examining the constellation between performance and perception, a quantitative dimension is added by analyzing the film distribution records, the numbers of films produced per year and the figures of moviegoers.

Bulgarian filmmakers, similar to their counterparts across the Eastern Bloc, vigorously resisted fitting into the role of lackeys of the Communist regime. Instead, the cineastes articulated their personal visions in their *oeuvres* by developing aesthetic practices and coded language, expressing their dissatisfaction with the *status quo*, and communicating their complex political and cultural views to the audiences. The filmmakers eluded censors while including the spectators as accomplices.[4] The tension between rebellion and conformism in the cinematic discourse was intense. Despite the powerfully oppressive cultural policies of the regime, the cineastes succeeded loading their works with subversive messages. Regardless of the ideological straightjacket imposed on them, they

sublimated their artistic passions and creative impulses, protested, and mocked the Establishment.

Why explore the Bulgarian cinema? As Iskra Dimitrova comments and asks rhetorically, "for those who know that to have a contact with numerous national cultures in the world is an endless adventure full of joy, mind and feeling, Bulgarian cinema could be an object of desire. Many would ask whether it exists at all."[5] In fact, filmmaking in Bulgaria was a very glamorous form of artistry. It started its existence at the beginning of the twentieth century and it became an industry, attracting large audiences during the late 1950s. The Bulgarian Communist Party perceived the world of film as a major arena for assertion of power. As former CEO of the Bulgarian Cinematography Corporation, Pavel Pisarev comments in an interview:

> In fact, the Politburo resolved and played out its internal conflicts hidden behind the Art pedestal. They argued about things about which they could not talk among each other. For example, the different Politburo members will choose protégés among the artists and elevate their careers hastily or dismiss them suddenly from their position as form of display of power between them.[6]

The political Establishment invested large amounts of capital to build modern film studios with updated equipment for the production of films, to educate young people in the art of cinema, and for the printing of film journals and magazines. During the Cold War, filmmakers and film critics enjoyed a high standing in society and received some of the largest funding and career opportunities. The film culture's unusual access to travel permits, connections abroad, foreign currency, and an array of privileges acted often as a "performance-enchanting drug"[7] for the artistic elite.

The "socialist manner of working"[8] made possible for the filmmakers to edit their works and rewrite their ideas over very long periods of time, sometimes extending up to 819 days. After 1989, a film usually needed to be produced in forty days.[9] To meet demands associated with mass consumption was not the major goal of the industry, as is the case after 1989. The government gave the filmmakers certain freedom to work in a style that satisfied their own high aesthetic standards and priorities. Nearly 600 feature films were produced during the years of Communism (1945–1989), and production peaked at around twenty-five features annually in the 1980s. In addition, about 20 television films, as well as 400 shorts and animated films were released every year.

Since 1989, the output of feature films has dropped to four or five per year and the total number of Bulgarian films for the period 1990–2005 is slightly over sixty. On recent occasions when critics were asked to name the best Bulgarian films of all times, most short-listed titles were from the 1960s and 1970s; not a single film created after 1985 ever makes it to the top dozen. Bulgarian cinema's best moments remain confined to the past, when filmmakers had to be politically conformist but still enjoyed the chance to work and reach out to audiences.[10]

The most innovative artists and intellectuals involved in the film industry were those who were, at least on the surface, loyal to the Party.[11] As philosopher and film critic Ivailo Znepolski shares in an interview, he consciously chose the cinema as an art of escape and salvation. As Znepolski continues, "the cinema was the only medium that allowed us to touch a different world. It was the only disguise where we could freely discuss all problems about we were otherwise not allowed to talk."[12]

Bulgaria had a vigorous and very prolific intellectual life, which is worth exploring in depth. The size of the film industry in the period was remarkable, especially in relation to the predominantly rural and sparsely populated character of the small Balkan country. The dramatic changes that occurred in Europe after the end of World War II invigorated the cultural life on the entire continent. In postwar Bulgaria, for example, the Communist government allowed the distribution of many previously prohibited films not only created by Soviet but also by American, French, and English cinematographers. As a result, already by the mid 1950s, the average yearly film imports in the country reached two hundred.[13] The nationalization of the film industry in 1945 in most countries belonging to the Eastern Bloc contributed, as well, to a slow but steady eruption of film production of unprecedented scale.[14]

