



Rhetoric of Belonging and Transnational Appropriation in the Text, Development and Marketing of the Bulgarian Popular Feature *Love.net*

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on issues of representation and belonging, in an attempt to uncover how contemporary popular cinema in Bulgaria, shaped by recent cultural legislation, caters to national sensitivities while at the same time making the link with the global film industries. The Bulgarian popular feature *Love.net* (Ilian Djevelevkov, 2011) focuses on the role of the Internet as facilitating love, relations and communication in the contemporary world. On a textual level, and similarly to *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003), it explores the six degrees of separation theory, implicitly advocating for a world of interconnectedness. While reflecting on universal challenges in human relationships, the film also highlights particularly local issues linked to self-colonisation, Eastern cultural influences, moral disillusionment and increased consumerism post-communism. Contextually, *Love.net* is an example of the shift towards treating filmmaking in Bulgaria as a business as much as a cultural venture. It emerged as part of broader European trends, which put an emphasis on film development, marketing and stars, with the aim to counter Hollywood's dominant market position. *Love.net* created a sense of virtual belonging among the local online community, allowing them to participate in the film's development and engage with its interactive marketing. Transnational stars provided a further point of contact and involvement. Through its mixed cast featuring home-grown and locally popular foreign actors, *Love.net* both channelled and challenged Hollywood, positioning European cinema as similar in glamour and attraction but different in identity. The text and the context of the film's creation highlight questions of onscreen representation and anxieties over cultural belonging, transcending the mere commercial imperatives of local popular cinema.

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'I never stop searching, wanting, desiring... I'm insatiable. Very impatient and very sexy! I'm fatal and disturbingly wicked. I know what I want... and how much I can give. Next, please!' Koyna Ruseva's character provocatively stares out of the computer screen and into the camera lens – a blonde, blue-eyed classic *femme fatale*, at the same time demanding the erotic gaze and challenging any notions of passive to-be-looked-at-ness (See: Mulvey 1975). Bold dating profile pictures. A husky-voiced monologue. Scarlet manicure, tapping on the keyboard, in the calm and calculating manner of a seasoned hunter. The challenge comes in the form of a chat message from a relaxed, quietly intelligent, slightly cynical, innuendo- and tequila-loving young journalist. A date between the two is set and so is the premise for the first Bulgarian feature to focus on the addictive fascination with modern technologies. The described scene is the opening sequence in *Love.net* (Ilian Djevelev, 2011), a Bulgarian motion picture which follows the parallel stories of a number of well-off capital city residents, who try to introduce new excitement into their lives through liberating online communication. In this paper, I briefly analyse the text, development and marketing of the film, in order to highlight its strategies for local success and reflect on the cultural and commercial influences over its creative choices.

Love.net emerged, following a period of legislative and creative rebuilding in Bulgaria, which started a new trend of producing big-budget event films during the late 2000s and early 2010s. The film was one of the first motion pictures that illustrated transnational adaptation and appropriation in the Bulgarian film industry post-communism. I argue that the local political and legislative realities prompted the film's cultural, commercial and transnational awareness. Through its topic of current appeal, innovative marketing and international cast *Love.net* attracted over 200,000 viewers in total, placing second in popularity at the domestic box office for contemporary Bulgarian movies to date (LUMIERE 2011). It came behind the biggest local blockbuster, *Misiya London* [*Mission London*] (Dimitar Mitovski, 2010), which had attracted over 377,000 domestic viewers the previous year and also set its own standards for a film with topical appeal and successful promotional strategies (LUMIERE 2010; See: Nedyalkova 2014). Unlike *Mission London*, which was a political satire, *Love.net* focused on finding love and unlikely relations online. The picture presented Bulgaria as intrinsically connected to the rest of Europe, while at the same time acknowledging typically local issues, stemming from the historical, political and social realities of life post-communism. The subject matter predetermined the film's close connections with modern technologies, prompting clever interactive marketing and online engagement. This shifted the sense of cultural belonging from the realm of the national to the space of the virtual, infusing the film with an air

of digital cosmopolitanism and, at the same time, re-defining Bulgarian identity along transnational lines. Transnational stars provided a further point of contact and involvement. Through its mixed cast featuring home-grown and locally popular foreign actors, *Love.net* both channelled and challenged Hollywood, positioning European cinema as similar in glamour and attraction but different in identity. As a result, the film highlighted questions of onscreen representation and anxieties over cultural belonging, transcending the mere commercial imperatives of local popular cinema.

Love.net's uncompromising domestic success was preceded by a period of turmoil and uncertainty for the local industry. During state socialism, the local film industry was fully vertically integrated, with film professionals employed on permanent basis by one of the big national studios and commissioned to work on successive projects. The import of foreign production was highly regulated and subject to ideological censorship. The unstructured changeover to an open market economy, which began after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, sent the Bulgarian film industry into a serious crisis, creating administrative and institutional chaos and leaving domestic film in an unequal competition with Hollywood. The balance between state and private funding shifted with the change in political regime in Bulgaria. With the transition to an open market economy, Bulgarian filmmakers had to learn to compete for government subsidies via the scarce budget of the newly set up National Film Centre. An executive agency of the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture, the institution remains responsible for administering funding and supporting national film culture. However, in its early stages, the National Film Centre had limited finances, raised from the central state budget, and reduced jurisdiction, which rendered filmmaking in Bulgaria a sporadic, sparsely regulated process. Without state regulation, appropriate film business education and international contacts, Bulgarian professionals proved ill-equipped to face the international commercialisation trends governing global film trade. Together with the disintegration of the previously vertically integrated film industry, this affected the possibility for financial sustainability of the sector. The majority of film professionals lost their permanent employment while the lack of a government-ruled system of production, distribution and exhibition meant that 'private producers with little experience and funds emerged in an environment lacking any enforceable legislative framework' (Manov 2006).

