

## POETS: GENRES CONQUERED

### SOCIO-CRITICAL VOICES IN THE FILM DRAMATURGY OF VALERI PETROV

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“I believe that to a certain extent everyone carries some childhood memories and something of their childlike outlook on life. Personally, I have a terrible memory and so I have very few of those left, but I do still have something of the ability to view life as if I were a child [...].”<sup>1</sup> This is what the Bulgarian poet, playwright, translator, and children’s writer Valeri Nisimov Petrov shared in 2011, when he was 91 years old. He was born in Sofia on 22<sup>nd</sup> of April 1920 into a family of the intelligentsia. His father’s family name was Mevorah, but even at the early beginning of his poetic journey, Petrov chose to use his mother’s family name. The reason behind his decision had to do with the refusal of some Bulgarian publishers to publish the works of *inorodtsy*<sup>2,3</sup>, because of influences from the racial politics of the Third Reich. The Jewish part of the family on his father’s side did not accept the mixed marriage between the lawyer Nisim Mevorah and the teacher of French Mariya Petrova. Years later, the child of this union will recall being called a mixed-blood and a bastard by the relatives on his father's side (Сара̀ндев 1997: 13–14). This is one explanation why, even though he is proud to be called his father’s son, because of their physical resemblance and the influence of the father in the formation of aesthetic tastes of the son, Petrov was a lot closer with the maternal side of the family. The childhood trauma and the scars of having to wear a yellow star on his sleeve, which every member of the Jewish community was forced to wear in Bulgaria during the war, predict the lyrical voice of the self, across genres, in the works of the author.

Despite his “terrible memory,” the poet had happy memories from the summers he had spent in his grandfather’s house in Varna. Motifs from the summer vacations by the

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<sup>1</sup> From an interview with G. Karamanev (Петров 2014). Excerpt translated by PP.

<sup>2</sup> A pejorative term used for different minority groups, in this case Jews (translator’s note PP).

<sup>3</sup> See *The Opportunity to Live* (2005, directed by Yuli Stoyanov and Itzhak Finzi, a production of the Bulgarian National Television and Pro-Film).

seaside are a primary source of inspiration, which were developed in some of Petrov's early poems, such as "By the Blue Sea"<sup>4</sup> and "Childhood"<sup>5</sup>:

Where did it come from this scent of seashells?  
Lord, how things could be better I cannot see!  
Going to the Seychelles is a curious notion,  
But even there I will still hear in the sea shells  
My childhood vacation by the Varna sea.<sup>6, 7</sup>

Both poems are retrospective idealisations of childhood with a plethora of images and spaces, but in them, as well as elsewhere ("Little Kid,"<sup>8</sup> "By the Hearth"<sup>9</sup>), there is a presence to be felt – the ghost of the revolution and of the new world. This is how Valeri Petrov puts forth the ideas and attitudes of the generation of poets of the 1940's to which he belongs, but at the same time he is different from this same generation in at least two ways. Firstly, he often makes use of childhood imagery and, secondly, of a dual perspective of identification/non-identification of the lyrical speaker with himself – this perspective combines what at a glance seem to be very different and incompatible ways of thinking (Димитрова, 1994: 22).<sup>10</sup> The contamination of the revolutionary discourse and the intimacy of family values are at the heart of his cause. In the aftermath of the revolution the curse of idealism, the impossible materialisation of the ideal, kept haunting Valeri Petrov after the political upheaval of 9<sup>th</sup> September 1944 (commonly referred to as Sept. 9<sup>th</sup>) and the longed for socialist people's rule. The lack of coherence between the ideal and the reality of it in the context of the new regime raises the most logical question: **is this what we were fighting for?**

*But how would you like to know what I really think? All of these cars: the Wartburg, the Volga, the Moskvitch, the Škoda, the Volkswagen, they are all in all a good thing, but isn't there something else that's better than all of that? (Knight Without Armour)<sup>11</sup>*

What is most valuable is beyond material things and the mission of art is to always remind us of that, to counteract the profanity of physicalism. However, for the longest time poetry

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<sup>4</sup> „Край синьото море“.

<sup>5</sup> „Детинство“.

<sup>6</sup> All poems used in the present paper, unless otherwise indicated, have been translated by PP.

<sup>7</sup> (Петров 2006а).

<sup>8</sup> „Палечко“.

<sup>9</sup> „Край огнището“.

<sup>10</sup> See also (Ликова, 1994: 67) and (Георгиева-Тенева, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> (Петров, 2006б: 214).

abdicated from its former role of a tribune for social rebellion and delegated its authority to another literary genre – playwriting.

