



Innovations in Bulgarian Cinema: From Historical Revisionism to Visual Aesthetics

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A shot from the film *Viktoria*

Source: YouTube Screenshot/ Maya Viktova

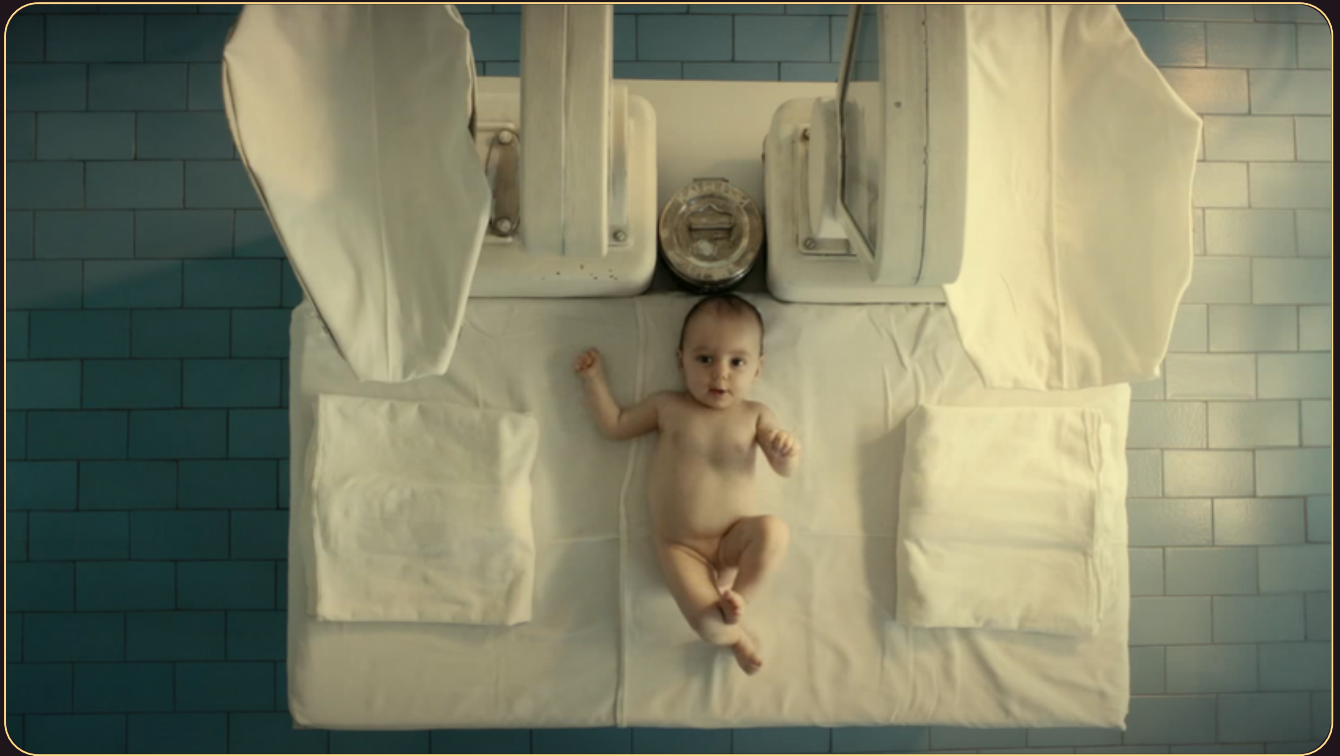
Bulgarian Cinema has undergone a remarkable transformation from its origins as a tool for propaganda during the communist regime to an industry with international recognition for its diverse narratives and visual aesthetics. Contemporary Bulgarian cinema is experiencing one of its most promising eras, and the innovations by filmmakers have shaped the medium into a powerful tool. These innovations range from historical revisionism to the visual aesthetics of the film.