After the privatisation and dismantlement of the exhibition circuit, the national market fell under the control of newly-established distribution companies Rainbow, Sunny and Alexandra Films, which favoured Hollywood productions and pre-determined the programming in the slowly expanding multiplex chains.¹ The festival circuit provided local pictures with exposure

to critics' circles but rarely secured distribution within the country. As a result, Bulgarian film disappeared from cinemas, ultimately losing its audiences. Filmmakers had to learn new skills in fundraising and guerrilla distribution. Unsurprisingly, some of the veterans and the members of the middle generation, who had come to the profession just before the 'perestroika' period, found it difficult and made hardly any films after the end of state socialism, while the directors of the generation that came to film in the 1990s only received recognition if they worked for television (Iordanova 1998; 2008: 9–14).

The political and economic turmoil of the transition to democracy in the 1990s transformed local audiences as well. American fashion and modes of expression were adopted by Bulgarians both as an escapist method of dealing with the domestic political and financial crises and as an attempt to own and transform them (See: Nedyalkova 2015: 83–95). As every aspect of local filmmaking and consumption underwent significant changes, the development of new structures and modes of operation became imperative.

The film industry recovery was prompted by legislative changes and professional adaptation. The period between 2003 and 2011, when *Love.net* was released, saw a steady revival in Bulgarian filmmaking and cinema attendance for local productions. The implementation of appropriate national film legislation proved essential. The Film Industry Act (FIA) of 2003 regulates Bulgarian state subsidy and participation in international co-production, in particular, through programmes like Creative Europe MEDIA, thus encouraging co-operation and a sense of European belonging. When first introduced, the legislation specified that the projects submitted for approval were evaluated according to: (1) their artistic potential within the context of the European cultural diversity; (2) their commercial potential and their likelihood of reaching international recognition; (3) the economic justification for the proposed budget; and (4) the exhaustiveness of the producer's strategic plan for the management and promotion of the project. Thus phrased, the law implied that any given application for funding should, at the same time, satisfy cultural criteria, commonly associated with art-house pictures, and commercial requirements, usually linked to popular productions. This lack of differentiation of funding categories within contemporary Bulgarian film legislation has prompted frequent criticisms, as have artistic lobbies influencing subsidy administration and the most recent amendments, perceived as privileging tax rebates for foreign productions and funding for commercial television programmes over local cinema (Andreev 2011; The Sofia Globe 2021). Still, in the case of *Love.net*, which obtained 60 per cent of its budget through a state subsidy, FIA proved a financially stabilising and creatively influential force. On the one hand, the government funding helped offset potential risks for private investors

and encouraged particular regard for commercial distribution (See: Tomova and Andreeva 2013). On the other, the subsidy meant that *Love.net* had to adhere to a cultural agenda, prompting the film to explore issues surrounding identity and belonging, particularly topical since Bulgaria's accession to the European Union (EU) in 2007.

Joining the EU had professional implications for the local industry as well. It secured the free flow of capital, skillsets and labour, which proved essential for revitalising domestic filmmaking. As a result, a new generation of commercially-savvy and internationally-oriented filmmakers emerged, attracting both mainstream and festival attention with their works. *Love.net* followed the domestic box office success of *Svetat e golyam i spasenie debne otvsyakade* [*The World Is Big and Salvation Lurks around the Corner*] (Stephan Komandarev, 2008), *Dzift* [*Zift*] (Javor Gardev, 2008), *Mission London*, *Stapki v pyasaka* [*Footsteps in the Sand*] (Ivaylo Hristov, 2010) and *TILT* (Viktor Chouchkov, 2011). All of the listed titles were viewer-oriented genre films with easy-to-follow storylines, recognisable casts, high production values and strong promotional campaigns. The majority were also European co-productions, which toured the international festival circuit with varying levels of success.² The films benefitted from national television channel partnerships and state funding support. This informal 'wave' of popular pictures certainly did not exhaust all films produced in the period but it did influence the way national cinema was perceived by domestic audiences, raising expectations about the way a film should look and communicate with its viewers.³ *Love.net's* director, script-writer and co-producer, Ilian Djevelevkov, formed part of this new filmmaking movement. A graduate of psychology as well as film and television, Djevelevkov had an understanding of different screen formats, genres and audiences. He had started his career as a producer and director in satirical TV programmes before co-founding Miramar film – a company which produces features, documentaries and commercials (Kalcheva 2020). With his debut feature film *Love.net*, he attempted to condense his knowledge and experience of popular culture by adopting a global mindset – borrowing freely from Western and Hollywood productions in terms of plot and marketing strategies but remaining focused on engaging with local audiences, dealing with a crisis of moral values and growing consumerism.

