

# THE LESSON AND THE GOOD POSTMAN: CONTEMPORARY BULGARIAN CINEMA AND DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION FROM THE MARGINS

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## Introduction

In 2009, with well-meaning intentions and the naïve excitement of a young emigrant returning home for the summer, I dragged a reluctant friend to see the newest Bulgarian film, *A Farewell to Hemmingway*. The film was screening at the old socialist-era theater Geo Milev in Plovdiv on a portable projection screen so small that only a seat on the third row guaranteed a full view. As we entered the theater, my friend said, “I don’t usually watch Bulgarian films. Why would I spend 5 BGN / 2.56 EUR to see a Bulgarian film when I can spend 11 BGN / 5.63 EUR and enjoy the excitement of Hollywood’s special effects?” She then enthusiastically described experiencing *Ice Age 3* in 3D. I was perplexed and ashamed of the choice to spend hard-earned money on a film that was at best mediocre, and I hid the inner excitement of watching a Bulgarian film—perhaps for the first time in my life—on what was, after all, a real theater screen.

In recent years, there has been a wave of scholarship theorizing redefinitions and remappings of European cinema after the collapse of the East / West Divide.<sup>1</sup> Even within the field, however, studies focusing specifically on developments in Bulgarian cinema are significantly rare.<sup>2</sup> The present article in part examines the experience of movie-going in Bulgaria in lieu of the shifts in the production and consumption of films during the transition to democracy. I begin with an overview of the primary characteristics of the post-1989 film industry and an analysis of the viewership of domestic films in comparison to that of

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1. See, for example: Luisa Rivi, *European Cinema After 1989: Cultural Identity and Transnational Production* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), Leen Engelen and Kris Van Heuckelom, eds., *European Cinema After The Wall: Screening East-West Mobility* (USA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), Catherine Portuges and Peter Hames, eds., *Cinemas in Transition in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), Anikó Imre, ed., *East European Cinemas* (New York: Routledge, 2005), Anikó Imre, ed., *A Companion to Eastern European Cinemas* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), Rosalind Galt, *The New European Cinema: Redrawing the Map* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2006), and Michael Gott and Todd Herzog, eds., *East, West, and Centre: Reframing Post-1989 European Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015)

2. With some notable exceptions from scholars such as Dina Iordanova, Ingeborg Bratoeva-Daraktchieva, Nikolina Dobрева, Maya Nedyalkova, and Temenuga Trifonova, among others.

Hollywood productions. Then, I argue that two recent Bulgarian films—*The Lesson* (Tonislav Hristov, 2015) and *The Good Postman* (Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov, 2017) demonstrate a shift in domestic filmmaking toward projects critical of contemporary social and economic realities such as, institutional corruption, the refugee crisis, and the pervasive sense of ineluctable precarity and instability.

### Changing Cinematographic Landscapes: Post-1989 Cinema in Bulgaria

The Fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War fundamentally transformed the ways in which films are produced and consumed in post-Soviet Eastern Europe. In Bulgaria, the politically turbulent and crisis-ridden decade of the 1990's made film production extremely difficult. Since the early 2000's, however, the film industry has witnessed various changes and both foreign and domestic films have had a slow, but steady increase in viewership and box office earnings.<sup>3</sup> The emergence and current prevalence of multiplexes (venues with 6 or more screens) has also altered the way audiences experience films. The presence of multiplexes in the country mushroomed from just one in 2003 to sixteen in 2018. The National Film Center's most recent report indicates that out of a total of 215 screens in the country, 158 are in multiplexes. Ninety-one of these screens are located in recently constructed shopping malls in Sofia, reflecting the broader economic and social transformations in Bulgarian society. Due to excessive centralization and high ticket prices, films are simply inaccessible to lower-class and rural populations.<sup>4</sup> Many small towns and villages have no access to movie theaters and average ticket prices have jumped from 4.32 BGN in 2002 to 9.10 BGN in 2017.<sup>5</sup> These developments have prompted innovative initiatives, such as the "Travelling Summer Cinema with BNT1", a program that sponsors screenings of recent Bulgarian films in towns without theaters. The state of Bulgarian cinema today is perhaps best described by Dina Iordanova as that of "optimism in moderation" as overall industry trends indicate an increase in both national film production and film attendance from the early 2000s to the present.<sup>6</sup>

Audiences, however, are much quicker to embrace Hollywood films. In fact, there were only two Bulgarian films to crack the "Top 20 theatrical releases in Bulgaria" in 2017: *Heights* and *Broken Road*. *Heights*—a film about national hero Vasil Levski and the liberation of the country from the Ottoman Empire—achieved considerable success, bringing in 131, 039 viewers and 1, 072, 903 BGN / 548, 519.30 EUR at the box office. *Broken Road*—an action-adventure film centered around a racecar driver—came in 18<sup>th</sup> place with

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3. Most foreign films are Hollywood productions.

