

PRESENTATION OF “THE IDEAL” AND “THE OTHER” MODELS OF FAMILY FORMATION IN BULGARIAN FILMS OF THE 1970S

MILENA MARINOVA
(Institute of Ethnology with Museum, Sofia)

Throughout the period of socialism the state undertakes a number of measures to control all aspects of the population’s life. The family, which at that time is looked upon as “a major cell of society”, is to shape the future generations in keeping with the ideology aspect to by the communist party. The family is kept under control ever since the start of its formation. A great number of regulations and restrictions are drawn concerning marriage contraction age, its form (e.g. “comsomol style” marriage) and the family’s reproductive function. The report highlights the depiction of those aspects of state policy in feature films from the “mature socialism” period.

Keywords: Bulgarian films, the 1970s, family formation, models.

The present paper is focused upon two film comedies from the period considered – *Two dioptries of farsightedness* (1976) and *One hundred tons of happiness* (1978). The director of both films is Petar Vassilev–Milevin. The scriptwriters are respectively the Mormarev brothers, for the former and, Miron Ivanov for the latter. *Two dioptries of farsightedness* stars Georgy Partsalev, for whom the part of the bride’s father was especially written,¹ along with other outstanding members of the cast, namely Sashka Bratanova as the bride and Dimo Panov as her grandfather. In *One hundred tons of happiness* Kiril Gospodinov, Todor Kolev, Ivan Yanchev and Dimo Panov perform as the “local factors” who have accomplished the construction of an imposing Wedding Couples’ Home where one hundred wedding couples are to contract their marriages².

The title of the film *Two dioptries of farsightedness* comes from a remark of one of the main characters addressing his daughter: “Better take good care of yourself, girl. And mark my words. Why do you think that with the years one gets to be farsighted? Because one starts to see much farther ahead. With me, they detected two dioptries right away”³. The plot revolves around the main characters secret “comsomol style” wedding and their parents reaction to it. The university

¹ И. Котева. „Два диоптъра далекогледство”. *Средношколско знаме*, 1976, бр. 24, 16 март, р. 3

² А. Янакиев. *Енциклопедия на българското кино*. София, 2000 р. 354, р. 548

³ Ч. Гешев. Против социалното късогледство. *Народна култура*, 1976, бр. 10, 16 март, р. 6

students Lily and Plamen get married through merely “signing at the municipality hall” while keeping their parents in the dark as they fear interference on their part. The response of Lily’s father and Plamen’s mother is particularly dramatic. The girl’s father believes that at 19 one is too young to start a family and one’s studies should come uppermost, scornfully referring to married girl students as “knitting baby booties while attending lectures”. Besides, the boy comes from the country and has no place to live in Sofia. To thwart his daughter’s future life together with her fiancé, mismatched in his opinion, the father is ready to go any lengths, his greatest trump card being to “crush him politically” by applying to his faculty comsomol secretary. Much to the father’s disappointment, however, the comsomol secretary turns out to be no other than his future son-in-law. In the long run, he redirects his efforts from preventing the marriage to organizing a wedding celebration in keeping with his views. To this purpose, he even invites to his home the wedding couple’s friends who suggest that it should be a “comsomol style” wedding. The father’s answer is that it will certainly be a “comsomol style” one and wants to be informed what that involves exactly. The reply that it is merely the wedding couple and their two witnesses who go to the municipality hall makes him indignant since he has already invited all their relatives and has bought seven kilograms of Prague ham. The newly weds then feel obliged to admit that they have already been married “the comsomol way” which results in a number of new moves on the father’s part. They include the purchase of a wedding dress, unsuccessful negotiations with an official to “perform” a formal marriage ceremony on the wedding day and a later talk with a lawyer to have them divorced for a week so that they would be able to remarry. The bridegroom’s mother, in her turn, disapproves of the bride’s family as she herself and her husband are dentists whereas the girl’s parents belong to the working class which she, being a representative of brain workers, views as lower-grade. In spite of all vicissitudes, at the end of the film, in a conversation with his father who reminds him that he too married without asking his father’s permission, the character embodied by Georgy Partsalev comes to the conclusion that what is most important is that the young ones should be happy and “the rest is all bunkum”. In the last shots the father and the newly weds are seen buying a pram.