Through its genre and plot, *Love.net* presented a transnational remake of Christmas-themed romantic comedy *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003), an international co-production with British, French and Hollywood participation. It was well-known in Bulgaria at the time when *Love.net* was produced, having garnered 79,658 US dollars or 16.7 per cent of the total earnings in the 2004 domestic box office (Box Office Mojo n.d.), and has been broadcast on national television many

times since. *Love Actually* focused on 10 intertwined stories of London-based characters, falling in and out of love, managing grief and travelling to escape betrayal, form new relationships or simply spend time with their respective families. It was a star vehicle, featuring a plethora of internationally renowned actors, including Hugh Grant, Liam Neeson, Colin Firth, Emma Thompson, Alan Rickman, Keira Knightley, Bill Nighy and Rowan Atkinson. The picture aimed to capitalise on a popular topic with an already established appeal. The six degrees of separation theory, which states that everyone is six or less steps away by introduction to anyone else in the world, gained prominence in popular culture through the film *Six Degrees of Separation* (Fred Schepisi, 1993), the Kevin Bacon parlour game, pop songs, TV shows and the rise of social media (Smith 2008). This idea both emphasises and transcends the importance of personal connections and individual national belonging. Through the small circle of immediate friends, family and colleagues we find ourselves irrevocably connected to the rest of the people on this planet. So, the six degrees of separation theory accepts that we make a limited number of acquaintances in a lifetime but challenges the idea of clear-cut boundaries or impermeable social communities. It also provides a useful metaphor for the ever-expanding reach of modern communications and, most notably, the Internet – an idea, which *Love.net*, in turn, readily appropriated.

Similarly to *Love Actually*, the Bulgarian film focused on the interconnected stories of a number of characters. Unlike its predecessor, which included its separate narratives under the umbrella of representing the different faces of love at Christmas, *Love.net* revealed intricate connections facilitated through new technologies, in the context of local social and cultural developments. The picture follows the endeavours of a journalist, Andrey Bogatev (Zahari Baharov) (whose surname alludes to the adjective ‘rich’ in Bulgarian) to research romance on the web for an article in a men’s magazine. Through a dating website he encounters the sexually liberated businesswoman Emilia (Ruseva) and then falls in love with an elite prostitute, Niki (Dilyana Popova), while his brother, the surgeon, Filip (Hristo Shopov), is caught cheating by his wife, the banker, Mila (Lilia Maraviglia). As a result, she attempts to infuse new life into their relationship through anonymous internet communication. Filip and Mila’s son, Toni (Teodor Avramov), is best friends with Emilia’s daughter, Devora (Lora Cheshmedjieva), a teenager looking for the wrong kind of attention online. At the same time, Mila’s friend, Joana (Diana Dobрева), who is a theatre director, meets an older British musician John (John Lawton) while searching for one of his songs on YouTube.

It becomes evident that, in addition to placing the emphasis on modern communications, the picture portrays a lifestyle standard. Like in *Love Actually*,

the main characters in *Love.net* are not marginal but successful urban types seeking physical and emotional fulfilment without any obvious financial preoccupations. This creates an attractive illusion of material prosperity which does not necessarily reflect the social and economic situation in the respective country. On the surface, the film favours a selective representation of what constitutes ‘Bulgarianness’. In this way, *Love.net* highlighted similarities across borders, at the expense of a somewhat controversial sense of class-dependent cosmopolitanism, typical of the romantic comedy genre. *Love Actually* was also marketed with an exclusive emphasis on its ‘Britishness’, peddling international stereotypes and negotiating a new national sensibility of exclusivity and self-satisfaction (Blandford 2007: 24). The universal appeal of such stereotypical characters allowed for easy export abroad which, in turn, could have been what attracted the creators of *Love.net* to the idea. However, while the film screened at festivals in Eastern Europe and the Americas, it did not receive commercial distribution beyond national borders. So, it becomes clear that the adaptation of the romantic comedy cosmopolitanism and the narrative link with the UK (an ironic reference to the original text) catered to the cultural agenda, embedded in Bulgarian film legislation, and to Westernised audiences at home instead.

On ideological level, *Love.net* proves an example of voluntary self-colonisation, aiming to create cultural symmetry between a peripheral, small country (like Bulgaria) and Europe’s idealised colonial centre (symbolised, in this case, by the UK). As Kiossev (2008) explains, self-colonisation efforts are born out of global power imbalances, where certain small nations, which were not subject to colonisation by larger European countries, nevertheless internalise a sense of cultural inferiority by adopting a colonial discourse to cultural and technological progress. In order to overcome their perceived inadequacies, peripheral communities promote appropriation and illusionary narratives of belonging to the wider European cultural family. Such discourses were not a new phenomenon in Bulgaria, which aimed to ‘catch up’ with Western Europe ever since its liberation from Ottoman domination in 1878, with efforts particularly intensifying after the end of state socialism and around the country’s accession to the EU. Through self-colonising representations, *Love.net* appeared to answer the Eurocentric canon-building call, embedded in the most recent film legislation. As already discussed, FIA specified that a picture must necessarily position itself with regard to European cultural diversity, implicitly indicating that, in order to obtain state support, Bulgarian artistic production should, indeed, be represented as an indivisible part of European cultural heritage. *Love.net* also intended to reaffirm Bulgaria as materially, intellectually and technologically progressive for the purpose of attracting young local audiences, exposed

to Euro-Atlantic discourses and used to Anglophone entertainment post-communism.

