

CHAPTER 2

Hybridity in *Mission London* Challenging the Othering Discourse

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After the fall of communism of 1989 and the subsequent restructuring of the political, social, economic, and cultural spheres, Bulgarian national identity faced a major challenge. Post-1989 transformations were particularly traumatic for Bulgaria, a nation that is obsessed with history, as it is often claimed (Liotta 2001; Roudometof 2002; Todorova 2010). It can be argued that this obsession was once again reactivated by the marginal position of Bulgaria in the European Union. Being on the margins of Europe and often viewed as the Other of the West, Bulgarians began associating themselves with European values even more, as a means of resistance. I suggest that in response to this, the new Bulgarian cinema provided a platform for negotiating national identity and challenging the othering discourse through hybridity.

In many ways, the post-1989 transition in Bulgaria initiated a coexistence and overlapping of multiple ideologies, inviting and encouraging multiple acts of border crossing (Koobak and Marling 2014: 334). Drawing on the work of Marotta, who suggests that boundaries are essential to ‘the very constitution’ (2008: 301) of the hybrid subject, in this chapter I define hybridity as a process of border crossing, a vernacular and transgressive act. In particular, the case-study film *Mission London* deals with the topic of migration and the hybrid nature of those who left Bulgaria, highlighting the subversive potential of hybridity in challenging the discourses of othering.

The negotiation of national identity on screen should always be seen as an ideological and political process (for further discussion of this aspect in the German context, see Evans in this volume). Applying further the idea that culture is always viewed as a site of ‘consent’ and ‘resistance’ (Hall 1981), I would suggest that it is precisely through these elements of contestation and consensus that we

can see the shifting boundaries of a nation most clearly. This role of cinema seems particularly relevant in the Bulgarian case, where the official platforms for debating the communist past have been limited. As of 2024, there is no historical museum of communism in Bulgaria. The only official museum of the socialist legacy is the Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia, opened in 2011, and the curators of the exhibition underline the apolitical nature of the museum, stating that the displays' aim is only to preserve the pieces of art that would be lost and decayed otherwise. It may be the case that the absence of official interpretations of history is facilitating the emergence of multiple grassroots initiatives that sometimes can be even more effective than the official ones. For example, virtual museums in Bulgaria seem to fulfil the need for alternative remembering institutions. As Gospodinov (2005) and Kazalarska (2018) note, alternative modes of remembering in Bulgaria emerge from the narrative tropes of a lack, void, concealment, and delay.

It is, of course, this combination of the political, economic, and historical 'unevenness' (Dimitrov 2001) of the post-communist transition that leads to some obvious difficulties in coming to terms with the past in Bulgaria. In between the economic crises, the political instability, the delayed processes of decommunization, it is not surprising that informal modes (such as cinema) of negotiating the past have gained momentum. Cinema has the power to reflect and represent the anxieties existing in Bulgarian society, particularly important in the context of the consistent use of contested memories about the fall of communism in the current political scene in Bulgaria (Vukov 2008). I argue that Bulgarian national cinema reflects on the transformations of Bulgarian national identity on screen, rethinking the shifting limits of the nation but also engaging in a transnational dialogue through reflecting on the role of the Other as an external reference point.

By combining textual film analysis and focus group discussions with Bulgarians of different age groups facilitated by film extracts, this chapter focuses on the dialogue between 'us' and 'them' and the subversive potential of hybridity as an act of border crossing giving voice to the cinema audiences. Overall, six focus groups were conducted to obtain diverse information from various demographic groups, including four focus groups in Sofia (the capital city), one focus group in the village of Knyazhevo in the suburbs of Sofia, and one focus group in the small town Gorna Oryahovitsa. Each group was constructed to represent a particular (but broad) age group, including one group with young people under the age of 25,

two groups with a more varied mix of participants (ages varying from 28 to 44), and three groups with more senior participants aged from 60 to 78.

For the wider purposes of the research, six film extracts have been selected based on the time of release and production (films produced after 2008), subject (films about the post-communist transition), and recognition (popularity on the domestic market and international acknowledgement). *Mission London* was initially eliminated from the sample as a film based on contemporary events. Nevertheless, after the first focus group, it became clear that *Mission London* plays a vital role in the debates about new Bulgarian cinema and the transition, while also being one of the most popular and successful new Bulgarian films. Its plot tackles phenomena that play a significant role in the debate around lustration and the post-communist transition. These include post-1989 emigration to the West, corruption, and lack of lustration (former members of the communist party still being in power and, more specifically, the heavy presence of former communists among Bulgarian diplomats), as well as national stereotypes and refashioning national identity in the new European context.

