HANDYZINE BGSF, ISSUE 1/2026

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WHO ARE WE, WHERE DO WE COME FROM AND WHERE ARE WE GOING?

More than a century ago a famed Bulgarian writer, Ivan Vazov, wrote a story imagining a better future for our country – as he understood it. Even earlier than him a country teacher created and put on paper a fantastic new mythological system. Many more artists and writers in our country have followed in their footsteps. We are their spiritual descendants. Not all of us dream of utopias and colorful other world, but we – mind you, I am just an ordinary member, like everybody else, and have no more or no less right to speak up than anybody else – carry with us their curiosity about what is hiding behind the next bend of the road, or on next planet, or in the next day and next century.

This fanzine is a rushed, and patchy attempt to introduce the foreign audience to the speculative tradition in Bulgaria. It is meant to attract attention, rather than answer every question about our culture, history and future as we imagine them, about our written and visual arts as we produce them. We hope to intrigue you, we hope that you may seek the names and titles mentioned here, that you will follow the links and the material that we provided, and google your way around to find out creators and artists. A special section – probably the most important from the point of view of promoting our artists – offers bibliographical information where speculative art and writing of our creators can be accessed in translation.

The biggest question is what is unique about Bulgarian speculative fiction. I made a point to collect here materials pointing at my answer of choice – it is the link with the rich and diverse folkloric tradition in history, albeit often painful. The Balkan peninsula was a crossroad of worlds and a melting pot of various cultures long before these concepts were even formulated. This was not always a process of peaceful diffusion, more often it took violent paths, but we see today its result – our people are adaptable and famed for our hospitality.

The biggest problems of our community today are two. First, the isolation, because of the language barrier. While many Bulgarians speak English well and can survive without problems in their everyday life, this level remains far from the literary level required by the publishing world. Indeed, Angela Rodel translated the novel of Georgi Gospodinov, and not himself. Alas there are not enough Rodels for every aspiring speculative fiction writer. Second, there is the small scale of the Bulgarian literary market, because of the limited readers base, that today is estimated to less than seven million people. These two issues put an enormous strain on our professional creators.

The biggest success is the people… For example, we have a string of conventions devoted to the speculative. They often assemble over a hundred people. I would underline here just one – the annual national event Bulgacon (https://www.bulgacon.org/). It was the first to begin attracting significant international participation – both in-person or via video links. The list of guests includes such prominent genre personalities as Peter Watts, Pail MacAuley, Erik Simon, Aleks Schwartzman, Lavie Tidhar and Neil Clarke.

To a great extent, this fanzine is my personal view of the speculative genre in Bulgaria and it is biased towards my own preferences. I hope it will be a useful source of reference information and a good starting point in your journey across the Bulgarian speculative land. QR codes of selected links (also explicitly written in the text) can be found after some items. The content is (mis-)ordered according to the time of arrival or discovery in my personal archive.

Enjoy!

Valentin D. Ivanov and friends
1.06.2016, Munich

Selected web links:

https://www.bulgacon.org/

Between a Hummer and a Rock: The Bulgarian Speculative Fiction between the East and the West. A Historic View

I. First steps: Ivan Vazov – near-future Speculative Fiction from a century ago

Ivan Vazov (1850-1921; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan_Vazov) is the Father of Modern Bulgarian Literature (capitalized intentionally). During the first twenty eight years of his life our country was part of the Turkish empire. Vazov saw the end of a five century long occupation and the birth of a new independent kingdom of Bulgaria. This was a time of enthusiasm and hopes, akin to the first years after the American Revolution. Everything seems to be within reach, people just had to extend their hands…

It is no surprise that Vazov turned to speculative fiction (hereafter SpF) as a tool to present his hopes and expectations about the future of our country – his only SpF piece, the short story *The Last Day of the Twentieth Century* was a peek into that future. It was written on Dec 31,1899, and it described literally one day of the country's life hundred years later. The story doesn't measure very well against the rest of Vazov's work. The characters are two-dimensional, the narrative is descriptive and schematic. It is mainly a vehicle for the author's optimistic outlook.

It was the beginning of the Bulgarian social SpF. The writer, fan and researcher Alexander Karapanchev (1951-2021) identified a few poems written by the same venerable Ivan Vazov in the 1880s that contained mythological elements and if they were written today, they would be widely accepted as part of the fantasy subgenre.

Another notable SpF precursor is the two-volume *Veda Slovena* (1874-1881), a collection of tales about pagan gods and pre-Islamic/pre-Christian myths. Originally published by Stephan Verkovich (1821-1893) as folk tales from the Rhodope Mountains area, collected by Ivan Gologanov (1839-1895), a teacher in the region. Today most scientists consider it a literary hoax, written by Gologanov himself – in effect, starting a subgenre that today is considered an alternative or secret history. Finally, in the 1920's Svetoslav Minkov (1902-1966) wrote the first Bulgarian diabolic stories beginning what would later on become our dark fantasy and horror.

*

The Last Day... first appeared in print in 1912. The characters traveled by fliegtweg (flying car?) and conducted video conferences worrying about the prosperity of the Motherland. However, the story was largely forgotten and had little influence on the modern Bulgarian SpF. Nevertheless, it illustrates the strong connection of Bulgarian SpF with our cultural background – still a major element of the genre. It is both a source of strength and a weakness, giving the writers an access to our rich national mythology, but making the stories and characters somewhat incomprehensible to outside readers. Yet, there are some notable exceptions like *Foul Days* and *Monstrous Nights* – two fantasy novels by Genoveva Dimova (https://genovevadimova.com/) that were published by Tor in 2024.

Vazov's followers of today often use the Bulgarian mythology and continue the tradition of the Bulgarian folklore. A good example is the fantazy-noir-triller TV series *Mamnik* (2026; see a dedicated review later on), that is deeply rooted in folklore. It is based on a series of three – so far – novels by Vasil Popov (1990-). The title comes from a supernatural creature that hunts the Bulgarian countryside.

The Bulgarian SpF is far from limited to intro-cultural fantasy. There are many authors who transcend the national traditions and aspire to write more worldly SpF…

II. Svetoslav Minkov and the diabolic fate of the SpF writers who tried their hand at publishing

The timely end of WWI saved Svetoslav Minkov from a military career and he plunged into literature (it is unclear which occupation is more dangerous). It is difficult now to figure out why this successful librarian (working in the National Library), and even diplomat (at the Bulgarian consulate in Japan) turned to SpF, but he authored the first Bulgarian SpF book – the story collection *Blue chrysanthemum* (1922) and he was the founder of the first worldwide SpF publishing house, exclusively devoted to the genre – *Argus* (1922). Indeed, there were other SpF publishers before, but *Argus* limited itself solely to SpF. They brought for the first time to our country Edgar Alan Poe and the German modernist Hanns Ewers.

The most notable of Minkov's books – to me – are the story collection *The Lady with the X-Ray Eyes* (1934; translated in English, and copies from the1965 edition can still be found at some on-line booksellers) and the novel *Heart in a Cardboard Box* (1933; co-written with Konstantin Konstantinov). Both are social grotesques. In the title story of the collection, a lady acquires X-ray eyes only to make a disappointing discovery that many people lack brains. I guess, most of us know that too, despite having just ordinary eyes, but at the time of writing the magic capability of X-rays to peek inside the human body was still a novelty and the desire to take a look inside other humans' brains has always been high on most people's wish lists. The *Heart…* is a retelling of the oldest story about an artist in a crisis who has literally lost his heart. It is funny and witty but as this realization of the tragedy slowly sinks in the reader's mind, the atmosphere darkness.

