

Solidarity on the Margins: The Role of Cinema-Related Initiatives in Encouraging Diversity and Inclusivity in Post-1989 Bulgaria

by ANTONINA ANISIMOVICH (Edge Hill University's Department of Media)

Abstract

In the light of the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe, hate speech directed at refugees and ethnic minorities in mainstream Bulgarian media has increased. As a response, several recent cinema-related grassroots initiatives in the capital city Sofia are challenging such negative representations and establishing a more open and constructive dialogue with the Other. I argue that such events have the potential to create *interzones* or *conflictual dialogic spaces* (Halle 2014), where the public sphere is constructed from below, providing an alternative to mainstream media and political discourse. Adopting the theoretical framework proposed by Schober (2013), this paper evaluates the political potential of cinematic events in creating a public space for encountering the Other, both physically (in the same cinema hall) and symbolically (through representations on screen). I focus on one such initiative, a series of film screenings organised by *The House of Cinema* and *The Refugee Project* in Sofia, examining the *House of Cinema's* potential in promoting diversity by challenging the xenophobic mainstream discourse promoted in media.

Keywords: Bulgarian cinema, Bulgarian media, European identity, postcolonial studies, collective memory, national identity, refugee crisis, othering

Introduction

The problematic post-1989 transition in Bulgaria (Bell 1998, Deyanova 2014, Baeva and Kabakchieva 2014) highlights the necessity for new diversity and new solidarities studies in the area. It is evident that there are numerous challenges linked to the division and fragmentation in Bulgarian society, and the new attempts of nation re-building after the fall of the regime in 1989. Similar to some other countries of the former Eastern Bloc, the understanding of national identity in Bulgaria is complicated by the multiplicity of reference points, or national identifiers (Todd and Rougier 2008, Couroucli 1997). These multiple contexts intersect and sometimes complement each other, creating a unique background for a new national identity re-building (Brubacker 1995). This variety has contributed to the fragmentation and fluidity of the Bulgarian national

identity, which has offered a fruitful arena for reactionary nationalist movements that exploiting existing tensions.

In the context of Bulgarian accession into the EU and the constant struggle to prove that Bulgaria is inherently a European country, Bulgarian national identity is often built on the contrast with the 'barbarian' East. This is often done by creating a divide that differentiates Bulgaria from the non-European 'Other', which, in Bulgaria's case, in most general terms is the Orient (Perry 1995). This, in its turn, resulted in the necessity to prove that Bulgaria, in fact, belongs to Europe historically and culturally, which was manifested in the attempts to 'market themselves as civilised, developed, tolerant, or multicultural enough to be geographed as European' (Kovačević 2008: 86). This perceived pressure from the 'true' West

resulted in an accepted discourse of *Europeanisation* that evoked a whole number of problematic collisions within the national identity re-building process. National identity was constructed by the political elites through comparison and contrasting to either larger entities (Europe, East, West) or minorities (Other: Roma, Turkish minorities, and, recently, the refugees). New national ideas are built on 'distancing both the individual self and the "national self" from practices and traits that are considered un-European, while adopting such that are considered European' (Pilbrow 1997: 65). One of the mechanisms of this distancing is the process of marginalizing the minorities that could be stereotypically considered not, or less, European (Pilbrow 1997: 62).

After 1989, the major ideological divide in the Bulgarian political landscape has developed around the confrontation between the former communists and the democratic opposition. This divide has led to a strong association of the former nomenklatura with the 'left' and the democratic (and EU-leaning) forces with the 'right'. Gradually, the divide has been further exploited by the dominant parties who transitioned from promoting liberal values to what has now become a conservative far right ideology. Reinforcing the East/West divide even further, all pro-European parties, therefore, are automatically considered anti-communist and right-centrist (EuroZine 2017). Indeed, the parties represented in the current (2018) Parliament illustrate the recent shifts in the political climate in Bulgaria. They include *GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria*, pro-European but also conservative and right-centrist), *Bulgarian Socialist Party* (centre-left), *Movement for Rights and Freedoms* (centrist), *Will* (right-wing populism, right-centrist), and the *United Patriots* (an alliance formed by *IMRO – Bulgarian National Movement* (right-wing, Bulgarian nationalism), *National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria* (right-wing, Bulgarian nationalism), and *Attack* (far-right, Bulgarian nationalism)). It is crucial to add that out of these eight parties, at least five are promoting radical nationalist views and

are not hesitant in using extreme xenophobic rhetoric. The very names of these movements are very aggressive (*Attack, Will*) and suggesting that the Bulgarian nation needs to be saved from any foreign influence. Another important implication of such radicalisation is that these parties are non-inclusive, and most of them refer to the traditional Bulgarian values through the prism of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and are, therefore, openly anti-Islamic.

