

POETS - GENRE CONQUERED

TOPOS: Sofia, Boyana Cinema Center

THE FILM SCRIPTS AND POETRY OF KONSTANTIN PAVLOV IN SEARCH OF 'THE REAL TRUTH'

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Bulgarian cinema and literature have continuously interacted in their development. It is no coincidence then that a large number of Bulgarian screenwriters have their debuts in the field of literature. From the mid-1950's a number of prose writers, as well as representatives of different generations of poets, such as Valeri Petrov, Bogomil Raynov, Blaga Dimitrova, Radoy Ralin, Veselin Hanchev, Konstantin Pavlov, Lyubomir Levchev, Stefan Tsanev, Atanas Slavov, Boris Hristov, Miryana Basheva, among others, channel their talents into the cinematic field, which in turn has a strong impact on film production.

In the time between 1944 and 1989, when the one-party communist regime transformed the sociopolitical environment and cultural life, the aesthetic doctrine of socialist realism was imposed on all arts. In that climate the creative process needed to comply with the officialised ideas and aesthetic principles. Some gave in and complied, others pretended to, yet there were those who refused to take part in artistic life under these conditions, and still these were those who fought the regime in the name of freedom of artistic expression. Contemporary research in literary history offers different models of thought for some of the authors present during this period.¹ Research on the development of Bulgarian cinema between 1944 and 1989 also focuses on the tensions between the discourse of authority and the resistance against it.² Documentary cinema also reflects the ins and outs of socialist realism, for example, *Kratka istoria na sotsialisticheskia realizam* [A Concise History of the Socialist Realism] (2012, directed by Ivan Georgiev-Getz, written by Ivan Georgiev-Getz), as well as the tensions between communist authority and the democratically-minded filmmakers between 1957 and 1989, *Kinoto sreshtu vlastta* [The Cinema Against Authority] (2017, directed by Oleg Kovachev, written by Ivan Georgiev-Getz).

Konstantin Pavlov sheds light on these processes in poetry and cinema alike. After the publication of his second collection of poetry, *Stihove* (1965) [Poems], he turned to filmmaking and dedicated himself to it for a long time³. A careful examination of the artist's poetry and

¹ See Дойнов 2009; Неделчев 2012; Ефтимов 2013.

² See Братоева-Даракчиева 2013; Грозев 2015; Найденова 2013; Крумов 2013.

³ *Stihove* (1965) [Poems] reflects the categorical refusal of the poet to follow the ideas and aesthetic principles being imposed at the time. As a result, the book received numerous negative reviews. The clash with socialist criticism ends with Konstantin Pavlov being expunged from the literary field and a twenty-year ban on the publication of his poetry. His creative energies shift to the cinema, probably with the expectations that the poet will change his ways, expectations that were never truly fulfilled.

scripts reveals the connections between them. They interact and complement each other, while at the same time they stimulate the imagination of the reader/ viewer.

In a time of distorted values and ideas, the poetry of Konstantin Pavlov exposes the imposed way of thinking, speaking, and behaving that replaces the search for truth with the relativization of values. The lyrical speaker in the books of the author from the 1960's is a victim and an accomplice in his own self-effacing, but his own position is made very clear. There is a bright example of this autonomy in the poem *Deklaratsia* [Declaration] from the *Stihove* [Poems] collection. With a dignified proclamation – “The flame of every little truth/ does not attract me” (Павлов 1965: 6) – the Self chooses his own path outside of conventional norms. Naturally, there's a rejection of collective forms that permeate life and try to set its course in a particular direction. What is more, the individual, in the poetry of Konstantin Pavlov, as well as in his scripts, searches for one's identity, the world around one, life, and death. In this sense, the poet's words – “The real truth for me is the journey of the pursuit of truth itself” (Павлов 2000: 76) – suggest that it is precisely the search for and questioning of existing truths that bring meaning to one's life in a time when the relativity of moral categories is capable of blurring the line between what is real and what is not.

