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East Central Europe as a Politically Correct Scapegoat: The Case of Bulgaria

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Roumiana Deltcheva, "East Central Europe as a Politically Correct Scapegoat: The Case of Bulgaria"

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Abstract: Roumiana Deltcheva's article, "East Central Europe as a Politically Correct Scapegoat: The Case of Bulgaria," analyzes the mechanisms of image construction of East Central Europe in the West, taking Bulgaria as a case study as seen in literary and filmic texts. A historical overview of literary and theoretical texts which deal with the cultural semiosphere of Bulgaria is presented to demonstrate that contrary to widely held perceptions in North American "politically correct" scholarship, Europe is not a homogeneous cultural unity. In fact, a clear centre/periphery situation is established and delineated along the geographical axis West/East. In the post-communist period, preconceived notions from earlier times continue to dominate, sustained by the dominant cultural discourses in East Central Europe.

Roumiana DELTCHEVA

East Central Europe as a Politically Correct Scapegoat: The Case of Bulgaria

I would like to start my discussion by commenting on a short humorous sketch of the *Royal Canadian Air Farce* concerning the bribery scandal that recently shook the seemingly impervious foundations of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Based on the information released to date, it appears that the majority of the IOC members implicated come from the African quota in the IOC. First, it is curious to examine the humorous "reinterpretation" that the IOC theme was given by the *Air Farce*. The skit was structured as a commentary on current events by Dave the Cab Driver (John Morgan). In his approach to the bribery theme, Dave explained that the three implicated IOC members were unwilling to return the "gifts" they had previously received. The nationalities of these three fictional IOC members were Albanian, Romanian, and Bulgarian, respectively. The punch-line of the skit was the Bulgarian member's refusal to return his "gift" -- a hooker. This introductory example is not intended as an expression of a lack of sense of humour or outrage at the insults addressed towards three particular nationalities. However, its relevance is manifested in the fact that it subtly demonstrates how marginalization as an ideological gesture is legitimized. Personally, I believe that the particular choice of topos, i.e., Eastern Europe, in fact sustains a continuity in the discursive practice of marginalization of the "Romania-Bulgaria-Albania" axis. Although in this article, I will focus particularly on Bulgaria, a review of the recent and not so recent literature on the cinema of East Central Europe further supports such a generalization.

In his 1971 survey, *New Cinema in Eastern Europe*, Alistair Whyte subdivides his monograph into the following chapters: "Introduction," "Poland," "Hungary," Czechoslovakia," "Yugoslavia," "Albania, Romania, the German Democratic Republic, Bulgaria," "Conclusion." Between pages 142 and 156 the author manages to conflate four national cinemas representing four distinct ethno-cultural groups. Proportionally, the section on Bulgaria is the most abundant one with a mentioning of five Bulgarian features. For Whyte, "as yet nothing has emerged from Albania that could be remotely considered as 'new cinema'," Romania's major cinematic contribution of the period is "interesting cartoons," while "in the GDR the documentary has flourished ... but in the realm of the feature there is no real sign of a New Wave" (142). As far as Whyte's bibliography is concerned, of the eleven works cited altogether, five deal with aspects of Polish cinema and there are two sources on Hungarian and Czechoslovakian cinema, respectively, there is "a comprehensive dictionary of Eastern European films since 1945" (7), and the remaining three references are general film journals such as *Image et son*.

Mira Liehm and Antonín Liehm's 1977 publication *The Most Important Art: Eastern European Film after 1945* is devised as a more comprehensive publication dealing with cinematic trends in the region. The book is subdivided into three general sections organized according to recent decades: the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, respectively. Each national cinema is allocated a separate chapter. The book begins with a general introductory overview of "Film in Eastern Europe before 1945" which establishes a point of reference and a contextualizing framework. The authors begin with a promising statement presumably reflecting their awareness of the inaccuracies in the construction of any grand narrative: "We are fully aware of the inexactness of the term 'Eastern Europe,' which we use to signify the countries in that part of the world which found themselves within the Soviet sphere of influence after World War II, and which as a result underwent profound social changes" (3). The authors then proceed with an attempt to legitimize "otherness" by means of the Orwellian formula "Everyone in East Central Europe is un-Western, but some are more un-Western than others": "Early in the century, the countries of Eastern and Central Europe could be classified into two clear-cut categories. One of them consisted of Russia, Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary ... where the values of the Parisian and Viennese film worlds were generally accepted; the other, made up of Bulgaria, Romania, and some sections of what today is Yugoslavia, responded only weakly to signals that came through from Western Europe and then frequently faded or died out completely in the stifling native atmosphere" (7). Discussing the early years of motion pictures in the region, Liehm and Liehm suggest that in Yugoslavia there was opposition towards the new medium, especially on the part of educators as "constituting a threat above all to young boys and girls" (*Uchitel* qtd. in Liehm and Liehm 12). They then proceed with the following claim: "Waves of opposition to motion pictures began to take shape in

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Bulgaria, Romania, and Poland (in the latter they were supported by the Roman Catholic Church), hindering the growth of the medium" (12). No evidence to support the statement is presented and I have been unable to find indications in other sources -- Bulgarian or otherwise -- that Bulgarian society was adverse to the spread of this new art form.