Social criticism is a popular topic in the modern Bulgarian SpF and I am not talking about the communist-era politically-inspired literature. The social transformation of the East was (and still is painful), and the reality provides plenty of prompts: from the corrupt government officials to free shootouts between competing gangster groups. Think of living in The *Godfather*'s world – that was our 1990s. Probably, the most notable modern followers of Svetoslav Minkov are Yantcho Tcholakov (1967-) and aforementioned Aleksander Karapanchev. They both tried their hands in the publishing business: Tcholakov started his own small-scale publishing house *Ophir*, and Karapantschev was part of the present-day incarnation of the very same *Argus* publisher, relaunched by another well known SpF enthusiast Emanuel Ikonomov (1960-).

Tcholakov debuted in the late 1980s but his most notable novel *The History of the Lonely Ranger* appeared in 1995. There were various opinions on how to classify this book – from alternate history (or rather biology) to pre-historic heroic western. It is a tale of a famous fighter, summoned to take part in the siege of… Troy. It would have been too familiar if the character did not belong to a race of anthropoids (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthropod) rather than humans. The book contains supplementary material including "documentary" images and maps. Tcholakov received the *Graviton* award – the highest distinction in the Bulgarian SpF – in 1997 for his publishing work.

Aleksander Karapanchev was not an overly productive writer and in my opinion this speaks well of him. Among the Bulgarian SpF authors he was probably the one who has worked more than anybody else as an editor and it shows in his polished prose. My favorite story of his is *In the Unimo Era* (1984) – the title piece of his 2002 debut book that brought him an Eurocon award. It takes place in a consumer's paradise when the Unimo machine can create two hundred types of soup. Alas, it can not create happiness. This short summary doesn't do justice to this engaging and emotional story. *Stapen Croyd* is a poetic dispute with the famous *Silence, please!* by A. C. Clarke The characters of both tales suffer from the excessive "noise" of the world, and they fight it with technological solutions – Clarke has destructive interference, and Karapantschev has the technology to "harvest" the silence from one place and release it in another. However, while Clarke concentrates on the technological solution itself, and to some extent on its effects on public life,

Karapantschev tells the story from the point of view of an old poet who discovers that the silence has just been harvested out from the last quiet place – the cemetery. The nearly identical story line here transcends to the level of a personal tragedy. Unfortunately, only one of Karapantschev's works has been translated abroad, in the now defunct webzine *Phantazm*. He also received the Bulgarian *Graviton* in 1996 for his work at the new *Argus* publishing house and won a second Eurocon for editing the Bulgarian SpF magazine *FEP* (*Fantastika, Evristika and Prognostika*) in 1989.

Given their background, it is not surprising that Tcholakov and Karapantschev are considered the best stylists in the modern Bulgarian SpF. They take in our genre literature a place similar to that of Bradbury in the West.

III. Little lawful country – the golden age of the Bulgarian hard-SpF

While the previous tendencies in the Bulgarian SpF can easily be associated with one or two names, the hard-SpF is too broad for that, explaining the lack of personal names in the title of this post.

The American and British Golden Age SpF trickled through the Bulgarian SpF community, despite the ideological and trade obstacles of the Cold War, both via direct translations into Bulgarian and via translations into Russian. Books in Russian and other foreign languages were readily available in Bulgaria through a specialized network of bookstores. In fact, these books were often more accessible to us than to the Russians themselves — it was typical to see at those bookstores in my home town, a Black Sea port, many Russian sailors, waiting in line for the latest book in the *International Fantastika* series.

One way or the other, we became privy to the futuristic insights of Asimov, Clarke, Russel and others, and our own SpF writers finally saw the light some time during 1960-70s… Lyuben Dilov (1927-2008; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyuben_Dilov) was the clear leader of that pack and he still remains my favorite, after three decades of reading SpF. He had the misfortune to start working in the most ideologically tight environment, and his earlier books (i.e. *The Atomic Man*, 1958) suffered from the forced ideological constraints. However, later he was able to gradually break free from these artificial boundaries. *The Weight of the Spacesuit* (1969) is a first contact novel written along the traditions of the space opera, and it advocates the idea that with or without a spacesuit, the humans remain themselves – all too human.

His novel *The Icarus's Road* is a space opera and a coming of age story of its protagonist Zenon Balov – a kid brought up on an interstellar spaceship who has trouble finding his place in the static world of the adults that have spent half of their lives aboard. He has to shatter the environment, to open space for himself. The alternative is to walk away and at the end of the book Zenon does literally that – he walks away into a ... something I won't name to avoid spoilers, that might be a window to another intelligence. This novel brought the first Eurocon award to Bulgaria, back in 1976. Arkady Strugatsky considered it one of the five best SpF novels written in the East at the time.

Last but not least, Lyuben Dilov also defined his own version of the Fourth Law of Robotics: "A robot must always establish its identity as a robot." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Laws_of_Robotics). Creating new Laws has become somewhat a tradition in the Bulgarian SpF: Nikola Kesarovski (1944-2007; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikola_Kesarovski) defined a Fifth Law: "A robot must always know that it is a robot", in his appropriately titled story *The Fifth Law* (1983).

Dilov is also popular for his short works. Especially popular are: *My Strange Friend the Astronomer* (no surprise here, given my day/night job) and *The Whole Truth about the Chimp Topsy*. Now that the author is no longer with us, we will never know if the title of the latter story is an intentional and sophisticated multilingual game of words: Topsy sounds like the English word

“top” and like the Bulgarian word for “ball” (like in goofball). Either way, Topsy, who is launched aboard an US space ship, ends up leading a revolution against the tyranny of another world, just by virtue of ... behaving like a chimp.

Pavel Vezhinov (1914-1983) was a mainstream author who didn’t stay above SpF forays. In *The Doom of “Ajax*” (1973) a crew of the starship from the title has to make a major sacrifice, to save a dying extraterrestrial civilization. To open a bracket here – the idea that we can sacrifice ourselves better, faster, and cheaper... wait this is from another opera... than anybody else is essential in the Slavic tradition (BTW, I think the irony is the only reasonable way a small country with a thirteen century long history can look upon itself).

Strictly speaking his best book is not hard science fiction, but it is often considered the most notable achievement of the Bulgarian SpF: in *The Barier* a down-to-Earth composer runs into a girl that has escaped from a mental institution. She was locked in there because she had claimed she could fly. Eventually, they fall in love, and to his surprise, the composer discovers that he can fly, too. He is so shaken, he escapes in the countryside, trying to come to grip with his new ability. Broken, the girl commits a suicide. The novel is included in the curriculum of the university-level Bulgarian literature studies. It was filmed in 1979.

Many more authors work along similar avenues today, but in my opinion Nikolay Tellalov is the new leading figure in the subgenre. He was born in Bulgaria in 1967, but had the (mis-)fortune to have lived in two countries that do not exist anymore – the Soviet Union and East Germany. He is the first Bulgarian SpF author who created a large series of interconnected novels – a four-book multi-genre fantasy/alternate history/space opera saga *To Wake Up a Dragon*. But the work that helped most to establish him as a notable hard-SpF writer is *Nano* (2007) – an attempt to describe the indescribable, the Singularity. It is amazing how Tellalov walks the thin line between admiring the powers that nanotechnology would give the individual, and the dangers that these powers will bring when every one of us has the command of powers on a scale that used to belong to entire countries, no less. Interestingly, *Nano* shares these admirations and concerns about this all-powerful future with another book, written in the distant 1966 – *Four Fantastic Novellas*, by an early genre figure, Alexander Gerov (1919-1997). I was surprised that this work could appear at the height of the Communist time because the main character wakes up in a not-so-happy future, finds it too stale, and attempts to escape further ahead, in an even more distant future.