Miglena Todorova argues that the equation between Europeaness and Whiteness is not new, and has been present at least since the early twentieth century (2018). She examines the discourses of racial purity in *National Geographic* magazines and reflects on the origins of the new-coming immigrants from South Eastern Europe. As she demonstrates, even though the Balkan region was described as culturally European, it was still represented as not 'quite white' in terms of race, which put it in the middle position somewhere between the categories of 'white' and 'non-white'. The character traits, as well as the appearance of the Balkan peoples, are described in these magazines as a hybrid of Europeaness and Orientalism, in other words – as 'not-white-but-getting-there' (2006: 405). On the other hand, the discourses of *whiteness as Europeaness* that are now dominating the national public debates in Bulgaria could be considered as a continued legacy of communism as well, not just as a concept blindly inherited from the West. For instance, Todorova (2018) argues that in socialist times, nationalities were racialized by the official state discourse, and the category of race was replaced or hidden behind ethnic nationalism. As Todorova and Tlostanova both argue, this racialization in the Soviet and satellite states involved some 'borrowed' or internalised racist knowledge of the West, which Todorova describes as 'secondary Orientalism' (Tlostanova 2012; Todorova 2018). Specifically in the Bulgarian case, the national identity was still built on the ideals of belonging to Europe, especially in contrast with the 'real' Orient embodied by Muslim women 'as profoundly non-modern

and non-European – and, therefore, non-White’ (Todorova 2018: 122).

Thus, Europeanness was, even within the socialist state, considered and equated to supremacy, civilization, and progress. This suggests that both East and West operated within similar oppressive projects of modernity based on the hegemony and the ideas of racial purity and, broadly, whiteness. As Todorova further notes, on the surface, the Eastern bloc supported the anti-colonial movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America utilizing the opportunity to challenge the capitalist order in the West. Nevertheless, the discursive practices surrounding this support were ironically built on the same categories of exclusion, othering, and orientalising. Both systems were also based on the praising of the future as progress and blaming the tradition (the past) for everything reactionary and regressive.

Furthermore, the region has been a part of a racialized world for much longer than it is usually suggested (Imre 2005, Baker 2018). For instance, Todorova (2018) argues that, in Soviet times, nationalities were racialised by the official state discourse, and the category of race was not absent but hidden behind the idea of ethnic nationalism. In the Bulgarian case, the continuity of socialist race-related discourses can be observed in the context of the so-called Revival Process and its consequences. The Revival Process was a highly problematic forced assimilation campaign imposed on the Turkish minorities in Bulgaria by the communist party. The campaign that was launched in 1984 and continued until 1989 forbade the use of Turkish (and Muslim) names and entailed repressions in the form of prosecution and imprisonment for those who refused to comply with it (Grosescu 2017). It can be argued that the Revival Process demonstrates the contingency of the race-related discourses in today’s Bulgaria when the clash of ideologies after 1989 introduced even new dimensions to the already existing orientalising view of the non-titular ethnicities (Kalinova 2014). The continuity of the discourses of race, in its turn, proves the

embeddedness of the Bulgarian local categorisations of race in the world Eurocentric framework equalling whiteness and progress.

However, in some arenas, these dominant categorizations are being challenged. Postcolonial theory might be a useful analytical device when we talk about the East broadly as a discursive space of East and West contestation. 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 the 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). The postcolonial approach to the post-socialist territories, in particular, lies in the diversity and multiplicity of the possible intersections of race, class, gender, and other hierarchal society systems. Such an approach could help challenge the binary hierarchical framework demonising the East or the West, and, instead, offer an analytical tool that Tlostanova calls a feminist border thinking – an approach where special attention is given to the areas characterised by ambiguity and in-betweenness. For instance, as Deiana argues in her analysis of the Sarajevo Film Festival and its role in border crossing practices in the former Yugoslavia region, hybridity entails border crossing on various levels, ‘from geopolitics and institutions to everyday life and cultural practices’ (Deiana 2017: 2). Thus, hybridity as border crossing is a process and a vernacular act of negotiation that has the potential to challenge the official border politics. The focus on the negotiational aspect of cinema provides and opens up an opportunity to view the encounters mediated by cinema as dialogical, vernacular acts of bordercrossing. Viewing the negotiation of borders as a multidimensional and complex process helps to identify the opportunities where ‘dominant border conflict narratives might be challenged and re-imagined’ (Deiana 2017: 5). Therefore, it is argued that the role of cinema is not in resisting boundaries or

destroying them, but in crossing them in various contexts, potentially bridging the gap between 'us' and 'them', 'here' and 'there', the official and the vernacular. Halle's concept of *interzones* as 'conflictual dialogic spaces' (2014: 14) works well to describe the process of border crossing, suggesting that a significant dialogic potential is manifested in the borderline, hybrid, conflictual negotiations present in the cinema.