4. These trends in production and consumption of films have been observed on a global level, see Ignacio Sánchez Prado's study *Screening Neoliberalism: Transforming Mexican Cinema 1988-2012* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014)

5. Bulgarian National Film Center, *Bulgarian Cinema—Facts / Figures / Trends—Brochure 2018*, 2018, <[https://www.nfc.bg/media/documents/3d22125140bae447627951585e7683a3ff671fe4/Bulgarian\\_Cinema\\_2018%20online%202.pdf](https://www.nfc.bg/media/documents/3d22125140bae447627951585e7683a3ff671fe4/Bulgarian_Cinema_2018%20online%202.pdf)>

6. Dina Iordanova, "Bulgarian Cinema: Optimism in Moderation," in *Cinemas in Transition in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989*, eds. Catherine Portuges and Peter Hames (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013)

an attendance of 98,862 viewers. Both films trailed behind Hollywood productions, such as *The Fate of the Furious*, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Pirates of the Caribbean 5: Salazar's Revenge*, and *Despicable Me 3*, which claimed the top five spots. *The Fate of the Furious* was the top grossing film of 2017, bringing in 2,494,562 BGN / 1,275,339.33 EUR at the box office with a viewership of 273,110.<sup>7</sup> It appears that films that stir up strong national sentiments or imitate Hollywood productions are more easily able to captivate mainstream moviegoers.<sup>8</sup>

There is a palpable preoccupation in current Bulgarian film scholarship with the loss of national identity and the failure of filmmakers to forge new identities during the transitions to democracy. The lack of strong articulations of national identity—which I don't interpret as a necessarily negative development—is in part connected to the conditions of film production.<sup>9</sup> As public funding for cinematographic projects has drastically decreased in Bulgaria, multinational co-productions sponsored by European film funds, such as MEDIA, Creative Europe MEDIA, and EURIMAGES have become commonplace.<sup>10</sup> Film scholar Ingeborg Bratoeva-Daraktchieva underlines the role of EURIMAGES in promoting the so-called “European *non-national film*” and bolstering “the role co-productions were expected to play in the formation of a unified European cultural space” (351).<sup>11</sup> Paradoxically, it is perhaps for this reason that films like *The Lesson* (Bulgaria / Greece) and *The Good Postman* (Finland / Bulgaria) are successful at articulating pressing social anxieties that have surfaced in distinct regions throughout the European Union: economic precarity, political instability, depopulation, and the refugee crisis.<sup>12</sup>

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7. Bulgarian National Film Center. *Bulgarian Cinema—Facts / Figures / Trends— Brochure 2017*, 2017, <[https://www.nfc.bg/media/documents/64738e27dc960ebdc22143dd8ea4b16b74029c8a/Bulgarian\\_Cinema\\_2017.pdf](https://www.nfc.bg/media/documents/64738e27dc960ebdc22143dd8ea4b16b74029c8a/Bulgarian_Cinema_2017.pdf)>

8. Historical epics have a long tradition in Bulgarian cinema, see Nikolina Dobрева, “Eastern European Historical Epics: Genre and the Visualization of a Heroic National Past,” in *A Companion to Eastern European Cinemas*, ed. Anikó Imre (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 344-365.

9. For a detailed analysis of international co-productions in Europe, see Manuel Palacio and Jörg Türschmann, eds, *Transnational Cinema in Europe* (Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2013)

10. Public funding for 2017, on the other hand, totaled 6,538,600 BGN / 3, 342, 844.86 EUR for feature films and 1,262,300 BGN / 645, 348.10 EUR for documentaries, the two genres discussed in this article. (Bulgarian National Film Center)

11. Ingeborg Bratoeva-Daraktchieva, *Bulgarian Cinema from “Kalin the Eagle” to “Mission London”*, trans. Silvia Mavrikova (Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences: Institute of Art Studies, 2013), 351.