As Dimitrov suggests, in Bulgaria, the ambiguity of the post-1989 political transformations resulted in a 'high level of distrust in the political parties, and a level of electoral volatility much higher than those seen in established democracies' (2001: 66). While on the surface, the primary essential characteristics of democracy are present (separation of power, a system of checks and balances, and free elections), several factors remain problematic. The general discontent of the public led to the recent political crisis in Bulgaria, when the country faced five elections between April 2021 and April 2023. These events suggest that, even though *Mission London* was released over a decade ago, the themes reflecting on the major flaws of the Bulgarian transition, such as corruption and the continuity of political elites (Crampton 2007), remain relevant.

Bulgarian Cinema Post-1989

Even though Bulgarian cinematography emerged long before the accession of the communists to power, it was completely transformed and expanded between 1945 and 1989 (Garbolevsky 2011). During the Cold War era, cinema in Bulgaria became a domain of special attention, and an instrument of ideology. At the same time, compared to some countries of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, Bulgaria

experienced significantly less oppression and censorship in the cultural sphere (Garbolevsky 2011). Todor Zhivkov, the Bulgarian leader from 1954 and until the fall of communism, tried to stay neutral both in the domains of politics, resuming diplomatic relations with the USA and keeping good relations with the USSR, and culture, declaring that, although art should continue to be an instrument of ideology, communist and Western ideology could coexist peacefully (Garbolevsky 2011). As a result, it is somewhat difficult to define Bulgarian cinema production in terms of dissident or mainstream culture, as quite often the criticism of the regime was articulated on screen through personal stories, subjective existential struggles or in the sublime forms of satire, allegories, surrealism, and poetics (Portuges 1992: 535).

In 1989, the fall of communism and the transition brought a dramatic transformation to the film industry in the post-communist countries. As the Iron Curtain no longer separated the East from the Western world, the film industry of the region was facing not only ideological but also economic problems. After 1990, the government practically stopped financing films, causing unemployment and drastic changes in film distribution. Film production dropped, and state financial subsidy could only provide funds for one or two films a year (Iordanova 2008). This radical decline in the industry continued up until the late 2000s. However, since 2007/2008, the Bulgarian film industry has been showing some signs of a gradual revival, as the number of Bulgarian films has increased overall, as well as the number of cinemas and cinemagoers (Iordanova 2008).

Despite the post-transitional turmoil, new Bulgarian cinema shows a certain tendency towards establishing continuity with pre-1989 national filmmaking. One of the examples of this continuity in the film industry is the tradition of subversive political filmmaking. Building on the movement of politically subversive cinema during communist rule, many of the new Bulgarian films are now also challenging the status quo. In line with the pre-1989 Bulgarian film tradition, films dealing with the recent history and its aftermath expose the inconsistencies and fragmentations of history through absurdism and satire.

Mission London (2010)

Misiya London (Mission London, 2010), directed by Dimitar Mitovski, is a comedy based on a novel of the same name by Alek Popov. It is a European co-production

with the United Kingdom, Hungary, the Republic of North Macedonia and Sweden. Mitovski started his career in directing music videos and commercials. His breakthrough was a video for the Bulgarian progressive rock band FSB (Formation Studio Balkaton), whose song *High* was awarded Best Bulgarian Music Video of the Year in 1997. Mitovski's major fiction film recognition came in 2005 when his short film *Get the Rabbit Back* (a surrealist thriller co-directed with Kamen Kaley) was nominated for the Critics' Week at the Cannes Film Festival. *Mission London* is Mitovski's first feature film that, at the time of its release in 2010, topped the Bulgarian box office, becoming the highest grossing 2D film in post-1989 Bulgaria.

The plot develops in the Bulgarian embassy in London, where the newly appointed ambassador Varadin Dimitrov receives a particularly important task from the Bulgarian president's wife Devorina Selyanska to do everything in his power to invite the British queen to the concert organized to celebrate Bulgaria's accession to the EU. Varadin encounters several corrupt clerks, the Russian mafia, Scotland Yard detectives and other charismatic personas while trying to make sense of the anarchy that rules in the embassy. Varadin's only chance to contact the queen emerges when at a party he is introduced to a director of the agency with contacts in the highest circles. However, as it turns out, he is a director of a doppelganger agency that provided celebrity lookalikes for parties and, privately, to fulfil rich people's fantasies of sleeping with someone famous.

This chapter focuses on the textual analysis of *Mission London* and the focus group discussions facilitated particularly by extracts from this film.

