

FAMILY, MEMORIES AND BORDERS

Europe in the films of Stephan Komandarev

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In a 2016 interview about the challenges of film financing and low-budget productions, Bulgarian filmmaker Stephan Komandarev also reflected on contemporary social realities. He observed that ‘what is happening (right now), not only in Bulgaria, but around the world, (is) a crisis of neoliberalism, the disappearance of the middle class, poverty ... increasing inequality, debt, cris(e)s in education, culture (and universal human) values’. That is why Komandarev deemed it cinema’s duty to uncover the truth about pressing local and global issues, with films thus becoming the first step towards instigating a positive change (Dzhambazov, 2016). With his express concern not only for the successful financing and production, but also the distribution and impact of his pictures, Komandarev is one of the first filmmakers to bridge the art-house/popular divide in contemporary Bulgarian cinema.¹ It is perhaps the emphasis on communicability over form that prevents him from obtaining a true national *auteur* status in critics’ circles (see: Pavlova, 2017). However, the professed overt social engagement and popular appeal of Komandarev’s work (both in the home box office and at festivals abroad) render it a significant case study of local developments and attitudes, grounded in the experiences of an increasingly globalized world. The films analysed in this chapter represent ideological preoccupations concerning Bulgaria’s communist past and current place within Europe, necessarily contextualized within the broader transnational realities of shifting identities and unstable (national) borders.

As one of the frequently disregarded small national cinemas in Europe, it is important to briefly situate the country’s cinematic output in relation to its geographical and cultural position within Eastern Europe and the Balkans. To do so, I draw on critical discourses concerning national and transnational film industries. Following that, I analyse two of Komandarev’s European co-productions – *Svetat e golyam i spasenie debne otvsyakade* (*The World Is Big and Salvation Lurks Around the Corner*) (2008) and *Sadilishteto* (*The Judgment*) (2014), which successfully blend local anxieties of self-identification and belonging, on the one hand, and broader issues, surrounding migration, corruption and social inequality in Europe, on the other. The two films problematize family relations as the arena on which to negotiate the past and present, at once on a personal and political level. The fallout of the nuclear family and its essential values is revealed through the symbolic use of formal elements, such as light and colour, which accentuate the emotional processes of (transnational) remembering and existential quests. Komandarev alternates between reflecting on different visions of a divisive past and scrutiniz-

ing a disorienting present in which true moral and cultural authorities are palpably absent. Affected by uneven wealth distribution and a lack of equal opportunities across Europe, parents in his films consistently fail to provide emotional and/or financial support to their children. Their position as role models, who can adequately demonstrate how to navigate a world of increased interconnectedness, is essentially compromised. At the same time, community leaders continuously abuse their political and social influence, frequently profiting from the fluctuating ideologies and political regimes. The crossing of borders portrayed on-screen stirs up memories, which, compared with the contemporary reality of living on the European economic and cultural margins, serves to expose the hypocrisy of the seemingly changing political systems, demonstrating moral disillusionment. Throughout it all, Europe, as a vague collective vision, could only prove attainable for the younger generation, striving to reconcile past traumas and contemporary social realities.

Bulgarian cinema in the context of Eastern Europe and the Balkans

It is essential to bear in mind that focusing on film texts is simply one of the ways to describe the dynamics of a given local cinema or film culture. Nonetheless, it proves insightful to examine prominent themes and filmmakers' preoccupations as reflecting the socio-cultural environment of production. For the purposes of this chapter, aiming to unpick Bulgaria's represented relationship with Europe, I concentrate on recurring tropes in the subject matter of two of Komandarev's pictures as more broadly representative of social concerns. Regardless of genre and historical setting, a large proportion of Bulgarian films released in the last 30 years question (to various extents) stable identities, attempting to make sense of cross-border interactions, international mobilities, political history, changing family structures and clashing value systems.² The depicted historical traumas, migratory patterns and frequent oppositions between East and West pose a challenge to the idea of a culturally and politically cohesive European Union. Contextualizing Bulgarian cinema in terms of discourses on Eastern European and Balkan film helps transcend exceptionalist notions of national cinema and highlight the importance of the chosen case studies.

