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Bulgarian Cinema: From Allegorical Expressionism to Declined National Cinema

Declined National Cinema

The increased mobility of people within Europe has shaken up the socio-geographical fixity of a continent of nation-states, creating new modes of transnational culture and becoming a recurrent subject in what Luisa Rivi calls 'declined national cinema' (Rivi 2007). Rivi appropriates Gianni Vattimo's notion of 'weak' or 'declined' thought—*pensiero debole*—and transfers it to the debate on national cinema. The notion of *pensiero debole* refers to the exhaustion—but *not* the vanishing—of the project of modernity (the belief in reason, progress, history, the nation-state etc.). In *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, Vattimo argues that the postmodern is 'not only […] something new in relation to the modern, but also [...] a dissolution of the category of the new—in other words [...] an experience of 'the end of history' rather than...the appearance of a different stage of history' (1991: 4).[1] Vattimo does not read the postmodern de-historicization of experience nostalgically or pessimistically. Rather, he argues that the ideas of Nietzsche and Heidegger 'offer us the chance to pass from a purely critical and negative description of the postmodern condition, typical of early twentieth-century *Kulturkritik* and its more recent offshoots, to an approach that treats it as a positive possibility and opportunity. Nietzsche mentions all of this [...] in his theory of a possibly active or positive (accomplished) nihilism. Heidegger alludes to the same thing with his idea of a *Verwindung* of metaphysics which is not a critical overcoming in the "modern" sense of the term' (1991: 11). Heidegger's term *Verwindung* seeks to describe the overcoming of modernity and metaphysics, 'a going-beyond that is both an acceptance and a deepening' (1991: 172). Analyzing the etymology of the term *Verwindung* Vattimo underscores the connotation of 'convalescence' (to be healed, cured of an illness), also linked to resignation, and the connotation of distortion (to turn, to twist). One is cured of an illness and at the same time resigned to a pain or loss: 'Metaphysics is not something we can put aside like an opinion. Nor can it be left behind us like a doctrine in which we no longer believe; rather, it is something which stays in us as do the traces of an illness or a kind of pain to which we are resigned. It is neither a critical overcoming nor an acceptance that recovers and prolongs it' (1991: 175). Following Heidegger and Nietzsche, Vattimo insists that post-histoire (weakened history) is not yet another discourse that tries to legitimate itself on the grounds that it is more up to date and thus more valid or more authentic than the bankrupt discourse of modernity.

In her book *European Cinema after 1989* Luisa Rivi relies on Vattimo's notion of *pensiero debole* to describe the exhaustion—but not the vanishing—of national cinema. For Rivi, the decline of Europe's master narratives does not mark their end; instead, these narratives are realized in declined ways, 'through the introduction and acceptance of concepts of plurality, alterity, difference, opaqueness, and heterogeneity' (2007: 32). This process involves Europe acknowledging its past myths and master narratives and instead

of trying to overcome the past or recover it nostalgically, rethinking its master narratives to make them reflect the new social, political, and economic realities. Thus, Rivi argues that rather than discarding the concept of national cinema in favor of 'post-national cinema' we should approach post-1989 European cinema as 'weak' or 'declined' national cinema, one that acknowledges the different ways in which transnational forces and supranational bodies are altering the notion of national identity and national cinema. 'Declined' national cinema dramatizes the dissolution of national identity without, however, erecting another type of identity in its place that tries to legitimize itself as 'more authentic,' because, as Vattimo reminds us, authenticity, 'understood as what is "proper",' has itself vanished" (1991: 25).

In what follows I examine a number of recent Bulgarian films about internal migration, immigration before and after 1989, and post-communist spiritual homelessness in order to expose the first cracks in the monolithic body of Bulgarian national cinema. Although the geopolitical transformations that have been reshaping the actual and metaphorical borders of the new Europe have given rise to new genres and styles in Bulgarian cinema, there is still considerable continuity, both in terms of style and subject matter, between pre- and post-1989 films as evidenced, for instance, by the persistence of allegorical expressionism as the dominant mode of representation in Bulgarian cinema, which is challenged only occasionally by less provincial styles of filmmaking.

Allegorical Expressionism and Provincialism

Val Todorov's study "Bulgarian Cinema: Constants and Variables" provides a helpful starting point for exploring the shifting relationship between cinematic style and national identity. Todorov identifies several persistent stylistic features of Bulgarian cinema, among them *theatricality* and *allegorical expressionism*. *Theatricality* refers to the subordination of visual expression to narrative, which can be attributed to the fact that the Bulgarian film industry was built upon an already established theatrical tradition (Todorov 1999-2013). Inasmuch as under communism film production was controlled by the State, emphasis was placed not on cinematic language but on the script, which was expected to carry a film's ideological message. Recent films exhibit a greater concern with the visual language of film, a reflection of Bulgarian filmmakers' increased exposure to other filmic traditions, including non-European ones (for example Iranian cinema). With the exception of the 'poetic realist' cinema of the 1960s and 1970s the prevailing stance of Bulgarian cinema has always been *allegorical expressionism*, exemplified by philosophic and moral parables and allegories. The fact that allegorical expressionism did not disappear from Bulgarian films after the fall of communism suggests that it was not simply a strategy of resistance to totalitarian censorship. Rather, allegorical expressionism originates in Bulgaria's ethno-psychology and folklore, and in its Eastern Orthodox and pagan past. Referencing Liehm and Liehm's 1981 study *The Most Important Art: Soviet and Eastern European Film after 1945* Todorov reads allegorical expressionism—*schematism*—as a manifestation of the peculiarities of Bulgarian ethnicity, specifically Bulgaria's historical sense of isolation and provincialism.

