

POETS - GENRES CONQUERED

ITZO HAZARTA - A STREET POET AND A FIGURE OF POWER

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The origin of Bulgarian hip-hop culture dates back to the second half of the 1980s. This beginning was marked by rather sporadic events which, nonetheless, are the reason why, after the fall of the communist regime in 1989, the first wave¹ of Bulgarian hip-hop appeared, covering the period from 1991 to 1997. It was specifically 1997 that proved to be an important year for the group Upsurt, formed two years prior, which then won first place at the rap festival in Razgrad against 26 groups from all over Bulgaria. With some changes in its original line-up, the group continues its existence to this day.

Itzo Hazarta² [Itzo the Gambler], one of the longest-standing members of Upsurt, is a figure whose public career is not limited to just making rap music. There are two distinctly different personas through which Hristo Petrov is recognizable in the Bulgarian socio-cultural context today - a prominent *street poet* whose work is representative of the development of Bulgarian hip-hop culture, and a *member of the Bulgarian parliament* who has repeatedly won the trust of thousands of Bulgarians.

The official website of the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria provides information about each Member of the Parliament. In addition to biographical data, information about the MP's participation in parliamentary structures, legislative initiatives, proposals for draft laws, etc. can be found there. For the first time Hristo Petrov was elected as an MP in November 2021 and thus became a member of the 47th National Assembly. In the following years, a series of parliamentary elections were held for various reasons. The performing artist³ did not fail voters and was successively elected as a member of the 48th National Assembly and the 49th National Assembly. At the European Parliament elections held in June 2024, Hristo Petrov was elected Member of the European Parliament for the term 2024 - 2029. There are sufficient records in the public domain showing Hristo Petrov's activism and initiative as a Member of Parliament, as well as his involvement in various social issues.

¹ Bulgarian hip-hop culture includes three waves: the first wave (1991-1997), the second wave (2000-2005) and the third wave, known as contemporary hip-hop.

More about the development of hip-hop culture in the Bulgarian context in the 90s can be found in the feature - 'The First Monsters of Bulgarian Rap', bTV Reporters. See <<https://btvnovinite.bg/predavania/btv-reporterite/btv-reporterite-parvite-chudovishta-na-balgarskija-rap.html>>

² As for the nickname's operative meaning, the rapper says in an interview that he doesn't identify with its meaning, 'I don't just dislike it. I can't stand that nickname [...] I've never gambled. It's incredibly stupid to me.' (See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIgYW-38g9o>>). In fact, the nickname is an obligatory element of the rapper's social role - it is a sign of belonging in the alternative world of the underground, of an established pattern of presence in this space. As for the semantics of *Hazarta [the gambler]*, in Hristo Petrov's case it rather aligns with the connotations of the gambling personality, the reckless risk-taker, the one who takes his chances against destiny.

³ On the website of the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria this is Hristo Petrov's listed occupation. See <<https://www.parliament.bg/bg/MP/4316>>.

He is the founder of the One Bulgarian association aimed at helping children placed in social service institutions as well as disadvantaged people.

In 2019, two years before he became a recognizable political personality, the rapper Itzo Hazarta released his first solo album *Nepravilen Rap [Improper Rap]*⁴, which became very popular and won Album of the Year at the 359 Hip Hop Awards. The album contains 15 songs. The main topic of interpretation in the current text will be the rap poetry from the mentioned album, as well as a separate project that Itzo Hazarta created during his time as an MP - Christo the MP (2022).

Although there are certain stereotypes attached to rap music because it belongs to subcultures, by its very nature it is undeniably an art form with an already established status, a kind of ‘sound literature’ that is ‘inexhaustible’ (Jluch 2017: https). Rap poetry is characterized by the multiplicity of themes and motifs woven into the recitative - from idealizing the hooligan lifestyle to insightful analysis of modernity and its socio-political and socio-cultural aspects. The language and messages of rap poetry can be at odds with the socially established norms of what is considered permissible and ethical. At the same time, a skillful handling of philosophical-aesthetic categories and ideas can be found in other variants of its realization.

The album *Nepravilen Rap* can serve as proof of the belief that rappers can have as profound a critical view of the contemporary state of society and its problems as any socially engaged person publicly defending their choices of values. It is the album’s overall concept that makes it a unified work, even though it is thematically inhomogeneous and its content is rather diverse. Issues such as the state of contemporary mass hip-hop culture, the pervasive ignorance, and the over-idealization of the material are discussed in the lyrics. Careless living, indolence, displacement of blame, stupidity and escapist thinking are criticized as vices of modern society.