In order to understand the ways that these boundaries are contested, negotiated, and crossed, we need to look closely at the discourses of *othering* present in the public space. To do so, in this paper I will outline the media coverage of the refugee crisis and the role of ethnic minorities as the Other in the Bulgarian context. This section of the paper will include an overview of the hegemonic/mainstream discourse surrounding the image of the Other in the media and political speeches. Secondly, I will provide an outline of the methodological approach of *interzones* proposed by Halle and show its application to the Bulgarian case as an example of an *interzone*. This section will be focused on the development of small-scale initiatives, urban centres, the role of audiovisual content in inducing dialogue, and the role of alternative spaces in challenging the discursive hegemony, which will be followed by a discussion of the dialogic importance of counter-hegemonic space and diversity. I will rely on a case study of a series of film screenings organised by *The House of Cinema* and *The Refugee Project* to help understand how several urban spaces in Sofia enable this dialogue. I analyse the House of Cinema as an example of an *interzone* in the Bulgarian context, and will evaluate its potential in promoting diversity by challenging the xenophobic mainstream discourse promoted in media.

Hegemonic discourses around migration and ethnic minorities in Bulgaria: representations in media and political discourse

Although on the surface, Bulgaria has been famous for its liberal attitudes towards diversity, and most of all, toward ethnic minorities,

as the previous section shows, the actual situation is far from ideal. The notion of the 'Bulgarian ethnic model' first became prominent in the early 2000s, when the MRF party led by Ahmed Dogan noted that 'Bulgaria has achieved a model for the solution of minority problems unique for the Balkans' (cited in DeDominicis 2011). Particularly, comparing and distancing Bulgaria from the Balkan region and the conflicts in the Former Yugoslavian republic was crucial for the Bulgarian international politics prior to its accession to the European Union. The notion 'Bulgarian Ethnic Model' was used widely to stress the peaceful coexistence of multiple ethnic and religious minorities in Bulgaria, particularly pointing out to the fact that there was no racism and discrimination in the country (Rechel 2008). However, this is far from the truth, as numerous instances of racism and xenophobia have been documented by international organisations and national NGOs, in particular over the last five years (Rechel 2008). At the same time, it seems that the popular idea of the peacefully coexistent nations within the 'Bulgarian Ethnic Model' is used by the political elites to avoid acknowledging and dealing with issues of discrimination and hate speech, thus aggravating the already difficult situation the refugees and ethnic minorities find themselves in modern Bulgaria.

It is difficult to underestimate the crucial role that mainstream media plays in constructing the negative image of the refugees and ethnic minorities in Bulgaria. The recent report by the Institute of Social Integration states that since a very little percentage of Bulgarian citizens have direct contact with foreigners, their primary source of information and opinion-shaping comes from the media, and main speakers such as active politicians, public figures, and party leaders. As the Institute of Social Integration notes, 'Hate speech is the main problem of the refugees in Bulgaria' (2017). Monitoring of 355 national and regional Bulgarian media outlets in the spring of 2017 shows that the refugees are usually depicted as passive 'objects' in the news: they are not allowed to voice their own opinions.

The topic of the refugee crisis becomes particularly employed during election campaigns, when the threatening image of the Other is repeatedly used to consolidate the electorate to vote for far-right populist policies: 'This topic is used to instil fear, threat, mistrust'. An analysis of the transcripts of political speeches of the members of the parliament also shows that the refugees are presented as a threat to national security. Tsvetan Tsvetanov, a Bulgarian politician, recently pointed out the necessity to integrate the arriving refugees, simultaneously using a similar discourse of threat: 'There is a decrease in the refugee flow towards Bulgaria, but this should not calm us'. He specified that 'this should in no case lead Bulgaria to feel relaxed because there is still an influx of refugees on the Turkish border' (DNES BG 2017).

In an attempt to regulate the amount of hate speech in mainstream media, the *Association of European Journalists* provided criticism of the coverage of the most popular online media outlets. Their study demonstrated that the coverage of Roma minorities and the refugees is very rarely positive, and becomes even more radically negative during active election campaigns. Pointing out the extreme dehumanization of the image of the Roma in the Bulgarian media, the study shows that hate speech still dominates in the coverage of any news regarding ethnic minorities or refugees:

The speculative and almost always incompetent talk on the topic of the refugees, the abuse of human stereotypes and prejudices [...] and the lack of a clear demarcation between the concepts of "refugee" and "immigrant" gradually equalled the image of the refugee with that of the traditionally hostile image in the Bulgarian media, namely that of the Roma (AEJ 2017).