According to Ronald Holloway's 1986 monograph on Bulgarian cinema, the *cinématographe* came to Bulgaria by way of the Danube; hence, the first demonstrations of the Lumières' invention were staged in the town of Russe at the beginning of 1897 (76), only a year after the Lumières Brothers opened their cinema theatre at the Grand Café on the Boulevard des Capucines in Paris on December 28, 1895, the date usually considered as the birth date of cinema. In fact, newsreel cameras were not only fashionable, but they became indispensable tools for the visual recording of the turmoil that defines the history of the Balkans at the turn of the century, beginning with the Uprising of 1903 in Turkey-occupied Macedonia through the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, World War I, and its aftermaths. There was a parallel surge in feature film production and a total of fifty-five feature films were produced until 1950 when *Kalin the Eagle*, the first fiction film under a nationalized industry was produced (76-77). The two most important names of directors connected with this early period are Vasil Zhendov and Boris Grezhov. The latter was an assistant to Robert Wiene and other German directors between 1917-23 after which he began his own directorial career. There were six production companies competing among one another before the establishment of a socialist government after World War II and the nationalization of the film industry in 1948: Zhendov-Film, Rila-Film, Slav-Film, Kubrat-Film, and Rex-Film.

Michael Stoil's *Balkan Cinema: Evolution after the Revolution* (1982) approaches the subject thematically rather than geographically. Moreover, unlike Liehm and Liehm, the author is more accurate in describing the motion picture industry situation in the Balkan countries, at least acknowledging the processes that were taking place in the region until the beginning of the 1980s: "Albania released its first feature almost thirty years ago and now produces an average of three per year. The other three communist states of the Balkan peninsula -- Bulgaria, Romania, and Yugoslavia -- each enjoy cinematic traditions as old and extensive as many Western European countries" (1). In my opinion, however, it is the author's subsequent comment that is quite symptomatic. Stoil continues, "Nevertheless ... the national cinema of the Balkans is less familiar to American scholars and audiences than the national cinema of such countries as Australia, Nigeria, and Pakistan" (1). The main reasons for this absence of interest are the lack of "a large ethnic market for Balkan films" in the United States and the communist regimes imposing a set of ideological principles known as the method of socialist realism on an artistic form. While Stoil's arguments can be questioned, their relevance emerges in the above juxtaposition which foregrounds East Central Europe as a convenient topos for ideological scapegoating and "politically correct" marginalization. In other words, this is the point where Stoil and the *Air Farce* converge.

In the post-Cold War period, it is productive to approach the East Central European situation from the angle of post-colonial theory. From this perspective and due to its geographical location and historical developments, East Central Europe can be viewed as a periphery of two sides. On the one hand, the West as a traditional cultural centre has unavoidably exerted strong influence on the East. On the other hand, there is a second centre of power which acts from the East, i.e., the former Soviet Union through the mechanism of a "filtered" colonialism, that is, the cultural leverage of the former USSR is not primary but of the second order, "through ideological, political, social, cultural, and other means" (Tötösy 131). The paradigm is further complicated by the fact that the cultural influence of the West is not a post-Cold War development only but has been on-going for centuries with particular impetus since the nineteenth century. Moreover, the conscious attempt on the part of East Central Europe to emulate the West is not viewed as colonialism but as a process of integration, "the way to Europe." From a political perspective, this trend is exemplified by the recent inclusion of three former Soviet allies -- Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic -- in NATO, to be followed at a later stage by Slovenia and the Baltic states. This ambiguous struggle validates Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek's statement that "it is possible to speak, in and from North America, of a unified 'Eurocentrism,' when in Europe itself and from the *locus* of East Central Europe there is a marked centre/periphery situation within politics and economics as well as in culture and literature" (135). Notably, the non-homogeneous character of the "European identity" is acknowledged in the 1992 BFI publication,

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Screening Europe: Image and Identity in Contemporary European Cinema. All the contributors to the volume recognize the necessity to see Europe -- and especially the Europe of post-modernity -- as complex conglomerate of identities and subjectivities, which should include, for instance, artists from the periphery of Western Europe, such as Spain, or black artists brought up and currently working in Europe. Curiously, however, *Screening Europe* ultimately remains confined to Western Europe; its Central and Eastern regions, while not entirely disregarded, are once again denied the right to voicing an empirically-based cultural expression. Tötösy calls this peculiar geo-political and cultural disposition of Central and East Central Europe "inbetween peripherality ... a specific and mediating *altérité*" (136), a concept I have adopted in my applications of the notion and frameworks in the study of the cultures of the region (see 1997, 1998, 1999).