It is understandable why neither Dilov, nor Vezhinov managed to make the transition across the borders (except to Russia), but the fact that a novel like *Nano* by Tellalov, that is not bound by cultural references that would be incomprehensible to the Western readers, is not available in translations is worrying. It is a pity that the Bulgarian hard-SpF with all its potential of surpassing the language and culture barriers easier than any other subgenre is still confined (almost) within the linguistic boundaries of our country.

IV. Thou shall not be forgotten...

This trip across the years and names can not last forever. It was never meant to be complete and I am not even going to pretend that it was objective — I was simply telling you about my favorite SpF books and writers from my country. Here are a few words about some modern Bulgarian SpF writers of interest, at least in my view:

Khristo Poshtakov (1944-2020) was probably among the most widely translated present-day Bulgarian SpF writers. His print runs in Russia reached four digit figures, he had a few books in Spanish, and many stories in English, Spanish, and French. He won a Eurocon for debut in 1994. I liked best his first novel *Adventures in Darville*. It tells how some commoners, not much different than the classical little man of Charles Chaplin, fight against evil. Poshtakov was also known for his work promoting the Bulgarian SpF abroad.

Ivaylo P. Ivanov represents a common phenomenon in Bulgarian SpF: a talented writer, laureate of many writing competitions, with many publications under his belt who has lost interest in reaching out to the audience. It is easy to understand why – dwindling print runs, meager feedback from the fandom, vast reduction in the numbers of fans themselves. This not because the SpF is dying, but rather a reflection of the deep economical and existential crisis of hope and prospectives in Bulgaria itself. A large fraction of the young emigrate in search of better life, the elderly are too preoccupied with survival. The country has lost easily a third of its population in the last few decades. Ivanov is still young for a writer – he was born in 1973 in Sofia. Unfortunately, he too has not been published aboard even though some of his stories are exceptionally original and intense. My favorite is *I dreamt of a human face* (2005). It describes the fight for survival of survivors from a space ship wreck and the artificial ecosystem that they have created. They were forced to use the only biomaterial they had – themselves, and as a result, all living beings in their new world, from herbivores to predators, descended from humans and have preserved enough humanity to be aware of who they were and what they have become. The ending is cautiously optimistic – it doesn't matter if you look like a human, what makes a difference is if you behave like one.

I can go on, the list of writers is long: Petar Kadzhilov, Lyubomir Nikolov, Elena Pavlvoa (presented elsewhere in this issue), Genoveva Dimova (with two novels recently published by Tor)... and I am sure I would still miss relevant names and stories that are worth telling you about, but I will stop here.

Finally, we do have our Forrest Ackermans, too. Perhaps, the most distinguished ones are Atanas P. Slavov (1947-2022), Yuri Ilkov (1953-), Kalin Nenov (19xx-), Dilyan Blagov (1972-). Slavov was the editor of the first specialized Slavonic science fiction and fantasy magazine *Orphia* and a swarm of other fanzines and anthologies. The first issue of *Orphia* was presented at the 1990 Worldcon in the Hague, and won the Carel award. He has collected three Eurocon awards in various categories. Ilkov is the editor and publisher of the longest-running (since 1999) Bulgarian SpF fanzine *Tera Fantastika* and has an Eurocon ин 2002 on his own. Slavov and Nenov are the creators of the Human Library Foundation (http://choveshkata.net/) aimed at promoting and publishing quality SpF. Blagov is a long-standing leader of the SpF club in Sofia, named after the famed writer and futurist Ivan Efremov. Blagov is also a driving force behind the annual national convention Bulgacon that gathers hundreds of fans to celebrate the genre.

Readers of this biased review may want to check other sources about Bulgarian SpF:

- Rossie Decheva described the Bulgarian SpF life in its 2006 state in:
http://www.concatenation.org/europe/sfbulgaria2006.html
It contains a number of relevant links.

- Jim Walker summarized his experience at Eurocon 2004, that was held in Plovdiv, Bulgaria:
http://www.concatenation.org/conrev/eurocon04.html
The late Robert Sheckley was one of the guests of honor.

- A joint piece about Bulgarian and Romanian SF appeared recently in *Locus* magazine, written by this author and Cristian Tamas:
https://locusmag.com/feature/sf-in-bulgaria-romania-how-many-dwarfs-does-it-take-to-match-a-giant-by-valentin-d-ivanov-cristian-tamas/

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Bulgarian SpF is a process in progress. It emerged from the folkloric tradition, but at the moment of its birth it turned to the future and to the depths of human nature. People in the genre constantly reinvent, redefine and rediscover it. Now it is facing the extremely difficult challenge of emerging onto the world scene. Both the cultural and translation barriers pose a threat to this new

tendency, but writers like Pavlova, Dimova and a few others (not to mention the Booked laureate Georgi Gospodinov, who himself doesn't stray away from speculative social experiments) have successfully tackled them and have reached worldwide audience.

Valentin Ivanov
2012-2026

Selected web links:

https://genovevadimova.com/

Bulgarian Laws of Robotics

The Human library

Bulgarian and Romanian SF in Locus

Marin Troshanov: What is it like to be a Bulgarian speculative fiction writer today?

To be a Bulgarian speculative fiction writer is very different at this moment in time than it was ten or more years ago. When my trilogy *LAMYA LTD* saw its first edition, none of the major publishers dared betting on local speculative literature. That market was dominated by underground anthologies with mixed quality, lacking clear selection criteria.

To this day, there is a lingering hunger for good Bulgarian speculative fiction. It took the efforts of many gifted and persistent authors to meet the burning interest of the audience. These writers set high standards for themselves, despite having to combine their creative efforts with various other professional occupations, necessary to make a living. I dare say that we succeeded.

However, the Bulgarian literary market remains small-scale, it is badly saturated and follows a fast turn-over. Low revenues block the development of the literary agent institution – a critical representation function required for expanding to foreign markets.

But here are the advantages:

Our millennial history, the layers of overlapping civilizational and cultural influences, the unique Balkan mentality and customs combined with the inexhaustible toolkit of speculative genres give birth to original and exotic reader experiences.

If you are a good professional and create quality texts, you will very quickly gain direct access to the most talented and popular fellow writers and artists of speculative works in Bulgaria. All my publications are richly illustrated and it is important to me that the book is a full-fledged work of art.

The sense of community, closeness, and mutual support among artists is priceless. Many new communication forums, festivals, conventions, and events have emerged – as if we are trying to make up for decades of isolation and stagnation in just a few years. It’s nice to be a part of these processes, to see how your fantasies come to life and touch people in new and unexpected ways.

Bulgaria still remains aside from some global socio-political trends and industry standards, which is why the experimental spirit of domestic works is vital. It does exhibit amazing resilience.

I believe in the abilities of Bulgarian speculative fiction and I invite you to explore it.

Bio:

Marin Troshanov was born in 1984 in Burgas. He works in high-tech. In 2025, he was elected to the board of directors of the largest professional organization in the Bulgarian IT sector – AIBEST.

He is known for the supernatural thriller trilogy *LAMYA LTD*, the children's books about the robot Čapek, the fantasy-adventure *Emmy and the Thief of Shadows*, the post-apocalyptic children's book with augmented reality *Brave New World*, and the fairy-tale fantasy novel *Tales of Karina and Gabriel*. His stories have appeared in many modern action-genres anthologies.