National Identity Negotiation in Post-1989 Bulgaria through a Postcolonial Lens

After 1989, the nationalist discourse in many of the post-socialist countries was built around the idea of 'a return to Europe', as a return to civilization, democracy, and true cultural identity, rather than the rejected values of the USSR (European Commission 2005). With some caution, postcolonial theory might therefore be a useful analytical device when we talk about the re-building of national identity in Bulgaria post-1989. Veličković suggests that the potential of such analysis lies in the historical rethinking of the legacies of communism and the role that it plays in the reconstructing of history to serve modern needs (2012). As she notes, 'a long

overdue critical engagement with this discourse of “the return to Europe” as well as with the various “self-colonizing” practices in eastern Europe is much needed’ (2012: 168).

As Baker argues in her critique of postcoloniality without race, the discourses of race have long been ignored in the academic debates about the Balkans. Baker adds that while the concepts of postcoloniality were effectively applied to enhance the understanding of the ‘racialisation of the Balkans’, the ‘racialisation in the Balkans’ remained largely unstudied (2018: 11). Instead, a postcolonial approach with race should foreground ‘the position of racialized minorities (as well as the ethnic-majority nations who have been racialized as white) in the region’s demographic history’ (2018: 9).

In a similar vein, Ivan Calmar (2021) argues that the migration crisis of 2016 exposed the already existing tensions between the Western members of the European Union and the ‘new’ Eastern members. Calmar suggests that there is an evident correlation between the negative attitude towards Eastern Europeans (described by Calmar as ‘white but not quite’) in the West and the racism by Eastern Europeans directed at other ethnic minorities (including Roma and refugees from the Middle East).

The challenge, but also the potential strength, of the postcolonial approach to the post-socialist territories lies in the diversity and multiplicity of the possible intersections of race, class, gender, and other hierarchical society systems. Such an approach could help challenge the binary hierarchical framework demonizing the East or the West, and, instead, offer an analytical tool that Tlostanova (2023) calls a feminist border thinking – an approach where special attention is given to the areas characterized by ambiguity and in-betweenness. As Kassabova notes in the preface to her book *Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe*, the borders are always involving: ‘Once near a border, it is impossible not to become involved, not to want to exorcise or transgress something. Just by being there, the border is an invitation’ (2017: xv).

The Balkan region, and Bulgaria in particular, seems to be an appropriate place to apply the methodology of border thinking, since the post-1989 transition in the countries of the region was not a simple replacement of ideologies. Instead, it initiated a coexistence and overlapping of multiple ideologies, inviting, and encouraging multiple acts of border crossing. As Boatcă argues, in the periphery, ideological and political models like conservatism, socialism and even liberalism can take ‘forms that often retained nothing of the original model but the name’

(Boatcă 2006: 322). Considering this, it is particularly important to explore these transformations and to see the post-communist countries as an example of semi-periphery.

Self-Colonization and Othering

Self-colonization (Kiossev 1995) or self-exoticism is present in many post-communist Bulgarian films and could be seen as a manifestation of a profound need to be accepted. In his theory of self-colonizing cultures, Kiossev argues that the difference in power between the less modernized cultures and the ‘Great Nations’ results in the reframing of the nation in the context of a lack, or loss of something (Kiossev 1995: 1). Kiossev notes that self-colonization is different from colonization, because it means a different kind and level of ‘backwardness’; while these cultures are ‘not central enough, not timely and big enough’ if compared to the core, they are at the same time ‘insufficiently alien, insufficiently distant and insufficiently backward’, leaving the self-colonizing cultures in ‘the space of a generative doubt: We are European, although perhaps not to a real extent’ (1995: 3).

Kiossev suggests a multilevel model of ‘rationalizations’ that lead to self-colonizing impulses, and most of them can be applied to the Bulgarian case. For example, the first rationalization suggested by Kiossev is the idea of a rebirth or revival of the nation, which means a return to some version of a glorious past before the traumatic moment in the recent past (1989), in order to ‘self-convince such a culture that its own historical time has not started at the traumatic point but has been continuous from some honourable Past towards the glorious Future of the Nation’ (Kiossev 1995: 5). A second rationalization is explained as a necessity of two competing ideologies – Westernization (Europeanization) and nativism. The former is constructed as a linear progressive movement in the traditions of modernity, while the latter, according to Kiossev, ‘looks for and often finds (i.e. invents) the lost “authentic substance” of the Nation, before it has been corrupted by aliens, and then idealises it in a bucolic manner’ (1995: 6). The doctrine of nativism, thus, holds a dangerous potential of overindulging in the discourses of Othering, because all new influences are impossible, or at least difficult, to incorporate into an ideology based entirely on the distant past and inherent perennial characteristics.