It can argued that inbetween peripherality is a theoretically viable framework that can be used to integrate East Central Europe into the domain of critical thought and comparative cultural studies, as well as to contend the claim promoted by some Western scholars via the reductionist label "communist regime" that between 1945 and 1990 history and culture entirely ceased in East Central Europe, having already been hindered irreparably before that by "the stifling native atmosphere" (Liehm and Liehm 7). In this sense, my major criticism towards Stoil's work on Balkan cinema and the majority of other publications on film in "Bulgaria-Romania-Albania" from the past several decades concerns the fact that the authors fail to provide an in-depth analysis to what really went on in film productions. Instead, these books begin with a pre-formulated hypothesis -- this is nothing more, nothing less than cinema for communist propaganda -- and never go beyond the premise. It seems superfluous to read that these countries produced formulaic films based on the prerequisites of socialist realism and an inherently epic discourse almost devoid of reality-based motivation. Generally speaking, an implicit comparative scale based on the distinction Central (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary) and East (Bulgaria, Romania, Albania) Europe is introduced as a result of which there emerges a positive-negative polarity according to which "Central" is positively valorized, thus the different countries merit separate chapters, while "East" is negatively valorized. Hence they are clumped together indiscriminately of trends or subject matter or, worse yet, completely denied a voice. The GDR and Yugoslavia present interesting cases of displacement since they do not seem to conform to the nice symmetry otherwise established. Sometimes they are included in the discussions, sometimes not. Yugoslavia was often clustered together with the other members belonging to the team of the "East" and yet, some authors allotted it a more distinct place. The former GDR, on the other hand, was consistently being denied a specific cultural identity or development, a clear ideological gesture of the transferal of "Germanness" exclusively to its Western counterpart (see Juvan <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss1/4/>).

Liehm and Liehm chose a different approach of hierarchization with a distinct negative bias towards the East. Thus, thirteen centuries of Bulgarian history are conflated in a simplistic and misleading authoritative narrative: "Almost overnight, Bulgaria had traded her position as a supporter of fascist Germany in the struggle against Bolshevism for that of one of the Soviet Union's most devoted allies" (133). Not only do the authors chose to ignore the complex political state of affairs in the country during the war years, but the underlying implication of their condemnation is not so much the fact that Bulgaria was a supporter, albeit a rather passive one, of Germany, but the fact that they gave up the fight against "Bolshevism." The authors then proceed with their final blow: the construction of an image of Bulgaria as the epitome of primitivism and lack of cultural identity: "Bulgarian culture had lived a life more or less isolated from the world beyond its borders, an isolation that grew even more profound during the war" (133). To reinforce the negative image, the authors complete their discussion of Bulgarian film in the 1950s by literally obliterating the presence of the founders of the nationalized Bulgarian film industry from any further participation in Bulgarian cinema: "We are hard put to find the names of any of the people who helped establish nationalized film in the credits of films that -- beginning in 1958 -- attempted to find a new approach to reality, a more modern expression" (158). Such a tendentious silencing of the voices of a number of directors is surprising and once again unaccounted for and without empirical evidence. The early years of the 1950s marks the *début* of a number of Bulgarian directors whose presence was felt in the subsequent decades and some of whom continue to be active presently. Anton Marinovich, who had made features for private companies before the nationalization of the film industry, was to become one of the masters of the Eastern

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counter-espionage thriller, as well as of family-style comedies and entertainment films. Another director who began his career in the early 1950s was Nikola Korabov who subsequently made a number of films which were far from the definition of "formula films" and aroused much controversy, the most notorious of them being *Tobacco* (1962), *Ivan Kondarev* (1974), and *Destiny* (1982). Korabov's distinct taste for the historical epic allowed him to avoid the restrictive schematic plots of the post-war building of socialist society and venture into universal humanist dilemmas with hidden subversive political overtones. His films exemplify one of the strategies used to circumvent the hyper-ideologized aesthetics imposed on cinematic art at the time.

Clearly, then, while it is productive to investigate how the countries of East Central Europe culturally appropriate both the East and the West, the approach remains limited in scope in so far as it fails to address the strategies of marginalization exercised by the centre. Moreover, I postulate that at the present moment Eastern Europe -- and especially the Balkans -- presents a convenient, "politically correct" target for marginalization. Dina Iordanova perceptively claims in her article on female images in the new Balkan cinema that the Balkans are "a cultural margin of Europe -- so marginal, it is often even left beyond Europe's semantic borders" (1996-97, 35). In reality, however, "many of these films end up serving only ad hoc political needs in the new politcal environment of the country, without really providing deeper explorations of historical topics" (Najdenova qtd. in Iordanova 1996-97, 30). Several reasons can be identified to account for this situation:

The nominal geographical location of the region in Europe and an erroneous approach of many post-colonial scholars to view the continent as a homogeneous validation of "otherness" as it is represented by non-Europe. I can illustrate this claim with an occurrence in my personal experience. At the XVth Triennial Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association in Leiden (1997), an Italian colleague doing post-colonial studies vehemently denied my claim that as a European, Bulgarian writer Viktor Paskov could nonetheless "qualify" to be studied in the post-colonial paradigm and I encountered the opinion that the post-colonial paradigm can and/or should be used in the context of mainstream English, American, or French colonialism only in several other situations (see also Tötösy 136).