The film aimed to solidify its claims to 'Europeanness' through its plot, characters, locations and languages used. The explored topics and represented protagonists were, in their essence, modern and universal. Most Bulgarian locations, portrayed on screen, were devoid of any historical or geographical specificity and purified of any ethnic diversity, litter or homeless animals. The love story between Joana and John justified the extensive use of English and revealed transnational aspirations in terms of casting (a point to which I come back shortly). Moreover, this international romance set Bulgaria culturally on a par with the UK, implying that it was merely distance (and not cultural or social differences) that was the obstacle to their relationship. In fact, John is portrayed as living on a horse farm while Joana resides in the big city, subverting the stereotypical depictions of the West as urban and the East as provincial. At the end of the film, the camera zooms out of the web of individual stories and specific geographic locations to show planet Earth, thus, emphasising again notions of interconnectedness and cultural universality.

Nonetheless, *Love.net* also subtly referenced typically local issues, stemming from cultural specificities and the recent political transition. The protagonist of Andrey jokes about being a spy for the communist Committee for State Security when he first introduces himself to Emilia, he promises to visit Mila and Filip only if there is home-made moussaka available and drunkenly belly-dances on a webcam call with a middle-aged woman from the Orient during an Internet deep-dive. So, while on the surface the character might epitomise urban cosmopolitanism, he remains rooted in a legacy of local political trauma, regional gastronomy and Eastern cultural influences.

Importantly, the film also examines moral disillusionment and transformation of values, typical of countries undergoing significant political and ideological transitions. To begin with, Andrey, like his brother Filip and the absent father of Devora, signify a crisis in masculinity and patriarchal order post-communism.⁴ Bulgarian men are, at most, represented as providing financial support. Andrey pays Niki for their first rendez-vous, Filip sends Toni pocket money through a contactless phone app and Devora's father picks up the bill for her provocative clothing. However, they are unable to offer comfort or guidance in order to mitigate the fall out of the nuclear family. While browsing the internet, Andrey discovers the increasing emotional unavailability of contemporary Bulgarian women. As Emilia relays to him, quickly liquidated relationships and no commitments seem to represent the ultimate happiness nowadays. In a country, regularly rated low for gender equality, where sexism and violence against women remain abundant (Vassileva 2021), this appears like the ultimate resistance to conforming to patriarchal expectations of a 'woman's

place' in social order. Even more traditional, long-term relationships are not spared from deterioration. Filip finds it difficult to communicate with his wife or recreate the previous intimacy of their relationship. Mila complains that the two of them keep quiet even when the volume of the TV is turned down. During their anonymous internet communication, Filip dispassionately notes that when people live together long enough, they become invisible for each other. Persistently refusing physical intimacy with his wife, he seems unable or unwilling to help restore the traditional family order. Devora's father is never portrayed on screen but we witness the results of his absence: Devora has no positive male role-models or parental authority figures. So, she seeks validation from older men online. This, in turn, deepens the intergenerational conflict with her mother Emilia. The two are portrayed as frequently arguing and accusing each other of dressing frivolously as well as of ignoring their domestic chores and responsibilities. Genuine respect, concern and affection seem missing not just from Emilia and Devora's relationship but also from Mila and Filip's interactions with Toni, who is predominantly depicted as playing video games on his computer. On one occasion, his father jokingly addresses him as 'zombie' and the family is never portrayed as spending time together. These examples of families in crisis correspond with notions of the degradation of traditional family structures in Bulgaria post-communism (See: Pachkova 2018). The dysfunctional family and personal relations depicted in *Love.net* exemplify larger societal issues, linked to communication breakdown, inability to mitigate conflict and a cynical attitude towards intimacy.

In fact, it is precisely the commodification of sex throughout the film which exposes the most serious crisis in traditional values. Across different scenes Devora and her friends take provocative photos of each other in lingerie while listening to Bulgarian pop-folk music. The genre, which gained popularity after the end of state socialism, has been criticised for its Oriental-like sound, explicit music videos, which objectify women, and innuendo-filled lyrics, promoting consumerism and casual relations (See: Sotirova 2013). The inclusion of pop-folk diegetic music indicates the radical rift with the morals and norms of state socialism, when overtly sexualised behaviour was deemed a sign of capitalist degradation and subject to media censorship (Guzeva 2020). *Love.net* reflects the moral disillusionment with the values of the previous political regime, characteristic of the period of transition to democracy in Bulgaria. The cynical attitude towards the value of sex is further highlighted by Niki's casual approach to prostitution, as she tells Andrey that she has a circle of friends, not clients. Similarly, Devora excitedly recounts to her peers a story about a Romanian girl who sold her virginity for 10,000 euro. While *Love.net* represents an escapist utopia of material prosperity, these examples hint at

the social reality beyond its glossy filmic world, where Bulgaria consistently remains the poorest country in the EU (World Population Review 2021). Social science research has linked financial hardship to susceptibility to materialistic tendencies (Chaplin et al. 2014). So, as poverty exacerbates materialism, sex becomes an obvious bargaining chip in contemporary Bulgarian society. These examples serve to show that even though, on the surface, *Love.net* portrayed material prosperity, it did not glance over serious moral problems linked to the local cultural context.