Increased immigration and the expansion of the European Union challenge not only the imagined homogeneity of the nation but also the delineation of Western culture. Luisa Rivi notes that these processes raise questions of common European identity, legislation and economy. Globalization plays a significant part in re-negotiating contemporary questions of cultural belonging, rendering the concept of Europe 'exceedingly problematic, relative, and provisional at best' (Rivi, 2007: 1–2, 23). As Michael Gott and Todd Herzog observe, European cinema, through its topics of focus and collaborative initiatives, plays a growing part in disputing borders of economic, cultural and political division within the continent (2015: 3). While permeable and persistently challenged, such distinctions along East/West (and, recently, South/North) lines linger. Uneven wealth distribution, different effects of colonial expansions on discreet nation-states and ideological conflicts, remaining even after the end of the Cold War, demarcate Eastern Europe as an 'Other' in Western consciousness. In an enlarged European Union, which formally promotes social mobility and 'fluidity of identities' (Bergfelder, 2005: 329), borders are not so much political but metaphorical and mental (Gott and Herzog, 2015: 1). Ewa Mazierska et al. acknowledge that the image of Eastern Europe is constructed as inherently inferior to the West, which assigns itself the position of civiliser (2014: 21–2). Aniko Imre observes that Eastern intellectuals and creatives catered to this self-orientalizing image in order to appeal to Western audiences when exporting their productions, but also tried to resist marginalization by unapologetically adopting white supremacy at the core of their nation-building processes (2016: 4). The region's official claim to whiteness has been employed strategically as 'a

proof of Europeaness, a way to disavow the colonial hierarchy between Western and Eastern Europe and to make up for the region's long-standing economic and political inferiority' (Imre, 2016: 110). Due to the place of Eastern European countries in colonial processes, this claim to whiteness has been conveniently divorced from perceptions of guilt (Imre, 2016: 128). Still, as migration flows increased with the expansion of the European Union, Eastern Europeans have remained subject to racialization despite their eager claims to racial and, thus, cultural belonging.

Situated both in Eastern Europe and on the Balkan Peninsula, Bulgaria proves doubly 'Othered'. As Rosalind Galt notes, the Western European gaze structures the Balkans as exotic and essentially different, evoking notions of Orientalism and resulting in stereotypical representations of national spaces as primitive (2006: 24). The homogenizing effect stems from the countries' shared history of Byzantine and Ottoman domination, similarities in lifestyle, cuisine and local cultural traditions. Ethnic tensions and military conflicts (such as the Balkan and Yugoslav wars) further contributed to pigeonholing the region as violent and culturally underdeveloped. The very term 'balkanization' reveals a rhetoric of 'pre-modern tribal hatreds, susceptible to endless belligerence and incapable of forming a modern multi-ethnic nation state' (Galt: 121). Galt argues that the region falls within the binary opposition between the West (understood as Western Europe) and the East (or Asia) (136). In terms of their mixed cultural lineage, the Balkans remain a 'no man's land', neither here nor there. Such stereotypes present a challenge for cinematic representation. Komandarev allows for self-orientalizing tropes, perhaps similarly to Emir Kusturica, in a potential effort to cater to foreign (festival) markets and audiences (Petrova, 2003: 29–30).³ However, the main emphasis in Komandarev's films falls on means of overcoming harsh divisions. By focusing on the universal experiences of family relations, the personal and collective value of memories and the topicality of border-crossing, the director subtly challenges straightforward definitions of Bulgarian identity and divisions within Europe along the way.

The national and transnational in Komandarev's films

My analysis falls at the intersection between national and transnational film studies, simultaneously taking into account local history and cultural specificity as well as movements and interactions that transcend simple geopolitical outlines. Like Toby Miller, I attempt to address both the macro- and micro-scales, including the global as the carrier of capitalist transactions and cultural communication flows, the national as determining ideology and the local as a productive and interpretative site (Miller, 2010: 139). Thus, I perceive the national and transnational as mutually co-dependent categories.