Furthermore, the negative depiction of the refugees and Roma has led to a total exclusion of these groups from the public sphere. As a study by Nancheva shows, such discourse has led to the fact that the discussions about hate speech and xenophobia focused on 'protection from the asylum seekers' rather than 'protection of the

asylum seekers' completely replaced any talks on the topics of human rights or consolidation (2016). Thus, in the public discourse, the asylum seekers remained 'passive objects' that, nevertheless, pose a threat to national security, thus reinforcing 'a very visible exclusion of asylum seekers from participation in the political community of the state' (Nancheva 2016: 550). Talking about the extreme Othering techniques in Bulgaria, Kamenova rightfully notes, in the Bulgarian case 'the construction of stereotypes has entered into its full phase, the Othering discourse has attained monstrous dimensions, and the Other is perceived only as a danger' (Kamenova 2014: 181).

Bulgaria, therefore, can be viewed as an example of a public space where an extreme discourse of Othering dominates the mainstream media and politics. In this context, it is crucial to seek official channels to challenge this discourse, acknowledge this as a problem on the governmental level and control the illegal examples of hate speech. In the meantime, there is also a need for non-mainstream grassroots alternatives of public spaces that can challenge the mainstream discourse through a dialogue based on intercultural encounter and dialogue. The following section will examine the role of alternative non-official initiatives in constructing a counter-hegemonic discourse about the minorities.

Grassroots initiatives as counter-hegemonic alternatives: interzones and the political potential of cinema

Since the official discourse both in the political sphere and in the mainstream media is dominated by a hegemonic depiction of ethnic minorities as the Other, the few possibilities of counter-force or counter-hegemonic discourses are limited to grassroots initiatives, particularly active in urban spaces. Such initiatives, communities and art projects, to name a few, include the *Red Dot* art gallery, the *Sofia Film Festival for Students*, the art group *Destructive Creation*, creative space *Æther*, workspace and community centre *SOHO Sofia*, *The Red House Centre for*

Culture and Debate, and *KineDok* – an alternative platform for documentary films distribution. The main case study of the paper, however, will be the series of screenings and events organised by the cinema theatre *Doma na Kinoto (House of Cinema)* with the help of the NGO *The Refugee Project* in 2017 in Sofia. Being aware of the limitations of focusing on just one case study, I would suggest that this particular example still provides a fruitful base for an effective discussion. This overview is mainly illustrative, and the analysis is by no means exhaustive. However, I intended to focus on initiatives linked particularly to cinema and the cinema-going experience for the reasons outlined below.

Visual arts and cinema, in particular, have been an essential part of the public space in Bulgaria since the early 1940s, when the process of kinefication¹ led to a complete transformation of the cinema industry and made it one of the most powerful instruments of state ideology. At the same time, the film creators' privileged role as intelligentsia in the dissident movement was also crucial as a counter-force to the regime, as some counter-hegemonic representations were conveyed through these films that were banned by the communist regime. Thus, films were an extremely important part of the public sphere, and their role was always politicized, regardless of their place on the mainstream/dissident spectrum. It can be argued that this is still the case in Bulgaria, even though the political and social climate has changed drastically in the past 25 years.

As the outline of the mainstream discourses in Bulgarian media shows, there is still a lack of counter-hegemonic depictions of the ethnic minorities and refugees. At the same time, the Bulgarian political and social movement scene follows the patterns similar to other countries of

the EU, meaning the rise of nationalist and far-right movements and a rise of the xenophobic discourse (Ghodsee 2008). Given such circumstances, it is crucial that alternative platforms exist that not only offer different representations, but also enable an encounter and dialogue, of the Other.

Several studies in the European context have examined how social interaction between people can influence their perception of growing ethnic diversity. The question most often asked is whether a dialogue is possible and whether it helps establish tolerance and cooperation. Piekut and Valentine (2017), for instance, use social psychological methods to study different types of social encounter spaces. They argue that the particular type of space has a profound effect on the way that ethnic diversity is perceived and the way that the dialogue with the Other is established. Further on in this paper, I analyse the specific features of the space cinema used to build a bridge between ethnically diverse groups in contexts where these groups rarely interact on a day-to-day basis.

In his analysis of the process of Europeanization of cinema, Halle argues that cinema both produces and reflects imaginative communities, which are (as opposed to the original 'imagined communities' by Anderson) dynamic, fluid and transactional (Cooke 2015). Imaginative communities are, therefore, constructed through production and consumption of cinema, through a network of cultural interzones. Halle defines interzones as 'a conflictual dialogic space [...] that develops through bordercrossing in the broadest sense', adding that an interzone is characterized by constant transformation and contestation of diversity (2014: 23). Halle suggests that cinema plays a key role in generating the interzones, as it is described as 'a privileged vehicle for the representation of imaginative communities' (2014: 23). Talking about a specific case of the European coproductions as interzones, Halle notes that the public sphere in the European context is constructed from 'below':

¹ The process of promoting cinema as an ideological tool of the regime, initially conducted through establishing movie theatres in rural areas of Bulgaria, equipping schools and community centres with movie screens or even introducing 'travelling cinemas' to cover the most 'backward' areas (Bojilov 1946, Bra-toeva-Darakchieva 2013).

