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The Artist and the Poetic Provocations in the 1980 Bulgarian Live-Action Film *Illusion*¹

The figure of the artist is inherently loaded with heavy symbolic potential. Within the development of every national culture, there is a constant formulation of new concepts of the character and mission of a person gifted with extraordinary creativity. Many myths about the artistic personality are formed as a result of various conceptual models in cinema and literature. The Bulgarian sociocultural context of the 1944–1989 period was dominated by an institutional dictate of the political system of the time. This dictate turned the artists into an instrument used to help establish a political project. It required that works of art be produced in a way that corresponded to the rhetoric of authority. The depictions of the creative person, however, underwent certain transformations during the discussed period and occupy a specific place in the culture-historical context of the time, as well as within the framework of each individual expression that happens to include them.

The Socialist Period in Bulgaria—Brief Introduction to the Sociocultural Context

Between 1944 and 1989, a single-party communist regime was established in Bulgaria. As a result, the socio-political landscape and the

¹ The text is written for the “Poets in Cinema” project, a part of the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science programme “Young Scientists and Postdoctoral Students.”

nature of cultural activity undertook significant changes. Much like in other Eastern European countries under the influence of the USSR, the aesthetic doctrine of socialist realism was enforced upon the arts. Artists were required to endorse the ideology of the Communist Party in their works, guided by the official stylistic norms: “Regardless of whether a man belongs to the party on paper, in practice every artist in the totalitarian state was expected to identify with the politics of the party, to become its agitator and propagandist.”² A number of intellectuals and creators yielded to that sort of pressure, and adopted the party ideology; others simply adhered to the imposed thematic and stylistic principles. Dissenters refused to produce their art for a lengthy period, while some fought to uphold the potential of a different kind of artistic thinking.

Recent studies of literary history provide multiple, yet coherent, models of views on the contradictory authorial presence. Some authors place the expressive attitude of the artists on a spectrum stretching from the “canon of socialist realism” to an “alternative canon.”³ Others differentiate and formulate the notion of poets from “two cultures of the late socialist age—the culture of a time rushed by ideological grounds and the culture of stoic normality.”⁴ The third group suggests a model of “poetics of compliance and non-compliance.”⁵ Research on the development of Bulgarian cinema from 1944 to 1989 also highlights the tension between the party-imposed discourse and the resistance to it.⁶ Documentary films themselves present a thoughtful view of the specificity of socialist realism, for instance, *Concise History of Socialist Realism (Kratka istoria na sotsialisticheskia realizam*, 2012), written and directed by Ivan Georgiev-Gets. They also show the interrelationships of the communist regime and the democratically-inclined cinematographers of the 1957–1989 period, as in *Cinema Against*

² Dimitar Avramov, *Estetika na modernoto izkustvo* (Sofia: Kibea, 2009), p. 18. This and all other sources referenced in the article were originally written in Bulgarian. For the purposes of this research paper, all excerpts were translated into English by Vadim Banev, a lecturer at the Department of English, Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.

³ *Sotsrealisticheski kanon/Alternativen kanon. Ofitsialno i neofitsialno v balgarskata literatura i kultura mezdu 1944 i 1989 g.*, ed. Plamen Doynov (Sofia: Pan, 2009).

⁴ Mihail Nedelchev, *Dvete kulturi i tehните poeti* (Sofia: Nov balgarski universitet, 2012), p. 7.

⁵ Yordan Eftimov, *Poetika na saglasieto i nesaglasieto* (Sofia: Nov balgarski universitet, 2013).

⁶ See e.g., Ingeborg Bratoeva-Darakchieva, *Balgarsko igralno kino ot Kalin Orelat do Misia London* (Sofia: Simolini, 2013); Aleksandar Grozev, *Kinoto v Balgaria. Chast II (1956–1969)* (Veliko Tarnovo: Faber, 2015); Vera Naydenova, *Balgarsko kino. Po sledite na lichnia opit* (Sofia: Petko Venedikov, 2013).

Power (Kinoto sreshtu vlastta, 2017), directed by Oleg Kovachev and written by Ivan Georgiev-Gets.

The Figure of the Artist in the Bulgarian Cinema of the 1980s

During the 1980s, when the ideological control over the arts relaxed, Bulgarian cinematic works exhibited a variety of thematic directions and developmental processes.⁷ Cinematographers were distinctly interested in the people in the arts—poets, writers, directors, actors, musicians, painters, and sculptors.⁸ On the one hand, in a peculiar way, there existed a continuation of a tendency developed in the previous decade and particularly common in the production of documentaries. This tendency was related to the portrayal of artists and included films such as *The Poet and Nature (Poet i priroda*, 1972) about Tsanko Lavrenov, *Short Confession (Kratka izpoved*, 1972) about Chudomir, *Two Masters (Dvamata maystori*, 1973) about Vladimir Dimitrov and Stoyan Venev, *Art Portrait of Lyubomir Pipkov (Tvorcheski portret na Lyubomir Pipkov*, 1974), and *The Eternal Musician (Vechniyat muzikant*, 1979) about Aleksander Kerkov. Cinema also took part in forming the concept of an extraordinary creative person by focusing on writers of Bulgarian classics. As a result, in the 1950s the first film about Nikola Vaptsarov was made—*Song of Man (Pesen za choveka*, 1954)—while the 1980s saw films about Hristo Smirnenski and Peyo Yavorov—*The Poet and The Devil (Poetat i dyavolat*, 1983) and *Case 205/1913 P. K. Yavorov (Delo 205/1913 P. K. Yavorov*, 1984).