The title alone does not indicate what the overall concept of the album is. It functions as an identifier of the type of content - it is rap, it is meant for the usual rap audience, but just as the typical rap music there is another dimension. The word *nepravilen* [improper, incorrect] functions ambivalently. This rap is unconventional, it does not fit into the generally accepted rules for creating this type of music and the mainstream notion of the nature of the rhyming word. On the other hand, *nepravilen* could mean that there is something wrong, a mistake, something that could not come to fruition. The album cover brings another possible interpretation of the title. The visual elements have the capacity to interact with the verbal in a curious way. The phrase ‘improper rap’ interacts with the figure of Itzo Hazarta who is taking a pose with his arms crossed. The negative particle ‘im’ is separated from the adjective ‘proper’ and is in a position behind the rapper’s head, while the phrase ‘proper rap’ is written in front of the rapper’s body. In this sense, the title of the album as visualized on the cover could also be read as ‘(im)proper rap’, i.e. it claims that the rap that is about to be perceived is proper, real.

The state of contemporary Bulgarian hip-hop culture is the topic of discussion in the songs “Bravo”, “Hip-hop” and “Sarceto Na Hlebarkata” [The Heart of the Cockroach], with

⁴ The entire album is available on Spotify.

See https://open.spotify.com/album/7Jxv8TFzPJBRTJ3RmztbLh?si=7AFTo6_dReCptU1OQFZb9A

videos created for the first two. In addition to the subject matter, there is also a formal similarity between the three songs. Although only monological rapping can be heard, the songs imply the presence of a listener to whom the message is directly addressed. The presence of addressees and the second person pronouns confirm this. The song “Hip-Hop” (2014) has been familiar to the audience long before its inclusion on the album *Nepravilen Rap*. The sentence *‘My hip-hop is much better than your hip-hop’*, which is repeated multiple times and therefore functions as a leitmotif, registers the existence of multiple variants not reducible to a common denominator, to a single definition of ‘hip-hop’. The division between the members of this subculture and their overt public opposition is not a newly emerging phenomenon. Since its inception, hip-hop culture has been characterized by the coexistence of opposing phenomena: East - West, old school - new school, underground - mainstream. However, the main purpose of this song is not to provoke a rap battle and enter into a direct confrontation, but to openly ridicule the other hip-hop, the one that is foreign. The contemptuous attitude is tempered by the ironic tone of the rant. The mockery continues in the song “Bravo”, which is directly aimed at the *‘new BG stars’*. Here the decline of rap music is presented as increasingly evident. By stating *‘rap is dead’* the rapping self refuses to identify music whose purpose is to glorify easy living and appreciate the material as rap. The new “rap” music is totally annihilated.

Bravo, bravo, bravo, dear sir! Does it feel nice? I hope you quickly come undone!

Bravo, the road is not easy, your rap makes me queasy, just sing to me - “Dear son”!

Do you want me to pull out your teeth so that your new song won’t be released?

Your stupidity will never go away, but at least I can catch a break...

The verbal creativity of others, capable of creating only *‘some new stupid stuff’*, is likened to flatulence: *‘just to ask, don’t be angry with me - are you singing, or is someone farting’*. The open mockery of other artists’ hip-hop and its incessant ironizing is supported by the visuals of the two songs. Their videos are quite similar in concept (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGH72v5CHGY>/<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HCKDroWmio>). The main aim is the travesty of the typical elements of mainstream hip-hop - dancing women, men with gold chains hanging, all dressed in a certain style of clothing, and expensive cars.⁵

In the third song of this theme, “Sarceto Na Hlebarkata” [The Heart of the Cockroach], irony and ridicule give way to a considerably more caustic and offensive language. The work of the implicitly present other is presented as lacking in value: *‘your lyrics are stolen but pleasant, your videos cheap but interesting’*. This other is seen as insignificant: *‘your breed of filthy bastards, stay basic, how is it to be a nobody’*. The cockroach appears as a symbol of a human existence devoid of metaphysical horizons. The individual is intoxicated by the drive for quick success and profit.

A few other works can also be grouped together due to the ideological and thematic similarities between them. In “Zaradi Tebe” [Because of You], “Nafta” [Diesel], “Imam Chovek” [I Have a Guy], “Gladen” [Hungry] the rap artist lays bare the flaws of modern society, to which he himself belongs. The song “Zaradi Tebe” [Because of You] has a dual existence and serves a special function in building the conceptual integrity of the album. It appears twice on the album. The first version is a collaboration with rapper Qvkata DLG, and the second is entirely by Itzo Hazarta.