The need to put into words the voice of discontent takes control over the genres conquered – that of scriptwriting and playwriting. However, they are still subordinate to the primary genre – that of poetry, from which they draw themes and ideas. For Valeri Petrov “these genre definitions are relative,” because “everything I have ever done is poetry in different genre disguise, be it poetry to be read, for the stage, or for the screen...”<sup>12</sup> (Сарандев, 1997: 189, 201); the narrative strategies and the outlook of the poet remain unchanged. The difference in form is a technicality, but the lyrical is transposed in a special way. The field of dramaturgy turns out to be the more appropriate form-medium for a functionalization of the **dangerous sociocritical voice of the contemporary idealist**.

The freedom of the artist in the times after Sept. 9<sup>th</sup> is what preoccupies Petrov, it is both his chosen fate and philosophical imperative. The author can sense the antinomy between ideology and the ideological formation in the Bulgarian political context. The world of cinema and theatre is the recognised public outlet for the “little voice” of truth that strives to draw out the discrepancies between ideology and reality, and that cannot be silenced.<sup>13</sup> The different representations of this voice, surely more powerful than the author could anticipate, necessitate closer attention be paid to two scripts by Petrov that highlight two basic lyrical concepts: *Knight Without Armour* (1966) and *A Day of Filming* (1969)<sup>14</sup>, both directed by Borislav Sharaliev. What must be addressed first, however, are the characteristic features of Petrov’s poetry, as well as his preferred script model, on the one hand, and the biographical background of subsequent productions, on the other.

To the extent that film dramaturgy is a genre of mass culture, the writer needs to make sure that he is not misunderstood. One could argue that this eases the labours of the researcher, because it insists on straightforward messages, but at the same time it lends control to the writer of what is going on on the screen, a matter which requires a closer examination. Petrov’s creative decision in this case boils down to **frequent use of a narrator**, whose mission is to break the fourth wall. Many of his films, including *On the Little Island* (1958, directed by Rangel Vulchanov)<sup>15</sup>, *First Lesson* (1960, directed by Rangel Vulchanov)<sup>16</sup>, *Vaskata* (1965, directed by Borislav Sharaliev)<sup>17</sup>, etc., employ the narrator

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<sup>12</sup> Translated by PP.

<sup>13</sup> See Petrov’s interview with M. Karbovski (Петров, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> *Един снимачен ден*.

<sup>15</sup> *На малкия остров*.

<sup>16</sup> *Първи урок*.

<sup>17</sup> *Васката* in Bulgarian. A common pet name for the name Vasil.

technique, but the specific relativization of addresser and addressee is the deciding factor for the voice and its ‘messages’. In *On the Little Island*, the voices belong to the fallen comrades, calling to those who are alive and have forgotten about them; in *Vaskata* roles are reversed and those that are alive conjure up the memory of their dead friend; in *First Lesson* the voice cooperates with the narrator in the conception of the romantic intrigue between the two characters by the incorporation of aphoristic lines in the fabric of the work. The different versions and their intertwining ensure the originality of the scripts of Valeri Petrov; our inability to sum them up neatly, to classify them under a common genre denominator, says more about the narrative voice he applies than the limited thematic variability.<sup>18</sup>

His turning to dramaturgy, and more specifically to film dramaturgy, is no accident, but a development that came as the result of two major events in the life of Petrov. **In 1960, unexpectedly, he published his critical poem “In the Mild Autumn,”**<sup>19</sup> for which he received the Dimitrov Award. In the then People's Republic of Bulgaria this was the highest award for achievements in science, technology, and culture. The same year there were only three laureates, one of them was Valeri Petrov. The unexpectedness of the publication and the following award could be explained by the themes that are part of its fabric. What we know is that at first the text was not meant to be shared at all, because it was considered dangerous for its author. However, as a consequence of an unlikely incident Petrov lost the draft during a hike in the mountain and spent a month trying to rewrite it from memory, all the while riddled with fear that it could find its way into the hands of the authorities. Luckily, another hiker responded to the ad Petrov had placed in the paper and brought the draft back to the poet’s house, where he ended up combining the two versions into the final one we know today.<sup>20</sup> Petrov takes the entire incident as a sign that the poem needed to be published and shared with others. It is quite paradoxical that the award he won worked against the poet’s reputation: he was quietly denounced by the authorities, a partial ban on his publications was set in place and the few things he was allowed to publish were censored without mercy.