The first film to be made, based on one of Konstantin Pavlov's scripts, namely *Spomen za bliznachkata* [Memory of a Twin Sister] (1976, directed by Lyubomir Sharlandzhiev) raises the question of ambiguity in the fight of good versus evil. The magnificent Nevena Kokanova stars as the twin Nevena, whose character epitomises the duality of human nature. At first she refuses to believe in the superstition that everyone of us carries inside of ourselves an unborn twin that gives up his/her right to live in the name of us, so that we live a life of good deeds. When a person gives in to their sinful nature, the twin begins to grow and starts to take over in an effort to fulfil the other's destiny. As the plot develops, the heroine gradually manages to reconcile the nature of the evil Nevena with that of the good Katerina in a single identity. The moral ambivalence – neither good, nor evil have prevailed in the character's life – poses the question of the individual and their identity. Nevena's story is told by Viktor, who remembers the time he spent in the country right before the events of the political upheaval of September 9th, 1944. However, his recollection is not concerned with the changes society is going through at the time, instead, he focuses on the truth about the forgotten circumstances of this beautiful woman's life. His account of the story is centred around the twinhood, which encodes the idea of each of us possessing two antagonistic natures.

The philosophical aspect of the fight between good and evil, the duality of human nature, is further explored and developed in *Byala magia* [White Magic] (1982, directed by Ivan Andonov), where one of the plot lines traces the journey of the young girl Srebrinka to the truth about the human soul, possessed simultaneously by God and the devil. The magic of children's dreams is realised through the tale of old Neda (Kunka Baeva). Her wisdom reveals that in their soul every person carries their own god and their own devil, who are in constant strife to overpower one another. The duality of the heroine assigns equal footing for good and evil, where the person needs to take care and not allow either of them to take control. Naturally, the unity of these two categories in a single soul reminds us of *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoevski, where the soul is the stage on which the devil and God are set against each other. Dreams are an essential tool in the development of this idea. The connection with Dostoevski is present in *Spomen za bliznachkata* [Memory of a Twin Sister] as well, through the character of Viktor as a young man reading the novel. Overt or hidden, the dialogues with Dostoevski's works are more than isolated cases in the work of Konstantin Pavlov. Examining intertextuality in the poem *Alhimitsi* [Alchemists], Bilyana Kourtasheva highlights the connection between the poem and *Crime and Punishment* (Курташева 2018: 124 – 133). Moreover, in *Ilyuzia* [Illusion] (1980, directed by Lyudmil Staykov) the authors expressly state at the end of the film that the scene, where the main character, Kiril, bites someone on the ear, has been influenced

by Dostoevski's *Demons*. The reference to the Russian classic suggests that the only possible reaction to the verbal that is capable of influencing art could be the non-verbal. True to his creative proclivities, though, Konstantin Pavlov demonstrates a particular ironic take.

The didactic narrative in *Byala magia* [White Magic] focuses on universal truths rather than on some historical predetermination with the duality of two generally opposing categories at its core. According to Vera Naydenova, "here Pavlov gives the most freedom to his poetic imagination, metaphorical expression, and folklore imagery" (Найденкова 2013: 91). The blurring of the thin line that separates pagan rituals, which permeate visual layers, from christianity, that separates good from evil, is revealed through the changing of the places of one with the other. This is done seamlessly thanks to the remarkable directing of Ivan Andonov, who successfully manages to carry over to the screen the poetic and philosophical charge of the script.

The duality of human nature and the search for true identity are important themes in *Chuy petela* [Hark to the Cock] (1978, directed by Stefan Dimitrov). As in the case of *Spomen za bliznachkata* [Memory of a Twin Sister], here memories are central to the visual narrative as well. Old Toshe (Nikolay Binev) is forced to reexamine his life, after he finds out that when she was young his wife, old Petrunka (Nevena Kokanova), cheated on him. At the exact moment of her confession a parallel is drawn between what is happening and the cracked mirror old Toshe is looking in. From then on, he tries to put back together the pieces of his own self in his mind. How real his memories about events in his life are is put to question. On the one hand, there is the way he has always talked about them, and, on the other, the way they actually happened. This trip down memory lane suggests that life is a never-ending game in which one is never only good or only bad, but is constantly put to the test in the building up of one's true self.