The tendency to *schematism* or *allegorical expressionism* stands for a literal approach to story, conflict and characterization on analogy with parables or fairy tales,

which always have a clear message or moral conveyed in an allegorical manner. As a literary device allegory is characterized by its transparency and simplicity. The terms that make up an allegory refer to each other in a straightforward manner: something concrete stands for an abstract concept or idea in a relationship of correspondence or reference that is clearly marked. Although indirectly expressed allegorical meaning is finite and unambiguous. Significantly, for Liehm and Liehm schematism is synonymous with auto-censorship, where censorship is not (or not necessarily) political censorship but rather a self-imposed limit on the meaning one wants to convey and the means one believes are necessary (or sufficient) to convey it. In short, auto-censorship refers not to Bulgarian filmmakers' experience of being forced by outside powers *to delimit/disguise the meaning(s)* they want to convey, but rather to the *limited nature of the meaning* they want to convey in the first place, to a certain deficiency of expression, which Liehm and Liehm view as a result (or evidence) of Bulgarians' historical sense of provincialism.

This decoupling of censorship from its usual association with politics (communism = censorship), and its coupling instead with ethnicity and history, is particularly illuminating in the present moment when discussions of national and supra-national identity, national and transnational cinema, provincialism and globalism, dominate European cinema scholarship. One important question that emerges from such considerations is *whether transformations in cinematic styles*—for instance, a movement away from allegorical expressionism towards other, more complex or ambiguous tropes—*follow (or accompany) geopolitical and ethnic transformations*, such as the transition from national to transnational Europe/cinema. In other words, we could view the persistence of allegorical expressionism in Bulgarian cinema as evidence of a persisting sense of national provincialism grounded in an obsolete notion of a unified national identity impervious to transnational flows. Conversely, the appearance of a number of films that refuse to function as extended allegories or parables might be seen as a sign that the certainties associated with that style—the schematic notion of national identity as constructed by stable referents that remain in a stable, one-to-one relationship with each other—are gradually giving way to a polycentric and fluid notion of Bulgarian identity constructed by constantly migrating referents that never freeze in a one-to-one correspondence but continue circulating, on analogy with the new Europe's migrating bodies and minds. This way of looking at cinematic style is consistent with a poststructuralist understanding of how identity is constituted in the first place. The idea that Bulgarian filmmakers used allegorical expressionism to fight political censorship captures only in the most schematic way the relationship between filmmakers and historical reality, as if filmmakers carry around a toolbox with different styles from which they choose the most appropriate tool (style) to fit their purpose. The fact that certain cinematic styles persist beyond their 'expiration date' suggests that style is not merely a tool existing independently of the idea a filmmaker wants to convey but, rather, emerges organically from a filmmaker's sense of his/her own place in historical reality.

What is then the relationship between allegorical expressionism and provincialism?[2] Understanding an allegory depends on one's familiarity with *both* terms that make up the allegory: both the surface meaning and the real/hidden meaning. Allegory depends on a precise knowledge of the local, hidden meaning, *which is always already given rather than constructed in the course of viewing the film*. Reading an allegory—whether literary or cinematic—does not depend on the viewers' *reading skills*

but on their *prior knowledge* of the hidden/local meaning. No matter how experienced viewers might be in reading a film's visual language, the meaning of the allegory will escape them because it is not found in the purely visual language of the film, which is never fully codifiable. In allegorical expressionism, then, meaning is always found on the level of narrative, not on the level of the visual. Inasmuch as allegory relies on an insider's knowledge of the specific historical, social and political context in which the allegory operates, allegorical expressionism is *not* a transnational-friendly style.

Internal Migration, the Trauma of Immigration, and Spiritual Homelessness

Significantly, the majority of films Todorov gives as examples of Bulgarian cinema's allegorical expressionism, hence of its provincialism—the 1970s migration cycle [*Momcheto si otiva/A Boy Becomes a Man* (Lyudmil Kirkov, 1972), *Mazhe bez rabota/Men without Work* (Ivan Terziev, 1973), *Darvo bez koren/A Tree without Roots* (Christo Christov, 1974), *Selyaninat s koleloto*/A *Peasant on a Bicycle* (Lyudmil Kirkov, 1974), *Wilna zona/Villa Zone* (Eduard Zachariev, 1975) etc.]—explore the narrative trajectory (migration) and the deep structure of feeling (homelessness) central to contemporary European, including Bulgarian, cinema. Like Todorov, Violetta Petrova also sees the trope of the journey (physical and/or imaginary) and what she calls 'the synecdoches of glocalisation' in recent Bulgarian films as reinterpreting key moments in Bulgarian cinematic history: 1) the internal migration explored in the 1970s migration cycle, 2) the formation of national myths of identity (the internalized Other), and 3) the young generation's existential angst in anticipation of Eastern Europe's velvet revolutions (Petrova 2006).

While the migration cycle explored migration *within* the nation—village-city migration—recent Bulgarian films treat the subject of migration on a transnational scale.[3] Does this necessarily mean that they manage to break free of the provincialism of the 1970s films? To understand the allegory of 'a tree without roots' played out in the films of the migration cycle one needs to be familiar with Bulgarian national psychology. The eroticized mytho-poetic imagery of Mother Earth that permeates the films of the migration cycle points 'to a central dichotomy in the cultural history of Bulgaria—rural and urban—and registers a colossal social movement: the exodus from village to big city as a result of the process of a fast and at times brutal modernization and industrialization' (Petrova).[4] Scholars usually read the migration cycle as resisting the unifying, optimistic ideology of socialist realism. This is precisely what makes it provincial: to understand the allegory of the divided self, viewers have to be familiar with the peculiarities of socialism in Bulgaria. At the same time, however, the divided self in these films has another, transnational aspect insofar as it dramatizes a more general conflict, that between tradition and modernity. In this respect, the allegory of exile in the migration cycle prefigures more recent explorations of exile in transnational terms.