Besides films, the Bulgarian Cinematography Corporation [*Bulgarska Kinematographia*] had already fashioned during the late 1940s some popular science fiction and documentaries, as well as adding a cartoon section to its repertoire in 1948.[15]

The state income from film screenings in 1980 was 38.9 million leva and the state expenses for the maintenance of the film industry was 38.5 million for the same year.[16] The state subsidy for one film production, which was 1.1 million leva per year on average, suggests the presence of an influential and powerful industry.[17] Statistical data for the time span 1950–1989 indicate a gradual and constant growth of the numbers of Bulgarian films, starting with the production of one to two in the 1940s and reaching heights, such as twenty-one films per year during the 1970s and 1980s.

Table I–1. Annual Output of Bulgarian Films 1950–1989

Year	Films	Year	Films	Year	Films	Year	Films
1950	1	1960	9	1970	9	1980	19
1951	2	1961	9	1971	12	1981	18
1952	1	1962	8	1972	15	1982	21
1953	0	1963	9	1973	18	1983	19
1954	3	1964	11	1974	18	1984	19
1955	2	1965	12	1975	18	1985	20
1956	7	1966	7	1976	15	1986	21
1957	6	1967	10	1977	18	1987	20
1958	7	1968	10	1978	21	1988	19
1959	4	1969	17	1979	20	1989	19

Source: Alexander Janakiev, *Sto Godischen Filmov Process: Lichnosti, Filmi, Kina* (*One Hundred Years of Film Process: Personalities, Film, Cinema*) (Sofia: IK Titra, 2002), 297–311.

After the changes of 1989, the numbers of cinematic works produced per year dropped dramatically, with 7 films produced in 1990 and only 5 in 1991. Furthermore, the size of the viewing public was impressive, as well, amounting to 1.5 million viewers per Bulgarian film on average.[18] In 1980, Bulgaria with 3,439 movie theaters had the second largest number of filmgoers in the Eastern Bloc, after the USSR.[19] According to the source, there were on average one hundred fifty-seven people per screening in the cities and forty-five in the countryside in 1980.[20]

The data discussed above, the fact that the Bulgarian case is completely understudied, and the lack of evidence indicating a large exodus of *émigrés* or the presence of underground, dissident artistic networks make this country a particularly interesting case study. In fact, the history of film in Bulgaria is a history of constant cinematic revivals. Good examples can be found in the 1950's after Stalin's death, the rebellious 1960s, the 1970s, known as a time of relaxed regulations, and during the self-reforming 1980s, where the spirit of change was already in the air.[21] Hidden opposition against dictatorship developed and flourished during this period. As Dimitrova emphasizes, films during the Cold War functioned as an extraordinary substitute of all otherwise officially forbidden expressions of the social life such as the sense of hopelessness and malaise and the disillusionment with the hypocrisy and oppressive character of the regime.[22]

The film culture of Bulgaria was decadent. Despite its self-contradictory and ambiguous nature, the term "decadence" is used in the way David

Weir explores it "as Dionysian and pluralistic, as subversive, inverting harsh new limits, excessive, extravagant and elegant, whose explanations all reveal the difficulties of definition and show how the difficulties of definition itself can illuminate the meaning of decadence." [23] The artists were connected to the policy of patronage but they refused to act as lackeys of the regime.[24] A memorandum for the arts issued by the Politburo in Bulgaria in the 1970s stated that "despite the intentions of the cineastes, many films offer to us a conception of a human which is in deep discordance with the modes of Marxist thinking."[25]

The entire Cold War period is marked by the struggle between political administrators and the artistic elite and the failure of the Establishment to successfully manipulate and control the arts.

