



1960s to 80s The Golden Age of Bulgarian Cinema



A shot from the film, *The Goat Horn*
Source: *The Goat Horn* (Image for reference)

Bulgaria, a country in Europe, is famous for its beautiful sea beaches and hot springs (Bastos, n.d.). The country is rich with one more treasure: Bulgarian cinema. Bulgarian cinema is unique with its rich history and diverse genres. In the cinematic history of Bulgaria, the period between the 1960s and 1980s stands as the golden age of Bulgarian cinema.

The history of Bulgarian cinema can be traced back to the first Bulgarian feature film *Bulgaran is Gallant* (Bulgaran e galant). This black-and-white silent film was written and directed by Vasil Gendov, who also played the protagonist in the film. The initial films from Bulgaria were comedies and melodramas. There was nothing particularly unique about the Bulgarian cinema industry during that time; they simply made movies that visually resembled other European films. The films produced during this period also struggled to gain financial collection through screenings (Ivanova, n.d. & Transmedium, 2021). Before the Golden Age of Bulgarian Cinema, movies followed the principles of socialist realism, influenced by the Soviet cinematic style. These films were known for their simple storytelling and a focus on portraying an idealized version of socialist life.





The government of Bulgaria noticed the success of films from other countries and wondered why their industry was still struggling. The first issue they noticed was the budget. As a first step, the government founded its own production house, *Studios for Feature Films Boyana*. The state-sponsored studios and initiatives provided resources for filmmakers to create ambitious and high-quality productions. This paved the way for the Golden Age of Bulgarian Cinema (Transmedium, 2021).



The big balloon from the film, *Tied Up Balloon*
Source: *Tied Up Balloon* (Image for reference)

The first change brought by the films of the golden age was the rise in production quality. As the government started providing subsidies, more people began entering the film industry. Better equipment and technologies acted as catalysts, raising the visual quality of the films. Take the 1967 film *Tied Up Balloon* as an example. It stands out for its visual storytelling and high-quality filmmaking. The sound quality of the film was also better than in previous Bulgarian films. However, the film was banned by the communist government for depicting the actual reality in Bulgarian villages (Rarefilmm, 2020).





A shot from the film, *The Goat Horn*
Source: *The Goat Horn* (Image for reference)

The funding from governments was an advantage for Bulgarian filmmakers. Simultaneously, strict censorship policies prohibited filmmakers from depicting the harsh realities of Bulgaria. Thus censorship and government control became the major challenges during this era. What happened next marked a crucial turning point in the Bulgarian Golden Age. Filmmakers began using allegorical storytelling and symbolism to convey deeper meanings and comment on societal issues indirectly. *The Goat Horn*, (1972) is a perfect example of this use of symbolism. Set in 17th-century Bulgaria, the film depicts Kara Ivan's wife being brutally assaulted and murdered by four local Ottoman feudal masters. To seek vengeance, Kara Ivan disguises his daughter as a boy, providing ten years of training in fighting. The violence by feudal lords can be connected with the violence by invaders and local rulers. The film can also be seen as an exploration of repressed femininity and gender differences. The decision to disguise Kara Ivan's daughter as a boy symbolizes the challenging societal roles and expectations placed on individuals, especially women, during that historical period. This film was screened at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival and won the special jury prize (Eastern European Movies, n.d.).





A shot from the film, *Knight Without Armour*
Source: MUBI (Image for reference)

The period also gave importance to children's films, with productions such as *Knight Without Armour* (*Ritzar bez bronya*) (1966) *Problem with Many Unknown Quantities* (1977), and *Story with a Dog, Without a Dog* (1985). These films establish a nostalgic connection by depicting contemporary life during that era. *Knight Without Armor* exemplifies the clash between childhood purity and societal expectations shaped by socialist principles, showcasing the nuanced interplay between innocence and the socio-political context in Bulgaria during that period. The film won the Golden Bear Lion award for the best children's film at the Venice Film Festival, solidifying its status as one of the best children's movies from Bulgaria (Georgi, 2016).