European solidarity does not develop upward and outward but across, through, from below, sideways, crisscrossing terrains, potentially via urban centers, and equally likely via regional resistance to metropolitan control. Imaginative communities develop now more frequently not as metacommunities but as subcultures, micropolitical associations, ethnic migrant identities, midlevel economic partnering, sexual communities, and other “lower order” distinctive societies. (2014: 184-85)

Rather than imposed from above, interzones strive through grassroots initiatives, art manifestations, and intercultural dialogue. The dialogic essence of the interzones seems suitable for the analysis of the Bulgarian case, not only when we talk on a broader level about the sense of European solidarity. Rather, I argue that the concept of interzones applies to even smaller local spaces, including interactions between different cultures within one particular urban space, such as Sofia.

Schober, similarly, highlights the importance of cinema as a public space, seeing it as ‘an urban space where it is possible to meet the other’ (Schober 2013: 3). Comparing cinema-related initiatives in several cities of central and southeastern Europe, Schober examines ‘the potential the cinema has as such a space for encountering the other [...] and the effects this has on the level of urban civil society’ (Schober 2013: 4). The originality and novelty of her approach lie in the statement that films should be seen as a space-creating activity. Providing an example of the art installation by Rirkrit Tiravanija in Glasgow (1999), Schober introduces the particular ways that help to establish community connectivity and encounter with strangers in the urban public space. Tiravanija created a pop-up outdoor cinema on a traffic intersection in Glasgow, subverting the urban place and transforming its utilitarian use into a space of a direct encounter with the Other. Schober, thus, argues that cinema seems to have a specific potential for creating a public sphere by challenging the processes of ‘the further ‘privatization’ and ‘fragmentation’ of the political that goes along with [these] new media’ (Schober 2013: 16).

It is crucial to study the specific ways that constitute this encounter with the Other, in order to evaluate its potential in negotiating diversity. On the one hand, there is the understanding of the socializing power of cinema as a place that brings people together in a limited space for an experience of uninterrupted film consumption. This premise is, however, challenged by unconventional cinematic spaces, that are not only subverting the usual function within the urban context, but are also creating more possibilities for discussion and interaction. Schober notes that we need to examine the public space as a platform for negotiation of contested identities and ideologies, always remembering that such processes are political:

[...] the cinema has the potential to provoke its viewers into responding to the other, to something or somebody interrupting the smooth viewing process. In doing so, it re-exposes the viewer to the sense, that is, it challenges well-known certainties and allocations, but can also redirect our judgments and even our actions. (Schober 2013: 27)

It is clear then that the public sphere is understood as a dynamic entity, that is constantly constructed by its agents. Therefore, in order to challenge the hegemonic discourse of hate speech and xenophobia, new public spaces are stepping up as alternative opportunities to promote dialogue and negotiation. In the following, concluding section of this article, I look at a case study of a series of events in Sofia and evaluate the key characteristics that enable a dialogue within a given cinematic event, in which the audience, the NGO, and the film text interact with one another, creating a politicized viewing public space.

Cinema initiatives as interzones and public space-creating activities: inducing a dialogue and encountering the Other

This section looks at a case study of an initiative *The Refugee Project* in Sofia, Bulgaria, and its co-project with the Sofia cinema theatre *The House of Cinema*. This initiative includes multiple events promoting diversity and intercultural dialogue, including screenings of films on the sub-

ject of the refugee crisis. The analysis focuses on a screening of the film *The Good Postman* (Hristov 2016) and is based on a textual analysis of the film, an interview with the programming director of the House of Cinema, and a description of the event and the cinema hall as an interzone.

The Good Postman

The film follows the campaign of the local postman Ivan in the remote Bulgarian village of Great Dervent where he is running for mayor. Ivan proposes a scheme which includes integrating refugees into the village, providing them with land and homes in order to bring the aging and dying village back to life. The director, Tonislav Hristov, uses a semi-fictionalised script, that combines documentary and fiction style, whilst leaving the camera to observe the unfolding of the events. This technique allows for highlighting the numerous contrasts surrounding the problem of the refugees, including the *private* versus the *public*, the *national* versus the *local*, *us* versus the *others* and, last but not the least, the *west* versus the *east* (exploring it through some manifestations of communist nostalgia in the village). These contrasting and somewhat contradicting values become evident after a brief examination of the beliefs and motivations of the village inhabitants.