The cat-and-mouse game among censors, Party mentors, and filmmakers was not always suffocating but sometimes stimulating for the intelligentsia. Stylistically, the cineastes borrowed approaches from their Romantic predecessors by using the decadent as a method of, as David Weir put it, "fusion between Beauty and Death in a sort of two faced herm filled with corruption and melancholy and fatal in its beauty–a beauty of which the more bitter the taste, the more abundant the enjoyment."[26]

As Nietzsche remarked, "…*Décadence* is nothing to be fought: it is absolutely necessary and belongs to every age and every people…"[27] Charles Bernheimer adds, "decadence is a biological process that assures the organism's health whether this organism be an individual or society."[28] The result of this artistic sensitivity in Bulgaria was the creation of works of high aesthetic quality in which the cinematographers searched for hidden ways in order to express their longing for freedom and their desire for rebellion and disgust with the *status quo*.[29] The Bulgarian film critic Alexander Grozev perceived, already in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Bulgarian filmmakers abandoned almost entirely the belief that form was of secondary importance and that the aesthetic significance of a film depended above all on its content. The new artistic thinking was inextricably linked to the search for individual style and the use of a multi-leveled means of expression. The filmmakers showed greater trust in the members of the audience as potential co-authors who were not only capable of following the narrative with concentration and understanding but could also grasp the metaphors and discover hidden meanings.[30]

Despite the fact that since the start of the twenty-first century, an array of works dealing with the Cold War era and its intellectual heritage in a nuanced way has appeared[31] , the story of Bulgaria and its film culture is still largely unexamined and ignored by academic film scholarship. Bulgaria is a country about which remarkably little has been written. The

historiography on the subject of film is virtually negligible.[32] Some general accounts exist, which are largely written by Bulgarian scholars during the Cold War era and therefore lack objectivity and critical insight or serve as general chronological guides for the period. Consequently, they lack an elaborated critical apparatus.[33]

Moreover, the accounts about the history of the Bulgarian cinema are produced predominantly by film critics or the filmmakers themselves.[34] The weakness of these works, from the historical perspective, is that they largely assess issues related to the aesthetic representation of the arts and almost ignore their socio-political and institutional dimension. In general, many authors of historical works devoted to the history of the East European cinema written in the West, and in the East, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, either selectively use the Communist legacy in order to rewrite the differences across the Western model,[35] or represent the Eastern European cultural heritage either as artistically fruitless and depressed or as ideologically driven and over-politicized.[36]

The first historian, who wrote about Bulgarian cinema in the West, under close collaboration with the CEO of the Bulgarian Cinematography during the 1970s Pavel Pisarev, was Ronald Holloway.[37] Holloway, also, for a first time introduced the term "poetic realism" describing in this way the predominant mood in Bulgarian films.[38] Unfortunately, no one has elaborated significantly on his pioneering work.[39] Dina Iordanova justified in 2006 the lack of interest in the Bulgarian cinema as follows:

> On several recent occasions, talking to younger US-based colleagues, I insisted they should not fool themselves that they can sustain an academic career by specializing in Bulgarian cinema. First of all, it is difficult to do research about it: many of the films are never made commercially available and most are never subtitled. There is no single point of contact where one can go to ask for copies. It is necessary to rely on personal acquaintances most of the time and many of them are not particularly eager to respond promptly to correspondence from abroad. Secondly, Bulgarian culture is not exactly in the focus of Western interest. Even as an established academic, I have had to put up with situations where collections including texts on Bulgarian cinema are cancelled or endlessly postponed. If the situation in post-Communist times is so bad, I wonder to what extent the careers of people from the previous generation, like Ron Holloway who has a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, have been affected by their enduring commitment to neglected subject matters like Bulgarian cinema. In spite of the difficulties, looking back at my record, I am glad to see that I have managed to publish a number of shorter and longer pieces on Bulgarian film over the years. It is my intention to continue working with Bulgarian material whenever there is a chance.[40]

Even if difficult to study, inaccessible, and commercially not profitable, the Bulgarian cinema is worth exploring because it sheds a different light on the life of the intellectual elite from the Eastern Bloc. Why? The Bulgarian cinema mirrors the development of the other Eastern European cinemas but at the same time exemplifies a very different dynamic, compared to the picture that we traditionally associate with Cold War film, having in mind mostly the dissident cultures of countries, such as Poland and Hungary, or the theme of victimization predominant in earlier works of the Soviet cinema.[41]

By using comparative approaches, it is possible to demonstrate that despite the "Iron Curtain," East and West were following, consciously or not, similar trends. For instance, after 1945 filmmakers in the East were painfully aware of and influenced by the works of their colleagues in the West, such as Roberto Rossellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and Ingmar Bergman. They were also familiar with the emerging styles of neorealism and *nouvelle vague*.