A shot from the film, *Viktoria*

Source: YouTube Screenshot/ Maya Viktova

During communist rule, spanning from 1946 to 1989, the Bulgarian government used film as a propaganda tool. Propaganda films served several purposes, such as glorifying Communist rule, promoting socialist values, and fostering nationalism. Additionally, the government imposed bans on films that depicted social realities. Consequently, Bulgarian citizens were exposed to a distorted version of reality and history through these films. Therefore, after the end of Communist rule, one of the primary innovations undertaken by Bulgarian filmmakers was historical revisionism through films. They reinterpreted Bulgaria's true history through cinema, offering alternative perspectives, and challenging previous narratives.



A shot from the film *Viktoria*
Source: YouTube Screenshot/ Maya Vitkova

Viktoria (2014), directed by Maya Vitkova, provides a compelling example of historical revisionism in Bulgarian cinema. The film opens with the character Boryana, who yearns to escape from Bulgaria. However, her plans are derailed by an accidental pregnancy, compelling her to remain in the country with the unwanted child, Viktoria (Harvey, 2014). Set in 1979 during the communist rule, the film's historical revisionism is evident through Boryana and her desire to leave Bulgaria. This prompts the first question: why would she wish to depart from a country depicted as beautiful in older films? The answer lies in the stark reality portrayed in the film *Viktoria*: the dismal living conditions in Bulgaria. Boryana's fixation on the American dream symbolizes her longing for freedom, prosperity, and personal fulfillment beyond the constraints of socialist Bulgaria. Furthermore, the unwanted pregnancy and the subsequent birth of the child serve as poignant reminders of the strict abortion rules that prevailed during that time.



A shot from the film, *The Petrov File*
Source: YouTube Screenshot/ Sofia Film Festival

Through the lives of Boryana and Viktoria, the film *Viktoria* exposes the flaws and failures of communist rule in Bulgaria. By focusing on the ladies of the Boryana family, the film provides insight into the experiences of women under the constraints of socialist ideology. Viktoria is born without an umbilical cord, making her the “Baby of the Decade” (Wendemuseum, n.d.). The government attempts to market her birth without an umbilical cord as an achievement. This manipulation by the government showcases the propagandistic and manipulative nature of the communist government, portraying everything as a symbol of national pride and socialist success (Harvey, 2014). *Viktoria* prompts modern audiences to reevaluate their understanding of Bulgaria's communist past. By offering a fresh interpretation of historical events and their aftermath, the film encourages viewers to critically reassess the complexities of history and its enduring legacy in contemporary Bulgaria. Similarly, the 2015 film *The Petrov File* also reinterprets the history of Bulgaria, depicting the final years of communism and the chaos that ensued after the end of communist rule, intertwining personal narratives (Filmaffinity, n.d.).



A shot from the film, *Directions*

Source: YouTube Screenshot/ The Upcoming

The historical revisionism and selection of bold subjects propelled Bulgarian cinema to the next level, as content is always considered king in cinemas. The selection of new content creates curiosity among cinephiles for a time, but more is needed for the international success of an industry. Recognizing this, the next innovation in Bulgarian cinema was experiments with narratives. Films such as *The World Is Big and Salvation Lurks Around the Corner* and *Directions* (2017) stand as the results of these narrative experiments. Traditionally, Bulgarian films adhered to simple, linear narratives that straightforwardly unfolded the story. Take the film *The Goat Horn* directed by Metodi Andonov, as an example of a traditional linear narrative. The story unfolds in a clear chronological order. First, the shepherd's wife is murdered, then he escapes with his child, and later he gives training to the child to seek revenge for her mother's death. The story is narrated linearly, allowing the audience to follow a clear progression from beginning to end without confusion. However, contemporary Bulgarian filmmakers are now striving to provide viewers with fresh perspectives through various narrative approaches. These include non-linear narratives and multiple narratives, enhancing the overall cinematic experience. A non-linear narrative doesn't follow a chronological order. Instead, it shows different scenes that are out of order, using multiple timelines, flashbacks, and parallel plots. This style often requires the audience to piece together the puzzle and make connections between the incidents (DeGuzman, 2022).