Self-exoticism in world cinema was described by Elsaesser as a process where ‘the ethnic, the local or the regional expose themselves under the guise of self-expression, to the gaze of the benevolent other’ (Elsaesser 2005: 510). Self-exoticism and self-colonization are present in some post-communist Bulgarian films such as *Operation Shmenti Capelli* (Mitov 2011) or *The World is Big and Salvation Lurks Around the Corner* (Komandarev 2008), to some extent fuelled and conditioned by the controlling gaze of the Western Other that is perceived as more civilized and progressive. I argue that, while still present, in *Mission London* these processes are being mocked as they become a source of absurdist comic relief.

Challenging the Othering Discourse: The Possibility of Hybridity

Both forms of modernity that existed and influenced the processes of national identity formation in Bulgaria – the socialist (before) and the capitalist (now) – resulted in a deeply rooted acceptance of the binary approach to national identity. I argue that there is a potential for alternative dialogic ties in the more hybrid and fluid national identity representations in cinema. The following section will explore how in the case study film, hybrid identities are negotiated in more complex and non-binary terms, deconstructing the discourses of othering, and challenging the status quo.

Hybridity, hybrid identities, and border crossing are crucial concepts to use in the attempts to understand any society in transition. There has been an ongoing debate surrounding the notion of hybridity, and Pieterse describes the subsequent critique as the ‘anti-hybridity backlash’ (2001: 219). Marotta, for instance, argues that boundaries between societies are still unavoidable, despite the claims of the overbearing fluidity and mobility of the postmodern world (2008: 309). Drawing on the work of Marotta, who suggests that boundaries are essential to ‘the very constitution’ (2008: 301) of the hybrid subject, in the present research I define hybridity as a process of border crossing, most likely a vernacular and transgressive act; for this to happen the existence of boundaries is a necessary condition. At the same time, I refuse to see boundaries as stable entities with fixed meaning that cannot be affected by the dynamic of the border crossing. Instead, as Pieterse argues, hybridity and boundaries coexist in a state of negotiation, highlighting the vital ability of hybridity to problematize boundaries (2001: 220). Hybridity cannot

be restrained to just national, ethnic boundaries, and it could also mean transcending the boundaries of time or heteronormativity. As Berghahn notes, hybridity provides a problematization and critique of normativity by offering an alternative to the hegemony ruled by the dichotomies of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (2012: 133).

I also suggest that hybridity and hybrids are more than just a liminal space. Instead, Burns, for example, proposes viewing hybridity as an alternative rather than liminal space: ‘the notion of being trapped “between two cultures” is rejected in favour of marking out a “third space” of cultural hybridity that holds out the promise of a more liberated society’ (2007: 11). I would argue that this approach applies to the Bulgarian case, as it proposes a critique of the claim that Bulgaria is still stuck in transition, remaining forever in the liminal space in-between.

As Neuburger states, no hybridity is accepted by the Western version of modernity. Nevertheless, this does not eliminate hybridity, and, in some cases, hybridity can present an alternative to the hegemonic colonial discourse (2004). Morozov and Rumelli add that othering can be a positive, constructive practice, which can even be considered ‘a hybridising practice involving both positive and negative representations’ (2012: 32). It is clear, however, that within the East/West dichotomy, this practice is asymmetrical.

Hybridity and Cinema of Intercultural Negotiation

I am using the idea of interculturality in my study, because, as Marks notes, ‘intercultural’ refers to the role of cinema as a mediator, suggesting fluidity and possibility of change manifested through a ‘movement between one culture and another’ and implies that the dominant culture is not a static background for the unfolding of the cultural minorities – it is all seen as a fluidity and dynamic dialogue (2000: 30). At the same time, my focus on the negotiational aspect of cinema provides an opportunity to view the encounters mediated by cinema as dialogical, vernacular acts of border crossing. Intercultural cinema theory (see also Evans in this volume) presupposes an equal dialogue, while the idea of negotiation is more suitable to reflect that the dialogues between Bulgaria, its perceived core (Europe and the symbolic West), and the Other within are not equal. The concept of negotiation, therefore, emphasizes the focus on the numerous unequal relationships of power, influenced not only by economic but also political and cultural factors.

***Mission London* Film Analysis**

This section looks at the case study film through the previously mentioned lenses of self-colonization, othering and hybridity. *Mission London* follows some of the patterns of self-colonizing cultures suggested by Kiossev (1995). For example, the first two rationalizations proposed by Kiossev, namely the idea of a rebirth of a nation and a return to the once lost pre-traumatic times, are present in *Mission London*, even if they are used ironically. The fact that the Bulgarian President's wife, Selyanska,¹ is determined to invite the queen to the event at the embassy exacerbates the absurdity of the plot and highlights the tendency of self-deprecation. At the climax of the film, during the celebratory dinner at the embassy, the over-the-top show illuminates the anxieties and the inferiority complex that are central to the Bulgarian tendency of self-colonization.