12. *The Lesson*, although not commercially released in Bulgaria, was introduced to Bulgarian audience through the “Travelling Summer Cinema with BNT1” and made rounds at national film festivals, such as the Golden Rose Festival of Bulgarian Feature Films in Varna. Both films are available through Amazon's streaming platform, Amazon Prime, and have had a considerable exposure at international film festivals. (Bulgarian National Film Center)

## Confinement and Ruin in *The Lesson*

In the present section, I argue that *The Lesson* portrays raw, Kafkaesque experiences of social and financial precarity—intensified through a constant sense of confinement and ruin—symptomatic of the transition to democracy. It is a slow film that tells the story of Nadia, a middle school English teacher and freelance translator, who lives a modest life in a village on the outskirts of Blagoevgrad. Her husband, Mladen—an unemployed, recovering alcoholic—defaults on mortgage payments and squanders the family's savings to fix and sell an old camper without success. The local bank gives the family three days to pay the 8,000 BGN / 4,091.55 EUR loan and threatens to repossess the house. Meanwhile, the translation firm where Nadia does freelance work files for bankruptcy and is unable to repay months of back wages. Left with .56 BGN / .29 EUR in a bank account and without further recourses, Nadia is cornered into the predatory services of a moneylender who ultimately requests sexual favors, for himself and his business partners, in exchange for loan extensions. Unable to accept these conditions, Nadia robs a bank with a toy gun, returns the money, and continues an otherwise uneventful day of teaching English grammar.

*The Lesson* exposes the thin line between the precarious existence of a lower-middle class and the life of crime, prostitution, and homelessness that hides behind the threat of financial ruin. Indeed, the film pushes against notions of prosperity and mobility that formed part of discourses surrounding the transition and paints, as Dina Iordanova puts it, "...an unsettlingly violent reality, fertile soil for raging violent crime and overall moral and cultural decline" (25).<sup>13</sup> The narrative's circularity intensifies the already pervasive sense of confinement which is articulated through the marginalization of village life, unsurmountable economic hardships, limited professional opportunities, and a stagnant personal life exacerbated by difficult family relationships. The film's structure is also circular. It begins with the diegetic sound of writing, of chalk on a blackboard. Before the first scene comes into view, the audience can identify the space of the classroom, wrought with conflicting connotations of both hope and precarity. The grossly underpaid positions of teachers, in the Bulgarian case, has been notorious since the communist period. The transitions into the first scene and out of the last scene are marked with a J-cut and an L-cut, underlining the circularity of the narrative and conveying the unescapable sense of continuous failures. In this way, the film demonstrates that the race to the bottom has no definitive end. At the end, audiences are left with an increasingly urgent question: What is to be done when there is no way out?

The film offers glaring criticisms of contemporary socio-economic realities in Bulgaria by underscoring the failures of private and public institutions, specifically the banking sector and law enforcement, and the unfettered emergence and success of pseudo-criminal groups, such as loan sharks. It depicts Nadia's interactions with institutions as an endless bureaucratic labyrinth where hidden contract conditions, fines, fees, and explicit threats lurk around each corner. An unescapable sense of coercion and confinement is transmitted through slow narrative development, lack of non-diegetic sound, and multiple

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13. Dina Iordanova, "Bulgarian Cinema: Optimism in Moderation," in *Cinemas in Transition in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989*, eds. Catherine Portuges and Peter Hames (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 10-39.

close-up shots focusing on the tenacious expressions on Nadia's face. Thus, the film's neo-realist aesthetic suggests that depicting grim, miniscule details of everyday struggles supplants the need for enhanced dramatic effects.

Ultimately, the narrative implies that there is no significant difference between the impersonal treatment, hidden contract fees and conditions from the bank and the explicit threats of sexual and physical violence from the loan sharks. Both leave individuals in a state of extreme vulnerability. The local bank is depicted as a detached, generic representative of global financial institutions. In a particularly telling scene, Nadia and Mladen attempt to plead their case to a bank representative, shocked by the fact that the bank has raised the interest rate without warning. As the representative coldly explains that nothing can be done since the terms of the contract stipulate the right to raise interest rates without notification, promotional loan posters are visible the background. Sharp men and women in suits adorn these posters, captioned by the ironic text "We lend you a hand". In this way, the film emphasizes the deceitful nature of financial transactions as a fundamental experience of the transition.

This vision of Bulgarian society contrasts starkly with the ideals of "prosperity, mobility, and security" that powered the transition to democracy and the country's accession into the European Union (Rivi 140).<sup>14</sup> In this context, Lucian Georgescu's observations about the Romanian New Wave are highly relevant to the Bulgarian case:

The productions of New Romanian Cinema reflect in their neo-realist style the social and moral changes of the post-communist era to a greater extent than scientific research could. Contemporary Romanian cinema is nurtured by a major disillusion in the wake of the collapse of the dreams of the generation of the 1989 revolution: the films of these young auteurs portray the drama of a nation that lost its compass on the way towards the West. (158)<sup>15</sup>

*The Lesson* articulates precisely the unnamed tension between the desire for modernity and the realities on its margins. The film's morbid claim is that the individual is completely alone and forced into poverty due to the lack of support from government and private institutions and the disintegration of family networks. Furthermore, these sectors, engulfed in or adversely effected by a climate of crisis and criminality are actively eroding possibilities of building a civil society. While leaving the audience relieved, the film's Hollywood—esque ending breaks with the neo-realist tone and underlines the very impossibility of narrative resolution. The only way out of a destitute situation is to commit the impossible crime: rob a bank at gunpoint and escape unscathed back to normality.