The villagers are represented as an ordinary group of people, who turn out to be easily manipulated and bribed (the pro-communist character attracts voters by providing them with free food). Their views are by no means radical or set in stone, as far as we can tell from the documentary – instead, they are represented to the viewer as bystanders, as ordinary working people, more bothered by the difficulties of their day-to-day life than some potential threat of a ‘refugee invasion’. Nevertheless, we can follow how dangerously easy it is to manipulate these people when someone with even a bit of authority engages them in political discussion. This manipulation is strengthened by the only media to which they have access: the mainstream television and newspapers. An example of one of the

film’s dialogues proves that their understanding of the refugee problem is unclear: ‘Not only Syrians come. Afghans and Taliban come through here as well, and who knows who else...’ <...> ‘Ivan wants to welcome Syrians here! I disagree. Here? Syrians? Why? Is it not enough for him that we already have gypsies?’.

While Ivan visits one household after another trying to convince the villagers to vote for him, their nostalgia for the communist past is gradually revealed. An example of this is the interaction between the protagonist Ivan and his main opponents – pro-communist Putin sympathiser and the current mayor Veska, who could not care less about the refugees sitting in her office and listening to *chalga*². In his address to the potential voters, the pro-Russian mayor candidate says: ‘Comrades! I want internet for everyone! Like in Putin’s Russia! We need communism’. Viewing the life of the village through the binaries mentioned above provides an interesting insight into the context of the xenophobic sentiments in modern Bulgaria: even though most of the inhabitants of the village can agree that the refugees are ‘just people’, their judgement is very much affected by the media coverage of the refugee crisis.

A very significant scene and a turning point in the film shows the villagers gathered around the TV watching the news together and having disputes about their interpretations of the events. The report they are watching is the shocking story of 71 refugees suffocating to death in a truck while being smuggled through the EU border by a Bulgarian driver. This scene in *The Good Postman* indicates the first time that we see a change of heart in the villagers, as they begin to realise the stakes and the risks that the refugees take to escape their home countries: despite the differences in their attitudes towards the refugees, the villagers’ reaction to the news story is the same – that of a shock. The awareness that there are kids among those people who choose deliberately to risk everything they have for

² Bulgarian music genre, also known as ‘pop-folk’, or ethno, became popular in the 1990s.

the opportunity to escape the warzone brings the villagers together. Another related memorable scene in the documentary shows a conflict between a mother and a teenage daughter who tries to persuade her parents that the depiction of the refugees as 'monsters' on TV is not accurate, because they are 'also human, they are just like us'.

Interestingly enough, *The Good Postman* not only offers a critique of the state of the villages in Bulgaria now but also comments on the role of media in shaping and framing the public opinion about the refugees. With this somewhat metaphoric language, the film shows how easily balance can be destroyed and how conflict can emerge through the cracks of the impoverished and troubled postcommunist society, where the main goal remains the same – to find someone to blame for the failures of the system. Unfortunately, as the film demonstrates, it seems that the refugees have already been 'nominated' as Bulgarian's Other in the mainstream media discourse.

The Arab Quarter and the House of Cinema as an interzone

In 2017, The House of Cinema organized a series of events that included screenings of films about the refugees and events where refugees and whole families of refugees were invited to the cinema. The series of events called *Building Bridges Between Communities* was aimed at establishing a link between various diverse communities of Sofia, including that of the most vulnerable groups, such as the refugees and Roma. I will briefly take a look at an event that took place in October 2017. The Facebook announcement after the event stated: "Last week our friends from Voenna Rampa have been invited by The House of Cinema to see the "The good postman"! We believe that cinema is a powerful tool to bring people on a journey to each other, overcoming hardships in life."

Thus, as we can see, the organisers highlight the importance of cinema in 'building bridges' and establishing connections. The powerful role

of cinema as a storytelling tool lies in its ability to create relatable stories that unite people, despite their differences. In this case, the organisers invited the refugees from *Voenna Rampa*, the refugee centre located in the North parts of Sofia. Importantly, as a cinema located in the city centre, *The House of Cinema* emerges as a meeting point for encountering the Other that is more accessible for a wider variety of audiences. Another example of such initiatives, related to the *Building Bridges Between Communities* was the screening by the Sofia Film Fest for Students, which was conducted in September 2017 in the Roma community in Philipovtsi, Sofia. Their description of the event also touches upon the unifying and motivational role of cinema as a tool for creating a creative space of interaction, essentially establishing an *interzone*.