By combining self-colonising narratives with local preoccupations, *Love.net* clearly built on the idea of *Love Actually* through the transnational process of innovation through imitation. Mazdon explains that the remake, together with the sequel and the adaptation, is a well-known Hollywood form of production which attempts to counter the financial uncertainty of the film business (2014: 200). The remake is not necessarily inferior simply because it takes as a starting point a previously existing text. Remaking is a diverse activity which holds the potential to entice artistic and business productivity and overcome cultural differences (Mazdon 2014: 208). Joye similarly argues for acknowledging the social, cultural, ideological and economic forces that shape the process of cultural imitation (2009: 56–57). Local productions often borrow and re-interpret ideas from famous international blockbusters that domestic audiences would have been aware of. Informal remakes allow to outweigh financial risks, appeal to local sensitivities through reworking of cultural references and humor, and attract investors in this new context. The creative rewriting of an already existing and, in most cases, previously successful media product, depends on a careful balance between familiarity and innovation (Joye 2009: 56–57). *Love.net*, thus, built on its links with the local and global cultures, in an attempt to present a new product on the Bulgarian film market that, nonetheless, fitted within the well-known tradition of the British/Hollywood romantic comedy genre.

Informal remakes, like *Love.net*, challenge clear-cut definitions of national cinemas and complicate the Europe-Hollywood connection. As already discussed, the national audience is exposed not only to domestic, but also to non-indigenous films, especially Hollywood pictures. This, in turn, underlines the transnational experience of the 'imagined community' and the strong role that American products play in the construction of national cultural identity (Anderson 1983; Higson 2006). At the time of its release, *Love.net* revealed the importance of appealing to domestic audiences with a mixture of familiar and foreign visual symbols and narratives, creating new modes of identification and cultural belonging. The notion of inclusivity, in particular, was strengthened through the film's marketing strategy. By inviting direct audience engagement during the development and promotion stages, *Love.net* gained an

insight into the market and ensured financial viability. This revealed that contemporary Bulgarian cinema is not just passively influenced by Hollywood industry models; it appropriates foreign business strategies in an attempt to re-claim local viewers, already fond of American entertainment.

Love.net's marketing was focused on new technologies, providing local inclusivity and personalised viewer engagement. Before commencing work on the script in 2007, Djevelekov contacted the owners of the biggest Bulgarian dating website and negotiated the terms of their co-operation during all stages of the creation and promotion of the film. Shortly after, the website's administrator announced to its users the beginning of the preparations of a feature film, entitled *Love.net*. The main message was: 'Let's make this film together' (*Cinefish.bg* 2011). It encouraged contribution by inviting feedback and interaction. For two months every member of the website had the chance to send a short description of their most interesting love story that had happened through the Internet. 7,346 submissions and more than 50,000 registered visits put the film's profile on top of the site's popularity rankings. The stories received were, reportedly, not used by the team but confirmed that the envisioned script was as close to reality as possible (*Cinefish.bg* 2011). They also served as preliminary market research on general interest in the topic of the movie. The effort put into constructing *Love.net*'s script exposed regard for popular appeal and viewers' preferences. It also signified a prevalent concern with early marketing and audience engagement. The sense of 'belonging' that virtual participation in the script-development created among users was the first unofficial marketing strategy for *Love.net*. The development of the film evoked similarities with participatory culture where consumers are active contributors to the arts and media with equal access to opportunities, experiences, skills and knowledge (See: Jenkins et al. 2006). Similarly, the casting for minor characters started on the Internet, a tactic used to fortify the idea of communal filmmaking and further blur the boundaries between 'celebrity' and 'user', cinematic and virtual (*Cinefish.bg* 2011). Hence, the contribution and involvement of online communities was central for the development of the picture. It transcended national allegiance or representation, building instead a virtual society of shared experiences and interests.

This serves to show that with the rise of the Internet, there is an increased pool of creativity and easier access to feedback from audiences. As Ulin argues, development is no longer confined to one company or territory. The artist can network, relate with their audience and absorb trends online, responding to users' comments and criticism (Ulin 2009: 73). The potential for interactivity is what shapes contemporary audiences into more than passive consumers of cultural products. Their active influence on film production is welcomed by the industry as a means

of market research and a guarantee for financial success. Hence, the web provides an instant feedback loop, which, in turn, enables increased risk-taking and higher production values. Direct access to audiences helps survey attitudes and preferences, influencing creative and economic strategies and ensuring popularity with local audiences. Once this preliminary research was complete, the creators of *Love.net* focused on framing the film as a true event in the domestic cultural life. They appropriated strategies, typically linked to the American blockbuster, thus, subverting the category and actively reconstructing it in reference to local historical, cinematic and economic circumstances (Stringer 2003: 9; Berry 2003: 217–229).