Alex and Grandfather in the film, *The World Is Big and Salvation Lurks Around the Corner*

Source: YouTube Screenshot/ Culture Tube

The film *The World Is Big and Salvation Lurks Around the Corner* utilizes the possibilities of a non-linear narrative (Weissberg, 2008). The story centers around Alex (Sasho), who grapples with memory loss following a car accident. Guided by his grandfather, Bai Dan, Alex embarks on a journey to recover his lost memories (Komandarev, n.d.). The non-linear structure of the film intertwines with the fragmented memories of the character. As Sasho pieces together his past, the audience gains insight into his identity, relationships, and personal history. In this way, viewers also live through the experiences of the character. The non-linear narrative allows for a deeper exploration of Sasho's psyche and emotional landscape, as well as the complexities of his relationships with his family members. Along with providing a fresh feeling, the non-linear narrative also demonstrates a level of trust in the audience. By presenting fragmented memories and allowing viewers to connect the dots, the filmmakers elevate the audience's role in the narrative. This trust in the audience's ability to unravel the timeline puzzle and uncover the mysteries adds a layer of engagement and immersion to the film.



Greenish tone from the film, *Glory*
Source: YouTube Screenshot/ Film Movement

While cinema is primarily a visual medium, innovations in visual aesthetics have also played a significant role in shaping the growth of Contemporary Bulgarian Cinema. Filmmakers are actively experimenting with cinematography in diverse ways, utilizing the power of colors, landscapes, and the latest technologies. Films such as *Glory*, *Directions*, and *3/4* stand as prime examples, showcasing the beautiful cinematography of Bulgarian cinema to international audiences. The film, *3/4* adopts a minimalistic cinematographic style, effectively capturing realism. *Directions* utilized lighting, particularly yellow lights, to create a warm ambiance suitable for nightlife scenes. The film, *Glory* skillfully utilizes lighting in both indoor and outdoor settings, paying meticulous attention to detail. Additionally, the film incorporates a greenish tone that harmonizes with Bulgaria's landscape. These innovations in visual aesthetics have empowered Bulgarian filmmakers to create films across various budgetary constraints. Moreover, they catalyze attracting international viewers who often rely on visual elements more greatly, especially when the language may be unfamiliar.



A shot with a muted color palette from the film, 3/4

Source: YouTube Screenshot/ Ilinpelin

The innovation in visual aesthetics extends beyond just diversity in lighting. Contemporary filmmakers are also experimenting with a variety of color palettes and camera movements. The muted color palette in the film *3/4* can be interpreted as representing the dullness experienced by the family in the absence of their mother. While previous generations primarily used handheld cameras due to budget constraints, contemporary filmmakers are utilizing handheld camera movements to create tension and convey other motives. The handheld shots in the film *Directions* have successfully created a sense of traveling in some scenes and a sense of tension in others. Thus, filmmakers are cleverly manipulating the possibilities of cinematic techniques to enhance storytelling.



A shot from the film, 3/4

Source: YouTube Screenshot/ Ilinpelin

The evolution of Bulgarian cinema from its roots in propaganda during the communist regime to its current state of international recognition is a testament to the commitment and creativity of filmmakers. Historical revisionism in cinema has allowed filmmakers to challenge fake narratives and give fresh perspectives on Bulgaria's history. Films like *Viktoria* shed light on previously overlooked aspects of Bulgarian communism. This historical revisionism was a great eye-opener for international audiences who knew the history of Bulgaria only through film. Narrative experimentation has breathed new life into Bulgarian cinema by engaging both Bulgarian and international audiences in more immersive storytelling experiences. Additionally, the innovative use of visual aesthetics has allowed Bulgarian filmmakers to transcend budgetary constraints and attract international viewers through captivating cinematography. From color palettes to camera movements, filmmakers have skillfully manipulated cinematic techniques to enhance storytelling and evoke powerful emotions. As the Bulgarian cinema industry continues to evolve, viewers are eagerly awaiting further innovations for a more profound cinematic experience, solidifying the position of Bulgarian cinema on the global stage.

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