Indeed, there is value in acknowledging national specificities when interrogating on-screen representations. Spanning 110,550 square kilometres, with a population of just over seven million people, gross domestic product per capita (as estimated by the World Bank in 2018) of \$22,304.90 (or €19,768.83) and a history of political and economic struggles, Bulgaria can fairly be considered a 'small national cinema'. Despite the geographical and economic limitations, domestic film still proves culturally valuable in such niche markets. As Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie explain:

many small nations have emerged out of the twentieth-century processes of decolonization and liberation struggles and consequently have a strong vested interest in nation-building and the maintenance of a strong sense of national identity relevant both internally and externally to the nation.

(2007: 4)⁴

Hence, it is essential to examine the chosen case-study films with regard to their role in simultaneously maintaining and reflecting on aspects of contemporary Bulgarian culture which outline its distinctive circumstances in relation to the notion of Europe.

In a critical roundtable for *Frames Cinema Journal*, film and media scholars Tim Bergfelder, Elizabeth Ezra, Rosalind Galt, Will Higbee and Andrew Higson (among others) agreed that the concept of transnationalism invites shifting attention to the mode of movement between filmic elements in terms of processes and transits, while remaining attentive to questions of post-coloniality, politics and power (cited in Fisher and Smith, 2016). In this respect, Komandarev's films clearly contest stable national borders on textual and contextual levels. *The World Is Big...* follows amnesiac Alex (Carlo Ljubek) in his travels on a tandem bicycle from Germany to Bulgaria (and back to his roots and memories) with the help of his charismatic grandfather, backgammon champion Bai Dan (Predrag 'Miki' Manojlovic). The film is a co-production between Bulgaria, Germany, Slovenia, Hungary and Serbia, featuring an international cast and crew, and earning over 20 international festival awards. Due to its extended distribution, the film attracted 24,178 viewers at home (LUMIERE (a) n.d.). *The Judgment* sees a destitute father, Mitio (Assen Blatechki), trying to provide for his teenage son, Vasko (Ovanes Torosian), by smuggling Syrian migrants across the Bulgarian-Turkish-Greek border under the instructions of a merciless retired border patrol captain (Miki Manojlovic). Similarly, it employed a transnational cast, including actual migrant families as extras. It was co-produced with Germany, Croatia and North Macedonia, attained over a dozen international festival prizes and attracted 16,734 viewers in Bulgarian cinemas since its original release (LUMIERE (b) n.d.). By focusing on the representation of local and transnational processes and experiences of migration as well as by virtue of their collaborative production, national distribution and international festival success, *The World Is Big...* and *The Judgment* function both within and beyond the realms of the national. Through the representation of families in crises, border-crossing and the process of reclaiming personal (and, by extension, collective) memories, the films problematize spaces, places and identities, uncovering Bulgaria's complex relationship with Europe.

Broken families amid memories and realities of border-crossing

Komandarev's films link a crisis of family values to the increased mobility, economic hardship and the deceptive allure of (Western) consumerism. In the pictures, physically and emotionally separated family members come to represent the disparity and disunity between Eastern and Western Europe. As fathers fail to provide security for their families and mothers experience emotional breakdowns or disappear altogether, the pillars of traditional family structure are undermined, and social order is destabilized. Through cathartic re-living of personal and family memories, it is the younger characters who ultimately transcend historical and imagined borders and offer tentative hope for the future of united Europe.

In *The World Is Big...* Alex's father, Vesko (Hristo Mutafchiev), decides to escape with his immediate family to Germany because of pressure exerted by the communist secret militia to spy on his father-in-law, anarchist Bai Dan. Vesko puts in great effort in convincing his reluctant wife Yana (Ana Papadopulu) to leave her parents' otherwise happy home. In a flashback scene, we see the family celebrating the arrival of 1983. Komandarev employs cosy, warm sepia colours not only to hint at the restorative nostalgia, sometimes employed in oral memories recounting life during communism (Boym, n.d.), but also to signify the intimate portrayal of family unity.⁵ A close-up of the old grandfather clock as it strikes midnight is followed by Vesko's voiceover and a cut to him holding his wife Yana's face as he whispers: 'I wish for us to have a new life

