



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

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The Conformists: Creativity and Decadence in the East European Cinema, 1945-1989

Topic of Research Project

My project examines the complexities and paradoxes in the functioning of the Bulgarian film industry during 1945-1989.

Relevance and Contribution to Field

The history of the Bulgarian cinematic world is not only interesting but also important to assess. It exemplifies a very different dynamic, compared to pictures that we traditionally associate with Cold War Cinema culture, (having in mind mostly the dissident underground movements of countries, such as Poland and Hungary, the theme of victimization predominant in works about the Soviet film, or general stereotypes about art, life, and politics within a “totalitarian” state).

Because it is different, the Bulgarian case demonstrates the life of the intellectual elite, the functioning of the film industry, and the relationships between the intellectuals and the bureaucratic apparatus from a refreshing new perspective. Why? Bulgaria is a country about which remarkably little has been written. When we look at the history of Bulgarian film, the historiography on the subject is virtually negligible. 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.¹ Bulgarian historians at large have not yet discovered film as a legitimate historical source. The accounts about the history of the Bulgarian cinema, therefore, are produced by film critics or the filmmakers themselves.² 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. According to my findings, entirely no work exists in the field that examines the creation and development of the film industry as an institution and the complex interplay between the intellectuals and the bureaucratic apparatus of the Communist State.

Policy Significance

In the aftermath of 1989, we witness a phenomenon of “communist nostalgia” across the East/West divide.³ In addition, many Europeans are in the process of rethinking their past, searching for common identity and discovering common roots, realizing that open markets alone will not make a unified Europe. Furthermore, 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 understand Europe as an unified entity, the heritage of each European country must be integrated within “the larger picture”. It is a fact that Bulgaria joined European Union (EU) in 2007. However, despite to a largely successful transition towards democratization in this country, many scars from the past are still visible especially in the functioning of state sponsored institutions. Advanced members of the EU worry that the high level of corruption in countries such as Bulgaria and Romania can never lead to the expected and hoped for full integration of those countries in the European community. Therefore, in order to grasp the development of democracy in Southeastern Europe and the obstacles in building institutions according to the most recent Western models, we need to look back in order to understand the way Communism functioned and why it is so difficult to transcend the structural models from the past. In addition, in order to understand how globalization affects the culture of certain regions, especially those who tried very strongly to resist globalization, (in the case of Bulgaria this was evident during the Cold War Era), we need to assess very carefully the internal dynamics at work. Questions that are interesting to ask are do we have to deal with closed or open cultural systems and was the film industry destroyed due to the malfunctioning of local institutions, or was this the result of larger processes, whose effects and impacts were not as transparent as its deficiency at the local level?

Methodology

I started my research with a detailed case study, which explored in-depth the life of the Bulgarian film industry. The sources for this part of my research were located in the Central State Archive, Central Party Archive, and the Bulgarian Film Archive, in the Union of the Bulgarian Filmmakers and in the Central Library in Sofia. I worked for several months particularly in the Central State Archive in Sofia, in order to assess as many documents as possible relating to my topic. My goal was to trace the creation and development of a powerful

¹ See for example: Aleksander Janakiev, Sto Godischni Filmov Process: Lichnosti, Filmi, Kina (Sofia: IK Titra, 2002); or Petur Kurdzhilov, Bulgarian Feature Films: An Annotated Illustrated Filmography 1948-1970 (Sofia: Dr. Peter Beron State Publishing House, 1988).

² See Vūlo Radev, Isgubeni Prostranstva (Sofia: Literaturno forum, 2002)

³ Good examples are offered in the work of Alla Efimova, “Communist Nostalgia: On Soviet Aesthetics and Post-Soviet Memory (Russia, Visual Arts, Socialist Realism)” (Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1998).

industry that was mobilized for the needs of the Communist state. I wanted to explore the process of “making” of something that was at the beginning almost virtually not there. Further, I wanted to receive a sense of the everyday life of the cultural institutions in Communist Bulgaria.