The "non-visible minority" nature of the physical appearance of Eastern Europeans: after all, they are white.

The "exotic" quality of the region: few really know much about it and so the mechanisms of exoticization can be easily put in motion.

The countries' "communist past" and their former belonging to the "evil empire" provide the necessary underlying negative mythology. Thus, in the post-Communist era countries with socialist cabinets are viewed as lagging in their democratic reforms, their transition towards a market economy, and their debt repayments to the International Monetary Fund. Curiously, the same premise remains even after a pro-Western cabinet does eventually come to power; again Bulgaria is an appropriate example.

The never-ending ethnic conflicts and issues of nationalism which keep on occurring in Eastern Europe provide easy socio-political justification for vilifying the countries in the area.

Finally, the lack of any organized resistance to the construction of this image on the part of Eastern Europeans themselves becomes a factor conducive to such treatment.

Below, I present several instances pertinent to the argument of how a negative image of Bulgaria is consistently constructed. I emphasize here that in my view the process is not unidirectional, i.e., the West exclusively marginalizing the East, but rather there is an equally strong cultural trend within Bulgaria that is concurrent with this bias. My selection of texts follows a historical axis and while not exhaustive can be viewed as a representative sample that underlies the contemporary attitudes of marginalization.

Case 1: Voltaire's *Candide*

From a historical and comparative cultural studies perspective, probably the first onomastic mentioning of Bulgaria in West European literature is in Voltaire's *Candide*. Chapters two and three, respectively, discuss "ce que devint Candide parmi les Bulgares" et "comment Candide se sauva d'entre les Bulgares." On his first encounter with a regiment of soldiers serving under the King of the Bulgarians ("le Roi de Bulgares") in Chapter two, Candide is tied and flogged ceaselessly and without mercy. Just when he is about to relieve his suffering by having his head smashed, the King himself

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passes and thanks to his "rare genius," Candide is granted a royal pardon. While Voltaire's celebrated character is recovering from his numerous assaults by the soldiers, the King of the Bulgarians goes to war with the King of the Abares. Chapter three presents a graphic description of the calamities caused by the two armies at war. Consistently using the style of the grotesque, Voltaire's *compte philosophique* evokes the devastation of war through the juxtaposition between the grandeur of the two royal camps and the total destruction of the villages by each army. The ravage of war emerges via Candide's gaze which possesses the qualities of a panning shot in slow motion: "Il passa par-dessus des tas de morts et de mourants, et gagna d'abord un village voisin; il était en cendres: c'était un village abare qui les Bulgares avaient brûlé, selon les lois du droit public. Ici des vieillards criblés de coups regardaient mourir leur femmes égorgées, qui tenaient leurs enfants à leurs mamelles sanglantes; là des filles éventrées, après avoir assouvi les besoins naturels de quelques héros, rendaient les derniers soupirs; d'autres à demi brûlées criaient qu'on achevât de leur donner la mort. Des cervelles étaient répandues sur la terre à côté de bras et de jambes coupés. ... Candide s'enfuit au plus vite dans un autre village: il appartenaient à des Bulgares, et les héros abares l'avaient traité de même" (21-26) / "Passing by monads of the dead and dying, he came to a nearby village which had been burnt to the ground. It was an Abare village, which the Bulgars ["les Bulgares"] had burned in strict accordance with the laws of war [sic; "les lois du droit public"] Here old men, stunned from beatings, watched the last agonies of their butchered wives, who still clutched their infants to their bleeding breasts; there, disemboweled girls, who had first satisfied the natural needs of various heroes, breathed their last; others, half-scorched in the flames, begged for their death-stroke. Scattered brains and severed limbs littered the ground. ... Candide fled as fast as he could to another village; this one belonged to the Bulgars and the heroes of the Abare had given it the same treatment" (3-7).

