REASONING AND PROFILE OF BULGARIAN SOCIALIST BLOCKBUSTER CINEMA

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Statistics show that as of 2000, communist regimes are the most long-lasting type of non-democratic form of government in the 20th century. By that date, the average duration of non-communist one-party regimes was 28.51 years, of non-democratic monarchies 34.75 years, and of non-democratic communist regimes 46.2 years. Explaining this longevity solely on the basis of repression is unsatisfactory. One of the shortcomings of research on socialism, in my view, is the neglect of its policies related to consumption management. No doubt, the stimulation of various consumptive practices is linked to the creation of systems to suppress dissatisfaction. These were then easily transformed into various forms of bribery of different strata from the highest to the lowest levels of society. It was these proven mechanisms of corruption that were carried over almost without any damage into the democratic era.

Fixating only on repression makes it impossible to understand both the real reasons for the failure of socialism and the newly emerging nostalgia for it. It continues to dominate large sections of society and finds ground even among people who have little or no memory of that time. One of the deficits in the research on socialist cultural policy and art is the insufficient study of the mechanisms governing artistic consumption in that era. In this sense, the study of cinema and the policies implemented through it and aimed at audiences is particularly revealing.

Table 1. Bulgarian films and admissions in national cinemas (1976–1986)[1]

Year	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986
BG films distributed	20	20	22	20	20	21	20	19	19	20	23
% of all films in cinemas	11.2	12,3	12.7	11.8	11.5	12.5	12.2	11.9	11.0	11.5	13,5
% of all admissions	19.2	16.4	17.1	17.3	18.8	26.7	24.7	21.9	23.5	28.4	27.4

Table 1 shows that at the end of the 1970s Bulgarian feature films in the cinema repertoire accounted for 12% of all titles and 17.5% of all viewers. In the first half of the next decade, the percentage of Bulgarian films grew slightly, while

[1] CDA, f. 383, inv. no. 15, a. u. 37, p. 38.

the relative share of their audience reached 27-28%. That is, in the era of mature socialism, the consumption of national films increased by more than 50%.

The following table shows the admissions of the most-watched film in a particular year from the mid-1970s to 1989. This is a period of intensifying competition of television. Apparently the executives of Bulgarian state film industry have taken measures to deal with this problem. So while in the 1970s the audience for the most-watched films did not exceed two million, in the following decade the champions at the box office had two to three times that number. Moreover, this growth in admissions to the most watched films has occurred against a backdrop of an overall decline in attendance, as shown in the table № 3.

Table 2. Most watched film of the year (1976–1989)[2]

Year	Most watched film of the year	director	starring	admissions
1976	Dva dioptara dalekogledstvo	P. B. Vasilev	G. Partsalev	1 725 810
1977	Boi posleden	Z. Heskia	Iv. Burdzhev	1 469 567
1978	Toplo	V. Yanchev	N. Shopov	1 035 494
1979	Vsichko e lyubov	B. Sharaliev	Iv. Ivanov	1 817 110
1980	Dami kanyat	Iv. Andonov	St. Danilov	1 191 037
1981	Khan Asparuh. Part 1.	L. Staykov	St. Peev	4 073 747
1982	Preduprezhdenieto	J. A. Bardem	P. Gyurov	3 053 093
1983	681– Velichieto na khana	L. Staykov	St. Peev	2 170 148
1984	Spasenieto	B. Punchev	K. Tsonev	2 132 444
1985	Boris I. Part 1. Pokrastvaneto	B. Sharaliev	St. Danilov	5 835 123
1986	Denyat na vladetelite	Vl. Ikonomov	BV. Mihailov	2 686 109
1987	13-ata godenitsa na printsa	Iv. Grabcheva	B. Puncheva	1 808 277
1988	Vreme razdelno. Part 1.	L. Staykov	Y. Sarchadzhiev	5 305 921
1989	Margarit i Margarita	N. Volev	Hr. Shopov	2 359 872

The new approach to film industry management in the late 1970s was not so much aimed at increasing the number of produced films. It is a myth that more than 20-23 national films were shown in cinemas in the 1980s, roughly the same number that were distributed in the second half of the 1970s. It is true that production in general is increasing, but it is more at the expense of film production for television[3]. The figures of 50 Bulgarian films produced an-

[2] Yanakiev, Aleksandar. Cinema.bg. Sofiya, 2003, p. 303–311.