The trivial division of the Eastern European film into the categories of propaganda and dissent is too simplistic. The examples of many films show far greater complexity and the presence of an apolitical attitude with political undertones among the artists.[42]

As Catherine Portuges comments, "especially between the late 1960s and early 1980s, filmmakers from the Eastern Bloc managed to adeptly outmaneuver censors in creating stylistically subversive visual works that layered fiction and documentary, realism and surrealism, allegory, and satire.[43]

Especially during the 1980s, Hungarian, Czechoslovak and Polish filmmakers, followed by their Soviet, Bulgarian, and Romanian counterparts, boldly represented an angry cinema, embodying the subversive stance of the Hungarian uprising of 1956, the Prague Spring of 1968, and the Solidarity Movement in Poland. Another parallel among all cinemas of the Eastern Bloc is the presence of a painful awareness of their marginality, timid provincialism, and intense desire to be fully integrated with the rest of the continent.[44] Certain common themes among all Eastern European countries are well defined and explored in Dina Iordanova's book *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film*.[45] Unfortunately, Iordanova has avoided analyzing the Bulgarian cinema as a part of "the Cinema of the other Europe." The "white spot" or absence of Bulgarian cinema, except for short references in her other book, *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media*, which deals with Balkan film, is striking. If the Bulgarian cinema is not a part of

the Eastern European Cinema and not a part of the Balkan cinema, where should we situate it? This book should provide an answer to the question.

The common denominator for all Eastern European cinemas is the divergent historical, political and cultural heritage and climate in which the films originated. Despite several parallels among the countries of the Eastern Bloc, a monolithic interpretation of their film cultures is impossible. An examination of the Bulgarian cinema is necessary in order to reconstruct the mosaic of Eastern European cinema.

Among the most important reasons against a generalized and reductionist elucidation is the fact that the singular industries first originated in dissimilar context and second developed under unique implementations of Communist rule.[46] A good example here is the case of the former Yugoslavia where, since Tito's break with Stalin in 1948, the country claimed the status of a non-aligned socialist state pursuing its own political, economic, and cultural agenda.[47]

A major subject of the Central Eastern European cinema that was missing in Bulgaria, except with the 1958 German-Bulgarian co-production *Stars*, (*Zvezdi*/*Sterne*) directed by Konrad Wolf and written by Angel Wagenstein, was the Holocaust theme. The Holocaust largely unraveled in Eastern Europe and it was mostly Eastern European Jews who perished. In fact, Poland had a well-established Yiddish film industry already in the early 1930s. At the beginning of the Cold War, the Yiddish cinema was suppressed, but with the demise of Communism it became particularly visible again.

Already during the Cold War, many films had explored the subjects of anti-Semitism and Jewish life.[48] The best known film about the subject that Eastern Europe had produced in that period was the Oscar winning *Mephisto* (1981) by Istvan Szabó.

The major pattern that sets the Bulgarian cinema apart from its Eastern European neighbors, in addition to the lack of dissident culture, is the fascination and preoccupation of the Bulgarian artists with death as a *leitmotiv* in their cinematic works. Communist societies were ordered by the powerful of the day to project only health and success. Therefore, the depiction of death, as one of the faces of the decadent, was perceived by the cineastes as the strongest form of subversion. The major Bulgarian masterpieces exhibit a dramatic, tragic, ornamental, and poetic outlook. The Bulgarian filmmakers, as opposed to their Eastern European counterparts showed little interest in "the ordinary" or everyday life.[49]

Why is this research relevant? As David Norris emphasizes, the Balkan academic industry has focused recently on exploring problems related to national identity and the ethics of ethnic politics.[50] The

historiography on the Balkans has exhausted the theoretical frameworks of Orientalism[51] used to illuminate the postcolonial identity dislocation of the region. Maria Todorova's pioneering 1997 work *Imagining the Balkans* historicized the imaginative engendering of the Balkans and alerted readers to blind spots within Western representations of the region. Further, Todorova drew attention to the complexity of Balkan self-images, portraying them as internalized stigma.[52]