I would like to make some observations here about the author's choice of onomastic signifiers and especially the implications of his use of the concept of "les Bulgares": In both the French and the English editions of the text, an explanatory note specifies that under "les Bulgares" Voltaire allegorically refers to the Prussians. The French edition, however, does not clarify the connection between Bulgarians and Prussians. In this sense, the English translation sheds more light on the issue. Here is Robert M. Adams' note: "Voltaire chose this name to represent the Prussian troops of Frederick the Great because he wanted to make an insinuation of pederasty against both the soldiers and their master. Cf. French 'bougre,' English 'bugger'" (3, note 7). Etymologically, the word "bugger" is traced back to Bulgarian history and the Bogomils, historically considered to be the first heretic movement within Christianity: hence the word's pejorative semantics. With this linguistic specification in mind, we can agree, then, that Bulgaria's *début* on the authoritative French literary scene is far from complementary. In this context, one last remark is in order. While Voltaire is certainly far from complementary to the Bulgarians, at least he recognizes their existence. This view of Voltaire becomes more evident when we look at the English translation of *Candide*. In it, "les Bulgares" are rendered merely as "the Bulgars." I take the translator's choice as a gesture of further marginalization, in effect, a complete effacement of Bulgaria from the text. Voltaire at least acknowledges the existence of "les Bulgares" and "les Abares" even if he portrays them as savage and pilfering ransackers. The English translator, however, denies them even the role of villains and transforms them into mere hypothetical constructs: the Bulgarians become "the Bulgars" of pre-European times, while the Abares are described in a footnote as "a tribe of semicivilized Scythians *who might be supposed* at war with the Bulgars" (5, note 2; my italics). Historically, the Abars (Avars) were a Scythian tribe that inhabited the area around the Caspian Sea and later present-day Hungary in the Danubian Basin. In other words, they represent another ambiguous ethnos of the periphery, on the border between Europe and non-Europe.

Case 2: Shaw's *Arms and the Man*

George Bernard Shaw is more generous to the nations from the Balkans. In fact, he situates one of his plays, *Arms and the Man* in Bulgaria right after the war of 1885 between Bulgaria and Serbia. While on one level, the play can be viewed as Shaw's ironic treatment of the senselessness of war, on another, it is a prime example of the British condescending, imperialist attitude towards the European margins. As an Irishman, Shaw was certainly aware of these attitudes by the English towards himself and his compatriots. While it can been argued that in his play, Bulgaria allegorically represents Ireland, this

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view does not invalidate my literal level of reading of the text. In terms of its plot, "Arms and the Man" is a love story with a happy ending. A young Bulgarian woman, Raina Petkoff, saves a Serbian fugitive after a successful victory for the Bulgarians. Although the girl is actually engaged to the hero of the regiment who wins the battle, she feels uncomfortably attracted to the stranger who turns out to be a Swiss mercenary fighting for the Serbs. Fastforward five months later. The war is over and the former enemies have become business partners. Raina and the Swiss meet again and after a few hours of confusion and romantic tension, there is a reshuffling on the love front: Raina dumps her Bulgarian fiancé for her Swiss "Chocolate Cream soldier" while the fiancé is finally free to profess his love for the servant and in fact commit a bold transgression of convention by asking the latter to marry him. Here, I would like to concentrate on the manner that Shaw constructs not only the image of Bulgaria and Bulgarians, but his overall attitude to the region. Consider the description of the "schizophrenic" Bulgarian setting as it appears in the directions to Act I: "A lady's bedchamber in Bulgaria.... The interior of the room is not like anything to be seen in the east of Europe. It is half rich Bulgarian, half cheap Viennese. Above the head of the bed ... is painted a wooden shrine, blue and gold, with an ivory image of Christ.... The principal seat ... is a Turkish ottoman. The counterpane and hangings of the bed, the window curtains, the little carpet, and all the ornamental textile fabrics in the room are oriental and gorgeous: the paper on the wall is occidental and paltry" (3; all subsequent quotations are from the 1901 edition).

The same patronizing attitude can be found in the description of the family library at the beginning of Act III, the implication being that it is clearly a Western transplant the function of which has been vandalized by the local lack of culture and style: "It is not much of a library. Its literary equipment consists of a single fixed shelf stocked with old paper covered novels, broken backed, coffee stained, torn and thumbed [clear markers of a barbaric approach to culture]; and a couple of little hanging shelves with a few gift books on them: the rest of the wall space is being occupied by trophies of war and the chase" (44). The fact that the Petkoffs actually possess a library, "the only one in Bulgaria" according to Raina's explanation to the Swiss soldier, is simply incredulous to the Westerner who exclaims: "Actually a real library! I should like to see that" (19). Shaw sustains his mocking attitude in his grotesque presentation of the Bulgarian characters. Raina Petkoff first appears on her balcony "intensely conscious of the romantic beauty of the night, and of the fact that her own youth and beauty are part of it" (3) while her mother, Catherine, is "a woman of forty, imperiously energetic, with magnificent black hair and eyes, who might be a very splendid specimen of the wife of a mountain farmer, but is determined to be a Viennese lady, and to that end wears a fashionable tea gown on all occasions" (4). The servants Nicola and Louka are portrayed as wearing the ubiquitous traditional folk attire, more likely another stereotypical projection on the part of the playwright than an objective reflection of fashion trends in Bulgaria. Moreover, Shaw names his female servant Louka, an unambiguously masculine name despite its belonging to the first declension. The two Bulgarian men, Major Sergius Saranoff, Raina's fiancé, and Major Paul Petkoff, her father, emerge as sorry caricatures with their inferiority complexes, exalted patriotism, and pompous arrogance. Shaw's detailed description of Sergius -- starting with the completely un-Bulgarian form of the name which would be Serguei -- is worth noting because it goes beyond the mere physical and psychological portrait of an individual but equally reflects the stereotyped perception of the Westerner and the unlikelihood of East and West ever meeting on an equal basis: "[He] is a tall, romantically handsome man, with the physical hardihood, the high spirit, and the susceptible imagination of an untamed mountain chieftain. But his remarkable personal distinction is of a characteristically civilized type. The ridges of his eyebrows, curving with a ram's horn twist round the marked projections at the outer corners; his jealously observant eye; his nose, thin, keen, and apprehensive in spite of the pugnacious high bridge and high nostril; his assertive chin, would not be out of place in a Parisian salon, showing that the clever, imaginative barbarian has an acute critical faculty which has been thrown into intense activity by the arrival of western civilization to the Balkans" (27).