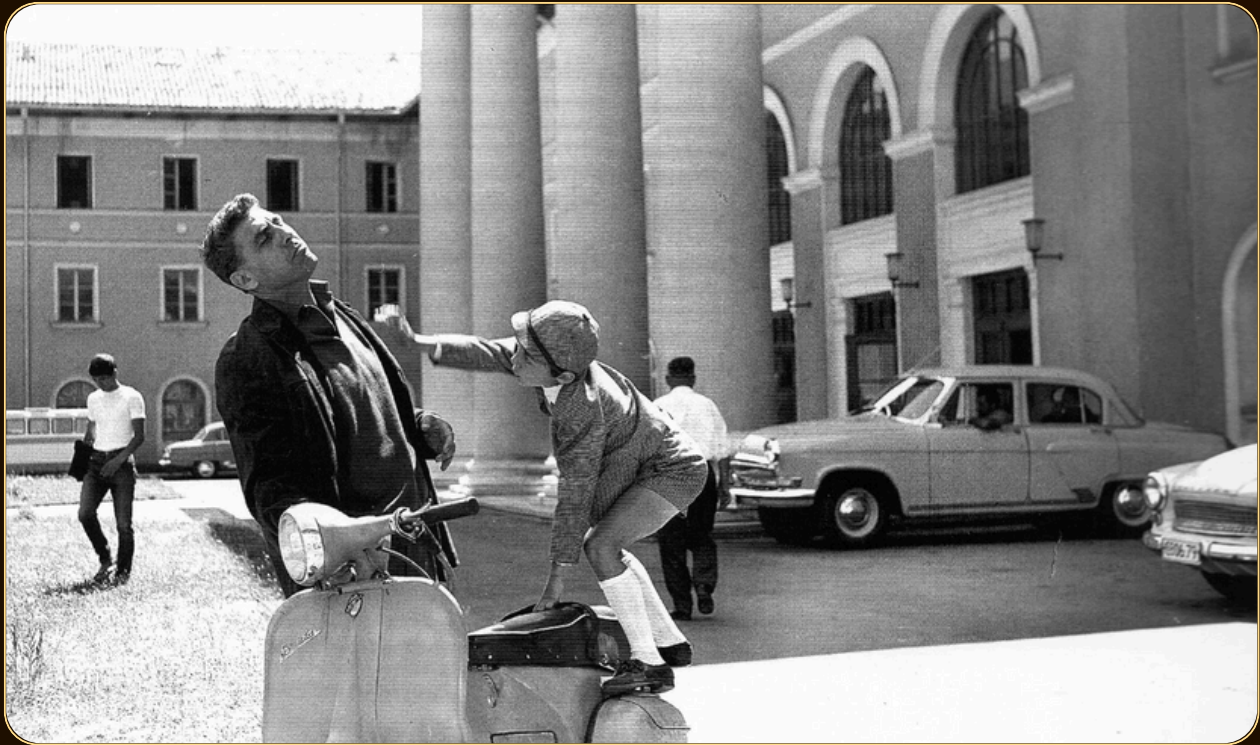


Different shots from the film, *The Last Summer*
Source: *The Last Summer* (Image for reference)

Another interesting aspect of the Golden Age was the change in the style of filmmaking and editing. In the previous era, films used less number of shots, cutting to more lengthy shots. Some filmmakers from the Golden Age started experimenting with a different editing style. They began shooting more visuals and reduced the length of shots. This enabled them to use more cuts and different angles. The increase in the number of cuts heightened the pace of the film and provided a fresh feel to the viewers. Take the 1974 film, *The Last Summer*. It is unique with its number of shots and cuts.

The international reception of Golden Age movies marked a significant milestone in Bulgarian Cinema on the global stage. The success of films like *The Goat Horn* at international film festivals brought recognition to Bulgarian filmmakers. The Golden Age films contributed to the formation of a distinct Bulgarian cultural identity by emphasizing local narratives and historical events. These films, which blended Bulgarian culture, were perceived by audiences with different cultures. However, the universal themes such as gender differences and social injustice easily resonated with them. The nuanced interplay between individual innocence and the socio-political context in *Knight Without Armour* found relevance in cultures facing similar challenges. Thus, the use of symbolism and allegory in these films inspired filmmakers from other countries to do the same.





A shot from the film, *Knight Without Armour*
Source: IMDB (Image for reference)

The Bulgarian film industry had a tough time during and after the Golden Age, which included challenges such as not having enough money and adapting to new filmmaking technologies. Even though the Golden Age ended, it left a strong mark on Bulgarian cinema. The films from that time are praised for their art and how they show Bulgarian culture and history. People still study and appreciate these films, seeing them as important parts of their culture. The influence of the Golden Age is seen in new filmmakers who look up to the past. The unique blend of culture, history, and allegorical storytelling serves as a source of inspiration for contemporary filmmakers. Additionally, the experiments in editing and other visual aspects during that era motivated the new generation of filmmakers to engage in further experimentation.





A shot from the film *Tied Up Balloon*
Source: Rare filmm (Image for reference)

In the rich tapestry of Bulgaria's cultural landscape, the Golden Age of Bulgarian Cinema emerges as a vibrant and transformative period. The exploration of societal roles, gender dynamics, and historical struggles in films highlighted certain aspects of Bulgarian identity, leading to discussions about the country's past and its impact on the present. The impact and legacy of the Golden Age films resonate not only in Bulgaria but also on the global cinematic stage. These films carved a niche with their unique blend of cultural reflection, allegorical storytelling, and experimentation, elevating Bulgarian cinema to international acclaim. As Bulgaria's beaches and hot springs continue to attract travelers, its cinematic legacy stands as a testament to the country's cultural depth and artistic innovation. The Golden Age of Bulgarian Cinema remains etched in history, a period where storytelling transcended boundaries, leaving an indelible mark on the cinematic world.





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Image Links:

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