in the New Year. In the West. Free, rich and happy! Right?' It is the magic hour when wishes appear to come true. Yana hesitantly agrees, before gazing off-screen. The mirage of upcoming affluence and happiness in the West is enhanced by the following scene in which grandparents, parents and child open a bottle of sparkling wine, kiss and hug while holding sparklers, as the Bulgarian national anthem plays in the background. The family appears to be under the illusion that they can maintain their national identity and connections while accomplishing their West European dream. Reality proves sobering.

In another series of flashbacks, this time from Alex's perspective, Komandarev employs a cooler blue filter to indicate the change in emotional charge and growing distance between the characters. The family is portrayed leaving their political refugee camp to walk around the Italian city of Trieste for the first time. Overwhelmed by the different language, historical monuments, vast open spaces and their inability to participate in any social activities or make any purchases, due to lack of finances, the family gazes around perplexedly. While in Bulgaria they had to queue in front of the local grocery shop to buy some of the limited amounts of sugar available, here there is plenty to eat, drink and enjoy on display, but it is all unattainable. Physical migration to the West was not automatically accompanied by a sense of cultural belonging or economic accomplishment. On the contrary, as culture shock settles, family relations become strained. When their young son briefly disappears, Vesko and Yana seem even more displaced. Fast cutting, interspersed with disorienting hand-held camera point-of-view shots portray them running around in panic, as the local population looks at them in disbelief. Once reunited, Alex cries and professes that he wants to go home, so his parents buy him a small red toy car, which comes to symbolize migration and material possessions substituting the ability to maintain a stable identity and family connections. Yana experiences a nervous breakdown and, in a desperate attempt to reassert his masculinity as relevant and comforting, Vesko initiates sex with his wife. Unable to truly address their cultural inadequacy or reinforce their emotional bonds, Vesko turns to the realm of the physical instead. The scene is particularly unsettling as the supposed intimacy of the act is further undermined by the backdrop of the communal bedroom of the refugee camp in which it takes place. Later, Yana tries to send a postcard to her parents in Bulgaria to let them know that they successfully crossed into the West but is merely allowed to write the address, in fear of any detailed messages being intercepted by the communist regime.

These flashbacks testify to the breakdown of family relations as a direct result of migration. While boundaries and identities are increasingly destabilized, communication between East and West remains censored, thus, preventing true reintegration. Years later, as Alex gradually regains his memory, he tells his grandfather that his parents separated shortly after arriving in Germany. They meant to try and reconcile on their recent journey back to Bulgaria, but a car accident took their lives and Alex's memories. Before Bai Dan arrived, Alex had internalized the East-West borders, which his family could not overcome. He was confined to a depressing life of translating vacuum cleaner manuals in a grey unfurnished rented flat, with no friends. However, through his journey across borders and memories, he appears to have been given another chance to re-claim his roots while at the same time realize his place as a transnational subject of Europe.

Similarly, the young generation proves to be at the forefront of changing family structures and re-negotiating identities in *The Judgment*. A disruption in patriarchal power relations is first evident when Vasko learns that his father has lost his job at the local dairy farm. As already discussed, Komandarev relies on colour and light to set the emotional tone between the characters. In a scene, privileged by depressing greys, blues and browns, Mitio is facing out the front door, smoking anxiously, while his son finishes his meal at the dining table in the background, turns