⁷ In *Balgarsko igravno kino ot Kalin Orelat do Misia London*, Ingeborg Bratoeva-Darakchieva examines the leading tendencies in Bulgarian cinema from the 1980s in connection with the celebration of 1,300 years since the founding of the Bulgarian state, to the process of the forced renaming of Bulgarian Muslims, and the influence of the Russian “perestroika.” The author emphasises the appearance of many films with a historic thematic focus and highlights works infused with a sense of social pessimism, but also the conformist deeds of some artists who rendered the state leader Todor Zhivkov as their films’ protagonist. There is an indication of two more lines of films—those which openly comment on moral deformations caused by the insincerity and hypocrisy of the totalitarian regime, and new, provocative and experimental debuts, which conclusively sever all ties with the cinematic socialist realism.

⁸ This text confidently puts forward the thesis of the interest of Bulgarian cinematographers in the figure of the artist during the 1980s on the basis of research conducted by this author as a part of the “Poets in Cinema” project. Work on this project (which, in its initial phase, relates directly to the efforts of contemporary Bulgarian poets in cinema) and the selection of empirical data offer the possibility of a reversed research perspective; namely, analysing the way in which Bulgarian cinema represents the figure of the poet, and the artist in general. The included list of films (which partially or completely focus on the figure of the artist) is a part of the same research, and does not purport to be complete or definitive.

On the other hand, by virtue of artistic convention, a system of personages is created, which gives a clear view of art and artists. In direct correlation to other themes and motifs clearly established in the 1970s and 1980s, the artist is depicted as central to the inculcation of values thanks to which talent and inspiration transform the visible and the transitory and orient it towards the unseeable and the eternal. The artist is also shown as a carrier of solemn moral responsibility. Through the prism of the so-called “youth theme,” films like *The Swap* (*Trampa*, 1978), *Mass Miracle* (*Masovo chudo*, 1981), *A Home for Gentle Souls* (*Dom za nezjni dushi*, 1981), *Reflections* (*Otrazhenia*, 1982), *And Where Do We Go from Here?* (*A sega nakade?*, 1988) introduce young characters who, through art, seek their role in society, find an introspective path to their inner selves and connections to others, reject or accept the hypocrisy of social pretence, and recognise the value of believing in their own choice. *With Love and Tenderness* (*S lyubov i nezhnost*, 1978), *Life Poste Restante* (*Zhivot do poiskvane*, 1987), and *Return to Earth* (*Prizemyavane*, 1978) demonstrate their characters’ lack of satisfaction with themselves and the surrounding world, while also serving to highlight the devastating power of compromising one’s art for the sake of alleged success.

In 1982, two films were released which, in their own ways, present the clash of a musician’s dreams and reality. The choice of framing this problem as an immersion in the paradoxes of artistic fulfilment—as opposed to agreeing to produce a life-asserting narrative—determines the diametrically opposed fates of *Our Shoshkanini* (*Nashiyat Shoshkanini*, 1982) and *A Nameless Band* (*Orkestar bez ime*, 1982).

Even though they differ in many ways, *Yo-ho-ho* (*Yo-ho-ho*, 1981), written by Valeri Petrov, and *Thou, Which Art in Heaven* (*Ti, koyto si na nebeta*, 1989), an adaptation of Viktor Paskov’s *A Ballad for Georg Henig* (*Balada za Georg Henih*, 1987), are united in their understanding of the power of art, which is born out of pure impulse and elevated spirits against the backdrop of a rough reality—the power that makes itself known via the transformational potential of speech and/or music and touches the contiguous world of a child’s gentle soul. Art as salvation from violence is accepted by the artistic characters in *Illusion* (*Ilyuzia*, 1980) and *Memory* (*Pamet*, 1985), who choose to create, and thus, seek their own paths towards truth; choose to preserve memories not through a rational

enumeration of factoids, but rather, by relying on the instincts of an uneasy heart. *AkaTaMuS* (*AkaTaMuS*, 1988), directed by Georgi Dyulgerov, was released toward the end of the decade. The skilful intertwining of dance, music, and poetry makes the film a modern experiment that draws on the myth of Pygmalion and fosters a collision between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in art.

The Live-Action Film *Illusion* in the Context of Bulgarian Cinema and Konstantin Pavlov's Works

Of specific interest for this article is the film *Illusion* (*Ilyuzia*, 1980), directed by Lyudmil Staykov and written by Konstantin Pavlov. This movie won many awards, including the first prize at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in 1980. It embodies many leading tendencies of Bulgarian cinema and in the oeuvre of Konstantin Pavlov.

Illusion is a piece of great significance. Konstantin Pavlov publicly declares his moral and civil stance as well as his aesthetic outlook. He chooses a subject which includes everything that an artist contemplates—the usefulness of art and the point of creating, the possibility that creators of art may exist devoid of ephemeral fallacies and temptations, whether it is a responsible venture to create art which concerns itself with the evil perpetrated in life or whether as a true ‘sublime spiritual realm’ that caters only to its idealistic strives; is the creator responsible for false interpretation and conclusions on the part of self-proclaimed patrons of art, or are these crimes left solely within the purview of the illiterate, the narrow-minded, the profiteering.⁹

The view of the artist and art established in this film bears a correlation to the author's poetry as well as to subsequent films based on his screenplays.¹⁰ The general impression one gets from the film's content

⁹ Vera Naydenova, “Fantaziya varhu izkustvoto za priyatelite na izkustvoto,” *Kinoizkustvo*, Vol. 11 (1980), p. 36.