The show relies heavily on the long-lost Bulgarian golden eras – first, the proto-Bulgarians, and then, the already mentioned National Revival after the liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire. Initially, the exaggerated fire show was meant to impress the British Royal Family, while also proving to them that Bulgarians are part of the European 'family'. As the president's wife Selyanska says in her speech before the dinner: 'You will become convinced yourself that we all belong to one and the same cultural motherland called Europe'. The choice of these two scenes from Bulgarian history to prove that Bulgarians are, indeed, Europeans, is not accidental. Both episodes represent the glorious times when Bulgaria still shared a common path with Europe, before the traumatic event of the communist coup in 1944 that disrupted the natural flow of history. Using Kiossev's terminology, the self-colonization through a return to these particular idealized times in history allows Bulgarian national identity to return to its lost 'authentic substance' (1995: 6) and, thus, respond to the expected critique from the colonizing West.

The failure is, nevertheless, unavoidable: the concert goes wrong, and the fireworks to celebrate 'the victory of the Bulgarian soldiers' on-stage result in an explosion and fire in the embassy hall. As the guests, including the fake queen, leave the room, the absurdity of the situation becomes even more obvious. The image of the fire in the embassy is the peak of absurdity in the film's narrative: there is a very extravagant dinner served, the decorations are very pompous and classic, but the fire destroys everything, and the aftermath of the disaster looks fake and ridiculous. The fear of embarrassment becomes a reality, as a Scotland

Yard detective arrives and, shocked that something like that could happen in an embassy, exclaims: ‘What is going on here? These people are barbarians!’.

Indeed, ‘these people’, the Bulgarians, are finally mocked for their constant desire to prove themselves as truly European. I would argue, however, that the film goes beyond simply following a certain self-colonizing pattern. *Mission London*, in its satirical manner, offers a glimpse into the absurdity of this pattern and reflects critically on the inferiority complexes rooted in the overbearing sense of always remaining stuck in the in-between state of ‘not European enough’.

The use of satire in *Mission London* seems to be directed at everyone, except for the ambassador, Varadin, who remains the only distanced and somewhat rational character. His position as an observer is highlighted when he tries to cope with the absurdity around him by watching a hypnotherapy video and then desperately trying to relax by using counting techniques. By slowly counting down from one hundred to one, Varadin maintains his calm distant position to the rest of the world, however disturbing and frustrating it becomes.

The following scene from *Mission London* offers another interesting perspective on the way that the Eastern gaze can be reversed through cinematic narratives. The first time we see Varadin, he is arriving in London in a black cab, looking at Westminster and Big Ben through the window, unaware that he is simultaneously being watched by Mr Carver – the Minister of Defence. The hierarchy is quite apparent in this scene, as Mr Carver is literally above everyone else, hiding behind a curtain in the parliament building and looking down, while Varadin is in the car down below. The dynamic is reversed after the already mentioned European summit when Mr Carver takes the ambassador to his home and talks to him while also getting drunk. Varadin is the one who is trying to use the other for his own interests, while the minister appears to be the more naïve one. Meanwhile, Varadin appears to be Westernized and looks like a stereotypical English gentleman, wearing a Burberry scarf and a coat.

Although Varadin had to obey the president and his wife, the audience could identify with him as the main character and also view the surroundings from this slightly distanced and, therefore, more critical and self-reflective perspective. This perspective is reinforced by the fact that Varadin remains sober in the scene with Carver, while the supposedly more civilized minister is drunk and falls asleep.

It can be argued that Varadin subverts the stereotypical image of the Bulgarian abroad – instead of embarrassing himself in front of the more civilized foreigners, Varadin is an idealized model of a genuinely European Bulgarian who does not

have to trick the Westerners in order to become equal to them. Furthermore, Varadin is the only 'sane' character through whom we get to witness the madness of his world. He is already more civilized and rational than some of the members of both sides of the world: he is calm, in control, and distanced, conforming to the stereotype about a typical Westerner. This allows him to be an observer rather than a hybrid. The film, therefore, opposes self-exoticism by presenting the tropes of unification, the universalization of experience and humanization through its satirical take, demonstrating the similarities and coherences, rather than differences and extremities (Easthope 1988). It is suggested that national ideas are indeed nothing more than complexes of inferiority, a struggle for power, and a manifestation of political interest. The national identity construction is depicted as something artificial, politicized, and imposed from above so that we can see the similarities between 'not-there' Bulgaria and the 'true-Europe' Britain more than their differences.