to face his father's back and angrily asks: 'How will we live now?' Mitio slowly walks back to his son, a seeming figure of authority, and pronounces, with little conviction in his voice: 'I'll find another job'. Outwardly close in proximity, there is little eye contact, and the emotional distance between the two characters is obvious. Not being able to provide for one's family seems the ultimate humiliation. When their house is about to be repossessed by the bank over an unpaid loan, Vasko disappointedly asks his father: 'How could you be such a failure, man?' All respect appears lost. Dents in traditional family structures are further scrutinized as Vasko's new girlfriend Maria (Ina Nikolova) reveals that her mother went to work in Italy. While she bought her daughter a second-hand car as a substitute for affection, she has not been back to Bulgaria for four years. We hear Maria's monologue in voiceover as the small car, which she is driving, approaches down a wet empty road. The orange street lights and wild greenery on either side contribute to an eerie, surreal atmosphere. The teenagers appear to be in the middle of nowhere, with no parental figures to provide care or guidance. In Komandarev's films, families break down because parents appear unable to offer emotional grounding and financial support simultaneously. Uneven wealth distribution and lack of equal opportunities across Europe undermine unity within families and across the continent. So, children have to negotiate their sense of origin and future paths by themselves.

Families in both case-study films are represented as what Deborah Chambers would consider 'site(s) of cultural struggle', where social values and disputes play out (2001: 165, 176). Mazierska (2003) notes a similar crisis in masculinity and traditional family values in post-communist Polish cinema, revealing that the chosen case studies form part of broader concerns surrounding fluctuating identities in Eastern European film. Indeed, in his review of European culture and cinema following the financial crisis of 2008, György Kalmár observes disillusionment with the liberal democracy and consumer capitalism of modernity. He points towards the realization that Western-type capitalism was not 'a fundamentally better form of human existence ... (a) social-economic system (which once) introduced (would make) all the well-known human miseries ... suddenly vanish' (2020: 45–6). However, instead of addressing the power and wealth imbalance which the dominant cultural and political regimes produce and sustain across national, gender and race divides, Kalmár argues for the disenfranchisement of white masculinity, in particular (2020: 10–21). In his analysis of *The World Is Big...* (among other case studies) Kalmár implicitly relays the same claim which, as Imre revealed, conflates whiteness, racial superiority and European belonging in order to strengthen Eastern European nationalisms. The author unquestioningly labels the character of Alex as representative of white manhood in crisis and interprets his journey from the Western centre to the Eastern periphery as a symbolic retreat to the nostalgic, pre-modern past, where his true (European) roots and, by extension, his masculinity can be recovered (Kalmár, 2020: 43–50). In addition to failing to acknowledge the reality of racial exceptionalism and racism in the region, Kalmár foregoes the opportunity to link male feelings of inadequacy in the contemporary globalized society with the cynical selectivism of what constitutes inclusion and equal opportunity across Europe. A return to a pre-modern patriarchal idyll does little to resolve the conflict at the heart of which lies corrupt structures of economic and political power.

Uneven wealth and power distribution persisted even when the East was formally reunited with the West and this reflected on ordinary Bulgarian families, as *The Judgment* suggests. In a desperate bid to repay his loan, taken out to cover the medical expenses of his late wife, Mitio tries to sell his Renault milk cistern truck. Manufactured in November 1989 – when the Cold War formally ended – the French vehicle proves a metaphor for the transition from state socialism to democracy, marked with faux hopes for open market entrepreneurship, personal success and a process of natural reunification with Western Europe. As the car dealer explains, no one is currently buying such cistern trucks, so the vehicle and, by extension, previous optimism for the future post-communism are rendered worthless. Ironically, the only value the truck retains

is as illegal transport and a symbol of hope for refugee families, seeking the security and prosperity that Bulgarians once hoped to achieve through their ultimate accession to the European Union.

Local structures of power also remain unchanged. The secret militiaman who once terrorized Alex's family in *The World Is Big...* is now displayed on posters, running for Bulgarian parliament, with the ironic slogan 'For new Bulgaria!' In *The Judgment*, the ex-border patrol captain who, during communism, ruthlessly ordered the execution of defectors, now helps smuggle immigrants, with similar disregard for their lives and well-being. In a world where official ideologies mean little in practice, the process of remembering, in personal and collective terms, appears the only way to challenge social injustices and seek accountability.⁶ As Daniela Berghahn explains in her study of European diasporic family film, '(w)ithout the dynamic reconstitution and articulation of the past in acts of memory there would be no sense of continuity, community and identity' (2013: 85). In this respect, remembering and re-enacting border-crossing is portrayed as both traumatic and illuminating.