Moreover, throughout the play the young major exteriorizes this inherent bestiality by acting as a sex maniac who merely needs to satisfy his animal drives with Louka -- some definite homoerotic connotations emerge here for those acquainted with Bulgarian --- in order to be back in control before Raina. Louka, however, bravely protects her virtue while continuing to love him deeply. By the end of the play, her virtue is rewarded just like Richardson's Pamela. Through the character of the old Petkoff

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the marginalization of Bulgaria is complete: both inwardly and outwardly. Not only is he ignorant, pretentious, and ridiculous, he is also uncleanly and mocks people who wash every day: to this "English" practice he juxtaposes good old "Bulgarian" customs: "Look at my father! he never had a bath in his life; and he lived to be ninety-eight, the healthiest man in Bulgaria. I don't mind a good wash once a week to keep up my position; but once a day is carrying the thing to a ridiculous extreme" (26). Shaw sees the Bulgarians as primitive not only with respect to the West but also with respect to the Russians, who in violation of historical facts are involved in the war on the side of Bulgaria. Raina says she was concerned that Sergius "might cut a poor figure ... beside all those clever Russian officers" (5). The Serbians, too, are shown as incapable of fighting a war without outside help: they are assisted, again historically inaccurately, by Western mercenaries -- Austrian troops and Swiss soldiers. (I would like to add here that historical inaccuracies are of course permitted and normal in fiction, as we know. However, here historical inaccuracies reinforce the negative perspective and thus they are of some importance.) This Western connection, however, does not put them closer to the European centre. As the Swiss, Bluntschli, is quick to explain to Raina that his engagement with the Serbian cause is purely accidental: "I joined Servia because it came first on the road from Switzerland" (12). Moreover, Serbia is referred to by the widely accepted name of "Servia" at the time: a folk etymology linking the Serbs and other Slavs to the semantic field of "slave/servant" (<Lat. 'sclavo') and carrying unambiguous pejorative connotations. Notably, these negative connotations were felt by British publishers who changed the forms to "Serbia" and "Serbs" in later editions of the play (see, e.g., Shaw 1931; for the "inbetween" historical situation of Serbia in current media, see, for example, Dyer). The only Balkan country "redeemed" by Shaw is Romania although his pejorative streak extended to other countries of the region, such as Hungary (in the *My Fair Lady*). In her attempt to appropriate the status of a "civilized" person, Raina points out that every year her family goes to Bucharest "for the opera season; and I have spent a whole month in Vienna" (19).

Case 3: Jay Leno's Bulgarian Pen Pal

For the past couple of years there is a recurrent skit on the *Tonight Show* featuring Jay Leno reading letters from his Bulgarian pen pal Pavel Spazov [sic] and responding to his queries about America. Not surprisingly, Pavel lives in a remote, primitive village where he is a shepherd. Pavel is a truly post-modernist creation of the totalizing American discourse. On the one hand, he is naive, backward, and writes in a ridiculously broken English. On the other hand, he is fluent enough in English to correspond successfully with Leno, who lacks even the ability to pronounce Pavel's last name correctly: "Spasov." Moreover, Pavel clearly possesses more knowledge about the world than Jay does since he is always the inquisitive one, while Leno merely submits his commentary without ever asking anything about Bulgaria. Once again, the image of Bulgaria as it is presented on the *Tonight Show* confirms my initial claim that Bulgaria does emerge as a convenient scapegoat on which all properties defined as bad, different, uncleanly, backward, in short, unacceptable by the dominant Western grand narrative, can be dumped.

These three examples, taken from distinct cultural periods -- the Enlightenment, *le fin de siècle*, and post-modernity, respectively -- can be viewed as archetypal texts demonstrating the marginalizing power of the West. Yet, as I mentioned above, I do not view marginalization as a unidirectional process. That is why, in this last section I will concentrate exclusively on how Bulgarian artists themselves consciously or subconsciously promote existing negative stereotypes. I will limit myself to Bulgarian films, although I do believe that similar processes are occurring in the other artistic domains. As a starting point, I would like to make the following methodological assumption: in the post-totalitarian period of Bulgarian society, we have a situation which mirrors the relations between dominant majority--ethnic minority in Canada as it is presented in William Anselmi and Kosta Gouliamos's book, *Elusive Margins: Consuming Media, Ethnicity, and Culture*. I postulate that at the current (still) "transitional" phase in Bulgarian political culture, the recent past as a discursive practice is not being reevaluated from a new, democratic vantage point. Rather, we are witnessing the establishment of another hegemonic discourse which carries the external label of "democratic" but refuses to enter into a dialogic relation with the past. Instead, it promotes a new kind of monologism aimed at silencing the voices of the past forty-five years. In other words, instead of coming to terms with history, Bulgarian politicians via subservient cultural institutions are constructing a new grand narrative, equally epic and autocratic, writing itself on an illusory *tabula rasa*. As a result of this