Although recent Bulgarian films explore the theme of migration and homelessness in transnational rather than national terms they continue to invoke the old city versus village dichotomy, positing the village as a morally and spiritually privileged realm, a source of 'authentic national identity', and contrasting it with the post-communist city as a place of exile, moral decrepitude, and inauthenticity. *Pismo do Amerika/Letter to America* (Iglika Triffonova, 2001), *Mila ot Mars/Mila from Mars* (Zornitsa-Sophia, 2004), *Shivachki/Seamstresses* (Lyudmil Todorov, 2007), and *Svetat e golyam i spasenie*

debne otvsyakade/The World Is Big and Salvation Lurks around the Corner (Stephan Komadarev, 2008) demonstrate that post-communist Bulgarian cinema is still dominated by a conservative nationalistic discourse based on a perennialist notion of national identity rooted in the nation's ethno-scape, ethno-history and ethno-memory and allegedly 'corrupted' by post-communist developments such as immigration and globalization. *Letter to America* tells the story of two friends: Kamen, a theatre director who immigrates to the US and Ivan, a writer who remains in Bulgaria. Kamen's immigration is treated as a pretext to explore another kind of movement, the reversal of the village-city migration in the migration cycle, namely the return of the disaffected city intellectual (Ivan) to his roots. The film constructs both village-city migration and immigration as two forms of spiritual sickness, which can be cured only by a return to the roots of Bulgarian identity, the village. *Mila from Mars* (2004) tells the story of a 16 year old orphan, Mila, who is sold to Alex, a successful businessman and, later, her pimp. The pregnant Mila escapes from Alex and hitches a ride to a village near the border, which is all but abandoned except for a group of peasants involved in marijuana trafficking. The villagers adopt Mila as a sort of a surrogate communal granddaughter. The film is an extended *allegory* for the nation's continuous attempts to reconcile its communist past and agrarian roots with its nouveau riche present and uncertain future. Here the past, implicitly identified with traditional folk life, is positioned as a pure Heimat in danger of being polluted or profaned by the present that is the foreign amorality and capitalist greed of free-market mobsters, which the film constructs as perversions of Bulgarian national character. *Seamstresses*, which tells the story of three young girls moving to the capital in search of employment, examines the loss of ideals in the movement from village to city. Ruled by the evil forces of capitalism, the corrupt post-communist city is positioned as alien to Bulgarian identity and sensibility, of which the three small town girls are, allegedly, the embodiment. In *The World Is Big and Salvation Lurks around the Corner*, too, the only cure for national amnesia is a road trip from the host country back to the lost homeland. Alexander, a young Bulgarian man who immigrated with his parents to Germany in the early 1980s, suffers a car crash as a result of which he loses his memory. It is then up to his grandfather, who travels from Bulgaria to Germany, to restore his grandson's memory. To immigrate, the film suggests, is to condemn oneself to a life of alienation and loneliness. In Germany Alexander is stuck in an unrewarding job, translating vacuum cleaner manuals, living alone in an apartment full of empty boxes: Germany for him remains an address, not a home. These films continue to subscribe to a view of immigration as an inherently schizophrenic experience resulting in a pathological state (split identity or amnesia). While the communist regime used to exaggerate its appreciation for folk culture in order to naturalize communism and conceal its ideological character, post-communist films revive the fascination with village life, and the sentimental/organic notion of the nation on which it is based, as a convenient antidote to bleak post-communist reality, thereby perpetuating the long outdated 'sleeping beauty view' of national identity as 'the awakening of something extant, which had merely been dormant' (Hall 1995: 11).

The second moment in Bulgarian cinematic history, which, according to Petrova, prefigured the more recent reconfiguration of Bulgarian identity as 'multiple, broken, quivering, shattered, virtual' includes the series of 1980s historical epics exploring key moments in the formation of the nation. Petrova reads the most important one—*Vreme na*

nasilie/*Time of Violence* (Lyudmil Staikov, 1988), which deals with the violent conversion of Bulgarian Christians to Muslims during the period of Ottoman domination—as illustrating 'the drama of the internalized other.' By making Karaibrahim, the cruelest of the Ottomans—who is, significantly, of Bulgarian origin—the protagonist, the film 'redirects the attention from inter-ethnic to intra-ethnic tension', with the result that 'the narrative oscillates between the notions of internalized other and a plural self.' The film, Petrova claims, 'implicitly promotes a sense of belonging to the larger Balkan community, which shares similar historical sentiments and concerns.' The 1980s historical epic's construction of Balkan identity as always already 'doubly occupied', to use Elsaesser's term (Elsaesser 48), anticipates more recent engagements with this issue such as Zornitsa-Sophia's *Prognoza*/*Forecast* (2008), in which a group of friends from different Balkan countries go surfing on an isolated Turkish island. Early in the film Zornitsa-Sophia strategically plants seemingly harmless comments expressing deep nationalistic sentiments to prepare us for the full-blown Balkan conflict that will erupt later. The nationalistic comments are, however, offset by scenes emphasizing the fundamental similarities (language, sense of humor, machismo) between Balkan nations. Indeed, the film suggests that the Balkan conflict is, to a large extent, the result of trading an inside/Balkan/shared worldview for an outside/detached/Western worldview, which exaggerates the differences between Balkan nations.

The third point in Bulgarian cinematic history that anticipated the reformulation of Bulgarian identity as multiple and hybrid was the period between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, which saw the arrival of a new generation of filmmakers—later known as 'the lost generation'—interested in exploring not key moments in the nation's history but the existential problems of disillusioned young people. Krassimir Kroumov's trilogy *Ekzitus*/*Exitus* (1989), *Malchanieto*/*Silence* (1991), and *Zabraneniat plod*/*The Forbidden Fruit* (1994) is representative of this cycle of films, which announced the arrival of a new, post-communist, morally ambiguous subject and anticipated the fragmented subject of post- 2000 films. Kamen Kalev's *Iztochni piesi*/*Eastern Plays* (2009), Iglika Triffonova's *Razsledvane*/*The Investigation* (2006), and Ivan Tscherkelov's *Raci*/*Crayfish* (2009) continue the legacy of "the lost generation," returning to its major preoccupations: existential angst, crime, violence, moral ambiguity, feelings of displacement and homelessness. Kalev and Triffonova are not interested in the economic and political transformations taking place during Bulgaria's never-ending transition period but in the spiritual and moral after-effects of the geopolitical shocks to the system. Although their films explore the experience of homelessness they do so neither through the subject of internal (village-city) migration nor through the trauma of immigration. In *Eastern Plays* homelessness is *not* associated with immigration; instead, the film looks for the roots of the *spiritual and moral homelessness* experienced by those who did *not* immigrate. Rather than locating Bulgarian national identity in its idealized agrarian past and contrasting it with the 'evils' of immigration or capitalist exploitation, Kalev paints a complex picture of the amoral, opportunistic culture of post-communist Bulgaria without offering a cure for this spiritual malaise.