¹⁰ The perception of art and artist in *Illusion*, as analysed in this text, could be connected to early and later poems by Konstantin Pavlov such as “A Poem of the Poet's Cattle Farm” (*Stihotvorenie za skotovadnata ferma na poeta*), “Oh, May any Vileness Be the End of Me” (“Ah, neka vsyaka merzost me ubiva”), “The Satirist” (*Satirikat*) from his 1960 *Satires* (*Satiri*), “The Exquisite in Poetry or Victim of Tropical Fish” (*Prekrasnoto v poeziyata ili zhertva na dekorativnite ribki*), “Alchemists” (*Alhimitsi*), “Five Old Men” (*Petima Startsi*) from 1965 book *Poems* (*Stihove*); “Singing Contest” (*Nadpyavane*), the first and second part of *Endless Poem* (*Bezkraina Poema*), “Interview in the

and technique connect the Bulgarian contexts of different decades of the twentieth century in a novel manner. This facilitates observation of their specificities and fosters a shift in the referential strata, which brings about an updated discussion of universal issues. The power of suggestion is created by a large number of poetic provocations. They are carried out by quoting some of Konstantin Pavlov's poems written between 1960 and 1980, as well as through a very particular continuation of themes, motifs, and images from his poetry. There is also a unique translation of the poetic to the realm of the visual arts, fleshed out not so much by the verbal, but more by codes of association, fragmentation, and polysemy.

The events of the film occur in the 1920s, after the suppression of the September Uprising in Bulgaria. *Illusion* thematically resembles other films about the events of that period of Bulgarian history, such as *The Heroes of September* (*Septemvriysi*, 1954), *Ivan Kondarev* (*Ivan Kondarev*, 1974) based on Emilijan Stanev's novel of the same title, *Amendment to the Law for the Defense of the State* (*Dopalnenie kam zakona za zashtita na darzhavata*, 1976) and *On the Tracks of the Missing* (*Po diryata na bezsledno izcheznalite*, 1979). These pieces, however, project quite distinct viewpoints and different tones that could hardly be considered identical. In this regard, *Illusion* presents the atmosphere of this dramatic decade by its two parallel narratives. On the one hand, the audience is introduced to the fates of a poet, an artist, and an actress. On the other, the film tells a story about the extinction of a village. The intertwining of these stories is executed on several levels and this gradually establishes the feeling that there is only one way to come to terms with the horrors of reality and to overcome them—imagination (as a defence mechanism) transforms reality and makes it tolerable.

Belly of the Whale" (*Intervyu v utrobata na kita*), and "A Kiss as Light as Air" (*Vazdushna tseluvka*) from 1983 *Old Things* (*Stari Neshta*). The same view of the artist is elaborated in films based on the screenplays written by the poet, for instance, 1981 *Mass Miracle* (*Masovo chudo*) and 1985 *Memory* (*Pamet*). It should be pointed out that the poetic works of Konstantin Pavlov are among the most emblematic when it comes to alternative lyrical thinking and writing in the socialist realist period of the latter half of the 20th century. In 1960, Pavlov's lyrical debut *Satires* was published. The harsh reaction of the official literary critics with regard to the poet's second book *Poems*, published in 1965, lead to the total printing ban on his lyrical works during the 1980s. Following significant shifts in the political, social, and cultural life in the country, many volumes by Konstantin Pavlov eventually made their way to book stores after 1989. From 1976 to 2001, many live-action films based on his screenplays were produced. In them, the artist's innate preference for the absurd and the grotesque comes through clearly. The rejection of the false paths of socialist realism, the mass delight and fallacy, the protest against violence, and the negation of an individual's right to choose, remain integral to Pavlov's linguistic attitude.

The Prologue and the Story of a Poet, Painter and Actress, Indicating Three Concepts of Art and the Artist

The beginning of the film sets the stage for a fantasy that has no boundaries:

The silly jumping Harlequin and the villagers running in tow are not only moving through space, but also passing through time—the seasons shift while they carry on, engrossed in their jaunt; across snow, sand, summer meadows and, once again, back to a snowy surface... The allegory of the prologue bears no single interpretation. Is Harlequin actually leading the villagers somewhere, or, as it turns out later, are they pursuing Harlequin? Indeed, this film contains many elements which disallow a single definition, starting with the title itself.¹¹

The pursuit is interrupted by a mysterious elderly man who turns to the audience and surprises it by quoting a complete definition of the word “illusion.” The clash of fact and fiction, the attempt to explain the irrational rationally is then extended to the entirety of the film.

The introduction, which engages our senses and focuses them on the peculiar images of the villagers and the best-known character from the Italian *commedia dell’arte* is followed by a sudden and abrupt change. The action shifts to a big city, depicting the goings-on of the cultural elite of the period. The story of poet Kiril (Rusi Chanev), visual artist Ivan (Lyuben Chatalov), and actress Katerina (Zuzana Kotsurikova) is delivered in the traditional form of a love triangle but quickly develops into a narrative about art and the artist. Their direct interactions make it clear that each of them possesses a specific moral and artistic credo and exemplifies a different notion of the figure of the artist.