Border spaces appear to be alternative *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989), places of power, resistance and transgression, which might have reviewed, relinquished or fortified their structural impact, depending on the historical context and human subjects involved. They serve as 'embodiment(s) of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists' (Nora, 1989: 7). As Ingeborg Bratoeva-Daraktchieva explains: 'national borders ... (are) first and foremost ... metaphorical spaces of intense interaction between the political and the private' (2019: 10–11). As such, in *The World Is Big...* and *The Judgment*, they serve to expose not only family memories and secrets but also positions of personal agency, governmental agendas and structures of power.

Komandarev draws useful comparisons of the representations and experiences of borders within and across his films. During one of Alex's flashbacks in *The World Is Big...*, we see his family trying to cross into Italy when they clumsily drop their suitcase of possessions and, as a result, raise the attention of a young border patrol soldier. There is no distinguishable sign to indicate the liminal space, only trains and tracks that they must move through. This reveals the vague and subjective nature of borders, which lend themselves to interpretation, even during the Cold War. Indeed, the soldier who stops them takes pity and lets them pass unperturbed. An equivalent situation, but from the opposite point of view is relayed in *The Judgment*. In an emotional long shot, the camera focuses on Mitio's face as he discloses to his son that in 1988, during his compulsory military service at the nearby border, he was ordered by the captain to shoot a young East German couple, trying to flee to the West. The border of Mitio's memories consists of barbed wire and rugged mountain cliffs. It is similarly elusive as the one in *The World Is Big...* but far more treacherous. These mirror memories on either side of the border display the conflicting possibilities for the male characters to be, respectively, inexperienced transgressors and reluctant keepers of ideological divides. The process of younger characters remembering or claiming as their own such difficult memories involves acceptance of personal and communal accountability, grounding in ancestral links and political histories as well as the possibility to address and bridge lingering divisions.

Importantly, the films provide a point of comparison with contemporary experiences of border-crossing that prove just as arbitrary as in the past. In *The World Is Big...* the tandem bicycle journey offers sunny, idyllic and brightly coloured scenery of famous European mountains and historical monuments, the opportunity to joke and face unexpected adventures as well as to find love. Bai Dan and Alex are never shown going through customs or having their documents checked, implying freedom of movement and, by extension, liberation of mindsets for European citizens. In *The Judgment*, crossing borders involves sinister foggy mountains, dangerous cliffs

and an old minefield. A boat journey down the dark Maritsa River appears strikingly similar to imagery from Greek mythology with Mitio serving as Charon, the ferryman who transports the souls of the dead across the rivers Styx and Acheron to the lands of Hades. Migrant families are portrayed hiding in abandoned army headquarters and crossing dangerous terrains under the pouring rain while avoiding border police. The comparison in colour and mise-en-scène employed in detailing the different journeys reveals that the open borders policy of Europe is still applied discriminately. While now seemingly on the privileged side, Bulgarians still struggle to reconcile their newly established freedom of movement with their communist past and current place on the outskirts, between Asia and Europe.

The bittersweet endings provide a glimmer of hope for the transnational project. Having uncovered their family memories and, by extension, their true roots, Alex and Vasko are able to 'find (their) place in the global world' (Bratoeva-Daraktchieva, 2019: 14). More confident and content, following his journey home, Alex travels back to Germany to resume his romance with the Hungarian dance teacher whom he met at a campsite in Slovenia. After the tragic death of his father, Vasko takes responsibility for his wrongdoing and writes (in the universal lingua franca English) to the family of the killed East German girl, in the hope to provide them with closure. Both characters rebuild the bridges between East and West through personal acts of love and sympathy. Komandarev shows that it is not ideological but individual and communal change, grounded in remembering the past that can ultimately demolish physical and metaphorical borders.