Investigation treads similar territory but does so—in a radical departure from the films of 'the lost generation'—through the eyes of a *female* protagonist, the single female detective on the Sofia Police Force, a married woman who feels morally and spiritually homeless. This existential psychological drama runs counter to Western expectations of

Eastern European and Balkan filmmakers to make explicitly anti-nationalist films in order to be considered cinematic and worthy of festival exhibition. Triffonova's film is a Cain-and-Abel crime drama based on material she gathered while working on an earlier documentary (*Razkazi za ubiystva*/*Murder Stories*, 1993). Detective Alexandra Yakimova attempts to crack a perplexing case of a man who has vanished without a trace. Although she has no solid evidence she suspects that the man's brother, Plamen, might have killed him and buried the parts of his severed body somewhere. Conventional detective methods prove useless in solving the case. It is only when Alexandra finally 'cracks' emotionally, when she learns to love—first the criminal she is investigating and then her own family, from which she feels alienated—that Plamen confesses to the murder. The murder investigation thus serves as an occasion for Alexandra's *self-investigation* as she comes to realize that the Other—embodied by the person with whom she is least likely to identify, a murderer—is not merely an abstraction positioned somewhere on 'the outskirts' of her own self; rather, her private self is always already in a state of 'semantic occupation' by the Other.[5]

Investigation picks up the idea of the always-already occupied self, treated in the 1980s historical epics in *ethnic, religious and national terms*, and reinterprets it in *ethical or existential terms*. The question of nation building gives way to the care of the self and the ethics of the self. Once Plamen senses that Alexandra understands him—that she understands his motif for murdering his own brother not through means of deduction but through empathizing with him—he readily confesses to the crime. The film is more interested in exploring the basis for establishing a community of fellow human beings rather than in a top-down approach to nationhood or citizenship. The first step in challenging the ideology of the nation is not to ask how national borders are drawn—as Étienne Balibar does in *We, the People of Europe?: Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (2003), where he argues that as an institution the nation rests upon the formulation of a rule of exclusion, of visible and invisible borders materialized in laws and practices—but rather to ask how the self draws the border separating her from 'the Other.' The separation between self and other, between the innocent and the guilty, between the detective and the criminal, is the basis for all other divisions, including those at the level of the nation: the unspoken and unwritten law of *personal* human relationships is the foundation of the Law. Alexandra begins the investigation using traditional methods that render the criminal an 'object of study': she observes him in the prison yard through a pair of binoculars, she looks at pictures from the scene of the crime, jots down notes on post-it cards, but it is only when she *identifies with* Plamen as a human being, instead of seeing him as an 'Other', that he confesses to the crime. Significantly, the film ends with Alexandra attending a production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, a play about mistaken identities that drives home the point that 'mistaken identity' is a contradiction in terms. Identities cannot be 'mistaken' because identity is never singular: the Other is constitutive of the Self.

While Triffonova explores homelessness in existential terms, Cherkelov's *Crayfish* (2009) focuses on the political and socio-economic roots of the spiritual homelessness of its protagonists, two small-town working-class drifters, and presents us with two different responses to the ongoing socio-economic-existential crisis in which the 1989 generation remains trapped: cynicism (Doca) and passive acceptance (Bonzo). Doka and Bonzo are hired by two rivaling business partners to earn some quick money

but eventually find themselves on opposite sides and, without suspecting it, one of them kills the other. Although they are both in their thirties Doca and Bonzo still live like the teenagers they were back in 1989. The film effectively conveys the debilitating sense of stagnation that permeates all relationships in contemporary Bulgaria: between friends, lovers, parents and their children, co-workers, politicians, and citizens. The Communist Party is no longer in power but the new leaders of the homegrown brand of neo-liberalism continue its legacy of total control and ruthless manipulation. The film cuts back and forth between Bonzo and Doca's mundane existence, the secret machinations of Bulgaria's nouveau riche class (parvenu 'businessmen'), and an assortment of vestiges of the communist regime (an ex-cop, former members of the Communist Party throwing up patriotic orgies in abandoned party hotels, the head of the Bulgarian army driving around aimlessly in his refurbished Russian car). Following 1989 communist apparatchiks 'reinvented' themselves as leaders of the neo-liberal order—businessmen, a.k.a. mafia kingpins, who now exploit the country economically rather than politically. The setting of an important conversation between one of the rivaling businessmen and his personal advisor is emblematic of the way in which business is conducted in Bulgaria: not through official, legal channels, but from a random hotel room, the back of a car, or a bathroom. The other businessman seems to operate from a 'real' office, wearing a suit and surrounded by other suited up men, while a secretary dutifully takes calls behind the glass door. And yet, his office, empty except for the table covered with laptops and junk food, seems ready to be folded up the minute someone suspects the business transactions carried out in it are illegal.