Ten years later, in 1970, **Petrov demonstrated openly his dissatisfaction with the political regime.** At the First National Conference of the Union of Bulgarian Writers (held 16–24 November 1970) under “Miscellaneous” a letter of protest was read that was addressed to the Nobel Prize Committee, which had awarded the Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn the same year. The writers attending the meeting called for a vote of support for

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. (Делов, 2011: 25; Сарандев, 1997: 159).

<sup>19</sup> “В меката есен”.

<sup>20</sup> For more details see (Сарандев, 1997: 86–88).

the letter and most members complied – only two withheld their vote and one voted against the letter. One of the two, who refused to vote, was Valeri Petrov.<sup>21</sup> This was used as an excuse for his being voted out of the Union of Bulgarian Writers, as well as the Bulgarian Communist Party. Even after the political changes in Bulgaria, after 10<sup>th</sup> November 1989, the author did not wish to talk about these events, because for him it was the ultimate proof that the socialist idea was doomed, whereas he continued to fervently believe in until the end of his days.

“In the Mild Autumn” channelled the poet’s anger of his freedom being trampled but he continued this outpour in other works in different forms. The difficult decade between 1960 and 1970’s was marked by the creation of most of Petrov’s works for the screen. The intensive work over the course of a single decade – he completed five films – explains the common characteristic features and concepts between them. Each of the five films has a different voice, but behind these differences could be discerned common sociocritical issues. The films *Knight Without Armour* and *A Day of Filming* deserve special attention, because they represent two different frameworks of representation, even if they achieve similar semiotic and semantic exchange. While *Knight Without Armour* is a typical lyrical drama<sup>22</sup>, *A Day of Filming* is a drama with a problematic plot line. These conclusions can be drawn after the close examination of the two films.

***Knight Without Armour* impresses with an organised and compact plot that is meant to completely correspond with the world it represents.** At first glance the family of the high ranking party member Stoyan Stamov appears to live in perfect harmony: he has a beautiful wife, his car is brand new, his apartment is large, his son adores him and tries to be like him in everything he does; the nuclear family model of the basic social building block, the family, seems stable. The crash is inevitable both in the figurative and quite literal sense. During a family outing the inexperienced driver Stamov forgets to pull on the handbrake to secure his shiny, new car; then he and his wife get out of the car and leave their son Vanyo inside. Following the basic laws of physics and the need for action, the car starts going down the steep hill and crashes into a tree. Luckily, Vanyo is not inside, because he had gone to relieve himself in the bushes nearby. After an initial wave of relief when the parents find out that their son is alive, it is time to mourn the material losses. The crash is very important for the plot, because it is a rare occasion of domestic accord. From then on, the distance between

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 91–94.

<sup>22</sup> Here ‘lyrical drama’ is used in the sense of Ch. Dobrev, even if he chooses to focus his analysis solely on V. Petrov’s theatrical dramaturgy (see Добрев, 1973: 253–274).

the members of the family continues to grow until the complete physical and spiritual collapse of the family unit.

The narrative strategy develops and a series of coincidences happen on the screen, all charged with the logic (and determinism) of microclimaxes. On the one hand, there's the despicable behaviour of the father (a bureaucrat and a high-ranking party member), and on the other, the sin of the mother which is at odds with her conventional role of guardian of the family. The name of the mother is used twice, she is called once Emilia and once – Anelia<sup>23</sup>, and everywhere else she is referred to as the Mother to underline her social position. She has taken a lover and is cheating on Stamov. The error with the names of the mother has a curious symbolic effect. Once she is called Anelia by her happily-married fellow student, a personification of a subconscious voice, of a hidden self. The other time her name is mentioned, this time she is called Emilia, is by her husband. This unintentional mistake poses the question: Is this woman Anelia or is she Emilia? Ordinarily, we would consider the final word to be with what we find in the end, namely, that she is Emilia. What if her name is in fact Anelia though? Then, it is not the author or the publishers who are at fault, but the husband, who is so drunk with power and used to possessing things such as cars, women, etc.

Leaving aside this technical error, the way we find out about the affair of the Mother is also by accident. However, this accumulative effect of accidents works on the surface, below it is a strong undercurrent of determinism. After the car crash everything seems to be going fine. Vanyo lives the normal life of any happy child: crisscrossing the streets with his friends, dressed in his cardboard armour; showing off his new bike. A second car crash, this time involving the boy's bike, marks the culmination that is to follow, but the viewer does not witness it. Vanyo has left the safety of the space around his building and ventured into a different neighbourhood in order to get his bike chain fixed. There he joins in a game of 'witch hunt' the target of which is his own mother. The kids there have decided that this woman, who is a stranger to the neighbourhood but is often seen there, is a spy and their mission is to follow her and expose her. The moment her identity is revealed is shocking to both mother and son, but holding hands they take the tram back to their neighbourhood and her affair is implied but not entirely revealed to the omniscient narrator or Vanyo. The excerpted episode is striking both with its euphemistic quality and its teleological organisation, devoid of any spontaneity.