While *Imagining the Balkans* was a groundbreaking work in the 1990s within the light of the end of the Cold War and the military conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, the dynamics on the eve of the new twenty-first century demand more nuanced and sensitive approaches.[53] Catherine Portuges points out in 1992, "it is time to redefine 'national' in the context of the Eastern European cinema and to acknowledge its intersecting visual and cultural language."[54] Dina Iordanova emphasizes, "the products of the various Balkan cinemas cannot be considered creations of a cohesive group of people."[55]

Of course due to the common geography and culture and legacy of the past as subjects of *Pax Ottomana*, Balkan films are occupied with some similar themes, such as patriarchy, marginality, stubbornness, resistance to authority, and the longing for shared and special ethnic belonging. The cosmopolitan themes are also present in all Balkan cinemas, such as the sense of universally distorted harmony, irrecoverable identities, and *fin de siècle* sadness.[56]

The differences among the separate Balkan countries have received little attention so far. Scholars, such as Malcom Brandbury, for example, have failed to distinguish at all between South-Eastern Europe and the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War.[57] This work seeks to normalize the Bulgarian case, de-Balkanize the Balkans[58], transcend the simplistic "pattern of denigration" of the "murky," "primitive" Balkans[59] and focuses more on parallels and continuities between the East and the West.

The Balkans as a category almost disappeared during the Cold War era. As Michael Haynes points out, "the meaning of the 'East' as a conceptual designator changed as it came to betoken the 'Soviet Empire' rather than 'the Orient'."[60] Within this context, countries with a "Balkanist" legacy, such as Bulgaria and Romania, had similarities with Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia.[61]

This book will examine the perception among many Bulgarian artists of "being strangers to themselves"[62] by assessing the intricate and evolving relationship that Bulgarians have towards themselves from within, avoiding stereotypes associated with their presumed "otherness" and stressing less the obvious divergences between Bulgaria and the

West. It can be argued that "the other" (the Balkans) is part of "the self" (Europe), and we need to find the form, the voice, and the ethical stand to represent it as part of a universal cultural heritage.

A further goal of this book is to release the Balkan voices within Bulgarian context, by close textual reading of the cinematic narrative and by drawing evidence predominantly upon archival, historical, and critical sources produced by Bulgarian scholars and Bulgarian émigrés conducting research in the field. On the wider level, this work revisits cultural trends from the recent past. For us, to see the Cold War cultures from a new angle is particularly relevant within the context of globalization and the advent of a large unified Europe.

Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004 and the European Union in 2007. In the aftermath of 1989, the academic community has repeatedly witnessed the phenomenon of "Communist nostalgia" across the East/West divide and a growing interest in the processes of remembering Communism.[63] As Maria Todorova emphasizes, due to the incipient rise of leftist orientation and a renewed awareness about leftist politics, the elaboration of an adequate scholarly perspective on the Communist legacy seems mandatory because people who still remember it as a lived experience are quickly dying out. [64] Scholars must salvage from oblivion the memory that many fellow citizens want to forget, to preserve a tradition that belongs to the less wealthy parts of the world, to demonstrate that "the margins" are not less important than "the center," and to dignify a past that is to a large extent unappreciated and denigrated. [65]

Many Europeans, as well as others caught up in the advent of globalization, are in the process of rethinking their history, searching for common identity, discovering common roots, realizing that open markets alone will not create a new Europe and a unified global community. An in-depth examination of East European film, (with a focus on a Balkan country), can demonstrate that the small players are as important as the big ones and that in order to better appreciate Europe as an unified entity, the inheritance of each European country must be integrated within "the larger picture."

It is hoped that this book will generate a more vigorous dialogue between what we still consider the "West" and the "East," inspire and provoke the creation and publication of academic works about little known regions and stimulate critical reassessment of the culture of the Cold War era.