⁵ In fact, these elements are the subject of an ironic comment in the song “Bravo”: “You need b*tches, coke and cars for your new video, take your mother and shoot her white jeep”...

The placement of the two versions of the song is not random. The first version is second song on the album, and the second version is the fourteenth song, i.e. the two songs mirror each other and build a particular circular structure, since the intro of the album is not a stand-alone song, but a short excerpt from a speech by Mitio Pishtova - easily recognizable for his peculiar manner of speaking. The choice of this particular personality for the intro does not seem accidental. The sarcastic attitude of the rapper becomes evident with this choice - ridiculing a society that favours this type of person. Mitio Pishtova is a publicly recognisable personality whose popularity is attributed to two main factors - a specific manner of speaking and behaviour, as well as the information circulating in the media about his debauched lifestyle. His public image is of the anti-hero who gained popularity because of his undeniable intellectual limitations and his proud display of negative qualities such as greed and gluttony. An antihero whose ambitions for social activism and political positions go far beyond the realm of show business.

Due to its optimistic content, the last song “Radost” [Joy], could not be classified among the thematically grouped works here either. In this sense, the two-version song could be considered representative of the whole album, and the issues addressed in it appear essential to its overall conception. Incidentally, the theme of transferred guilt continues to interest Itzo Hazarta in the later-released song “Deputata Hristo” [Hristo the MP].

Despite the formal differences between the two versions of “Zaradi Tebe” [Because of You], they are identical in their content. The title itself points to the issues of this work. *Because of you* is a phrase indicating accusation. In fact, underlying the phrase in question is a behavioural trait known as *blame-shifting*. It is precisely this inherently aggressive verbal act that is the topic of discussion in the two-version song. The type of people who do not acknowledge their faults and shortcomings, who look for the reasons for their mediocre existence in others are subjected to scathing criticism. Already at the beginning of the first version, the implicitly present other, whom the rapper addresses constantly, is presented as an impersonal subject who instinctively and blindly submits to the status quo and lacks the will to fight of their freedom:

*Draw me a portrait of a sheep.
Use the mirror at your home to do this [...]
Put some chains on the head, pull them tight,
you have a TV - toss these books [...]
In Bulgaria, 'free-spirit' is an offensive word.*

For this will-less subject, who embodies the idea of escapist existence, the core values in life are drinking and instant success. The only thing this subject can purposefully and deliberately accomplish is to blame others for the misfortunes of his existence: *how nice it is to have others to blame....* The chorus builds the image of the ‘blame-shifter’ through a succession of epithets:

*Tell me, are you **last** again because of me,
Tell me, are you **obedient** because of me,
Tell me, are you so **poor** because of me,
Or... because you, you f**king moron!
Tell me, are you **useless** because of me,
What did I do to make you give me the finger again,
Is it because of me your brain is so **damaged**,
Or... because of you, you f**king moron!*

The second version starts with the same opening verse and part of the chorus. Following this same part, this second version does not particularly criticise the indifference and escapism of the ‘blame-shifter’, but the zeitgeist and the peculiarities of society: ‘*My city is a parking lot and an ashtray [...] Facebook gives power to the liar and the fool*’.

The song “Imam Chovek” [I Know a Guy], a collaboration with the rapper Homelesz, discusses a particularly interesting topic. An immensely widespread practice is lyricised while simultaneously parodying it. The leitmotif phrase ‘I know a guy’ represents a social phenomena of nepotism and favouritism. ‘I know a guy’ is a long-standing practice which bypasses red tape in any government institution through the mediation of someone trust-worthy, someone close, someone you know, someone who is ‘*here and there*’, who works at the relevant department. The acquaintance with this person provides certain advantages: ‘*no standing in queues, only wholesale prices*’, as well as the use of privileges in a number of government institutions, such as: the NRA, the NSSI, the traffic police, the RHI, the SANS. The lyrics both ironize the normalised practice in question and undermine the credibility of all public structures and private companies mentioned (such as the names of some banks or petrol stations). Through irony this type of “networking” is represented as completely vicious.