According to press reviews, the film pictures the changes in young people’s lives in the period of “mature socialist society”. One of the most essential of those changes is the opportunity to build their relationship “not upon coarse material gain but “upon the pure emotions and noble impulses of love”. The purpose of the film is to ridicule philistine displays in the society of the period, finding expression in calculating considerations as to the choice of marriage partners⁴. Thus, an exponent of philistine mentality advises Lily to find a boy from Sofia “with everything

⁴ М. Стоянов. СМЕХЪТ – СИГНАЛ ЗА УСПЕХ. *Народна младеж*, 1976, бр. 51, 28 февруари, р. 14; Ч. Гешев. Против социалното късogleдство. *Народна култура*, р. 6

about him in the right place” and with a father “somebody to talk of”. The Narodna Mladezh newspaper, the acknowledged mouthpiece of DKMS⁵ levels criticism at the film for insufficient condemnation of “philistinism” and scanty emphasis on a more solid and expressive portrayal of the comsomol members while the characters are powdered with “a rather great amount of daily concerns”.

In the film two types of weddings during the period dwelt upon are outlined and contrasted against each other – the comsomol-style wedding viewed as the ideal form of contracting a marriage in line with the authorities stipulations as against the other one, the philistine-style wedding with all the relatives present, the wedding couple wearing a special kind of clothes, abundant food provided, etc. The initiator of the second type of wedding is a working class member who married in his time without asking his parents’ permission and whose own wedding was also comsomol style in its essence. Now, already in the capacity of a parent, his values have changed. It has become a matter of major importance to him to effect the kind of wedding that he himself did not have. During the 1970s the authorities resorted to a number of measures to popularize the somewhat forgotten “comsomol style weddings” of the mid – 1940s and the early 1950s, having realized that this type of weddings had come to be rather the exception. It was enjoined on the comsomol committees, Fatherland Front and women’s councils to make efforts towards the eradication of “philistinism, commonplaceness and ugliness in wedding celebrations as contrary to communist world outlook and rituals”. That is why the faculty comsomol secretary in the film can only marry “the comsomol way” and overcome through plenty of tactfulness, skilfulness and good will, the views of his bride’s father. On the other hand, the emergence of the pram in the final shots reconciles the personal-level contradictions among the characters along with suggesting the birth-encouraging policy pursued by the authorities, which underlay the introduced “bachelor tax”.

The second film *One hundred tone’s of happiness* aims at condemning the overzealousness of local functionaries in a small town who strive to organize something imposing to bring fame to their town, the country and, why not, bring them world fame. To this purpose they initiate the construction of an impressive Wedding Couples’ Home where one hundred couples are to be married, at a special ceremony. The media representatives disclose the fact that in the course of five years there has been a ban on holding wedding celebrations thus the desired number of wedding people has been reached. When the photographer urges the brides and bridegrooms to come closer for an overall picture together he makes the children present considered to be bridesmaids and brideshelp, stand frontmost. At that point he is taken aside by one of the organizers who explains that those are no bridesmaids and brideshelp but the wedding couples’ children as “the business has dragged on and love cannot wait”. On the other hand, the major person – the senior

⁵ Dimitrov Communist Youth League for which the word “comsomol” is yet another abbreviation.

ritual man, “winner of an international prize for weddings and marriages” – fails to turn up for the ceremony. He is frustrated and, in the long run, extremely irritable because he was unable to buy tricolour ribbon as the saleswoman is on holiday and there is no one to replace her. The bus arrives late and he gets a toothache but the dentist cannot help him as the technician has been evading the assemblage of the dental machines for two years due to the fact that he was denied a business trip to Sweden. Patients with a toothache are treated by hypnotism but the ritualman is far too nervous to feel its effect and he finally decides to run away and shun the performance of the civic ceremony for the one hundred couples. A great number of vicissitudes follow where the Wedding Couples’ Home officials take pains to have the chief ritualman come back and cajole him into officiating at the ceremony. In the end, he makes his appearance but the wedding couples, bored with the long wait, have already dispersed.