The film is a story of the transformation of the painter Ivan and his path towards truth, towards art, towards living a real life. This change is mainly driven by Kiril’s bold behaviour and liberation from the norms of decency, his lyrics, and his critical statements that model the individual who thinks differently, of the misunderstood artist who is rejected by his society. The difference between Ivan and Kiril can be observed in two pieces of their art. On the one hand, there is the image which juxtaposes

¹¹ Vladimir Ignatovski, “Ilyuzia,” *Filmovi novini*, Vol. 9 (1980), p. 4.

the erotic quality of a naked woman with a funeral attire as a mask of death and grieving and the use of piquant sensationalism of the image. On the other hand, a powerful rush of creative energy is released through pieces of absurd poetry that avoid any possibility of interpretation which could twist what has been created beyond recognition. The shock of provocation caused by expressing the unthinkable, the bizarre, the unusual—all achieved through the inexorable potential of language—bluntly present their challenge to the individual's frame of mind. Konstantin Pavlov's poetics is easily recognizable in the poems Kiril recites to his friend. In fact, the audience hears an excerpt from the still unpublished poem entitled "A little more... A little more" (Oshte manichko... Oshte manichko).¹² Inserting that excerpt into the film provides its unique premiere—not for the traditional reading audience but the filmgoers. Note that the piece was later printed in the poet's third book *Old Things. Selected Poems and Screenplays* (*Stari neshta. Izbrani stihove i kinostenarii*), published in 1983, after a nearly twenty-year compulsory hiatus from the realm of literature for Konstantin Pavlov. Paintings by Svetlin Rusev are also used in the film. Thus, the established dialogue between language and images, between the poet and the painter, reminds us of the long-lasting collaboration of Pavlov and Rusev and is likely inspired by the real story of their interaction.

Lonely in their fates, the characters of the film are not isolated from their time. The reality that surrounds them catalyses a creative process and a discussion on the nature of art, while the power apparatus constantly manipulates art. The horrific scene in which a funeral is broken up by the police and an innocent young boy is killed jolts the characters' inner worlds and causes their diametrically opposed views on the relationship of the artist and history to expand. The episode pushes the action forward while it allows the audience to reflect on the multifaceted image of the artist represented in the film.

The painter believes that art is a refuge for humanity. Following this thought, he depicts the bloodied face of the boy, tragically killed during the funeral, and names his painting "Cruelty." Striving to express this universal theme, he is entrapped in manipulative practices enacted upon man and art. The character allows his painting to be purchased without showing any interest in who is buying it and to what end. It thus becomes an item

¹² Konstantin Pavlov, *Stari neshta. Izbrani stihove i kinostenarii* (Sofia: Balgarski pisatel, 1983), pp. 56–59.

of propaganda for the people in power, turning into a widely-circulated printed image with the inscription: “The Ruthlessness of Communism.” Deeply shaken by this misuse, Ivan states that his talent is not aimed at a direct depiction of reality, but finds himself a captive of the concept that an artist may make his or her mark in time only if they do not voice the banal and trite nature of everyday affairs. The painter believes that he has failed in this respect, he feels that “there is a crisis, mental perturbation, and artistic confusion. False hope is ignited within the artist that he could escape into ‘pure beauty.’”¹³ In his passionate desire to deflect all attempts to put his art at the service of non-aesthetic purposes, Ivan focuses on still-life painting. While his early paintings tend to be abstract, later on, the motionless natural objects are depicted precisely, clearly, and truthfully. In consequence, Ivan is offered a large exhibition of his floristic still lifes. Paradoxically, the more the character yearns for an escape from the trite essence of daily life, the clearer it becomes that this escape is not possible. The words of the presenter opening the ceremony crush his misguided beliefs that the paintings cannot be interpreted by means of the leading ideological clichés.

The image of the actress Katerina who poses for Ivan’s paintings is a carrier of a different concept of artist. Initially, she exists as an object of attention for the painter, her beauty not only incites his sensual spirit but also makes him try to conceal his intimate desires by disguising them in his paintings. Later on, it is revealed that she has become part of a group of inept artists who use their connections in bohemian circles to deliver information to the secret police. This is shown in the scenes taking place in a café—a usual meeting place for the artists. One of those scenes reveals Katerina’s attitude towards the artistic intentions of Kiril and Ivan. Thus, her reaction to the information about the demise of the innocent boy and to the discussion about art that it triggers is marked by a hypocritical attempt to make sense of Kiril’s poems. She claims that his lyrics can sometimes be cruel and egocentric because he attempts to rise above the true nature of life. She only does this in order to disguise her true feelings for the poet. Succumbing to her mother’s manipulative insistence that the appropriate partner for an actress should be a man of distinguished position in society, Katerina puts aside her true feelings for Kiril and ends her relationship with

¹³ Vera Naydenova, “Ilyuzia,” *Kinobesedi*, Vol. 11 (1980), p. 3.

him. Attempting to fit into her mother's narrow views, she loses track of her own individuality, but in the end comes to accept an unpleasant truth about herself. She comes through as a person of dignity by recognising that she lacks talent and accepting that living a lie brings no salvation. Equally attracted by the boldness of the poet and the naivety of the painter, the actress attempts to put her past behind her and to start a life with Ivan, yet she eventually leaves him as well. Her final appearance in the film reveals her newly-found insight into art—she herself and Ivan's flowers are the reason for Kiril's death. Having played her part in the story of the intellectuals, her presence becomes unnecessary.