The exaggerated absurdist humour is crucial in the film – it not only highlights some traumatic conflict points of national negotiation but also makes their needlessness obvious. The absurd events at the embassy dinner once again highlight the excessiveness and artificiality of the constructed imaginary spaces of East and West. The entire process of adaptation and catching up with the West becomes the object of parody, especially when highlighted by the way that the Western characters themselves behave. Adaptation, thus, it is not depicted as something necessary; on the contrary, since everyone is a part of this absurd game, then perhaps the need to catch up is also artificially imposed.

Nevertheless, this contrast of power and the desire of Bulgaria to be recognized as truly European is continuously ridiculed in the film. When Varadin first meets the representative of the agency 'Famous Connections' at the embassy, they are being served sandwiches that look like a stereotypical image from the popular Soviet cookbook, *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* (1952). The representative makes a striking comment about the food: 'I'm afraid that these sandwiches prove that you have a *long way to go to catch up with the rest of Europe*. I am not a snob, but as far as sandwiches are concerned there are certain sacred standards for this country'. This comment is particularly ironic coming from an agent who locates celebrity lookalikes to satisfy his clients' erotic fantasies. Nevertheless, it also exposes some complexes that Bulgarians have: the ambassador asks his cook to 'do some research' and make 'proper sandwiches' to avoid embarrassment next time. On the other hand, the absurdity of this comment and its irony could be seen

as a critique of the acceptance of the perceived artificial standards imposed on Bulgaria from the outside. The irrationality of these imposed demands is challenged through the satirical appeal of the scene and, thus, the subversive potential of the absurdist humour is fulfilled.

Another humorous commentary on the Bulgarians, or rather, all post-communist countries, is expressed later in the film by the same agents, who state: ‘They are really damaged over there, *they’ve got no taboos left after the collapse of the Berlin Wall*’. This seems to be a reflective and critical view of the East on itself through an imagined, mediated Western gaze, taken to the extreme. At the same time, the subversive power of both scenes lies in the satirical approach – both times the criticism of the East is voiced by characters who do not hold much power or legitimacy themselves. On the contrary, their own moral stance is questionable and, thus, their judgement cannot be considered authoritative or competent.

Both comments on the ridiculous standards that are felt to be imposed on Bulgaria by the West, or the ‘true’ Europe, suggest a sharp critique of the ‘catching up’ discourse. The attempts of the Bulgarian characters to adapt to and comply with the demands are ridiculed rather than really admired. The decolonial potential of *Mission London*, thus, lies in its subversive, satirical depiction of the negotiation dynamic between the older and the newer European Union states. The deidentification and universalization power in the film is also realized through the tools of absurdist humour, which challenge and question the rigid borders of the East/West divide.

Mission London Focus Group Discussions

Mission London offers a refreshingly complex and nuanced picture, exposing the overlapping and ambiguous essence of the constructed ideas of Europeanness, Balkanness, and Bulgarianness. However, the potential of the common experience of postcolonialism and the Western gaze does not guarantee a feeling of solidarity between semi-periphery and periphery. It is not enough for Bulgarian cinema to look back at the West; it is also necessary for it to look at those on whom they are projecting their Otherness. The question of who the actual Other is, if Bulgarians are indeed European, remains too complex and problematic to answer.

Not surprisingly, a discourse of blame was common in the focus group

discussion in relation to the Roma (an important but highly racialized and discriminated against ethnic minority in Bulgaria), particularly when talking about the ‘un-European’ and ‘non-civilized’ behaviour abroad. Referring to an episode from *Mission London*, one participant stated that the people abroad are so different that they cannot even imagine stealing a duck from the park and selling it, while the Bulgarians and the Roma take advantage of such naivety:

They cannot imagine why you would have to kill the ducks, sell them to the Chinese or whatever. This would never even cross their mind. Think of all the problems they have with their social services and the Bulgarians who abuse their benefits system. Whether they are of Roma origin, or not . . . (Participant 3, 40)²

When discussing *Mission London*, the participants reacted most obviously to the typical Bulgarian national trait – the desire to outsmart everybody else and to earn money without working. Interestingly, this is simultaneously the feature that they criticized in the Roma:

- *I think there are many other factors in Bulgaria that make a wrong impression abroad. The Gypsies,³ for example. (Participant 4, 31)*
- *Yes, the Gypsies. (Participant 2, 28)*
- *When they are caught stealing, no one says ‘I am a Gypsy’, they say ‘I am Bulgarian’. (Participant 4, 31)*
- *This is making a wrong impression. (Participant 2, 28)*
- *I see this in myself sometimes . . . It is the same when we think of Kosovo, about Albania. I can remember how we perceived them, as if we were expecting to see some cannibals there. (Participant 4, 31)*

Similar projections are evident in this dialogue where the participant admits his condescending attitudes towards the neighbours who are perceived as more ‘balkanized’:

- *We all have a similar mentality in the Balkans. (Participant 12, 43)*
- *I mean, all countries from this part of the Balkans. Slovenia and Croatia are different. Their mentality is different; they have a more civil society. I would say that Bulgaria is closer to the Balkans anyway. (Participant 9, 47)*

Interestingly, although the participants were aware of their own views towards the other Balkan states, their deprecating view of the Roma was not included in this self-reflective narrative. Nevertheless, I argue that there is a potential for alternative dialogic ties in the more hybrid and fluid national identity representations in *Mission London*.