In a press interview, the director Peter Vasilev – Milevin asserts that it was his purpose in the film to show up initiatives and events of this sort where “immoderate ambition”, “the underrating of one’s own abilities and powers” result in “withering man’s spiritual world”⁶. The film mirrors the authorities’ policy of the period to build imposing ritual homes and halls, mostly in smaller places. Along with the new socialist rituals, they are intended to contribute to the transformation of the civic marriage contraction into a climax of the wedding celebration. However, the ritual centre construction takes too long, which again leads to setting the ideal and the other models of marriage contraction against each other. While waiting for the centre construction, being under a ban to contract marriages, the greater part of the wedding couples already have children.

Both films were shot at a time when Bulgarian intellectuals dared to stand up in open confrontation with the authorities far too infrequently. In return, their loyalty was encouraged and rewarded by those in power who resorted to a wide range of means to affiliate the artists. On the one hand, they were promoted to high posts and showered with awards; on the other hand, considerable financial resources were allotted to culture events. Confident as to their own stability, the authorities allowed a certain expansion of what was expected to be permitted in the sphere of culture demonstrating a greater tolerance to artistic quest. For this atmosphere of relative tolerance Todor Zhivkov’s “attention” to artists, his skill “to court” them as well as the enlisting of a greater number of artists in the management of culture proved of major importance⁷. In the 1970s Stoyan Mikhailov, secretary of the BCP Central Committee in the charge of ideological issues, voiced his stand that public discontent was to be periodically reduced

⁶ X. Хубенов. Пред среща със зрителите: „Сто тона щастие”. *Кооперативно село*, 1978, бр. 62 28 март, р. 4; Л. Рупов. Снима се нов филм „Сто тона щастие”. *Пиринско дело*, 1977, бр. 164, 14 юли, р. 4.

⁷ Е. Калинова. *Българската култура и политическият императив (1944–1989)*. София, 2011, р. 294.

through authorities-dominated “social vents” among which the cinema, football matches and the totalizer stand out⁸. To what extent those “vents” were controlled by the authorities is evident in both films dwelt upon. Milevin who does not dare to evolve his potential to the full in them due to difficulties attending the “screen release” of his film *Whale* (1967), which set up the permissible scope of the director’s criticism. In *whale* mockery grows into satire ridiculing institutions “inaccessible” to criticism. The ambiguous image of the sprat gradually transformed to a whale as the news about the fishing ship’s catch ascends to each of the various levels of bureaucratic hierarchy hints at the falsehood and showiness throughout the state and party system. That is why the film was released as late as 1970. The film critic Bozgidar Mikhailov believes that the director (Milevin having directed the films *specialist in anything*, 1962, and *The Quiet fugitive*, 1972 as well) venturing to accomplish *whale* was for more resourceful and audacious in those earlier films whereas after “the freezing” of *whale* has become rather more cautious⁹.

In this sense, the films under consideration can also be regarded as exemplifying the “social vent” films in which criticism is aimed at individually negative “local factors”, philistine prejudice of particular social members, the incongruity between a certain number of intellectuals and society but by no means intended to ridicule the dominant state and party system.

mmarinova1977@abv.bg

⁸ И. Братоева-Даракчиева *Българското кино от Калин Орелът до Мисия „Лондон“*. София, 2013; 177

⁹ Н. Станимирова. *Кинопроцесът – „замразен временно“*. *Български игрални филми 1950–1970 в документи, спомени, анализи*. София, 2012, р. 272–273