It is no coincidence that she disappears in the second part. She, who is an expression of the complexity of their interactions, a function of time and its refraction within the minds of the characters, disappears when the storytelling concerning the intimate experiences of the characters unfolds into the horrific tale of the ruined village [...]. She truly is a function of the two characters and vanishes with Kiril's death.¹⁴

Kiril is shot out in the open by an anonymous killer while he is working on his lyrics. His works, his behaviour, and understanding of art are the true reasons for his destiny. "The poet is a tragic character. He is a nihilist and purposely moves toward his demise, you could almost say that he contributes to its preparation. The poet is a man with no inhibition [...]. The poet provokes, disturbs, keeps those around him on their guard."¹⁵ He freely expresses his artistic intention by writing down his lyrics on napkins and random pieces of paper only to throw them away later. The painter, however, carefully collects them in a folder, perceiving them as an expression of great talent. Kiril severely criticises his friend's paintings, exposing the fraud of his flight from life and scolds him for acting cowardly and not revealing his true face and position. His words contain both an understanding and a rejection of the position from which Ivan recreates the world in art. The painter's argument that art is a refuge, that there must be a natural and deeply emotional reaction to what is happening, is countered by the poet's stance that nothing natural can find its place in art when all the world has gone into the realm of the unnatural. In a

¹⁴ Ignatovski, *Ilyuzia*, p. 4.

¹⁵ Violeta Delcheva, *Lyudmil Staykov*: "Filmat e edin vik," *Novi filmi*, Vol. 11 (1980), p. 8.

time when people are being tracked and killed for their unconventional thinking, horror and violence rule over all. Kiril believes that if an artist allows his art to be used for the purposes of the political apparatus, he becomes amoral. For him, morality is mostly the explicit nature of one's stance and the power of choosing to doubt every absolute truth, to create by being abstract in the depiction of the surrounding world and to always employ forms of expression, which allow for a wide range of interpretations. This choice finds expression in his work, which he recites at various points in the narrative. It thus happens that the film organically includes not only portions of "A little more... A little more," but also of pieces like "Alchemists" (Alhimitsi),¹⁶ "Capriccio for Goya" (Kaprichio za Goya), and "Second Capriccio for Goya" (Vtoro kaprichio za Goya),¹⁷ which are parts of Konstantin Pavlov's second collection of poetry from 1965 entitled *Poems (Stihove)*. The pieces reveal the artistic reaction to the horror and violence; the reaction that unfolds by means of the absurd. A salvation for the character comes from his linguistic ability that allows him to invent terms like "Persifedron," which can be attached to any meaning and, as a result, come close to nonsense. Any possibility of art being an incarnation of sentimentality, and an indication of the fragile emotional state of man, is twisted beyond recognition.

Connections between Different Bulgarian Cultural Contexts through the Twentieth Century

The figures of the poet and the painter can be considered expressions of two opposing theses on art: idealistic infatuation of the spirit, which traps itself in its own illusory world, and modern expression of the ego, which attacks senselessness, cynicism, and the absurdities of the world with the power of parody and grotesque. The figure of the poet constantly gravitates around the avant-garde artist, who "refuses to create homogeneous pieces, to limit, by virtue of inherited tradition and rules, the harmony of his free play with content and form, and to subdue the dynamism of his spirit, which expresses itself in the associational hopping and fragmentation of disharmonious art."¹⁸ To a large extent, *Illusion* presents the mission

¹⁶ Konstantin Pavlov, *Stihove* (Sofia: Balgarski pisatel, 1965), pp. 26–29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 24–25, 42–43.

¹⁸ Vladimir Yanev, *Balgarskiyat literaturne avangardizam* (Plovdiv: Makros, 2002), p. 47

of the artist in a way that comes down to Geo Milev's beliefs that artists must leave behind self-isolation from the world, cease the fruitless seeking of escape, which rests entirely within the realm of the spiritual, and the crude and empty copying of reality, in order to provoke and disturb the consciousness with the power of distant associations, lack of logic or clarity. Thus, the argument between the two characters in the film stirs up memories of the radical avant-garde artists of the 1920s who rejected realism and manifestations of "pure spirituality." Additionally, these artistic approaches echo the way in which modern art once again made its way through the forced methodology of socialist realism throughout the 1960s and up to the 1980s. The escape into the nonsensical expressed in Konstantin Pavlov's lyrical writing shifts the perspective to the later developments of modern movements in Bulgarian poetry. The screenplay published in 2002 extends the reflections in this respect and offers other research opportunities related to examining the piece as "an absolute triumph of language."¹⁹

The suggestions of the constantly renewed clash of the old and the new in the history of art, and the rapprochement of various political systems, which assail the individual and the artist, are poeticised and turned into an artistic summary of every age of violence. In this sense, of particular interest in the film is the way the poet plays with power and encourages the question of whether and to what extent artistic freedom is possible in the regimes of oppression. The poet openly expresses his rage toward everyone who limits human freedom and believes that his poetry can be a response to barbarity. He not only aims his verbal jabs at the secret policeman who listens in on the three characters in the cafe but also gets into a fistfight, defining this act as the most beautiful gesture of his life. This particular behaviour, as well as the subsequent scandalous acts aimed at those in power, haunt him.

