TRANSFORMATIONS OF MODERNISTIC CONCEPTS IN BULGARIAN ANIMATION

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Animation has been a substantial part of the avant-garde movements of the 1920s. Its abstract films by Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann, Viking Eggeling, Fernand Léger strongly contributed to the avant-gardists efforts to perform the 'pure cinematic language' (*Cinéma Pur*) and 'visual music'. The surrealist films by Man Rey or Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí were quite close to the visions, dreams and nightmares that animation easily performs and reproduces to this day[1]. The natural connection between animation and avant-garde forms got even stronger, revitalizing new and new avant-gardes.

However, history sometimes strongly impacts the development of modernist styles in different countries. In Bulgaria, similar to other countries of the former Socialist bloc, the dynamics of the artistic processes were heavily influenced by communist ideology and the dogmas of so-called *socialist realism*. In the 1950s the imitative mode of animation, or the hyper-realistic/naturalistic styles, following some of the Soyuzmultfilm productions, were thought as loyal to the ideology.

FIRST MODERN GRAPHICS ATTEMPTS

Paradoxically, this period, dominated by ideological clichés, did not last long. In the 1960s, new ways of artistic expression and harsh social satire unexpectedly emerged and flourished. Modern graphics, often influenced by European models, provoked the patience of censorship in the 1960s in the films by Todor Dinov, Ivan Andonov, Stoyan Dukov, Ivan Vesselinov and many others. Bulgarian animation developed a kind of 'Aesopian language,' metaphoric expression, ability to tell subversive stories via vivid visual means. The absence of dialogue in most of the films placed the Bulgarian authors mostly out of the focus of the ideological drones. That was why Bulgarian animation was more radical in its criticism of the regime and society than it was possible for feature films. The animation language was based on symbols, metaphors, visual tropes and individual artistic styles.

The 'good luck' of the Bulgarian animation was due to two reasons. The first was the weakness of the animation industry. After finishing two big productions: *Forrest Republic* by Dimitar Todorov-Zharava (1953) and *Marco, the Hero* by Todor Dinov (1955), it became quite clear that animators could not meet the increasing administrative demands for more films and could not fulfill the five-year plan, if working in a hyper-realistic 'heavy' style which needed hard and long-lasting animators' labor. Thus, the then director of the animation studio, VGIK-trained artist Todor Dinov, decided to turn the studio policy of the modern European-based graphic design, a plain easy line and a flat background.

The second reason for this unexpected freedom was rooted in censorship mechanisms themselves. Animation was then considered a 'second hand' cinematographic art needed for children's education and entertainment. So, the censorship institutions did not keep an eye on animation and the artists felt increasingly free to express subversive ideas and styles. They redirected their efforts to adult audiences. All this caused radical changes in the type of representation and visuality. Animation characters were constructed as signs and symbols rather than 'realistically rendered'; the flatness of the screen

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1   TURVEY, The Filming of Modern Life: European Avant-Garde Film of the 1920s, 2011.

became an artistic device replacing the illusion of the three-dimensional ('real-life') space. The plots and stories changed in line the visual styles. Social satire became a leading model: *Lightening Rod* (1962) by Todor Dinov, *The Apple* (1963) by Todor Dinov and Stoyan Doukov, *The Hole* (1966) by Zdenka Doycheva, and others. New thematic fields, conflicting with the communist ideology, started to appear: freedom and individuality (*Daisy*, dir. Todor Dinov, 1965; *Embarrassment*, dir. Ivan Andonov, 1967, etc.), the subject of self-identity in Freudian interpretation (*My Second Me*, dir. Donyo Donev, 1964, *Masquerade*, dir. Hristo Topusanov, 1965). Even quite unacceptable for the "society of collectivism" topics, such as alienation, emerged suddenly outrunning the process in the feature film (*Houses-Fortresses*, dir. Stoyan Doukov, 1967). Distortion, hyperbola[2], grotesque, 'uglification' took the lead in the shorts and that turned the studio practice to modern imagery. I am far for implying that, in the 1960s and the early 1970s, most of the Bulgarian animators *consciously* created their films in opposition to communist ideology. What we have here is a rather complicated oscillation, a kind of obscure subconscious choice unsettled between the drive for freedom and the fear of self-censorship.

THE RADICAL NEO AVANT-GARDE FROM THE MID-1970S

In the mid-1970s and the early 1980s, a new generation of artists and directors emerged. Their works can be considered as neo avant-garde because of the radical challenge to the tradition, including the modern one. A curious fact is that Anri Koulev, Nikolay Todorov and Slav Bakalov had just graduated from the Soviet VGIK, and Assen Munning from the Czechoslovakian FAMU. All of them, together with Roumen Petkov, are often called a New Wave in Bulgarian animation. At the time of their appearance such films as *Hypothesis* (1976), *Staging* (1978), *Cavalcade* (1979) by Anri Koulev, *Megalomania* (1979) by Nikolay Todorov or their joint *One-man's Flat* (1979), *The Ship*, *Sunday* (1980) and *Bagpipe* (1982), and others inflict an explosion of bewilderment and misunderstanding. The administrators evaluate these films as

'not ours' (foreign), confused and pessimistic.