Notes

1. Alexander Archipenko cited in Bill Nichols, "The Memory of Loss: Péter Forgács's Saga of Family Life and Social Hell," *Film Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (summer 2003):2.[journal online]; accessed 10 Jul. 2010; available from http://www.jstor.org/stable/1213879.
2. Yuri Vidov Karageorge, review of *The "Thaw" in Bulgarian_Literature*, by Atanas Slavov, quoting Vasil Popov, *World Literature Today* 56, no. 3, Varia Issue (summer 1982): 535. [journal online]; accessed 10 Jul. 2010; available from http://www.jstor.org/stable/40137388.
3. Jerzy Toeplitz, "Cinema in Eastern Europe," Cinema Journal 8, no. 1 (autumn 1968): 4. [journal online]; accessed 10 Jul. 2010; available from http://www.jstor.org/stable/1225222.
4. Anikó Imre, ed., *East European Cinemas* (New York: Routledge, 2005),124.
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6. Pavel Pisarev, interview with Dima Dimova, *Kino* (Cinema), Jun. 2004, 4.
7. Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel, "Defining DEFA's Historical Imaginary: The Films of Konrad Wolf," *New German Critique* 82, East German Film (winter, 2001): 3–24.
8. Alexander Janakiev, *Sto Godischen Filmov Process: Lichnosti, Filmi, Kina* (One Hundred Years of Film Process: Personalities, Film, Cinema) (Sofia: IK Titra, 2002), 266.
9. Ibid.
10. Dina Iordanova and Ron Holloway, "Hoping for a Bulgarian Film Revival," *New Russian Cinema: Kino Kultura*, Special Issue 5 (Bulgarian Cinema), Dec. 2006 [journal online]; accessed 26 Jun. 2010; available from http://www.kinokultura.com/specials/5/holloway-iordanova.shtml.
11. A similar argument is made about East Germany (DDR) in Joshua Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary: Depictions of Daily Life in the East German Cinema, 1956–1966* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 18.
12. Ivailo Znepolski interview with Iskra Dimitrova , "Nie sme plod i zhertva na kulturata si, na protivorechiyata v nashata kultura, na nevzmozhnostta si da se opravim v kulturniste si protivorechiya," (We Are Fruit and Victim of Our Culture, of the Contradiction in Our Culture, of the Impossibility to Repair Our Cultural Contradictions) *Demokraticheski Pregdel* (Democratic Review) 45, (winter 2000–2001): 1–2 [journal online]; accessed 15 Mar. 2010; available at http://www.extremno.com/~bgfilm/znepolski.htm. Dr. Ivailo Znepolski is one of the most prominent Bulgarian intellectuals. He is the author of many books, and served as minister of culture and lecturer in France.
13. Janakiev, 177.
14. For exact numbers consult Janakiev, 226.
15. Alexander Grozev, *Bulgarskiat Film i Kritikata* (The Bulgarian Film and Critic) (Sofia: Nauka i Iskustvo, 1974), 28.

16. Centralna Durjavna Archiva [Central State Archives] (CSA), Sofia, Bulgaria, fond (f.) 383, opis (op.) 15, archival unit (a.e.) 140, n.d.
17. Janakiev, 177, 297–311.
18. Ibid.
19. CSA, f. 383, op. 15, ae. 1, 1980
20. Ibid.
21. For more information about specific films see Janakiev.
22. Dimitrova, "A Point of View of the Cinema Art," 2.
23. David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).
24. Feinstein, 231.
25. Janakiev, 228.
26. Weir, 3.
27. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage, 1967), 25–26, cited in Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the* Fin de Siècle *in Europe*, eds. T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 9.
28. Bernheimer, 9.
29. Good examples are the DDR film *Die Legende von Paul and Paula* (The Legend of Paul and Paula) (1973) and the Bulgarian film *A Woman at 33* (Edna zhena na trideset i tri) (1982).
30. See Grozev, 31.
31. Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Dina Iordanova, ed., *The Cinema of the Balkans* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006); Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003); Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (London: Verso Books, 2010); Maria Todorova, ed. *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2010).
32. Note: The only complete work on Bulgarian Cinema in English is Ronald Holloway's, *The Bulgarian Cinema*.
33. See for example: Janakiev; or Petur Kurdzhilov, *Bulgarian Feature Films: An Annotated Illustrated Filmography 1948–1970* (Sofia: Dr. Peter Beron State Publishing House, 1988).
34. See Vŭlo Radev, *Isgubeni Prostranstva* (Lost Spaces) (Sofia: Literaturen Forum, 2002).
35. Historians writing directly after the revolutions of 1989 sympathetically aim to victimize the intelligentsia, stressing the oppressive role of censorship and the existence of a large array of prohibited works. See for example: Leslie Ann Auerbach, "Censorship and East European and Soviet Theater and Film 1963-1980: The Censor's Game" (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1988).
36. Good examples for these tendencies are offered by Peter W. Jansen and Wolfram Schütte von Hanser, eds. *Film in der DDR* (Munich: Hanser, 1977);