Marin has won prestigious national literary accolades, including *The Quill* (2019) and the *Konstantin Konstantinov award* (2020 and 2022).

He is among the most popular authors and a favorite guest at dozens of schools, universities, and libraries across Bulgaria.

Goodreads profile:

Marin Troshanov

Nikolay Tellalov: father of Bulgarian ethno-fantasy

I was born in June 1967, in Sofia, although it was supposed to have been in Plovdiv. My father was an aviator who had been flying since the tender age of fifteen, because he had lied about his age at the Yambol Aeroclub. For a long time I dreamed of becoming a pilot too. Then I realized that I could fly on the wings of imagination.

The first books I read were science fiction. That's why at school I developed an interest in chemistry, physics, and biology, without anyone forcing me to do my homeworks. Under the impression of what I had read, I made aliens out of plasticine and paper; I carry to this day a Welsian Martian made of thread as a talisman.

Until turning thirteen, I was convinced that my girlfriend would be a Martian. Today I admit that I was almost right – I am in love with a charming supernatural being, not exactly science-fictional but still fantastic.

Stephen King encouraged me to start writing, practically personally, because in one of his novels I found an advice, almost meant directly for me. I set out to imitate the theme and style of Isaac Asimov. I surprised myself by writing an “urban fantasy” work and because of it I recently received a public compliment that I am the “father of Bulgarian ethno-fantasy”. May it be an exaggeration, but still a pleasant one.

After the first book, I managed to combine spaceships with dragon wings. Today I strive to complete many drafts, including a “futurological manifesto” for the possible (post)humanity’s Cosmic future.

In short, I have remained a stubborn dreamer who prefers utopian to apocalyptic.

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Regarding AI, I want to say that true machine intelligence inevitably evolves into a Prometheus-like image. Which, in my opinion, is a good option for people. What is important in us is reason, our understanding of good and evil, our ability to give meaning to the Universe, and biology is a variable that is subject to change.

Nikolay Tellalov

Goodreads profile:

Nikolay Tellalov

Yancho Cholakov: the writer and the writings

The writer:

He was born in the hot summer of 1967. During the era of Dad[1], he was forced to take the sinecure position of a flag bearer at his native high-school, after previously publicly denouncing all other positions at the Komsomol[2]. He caught the last train of the brigadier movement[3] when he was sent to replenish the insufficient reserve of prisoners at the quarry in the village of Dolno Ezerovo and made a career there, breaking stones with a hammer for several months. He was put to work at furnaces with a temperature of nine hundred degrees in a metal billet factory, where he received the first of two metal shavings in his right eye. After being enlisted in Army, military surgeons wanted to cut off his middle finger, which had frozen in the snows of Shabla[4], but he refused the dismemberment. As punishment, he was trained to serve in the pioneer units, which he did, until he discovered once that only the head and the left shoulder remained from another, more careless soldier. He put a blasting cartridge under the tail of the colonel's big black mastiff and got into serious trouble the day the big black mastiff ceased barking. To this day, the Society for Animal Protection considers him its public enemy No. 1 because of two opening scenes with a dog and a cat in his novella *Chthonic Creatures*.[5] He doesn't allow some random editors to touch his texts. They are allowed to touch other things, but never the texts – he considers these too personal. His otherwise slow lifestyle is an illustration of the proverb about the drop that, with persistence, can turn a stone into a lattice. He faces the future with a cheerful and courageous look, despite the two metal shavings in his right eye. He is poor as a church mouse, but doesn't worry too much, because he's been told that he is filthy rich in a parallel reality where money is irrelevant.

The writings:

Cholakov's stories started appearing in literary magazines when he was still a schoolboy. His first publication abroad was in Kiev, Ukraine, in the magazine Real Fantastika in 2004. His works have appeared in professional magazines in Germany, USA and Russia. Cholakov has won many national accolades, including the prestigious Graviton (1997), the annual award of the famous magazine Ural Tracker (2016 and the international award Byzantine coffin for the (2018) for promoting Slavic literature. His story *And the Soldier Asked* (2000) was long-listed for the John W. Campbell (now Astounding) award for best new writer (2015). He is the founder of one of the first Bulgarian SF publishing houses *Ofir* (1993-2001), established shortly after the political changes in his country.

There Is Not A Night Without Darkness (1986) is a fictionalized retelling of a historical unrest that actually never happened – but could have – in medieval Spain. *Depopulated* (1988) is a

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1 Trans. note: Commonly used to refer to Todor Zhivkov, the long-standing General secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party at the time.

2 Trans. note: Komsomol was the young-adult version of the Bulgarian Communist Party. There was a separate Pioneer organization that was more akin to the Western scouts and had nothing to do with the military branch that built or blew up bridges.

3 Trans. note: Brigadier's movement was a semi-voluntary semi-compulsory practice of "conscripting" students and industry workers to help with the agricultural efforts in the countryside in former Communist countries.

4 Trans. note: A military training ground in the Northern Bulgarian Black Sea cost.

5 Trans. note: Trojan War inspired conflict in the far future between new intelligent species evolved from insects and the remnants of humanity.

poetic fantasy about the dreams of a soldier who is simultaneously a guard and an executioner. *Htonic Creatures* (1991) is a retelling of an alternative Trojan war as a conflict between the human race and intelligent arthropods. *Ricochet* (2000) describes the grand stand of Gorgon Medusa and a monstrous basilisk from Upper Prussia. *The Xylophonia* (2006) tracks the clash between Thracian gods during several millennia, in Zelazny style. *Lit a Candle For The Devil* (2013) is written in the self-invented folk-punk genre and it brought Cholakov the award of the biggest Bulgarian SF publishing house Argus. Other books from him are *The History of The Lonely Soldier* (1995), *Myths for Charred Darkness* (2006), *Exercises in Immortal Writing* (2009). His more recent and mature novel *The Entire World in the Hands* (2014) raises the question how power dissolves and destroys the individual. Cholakov's latest novel *Enlightenment* (2019) brings together the two most popular phenomena of twentieth-century literature, magical realism and postmodernism, but in the playing field of the new twenty-first century. Cholakov explores illness of an individual as a disability of the society, and the inability of the person to adapt to rapidly changing mechanisms of state-run healthcare.

The well-known Bulgarian literary critic Svetlozar Igov defines Yancho Cholakov as "an author with a strong storytelling talent, an inventive and wild imagination, solid and precise historical and humanitarian erudition, a sense of humor, ironic twists and parodic travesties, with the vision of a sharp social diagnostician who demonstrates flexibility in selecting and mixing different epochs and mythologies, but also for modeling them artistically in a diverse way." *Locus* magazine describes Cholakov "as a really original writer, who goes far beyond the well known SF tradition, bringing something new to our SF perceptions."

Yancho Cholakov

Facebook profile:

Yancho Cholakov

Georgi Hristov: A friendly impression for 50th anniversary[6]

Dear attendees, speculative fiction writers, fans and the likes.