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14. Luisa Rivi. "Toward a Global European Cinema," in *European Cinema After 1989: Cultural Identity and Transnational Production* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 139-144.

15. Lucian Georgescu, "The Point of No Return: From Great Expectations to Great Desperation in New Romanian Cinema," in *East, West, and Centre: Reframing Post-1989 European Cinema*, eds. Michael Gott and Todd Herzog (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 158.

### ***The Good Postman: Solidarity from the Forgotten Margins of Europe***

I argue that the documentary *The Good Postman* is a call for solidarity that poses a direct challenge to growing nationalist sentiments in Bulgaria in the midst of the Syrian refugee crisis. The film confronts dominant discourses about migration, ethnicity, and national identity while engaging transnational audiences. *The Good Postman* opens with the non-diegetic whistling of “Ergen deda”, an upbeat folk song composed by Petar Lyondev that has achieved considerable international popularity. Thus, an immediate connection is forged between local conditions—in this case, the specificity of local culture—and the possibility of significant interventions on a global scale. The use of “Ergen deda” reflects and reinforces the main narrative of the film: the essential role of a seemingly insignificant border village in a massive international crisis.

*The Good Postman* tells the story of Great Dervent, a village of 38 inhabitants on the Turkish border decimated by poverty. The postman, Ivan, is a local volunteer for the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and makes early morning rounds searching for refugees crossing the border. At first, he performs this task dutifully and notifies authorities at each sighting. The first scene begins with an extreme wide shot depicting a barbed wire fence on the Turkish / Bulgarian border, which appears insignificant in comparison to the sprawling mountainous landscape in the background. Through this juxtaposition, the film underscores the impermanent and even absurd nature of the border fence. Eventually, Ivan decides to run for mayor on a platform to revive the village by offering abandoned houses to Syrian families and begins to pitch the idea to friends and neighbors. With a few vocal exceptions, the villagers—senior citizens struggling to pay bills and purchase food—embrace the initiative as the prospect of reviving jobs, reopening the local school, hearing children’s laughter, and bringing life back to the abandoned village is cause for enthusiasm and optimism.

However, the proposal to repopulate Great Dervent with Syrian refugees also fuels a series of events that expose the underbelly of Bulgarian politics: rampant corruption, hollow nationalism, and a lack of viable political alternatives. The film paints a bleak, cynical picture of the current political landscape. The three candidates running for mayor in Great Dervent are the postman, Ivan, a candidate for the center-right Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), Veselina, the incumbent mayor from the same party, and Ivan, a candidate for the Socialist Party and staunchly committed to reviving communism. Therefore, the film implies that in spite of the presence of genuine, innovative ideas, political participation ultimately requires affiliation with either GERB or the Socialist Party, both of which have been plagued by corruption and have lost all legitimate claims to power. The most powerful and haunting scene of the film depicts Ivan, the candidate from the Socialist Party, staging a political rally in the center of the village. A keyboard player, hired to entertain, plays a monotonous electronic tune as the six people in attendance wait patiently for their turn at a free kebob. With his back turned to the audience, Ivan speaks into the void of the surrounding mountains, “Comrades, I want internet for all! Like in Putin’s Russia! I want to see this here in Bulgaria. I don’t want refugees in my village. I don’t want this!” He concludes in traditional campaign fashion: by inviting all of his supporters to enjoy a beer and a kebob. This scene, loaded with irony, exposes a toxic mix of post-communist nostalgia

and fervent nationalism that has fueled anti-migrant sentiments in the country.<sup>16</sup> Beyond this parodic scene, the film genuinely documents the sense of profound loss and lack of political and economic choices villagers faced during the transition. It also suggests, however, that alternative courses of action are possible, namely through local challenges to violent nationalist rhetoric directed against refugees. The narrative looks beyond both the past and the present in order to open political possibilities grounded in empathy. Therefore, I maintain that the film's most important intervention is the affirmation of hope from the marginalized space of Great Derwent, submerged in economic, political, and moral decay.