Alexander Prokhorov, "Inherited Discourse: Stalinist Tropes in Thaw Culture (Russia)" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2002); Herbert Marshall, *Masters of the Soviet Cinema: Crippled Creative Biographies* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983); and Feinstein.

37. Pavel Pisarev, interview with author, 30 Jun. 2007; Ronald Holloway, *The Bulgarian Cinema* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1986).

38. Holloway.

39. Over the past several years film director Georgi Djulgerov dedicated time to a project that is not very typical for directors of his stature, but is particularly dear to us: he worked extensively on entering detailed information and synopses for a wide range of Bulgarian films on the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com). As a result of his efforts, the data on Bulgarian cinema on this site are by far superior to the information on the cinemas of many other countries.

40. Dina Iordanova, "Hoping for a Bulgarian Film Revival."

41. For more examples, see: Herbert Marshall, *Masters of the Soviet Cinema: Crippled Creative Biographies* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983); and Bryan Burns, *World Cinema Hungary* (Trowbridge, UK: Flicks Books, 1996).

42. Feinstein.

43. Catherine Portuges, "Border Crossings: Recent Trends in East and Central European Cinema," *Slavic Review* 51, no. 3 (autumn 1992): 531–535. [journal online];accessed 10 Jul. 2010; available from http://www.jstor.org/stable/2500059.

44. Ibid., 535.

45. These themes include the apolitical attitude of the cineastes, the relation to history as existential, the resentment toward the Party apparatus, migration, and reluctant feminism, to name a few.

46. The post-World War II legacy was at large different in the different states.

47. See Iordanova's *Cinema of Flames*; Daniel J. Goulding, *Liberated Cinema: The Yugoslav Experience, 1945–2001* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); and Richard Taylor, et al., eds., *The BFI Companion to Eastern European and Russian Cinema* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000).

48. Good examples are *Austeria* (*The Inn*) (1983) by the Polish producer Jerzy Kawalerovicz, *Tutajosok* (*The Raft*) (1989) by Hungarian Judit Elek and *Balkan Ekspres* (*Balkan Express*) (1983) by Yugoslav Branco Baletic. Taylor, 100.

49. Feinstein.

50. David A. Norris, review of *Mythistory and Narratives of the Nation in the Balkans*, ed. Tatjana Aleksić, *Slavic Review* 67, no. 4 (winter 2008): 1004. [journal online]; accessed 10 Jul. 2010; available from http://www.jstor.org/stable/27653049.

51. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

52. Ludmilla Kostova, review of *The Balkans and the West: Constructing the European Other, 1945–2003*, ed. Andrew Hammond, *The Slavonic and East European Review* 83, no. 4 (Oct. 2005): 752. [journal online]; accessed 10 Jul. 2010; available from http://www.jstor.org/stable/4214186.

53. Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, updated ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

54. Portuges, 535.
55. Dina Iordanova, "Conceptualizing the Balkans in Film," *Slavic Review* 55 no. 4 (winter 1996): 889. [journal online]; accessed 10 Jul. 2010; available from http://www.jstor.org/stable/2501242.
56. Ibid.
57. Kostova, 753.
58. Balkanization and its denigrated impact on the Balkans were covered first and most in depth by Maria Todorova in *Imagining the Balkans*. Todorova describes Balkanization to denote parcelization of large and viable political units and also as a synonym for a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primate, the barbarian. The term implies reductionism and stereotyping of the Balkans; Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 3.
59. Ludmilla Kostova argues that the pattern of denigration exists in the Western discourse of the region, especially since 1989. Kostova, 752.
60. Haynes cited in Kostova, 753.
61. Kostova, 753.
62. Julia Kristeva stressed the ethical importance of being "strangers to ourselves" in a speech at Sofia University in 2002. Kristeva cited in Kostova, 754.
63. Todorova, *Remembering Communism*, 16. Additional examples are offered in Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille, *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), and Alla Efimova, "Communist Nostalgia: On Soviet Aesthetics and Post-Soviet Memory (Russia, Visual Arts, Socialist Realism)" (Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1998).
64. Todorova, *Remembering Communism*, 14.
65. Ibid., 15.