In another emblematic scene Bonzo's mother goes shopping with Bonzo's pregnant wife in what used to be the capital's biggest shopping center, now a mall. 'Nothing will ever change in this country!' she tells her daughter-in-law. 'They made a shiny, expensive store but the people working in it are the same stupid, uncultured tekezesari.' She uses the word 'tekezesari', whose original meaning is 'members of the Communist Labor Cooperative,' as a derogatory term to refer to people whose way of thinking has not changed post-1989. While in earlier films, as we have seen, the village was depicted as the last stronghold of Bulgarian national identity, here the word 'tekezesar' or 'peasant' is used to signify the illusory nature of the transition period and the regression to old, communist, 'pre-European' attitudes. The film presents former communist leaders' reinvention of themselves as successful businessmen as a regression to non-European attitudes identified with communism. 'These same tekezesari with their stupid, leering faces will bury us,' Bonzo's mother says scornfully, helplessly. As if to confirm her statement, the director cuts to a long shot of half-naked old men and women, drinking themselves to stupor, singing the Bulgarian national anthem and waving the national flag in an abandoned Communist Party hotel, while outside a former Commander-in-chief in the Bulgarian Army drives around in circles and shoots randomly at a fat pig rolling around in the mud, 'guarding' the national flag. This image, which encapsulates Bulgarians' view of their country's leadership, is, as is often the case in Bulgarian cinema, sexually inflected, presenting the former communist leaders' neglect of the country in terms of sexual abandon and promiscuity, and depicting Bulgaria's current state in terms of sexual perversion.

A 'Declined' Bulgarian Cinema?

As I suggested earlier there are signs that Bulgarian cinema is finally entering the stage of 'declined cinema' at least in two ways. First, recent films revisit a familiar subject—forced immigration under communism—in a new light: *Zad kadar*/*Voice-over* (Svetoslav Ovtcharov, 2010) and *Stapki v pyasaka*/*Footsteps in the Sand* (Ivaylo Hristov, 2010) depart from the self-congratulatory, democratizing discourse of 1990s films, which were preoccupied with exposing 'the truth' about totalitarianism, and replace the pathos of revealing secrets and assigning guilt with an exploration of immigration in *personal rather than political* (*allegorical*) *terms*. Second, a couple of recent films—*Misiya London*/*Mission London* (Dimitar Mitovski, 2010) and *The Island* (Kamen Kalev, 2011)—suggest that Bulgarian cinema is finally learning to play postmodern games with national identity.

Voice-over begins in a self-referential manner with a film crew getting ready to shoot the film we are about to see, an autobiographical story in which the director of the film (Anton) is also the protagonist, a cinematographer separated from his family in the late 1970s when his wife and son leave for Western Berlin to get the best possible treatment for the boy's bronchitis. Although they don't leave with the intention of immigrating a year later Anton's wife informs him they are not coming back. Anton is not a poor struggling artist but a respected film professional whose work is supported by those in power. The film does not portray him merely as a victim of the system. Indeed, from the very beginning his ethical position is left ambiguous. When the director of the film he is working on is fired for failing to follow party directives Anton assures him that he will also leave the film in solidarity. However, when the Party assigns a new director to the project Anton continues working on the film, breaking his promise to his friend. Anton's betrayal motivates the film's first director to seek an appointment with Senior Lieutenant Angelov of the Bureau for National Security Director and report to him—in exchange for two glasses of airyan and a croissant!—that Anton is a potential enemy of the state (because of his connections with the West). Based on this 'testimony', and under the pretext that it would be a pity for Bulgarian socialist culture to lose such a talented cinematographer at the height of his artistic career, Angelov places Anton under surveillance.

The banality of Angelov's methods of surveillance and the matching banality of the 'reports' (that is, gossip) he collects, underscore the extent to which surveillance is integrated into people's everyday life. One of Anton's neighbors shares all too willingly her observations of Anton and his family, painting them as dangerous traitors. They prefer the West's 'casual lifestyle' to the hardworking communist lifestyle. Anton is, allegedly, condescending toward the neighbor, a woman from the countryside who is obviously not part of Sofia's 'cultural elite': under the communist regime class distinctions, particularly divisions along educational and city/village lines, persisted under the pretense of a classless society. Anton travels too often to West Berlin and appears to be extremely well paid while the neighbor's own husband, a war veteran and a member of the Communist Party, barely makes ends meet. Finally, Anton's wife is known to 'entertain Arabs at home', although, as Angelov reminds the neighbor, Arabs are from the (good) East, not from the (evil) West, a comment that exposes another well-disguised feature of communist society, its underlying racism. The banality of surveillance is dramatized in a scene in which Anton's neighbor opens his mailbox, using

her knitting needles, and read his wife's letter to him.

Angelov and his admiring female protégé (a recent graduate of the Bureau for National Security) finally get their hands on some 'hard evidence' when Anton and his wife begin sending each other gifts and letters through a German family who travel to Bulgaria for vacation. Angelov suspects the Germans are in charge of a secret 'underground railroad' for smuggling Bulgarians to the West. Therefore, he intercepts any attempts on Anton's part to travel to Berlin or of his wife to return to Bulgaria. Anton's career as a cinematographer is threatened when the next film he is hired to work on is stopped for political reasons and he learns of plans for the publication of an incriminating article about the film's director (Karlo) that paints him as 'a dangerous formalist' and a homosexual involved in a secret relationship with Anton. Eventually Angelov reaches the conclusion that Anton is not a traitor (though his wife is), promising Anton to help him finish Karlo's film but demanding in return that Anton file for divorce.

The film complicates the usual victim-victimizer relationship by refusing to treat Anton purely as a victim and Angelov as a mindless apparatchik following orders. Indeed, the film suggests that Angelov himself does not believe in the communist rhetoric he is supposed to stand up for. At one point he tells his assistant: ' "Doubt everything!" says…?' ' "Marx!" ' she finishes his thought, trying to impress him with her knowledge of communist literature, but he asks her jokingly ' "Groucho or Chico?" ' mocking her for taking the communist reference seriously. As Anton's marriage disintegrates, partly because of his blind dedication to his work and his unwillingness to sacrifice his job for his family, Angelov and his female assistant develop a romantic relationship, which humanizes them to some extent. *Voice-over* draws attention to the political promiscuity characteristic of recent Bulgarian history: people and parties may change their names but what appear to be the faces of "new Bulgaria" are the same old Communist apparatchiks. In the last scene we see Anton, a lot older, behind the camera, shooting the film we have just seen, surrounded by the same people who separated him from his family years ago (Angelov's former assistant is now Anton's First Assistant on set).