The process of self-realisation can be found in a number of poetic works by Konstantin Pavlov spread across his time. All of these are unequivocally connected to the topic of death as well. *Chuy petela* [Hark to the Cock] in a way sets the scene for the themes in *Bezkrayna poema* [Endless Poem] (Павлов 1983: 53-55) from *Stari neshta* (1983) [Old Things] and *V romantichen plan* [In a Romantic Aspect] (Павлов 1989: 10) from *Poyavyavane* (1989) [Appearing]. There is a foreboding that old Toshe seems to know that his end is near, as if this is what makes him conjure up his memories as a sort of preparation for death. This resonates with two excerpts from *Bezkrayna poema* [Endless Poem] where the speaker is trapped in a never-ending cycle of death and resurrection. Every time life is restored it takes a toll on the self:

*To be your own engineer and
Construct out of nothingness
The thing
That in a way would resemble
Your twisted and crooked
Former Self*

*I delve into my faulty memory
Until...
Until I awake the thoughts,
Until I remember the words,
Until I get my voice back.⁴
(Павлов 1983: 53 – 54)*

While in the second excerpt death is a welcome end to this cycle and the self asks:

⁴ All poems used in the present paper, unless otherwise indicated, have been translated by Polina Petkova.

*When tomorrow comes,
Make a solemn vow and:
Do not bathe my body!*

*Nor:
Look for cause –
I already know it:
Death is so unnatural!*
(ПАВЛОВ 1983: 71).

In *V romantichen plan* [In a Romantic Aspect] the lyrical speaker invites his memories – *barons of the soul* (ПАВЛОВ 1989: 10) – to feast with him one last time and in this way destroys the memory of his soul. The swirl of memories makes old Toshe think about the comical and the terrible about the fact that his life was spent in the effort to construct his own self. There is a sense of self-deprecating humour at the end, when he decides to leave a note about the customary bathing of a dead body and this is a direct link to Konstantin Pavlov's poetical works, in which meaning is elusive and ironic scepticism rules.

The clash between truth and lie, what is real and the poetical relativity of memories, as well as the search for truth, are all provoked by the mirror, which is traditionally viewed as a symbol of self-reflection. The cracking of the mirror not only multiplies the perspective but also leads to doubt. The scrupulous self-reflection and the strife for knowledge, inevitably linked to the mirror, are to be found not only in *Chuy petela* [Hark to the Cock], but also in *Spomen za bliznachkata* [Memory of a Twin Sister] and *Pamet* [Memory] (1985, directed by Docho Bodzhakov). A debut for Docho Bodzhakov and the sixth film based on the screenwriting of Konstantin Pavlov, *Pamet* [Memory] rejects the propaganda which demands the rewriting of history and focuses on exposing the myth-making practices of the government. The critical charge crystallises in the clash between the individual and public memory. The plot takes us back to the events right after September 9th, 1944. A young boy, Kiril, had died fighting the fascists and the representatives of the then governing body decided to raise a monument in his honour, naming Kiril as a hero of the revolution. His mother, Elena, however, is convinced that he was betrayed by one of his friends. What convinced her were the poems Kiril had written and left behind, which she would often reread. The poetry draws on the first two books by Konstantin Pavlov, *Satiri* [Satires] and *Stihove* [Poems]. Katya Paskaleva recites *Na edin predatel* [To a Traitor] (ПАВЛОВ 1960: 12 – 13), *Slaveite peyat* [The Nightingales Sing] (ПАВЛОВ 1960: 14 – 15), *Krah na mitologiyata* [Collapse of Mythology] (ПАВЛОВ 1965: 40 – 41) and *Vtoro kaprichio za Goyya* [A Second Capriccio for Goya] (ПАВЛОВ 1965: 42 – 43). The poetic quotations have an important part in the development of the themes of betrayal and memory. To an extent, they propel the action, because they problematise every truth that is served on a silver platter.