[3] In the mid-1980s, when the peak of Bulgarian film production was reached, the National Film Centre (Boyana Film Studio) produced „about 23 feature films a year, 25 television films, 15-20 commissioned films, documentaries, dubbed films" (Tasev, Ignat. Cinema Is Not Only Art. – Kultura newspaper, Nr. 7, 13 February 1987).

nually, which are raised as a slogan, have no other meaning than propaganda. Before 1989 they reflected the grandomania of socialist industrial production and served as a mask for the hidden real unemployment in the artistic sphere. In the first two decades after the changes, these impressive but in fact exaggerated numbers of films produced served as an argument in the filmmakers' negotiations with the state to increase the amount of state support.

Table 3. Admissions (in mill.) 1970–1989[4]

Year	1970	1975	1979	1980	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
Admissions	106,7	102,7	101,6	102,3	98,3	91,1	89,4	85,1	82,7	68,0

The most significant transformation in state policy towards cinema, implemented in the late 1970s, was another. It consists in the practice of creating high-budget film productions on historical subjects aimed at the widest possible audience. They are intended to perform consolidating and propaganda functions in the context of the spectacular, politically fabricated 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state. Subsequently, the production of this type of film became standard procedure. It had no analogue in other socialist countries at the time, although it repeated practices from Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1930s and early 1950s.

The reasons for the celebration of the 1300th anniversary of the ‚founding' of the Bulgarian state are of various kinds: political, economic, and ideological. They also contain a very strong personal motivation of Lyudmila Zhivkova[5], who authoritatively took all decisions in the field of state cultural policy. Zhivkova's „strategic" visions, some of them on the verge of the maniacal, were given an ideal tool for implementation in the command-and-control system that was the basic organizing principle of the socialist film industry. Its structuring and methods are determined by the imperative to orchestrate cultural processes „from above". This means thematic programming complemented by a strictly observed system of genres in which these priority themes and subjects are interpreted. To further perfect this project in its

4 Statistical Yearbook of Bulgaria, 1989 (NSI, 1991).

5 Lyudmila Zhivkova (1942–1981) was a senior Bulgarian Communist Party functionary and Politburo member. She was the daughter of Bulgarian Communist leader Todor Zhivkov. She served as assistant president of the Committee for Art and Culture (1972–1973), its first vice president (1973–1975) and its president (with the rank of a minister) between 1975 and her death in 1981. – Editor's note.

practical implementation in the film production system, Soviet film industry copied the Hollywood system of the major studios. It was this model that established itself in the 1930s as the most perfect form of industrial organization in the field of cinema.

Stalin and his circle of subordinate economic officials identified in the principles of vertical organization, brought to perfection by Hollywood, an ideal mechanism for implementing socialist cultural policy. The coordination of production, distribution and exhibition, not only on a functional and structural level, but also on an ideological-content level, allowed socialist cinema and other forms of industrial artistic production to achieve the goals of their strategists as perfectly as the great American film moguls for whom Hollywood has been called a „dream factory."

Identifying the relationship between industrialized cultural production, of which Hollywood is an emanation, and the practices of socialist realism reveals a different perspective on its genesis and forms of functioning. There is no doubt that this method was not born spontaneously, from the depths of artistic-creative discussions, but was the product of a kind of administrative and ideological engineering. But this engineering did not borrow models from the ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin, but combined the actual practices of the cultural industries and selected methods of some of the most radical modernist movements.

On one hand, control – ideological, institutional, productive – underlied the organizational practices of social realism. It was the key method of capitalist cultural industries – cinema, radio, book publishing, and theatres functioning as large commercial enterprises. On the other hand, this method was strongly influenced by the collectivist forms of artistic work characteristic of modernism: the association of independent painters to oppose the representatives of academicism protected and sponsored by the economic and political establishment; the collective actions of surrealists to confront the entrenched bourgeois norms more forcefully and noisily; Brecht's artistic collectives, which operated not so much in the process of theatrical realization but in the act of writing the playwright's material. One of the leading American producers at the birth of the Hollywood major studio system, Irving Thalberg, head of production of MGM, proclaimed the organization of the process of making a film along the assembly line model. His maxim was that films "are not made, they are

remade"[6], i.e. the original idea goes through a series of modifications in the various stages of technical and creative realization to become the product that perfectly serves the interests of the film studio, but is completely devoid of any author individuality. This is what the social realism ideologists aspired to – they tended to use the imagination, to exploit the talent and creative energy of artists from different arts, but channeled these in the ideological norms of the state proclaimed as the only legitimate creative method. The original work, even of the most orthodox „singers of the victorious system," was only a semi-finished product that did not just lend itself to, but is necessarily subjected to, collective discussion and implementation of guidelines for revision.