CHAPTER ONE

BEHIND THE CURTAIN: CULTURAL POLITICS AND THE FORMATION OF THE BULGARIAN FILM INDUSTRY – 1940S AND 1950S

> You would think that nothing existed now except ideas of violent revolutions. But everything in history is revolution; even a renewal, a slow, peaceful discovery. Away then with the preconceived idea of moral renewal which needs, (on the part of the other people, the activists), violent action. Away with this childish need for company and noise.[1]
> —Federico Fellini

> The movie business is macabre. Grotesque. It is a combination of a football game and a brothel.[2]
> —Federico Fellini

> It's terrifying when everything starts forming an image.[3]
> —Julia Kristeva

The Question of Periodization and Early Formation Patterns

This chapter explores the development of Bulgarian cinema after the Communist *coup d'état* in 1944 and its institutionalization and evolution into an industry. It assesses the transformation of a small enterprise, occupied with film production and represented by five major companies, into an institution and industry dominated by the state and exploited for the purposes of indoctrination and propaganda.

In addition, the section assesses the complexities and paradoxes in this process. It sheds light as to why the cineastes initially embraced the interference of the government. It questions the relationship between the first pioneers and their state sponsors. And finally, it looks at how the

cultural policies of the Bulgarian Communist Party evolved and affected the filmmakers and determined the future course of the life of the industry.

Bulgarian film historians disagree about the exact point at which the film enterprise developed into a film industry.[4] Critics writing during the Communist period stress the view that "the birth" of Bulgarian cinema coincided with the date of the Communist coup, the 9th of September, 1944.[5] On the other hand, film critic Nedelcho Milev points out that the first phase of the Bulgarian cinema started immediately after the abolition of the monarchy, and more particularly on October 14, 1946, with the creation of the first law for cinema culture. In his document we read that "the State starts taking care and directing the right development of the cinema culture."[6] Films made during this period (1946–1948), such as *People among the Clouds* (*Hora sred oblatzite*) (1946), *One Wild World* (*Edin div svjat*) (1948), by Zachari Zhandov and *The Long Way of the Cigarette* (*Dalgiyat pat na tzigarata*) (1948) by Boncho Karastojanov, already reflected the enthusiastic spirit of the cineastes.

As Ronald Holloway points out, although over fifty feature films had already been made in Bulgaria when Zhandov was called in to direct *Alarm* (*Trevoga*) (1951), this was the true beginning for the young film industry. Zhandov belonged to the older generation of Bulgarian filmmakers, who learned their trade before and during the Second World War, and had won recognition abroad for his documentaries and short films: *One Day in Sofia* (*Edin den v Sofia*) (1946), and *People among the Clouds* (*Hora sred oblatzite*) (1947), the latter a film about weather stations and a First Prize winner at the Venice Film Festival.[7]

According to Milev, during this initial stage, two trends in film emerged: exploration of the life under the new dictatorship and a fascination with the historical past, specifically the Bulgarian Renaissance in the late 19th century, occurring immediately after the declaration of Bulgarian independence from the Ottoman Empire.[8] Milev and his contemporaries regard those early works as thematically oriented, ideologically immature, and aesthetically lacking.[9] The weaknesses of the filmmakers, according to Milev, provoked Party leaders to pass a new and more radical law addressing Bulgarian cinematography. The law provided for the complete nationalization of the industry, creating a central cinematic economic enterprise and cultural leadership presiding over the entire process of filmmaking and distribution.[10] Many scholars see the adoption of the law for nationalization of cinematography as the beginning of the industry.[11] Some schools of historians and film critics go even further, indicating an even later starting point in 1950, when the film, *Kalin the Eagle* (*Kalin orelât*), was first screened.