*I know a guy in the NRA/ And I don't give a s**it
I know a guy in the traffic police/ No standing in queues anymore
We know a guy here/ We know a guy there, too
I know a place to buy from/ And sell to you*

The last part of the song ‘*It is interesting in Bulgaria. Oftentimes the times are not fair*’ is used to question the authority of the government itself. In the song’s video, Itzo Hazarta and Homelesz play characters who drive around institutions in an undercover van⁶ and by various means (detonation, fumigation) try to destroy the institution and people in question (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhAe4ILR8Ms>). The phenomenon of ‘knowing a guy’ is visualised in several different situations. The video opens with a conversation between the rapper Itzo Hazarta and a gentleman in a suit (the boss of an unmentioned institution) uttering the credential-conferring words *We know a trusted guy in there. I have people everywhere*. The rapper does not have any lines in this introductory scene, instead he is portrayed as the destroyer of the ‘knowing a guy’ practice - as he exits the room it becomes clear that he has forgotten his bag, which explodes seconds later and destroys the place. One of the next stops of the two justice fighters is a building, symbolising an institution, where there is a long line at a counter staffed by a not-so-friendly female clerk. Upon the appearance of the two heroes,

⁶ The following image is seen on the van: placed in a red prohibition sign, a figure of a man holding bags of money.

this time disguised as insect exterminators, rodent exterminators - pests of all kinds, the clerk displays a sign saying 'Not an information desk', but is immediately gassed by the two heroes and instantly the clerk's face takes on the appearance of a mouse, and then her very body explodes and turns to smoke. Through the act of the two characters, the 'true' nature of those working in institutions is laid bare, adding to the identification the negative allegories associated with rodents, the reduction to 'scale' (a small, faceless, harmful, grey mouse). The song's video realises the "literalized metaphor" - the metaphorical transfer unfolds as a fabula and demonstrates the absurd, builds the grotesque.

Another type of social phenomena is ironized in the work *Hungry* [Gladen]. The obsession with appearance and the overvaluation of the body are commented upon. The modern eating culture is ironized, encompassing the two extremes - the constant strict adherence to diets and the overconsumption of food. In between these lines of the work, the rapper's scathing attitude towards another phenomenon is expressed, but could be seen as one of the causes leading to obesity (a problem that is more fully developed in the video for the song). Laziness and the various forms in which it manifests itself is problematised: *work for me [...] I can't just have a bunch of coffees and chew shisha like you [...] The body ate, drank and slept and mostly just sat*⁷. The concept of the video was based on the idea of showing the vicissitudes of an obese person on the road to weight loss (See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0udaOvE_qOU). The impetus for this decision comes from the opening scene of the video, where the protagonist makes a tremendous effort to get out of the apparently expensive sports car he is driving, but is having difficulty due to his oversized body.

Attention should be paid to one detail of the gentleman's outfit, which could be essential for the overall concept of not only this work, but also the whole album **Nepravilen Rap**. In the interpretation of other works, it has already been pointed out that the lyrics constantly ironize the subject of commentary. In this sense, irony is clearly an important device in Itzo Hazarta's rap poetry. Irony that is handled in a very serious way. The lyrics and videos ironize, parody, mock, but this seems to be the result of a well thought out concept beforehand. The obese character in the video for "Hungry" wears a blue t-shirt. On its front, in enlarged green letters, the following phrase is stamped: **TAKE FUN SERIOUSLY**. In the context of this work, but also of the album itself, this phrase cannot be passed over as a randomly appearing catchphrase on a t-shirt. The choice of this particular t-shirt could be interpreted as intentional given its possible functionality. The phrase "take fun seriously"/"take fun seriously"⁸ appears to be an expression of a vision of creativity in which the fun mode (through irony and parody not only as verbal figures but also through their applicability to the visual aspects of the work) is in fact the fruit of a serious premeditated creative process.

The ironic way in which various themes are presented in the album, the particular "lightness" of the slang language, demonstrating a complete disregard for the norms

⁷ By the way, laziness is also criticized in the work "I Have a Guy":
Only if it's for a job I'm not looking for/ I'd be Minister of Labour, but I'm lazy.

⁸The attempted translation is mine - I. B.

of “good taste”, of social order, actually underlines the great disappointment, bitterness and disgust that the world of everyday life evokes. A world where nepotism, laziness and snobbery are ubiquitous, where even music is a sham, an imposed lie or just a convenient habit. Itzo Hazarta’s rap is not necessarily “a call for social revolt” for a definite break with the world of pseudo-values. It certainly is, however, poetry that has preserved the primordial ability to share directly (sincerely and convincingly) the emotions, anxieties, and dissatisfaction of the individual, of the individual self, with the large audience of its listeners.