We have gathered today to celebrate a grim Balkan person. A policeman, but not quite, an owner of a raspberry bar, without raspberries, a former tehsildar[7], ringing at the doors and disturbing the peace of ordinary citizens, Georgi Hristov is, in addition to all this, quite some writer. What kind of writer he is, can be figured out from his name. Which regular writer would continue to struggle with the name of a famous pop singer[8], instead of choosing some nice pseudonym to put himself apart from the gray and mediocre mass of scribblers. Karamfil Trayanov, for example, or Temenuzhko Bondarev would have done miracles and Hristov would have been instantly remembered as a subtle and elegant stylist, whose handwriting is distinguished from that of the entire talentless writing fraternity. But he would not. In any case, the pseudonym is the least of his flaws. Let's consider the book titles of the aforementioned dark personality. They are even darker. *Dark fantasy*. *More dark fantasy*. Many have written dark fantasy to this day, but no one has ever thought of putting the name of the genre on the cover as a title. Because writing fantasy requires a fine imagination, and here it was insufficient to come up with better names that would immediately grab the attention and betray the high artistic value, such as *I will spit on your graves* or *I will wrap your liver around your ears*. Then, there are their sizes. There are only eighty pages, so the readers scratch the backs of their heads and ask themselves: are these pamphlets, is this a study of horror as such, or most of all, how many vampires can be packed into such tiny booklets? Before they give up and the story seems to be over. Look at the thousand page sagas that other have written in the last fifty years, and Temenuzhko Bondarev, excuse me, Georgi Hristov, is still stuck on the eightieth page, on the twelfth line from top to bottom, and only at the middle of that line! Moreover, people say that the aforementioned Hristov so quickly gave away for free the miserable print run of his booklets that today one can't find a single copy of his masterpieces in bookstores. So, when a person goes to Helikon bookstores, and looks: there is a writer Homer, there is a writer Shakespeare, but there is no writer Georgi Hristov, none! There were only two Georgi Hristovs – one was running around and singing like a powdered crow on radios and televisions, and the other worked as a cook in a dubious resort in our country. You can tell what kind of cook the latter one is by the way he hides his hands, because they are all cut up and covered with patches and scars from peeling stuff and chopping lettuce. That's why we say – he better writes! Because if we ever go to that dubious resort of ours and he has to feed us... then something terrible might happen to us that can not be encountered even in the darkest of fiction. We will be overwhelmed by the most extreme realism! We will gnaw on the skins, we will chew the burgers, from which rat tails the thickness of a thumb stick out, we will wipe away tears and snot, and we will wish that we had only known him as the author of the collections *Dark Fiction* and *More Dark Fiction*. But alas, this is impossible, because, as already mentioned, the domestic bookstores have long run out of copies and information about these books can only be found in short electronic references and on undetailed sites like Wikipedia, which are not at all suitable for reading and having a pleasant time!

Yancho Cholkov
16.11.2014

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6 Zhoro, I know you behave well under heavy ~~fire~~ humor!

7 Tax collector in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

8 A different Georgi Hristov is a popular Bulgarian pop singer.

Ivan Efremov Club, Sofia

The Integral Club of Speculative Fiction, Prognostics and Heuristics named in honor of Ivan Efremov was founded in April 1974 in Sofia as an informal gathering place for people who, in one way or another, have made speculative fiction and prognostics their calling, a field for creative fulfillment or just a hobby. The members include writers, poets, artists, scientists, translators and, above all, fans of our beloved fiction. From day one, there have been no formal structures to regulate club life, with the exception of the chairman, who has duties but no privileges. There are no formal requirements for club membership; everyone is welcome, relying on their good intentions, desire for dialogue with others and, of course, love for speculative fiction.

Currently, the club meetings are held every Tuesday at 7:30 p.m. at the Municipal Cultural Center Sredets, 2a Krakra Street. Three times a year, the topics of the meetings for the next three months are selected. Everyone can propose a topic from any area of human existence as long as it is connected with the speculative fiction and the future. The events can be lectures, free discussions, readings, but most often they naturally flow into each other. The club also has meetings in the Summer, but there are no predetermined topics.

Members of the club and initiative groups have participated in practically all fiction activities in Bulgaria over the past 33 years.

The club's logo was designed by the artist Plamen Avramov, a prominent club member.

Dilyan Blagov

Club’s website:

Ivan Efremov Club, Sofia

Arkady and Boris Strugatsky Club for Speculative Fiction, Heuristics and Prognostics, Pazardzhik

Welcome to the world of speculative fiction!

If you like to think beyond the limits of the possible, to explore universes created by the words of talented authors, and to discuss ideas that challenge the mind and imagination – Arkady and Boris Strugatsky Club is the place for you!

Welcome to the endless world of fantasy and free thinking!

Here we don't just read books – we discover worlds. From the classic novels of Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, through the books of the Strugatsky brothers and Isaac Asimov, to the modern visions of Liu Qixin, Baoshu, Ken Liu and Ted Chiang; from the dark abyss of space horror to epic fantasy sagas and the diversity of alternative history; from the psychological labyrinths of Philip K. Dick to the visual masterpieces of anime creators like Hayao Miyazaki and Makoto Shinkai.

For us, speculative fiction is a universal language. It brings together fans of all genres under one roof – fantasy, horror, cyberpunk, steampunk, solarpunk, science fiction and even experimental forms outside the canon. There are no "wrong" preferences – only endless possibilities for conversation. If you enjoy analyzing the hidden messages in *Ghost in the Shell* or debating the social metaphors in *Dune*, you will find interlocutors here.

We welcome dissent. Our space is open for all who believe that thought should be free – dreamers, rebels, non-conformists, creators. If you are tired of templates and superficial discussions, here you will find an environment that values depth, curiosity and the courage to be different.

What else do we do?

- see and understand "anime" not just as animation, but as art – from the existential abysses of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* to the philosophical parables of *Castle in the Sky*;
- discuss little-known works that challenge the status quo;
- organize movie nights with films that have attained cult status and with independent projects;
- are proud to be a platform for young talents! We organize round tables with debuting authors, where they can present their works to a real audience. If you have a written story, poem, novel or even just have an idea – this is your place! We believe that the next great author may be hiding right in our ranks.
- share our own works – stories, essays, fantasy poetry, fan art;
- look for a connection between fiction and reality: How does speculative literature predict technology? How do utopias and dystopias shape our future?

Join us – because our universe has no boundaries. And every new idea is a star that shines brighter in our collective consciousness!

Become a part of our speculative fiction club Aradii and Boris Strugatsky in Pazardzhik by first taking some of your time to attend one of our meetings (from 19:30 to 21:00, every Friday, in the piano room of the Youth Center).

Welcome!

Iliya Valov

Club’s website:

A. & B. Strugatsky Club, Pazardzhik

The Human Library: Preface to the Eurocon 2026 sampler of almanac *ФантAstika*

Dear fellow Con members,

We—all human and non-human beings on this planet—live in an age that needs ever more bridges, both across the world and to the future. That's why we—the members of Terra Fantasia and the Human Library (https://choveshkata.net/blog/?page_id=36#English), two creative communities from Bulgaria—offer you this sampler of *ФантAstika*:

https://choveshkata.net/dl.php?key=78fc47d4b76640f8c48207dc1bbc1c8c46541b0e

It is our hope that it will help build some of those bridges. It will be our joy if any of its stories manages to transport you to a place where you feel more complete, more at home, closer to what you dream to be. Or what you dream our world to be.

As for the complete *ФантAstika*: Almanac of Bulgarian Speculative Fiction, the big sister of this sampler, it's still looking for its own home. As are all the novels whose excerpts we've included here. If you can point us to anyone who can offer them a home—agent, editor, or publisher—please find us at **poslednorog@gmail.com**. Or tell us if you wish to read *ФантAstika*, all five hundred pages. Or talk about the new places it has taken you and the new dreams it has given you.

We are standing next to you, listening.

Kalin M. Nenov

P.S. There is a bonus story in this sampler which couldn't make its way into the big *ФантAstika*. Can you spot it?

Selected links:

Human Library

Alamanc ФантAstika sampler

Club *Terra Fantasia*, Burgas

The club *Terra Fantasia* in Burgas was founded in 1968 by Atanas P. Slavov, a student at the *Nikola Fichev* construction and architecture school at the time. At first, the Comsomol Committee of the town allowed the members to gather once a week in the hallway of their building and so it began.