Like *Voice-over*, *Footsteps in the Sand* (2010) explores immigration in personal rather than political terms. Slavi returns to Bulgaria for the first time in twenty years and recounts his story to a group of custom officers at the Sofia airport. The first third of the film takes us back to his youth as he graduates from high school, falls in love with his best childhood friend, and reluctantly leaves to do his military service. After unsuccessfully applying to the Academy of Medicine he learns that he was denied entrance because of his problematic family history (both his grandfather and father tried to escape from Bulgaria). By the time he finally makes it back to Sofia his love, Neli, is dating another man. Slavi takes up drinking, gets into trouble with the militia and eventually decides to defect to the West, significantly, to mend his broken heart rather than for political reasons. After staying at a refugee camp in Austria, where he has a short-term affair with a Serbian woman, he travels to the United States. An American friend helps him buy a truck and Slavi hits the road. Eventually he settles in Chicago. A few years after the fall of the Berlin Wall he returns to Bulgaria, where he is reunited with Neli. The film depicts Slavi as a man without roots, desperately searching for a home, rather than as a political dissident. Indeed, as he prepares for his interview at the Austrian refugee camp, Slavi has be coached how to act like a political dissident by an old Bulgarian friend he accidentally meets in the camp. His friend advises him to say that

he left Bulgaria because he was 'repressed by the Bulgarian authorities' and to lie that he has never travelled outside Bulgaria before, because, as his friends puts it, 'what kind of repressive regime would rob its citizens of their freedom and then let them travel abroad freely!'

The film paints a realistic picture of the immigration experience, emphasizing the loneliness and alienation Slavi feels even though most of the people he meets are well-meaning: the American Jim, who wins a large insurance case, gives Slavi thousands of dollars to buy a truck and the Native American owner of a souvenir store in Utah advises him to buy an arrow, an amulet that is supposed to bring Slavi's lost love, Neli, back to him. Slavi manages to support himself financially but he never becomes integrated either in Austrian or in American society. In Austria he communicates only with other refugees, developing a close relationship only with another immigrant (the Serbian woman). In New York he spends his time with the African American Jim and an Arab co-worker. In both countries we see him only at his place of work, never at home, because 'home', the film implies, cannot be recreated anywhere else: the only 'true home' is the one circumscribed by Bulgaria's cultural, geographical and historical borders.

In addition to depicting Slavi's growing sense of homelessness, the film paints a stark picture of post-communist Bulgaria. Bulgarians' initial intoxication with their newly found freedom eventually gives way to disillusionment and resignation: Neli's husband, a promising theatre actor, roams the bars, drunkenly performing the trick with which he used to impress his high school schoolmates, and Neli's best friend sells newspapers at a little kiosk in Slavi's hometown. Neli is the only one who has been moderately successful, working as a doctor in the local hospital. In short, while Slavi's initial decision to immigrate might have appeared rushed, the immature act of a young, romantic man with a broken heart, in retrospect it turns out to have been a wise choice given how all of those who stayed behind have fared after the long-awaited changes in the political system. However, the happy ending to the romantic story prevents us from dwelling on the depressing post-communist reality.[6]

Kamen Kalev's second film, *The Island*, a radical departure from the gritty realism of *Eastern Plays*, follows a Parisian couple, Sophie and Daneel, as they travel on vacation to a Black Sea island. When they arrive in Bulgaria Sophie learns, to her surprise, that her boyfriend of four years, who she thought was German, was actually born in Bulgaria, where he lived in an orphanage until he was ten, when a German priest took him to Germany. After the lovers miss the boat back to the shore, the vaguely ominous atmosphere hanging over the island steers their already rocky relationship out of control. When Daneel runs into a woman he is convinced is his biological mother and starts having weird dreams, or delusional fantasies, Sophie returns to Paris, leaving him alone on the island to experience a quasi-spiritual transformation triggered by an intimate communion with nature, a transformation in the course of which he sheds his Western European/corporate persona and reconnects with his Bulgarian/wild/authentic self.

Like its own pseudo-spiritual premise—the idea that each one of us harbors multiple personalities—*The Island* suffers from multiple personalities/generic identities: it starts out as a drama exploring a couple's deteriorating relationship, then switches to a psychological thriller as the couple arrive on a mysterious island populated by weird people (that is Bulgarians), before transforming again into a kooky reality show (or a critique thereof) in the third act. Putting aside the absurd premise (the two lovers have

been together for four years yet somehow Sophie never suspected the real nationality of her boyfriend), it appears that that by focusing the story on Daneel, a Bulgarian man who returns to Bulgaria after more than twenty years abroad, Kalev presumably wanted to explore the issue of borders or limits: both the limits of personal identity and, on a larger scale, the limits of national identity. Although the film appears to trace Daneel's personal journey—from a corporate slave to a new age prophet, a Bulgarian Jesus who lectures Big Brother audiences about their spiritual enslavement by the media and by big money business—it also provides a commentary on what being Bulgarian means twenty years after the fall of communism. However, despite its New Age rhetoric, which might make it seem more 'modern' than other films exploring the loss of Bulgarian identity, *The Island* rehearses the familiar health/illness metaphor that renders immigration as a sort of illness the only cure for which is a return to the homeland. Daneel's Western European identity is summarily dismissed as a façade disguising his 'true Bulgarian identity', which the film constructs in quasi-religious terms. Soon after Sophie returns to Bulgaria and rejoins Daneel on the set of *Big Brother*, Daneel disappears from the Big Brother house. Sophie, pregnant with their child, responds to his sudden disappearance by directly addressing the show's audience and asking them to call her 'Mary'.