Aggressive marketing characterises most US studio productions. It presents an attempt to avoid financial risks related to big-budget event films and predict a picture's box office performance. As Maxwell et al. observe, film marketing is based on the idea that it guides customers in committing to purchasing a ticket 'under circumstances that force them to do something very irrational – namely, to buy a product sight unseen' (2005: 268). So, good promotional strategies are described as not only informative but also persuasive. Traditional film marketing and promotional techniques include posters, press, television and advertising, theatrical trailers, screenings/previews, publicising box-office performance or festival and other awards won, star and director appearances and virtually everything that provides a film with extra media exposure and influences the potential spectators (Jäckel 2003: 94). Obtaining maximum visibility remains a key aspect of successful marketing. It was precisely what *Love.net* focused on as well. Especially following the box office success of *Mission London* the previous year, aggressive advertising was justified as the most secure strategy to bring audiences into cinemas during the first two weeks of the film's release. In an interview for a prominent national newspaper Matei Konstantinov, co-producer and script-writer of *Love.net*, argued that in the early years of democracy, promotion had been the most underestimated part of Bulgarian productions. It relied on a mere 10 per cent of the promotional budget of a European picture and one per cent of that of a Hollywood project. The escalation of marketing costs and the proliferation of expensive marketing campaigns determined Hollywood as the dominant force on the global film distribution market and held back the performance of Bulgarian pictures at home. Most domestic titles were doomed even before reaching the big screens. Learning from the previous success of *Mission London*, which relied on aggressive and extensive promotion across exhibition sites and media channels, Konstantinov maintained that saturation marketing was not a desperate attempt to sell a weak product but an indivisible part of the film's quality. Otherwise its excellent footage, expensive technology and professionals would

most often pass unnoticed (Chalakov 2011). Flooding the public space with details about new domestic productions provided an adequate response to foreign cinematic domination, turning local pictures into big cultural and social events. *Love.net* benefited from co-production arrangements with Nova Television and partnerships with the most popular Bulgarian email host, the biggest domestic video sharing website, an established information portal, four prominent radio stations, two film-related websites, a lifestyle magazine, a satellite television channel, internet and telephone service providers, a television entertainment channel and a Bulgarian record label (*Love.net* n.d.). *Love.net*'s campaign was, thus, ambitious, attempting to cover the widest possible range of communication channels. Saturation marketing raised awareness about the film, triggered curiosity and created a cinematic event out of its premiere.

The teaser trailer for the picture started playing in cinemas a year before the movie's release while the official trailer premiered before Christmas 2010. In addition, multiplexes were branded with advertising materials from 14th February (strategically drawing links with Valentine's Day). On 21st March 2011 the outdoor campaign, featuring billboards, city lights and advertisements in the newly built Sofia metro stations commenced (See: *Fig. 1*). Giant laptops were positioned within cinemas and underground exits in Sofia (*Cinefish.bg* 2011). By embarking on such an extensive promotional operation, the film's creators exhibited awareness of the competitive market environment and knowledge of blockbuster strategies for saturating the public space with information about an upcoming production.

Marketing is, indeed, a competitive field, especially in the context of recent business consolidation and globalisation trends. To outdo rivals and suppress new competitors, the Hollywood studios collectively developed and maintain a 'product differentiation barrier to entry' via accumulation over time of consumer preferences. 'Accumulative preference' is constructed through advertising clichés such as 'from the producers of *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009)'. This provides a 'quality certificate' for 'good entertainment' and 'gives the majors a hypothetical monopoly of filmgoers' (Maxwell et al. 2005: 260). To break through this differentiation barrier, popular Bulgarian titles had to reinvent themselves as similar to Hollywood in entertainment values but different in identity. Appropriating marketing strategies that appealed specifically to and actively engaged with the Bulgarian audience proved essential in challenging the box office domination of American films.

A guarantee for the quality of *Love.net* proved to be the fact that its production company, Miramar, already had in its portfolio a successful picture, *Zift*. The communism-themed neo-noir mixed art-house with genre cinema, winning awards at festivals in Moscow, Wiesbaden and



Figure 1 Promotional poster for *Love.net*.

Sofia, becoming the sixth most successful contemporary Bulgarian feature by 2011 and securing broadcasting on HBO Europe. Miramar exploited the same continuity that allowed Hollywood studios to obtain exclusive stature with cinema-goers. It promoted *Love.net* as similar to *Zift* in terms of quality but contrasting in terms of plot and entertainment values.

To underscore *Love.net*'s appeal, its creators highlighted the enjoyable qualities of the story. Media coverage described the picture as:

... a positive and serene film with no blood, violence, mafiosos, drug-dealers, patriarchal idyll or a return to the socialist past. It is a film about love that happens thanks to and in spite of the Internet. With its choice of a universal contemporary topic and the modern approach

to [it], this film almost isn't Bulgarian and, yet, it is the most Bulgarian film of the year! Because it happens here and now, it tells of people who love, cheat, forgive and punish precisely here... The Bulgarian audience got used to watching films on the Internet. But this film tells of the Internet and the producers hope that the viewers will see it in cinemas (Cinefish 2011).

As previously discussed, while *Love.net* was rooted in local issues and conflicts, it managed to escape depressing genres or formats. The general appeal of the picture stemmed from the paradoxical way of defining its national belonging, at the same time challenging past developments and epitomising the future direction of Bulgarian film. The message conveyed: *Love.net* communicates at a local level but displays world-class

quality and vision. The promotion of the film clearly utilised a transnational framework to shift notions of what constitutes contemporary Bulgarian cinema.