The new trend in animation cannot be considered only as a renewal of style or thematic scope, or as a change of techniques. The films of then young authors seem more like a relentless invasion of a new type of thinking and self-awareness, a new language of animation, a new understanding of creative expression across a wide range from thematic scope to visual styles and techniques. This is the most pivotal and dramatic aesthetic phenomenon in the entire history of Bulgarian animation. So far, to one degree or another, the films of our animators have had some interconnection, mutual respect, a community of models. Even films that have touched new artistic territories did not "cut the links."[3] Or, at the very least, they have shown respect for the understandable narrative-dramaturgical structure.

The works of the younger generation from this period dramatically changed the thematic scope of animated cinema and immersed in the anxieties, doubts, fears, neuroses and complexes of contemporary man. Evil, violence and brutality were part of the modern world in the interpretation of these authors.

In the film *Hypothesis*, which became emblematic for this generation, directed by Anri Koulev in 1976, the lack of a consistent narrative is replaced by easily recognizable symbols (Napoleon, Icarus, the Titanic, Pushkin, Einstein, Charlie Chaplin, and the like). These symbols in turn are combined with subjective intrusive (subconscious) images of crowds, cyclists, people reading newspapers, boatmen…. Anri Koulev's hypothesis is based on the tensions between different segments of action. The line of dramaturgy is ragged, the motives interrupt themselves without reaching a culmination. They are perceived as fragments, not as complete or exhaustive observations. The expressive narrative sharply cuts the sequential exposition to pieces, relies on the synthetic, fast and shocking impact of the cultural sign-quote, and provokes the traditional linear storyline. The fragmentary actions in Anri Koulev's film are not based on their logical development, but on the contrary, on their slippery and variative repetition.

The films of the New Wave artists from the mid-

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2 GUERTCHEVA, Феноменът българска анимация, 1983, p. 74.
3 MARINCHEVSKA, Българско анимационно кино 1915-1995, 2001, p. 169-170.

1970s provoked a kind of visual graphic and technological revolution in Bulgarian animation. The complex, nervous, chipped graphic stroke typical of Anri Koulev or some of Roumen Petkov's films (*Alternative*, 1978, *Monkeys*, 1981, *Archipelago*, 1985) is non-functional, difficult to move, but strongly impacting the viewer's senses with its constant pulsation. Slav Bakalov's intentionally 'primitive' style is confusing with its contradictory perspective and deceptively simple form. Nikolay Todorov's pictorial and graphic virtuosity is full of enormous provocative energy. The grim image torn by psychedelic bright yellow lines distinguishes Assen Munning's individual handwriting in *A Sigh of Relief* (1983). The so-called auteur techniques—drawing on paper, painting under a camera, collage, and others—break powerfully into Bulgarian animation. The quotations and direct references to great Western European avant-garde styles, such as expressionism, cubism, surrealism, primitivism and many other '-isms,' are interpreted to create extreme and personal messages, highly valued mainly at foreign festivals. It is not just a matter of silent subversive penetrations of avant-garde forms in art, but of evident opposition to the whole doctrine of 'socialist realism.'

THE NEW ERA

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the economic, financial and production crises and, above all, the crisis of identity[4], placed Bulgarian artists in an oscilating, unstable position that failed to give rise to new messages of the time. The old models of social satire seemed totally inappropriate to fit into the fierce polemical and antagonistic discourse of the society of the 1990s. In their place, no new patterns emerged to form a clear trend. It would be logical that the sudden disappearance of censorship and the newly achieved social freedom would provoke new art forms. Unfortunately, this did not happen until almost 20 years later (with few exceptions).

2009 was a radical turning point in the development of Bulgarian animated film, marking the end of the 'transition' period. At the national festival of the documentary and animated film Golden Rhyton in Plovdiv, simultaneously and suddenly four (!) films appeared—all extremely different, but indicative of the art process. They swept the existing practice of quiet adherence to the status quo. *Anna Blume* by Vessela Dantcheva, *Three Sisters and Andrey* by Boris Despodov and Andrey Paounov, *Fellinicita* by Andrey Tsvetkov, and *The Lighthouse* by Velislava Gospodinova were the films that changed the entire discourse in Bulgarian animation with their neo-avant-garde thinking and free embedding of motifs, aesthetics and stylistic accents from European culture. In doing so, the authors easily accomplished something previously unheard of in Bulgarian cinema. This easiness was a result of the authors' faith in being citizens of the world and conviction that the treasures of the whole world's culture are a natural inspiration for their creativity as their undeniable heritage.