Conclusion

Instead of promoting sentimental and provincial definitions of (national) identity, rooted in the ethnoscape (Trifonova, 2015: 132–3) or a regressive retreat for victimized white men from Western cultural centres to Eastern homelands (Kalmár, 2020: 37), I see *The World Is Big...* and *The Judgment* as aiming to problematize and then reconcile the rift between the East and the West. The process of border-crossing prompts younger characters, in particular, to re-live and re-claim personal and collective histories, confront past injustices and begin to overcome internalized divisions. Remembering proves therapeutic, allowing characters to seek accountability, pursue growth and explore the possibility of genuine social transformation. This process is particularly important as, at the time of writing this chapter, Bulgaria is (once more) stormed by anti-graft protests, triggered by growing (international) oligarchy structures and lack of government accountability in the country. Thirty years since the formal end of state socialism and 13 since the accession of Bulgaria to the European Union, it appears that the clique in power not only has not changed, but it is growing in economic and political influence. A graduate of medicine (specializing in psychiatry) as well as film and television, director Komandarev displays an acute sensitivity to the social ills and disillusionment spread across contemporary Bulgarian society. His films prove particularly topical and current, revealing the struggles of a small nation on the margins of Europe in trying to negotiate its history, belonging and future.

(For a dialogical debate on borders, see Freijo, Chapter 32; on nostalgia and national belonging, Anisimovich, Chapter 1, Gergely, Chapter 33 and Krstić, Chapter 35; on post-socialism, McGinity-Peebles, Chapter 38; other chapters on single directors/auteurs: Evans, Chapter 7, White, Chapter 28 and Rydzewska, Chapter 40.)

Notes

- 1 Critics and filmmakers who began their careers before the transition to democracy seem more inclined to disregard the significance of films reaching a wide audience, displaying instead an elitist attitude