It is important to clarify that Kiril's and other intellectuals' bohemian lifestyle captured in the film is shown through the prism of the artistic atmosphere in a cafe in the capital city, the painter's studio, and the poet's rented apartment. These loci present the colourful aspects of cultural life and enable debates on art. They are a kind of stage for the debut of new

¹⁹ Kalina Zahova, "Mezhdu pokaz i izkaz. Vzaimodeystviya mezhdu kino i literatura v stsenariite na Konstantin Pavlov," in: *Konstantin Pavlov v balgarskata literatura i kultura. Izsledvaniya, statii, eseta*, ed. Plamen Doynov (Sofia: Kralitsa Mab, 2008), pp. 205–219.

pieces. If the enclosed personal space is a territory of absolute individual freedom, where ideas can be exchanged with ease, the cafe, traditionally considered free of institutional control, is where both artists and secret agents meet. As a sociocultural phenomenon, the cafe has acquired a vast mythological significance, which can be attributed both to the specific time recreated in the film (namely, the 1920s), as well as to the time between the 1960s and 1980s when “cafes, leisure centres, and personal quarters become loci housing both the official and the informal.”²⁰

It is precisely the confrontation between the poet and the policeman that illustrates Mihail Nedelchev’s proposal of the “line across the table” culture. In his work on the socio-cultural life of Konstantin Pavlov, the literary historian defines the aforementioned paradigm thus:

This is a type of verbal behavioural characteristic of the second and third decade of the socialist period. A ‘line across the table’ is spoken by whoever has been forced to keep quiet and suffer under the toil of ideological stagnation. Even though this line is usually spoken during a meal, it typically outgrows its specific cause and specific table setting.²¹

The author points out the place of the poet in the paradigm as follows: “Otherwise, as a true speaker of such lines, Konstantin Pavlov was truly fierce. He was completely unpredictable for the ones maintaining order and norms during the socialist period.”²² The cafe scene in the film falls within the same range of meanings. The spontaneous artistic impulse of the characters is expressed in some quickly composed strings of lyrics:

The Bulgar flag
soiled and tattered
shaking
tucked between the horse’s back thighs.²³

²⁰ Antoaneta Alipieva, “Kafeneta, kvartiri i pochivni stantsii prez 60-te i 70-te godini na XX vek,” *Literaturen vestnik*, Vol. 30 (2016), pp. 9–11.

²¹ Mihail Nedelchev, “Belezhki za sotsioliteraturnoto bitie ot 70-te i 80-te godini na Konstantin Pavlov,” in: *Konstantin Pavlov v balgarskata literatura i kultura. Izsledvaniya, statii*, ed. Plamen Doynov (Sofia: Kralitsa Mab, 2008), pp. 10–23.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²³ Pavlov, *Stihove*, p. 27.

The poem “Alchemists” is reduced to this stanza uttered by the poet who has been rejected by the reading public and gains the status of the perfect instance of the mentioned “line across the table.” The character himself playfully throws it in as a provocative gesture to the secret agent snooping at the adjacent table.

Correlation of the Poet Kiril to Konstantin Pavlov’s Lyrics and Screenplays

The figure of the poet is open for interpretation and guides us towards the complex relationship between Pavlov’s poetry and his screenplays. The image of Kiril is a projection of the autobiographical speaker from Konstantin Pavlov’s poetry. The author’s refusal to adhere to prescribed notions of clear and easily understood art in the 1960s was met with the sanctions of criticism and followed by an extended printing ban on his lyrics. During that period of restriction, his talent was redirected to the field of cinema, likely with the expectation of a change in his verbal behaviour. The exclusion from the collective choir of poets had consequences related to a specific auto-reflective model in his poems. For example,

in his poetry, the self-telling of how the sanction was carried out is tied to the motif of a ‘sealed voice.’ The ascertainment that ‘my pieces are not something anybody reads, nor are they something that they print’ from the poem “The Exquisite in Poetry or Victim of Tropical Fish” is followed by a grotesque act of lyrical creation in the style of the period, but the realisation of this ‘personal recital’ in front of the fish in their aquarium in the small room is in effect a (self)annihilating demonstration. The ironic and grotesque examination of the artist’s life through the lens of the shocking and raging mediocrity of the official critical response is a plot propped up in time by his poetry. In “A Kiss as Light as Air,” written in 1982, the sharp artistic imperative of the 1960s, embodied in the figure of the throat-resounding-voice, completely fails in the gesture of ‘sealing off one’s voice with lead.’²⁴

Moreover, Kiril’s pieces in *Illusion* are neither printed or read nor are they understood by anyone. This is confirmed by the painter, whose

²⁴ Gergina Krasteva, “Liricheskiyat glas na 60-te godini na XX vek—ot ‘vika’ kam ‘laringsa na malchanieto’ (nablyudeniya varhu balgarskata poeziya v konteksta na liricheskata samonablyudatelnost),” *Proglas*, Vol. 2 (2008), p. 76.

speech reflects on the models through which the lyrical work, as well as the poet's personality traits, have been commented on. In this regard, there is an expansion of the portrayal of Kiril as a sick and bitter man who rejects everything. The recital of his poems, extended in the cosy setting of the enclosed studio, the apartment, the street for random passers-by, and, in the cafe where he is snoopied on by the secret agent, could be considered the same kind of "(self) annihilating demonstration" mentioned by Gergina Krasteva.