These universal principles of applying the methods of creative industries production to the practice of socialist realism also underlie the easy reformatting of the historical film of the late socialist era along the lines of the American cinema blockbuster.

Bulgarian super-productions of this type are in the principle state commissioned, which means they were funded outside the usual procedures and in significantly larger amounts. If the average budget for a feature film in the first half of the 1980s was about 450 thousand leva, for the three series of *Khan Asparuh*[7] a total of 8.1 million was spent. However, to this amount must be added a significant amount of services and labour not calculated in the production budget. They were financed from various sources, the most significant being the so-called „co-production" with the film studio of the Bulgarian National Army. It involves equipment, logistics, personnel and troops engaged in giant mass scenes.

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6 Vieira, Mark A. Irving Thalberg: Boy Wonder To Producer Prince, University of California Press, 2010, 63

7 A historical epics of three parts about the establishment of the First Bulgarian Kingdom in 681 and its ruler Khan Asparuh. – Editor's note.

Table 4. Budgets, revenues and return rates of state commissioned feature films (1980–1984)[8]

Title	Year	Budget in Tsd. BG Leva	Admissions	Revenue in BG Leva	Return rate %
Boyanskiyat maistor	1980	714	587 793	296 036	37.0
Chovek ot naroda	1981	327	1 054 574	505 036	132.9
Mera spored mera	1981	1 043	1 213 890	554 178	47.0
Asparuh	1981	8 303	10 794 392	5 143 767	59.1
Udarat	1981	2 093	2 115 805	1 011 253	40.5
Preduprezhdenieto	1982	2 750	3 061 067	1 424 845	49.8
Konstantin Filossof	1983	4 512	No distribution	60 094	1.2
Spassenieto	1983	1 409	2 140 982	987 079	61.7
Boris I	1984	5 921	10 501 779	4 952 288	72.8

In addition to a common ideological concept affirming a type of socialist nationalism, these kinds of productions have a common organizational, production and commercial principle. It is at the heart of a model that replicates the then emerging Hollywood formula of the so-called "blockbuster". The term came into being with the phenomenal success of *Jaws* in 1975 and its essence is expressed in several different ways. According to their production model, these are films with a budget significantly larger than usual. They are conceived thematically, dramaturgically, stylistically, and conceptually to pique the interest of an audience spanning as wide a demographic as possible. They generally offer fast-paced action, an abundance of characters and storylines, complex structure, elements that invite repeated viewings. Careful analysis of the *Khan Asparuh* trilogy reveals narrative and stylistic analogies to popular Hollywood films of the time such as *Star Wars* and historical epics of the 1960s.

An essential characteristic of the blockbuster concept is its distribution strategy, which includes intensive advertising in all possible media. An element of the formula is the inclusion of "action in a dramatic historical era and exciting visual design". In exhibition terms blockbusters require a release during a period of traditionally high cinema attendance and in as many theaters as possible, evenly spread across all regions of a particular distribution market. The objective is the movie-going audience can be

[8] CDA, f. 383, inv. no. 15, a.u. 158, p. 1.

"herded" to the cinema[9]. Blockbuster movies rely on a secondary impact to engage audiences through amplified word of mouth resulting from the first wave of highly satisfied audiences. The blockbuster theory is based on the classical notion (by G. Barker) that cinemas tend to pay for more expensive films, which guarantee them a much higher revenue level, than for cheaper ones, the earnings from which hardly allow them to pay their expenses, the amount of which is constant and does not depend on the success of the film shown[10].

Blockbusters as a type of cinema entertainment emerged to counteract the leakage of audiences to television, insofar as this category of films offers an experience that far exceeds in impact of the standard television film program.