The members wrote together a novella, everybody tried their hand at it. They sent a "hello world" letter to the soviet international digest *Sputnik*, to announce themselves, and it was published. Responses arrived from everywhere, but three were particularly notable. One was from India, from a Russian speaking Sundram Darapuram, who became a corresponding member of the club. Another corresponding member was David Dagan from Wakefield, UK. Finally, from Sofia Nenko Seymenliski and Todor Yalamov called. They had just started a similar students' club *Speculative Fiction and Futurology*. Soon the members of the writers workshop *Golden Feather* (organized by *Cosmos* magazine in Sofia) come to visit and this was the first meeting of two soon-to-become towering figures in the fandom: Atanas P. Slavov and Aleksandar Karapanchev.

Terra Fantastia went into hiatus in 1972, when A. P. Slavov moved to Sofia, where he, together with the core members of *Speculative Fiction and Futurology* formed the still-existing club Ivan Efremov. In the following years the club in Burgas renewed its activity a few times, for short periods. First, in 1974-1976 it gathered at the Burgas City Youth Center, under the chairmanship of A. Slavov, who traveled from Sofia for every meeting. Next, in 1980-1983 it was restarted by other enthusiasts who participated at the national speculative fiction festivals in Plovdiv. The club was resurrected again in 2000 for two more years by a group of writers, including Yancho Cholakov, Georgi Hristov, Tsenka Bakardzhieva, and Valentin Dilov who gathered at the Center for Sustainable Development *Compass*, led by Emanuil Arnaudov. Later on, he became the driving force behind two speculative art competitions in 2007 and 2008.

The 40th anniversary of the clubs was celebrated on Oct 24, 2008 with an official ceremony at the Burgas city theater. A commemorative anthology *40 years of speculative art from Terra Fantasy* was published. A year later the club became the basis for a new organization – Society of Bulgarian Speculative fiction writers. Atanas P. Slavov becomes its head and the almanac *ФантAstia begun* appearing.

The most recent incarnation of *Terra Fantasia* club became active on Nov 8, 2022 when it resumed its activities due to the efforts of Yancho Cholakov, Yordan Donev, Alexander Ivanov and Stoyan Damyanov. They began holding regular meetings at the Peio Yavorov regional library.

More information about the current activities of *Terra Fantasia* can be found at:
https://www.facebook.com/groups/6165650673480037

After notes by Atanas P. Slavov

Club’s website:

Terra Fantasia, Burgas

Alternate History Class 101: *Asen and the travelers in 100 Bulgarias* (*Асен и пътешествениците в 100 Българии*)

Publisher: Softpress, 2020.
Illustrations: Tsveta Petrova.
Cover design: Radoslav Donev.
ISBN 978-619-151-633-9

Elena Pavlova (b. 1974) is a well-established Bulgarian science fiction writer and translator, in fact, she is one of its leaders today. Her contributions to the genre span a quarter of a century and spread over many sub-genres: science fiction, fantasy and horror. She has gained international recognition too – her novel *Adventure in the Lower land. Caroles versus Hallus Beasts* (*Приключение в Долната земя. Коледари срещу Hallus Beasts*) won Eurocon in 2021 in the Best Children's book category.

Recently, Elena Pavlova turned to the young readers and *Asen…* is a book, aimed at "my 12-13 yr old self", as she once said. At first it may look like a well-known story – about a kid, discovering that the world has hidden folds, not necessarily nice and welcoming. It is also the eternal account of growing-up, with all expected and surprising bruises and wisdom that come along.

The new element here is the setting – Elena avoids the typical American/English point of view and puts the reader in the shoes of a kid growing up in Eastern Europe. It is an open question if this is our time line, but for all intents and purposes it is close enough. Asen, the title character, has lost his Mom to a terrible disease – an element that can be traced to other works of Elena Pavlova – and even though his step-mother is well-meaning enough, he faces some tough challenges, expecting a new member of the family. It is the step-mother that sends him to attend something akin to a scout's summer camp that is meant to keep him occupied in these difficult times, and this is where the story begins.

The camp is not as expected, the scouting is not just a game, and everything turns out to be deadly serious. Asen discovers that this is a cover for an organization that recruits young teenagers to travel between alternative realities – for they are the only ones with this ability. Growing up means not only shedding off the youthful naivete, but losing up this special skill as well.

The danger comes from the same old greed and stupidity that has hampered the human kind forever – the people in control of some timelines look at the other timelines as an easy prey and suppliers of cheap goods. There is a memorable scene with kids, whose heads are barely visible above the steering wheels, driving heavy trucks across the path from such a "supplier" timeline.

To his credit, Asen quickly rises to the challenge and escapes the self-pity trap he seems to be falling into, at the beginning of the book.

The story is fast paced and cinematographic – and this is the trap I discovered while reading the book with my kids, who, unlike me, had never lived in Sofia: knowing the setting, at least in our timeline, would have helped a lot to visualize the action better and more tangibly. The author mentioned once that the book – which is beautifully illustrated with black-and-white hand drawn graphics (special compliments to Tsveta Petrova!) – was supposed to include even more visual materials, but those had to be discarded, probably to save printing costs. A dedicated website may be a solution to this problem.

The alternative history elements deserve a special note. *Asen and…* being a children's book, is an excellent introduction to this subgenre, as the Americans would say, it is a 101-level class. I am not sure if the parallel with the number in the title was intentional, but it is certainly nice. It is also a nicely educational introduction to the history of Bulgaria, for those who have not paid

attention in school. Two sets of supplementary materials help the reader – one with a timeline of the major relevant historic events, and another with a basic intro to alternate history subgenres, listing some important concepts and works.

Good landmarks, if we try to place the novel in the landscape of the Western subgenre, are *The Merchant's Empire* series by Charles Stross, *A Nomad of Time Streams* by Michael Moorcock, and particularly with the young adult aspect – *The H-Bomb Girl* by Stephen Baxter and the *Everness* trilogy by Ian McDonald.

Valentin D. Ivanov
3.11.2021

My Poor Bernardier, a story by Agop Melkoninan

What does it mean to pretend? When does the pretense turn from a sham or a mask to a true face?

What is art? How does it touch us? Do artists have a responsibility for leading the audience?

What is a human? Should he or she fight against a safe, but restricting society? Or embrace it instead?

These are only some of the questions that the Bulgarian speculative fiction writer Agop Melkonian addresses in his 11,800-word novelette *My Poor Bernardier*. These are questions that have – consciously or not – bothered for ages writers and readers who liked to think what the life around them meant. Most likely, these questions don't have a single or a simple answer. Some people prefer to sweep them aside as cliches, but this won't help us in our quest for expressing or understanding the ever more mysterious human condition.

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Agop Melkoninan was born in 1949 and left us in 2006, falling victim to cancer. An engineer by training, he spent most of his adult years working as a journalist, writer, translator and publisher. He left behind hundreds of articles, tens of stories, a few theatrical plays and about a dozen books – an eclectic mix ranging from popular science titles about SETI and railroads to poetry and most importantly, to science fiction. He is well known with his translations from Armenian, and he is one of the creators of the Armenian literature Department at Sofia University.

In my opinion, Agop Melkonian, who never had a formal literary education, is one of the best masters of style in the Bulgarian speculative fiction genre, together with Pavel Vezhinov, Lyuben Dilov-father and Svetoslav Minkov. Yancho Cholakov, a pupil of Melkonian, is their close follower from the latest generation to enter the genre.