Both events highlight the importance of the location of the event. It is important to note that an interzone often appears not only broadly in an urban space, but also on the border of two or more different cultural zones, where they can interact both metaphorically (as a symbolic exchange), but also physically (as bordering quarters). I argue that *The House of Cinema* in Sofia can be viewed as an interzone on the urban landscape of Sofia.

The House of Cinema works as an example of an interzone situated on the border of two different 'worlds': the most politically, economically and culturally significant area of the city centre and the so-called Arab Quarter. The area of the Vitosha Boulevard and the central Serdika metro station is the main shopping and tourist 'vein' of the city, while this part of the capital is also an important area politically, with the Parliament building and the former *House of the Party* just around the corner. In terms of religion, the square above the Serdika station is informally known as *The Square of Tolerance*, an area where four temples of different religions are situated in a very close proximity, including the Catholic Cathedral of St Joseph, the Eastern Orthodox St. Nedelya Church, the Sofia Synagogue and the main Banya Bashi Mosque.

The Arab Quarter was traditionally an area inhabited by Muslim immigrants, and, beginning in 2012, these streets have seen a new influx of refugees and migrants. While there have been numerous rumours that the quarter is not a safe place, in 2016 a Nova TV (a commercial TV channel) journalist explored the stereotypes and beliefs that people have about the Arab Quarter, and came to the conclusion, that 'Probably, the Arab Quarter is now the safest place in the capital', mainly due to the large numbers of police forces sent to guard these streets against any potential 'threat' (NOVA TV 2016).

In an interview, Hristo Hristisov, the program manager of the *House of Cinema* points out that in the context of the rising amount of hate speech in the media and political discourse, most Bulgarians still do not have any direct contact with the refugees. As Hristosov pointed out, the Bulgarian families are often 'educated by the TV and lacking critical thinking'. The only knowledge they receive comes from media, while the *Arab Quarter* remains isolated from the rest of the city. Hristosov says that the screenings in the House of Cinema are aimed at bridging this gap by organising events that would promote integration of the refugees and their families. Refugees and whole families of refugees are invited to these events: "by inviting families, we show that there are more similarities than differences between 'us' and 'them', there is a sense of acceptance, challenging the overall feeling of fear". In particular, Hristosov points out the importance of the location of the cinema and its role in the local community is highlighted: 'it is on the verge of the Arab Quarter where the refugees live now. So, the role of cinema is also that of creating a safe space for interaction'.

Therefore, the audiences are not only invited to visit the premises of the Arab Quarter to make sure that the place is as safe as any other quarter in Sofia, but they are also sharing a common viewing space with the Other in the movie theatre. The audience is thus encountering the Other on a broader scale on 'their' territory, but is also sharing the more intimate experience of a

common viewing practice. By sharing a peaceful and entertaining activity, the audience becomes united both by the physical structure of the cinema and the symbolic space of the film and its narrative. This last aspect is also reflected in the program selection that aims at showing more films telling the stories of the refugees, including but not limited to *The Good Postman*.

The Good Postman is a prime example of an imaginative space of negotiation, while the engagement of the audience through public dialogue can potentially occur when physical interzones are constructed. As Kovačević suggests, 'the need for solidarity and compassion is invoked through narrative perspectives that subject cultural prejudice and economic exploitation to critique while proposing various avenues of subaltern transnationalism' (Kovačević 2013: 197). At the same time, in order to argue and assume that this is indeed the result of viewing such films, more direct engagement with the audiences is required to evaluate to what extent it impels its audiences to rethink hegemonic cultural and political imaginaries in the region.

Conclusions

The negotiation of national identity cannot be seen in isolation from the political frameworks within which it is embedded. In the Bulgarian case, the building of national identity is constructed through the discourse of comparison and contrast, and this discourse is built on the processes of exclusion and inclusion. It is in these gaps and inconsistencies where we can most evidently witness the points of negotiation. Cinema has the capacity to expose such gaps and facilitate 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).

In terms of evaluating the effectiveness of cinema-related initiatives, it is of course, very difficult to single out certain factors that contribute to the challenging of the discourse more than

others. As Hristosov pointed out, the expected result of such events is not a 'drastic transformation', since the people who come to these events are oftentimes already progressive. Rather, the goal shifts towards mobilisation of these people who are already more knowledgeable and sympathetic about the lives of the refugees and ethnic minorities. Thus, the aim here is not to turn the worldview of the audience around, but to influence those who are undecided to see the Other in a comfortable safe space unified by a common activity and to inspire these people, energise them to influence their environment, inspire to change.