- towards Bulgarian cinema, as a form of protection against the commercializing influence of open market forces.
- 2 A few notable examples include: *Bay Ganyo tragna po Evropa/Bai Ganyo on His Way to Europe* (Ivan Nichev, 1991); *Iskam Amerika/I Want America* (Kiran Kolarov, 1991); *Vampiri, talasani/Vampires, Spooks* (Ivan Andonov, 1992); *Sezonat na kanarchetata/Canary Season* (Evgeni Mihailov, 1993); *Granitza/Border* (Hristian Nochev, 1993); *Chernata lyastovitza/Black Swallow* (Georgi Djulgerov, 1996); *Sled kraja na sveta/After the End of the World* (Ivan Nichev, 1998); *Bulgaria – tova sam az!/Bulgaria: It's Me!* (Svetoslav Ovtcharov, 2000); *Pismo do Amerika/Letter to America* (Iglika Trifonova, 2000); *Ogledaloto na dyavola/Devil's Mirror* (Nikolay Volev, 2001); *Halmat na borovinkite/Blueberry Hill* (Aleksandr Morfov, 2002); *Emigranti/Emigrants* (Ivaylo Hristov/Lyudmil Todorov, 2002); *Pod edno nebe/Under the Same Sky* (Krassimir Kroumov, 2003); *Izpepeilyavane/Parched* (Stanimir Trifonov, 2004); *Drugiyat nash vazmozhen zhitov/The Other Possible Life of Ours* (Rumyana Petkova, 2004); *Mila ot Mars/Mila from Mars* (Zornitsa Sophia, 2004); *Otkradnati ochi/Stolen Eyes* (Radoslav Spassov, 2005); *Buntat na L./The Rebel of L.* (Kiran Kolarov, 2006); *A dnes nakade/Which Way Today* (Rangel Vulchanov, 2007); *Baklava* (Alexo Petrov, 2007); *Dzift/Zift* (Javor Gardev, 2008); *Prognoza/Forecast* (Zornitsa Sophia, 2008); *Iztochni piesi/Eastern Plays* (Kamen Kalev, 2009); *Kozelat/The Goat* (Georgi Djulgerov, 2009); *Zad kadar/Voice Over* (Svetoslav Ovtcharov, 2010); *Misiya London/Mission London* (Dimitar Mitovski, 2010); *Stapki v pyasaka/Footsteps in the Sand* (Ivaylo Hristov, 2010); *Staklenata reka/The Glass River* (Stanimir Trifonov, 2010); *Love.net* (Ilian Djevelekov, 2011); *Ostrovat/The Island* (Kamen Kalev, 2011); *TILT* (Viktor Chouchkov, 2011); *Cvetat na hameleona/The Color of the Chameleon* (Emil Christov, 2012); *Chuzhdenetsat/The Foreigner* (Niki Iliev, 2012); *Otrova za mishki/Rat Poison* (Konstantin Burov, 2013); *Viktoria* (Maya Vitkova, 2014); *Urok/The Lesson* (Kristina Grozeva/Petar Valchanov, 2014); *Karatsi/Losers* (Ivaylo Hristov, 2015); *Tête baissée/Face Down* (Kamen Kalev, 2015); *Slava/Glory* (Kristina Grozeva/Petar Valchanov, 2016); *Vazvishenie/Heights* (Victor Bojinov, 2017); *Lili ribkata/Lilly the Little Fish* (Yassen Grigorov, 2017); $\frac{3}{4}$ (Ilian Metev, 2017); *Posoki/Directions* (Stephan Komandarev, 2017); *Davka za baloncheta/Bubblegum* (Stanislav Todorov Rogi, 2017); *Snimka s Yuki/A Picture with Yuki* (Lachezar Avramov, 2019); *Kotka v stenata/Cat in the Wall* (Vesela Kazakova/Mina Mileva, 2019); *Zavrashtane/Reunion* (Niki Iliev, 2019).
 - 3 Antonina Anisimovich (2020), for instance, notes the parallels between German boring and sterile living and Bulgarian primal, fun and dangerous characters who, as a result, are perceived as lacking Europeaness in *The World Is Big...*
 - 4 Throughout history and in contemporary times, small and large countries alike display a vested interest in nation-building through cinematic output. However, there is a difference in relations of power, scope of operations and perceived value. Larger (and, arguably, wealthier) territories can consistently project their cinematic ideology and self-image further through enhanced national and international marketing and distribution than a small nation-state could hope to. Negotiating the colonial past can also take different shapes, depending on the perspectives taken. Marginalized voices from smaller countries can pose significant challenges to official discourses of cinematic representations of history imposed by larger geopolitical powers, hence their implicit value. At the same time, countries of small proportions with cultural/linguistic specificities often consider cinema (among other arts) important means for preserving and re-instating their heritage when faced with the effects of globalized work, education and entertainment. That is why the concept of a 'small national cinema' preserves its cultural relevance and functional application when examining the contexts of films creation, dissemination and consumption.
 - 5 The colour palette is distinct from that of other Bulgarian (and, indeed, Eastern European) films, which are more unambiguously critical of the past political regime. Good examples in this respect are *TILT*, *Zift* and *The Color of the Chameleon* (the latter two, relying heavily on neo-noir aesthetics and cinematography).
 - 6 It is, thus, no coincidence that Alex needs to overcome amnesia, in particular, as a result of the car crash.

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Further readings

For a more focused discussion of national and transnational cinema, see: Higson, A. (1989) 'The Concept of National Cinema', *Screen*, 30:4, 36–47; Ezra, E. and Rowden, T. (2006) *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, London, Routledge; Higbee, W. and Lim, S.H. (2010) Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies', *Transnational Cinemas*, 1:1, 7–21. Barriaes-Bouche,

S. & Attignol, M. (2007) *Zoom in, Zoom Out: Crossing Borders in Contemporary European Cinema* (Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing) proves an insightful volume on border-crossing in European film, with particular attention to Nevena Daković's chapter 'Borders in/of the Balkan Road Movie'. For more on migration and identity crises in Bulgarian cinema, read Petrova, V. (2006) 'Migrating minds and bodies: The Transnational Subject and the Cinematic Synecdoches of "Glocalisation"', *KinoKultura*, 5, 1–21 and Bratoeva-Darakchieva, I. (2013) *Balgarsko Igralno Kino: Ot Kalin Orelat Do Misiya*, London, Sofia, Institut za izsledvane na izkustvata.