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<sup>23</sup> It is possible that the author made a mistake by using two different names. See (Петров, 2006б: 204; *ibid.* 209).

From then on both the Mother and the Son from *Knight Without Armour* are allies, for they are searching for alternative members of the family. For the Mother this is her Lover, and for Vanyo this is his Uncle. In both cases they are replacements for Stamov, who is apathetic to the social role of Husband and Father. Here the failed marriage is associated with the refutation of Plato's myth about the androgyne<sup>24</sup>, but what actually leads to the rift between Father and Son is a particular event. In the scene, the Father is not moved by a woman in trouble and does nothing to help her, even though he is in the position to do so. Even though he knows that the teacher (Kirilova) is right to protest her unjust dismissal, Stamov refuses to act like a Don Quixote and sends her away, crippled by fear from his superiors.

“The woman is right,” says the mother.

“What an odd woman you are! I know that she is right,” the father is infuriated. “But what am I to do about it? Am I supposed to defend her? Thanks but no thanks! I want to part in this Don Quixote business!”<sup>25</sup>

In that moment the Father no longer has a place in the son's heart and in a way the author throws him out of the story and in his stead brings in the boy's maternal Uncle.

The lines from “In the Mild Autumn,”

...very soon under the pin others

Will hide the stains on their souls.<sup>26</sup>

illustrate the scene discussed above. Vanyo, clinging to the torn armour his Father had once made for him (a symbol of the broken link between the two generations), storms out of the room and the armour is finally destroyed when it is caught in the door. His Father feigns concern and goes after him, for the first time Vanyo stands up to him, ashamed that he had tried so hard to be like his Father. The last straw for the Son seems to be when Stamov takes the five-star pin off the armour. Vanyo cannot stand to look at the hypocrite in front of him, who had just taken hostage the symbol of the communist ideal, so he jumps at him, takes back the pin, then throws armour and all out of the balcony. This act of defenestration symbolises **the ritual of excluding the Father from the universe of the Son** and in this sense perhaps we could interpret the title of the film as ‘a child without a father’. The tears of

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<sup>24</sup> (Платон, 2011: 45–51).

<sup>25</sup> (Петров, 2006б: 223).

<sup>26</sup> (Петров 2006а).

the pure heart of the idealist fall on the fat fingers of the bureaucrat as he is trying to cling to what he had lost.

As far as the narrator's voice is concerned in *Knight Without Armour*, in the first few pages of his script Petrov outlines the role of the narrator, but he is careful not to assign it to anyone in particular, because the narrator can be anyone, who

...is not any more aware than we are of what is going to happen in the film, who loves children a little more than the average person and is slightly more concerned with some issues the adults in our society experience.<sup>27,28</sup>

Vanyo is the only one who can hear and talk to the narrator, but only in his head when he is alone. This duality, and to some extent antithesis of narrator and hero, problematizes the hypothesis of the internal genesis, of the idea that the voice of the narrator belongs to anyone in particular (an imaginary friend of Vanyo's or an idealisation of one of the characters, the Uncle for instance)<sup>29</sup>. It is precisely because the narrator's voice does not belong to anyone that it is possible for the narrator to verbalise the collective social discontent; it is the opposite of the child's perspective, making the child consider things as he is gradually learning about the surrounding world.

The double meaning, improvisation and the 'hidden' interaction are aesthetic features of the parody<sup>30</sup>. If in the lyrical drama *Knight Without Armour* satire steps back to make room for tragedy, then *A Day of Filming is the stage for some of Petrov's most successful ridicule of the 'crooked' world*. This script is very odd at first glance, not because of the script within a script approach, but because it seems to be lacking meaningful action. There is a sense of fragmentariness that is the result of constant repetition of the same virtually unintelligible take:

HE: "You can do eight, can't you?"

SHE: "With you! I cannot wait!"

HE: "A little closeby at the Amour."

SHE: "What is the occasion, mon amour?"

HE: "A successful experiment at the lab!"<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Translated by PP.

<sup>28</sup> (Петров, 2006б: 198).

<sup>29</sup> See (Янакиев, 2000: 520).

<sup>30</sup> (Делов, 2011: 44; Ликова, 1994: 129–133).

<sup>31</sup> (Петров, 2006б: 315).