In addition to the traditional television and radio spots, *Love.net* also depended on a large-scale Internet campaign. Although new media platforms allow for cost-effective promotion which, in turn, helps establish an online presence and identity quite easily, for a webpage to appear high in the general search and to provoke audience interest, additional efforts must be made. A priority for *Love.net*'s innovative campaign was the 'online word of mouth – or viral marketing' (Knight & Thomas 2011). Attracting attention through banners, trailers and wallpapers on related websites as well as through the official webpage (www.themovieLove.net) and the Facebook profile proved essential. Photos of the film's production, a jam session with the British rock band Uriah Heep (which Lawton was part of), information on the soundtrack, teasers and press reviews were made available through the social network platform. The Facebook page also provided interactive tests ('Which *Love.net* Character Are You?'), information on the screenings across the country, festival participation and collected awards, and a survey related to the most preferred distribution method. The filmmakers announced an online contest for a photo or a video entitled 'Me and My Computer' with the best submission winning a 3D digital camera from one of the film's sponsors. Related promotional activities continued after the film's release. Nova Television's morning talk show *Na Kafe [Over Coffee]* hosted a competition for the most romantic love story that had started online and BG Radio invited submissions for lyrics to band D2's song 'Cherry Tree', included in the film's soundtrack (*Cinefish.bg* 2011). *Love.net*'s interactive approach was utilised to engage Internet users and filmgoers, creating a feeling of belonging. It rendered entertainment accessible and highlighted the important reciprocal relationship between content-creators and consumers.

Love.net further capitalised on the fascination of the Bulgarian audience with stars, a category largely constructed by Hollywood and appropriated at local level through creative marketing campaigns. Stardom, as an aspect of the film industry, emerged at the beginning of the 20th century through the growing allure of the screen image, both a part of the fantasy world on film and representing the performance of real human beings (Ellis 1982: 91). An important aspect of the star image as a byword of desire comes with the possible ideological interpretations within a vibrant sociocultural environment. Stars signify a particular interplay between representation and identification (King 1991). Actors with onscreen charisma and convincing performance are significant factors for the success of any production. Established stars are known to provoke the public imagination and trigger viewers' fantasies. The most popular actors also guarantee a loyal following, helping

a film throughout promotion and exhibition. Often 'brand names', actors in Hollywood are the main selling tools, ensuring high level of media exposure and advertising (Dale 1997: 42). In contrast, most European actors fail to achieve global fame, boasting instead what Schneider and Hediger define as 'vernacular stardom' – 'a regionally specific form of drawing power [from] film actors dependent upon a variety of factors such as language, genre, role, and [the] interaction and coordination of cinema with other mass media' (2007: 65). European stars are dependent on the local context of their production and consumption, and seldom travel beyond them. As Hedling explains, due to their 'cultural discount', most of these vernacular stars lack pan-European or global appeal. Hedling attributes this to European film's reliance on protectionist measures and state subsidy which promote national instead of transnational stars (2014: 117–129). Similarly, famous Bulgarian actors rarely achieve global recognition. However, in an attempt to expand its appeal and emphasise its links with Western Europe and Hollywood, *Love.net* marketed its cast as transnational.

The presence of local and foreign celebrities in *Love.net*, who were particularly well-known to the Bulgarian audience, answered to the previously discussed cultural anxieties in Bulgaria and formed the basis of successful promotional strategies. By utilising the Hollywood star system in its marketing, *Love.net* appealed to larger audiences and served as a self-proclaimed bridge between Bulgarian film culture and domestic perceptions of what constitutes international show business. The idea of Hollywood stardom contributed to representational complexities. Actress Koyna Ruseva, established in theatre and television, was cast as one of the leading characters. Famously described by the producers as 'the Bulgarian Marlene Dietrich', Ruseva was, thus, positioned within a multitude of national contexts (*Cinefish.bg* 2011). She was compared to German-born American actress Dietrich with the implication that both possess talent, dramatic sex appeal and exotic looks that could conquer Hollywood. However, she was the 'Bulgarian Dietrich' and this appropriated version of the successful émigré actress was deemed essential for establishing a specifically national viewing context for the film. Likewise, Hristo Shopov (with experience in theatre and film) was portrayed as making the link between Bulgarian and Hollywood filmmaking. Shopov had risen to stardom with the cult *Vchera [Yesterday]* (Ivan Andonov, 1988), a picture, named after the famous Beatles' song and embodying youth culture and free spirit in the last years of state socialism. However, in recent years, the actor had participated mainly in foreign productions alongside stars such as Rutger Hauer and Val Kilmer. Among his most prestigious was the part of Pontius Pilate in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) (*Cinefish.bg* 2011). Therefore, Shopov's experience in both Hollywood

productions and Bulgarian features rendered him a unique ambassador of transnationalism for *Love.net*.

The motion picture further exploited post-communist domestic fascination with Western European culture through its cast. Musicians John Lawton and Mick Box from the British rock band Uriah Heep were invited to participate after frequent guest performances at the Kavarna Rock Festival, on the Bulgarian seaside (See: [Figure 2](#)). Although losing international popularity in the 1980s, the band had remained the epitome of free spirit and democracy for countries of the Eastern bloc. An advantageous political situation contributed to their great popularity in post-communist countries. In 1987 Uriah Heep was among the first Western bands approved to tour the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Up until this point, the USSR had been strictly out of bounds for heavy rock bands, though Uriah Heep's song 'July Morning' had somehow managed to establish their name over there in the late 1970s (Uriah Heep n.d.). Bulgarian audiences identified Uriah Heep with the transition to democracy and freedom of speech. Thus, even though the band's international popularity was in decline, for the domestic viewers Lawton and Box embodied the much admired Western European culture. *Love.net* reverse-engineered an American model of influencing local audiences, buying up international talent and content in order to help success in foreign markets. This was the logic employed when Gerard Depardieu appeared in *102 Dalmatians* (Kevin Dima, 2000), Michelle Yeoh in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1997) and Tchevy Karyo in *The Patriot* (Roland Emmerich, 2000) to boost the films' appeal outside the US (Maxwell et al. 2005: 269). By reversing this strategy and employing foreign actors, *Love.net* was regaining a home audience already conditioned by Hollywood to seek cosmopolitan