Indicative of the high degree of organization and competence of the Bulgarian film industry in the late 1970s and 1980s was the ability to combine political functionality with commercial pragmatism. This satisfies the desire of cinema consumers to receive a film spectacle that, although ideologically burdened, is equivalent in attractiveness and scale, and is relatively close in professional execution to the most popular Western examples.

Another phenomenon related to the rise of blockbuster culture is confirmed in Bulgarian conditions. Films of this type attract a larger number of viewers than the most watched films of previous years. At the same time, however, all other films appearing alongside the blockbusters achieved a much lower attendance than the average for the previous period. Statistics show that, while in the 1970s the most poorly attended films had around 200-300 thousand viewers, by the turn of the next decade they were averaging around 100-150 thousand viewers, and by the late 1980s they were falling below 100 thousand. The blockbuster trend works in reverse to the principle of the docked vessels: its flagship films attract significant audiences in numbers but cannot compensate for the decline in average cinema attendance caused by a series of cultural and technological factors.

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9 De Vany, Arthur / Walls, W. David. Movie Stars, Big Budgets, and Wide Releases: Empirical Analysis of the Blockbuster Strategy. In: De Vany, Arthur. Hollywood Economics: How Extreme Uncertainty Shapes the Film Industry. Routledge, 2003, p. 122.

10 Bakker, Gerben. Entertainment Industrialised: The Emergence of the International Film Industry. 1890–1940 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

If we want to understand the deeper reasons for the declining attendance of Bulgarian films during the period of democratic transition, we need to analyse not so much the films themselves, but a much wider range of issues. And they are not only related to the drop in funding or the reduced number of cinemas. After the significant increase in state budget support under the recently updated film industry law the first concern should no longer be discussed at all. How this increase in funding is put into practice is another question.

Turning to the state of the cinema network, I would like to point out the situation in 1940, when the existing 165 cinema halls throughout the country were visited by nearly 15 million moviegoers. On top of which only about 60% of cinemas were open every day of the year. Against this backdrop, in 2018, the most successful year before the pandemic, the 240 or so cinema halls operating in the country welcomed 5.5 million visitors. Obviously, the existing number of cinema halls cannot be the only explanation for the declining audiences. The reasons are complex and in the first place stands the transformation of film consumption – technological, social, cultural.

No less important, however, are the changes that have taken place over the last three decades or more in the structure and nature of the supply: the genres and themes of the films, as well as the model of attitude towards the audience expressed by the creators.The changes in Bulgarian cinema after 1990 were largely aimed, among other things, at abolishing the model of creating highly popular works targeted at the general public. Priority was given to films that were extremely artistic and/or highly critical of the socialist era. They carried on the tradition of precisely those highly artistic works of the previous period, which were even then increasingly losing popularity. Some of them, but too few in number, had and have success at prestigious international festivals.

At the same time, the trend of films that pleased the general moviegoing public was radically interrupted. Some of them, of course, were loaded with communist ideology. But there were other films that presented contemporary reality in a mundane way and with an emphasis on the easily identifiable problems of everyday life. Some of them, besides the entertainment elements, had a certain critical edge, such as *The Double, Yesterday, Loving Stubbornly, Maneuvers on the Fifth Floor, Adio, Rio* – to mention only those that made over a million admissions in cinemas. It was this category of films

that was wiped out with the changes after the early 1990s. The reason was the complete denial of dialogue with the general public, a practice that dominated cinema at the beginning of the democratic era. Priority was given only to local attempts at high artistic cinema, which, however, often diverged from the rapidly changing tastes of the international festival community.

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Published Books: *Slatan Dudow. Praviyat pat kam kinoto* (Slatan Dudow. The right path to cinema, 2023), *Kartografirane na filmovata neopitomenost. Nezavisimo, amatyorsko i alternativno kino v Bulgaria sled 1989 godina* (Mapping the Untamed Cinematic: Post-1989 Bulgarian Independent, Amateur and Alternative Cinema, 2021), *Nezavisimite v kinoto: ot Edisson do Netflix* (Film independents: from Edisson to Netflix, 2019), *Pomosht ot publikata. Balgarskite igralni filmi v nachaloto na XXI vek* (Ask the Audience: Bulgarian feature films in the beginning of 21st century, 2018).

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