A woman with a striking individuality, Elena doubts absolute truths. She is convinced of the betrayal and will stop at nothing to get justice. Kiril's mother finds proof in his poetry, the dying tree in her yard, the blurry vision of a strange man she sees in the mirror, as well as the overwhelming feelings of fear and suspicion. All of this is a driving force for Elena to learn to draw, so she can capture the image of the traitor. "As strange as the rational mind would find it, she chooses art to get to the truth. She does this unwittingly and in the end she arrives at the artistic type of knowledge" (Кулезич 1985: 9).

Regardless of the categorical refusal of the mother, Kiril's monument is erected. What follows is the culmination of the tension in the film between the unstoppable energy of the heroine, doing her best to capture the image of the traitor, and the poems that are swirling

around in her mind. The connection between words and image is achieved in a fabric woven out of artistic and documental threads. There are scenes with dead bodies as the voice recites:

*An ecstatic nightingale sings...
Shut up, nightingales!
Damn you, nightingales!
I hope that in the quietude
A single crow will dare
To tell me the truth.
The awful truth!* (Павлов 1960: 14 – 15)

The effect is one of exposing the elation which hopes to construct a pathetic image of the present and the future to come. The fake present moment and the oblivion that comes from the singing crowd are rejected in the name of remembrance, even if this means holding on to pain, so that it can be overcome.

In her communication with the other in the mirror, it is important to highlight something we find in the newspaper Film News. In her article on the preparations for *Pamet* [Memory] Sonya Aleksandrova turns special attention to the complex relationship between the reflection of the suspected traitor and Elena: “Something odd happens between her, the grief-stricken mother, and him, the stranger in the mirror. A feeling of intimacy can be traced, mutual attraction even. He is transformed from ‘scum’ into a ‘handsome fellow’” (Александрова 1985: 18). Why this nuance is omitted is not known, but it is significant of the opportunity to capture on screen the paradoxical quality that can be detected in the poetry of Konstantin Pavlov in the form of an original interpretation of the grotesque relationship between victim and wrongdoer. A very likely explanation as to why this change of heart remains off the screen is that the direct switch from hate to attraction is unthinkable in a time of socialist regime.

Following the culmination discussed above, there is a plot twist after which the image in the mirror can be seen clearly. The relentlessness with which Elena strives to find out the truth leads her to finishing her sketch and finding out his identity. The suspicion of betrayal does not turn into solid evidence, because the boy had died. The film does not offer a resolution. The actions of the characters are foregrounded, not their results, in order to highlight the power and meaning of memory as a moral duty of every human being.

The image from the mirror that torments the heroine is connected to the search for truth, to knowing one’s own self – a self that chooses art and to transform reality through art. And if the doppelganger is one of the manifestations of the mirror metaphor (cf. Протохристова 2004: 33, 178 – 183), then the development of the doppelganger motif in the poetry of Konstantin Pavlov in the 1990’s should come as no surprise. We could consider the films *Spomen za bliznachkata* [Memory of a Twin Sister], *Byala magia* [White Magic] and *Chuy petela* [Hark to the Cock] as a beginning and as a testament to the complex interaction between the artist’s screenwriting and his poetry. In the collection *Poyavyavane* [Appearing] we find an interpretation of the idea of the doppelganger as *the reflection of one and the same image* (Павлов 1989: 4), as *a tragic mirror* (Появяване 1989: 12). In a multitude of seemingly similar people, one is on one’s own and one is not original, one is in a constant state of trying to adapt to social propriety. The swift, almost chameleon-like disguises in *Dvoynik na mnozina* [A Doppelganger of Many] (Павлов 1989: 12) unambiguously lead to a rejection of one’s own face. The dynamic transformations create the feeling that the individual is unreal and is only there to assume the fates of others.

When anxiety and negative emotions take control of the self, when the absurdity of existence becomes apparent, then the self could reject oneself, go mad or become someone else. At that fragile moment the original self meets the other part of the self, because the primary

meaning of the doppelganger is viewed as the unrealized or excluded part of the self. Therefore, the possibility of transformation is an inextricable part of human nature. In the same vein, though, the lyrical hero is hoping to protect himself by committing suicide. In *Izhod vinagi sashtestvuva* [There is Always a Way Out] (Павлов 1989: 23) death comes as the only possible way for the speaker to save what he wanted to be and was.