Works such as "The Exquisite in Poetry or Victim of Tropical Fish" (*Prekrasnoto v poeziyata ili zhertva na dekorativnite ribki*)²⁵ and "A Poem of the Poet's Cattle Farm" (*Stihotvorenie za skotovadnata ferma na poeta*)²⁶ exemplify the poet's choice to avoid conventional thinking, come to terms with his own unbridled imagery, discredit the uniformity and monotony of peace in life and art. The consequences extend not only to the ruined possibility that the lyrics could attract any publicity but also to the boundaries of loneliness and death, both accepted with dignity and self-confidence. So, Kiril too, having rejected the twisted moral norms of society, is extraordinarily lonely in his nihilistic rebellion against insincerity and hypocrisy. Even further, he becomes the literal visual embodiment of the figure of the poet from *The Exquisite in Poetry or Victim of Tropical Fish*, the figure from which the notions of the dangerous and demonised artist emanate. The sequence in which Kiril bites the ear of a man speaking at the exhibition highlights this very idea. The screenwriter and the director point out at the end of the film that the act of biting is suggested by Dostoevsky's *Demons*. The association with that novel's protagonist, Nikolai Stavrogin, sheds some light on the idea that the language that changes art cannot be responded to with words. The scandalous gesture is realised as a jab at officials in power, themselves catalysts for the individual's "demonic" potential. This direct reference to Dostoevsky's novel and protagonist is evidence of a self-deprecating attitude and invokes yet another association, one related to the speaker's voice in the poem mentioned above "A Widow Said I Am the Demonic Type."²⁷ In this case, Valeri Stefanov's interpretation of the figure of the speaker in the poem can also refer to the character in *Illusion*:

²⁵ Pavlov, *Stihove*, pp. 15–18.

²⁶ Konstantin Pavlov, *Satiri* (Sofia: Balgarski pisatel, 1960).

²⁷ Pavlov, *Stihove*, p. 16.

Following the ban (the denied access to publicity) [...] come the consequences for the demonised artist. It is common knowledge that demons also have their fate, and that, often, it is the fate of the persecuted and victimised [...]. Denying publicity imbues the poet with a social stigma, makes him socially dangerous. Akin to a city under siege, he becomes a targeted subject for watchful ideological shooters, constantly in sight of the latter [...]. Suggesting the image of the demon, the piece develops the demonic train of thought with some intensity. The artist sentenced to loneliness becomes a 'demon' and acts demonically, seemingly as a way of seeking a fitting response to the image crafted for him among the public.²⁸

The ambition of the poet to vex, amaze, and stir indignation attracts the attention of the policemen who keep track of all his appearances in public and triggers the protective measures taken against him by the authorities in order to subdue the sinister spirits.

Illusion from 1980, *Mass Miracle* from 1981, and *Memory* from 1985 include three manifestations of the same type of character, that, in all three instances, is named Kiril and depicted through the prism of various topics. In *Illusion*, the artist confronts the dramatic developments of the 1920s; *Mass Miracle* immerses the viewer in the 1980s and the efforts of a young man who wants to become a director and films various stories at a large construction site. *Memory* features a poet who dies right before 9 September 1944, but he is present only through the inclusion of his stanzas. These films give an almost identical impression of the artist, as the lonely creative individual misunderstood by society, and represent his poetry replete with marks of doubt with respect to received truths, and brings down the pathos of vehemently imposed ideological presets of the period.

The Story of Danil and the Epilogue of the Film—Issues of Understanding, Surrealism, Final Transformation of the Painter Ivan

The poet in *Illusion* defends his position, and his consistency is contrasted with the ramblings of the painter, who undergoes a number of transformations. The final step in Ivan's transformation comes after the death of his friend. Finding himself amidst natural surroundings, he meets

²⁸ Valeri Stefanov, *Balgarska literatura XX vek. Dvanadeset syuzheta* (Sofia: Anubis, 2003), p. 352.

yet another peculiar artist. That artist's name is Danil (Petar Slabakov)—the same elderly person who, at the beginning of the film, recites the definition of illusion—and the audience is treated to his allegorical tale of the destruction of a Bulgarian village during the September Uprising of 1923. The stage is set for this story not only by the prologue but by the entirety of the film by means of the “precursory echo,” defined by Vladimir Ignatovski as follows:

Almost entirely throughout the editing process of the narrative, there are flashes of hints, be they visual or verbal, of some future event (with respect to its full-fledged appearance on the screen, to established familiarity with it, and not from the point of view of the actual chronology within the narrative frame of the film). Gradually, the audience accumulates the vague sense-image of the foreboding for what will be.²⁹