This destroys any sense of chronological order. In terms of composition, the hodgepodge of characters (crew, actors, passersby, extras) and chaotic lines suggests a creative representation of an *orderly* world. Thus, the effect of the caricature of a love scene introduced above is neutralised, because of the multiple claps of the film slate. The cameras ignore the artificial in favour of what is actually going on in the world: the real, undirected, spontaneous life with all of its ups and downs. The two extras who unexpectedly fall in love, the actor, for whom football matters more than any film could, the old folks, sitting on a bench, talking about their aches and pains – these are all part of the way Valeri Petrov expresses his love for life through his script.

In the mess of the different narrative voices we hear there are two memorable lines, whose humour evokes social criticism. The first one is not part of Petrov's script, it was probably added without his consent and it shows: a group of boys are arguing and yelling at one another, when one of them blurts out:

Even Achilles's mother wanted to gain him special favour and so had a chat with Zeus, who was a relative (*A Day of Filming*).<sup>32</sup>

What is parodied by this episode is the very popular practice of nepotism in the country at the time. Profanising mythology and Homer's Iliad is a sign of defective discourse and total failure of cultural literacy. Homer's gods and heroes are put on par with corrupt practices, which is significant of two things: one, the collapse of the educational system at the time; and two, that heroism is misunderstood or simply not necessary. Similar to the scene in *Knight Without Armour* where the teacher (Kirilova) was fired, so that a relative of the principal could take her place. The name of Achilles's mother, the goddess Thetis, is omitted to show the ignorance of the boys but also the irrelevance of the middleman – what is important is the relationship between the person who is asking the favour and the one who has the power to grant it.

The second line that I would like to pay special attention to also has to do with education, but this time it concerns the general knowledge of students and more specifically their linguistic skills. In the scene, there's a Frenchman and his interpreter, who stop to have a look at the filming that is in progress. A very ambitious mother notices the foreigner and decides to show off her daughter's command of the French language:

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<sup>32</sup> Translated by PP.

“Krasimira!... Come here! Hurry up, will you! (to the interpreter) They are learning French! (to her daughter) The comrade is from France! Tell him something in French!” The child is silent. The foreigner ... extends his hand:

“Bonjour, mademoiselle!”

“Bonjour,” the daughter responds shyly. But her mother is not happy.

“Bonjour, bonjour! Even I know how to say that! Tell him something else! ... Come on, honey! You have been studying the language for three years now! Go ahead or I will...” Finally, the child says:

“Viv la grande révolution d’Octobre!” (*A Day of Filming*)

All the lines that belong to the mother are exclamative; the aggressiveness of the punctuation culminates with the threat aimed at the daughter, who in turn manages to recall a single cliché that is irrelevant to the occasion. It turns out that the three years spent learning French have led to the memorisation of a single misunderstood and ideologically charged phrase, not unlike the case of Achilles and his mother. These two incidents aim to expose the incompetence and utter lack of ability to have adequate interactions outside the world of socialist regime. The Frenchman seems surprised and embarrassed and responds with:

“Oh la la!,” is his only response. (*A Day of Filming*)<sup>33</sup>

The Frenchman’s exclamation is a national marker that comes as a reaction to the encounter with the contrary. Compared to his response, the phrase Krasimira manages to produce and her mother’s behaviour seem insulting, part of a social context in which children are instructed to parrot ideologically charged slogans, devoid of any sense.

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After the democratic changes in the Bulgarian political scene from 10<sup>th</sup> November 1989, Valeri Petrov makes a single film, *Starting Over*<sup>34</sup> (1996, directed by Ivan Pavlov), which to a certain extent recycles the (anti-)plot of *A Day of Filming*. The poet lived to 94 years of age, before he closed his eyes for the last time on 27<sup>th</sup> August 2014. From 1989 until his death, when he was finally able to speak freely, he gave very few interviews. Ivan Sarandev’s efforts in 1993 were published four years later in 1997 by Hermes Publishing and to this day remain the most in-depth attempt at getting Petrov to open up about the past. One cannot entirely say that Sarandev was successful, because even in talking to his friend, the poet avoided talking about the recent past, and even when he did, either because he was being manipulated by the interviewer or simply as a result of tracing the creative process, he often

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 328–329.

<sup>34</sup> Всичко от нула.

stopped himself with the excuse that he had deviated from the cultural aspect he was after. Unwittingly, Petrov draws a line between culture and cultural genesis, to him they are opposites. The scripts of Valeri Petrov to a large extent express the need for active resistance against the shortcomings of social order through art, a mission that has a primary role in keeping the artist in the collective memory.