



Nostalgic Echoes of the Past

Self-Image, Change and Resilience through the Bulgarian Cinematic Lens as seen by an emerging Bulgarian filmmaker.

Text — Nadezhda Atanasova

Growing up in Bulgaria, there were always iconic one-liners from old Socialist films floating around. They functioned as inside jokes in my parents' generation, that us kids felt almost purposefully left out of. The attitude varied from parent to parent - some people forced their kids to watch every old Bulgarian film under the sun, while others held a more "you wouldn't get it" attitude towards it, leaving their kids wondering what it meant for people to be sat somewhere in the order "relative, policeman, relative, policeman"¹, or that something was "allowed for cats and dogs, but not for pigs".

If there is one thing Bulgarians universally agree upon, it is that "they used to know how to make movies back in the day"

Opinions on the socialist regime vary from person to person, and people tend not to talk about it, possibly to avoid potential arguments. However, if there is one thing Bulgarians universally agree upon, it is that "they used to know how to make movies back in the day". One could argue that older people cannot see past their nostalgia, and tend to wear rose-coloured glasses when watching films from their youth. What is interesting is that the younger generation also supports the claim for superiority of older films, despite not having lived through the times they depict. While a world where people refer to each other as "comrade" appears foreign, older films make it easy for one to put themselves in the shoes of the

protagonist, as they usually depict simple, yet touching human stories - characters falling in and out of love and coming of age as well as the ups and downs of family dynamics and friendships.

While most of these beloved films do not contain any explicit Socialist propaganda, one cannot ignore the influence the regime had on the film industry. For instance, the national academy of theatre and film arts turned away applicants whose families had a known history of political disobedience. Such was the

case of Nevena Kokanova - one of the most acclaimed Bulgarian actresses of all times, who managed to find her place in the industry despite being rejected from the renowned institution. She happens to be the lead actress in my favourite Bulgarian film - "Tobacco" (1962), based on the 1951 novel of the same title. The action takes place shortly before the beginning of the socialist regime, and it was only published after the author, Dimitar Dimov agreed to include several additional communist characters, whose stories paralleled those of the two main capitalist antiheroes. In the last decade the novel was re-published in its original state, however some readers admitted that despite their knowledge of the extra characters being "artificially added",

[1] Quote on the film "Dangerous Charm" (1984) (bg: Опасен чар)

[2] Quote from the film "The Countryman with the Bike" (1974) (bg: Селянинът с колелото)

they preferred the modified version simply because they are nostalgically tied to it.

It has happened more than once that I've gone to the cinema to see a modern Bulgarian film, and I've been the only person in the auditorium. It has also happened so that people have not simply walked out, but also out-loud dissed a Bulgarian film in the middle of the screening. While the efficacy of this method of criticism is arguable, I can't fully say I blame them - as quoted by author Ivo Siromahov, in contemporary Bulgarian cinema "all the characters suffer, but who suffers the most is the audience".

I don't want to go into the stereotypical description of Eastern Europe as a bleak, depress-

ing, place where dreams go to die between the endless rows of brutalist blocks, but living in Bulgaria can be tiresome. You go out in the morning only for the bus driver to yell at you for

"All the characters suffer, but who suffers the most is the audience"

not having the exact change to pay for your ticket and you incur the wrath of employees at various institutions for not complying with the stone-age ways of their systems. Then you go to the cinema to watch... this, but ten times worse. Everyone's father is an alcoholic, mothers are inherently single and struggling to make ends meet, and don't even get me started on grandparents — they are all mercilessly abused and blackmailed in the most God-

forsaken, secluded village on the planet. To summarise, most recent films coming from my home country attempt to flesh out the various depravities that take place within our society, but I would argue that many of them fail to do so accurately, and instead exist largely as impersonal, exaggerated poverty porn specifically manufactured to feed the ever-present desire of the western world to see people doing worse than them.

If there is one cinematic topic that has always been "in", regardless of the political atmosphere, that is the fight for freedom during Ottoman times. Ottoman rule lasted for approximately five hundred years, coming to an end in 1878 and is considered the biggest wound in Bulgarian



"With Children at the Seaside" (1972)

history. At the same time, these centuries have inevitably produced the greatest source of national pride in the face of the revolutionary movement, and that is precisely what most films placed in the era are all about. Until recently, the period in question was referred to as the “Ottoman slavery”. It is currently an ongoing debate whether the term should be officially switched to “Ottoman rule”. This has resulted in heated discussions - some claim “slavery” started off as a literary term used in poetry and fiction from the time, and its use in historical context is incorrect, while others consider the term “rule” not strong enough and thus disrespectful towards the suffering of the ancestors.

At this point, the modern nation almost resembles a person that was born after a long period of non-existence (the Ottoman Empire), grew up under the care of a strict, domineering parent (the Socialist state), and by the time they gained independence, they realised that they are not fully equipped for adulthood, and dove into a lengthy period of teenage-like self-loathing. While I find this to be a relatively satisfying explanation for the notable difference in the

nature of films made in the two different time periods, I can't help but ask a bigger question: What kind of a relationship must a nation hold with a past like that in order to be resilient, and what is the right way to artistically represent it? How much room is there for nostalgia in the mind of a resilient nation, and what is the right attitude when it comes to remembering a complicated past, and furthermore, addressing the complicated present?

By definition, resilience has two different but complementary traits: toughness - the capacity to withstand or to recover quickly

from difficulties, and elasticity - the ability to spring back into shape. Does this supposed toughness allow nostalgia for a time that one knows was repressive, and could allowing this nostalgia be described as elasticity? Obsession with the concept of national martyrdom seems to be a driving force in our society - from the desire to be referred to as former slaves, to the seemingly inevitable, never-ending suffering in contemporary film. Does demonising ourselves on the silver screen for the sake of Europe's pity gain us anything, or has the time come for us to finally stop pitting ourselves and come of age?



“Dangerous Charm” (1984)