A more nuanced discussion becomes possible where there is space for a more critical account of the Europe/East dynamic. Some of the focus groups gradually revealed a level of reflection on fluidity in Bulgaria's place in the European terrain, thus revealing the film's capacity to inspire dialogue and self-reflection. Some reflected that the reason behind the pronounced necessity to steal is economic:

I think that the problem with us is that the Bulgarian is poor, basically. And when a Bulgarian is poor, he can think of so many mischiefs, it's unbelievable. I think if people were more . . . If they lived more normally, had better income and a more normal standard of living, maybe they would not think how to trick England and France. (Participant 2, 28)

Participants were also quite critical about the outcomes of emigration to Western Europe. Almost in every group, the idea of the happy future in the West was challenged by the participants, who stated that 'When we go to the West, we work at the lowest levels' (Participant 7, 23) and 'I think that it does not come naturally to Bulgarians to live in other countries; they always want to return home. [wherever you go, Bulgarians are looking for the Bulgarian]' (Participant 15, 62).

Not surprisingly, in the focus group discussions, some participants defensively pointed out that the West 'underestimates' Bulgarians. They also noted that they are being made to believe that Bulgarians are lazy, because they are just being paid less and, therefore, exploited:

This is all part of some plan; they are trying to convince us that we are lazy. In Europe, they are getting big salaries because they work hard, and we do not work hard enough. The truth is just the opposite – we're working and we're working very hard! When they come from Europe to work here, we see the difference. They work ten times less than us, have their requirements, and if anything goes wrong, they refuse to work. While we work without any complaints. (Participant 15, 62)

It is clear in the discussions above that in these more critical reflections, the audience refuses to automatically accept the natural logic of othering, where Europe is always at the top of the hierarchy. Portraying the process of national identity negotiation through a satirical lens, *Mission London* highlights the absurdity of some of the claims imposed by the East/West inequality and helps the audience to challenge the logic of the 'catching up' discourse and question the stigmatizing of the Balkans as the margins of Europe.

In *Mission London*, the characters are hybrid, ambiguous and avoiding the obvious binaries while making them excessive and visible. Ambassador Varadin is a pragmatic figure, a balanced character who is relatable without the need to be ridiculed. Satire is not used to devalue the character but instead exposes the inconsistencies and the structural inequalities. As a hybrid, Varadin does not take on the role of a trickster. Instead, he offers an alternative type of 'a figure on the boundaries' (Tlostanova 2007) that does not require a marginalized or ironic status, but still can be a vehicle of border thinking. Thus, border thinking is adopted in *Mission London* through exploring the boundaries of Europeanness, the Bulgarian desire to be accepted as European, the fluidity of borders between Bulgaria and other Balkan or Eastern European countries.

The subversive potential of the film is realized in its tendency of unification: no one is safe. Perhaps, what is highlighted most is that there is no need to adapt – everyone is similar anyway: the British characters are just as ridiculous in their agency of celebrities as are the embassy clerks who show their ability to outsmart the system. The absurdity of the standards that the characters of the film are struggling to follow challenges the self-colonizing and self-deprecating image of the Bulgarian. Furthermore, the very stereotype about the insurmountable difference between the East and the West is challenged. It can be argued, therefore, that *Mission London* is a part of the cinema of intercultural negotiation. Using satire and absurdism, the film shows the interchangeable perceptions of the East and the West who both demonstrate the tendency to exoticize the Other in their differences. Nevertheless, because of the excessive amount of absurdity, the idea of the East/West divide is challenged.

Conclusion

In this chapter I viewed and analysed the national negotiation process in Bulgaria through the postcolonial lens, the discourses of inclusion and exclusion, and the subsequent process of othering. An interesting exchange between the symbolical core, semi-periphery and periphery emerged as a result. On the one hand, cinema encourages, mediates, and facilitates the exchange between these symbolical entities. The case study film produces multiple diverse representations of national identity that are not limited or homogenous in their treatment of the Other, providing fertile ground for hybridity and intercultural negotiation in the context of the transition from communism. The non-inclusive discourses of Otherness are criticized through the means of absurdism and satire and a more universalizing perspective, which focuses on the intercultural similarities rather than the differences. I argue that, despite being a comedy and a commercial blockbuster, *Mission London* has the potential to challenge the mainstream discourse of projected othering in Bulgaria.