*The Good Postman* makes possible the connection between groups of people that have experienced forms of systemic marginalization and—in different ways and under different circumstances—have struggled for survival. Therefore, Ivan's seemingly radical idea to open up abandoned village houses to Syrian refugees crossing the border is an expression of survival that mirrors global political reconfigurations. Several scholars, including Leen Engelen and Kris Van Heuckelom, claim that the Cold War era East / West Divide is being replaced by a new North / South Divide:

...in these times of enduring economic crisis—a crisis which seems to render the project of a common Europe increasingly uncertain—one could risk to claim that the notorious East—West axis which has helped Europe to define itself as a beacon of progress and civilization will soon give way to the emergence of another split, dividing the Continent in a “northern A-Zone” and a “southern B-Zone” and creating new geopolitical hierarchies and cultural alignments.<sup>17</sup>

These splits and new cultural alignments, to borrow Engelen and Van Heuckelom's terms, are the central focus of *The Good Postman*. In the last scene, Ivan sets off to perform his routine sightings along the border fence where he spots a new group of women and children. After the failed mayoral race and subsequent realization that efforts to change the system from within are futile, he resorts to the only possible meaningful act and calls the Border Police with the following statement, “There are no refugees today. I haven't seen any. That's all.” In other words, he does nothing. This final act echoes Slavoj Žižek's assertion that it is “Better to do nothing than to engage in localized acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run more smoothly” (199).<sup>18</sup> It leaves audiences with a sense of renewed hope that comes, paradoxically, precisely from the refusal to participate in the system. The film ends with a wide shot of Ivan standing in front of the border fence, bringing the narrative full circle. The barbed wire border fence is barely visible, engulfed by the uninterrupted mountain range that recognizes no national boundaries.

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16. For more on this topic see, Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille, ed., *Post-communist Nostalgia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012)

17. Leen Engelen and Kris Van Heuckelom, ed., “Introduction,” in *European Cinema After The Wall: Screening East-West Mobility* (USA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), vii-xxii.

18. Slavoj Žižek, *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism* (London: Melville House, 2014), 199.

## Conclusions

A wave of films dealing with the difficult legacies of communism dominated the Bulgarian film scene in the 1990s and early 2000s (Jordanova).<sup>19</sup> After an exhaustion of this topic, Dina Jordanova identifies a shift in filmmaking toward what she terms “drabness films” and the “gloomy Bulgarian film”, preoccupied with the dreary socioeconomic reality of the country and related existential anxieties that accompanied the transition (26). Ingeborg Bratoeva-Daraktchieva claims that Bulgarian films express a series of identity crises from 1968 until the present day. Most recently, they register the change in identity paradigms from communism to globalization (5).<sup>20</sup> She argues that recent films, produced in the 2000s, are engaged mostly in observing, “The films of young Bulgarian directors are not explanatory. They do not comment—they either simply observe, concentrating on everyday life, or make genre films” (352).<sup>21</sup> The two films analyzed in this article, I argue, go one step further. Perhaps for the first time, contemporary Bulgarian films like *The Lesson* and *The Good Postman* offer a critical perspective of the present social reality and capture a sense of disillusionment and geographic confinement. They criticize notions of modernity, prosperity, and mobility that followed the fall of communism without delegitimizing the ideal of democracy.

*The Lesson* and *The Good Postman* form part of a wave of Bulgarian cinema that reflect the challenges of the transition to democracy. In my opinion, both films expose the fault lines in contemporary political discourses: the legacy of communism, economic instability, and the flawed construction of democracy. *The Lesson* indicates that an escape from current socio-economic realities would require an event as unlikely as the ending of a Hollywood action film. *The Good Postman*, in contrast, makes a compelling case for solidarity at a time when much of post-Soviet Eastern Europe is submerged by a wave of right-wing populism. Nonetheless, an overall sense of inescapable desperation and precarity drives both narratives, leaving audiences to consider one critical question: What are the viable paths forward?

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19. For more on trends in Bulgarian film during the transition to democracy see Dina Jordanova, “Bulgarian Cinema: Optimism in Moderation,” in *Cinemas in Transition in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989*, ed. Anikó Imre (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 10-39.

20. Ingeborg Bratoeva-Daraktchieva, “Българското игрално кино от началото на XXI век / “Bulgarian feature cinema in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” *Art Studies Quarterly* no. 3, (2012): 3-8.

21. Ingeborg Bratoeva-Daraktchieva, *Bulgarian Cinema from “Kalin the Eagle” to “Mission London”*, trans. Silvia Mavrikova (Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences: Institute of Art Studies, 2013), 352.

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