The film presents us with two extreme and mutually opposed views of Bulgaria: the island and the Big Brother show. The choice of the island as the site where Daneel supposedly reconnects with his roots is significant as it locates the film within an established, conservative tradition of Bulgarian films that continue to construct national identity in terms of elsewhere and elsewhen, relegating Bulgarian identity to a *supposedly simpler past* (Daneel's nostalgic childhood memories of vacationing on the island) and to *a specific geographical area, the countryside* or, in some films, the *wild Black Sea Coast*[7] not yet ruined by foreign developers, both 'uncorrupted' by post-communist developments. The third act of the film presents us with the exact opposite of this 'authentic' Bulgarian identity, neatly mirroring the corporate façade of the allegedly inauthentic, corporatized Western European identity glimpsed in the first act, which condemns as inauthentic both Daneel's job and his girlfriend's parents' marriage for no reason other that they are both Western: the new, Westernized façade of post-communist Bulgaria symbolized by Big Brother. Referencing Lars von Trier's *The Idiots*, in which a group of friends pretend to be retarded as a way of getting in touch with their inner selves ('the idiots' within them) and criticizing the pretensions of bourgeois morality, Kalev has Daneel volunteer to be a contestant in Big Brother, where he plays the role of a retarded man and 'spasses out' in front of the entire country before inexplicably dropping the mask one day and assuming another role, that of a prophet who takes it upon himself to lecture Bulgarians, on national television, about the inauthentic lives they live. There is no middle ground between these two extreme, caricatured images of present-day Bulgaria: the old Bulgaria as a wild, Black Sea island, a sort of eco-preserve untouched by the grabby hands of Bulgarian and foreign capitalists, and the new Bulgaria, a despicable reality-show that recreates, in the form of an entertainment show, the spiritual and intellectual enslavement by the communist regime of surveillance (the original Big Brother). Although the film portrays the immigrant (Daneel) as suffering from an illness—the 'illness' of immigration—it also positions him, in the third act of the film, as a sort of spiritual leader for the whole country, a Jesus—or Neo—type figure, who lectures the Bulgarian people to break free from the capitalist matrix. Ironically, the only

way he can reach his audience with this 'message of liberation' is from within the confines of the very reality he condemns (the 'fake reality' of the reality show). At the end of the film, in true Jesus fashion, having waxed philosophic for several months Daneel questions Bulgarians' search for spiritual enlightenment, including their blind willingness to accept him as their spiritual leader. One day he vanishes from their TV screens, leaving everyone as baffled by his mysterious disappearance as they were by his original appearance.

Most of the action in *Mission London* takes place at the Bulgarian Embassy in London. Through the character of the Bulgarian President's wife, a socialite of the first order who seems to be running the country by spending taxpayers' money on extravagant PR events and dinners at Bulgarian embassies abroad, the film explores Bulgaria's inferiority complex manifesting as a maniacal desire to prove our European origins. The President's wife sends Varadin Dimitrov to London as the new Bulgarian ambassador in the UK. His first mission—to organize a charity dinner at the embassy and invite her Majesty the Queen—turns into a nightmare as he is forced to work with the embassy's corrupt staff, all of whom are involved in bootlegging and other clandestine business deals with Bulgarian, Russian, Serbian, Macedonian and Jewish mobsters. Varadin contacts the *Famous Connections* agency, which promises to secure the Queen's presence, along with other VIPs, at the charity dinner. As he learns too late, the agency, which specializes in celebrity lookalikes, intends to provide him with the Queen's double. While the film openly mocks Bulgarian politicians' desperate need to be accepted by Europe's cultural elite, it is equally scathing in its critique of the British, including Sibling, the Director of the Famous Connections agency, and Lord Dean Carver, a drunken British parliamentary wheeler-dealer, who waxes poetic about the good old communist times when he visited Bulgaria and was invited on hunting trips by Bulgarian politicians, 'who may have lacked style but certainly had scale.'

The film draws a distinction between two generations of immigrants: the older generation that is the embassy staff who have been working there since before 1989, and the new generation, represented by Katia, who immigrated after 1989 and now works as a stripper and a cleaning lady at the embassy in return for free accommodation. Although the embassy staff must have been living in London for decades their way of thinking is still painfully provincial. They live in one of the most multicultural cities in the world yet maintain close connections—that is carry out their shady business deals—only with other Balkan and Russian expats. The term 'Bulgarian' is here used as shorthand for 'uneducated, uncivilized, barbaric, primitive, provincial, and gullible,' in short, 'non-European.' However, by mocking Bulgarians' inferiority complex—the need to prove that we, too, are European—the film ends up sabotaging Bulgaria's *real claim* to a shared European identity. This is especially obvious in the experimental fire dance performance the Bulgarian President's wife organizes as part of the charity dinner. The performance, whose scale and nationalist rhetoric recall the old communist grand parades and celebrations, traces the history of the Bulgarian nation, starting with the proto-Bulgarians—fearful barbarians—and ending with the rape of innocent Bulgarian virgins by the Turks. This familiar historical narrative remains inexplicable to the Brits, including the fake Queen, who, struggling to understand the meaning of all these semi-naked men dancing with spears among the flames, wonders if this represents 'the call of the wild.' The dance show dramatizes Bulgarians' complex relationship to their own

history: *mocking it and re-validating it at the same time*. Key moments in Bulgarian history and essential aspects of the national psyche are openly presented, and mocked, as barbaric, primitive, un-European, precisely as a way of demonstrating Bulgarians' claim to European identity, the implication being that the power to distance oneself from one's primitive, barbaric past, by objectifying it (presenting it through the eyes of another, here the Brits), demonstrates one's rationality and enlightenment that is one's Europeanness.