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manipulation, "the dimension of representation regarding political culture is obliterated and reduced to scopophilic representations of: 1) fetishized nostalgia; 2) militant nationalism; 3) auratic pop culture; and 4) assimilated practices and ideologies" (Anselmi and Gouliamos 49). In this sense, the construction of the image of Bulgaria in post-1989 cinema lacks fluidity and continuity and is presented as a neatly packaged series of individual "bubbles" of events, taken out of context and manipulatively valorized according to the needs of the present. In other words, we are faced with a curious paradox of "ahistorical historicism." What I mean is that there is a simulation of looking back at history with the intent of telling the whole story with its dialogical conflicts and polyphonic texture, giving a voice to those who were repressed. In reality, however, "many of these films end up serving only *ad hoc* political needs in the new political environment of the country, without really providing deeper explorations of historical topics" (Iordanova 1997, 1998, <http://www.utexas.edu/ftp/depts/eems/Bulgarian.html>). In other words, there is only a radical substitution of one dominant epic discourse by another one; once again, monologism reigns supreme.

A few examples are in order. Let us consider two Bulgarian post-1989 films which received much publicity by the critics, even if practically nobody saw them: Docho Bodzhakov's 1990 *The Well* and Evgueni Mikhailov's 1993 *The Canary Season*. In both films, we have an epic clash between good and evil represented as a war of the sexes, where women are good, submissive and tortured while men are evil, with predatory instincts, "members of the class of male-only Communist rulers" (Iordanova). As Dina Iordanova claims: "Innocent and helpless women are victimized by brutal and amoral men, who are not only endowed with masculinity, but also have political power and control all possible forms of redress" (Iordanova). Both films are set in the 1950s and 1960s, a time of extreme political dogmatism and physical repression, and deal with personal tragedies. Both make an attempt to establish an intrinsic connection between politics and sex. *The Well* tells the story of Maria, a village teacher whose husband is killed after the Communists take over Bulgaria in 1944. The young widow is forced to raise her daughter alone. Anguel, the Communist leader responsible for the death of Maria's husband, is also a single parent, raising a son -- a touch of exquisite parallelism to heighten the emotional effect on the part of director Bodzhakov who also wrote the script. Anguel brutally rapes Maria and then forces her to continue to have sex with him until she finally commits suicide. Anguel takes Maria's daughter, Daria, to an orphanage in another town, far away from his son who has become strongly attached to the girl. Ten years later Daria returns to the village where she has been interned as a juvenile delinquent. Soon she falls victim to Anguel's sexual appetites whom she does not have the strength to repel; she looks so much like her mother (both roles are played by Vania Tsvetkova) that Anguel feels a pathological attraction to her. Meanwhile, Daria feels genuine affection for Anguel's son, Ivan. Their affair, however, remains Platonic, while at night Daria has to endure Anguel's sexual assaults. In other words, the amoral promiscuity of the Communist -- for which absolutely no motivation is provided apart from the fact that he is a Communist -- destroys not only the mother but the daughter as well, not to mention the tragedy of the son. Daria, too, attempts to commit suicide and Anguel decides to have the militia take her away because she is too much of a trouble-maker. Ivan makes a last, unsuccessful effort to keep her in the village. The film ends as a resigned Daria is carried away into an even grimmer future.

In *The Canary Season*, Lili, the protagonist, is a single mother with a twenty-year old son who confronts her and asks her about the identity of his father. She gradually begins telling him about her past -- told in flashback sequences -- which turns out to be another horrifying ordeal. In the 1950s, Lili is raped by a Komsomol leader, is then forced to marry him, and is subsequently exposed to all sorts of humiliations. She is then sent to a labour camp where she becomes a witness to the inhumanity of the Communist "correction efforts." Eventually, she is locked up in a mental institution where the guards and wardens abuse her sexually. Finally released, "Lili comes to the conclusion that most of her fellow citizens have become servants of the system that destroyed her life" (Iordanova 1996-97, 31).

Films such as *The Well* and *The Canary Season* are clear indicators of the swiftness of response to new political realities and the inherent flexibility that define Bulgarian national psychology. Unlike Iordanova who is ready to give the film-makers the benefit of a doubt as to their motives for making these films, claiming that "it is difficult to judge if they do this merely to be ideologically correct or out of sincere conviction" (Iordanova), I view these films as an emanation of a new type of totalizing and

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marginalizing discourse. Mikhailov's film was funded almost entirely by the state and according to outspoken film critic Liuba Kulezich, if the Communist approaches to cultural persuasion could still be implemented, the whole population would have been "voluntarily" taken to see it (qtd. in Iordanova).