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My Poor Bernardier is not among the most widely known stories of Melkoninan whose other works (*A Winged Boy*, *Sonatina by Ravel*, *E-mail*) have entered some school books, but it does feels eternal, in pretty much the same way that Asimov's cycle about Susan Calvin and her beloved robots does. The adventures of Bernardier in the theaterless future are as modern today as back in 1983 when this story was written. Here the comparison with Asimov is not a random whim on this reviewer's part – Melkoninan intentionally mentions the famous robot-building corporation *United robots*. In some ways the links with Asimov are a tradition of the hard science fiction in Bulgaria – three additional laws[9] have been formulated in my country by Lyuben Dilov, Nikola Kesarovski and Lyubomir Nikolov. And yet, this is not a fan fiction or even a homage to Asimov, the name drop serves just to place the novella in a wider genre context.

Melkonian tells a simple tale – a middle-aged man, Bernardier, is touring the countryside of an unnamed planet that could easily be a future Earth or a distant backward colony. The Western reader will likely find this place akin to the world of Keith Roberts' *Pavane* – an alternative history fix-up novel, telling stories from a world in which the Church never went through the Reformation and the Roman Catholic church still rules an world, the feudal system remaines in place and the common means of fast communication are networks of semaphore stations. Bernardier travels with carts, pulled by bio-mechanical horses (apparently, there has been some technical progress, albeit it

[9] See my article *Little Lawful Country* at: https://worldsf.wordpress.com/2011/06/15/lawful-little-country-the-bulgarian-laws-of-robotics/

followed unexpected ways). He is surrounded by a band of bio-mechanical androids of the "second luxurious category A, with long-term memory". The man has programmed them to act, – as in theatrical plays. In other words, he is a master of traveling theater. The simple shows of the Duke and the King from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* come to mind, except Bernardier runs a more sophisticated version able to perform Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Never mind the robots, the world of *My Poor Bernardier*, *Pavane* and Mark Twain's novel share the same arrested social development and conservatism. Melkonian describes a future society of strict order, where people attend indifference courses, and the lordpoliceman holds tightly the reins of the community.

Bernardier is on a quest to give the forgotten art of theater back to the people, with all the applications – from entertainment to challenging the social norms of the day. In the words of the title character: *"Oh, theater is something magnificent! Imagine an empty space that suddenly comes alive, becoming either a home or castle or a market or a court room. You see, this is an invented space where you gather the world. Fates and characters tied in there, but not for real, it is just a play! Honestly, I don't know anything more splendid than this act, my boy. You become someone else, speak differently, you pull out of yourself a different human being and bring him to live."*[10]

Bernardier's tragedy is that the people have forgotten this art so thoroughly that they actively resist the very idea of acting something out.

Theater is commonly used to treat the questions about the relation between art and life, both in speculative and mainstream fiction. There is the famous novel *Theater* by Somerset Maugham. This art form is also prominently featured in some genre novels by Jack McDevitt (e.g. *Time Travelers Never Die*).

My Poor Bernardier is centered around the visit to Darlington – yet another small town that the troupe comes across after ten years of disappointment and rejection. Their master/director is full of optimism – it will be different this time, he says and asks his "actors" to rehearse more and harder than ever before. However, we learn from the internal monologue of the robot who carries the point of view that it has been like that all these previous times. The bio-mech machine wonders how come Darlington will be darling to them, unlike all these other undarling towns where they had stopped before. This game of words comes across only in English, but given Melkoninan's history as a translator, we should not be surprised.

Unfortunately for the protagonists, Darlington indeed turns out to be different, but in a worse way – here they are captured, sent to prison and sentenced. The misadventure in Darlingotn begins rather innocently – Bernardier sells thirty six tickets and rejoices, the proceeding will be sufficient to buy food for five days (early on we were given to understand that the master often resorts to sending the bio-mechanicals to still food for him) and there will be even some left for wig polish. The story contains a lot of details like this, that require behind-the-stage knowledge of theater. Throughout his career Melkoninan wrote a number of plays and three of them appeared on professional stage.

Eventually, the audience leaves, all but one person. The others are unable to perceive the make-believe art, despite the fact that some other very artificially sounding art forms are mentioned. People's mindsets, sculpted by the rigidity and lack of imagination, are unable to accept that a story may be truthful without being true. One of the locals summarizes: *"We know who the killer is, we know why he has killed, we know he will be discovered. So, why should we spend two hours in the dark?"*

Melkonian refrains from passing judgment here. Through the eyes of Bernardier the author paints the public not as a congregation of evil creatures, but as a group of victims in need of help. The main protagonist explains to them: *"It is not about the testimony… he (Hamlet) wants to bring them to the court of their own conscience!"*

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[10] Here and later the translations are by Valentin D. Ivanov.

Only the cleaner (a surprising parallel with the recent movie *Shape of Water*) remains, curious enough about the troubles and tribulations of Shakespeare's characters. However, he too leaves some time later, when the internal censorship, instilled in him by social norms, takes over and makes him feel guilty.

Here we see the depth of Melkonian's perception and understanding of how the dictatorships work – the powers rule both the external and the internal life of its subjects (it is unclear of the political system in that world is a monarchy or some form of a quasi-democracy, but my fingers refuse to type the word citizens here). Back in Soviet times dissidents could always go into internal immigration. The novella doesn't show how, but the level of social manipulation in the world of the story has reached much higher level than at the times of the Cold War when Melkonian grew up and lived. Chillingly, the advanced artificial intelligence systems of today, even in their "soft" version (e.g. neural networks, expert system, etc.) are able to interpret people's behavior and feed the users (us) the most fine-tuned ads and content that are most likely to be believed. Creating fake news has been transformed from a black art to a cold science. The path from here to the complete total influence over people is just a few short steps long. Hopefully, the same technologies that can control us will be so easily accessible, that they will also free us, helping to recognize attempts to impose on us hidden influences and secret agendas.

One of the character-building gems in this novella is the encounter of the protagonist with the nameless colonel in charge of the local law enforcement. The two men first meet shortly after Bernardier and his actors are arrested. It is a classical scene that could fit perfectly in any anti-totalitarian piece of fiction. To underline that they feel, think and live in different planes of existence Melkonian brings this moment to grotesque level, when the opposing sides speak with epigrams: *"... you spread infection"* the colonel accuses them. *"We spread the infection of beauty"* answers Bernardier and later adds: *"The stage is a territory of freedom"* and *"without emotions life is a swamp."*

The next meeting evolves further the interaction between the two. The troupe is locked in a prison cell, the robots are low on power, some switch to what we would call today a stand-by mode. Yet, Bernardier wakes them up to prepare for their regular rehearsal, at nine thirty in the morning. They refuse, logically and understandably, under the circumstances. Then, we are treated to a surprising celebration of theater and art told from the point of view of a bio-mechanical:

"As you wish, my children! I will play by myself" Bernardier says, takes off his jacket and takes a long look around at the cell. Probably sets up the stage in his thoughts – the watch tower is here, the soldiers will talk there, the ghost will enter from the other side.

I was astounded to find, years ago, that Bernardier had no need of props. A few square meters of space, words and at least one viewer was enough for him. Because theater without an audience is a schizophrenic delirium.

If I believed in God I would have thought that Bernardier is a son of the Devil."

He plays all the parts, and his sudden burst of energy and emotion gradually draws along the members of the troupe. One by one they step forward and say their lines, knowing that this may well be their last performance. It is a deeply disturbing notion that the ultimate stage in existence in this world is a prison cell.