The film's tendency to self-exoticization—portraying Bulgarians as exotic, wild, the other of European—is complemented by an equally unsurprising turn to self-victimization or, alternatively, blaming the 'bad Other', in this case the exclusive 'European club' that refuses to recognize Bulgaria's claim to membership in it, a membership that was temporarily suspended during the communist regime, which, in post-1989 accounts of Bulgarian history, is usually dismissed as an aberration in Bulgarian national history, a detour from Bulgaria's true, European destiny. Accordingly, the British in the film are portrayed as taking advantage of Bulgarians' gullibility and of their inferiority complex. Although at first the Famous Connections agency are wary about extending their services from private clients (rich Londoners who hire the Bulgarian stripper to act in various perverse scenarios) to political bodies (the Bulgarian embassy), they soon come around as they realize the huge profit that can be made from such a deal.

The character of Katia, who represents the new generation of immigrants, offers an insight into Bulgarian identity through the notion of 'passing,' which has been central to post-colonial discourses of American identity (African-American characters 'passing' for white, for example Douglas Sirk's 1959 film *Imitation of Life*). For a good part of the film Katia appears in complete makeover, working as a call girl and dressed as none other but the epitome of 'Britishness,' Princess Diana (tiara and all). The Famous Connections agency subplot suggests that national identity might be just a mask or a role one plays for money: in fact, the film goes as far as to suggest that not only can a Bulgarian girl 'pass for' a British princess, but that British royalty itself is a well-crafted illusion. Thus, through what seemed to be a simple plot device—the 'practical joke' the agency plays on the gullible Varadin—the film drives home the idea of a multiple, fluid identity and of national identity as a construct.

Conclusion

Over the last several decades the scholarship on 'national cinema' has been informed by a persistent skepticism toward the idea of national identity, with Stuart Hall challenging the supposed unity of the nation by asserting difference in the specific context of black culture in Britain, Homi Bhabha defining postcolonial cultures and identities as 'hybrid', Andrew Higson advocating the study of a *national film culture* over that of a *national cinema*, and Stephen Crofts emphasizing the importance of analyzing the *popular* and *generic* aspects of national cinema while taking into account the *cultural* specificity of genres and nation-state cinema movements.[8] The increased mobility of people within Europe has put into question the usefulness of the concepts of 'national identity' and 'national cinema' and introduced instead the notion of 'migrant', 'nomadic' or 'exilic' identity, which, although they refer to a generalized discourse of displacement often described in liberating terms, cannot be separated from modernity's dominant orientalist tropes.[9] If there is one narrative trajectory or one deep structure of feeling that

contemporary European films share, it is the narrative of migration and the feeling of homelessness experienced by an increasing number of Europeans, including Bulgarians. If we think of migration in terms of 'homelessness' and expand the notion of 'homelessness' beyond its narrow association with 'immigration' to include 1) spiritual, rather than only geographical, homelessness and 2) multiple or hybrid identity (if 'the self' is aligned with 'home', a multiple or hybrid identity is aligned with 'homelessness') we can say that Bulgarian cinema is beginning to outgrow its long-standing investment in the idea of a pure Heimat; nevertheless, it is still unclear to what extent we can see contemporary Bulgarian cinema—most of which still tries to 'resurrect' an 'authentic' Bulgarian identity—as a 'declined cinema.'

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NOTES

[1] See Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991) and Gianni Vattimo and P.A. Rovatti, *Il pensiero debole* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983).

[2] Todorov attributes the dichotomy between the ethnic/provincial and the universal/cosmopolitan to Bulgaria's unique geographical position, observing that "as a country on the crossroads between Europe and Asia [Bulgaria] tends to *absorb and reflect* rather than promote or flaunt its own unique national character" (my italics).

[3] In Krassimir Kroumov's *Pod edno nebe*/*Under the Same Sky* (2003) a teenage girl leaves her mountain village to look for her father in Turkey. Svetla Tsotsorkova's *Zhivot sas Sofia*/*Life with Sophia* (2004) traces the mental breakdown of a village woman as she awaits the return of her husband who has immigrated without her. Nadejda Koseva's *Ritualat*/*Ritual*, part of the omnibus European production *Lost and Found* (2005), focuses on a village wedding celebration, which takes place in the absence of the bride and

groom, who have immigrated to Canada, where they are shown getting married in a simultaneous private ceremony.

[4] On the theme of migration in Balkan cinema see ch.13 in Dina Iordanova (2008), *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media* (London: British Film Institute). On the role of village-city migrations in the construction of Balkan national identity, see Mark Mazower (2000), *The Balkans: A Short History* (New York: The Modern Library), 24-36.

[5] See Thomas Elsaesser (2008), "Real Location, Fantasy Space, Performative Place: Double Occupancy and Mutual Interference in European Cinema," *European Film Theory*, Ed. Temenuga Trifonova (New York: Routledge), 57-63.

[6] *Tilt* (Viktor Chouchkov, 2011), set during the late 1980s and early 1990s, addresses more critically the post-1989 aftermath although, like *Zad Kadur*, it rejects the possibility of re-creating 'home' outside Bulgaria's literal borders.

[7] *Ketsove/Sneakers* (Ivan Vladimirov, 2011) displaces the opposition city/village to city/beach, the Bulgarian Black Sea coast now serving as the new source of liberation not from oppressive socialist ideology but from the equally oppressive capitalist ideology, of which the post-communist city is apparently the embodiment. *Krapetz/Three* (Kiril Stankov, 2013) performs the same kind of displacement.

[8] See: Stuart Hall (1992), "The Question of Cultural Identity," *Modernity and Its Futures: Understanding Modern Societies*, Ed. Stuart Hall, Tony McGrew and David Held, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 273-327. Stuart Hall (1996), "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?" *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1-18. Stuart Hall (1994), "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, Ed. Patrick Williams and Chrisman, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 392-401. Homi Bhabha (1994), *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge. Andrew Higson (1989), "The Concept of National Cinema," *Screen*, vol. 30, no. 4: 36-47. Andrew Higson (2000), "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," *Cinema and Nation*, Eds. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie, New York: Routledge, 63-74. Stephen Crofts (2002), "Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s," *Film and Nationalism*, Ed. Allan Williams, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 25-51.

[9] See Caren Kaplan (1996), *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).