In addition, I attempted to understand how they operated and why they were so successful. I collected substantial numbers of documents illustrating a large array of tasks with which the administrative apparatus was occupied, such as the processing of claims and complaints, the nationalization of cinema theatres, the distribution of the budget, the mobilization of the film industry as a powerful propaganda machine, the planning of film productions, the dealings with staff on several levels, correspondence between Communist Party leaders and the heads of the Union of the Bulgarian Filmmakers, and also major legislation passed during the period under consideration which concern the dynamics of the cultural life of the country.

Another important step in my research was to locate statistical data that illustrate the receptions of films at a larger scale. Here, I collected numerical evidence showing the distribution of films, the numbers of filmgoers, and viewers’ reactions about some major Bulgarian films. By analyzing the film distribution, the numbers of films produced per year and the numbers of moviegoers is crucial because it adds a quantitative dimension to my research. In addition, the role of the public is very important because it helps to grasp the constellation between performance and perception.

The second step of my research was to explore as many printed sources as possible, demonstrating the life of the artistic elite during the period. I assessed publications about films and personalities engaged in the film industry, articles in major Bulgarian journals and newspapers dealing with the arts and documents about some international and domestic festivals in which Bulgarian movies were involved. Furthermore, I closely explored documents dealing with the salaries of the film makers, business trips, and social activities in which they were involved.

My next step was to explore the final products of the industry: the films. For this part of my research I had to gain access, (which was not easy), to very rare films produced during the period. Here, I searched for “messages between the lines,” text and subtext, exploring several forms of subversion which made the arts so resilient and so successful.

A large part of this final activity was devoted to assessment of the censor machine in communist countries. I studied particularly carefully those films which were stopped from screening and made inaccessible to the larger public. I tried to grasp the “obvious” and not too obvious reasons for their restrictions. Here my findings were very interesting and often surprising.

Finally, I conducted interviews with movie makers, politicians and cultural leaders who were active during the period under assessment. In general, I searched for resilience in the *oeuvres*, in the operation of the institutions, and by looking at the lives of the artists, such as filmmakers, actors, screenwriters, composers, and cameramen. In my interviews, I posed questions, such as: How would those personalities define the relationship between the intellectual and the political apparatus? What were their major successes and the projects that they could never realize? Why do they think that in Bulgaria there was not a classical dissident culture? Is there anything unique in the Bulgarian cinema, (or is it rather a peripheral phenomenon)? and finally, are they nostalgic and if so, why?

I tested the working hypothesis, why the history of film during the period was a success story and why many intellectuals decided to go with the regime instead of openly rebelling against it.

Furthermore, I attempt to avoid the association of the term Eastern European with the notion of *malaise*. The question that I pose is not whether the arts in the Eastern Bloc were successful, but why were they so successful? At a larger comparative level I tried to gain understanding how cultural institutions and the people involved in film production operated within a relatively closed system, which according to my findings could be indeed called “totalitarian.”

Sites:

www.imbd.com
www.filmmakersbg.org
www.bnf.bg
www.bas.bg
www.natfiz.bg
www.uni-sofia.bg
www.kinoeye.org/archive/vountry_bulgaria.pnp
www.nationallibrary.bg/history_en.html
www.gotterdammerung.org
www.extremno.com/~bgfilm/
www.ny-bgfilmfest.com/
www.cinema.bg

Findings

The documents illustrated the creation, rise, and fall, (after 1989) of a powerful industry. The modus of operation of the film industry indicates a style of rule which is not at all that removed from what scholars still call “totalitarian.” In fact, one huge state department controlled every single aspect of the production and distribution of films. Especially during the first decade after the creation of the communist film machine and its complete “nationalization” and mobilization for the purposes of the state, sometimes, the administrator who dealt with the problems of a remote movie theatre in a small village was at the same time responsible for the calculation of film budgets, censoring, and hiring of cadres.

Despite the fact that with the growth and development of the industry a diversification of departments and functions is evident, the first impression is deceiving, because this apparent complexity is just on the surface. What I discovered is the existence of an uncomplicated machine which was probably so successful due to its simplicity. Of course there was an attempt on the part of the political elite, to create an impression for the presence of a “self-censorship” stemming from within the ranks of the film makers. For these purposes, four bodies of so-called “creative collectives” were formed during the 1960s. At the head was a leader who presided over several editors whose professions were writers, scriptwriters or film makers.. Those bodies decided which 6 films per year should be produced.