Viewing these films, one cannot help being reminded of a persistent Communist-era cliché: that of the morally superior communist woman falling victim to the perverted and excessive sexual appetites of fascists. In the democratic era, the sexual villains become the communists who are bestially promiscuous and lacking any values. Yet, there is a difference which needs to be noted. In the antifascist films of the communist totalitarian period the positive heroes and heroines are neither passive nor submissive, because they are guided by an ideal for a better future. In spite of the formulaic schematism of many of these plots, there is a consistent juxtaposition of two irreconcilable ideologies -- capitalism and communism -- which define the personalities of the individuals representing them. In other words, the characters are always constructed as subjectivities who emerge from a particular socio-political environment; as such, they are never amoral. Thus, we come to the paradoxical situation that there is greater character development and motivation in the formulaic communist totalitarian films than in what has been produced after 1989. Zahari Zhandov's 1951 *Alarm* is a case of point. While undoubtedly schematic and theatrical, the film focuses on the division of loyalties in a close family circle. Considered as the first Bulgarian antifascist feature film, it centres on the character of a retired army officer who attempts to remain neutral while his son, a Bulgarian royalist, pursues his son-in-law, a partisan. Eventually, the protagonist overcomes his neutral indifference and joins the guerrillas. The film depicts the classical triangle of the active communist, the anti-communist, and the skeptical intellectual who after painful soul-searching must make an ideological choice in the end. Binka Zheliazkova's poignant autobiographical chamber drama *The Last Word* (1973) gives a voice to another type of woman, different from Maria, Daria, and Lili. The film follows the final days of six women, representing a cross-section of Bulgarian society, sharing a prison cell and awaiting the execution of their death sentence. What is impressive in the film is not the axiomatic premise that they all resist temptation and torture in the name of the communist idea but the subtlety of presentation of the characters who are not static figures. They all undergo an inner battle which leads to their conviction that their sacrifice is for a worthwhile cause. The overall effect of such films on the spectators was all the more meaningful once the cinematic text was matched to the extratextual reality -- a reality in which the high ideal has been carnivalized to the point of a surrealistic grotesque. In his 1989 *Margarit and Margarita*, director Nikolai Volev gives an artistic vision to this travesty. The film depicts a bleak, poor socialist reality in which a young couple struggles to survive and preserve the purity of their love in spite of all hardships. The battle proves to be a *causa perduta* when a functionary of the totalitarian system becomes interested in Margarita. The film is not only quite bold in its treatment of sex and politics, but it also establishes a connection between the two themes that is not gratuitous but functionalized. And while Margarita is abused both physically and psychologically, she refuses to take the easy way out by playing the victim.

In this context, I view the post-1989 cinematic production in Bulgaria as an inverted return to hyperdogmatic formulas and simplistic binary oppositions. The past is rewritten and repackaged according to the new realities which once again are subordinated to an external hegemonic discourse. The result is the construction of a new image of Bulgaria by Bulgarians which is based on the voluntary marginalization of its entire identity. In this process, erasure becomes a dominant gesture. The "predicament of the new social reality" -- the reigning cliché of the post-totalitarian era -- serves as the easy excuse not to deal with oppression on any level. The "transitional period" after Communism -- now in its tenth year -- becomes the legitimizing pretext for not discussing gender relations: women simply must learn to adapt to the harsh new conditions if they want to survive. Finally, the ultimate deletion -- that of history -- and once again a voluntary one, is mediated through art, not politics, and finds its quintessential expression in the lyrics of the hit song sung by the "Builders of new Bulgaria": "45 years are enough -- Time is ours!"

The processes taking place in Bulgaria described above emphasize the state of ideological fluidity that generally defines the post-1989 condition in East Central Europe. Ironically, in addition to the political and economic sommersaults that have defined the decade of the 1990s, the demise of the Soviet hemispheric dominance has effected another, less visible transformation in the cultural semiosphere of the region. The earlier, politically-motivated antagonism between East and West, "us"

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and "them," has been nominally substituted for a subtler "volumetric" model where binary oppositions have become ternary structures (see Lotman). Yet, this shift in paradigm does not preclude the existence of a centre/periphery situation within the new model. In fact, as I have tried to show above, historically the region of East Central Europe -- because of its "inbetween peripheral" status -- has been an appropriate scapegoat for political, economic, and cultural marginalization. This "politically correct" victimization in turn affects the mechanisms of identity construction at the present stage and accounts in part for the divergent tendencies that arise in East Central Europe. The acknowledgement and investigation of these processes become all the more important in lieu of the phenomena of globalization and accelerated migration. It is quite likely that in spite of its peripheral displacement, "inbetweenness" will paradoxically acquire the status of a dominant discourse.

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