entertainment and to admire international stars. These examples further reveal the dual affiliation with national culture and international Hollywood business strategies that Bulgarian big-budget productions capitalised on. References to domestic celebrities embedded in large-scale promotional campaigns contributed to a post-modern fusion of local culture and global commerce. Through its mixed cast, *Love.net* was positioned simultaneously within traditions of Hollywood and European stardom, with particular emphasis placed on local talent. This presented an attempt to revive national filmmaking traditions by employing and, at the same time, challenging a Hollywood framework of reference.

Love.net exploited another established Hollywood strategy for attracting media attention – the lavish film premiere. The film opened officially on 29th March 2011 in the large multiplex theatre 'Arena Mladost' with a red carpet and an extravagant reception (See: [Figure 3](#)). The media were eager to report: 'The official premiere of *Love.net* would match any glamorous Hollywood event' (Tialoto 2011). Once again, the picture was compared to an American blockbuster – an assurance of the film's glitzy style, entertainment value and attraction. The whole Bulgarian government was present, led by the then-Prime Minister, Boyko Borisov, who, allegedly, strongly advised them during a work meeting to attend the film (Oncheva 2011). Known for his populist statements, Borisov likely utilised the premiere to gain extra media exposure. However, it was also a move certifying official government support for popular entertainment in Bulgaria. It legitimised the importance of home-grown cinema and encouraged private investment in local productions. In fact, *Love.net* set a precedent for Bulgarian theatrical film circulation. The biggest domestic distribution company Alexandra Films



Figure 2 Uriah Heep playing 'July morning' with Bulgarian musicians at the Black Sea coast.



Figure 3 The cast of *Love.net* at the official premiere.

became involved with the production even before it was completed (*Cinefish.bg* 2011). This signified a conviction that *Love.net* would prove a successful business venture. At the same time, affiliation with such a powerful distributor allowed the film to maximise its market reach.

The shift towards bigger promotional campaigns in Bulgaria is, in fact, part of broader tendencies in European film. As Jäckel explains, European marketing budgets soared in the late 1990s. In France investment in film advertising grew by 50 per cent between 1995 and 1999 because a successful cinema run guaranteed the distributors higher revenues from ancillary rights (which included everything from television to other non-theatrical outlets). The shrinking theatrical windows, thanks to the advance of digital technology and alternative distribution, also put a stress on advertising. A picture was expected to make a profit in cinemas in a much shorter time. Competition was intense and the large European players began investing in huge publicity campaigns (with matching budgets) to build up audience anticipation (Jäckel 2003: 99–100). The recognition of the power of marketing in Bulgaria should, therefore, be attributed not only to the insight of commercially-savvy producers and the influence of Hollywood but also to changes in the general European audio-visual distribution and exhibition climate.

The recent revival in Bulgarian cinema was based on attracting viewers back to domestic productions. Relevant topics, innovative marketing and appropriated genre conventions improved the ‘visibility’ of local productions, raising attendance figures and revenue. This, in turn, revealed the economic potential of Bulgarian films and justified public and private investments. This case-study of *Love.net*’s text, development and marketing helps to outline parallels between seemingly dissimilar filmmaking contexts – Bulgaria, Western Europe and Hollywood. The film operates within a well-known commercial genre – the romantic comedy, established both in the UK and in the USA. *Love.net* further employs innovation through imitation, relying on self-colonisation but also typically local issues of concern in adapting a blockbuster narrative and marketing strategies to challenge Hollywood on its own grounds. The involvement of a mixed, international cast and the emphasis on saturation marketing mirrored American studios’ strategies for ensuring box office success. The present analysis reveals the importance of examining small national cinemas⁵ within a framework, which allows for a nuanced understanding of the contributions of popular films to local imaginaries of belonging, processes of self-identification and market revitalisation.

NOTES

- 1 A detailed discussion of the development of contemporary Bulgarian distribution and exhibition can be found in Donev (2018).
- 2 *The World Is Big...* secured more than 20 awards at festivals around the world and was shortlisted among the nine films selected for voting in the Foreign Language Film category for the 82nd Academy Awards. *Zift* won awards at international festivals in Varna, Sofia, Moscow and Wiesbaden. *TILT* collected prizes from the Raindance Film Festival (UK), the Woodstock Film Festival (USA) and Cinedays Festival of European Film (Republic of Northern Macedonia), among others.
- 3 For more on recent parallel developments in the Bulgarian arthouse movement, see Doncheva (2020).
- 4 Mazierska (2003) notes a similar crisis in masculinity and traditional family values in post-communist Polish cinema, revealing concerns surrounding fluctuating identities in Eastern European film more generally.
- 5 For more on the formation, development and operationalisation of the concept 'small national cinema', see Hjort and Petrie (2007).

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