Anna Blume by Vessela Dantcheva is an unconventional film conveying art messages from the European avant-garde of the 1920s. The film is an adaptation of Kurt Schwitters Dadaist poem of 1919, and the visual design by Ivan Bogdanov was inspired by surrealism. Vessela Dantcheva delves into the subconscious to explore the vague impulses of sexuality and obsession of a man with a woman. The surrealistic approach is artistic and creative, not stereotyped or just quoting. In this combination of Dadaism and surrealism, there is no immaturity. The director's concept is based on multiple variations of constantly emerging motifs, as well as on an elegant visual style in black and white with one main color as an emphasis. This is a kind of joke with the basic colors of suprematism. Vessela Dantcheva includes in the film an archived audio record of the poem's text, performed in a transcendental, distant manner by Kurt Schwitters himself. The Dadaistic verbal conundrum relies on incomprehensible phrases and sound-matches, while the obsessive images in the visual layer are constantly changing and developing. The direct visual quotations include one of the favorite surrealistic images—René Magritte's black hat— representing the male essence. The authors seem to feel quite comfortable with European culture and are not restricted by any ideological or regional issues.

Three Sisters and Andrey by Boris Despodov and Andrey Paounov is another kind of challenge to the Bulgar-

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4 About the identity crises in Bulgarian cinema see: BRATOEVA-DARAKTCHIEVA, Българско игрално кино. От „Калин Орелът“ до „Мисия Лондон“, 2013.

ian animation tradition. It is an absurd joke with Chekhov's theatrical play in which the unbearable boredom of being and the appearance of a mosquito lead to a fatal outcome. It is also a transformation of Anton Chekhov's characters in unexpected locations in the first years after the October Revolution. "The film is a terrifying expressive metaphor of the mutilated life that has become a senseless and mechanically repetitive habit. This in itself is Chekhov's motif," Nevelina Popova writes.[5]

The authors try to create a hybrid animation rotoscoping actors Yosif Surchadzhiev, Ilka Zafirova, Zlatina Todeva and Gergana Djikelova, whose images were subsequently hand-re-painted on paper in a hyper-realistic style. This is a distinctive turn not to the modern but to postmodern tradition in fine arts which, for understandable reasons, has had no development in the previous historical period in Bulgaria. The faces, similar to their prototypes, are quite altered via hyper-realistic painting. Each frame of the film is hand-made and re-shot, thus obtaining a new image quality. The recently flourishing hybrid of live action and animation genres strives for a combination of the ontology of a spontaneously captured person with the conceptualism of animation cinema.

What is important, however, is that Boris Despodov and Andrey Paounov easily approach a foreign literary tradition without fear of its conceptual transformation. This puts the film in the general trend starting from 2009 films to widen the local Bulgarian frameworks to the world and to adopt foreign cultural heritage without a sense of inferiority or marginality. Combining the text of a Russian author (Chekhov) with the western (mostly American) hyper-realistic postmodern style in a Bulgarian animated film is a challenge.

A way of adopting modern and postmodern European traditions can be seen in the magnificent carnival and visual bacchanalia inspired by the great master of the world cinema in *Fellinicita* by Andrey Tsvetkov—a film that does not adhere to a complex plot construction but follows the associative and the emotional logic of Fellini's films.

Velislava Gospodinova's *The Lighthouse* is based on Jacques Prévert's poem *The Lighthouse Keeper Loves Birds Too Much*. Poetic potential, however, is conveyed

through expressive means compressing the mood to tragedy in the ending. Velislava Gospodinova's black-and-white styling, supplemented only by the red blood of birds pounding into the lightbulb has a shocking effect. Once again after *Anna Blume* the black-and-white+red colour palette alludes to suprematist art, this time as a furious and artistic replica of expressionism.

The freedom of interpretation, the ease with which Bulgarian authors incorporate motifs and concepts borrowed from Western European avant-garde, modern and postmodern art, is a mark of overcoming the identity crisis of the previous two decades. As citizens of the world, the young generation of animation directors feel themselves both "here" but also as heirs to European cultural heritage. In the 2010s, more and more Bulgarian authors refer to the world treasures not forgetting their national values. Globalization has already reconciled with local, national and Balkan values. I can cite *Father* (Ivan Bogdanov, 2012, with a team of co-directors from 4 countries), *Mark and Verse* (team of 5 co-directors, 2015), *The Day of the Bleeding Gums* (Dimitar Dimitrov, 2014), *A Traveling country* (Vessela Dantcheva, Ivan Bogdanov, 2017), *The Blood* (Velislava Gospodinova, 2012), *The Piano Player* (Assia Kovanova, Andrey Koulev, 2012), *Love with Occasional Showers* (Assia Kovanova, Andrey Koulev, 2015), *Jungle out of the Window* (Ivan Vesselinov, 2013), *20 Kicks* (Dimitar Dimitrov, 2016) and many others. Logically, this process of opening the narrow national gates garnered international acclaim for the so-called 'Bulgarian animation school,' as it was known in the past, and the young generation of Bulgarian animators received the awards from some of the biggest international festivals.

Talking about festivals and awards, it is not possible to miss the name of Theodore Ushev, a Bulgarian born Canadian animator whose *Blind Vaysha* (2016) was nominated for an Oscar, and *The Physics of Sorrow* (2019) received the biggest animation award, the Crystal of Annecy, just a few days ago.

It is a pity that it took 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall for Bulgarian animation to find its place on the world map of animation.

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5 POPOVA, Драматургичното пространство на анимацията. 2016, 162 [Dramaturgichnoto prostranstvo na animatsiyata, 2016, 162].

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