After the members of the collectives made their decisions, the chosen films were carefully assessed by another body, called “mini-counsel”, (whose role was not as minuscule as their name suggests.). These “mini counsels” were formed at the Ministry of Culture. Over them, presided a so-called director, who was at the same time also a vice minister of culture. All films that were considered “controversial” or particularly important for state purposes, (which in fact meant all films) were assessed further by the Communist Party Central Committee (CPCC). The same process occurred when a film was ready. Despite the apparent complexity of this scheme, in fact a few people and the relationships among them determined the fate of many films and their creators. For example, the Central Committee members relied on the opinion of members of the “mini counsels.” Very often, film makers who were the protégées of CPCC members or of members of the mini-counsels” were favored and others, very often for irrational reasons were

limited in advancement or their careers were temporary ruined. Very often the elevation of one certain artist and at the same time the removal of another from the cultural scene indicated change in the political climate or the takeover of one faction of communist leaders by another.

In this regard, it is also very interesting to note what happened to the creators of films which were stopped. Those artists were not sent to gulags, or exterminated, as one might expect. To the contrary, they were kept under control, close to their colleagues and to the Party. They continued to receive salaries and were obliged to participate in all major political and social events. However, their projects were not admitted for a period of time, the duration of which could vary. In other words, they were publicly humiliated and deprived of what was in most cases crucial for them - being able to work.

Did this policy create a climate of suspicion among the film makers and prevent them from creating lasting friendships, which could be at a core of a possible grassroots resistance movement? Yes. Fear and the resulting atomization were indeed at the core of, to a large extent, a successful operation of the state machine. On the other hand, this was not a system solely made up of punishments, but also of rewards. The unusual film culture's access to travel permits, connections abroad, foreign currency, and an array of privileges acted as a "performance-enhancing drug" for the artistic elite. At the same time, the "socialist manner of working"⁴ made possible for the filmmakers to edit their works and rewrite their ideas for very long periods of time, sometimes extending up to 819 days. Furthermore, as already emphasized, even if sometimes they were occasionally deprived of work, they were never cut off from the cultural life of the country and never left without monthly income.

These policies, despite the oppressiveness of the *status quo*, made possible the flourishing of innovative ideas, which formed the basis for the establishment of dissident culture "within the ranks of party activists" of a very interesting kind. Furthermore, this closed circle seemed to have had in a somehow "perverted" way a stimulating impact on many artists, who searched for more complex and sophisticated means for self expression. One of the many ways of expression, as well known between Bulgarian artists was the so called "esop language." I discovered this mixture of grotesque, sadness, and didactical language in many of the films under assessment. The evidence indicated that the film makers were not merely lackeys of the regime. The representation of Utopian ideals and everydayness was not an easy task, which they uncritically embraced.⁵ A memorandum for the arts issued by the Politburo in Bulgaria in the 1970s states that "despite the intentions of the artists, the film offers to us a conception of a human which is in deep discordance with the modes of Marxist thinking."⁶

The cat and mouse game among censors, party mentors, and filmmakers was not always suffocating but sometimes stimulating for the intelligentsia. The result of this game was the creation of work 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*.⁷

⁴ Ibid., 266.

⁵ Feinstein, 231.

⁶ Janakiev, 228.

⁷ Good examples are the DDR film *Paul and Paula* and the Bulgarian film *A Woman in 33*.

Overall, the culture in the Eastern European states was not a culture of despair, but rather a culture which was deeply connected to the policy of patronage and the reward and punishment system of the communist government.

Another important role in this system was the part played by the film critics. They were ambitious intellectuals, as well, who very often sided with the powerful of the day and in this regard were instrumental in helping to promote certain artist and ruin others. However, similar to the film makers, they also attempted to rebel against the system from within. One way was to go in depth in critiquing western influences very vigorously, in this way introducing the culture of the West to the ordinary reader.