Despite the ugliness of reality, the last song closes the album with a great deal of optimism. With its message, this final song, co-written with the artist Bobo, aims to convince the reader/listener that in fact the adversities of reality cannot prevent a person from preserving their joy despite being in such a social environment. The song “Joy” begins with the intro - *There is so much joy in these wonderful eyes*, an excerpt from Konstantin Kazansky’s song of the same name. This work poses the problem of transience and the irreversible passage of time: *is there any way to be again what you were then. [...] Time puts a black stamp. You can’t move back a second*. The chorus emphatically renounces the hero’s emotional involvement with what’s going on outside: *I don’t care anymore*. The affirmative *I stay young and don’t become an old man because there is joy in my eyes* shows the decision to create a certain inner attitude towards reality. Youthfulness is a state of mind that is the opposite of being an old man. The old man here appears to be a figure of escapism harshly criticized in other works of rap poetry by Itzo Hazarta.

After being elected as an MP, Hristo Petrov prioritized his work in the National Assembly and it is evident that for a considerable period of time his appearances as a rapper were neglected. The album Hristo the MP (2022) is not only significant for his work, but is also directly tied to his political career, as it is a form of self-reflection on the rapper’s journey thus far as an MP. The title of the song explicates the other role through which Hristo Petrov is recognizable. Outside of its being a title, this phrase functions as an identifying formula used in interview⁹ titles and replacing the name Hristo Petrov.

The text of the work combines self-irony and political satire. The hero’s attitude to his work as an MP is openly sarcastic:

*super amateur among professionals [...]
I fulfilled my dream of being on salary and
from time to time to get something from your children [...]
My first job was to raise the petrol by a lev,
it was a great pleasure for me.*

In the song’s chorus, the first-person form of expression gives way to a set of phrases that illustrate public opinion of the rapper’s work as a member of parliament. Some of the phrases sound like clichés that could be used to address any political figure:

⁹ Agenda. Ep. 9 - MP Hristo - about power from within and why Hristo Petrov wants to become an MP (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KCjJNgjwDk>)

ToTo - Hristo the MP (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBAMmpJ2WGs>)

*In my opinion Hristo the MP
Is responsible for everyting
Honestly, are you crazy?/ Arn't you full, bro/
Did you at least sleep? Sell yourself out! [...]
Well it's been eight months and nothing.*

They are a repetition of the persistent vision that society has about politicians - they steal, they do not respect their campaign values and they do not fulfill their promises. The act of accusation directed at MP Christo is in fact indicative of the need to name a culprit to be blamed for all the misfortune.

After the first chorus, this song turns into a political satire. Through the sarcasm-soaked verses, the hero presents his attitude towards his fellow politicians. The criticized political personalities are not named, but from the definitions used it becomes very clear which persons are being referred to - *boss, you make me very happy with your glasses, kopeyka, rented revivalists, the tall and the obese, the country of the two swine*. The message becomes even easier to decode when one watches the video to the song. In it the political figures in question are visualised in the form of caricatures, and at the very end of the work excerpts from their speeches are played. Both the caricatures and the voices make it sufficiently clear to whom the rapper directs his stabs.

The video visualizes the two faces of Hristo Petrov - *the street poet Izto Hazarta* rapping in the neighborhood, a kind of “hip-hop social environment” (Ceran 2023: 114), and *the MP Hristo* giving a statement in front of microphones, which is broadcast on television (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W80-WX1pGBc>). Several different types of people make up the image of the society whose opinion is heard in the chorus of the song: an elderly man and woman watching the televised statement by Christo the MP, switching channels and each appearing to be a caricatured political figure, while through facial expressions and gestures they express their dissatisfaction with what they have heard and seen; a disgruntled taxi driver; an angry mother with two children; an elderly man sitting on a pavement seemingly homeless; a petrol station worker.

With the birth of the deputy Hristo, the rapper Itzo Hazarta did not perish. The two personalities continue to coexist and build the public image of Hristo Petrov. In an interview he states categorically: *‘I will not leave the music business because I am good at it. [...] No matter how much my business suffers, I still earn more from it than an MP’* (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KCjJNgjwDk>). Obviously, there is no place for rap games in politics, but rap poetry turns out to be a field particularly suitable for problematizing socio-cultural and socio-political phenomena of various kinds. Rap is not only a vehicle for idealizing the hooligan way of life, but also for a profound analysis of society in its actual being.

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