Danil “embodies fantasy, imagination, artistic ability of a man of the people,”³⁰ yet, at the same time, he is an understanding old sage, just like Daniel the prophet, whose name he carries. This identity is developed mostly in scenes in which Danil stands among the villagers and clarifies terms from the dictionary they have found. The wise man is the bearer of memory. He survives only to pass on the story of the village because his death would mean the irretrievable loss of that history. The story itself resembles a folk tale in which imagery and events remain ambiguous. The defeat of the uprising, related atrocities and killings do not require literal materialisation; absurdity and brutality lead the mind to the land of illusion and madness. The nuanced artistic attitude of Konstantin Pavlov makes it impossible to settle for a single interpretation of this sequence of the film:

I have been asked about the symbolism of the pumpkins in *Illusion*. Others have asked me about similar things, always dealing with the term ‘symbol.’ It is odd. I do not really care much for symbols. I prefer ‘polyvalent’ images; this is in exact opposition to what we call a symbol. I have to think about it. About the pumpkins, I mean. One possible explanation—we have witnessed whole nations go mad. In their madness, they have deified much

²⁹ Ignatovski, *Ilyuzia*, p. 4.

³⁰ Delcheva, *Lyudmil Staykov*, pp. 8–9.

less worthy objects, notions, individuals, than my pumpkins could ever be. What is difficult to understand about that?³¹

In *Illusion*, the issues of understanding are subjected to ironic reconsideration. The inability of the villagers to comprehend what abstraction means engenders a sickness of the mind and a fear of the unknown in those villagers. What is ironic in this case is that their attempt to grasp the meaning is in fact a masterly display of abstraction. The natural interlacing of reality and fiction brings together the villagers and Harlequin and creates a feeling that the characters can inhabit not only a given time but, really, any time. The depths of absurdity and grotesque reaffirm the setup of the poetic in cinema, which cannot be but considered through the lens of modern art. And, if there is anything that allows scholars to consider Bulgarian expressions of surrealism in cinema, anything that brings to mind the names of some of the most intriguing figures of cinema at large—such as Luis Buñuel and Rene Clair—it is the poetics of the screenwriter Konstantin Pavlov and director Lyudmil Staykov in *Illusion*.

Surrealism in *Illusion* is rendered in the purest way possible—the imagery has shortened its canonical status and becomes excessive, extends beyond the real, while attempting to obtain self-sufficiency. Reality has exited its figurative body (that has gone insane) and the artistic analogue of this is a surrealist poetics. The image extends further and overcomes its own content; deprived of it, it borders on the absurd, the fanatic, the nonsensical. Surrealism is universal, thus the visions in *Illusion* do not solely address the events of 1923, but rather all events as if they were of that sort. The sense of this being a contemporary film rather than a historical one does not go away as we watch. This polyvalency of the surrealist images leaves its mark on everything else, and thus, the realistic and psychological pathos of the film ceases. The events of 1923 are represented by Bulgarian culture in a specifically surrealist manner (Anton Strashimirov, Geo Milev, Nikola Furnadzhiev), that is, in which the connection between art and reality is broken off. The cultural code pushes Konstantin Pavlov to use these events in order to conceal his dread of what is going on in here and now, the dread of eternal repetition. The ages are mirrored semblances—this is the

³¹ Konstantin Pavlov, *Zapiski 1970–1993* (Plovdiv: Zhanet-45, 2000), p. 76.

basic prerequisite of surrealism taken on by Pavlov and carried through by Staykov.³²

The ending of the film is left open. It shows the artist in front of his canvas, ready to continue creating after what he has lived through. The character has walked the path to a cathartic overturning of his entire world. Timid and devoid of will at the beginning of the story, incapable of opposing others, the painter finally finds himself equally struck by personal failure, by what has happened with Kiril, and by Danil's story, leading him toward the final decision to commit murder. He shoots the man responsible for the execution of the people from Danil's village. The subsequent effort to go back to painting is triggered by his desire to reshape the world rather than to hide from it. The epilogue adds a certain finality to the vision of the artist that unites the variety of imagery used in the film. The person who creates crosses the boundaries of time and space with an elevated sense of responsibility for oneself. The artist acts mostly as a carrier of memory and seeker of (not absolute) truth. The problematic character of the individual-artist-history relationship is discussed by means of the various poetic provocations in the piece, which turn out to be the driving force behind the notional and artistic suggestion, but subordinate both the construction and the stylistics of the film. Konstantin Pavlov and Lyudmil Staykov comment on art through the language of modern art. All of this is in turn rendered into *Illusion*—the live-action film that constitutes a gripping narrative revelation with a permanent position in the annals of time.

³² Krasimir Krumov, *Poetika na balgarskoto kino* (Sofia: Agata-A, 2013), p. 467.

Maria Panova

The Artist and the Poetic Provocations in the 1980 Bulgarian Live-Action Film *Illusion*

This text highlights the aesthetic explorations of Bulgarian cinematographers from the 1980s, specifically those aimed at people of art. The article offers, first, a brief overview of films that examine the symbolic potential of the artist, which defines the consideration of an established and meaningful tendency in the development of Bulgarian cinema. The article focuses then on the live-action film *Illusion* (1980, directed by Lyudmil Staykov and written by Konstantin Pavlov) and examines the figure of the artist in the piece. The presented interpretation supports the view of the film as a morally valuable expression of modern art.

Keywords: artist, Konstantin Pavlov, poetry, cinema, provocation

Słowa kluczowe: twórca, Konstantin Pavlov, poezja, kino, prowokacja