Do my findings indicate that life under communism was happy? Of course not. Many of the works, as expected, were depressed, sterile, and one dimensional. However, a large array of the films under assessment, were very philosophical, sophisticated, and highly intellectually developed, made with an impressive precision, awareness of the contemporary trends in the development of the Western film and attention to detail. The reasons for this awareness are easy to grasp. Because of the lack of institution of higher education until the 1970s in Bulgaria, all film makers were educated abroad in countries such as France, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union, of course. There, they were either openly exposed to “the spirit of the West,” or they encountered a very complex and developed dissident culture, as in the case of the Soviet Union.

By and large, the evidence indicates 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*. In fact the difference between the “left-minded” intellectual from the West and their idealistic Eastern European colleagues was not as large as previously presumed.

The trivial division of the Eastern European film into the categories of propaganda and dissent is also too simplistic. The examples of many films show far greater complexity and the presence of an apolitical attitude among the artists.⁸ In fact, Bulgaria had a vigorous and very prolific intellectual life.

Several statistical data suggested that the size of the film industry in Bulgaria was remarkable, especially in relation to such a small, predominantly rural, and sparsely populated country. The dramatic changes that occurred in Europe after the end of World War II rather invigorated the cultural life on the continent. For example, in postwar Bulgaria, the communist government allowed the distribution of many previously prohibited films not only created by Soviet but also by American, French, and English cinematographers. The average film imports in the country reached 200 Western films per year in the mid-fifties.⁹ The nationalization of the film industry in 1945 in the former communist countries, as well, led to an eruption of film production of unprecedented scale.

Furthermore, statistical data indicated a steady growth in the numbers of films, starting with the production of one to two films in the 1940s and reaching heights, such as 21 films per year

⁸ Feinstein.

⁹ Janakiev, 177.

during the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁰ In addition, the average number of film viewers, which was 1.5 million per Bulgarian film, and the state subsidy for film production, which was 1.1 million leva per film suggest the presence of an influential and powerful industry.¹¹

Considering the numerical data discussed above, the fact that the Bulgarian case is completely understudied, and the lack of evidence to indicate a large exodus of émigrés or the presence of an underground artistic networks make this country a particularly interesting object of study.

In reality, the history of film in the Eastern Bloc 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.¹²

Suggestions for Future Research

The availability of my dissertation will hopefully encourage a more vigorous dialogue between what we still consider the "West" and the "East," and eventually lead to the creation and publication of more academic works about such little known regions. For example, after its completion, this proposal may open the doors for curriculum focused on the history of the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Moreover, it may stimulate the distribution in college libraries of more cinematic works by Eastern European filmmakers. In the publication sector, it may provoke critical reassessment of the culture of the Cold War era on a bigger scale. At large, my dissertation seeks to reexamine cultural trends from the recent past. For us, to see the culture of the Cold War from a new angle is particularly relevant within the context of a unified Europe and an ongoing process of globalization.

Recommendations for the US Policy Community

Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004 and the European Union in 2007. In October 2005, the Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov met with President George W. Bush in order to discuss strategies for the more rapid integration of Bulgaria as member of the transatlantic community. In June 2007, George W. Bush became the second American President to visit Bulgaria. These recent political events suggest that the relationships between the USA and Bulgaria will develop further in the future and that Bulgaria, as a close partner of the United States, will be worth studying and exploring on many levels.

¹⁰ Ibid., 297 - 311. (Note: Interesting are the numbers of films produced per year: 1950-1, 1951-2, 1952-1, 1954-3, 1955-2, 1956-7, 1957-6, 1958-7, 1959-4, 1960-9, 1961-9, 1962-8, 1963-9, 1964-11, 1965-12, 1966-7, 1967-10, 1968-10, 1969-17, 1970-9, 1971-12, 1972-15, 1973-18, 1974-18, 1975-18, 1976-15, 1977-18, 1978-21, 1979-20, 1980-19, 1981-18, 1982-21, 1983-19, 1984-19, 1985-20, 1986-21, 1987-20, 1988-19, 1989-19, 1990-7, 1991-5)

¹¹ Ibid., 177, 297 – 311.

¹² For more information about specific films see Janakiev.