However, several challenges to the effectiveness of such initiatives arise. First, as Deiana notes, we need to acknowledge that the cinema audiences and festival goers might already be privileged and 'inclined to engage in dialogue and cultural exchange' (Deiana 2017: 14). Nevertheless, even though these encounters with the audiences might be temporary and privileged, they remain an important 'site where to experience and sense everyday border negotiations through cinema's aesthetic and creative energy, and where filmlovers come together and make sense of these experiences' (Deiana 2017: 15). Secondly, from the point of view of the Other, an interzone is supposed to be a movement 'from below', or a grassroots movement, the role of the Other should be equal to that of the other audiences. The refugees who are attending such events should also be given an opportunity to participate in the organisation process, perhaps through discussions after the screenings, or by influencing the programming. Third, the effectiveness of such interzonal initiatives is limited by the strictly urban localisation of such events. Unfortunately, in most cases, such events are limited to the capital, and there is a lack of such initiatives in other cities and more rural areas. This challenge is particularly illustrated in areas outside Sofia, which experience the most conflicts and less tolerance. This includes Harmanli, for example, a town in Haskovo province, where the struggle with the refugee crisis received the

most attention by the media.

Further, it should also be noted that the active and critical engagement of the audience with the representations of diversity should not be simply assumed. In the future, in order to evaluate the more specific mechanisms of engagement triggered by cinematic experiences, more attention should be directed at studying the audiences, and their reactions to the screenings. For example, screenings accompanied by facilitated group discussions could provide more opportunities for intercultural exchange and negotiation. At the same time, the active engagement of the audience is not limited by the duration and the scope of the cinema-related initiatives. Activism is encouraged by introducing and cross-promoting a whole range of other solidarity networks during these events, including the recent campaigns *Toy Drive for Children in Need* and *Together, Tomorrow Will Be Better* co-organised by The House of Cinema and the Refugee Project network.

Nevertheless, as noted in the first section of this paper, cinema spaces have the potential to become public spaces and create opportunities for dialogues that challenge the hegemonic xenophobic discourses prominent in media and mainstream politics. The interview revealed that the role of cinema as a common viewing activity in itself could act as a unifying factor. The dark intimate space of the cinema hall makes the encounter with the Other possible in a 'safe space', where 'they' have the potential to become 'us'. Defying the lack of information around the refugees and the lack of actual contact with the Other, such initiatives act as a counter-hegemonic strategy, which seems particularly effective due to its location (in the Arab Quarter of the city centre) and setting (a small community cinema rather than a large multiplex). The choice of film, of course, has its own important role in the framing of a discussion about the refugees. The depiction of a polarised society modelled in a small abandoned village shows once again the role of media in inducing hate and fear. At the same time, the film shows a more optimistic route, including the attempt for political activism

even on such a small scale. The role of the postman as an ambassador of human rights in the village shows an inspiring though, at times, discouraging path of social activists in Bulgaria. Looking at the rural regions of Bulgaria, this film creates a much-needed connection between the capital Sofia and the remote rural areas, where cinema theatres were non-existent after the post-1989 privatisation of the cinema industry.

Thus, the paper demonstrates both the critical potential of cinematic initiatives in creating spaces for public discussions challenging the hegemonic xenophobic discourse in Bulgaria, as well as the challenges and potential paths forward. While such interzone spaces exist and provide a much-needed alternative to the mainstream media, there is still much to be done, especially regarding access and outreach. In addition to a serious lack of funding, the interview and the analysis of these events pointed out that although these events reach their respective audiences, the outreach is somewhat limited to the people who are already aware of the problem and are already open for a discussion. Not diminishing the mobilising role of cinema events, there is a need to address this issue in terms of providing access to such events to the wider audience, including audiences outside the capital, such as in smaller cities and more rural areas. Therefore, some areas of future improvement include giving more voice to the refugees, making these events more widely publicised to encourage a more inclusive space, outside of the activists' usual circle. In the vein of the inspirational role of such events, perhaps a more direct link should be established with the activism and volunteering opportunities for the audiences of these films. Furthermore, diverse location or festivals-on-the-move would be useful in promoting diversity and challenging the hegemony of mainstream media in the regions where an alternative is much less accessible (smaller cities and rural areas).

While I was conducting my research, a new initiative – the *Global Migration Film Festival* organized by the *Refugee Ocean* (online plat-

form 'designed to connect asylum seekers and refugees with the local community') took place in December 2017 in Sofia as well as in Harmanli, showing that some action is aimed at linking the discourse of diversities and the specific localities where these discussions are most needed.

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Note on the Author

ANTONINA ANISIMOVICH is a PhD researcher in Edge Hill University's Department of Media. Her main research focus is Bulgarian cinema concerning the transition after the events of 1989. Her broader scope of research interests includes collective memory studies, media memory, postcommunist nostalgia, historical representations on screen, as well as new Bulgarian cinema and post-1989 transition in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc.

Email: antonina.anisimovich@gmail.com