Not unlike the lyrical hero of the poet's work from the 1990's, the characters from such different films as *Chuy petela* [Hark to the Cock] and *Bez draskotina* [Without a Scratch] (1989, directed by Zako Heskiya) are faced with the other inside of them. Realising that to fit in they have to compromise and pretend, they willingly choose death. Death is the only way out, because neither old Toshe from *Chuy petela* [Hark to the Cock], nor the young and strong Feri from *Bez draskotina* [Without a Scratch] find their true self. Both characters are on the line between good and evil, truth and lie, reality and fiction, these antipodes constantly change places and elude a final characterisation. The complicated life of Feri Zhelezniya⁵ (Georgi Staikov) – a wrestler, used by the police for doing their dirty work – leads to the death of everybody close to him. Regardless of the fact that the character possesses free will and is different from all the other 'doppelgangers' that inhabit his world, he gradually turns into a hateful 'other', one who bears resemblance to Feri's father. The lack of a decisive moral position encompasses the self and reminds us of the doppelganger paradox – the doppelganger is both outside and inside, here and there, the exact opposite but also complementary. The hero is overcome by fear from his own destruction, which leads him to cruelty. His defence reaction follows and Feri dies without a scratch. The cause of his death remains unknown.

The absurd metamorphoses are at their peak in *Neshto vav vazduha* [Something in the Air] (1993, directed by Petar Popzlatev). In this film we find motifs from some of the early, as well as from some of the late works of the poet. The ideas about fear and horror as catalysts for the depersonalisation of man from the poetry of Pavlov from the 1960's take centre stage in the film. The horror from *Kaprichio za Goyya* [Capriccio for Goya] (Павлов 1965: 24 – 25) is now different and propelling the action forward. Even though this poem is heard fairly late in the movie, the mysterious atmosphere created at the beginning gradually dials up the feelings of anxiety and powerlessness in an unrecognisable reality.

The doppelganger motif that runs through the poet's work from the 1980's and 1990's puts forth the idea of alienation of the individual in a conformist society. The absurdity of two men chasing each other, who then turn into each other's doppelgangers, reinforces the idea of self-destruction. What is more, here the man is similar to the other, but nonetheless becomes a puppet, controlled by invisible forces. An important accent in conveying messages is the fact that the nameless characters, Number One and Number Two, in Konstantin Pavlov's script are portrayed by Valentin Ganev and Ivaylo Hristov. Emotionally and psychologically charged, the development of the characters and their incredible likeness to one another forces them to experience mixed feelings of both attraction and horror. In these circumstances it becomes impossible to get to the face behind the masks and uncover their true identity. Traditionally, the doppelganger is considered to be the embodiment of evil, but in the poetry and film discussed here it is easily understood as a projection of the traitor that triggers the instinct of self-preservation. What drives the doppelgangers from *Neshto vav vazduha* [Something in the Air] are the extreme emotional reactions of attraction and repulsion, which lead them to the unsuccessful attempt to destroy each other. Instead, they form an unlikely friendship. In this way, the cinematic work manages to remind us of, but at the same time to continue, the exploration of the absurd and the paradoxical in the author's poetry.

The works discussed in the present paper confirm our observation that certain themes and motifs transcend the boundaries of cinema or poetry. In this sense, it is not surprising that

⁵ A nickname, lit. meaning 'made of iron' or 'ironclad' (t.n. PP).

the majority of critics consider the scripts of Konstantin Pavlov difficult to translate for the screen. According to Nevelina Popova, “each one of his films, each of his characters becomes the more powerful when it is set against the larger context of his poetical backdrop” (Попова 2008: 196). A large number of the characters he develops for the screen, not unlike the speakers in his poetry, have a different understanding of themselves and the surrounding world, they doubt ultimate truths, view categories like good and evil differently, find it difficult to fit in, and instead they remain misunderstood, overcome by fear and horror. Both the poetry and the screenwriting of Konstantin Pavlov are focused on the journey of self-discovery as an eternal and difficult task in front of one who is forced to consider the meaning of one’s own existence.