Previously criticized for a lack of hybridity (Trifonova 2011), new Bulgarian cinema is shifting to express a more universal appeal in recent years. Some films focus on class struggle, poverty, and corruption, such as *Glory* (Grozeva and Valchanov 2016), *Directions* (Komandarev 2017), *Rounds* (Komandarev 2019), *Blaga's Lessons* (Komandarev 2023); others reflect on the experiences of women in the largely conservative Bulgarian society, such as *Mother* (Zornitsa Sofia 2022), *Women Do Cry* (Mileva and Kazakova 2020).

Since the release of *Mission London* in 2010, a number of films have continued to use the theme of migration to reflect on the complex marginalized role of Bulgaria in Europe and to express anxieties and insecurities about the place of Bulgaria within a broader European context. *Cat in the Wall* (Mileva and Kazakova 2019) takes place in a block of flats in London and follows an unfolding conflict between Bulgarian migrants and their British working-class neighbours. The documentary *The Good Postman* (Hristov 2016), its fiction feature version *The Good Driver* (Hristov 2023), *The Judgement* (Komandarev 2014), and *Fear* (Hristov 2020) address the topics of migration and the refugee crisis, specifically focusing on the literal and metaphorical acts of border-crossing. In *The Judgement*, the main character Mityo accepts a job smuggling migrants over the border into Bulgaria, and gradually realizes that this work reminds him of his military service as a

Bulgarian border guard where, ironically, his task was to prevent people from leaving the Eastern Bloc.

The negotiation of national identity cannot be seen in isolation from the political frameworks. For example, in *The Judgement* mentioned above, the refugees are not given their own voice, and they continue to be represented through the lens of Bulgarian characters and are, therefore, further dehumanized. One character, for instance, describes the (presumably Syrian) refugees as ‘Gypsies, Arabs, and blacks’. It is evident, therefore, that the building of national identity in cinema is still constructed primarily through the processes of exclusion and inclusion. Cinema exposes these points of negotiation, facilitating a symbolic conversation between the imagined core (the abstract idea of Europe and the West) and the periphery (Bulgaria), but also between the semi-periphery (Bulgaria) and the periphery including its multiple Others (Roma, refugees, migrants).

As the discussions in the focus groups show, it is not enough to assume the engagement of the audiences to challenge the already existing hegemonic structures of projected othering. Projected othering seems to be accepted quite uncritically, which shows the continuity and rootedness of these practices. Even though, as the analysis shows, *Mission London* provides examples of universalism and hybridity, this is not always enough: most of the focus groups still included divisive comments and strong binary oppositions. Moreover, the cinema which negotiates the position of the less privileged and more vulnerable minority groups (created by these groups themselves and from their perspective) in Bulgaria is yet to be produced.

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Notes

1. Selyanska's name is translated literally as *Peasant*; this word has a negative connotation and is often used to contrast urban and progressive with rural and backward.
2. Participant number, participant age.
3. The participant used the derogatory term *tsigani* instead of Romi, Roma.

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Filmography

- Blaga’s Lessons* (2023) Directed by Stephan Komandarev [Film]. Argo Film.
- Cat in the Wall* (2019) Directed by Mina Mileva and Vesela Kazakova [Film]. Bulgaria and France.
- Directions* (2017) Directed by Stephan Komandarev [Film]. Argo Film, Aktis Film Production, Sektor Film Skopje.
- Fear* (2020) Directed by Ivaylo Hristov [Film]. Profilm.
- Get the Rabbit Back* (2005) Directed by Dimitar Mitovsky and Kamen Kalev [Short]. SIA Advertising.
- Glory* (2016) Directed by Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov [Film]. Bulgaria.
- The Good Driver* (2023) Directed by Tonislav Hristov [Film]. Bulgaria.
- The Good Postman* (2016) Directed by Tonislav Hristov [Film]. Bulgaria.
- The Judgement* (2014) Directed by Stephan Komandarev [Film]. Bulgaria and North Macedonia.
- Mission London* (2010) Directed by Dimitar Mitovski [Film]. Bulgaria and North Macedonia.
- Mother* (2022) Directed by Zornitsa Sophia [Film]. Bulgaria.
- Operation Shmenti Capelli* (2011) Directed by Ivan Mitov [Film]. C and R Productions.
- Rounds* (2019) Directed by Stephan Komandarev [Film]. Contrast Films.
- Women Do Cry* (2021) Directed by Mina Mileva and Vesela Kazakova [Film]. Bulgaria and France.
- The World is Big and Salvation Lurks Around the Corner* (2008) Directed by Stephan Komandarev [Film]. Bulgaria.