The rehearsal goes well, until a strange voice interrupts them. The colonel arrives and freely admits that he admires their acting. The opponent of Bernardier clearly understands and even appreciates the messages of the play. *"God has long been unemployed"*, the enforcer says.

Here the main protagonists openly state their distinct moral positions. The lordpoliceman and his henchmen are for order. Never mind who imposes it – the officer suggests it is not God, it may be an anonymous dictator or a government computer, it doesn't really matter. We come to my opening questions – order is safe and secure, it doesn't let people to hurt themselves with actions or with *"intelligent philosophical discussions"* (again, the colonel is smart enough to understand that

those can be the most harmful). It is an old and well known philosophy that dictators have used since the beginning of time to justify themselves.

The policeman brings the verdict – in a few hours engineers from *United Robots* will come to erase the memories of the "actors"; Bernardier will be reimbursed for his property loss, of course; this is a lawful country, after all. Finally, the officer wants to see the rest of the play. He would let them continue, on one condition – they should promise to keep his presence in secret. Bernardier readily gives his word and the play goes on.

The coda of the story dots the i's and crosses the t's. It contains the novella's punchline and telling it out is a spoiler, but knowing the fate of the vast majority of the foreign (e.g. from non-English speaking world) science fiction works – never to be translated and published in English – I will give it away here. Some time has passed. The bio-mechanical who is managing Darlington's waste processing facility – a fancy name for an old-fashioned junkyard – occasionally freezes and utters strange words. Words that could be poetry, but aren't, at least they aren't written in classic verses. A few names, among them Yorick's are waived here and there in the text, for the especially slow readers. Another robot that calls herself Princess lurks around. Finally, a fifty-some year old man who looks like a typical crackpot, shows up. *"Do you know what theater is, my boy?"* he asks.

By now we have recognized that the old troupe is back together. Was it by chance, that Bernardier selected his actors (I skip the quotation marks here intentionally, by now the androids have truly achieved that "rank") from the *"second luxurious category A, with long-term memory"*? The keyword here is "long-term". Perhaps, Bernardier has reassembled his acting group more than once. This is not entirely unlikely, once we remember the comment at the beginning of the novella that he chose horse driven carts as a mode of transportation to avoid detection from the super-moral police. It seems this hide-and-seek game has been going on for a long time.

***

Bulgaria of the early 1980s was still a communist state behind the iron curtain with its obvious limitations and concerns. However, writers like Agop Melkonian transcended the politics of the day and managed to write tales that remain current today, a third of a century later. Learning from the experience of the past we can guess that – very unfortunately – they are likely to remain important in the future. I find it scary that this old story invokes thoughts about restricted liberty and freedoms of expression, issues that still plague our days. Apparently, thirty some years of social development have not moved us much up the social staircase if the old questions and worries are still alive and well. Last but not least, it's also worrisome that today, a long time after the Iron Curtain has fallen, some great speculative fiction from Eastern Europe still remains unknown to the Western readers.

Valentin D. Ivanov
Dec 16-23, 2017, Munich

Oh you, my Mamnik, you my, Black birdlet...[11]

Mamnik is a 12-episode TV show that aired at the Bulgarian National Television (BNT) in Jan-Mar 2026. It lies at the border between dark fantasy and horror, between the present day and some painful episodes of Bulgarian history. It is based on a novel with the same name by Vasil Popov. Director: Viktor Bozhinov, Starring: Ekaterina Lazarevska, Marian Stefanov, Gringo-Bogdan Grigorov, Vladimir Penev, Yordan Rusin, Eli Skorcheva, Atanas Atanasov, Nikola Dodov, Mariana Krumova, Galya Alexandrova and others.

Review by Dragomir Stoyanov

I remember that shivering feeling from my childhood – to sit in the twilight, staring at the screen, where Mulder and Scully descended once again into the darkness of the American countryside to solve yet another "unexplained case". Now, when the mystery is not set in the woods of Washington State, but in a place I can visit in an hour's drive, or in a city whose streets I recognize, somehow the horror is no longer abstract and it becomes a tiny little bit more personal. And it is precisely this personal proximity – geographical and emotional – that I have been looking for in *The X-Files* for years, is what I am finding in *Mamnik*.

I admit right away that I hadn't read or listened to the novel[12] and had almost no idea what it was about, despite its popularity. I knew I would watch the series regardless of what it would offer, at least because it was the first of its kind – the closest thing I remember was a TV movie *Kolobar*, also shown on Bulgarian national TV, around 2001. It suffered from the limitations of its time, but it should be acknowledged that it tried to offer something more unconventional. I have not heard of similar productions during the socialist era. According to Internet sources, the horror genre was absent as an independent phenomenon during that period, because it was perceived as alien to the ideological norms – a product of Western bourgeois culture, incompatible with the canons of socialist realism.

Back to the topic. The basis of *Mamnik* is a plot, impressing with the effective merging of folk legends and real historical memories of the country – two elements that carry the burden of centuries-old beliefs and collective fears. Adding references to the recent COVID ordeal weaves a sense of modernity and further familiarity into the folklore canvas, making the events on the screen disturbingly real. The plot follows the beaten path of the genre, and although it does not offer any particularly innovative solutions unknown to horror/fantasy fans, the narrative structure provides a sufficiently fascinating and attention-attracting experience. The mystery is well-dosed, the internal logic is well-maintained and allows the events to be viewed through the prisms of several characters without them becoming superfluous. The emotional charge of the story is convincingly present and fulfills its purpose, but the actors are the ones who have to bear the burden of recreating it, and we will talk later how they manage it.

The main problem, however, comes with the pace – it builds up too slowly and for almost half of the season the episodes have no particular contribution to the progress of the overall story ark. Yes, we could easily have done with six episodes instead of twelve. We see similar structure in foreign productions – *Westworld* (especially the first season) is a good example, as well as *Pluribus* – so we cannot attribute this solely to our local context. Apparently, this is the modern storytelling fashion. Yet, all this screen time could have delivered more hints and winks to the viewer – scenes that would allow for different interpretations and make you wonder how their logic fits with different theories, as well as for the occasional surreal moment that needed to be deciphered –

[11] Liberal translated line from a Bulgarian folk song.

[12] *Mamnik* first met with success as a book in audio and print editions.

similarly to was done with agent Cooper in *Twin Peaks*. These elements are not completely absent in the show, but their scale could have been expanded for the benefit of both the story and its viewers.

To some extent, this drawback is compensated for by the atmosphere, the cinematography and the soundtrack – three elements that are undoubtedly among the series' strengths. Landing a horrific feeling to places we visit every day (especially for me – I grew up next to the city park, which was a forest in the show) is definitely one of the direct hits. The cinematography also contributes – the ability to guide the viewer's gaze, to create compositions in which the threat is expected outside the frame, is crucial. The visual effects also do their job – although far from Hollywood scale and standards, they are credible enough and help the production, rather than harming it. The soundtrack is tense, ominous and fits the atmosphere perfectly. The new generation may not know, but the composer Petar Dundakov is largely responsible for Marius Kurkinski's *Ti-ri-ri-ram*, as well as for the quality Bulgarian electronic music of *Tibetan Hearts* from the late 1990s. It's satisfying to see him succeed as a film composer today.

Speaking of the acting – as hinted above – we see the well-known weakness of most of our productions, so I won't go into details, but I will highlight the stronger performances. Jordan Rusin (Kamen), Marian Stefanov (Mitko) and Dimitar Selenski (bai Ventsi) do a believable job, with the latter always managing to impress on me an extra degree of evil. The presence of Nadya Derderyan as the stepmother, however, stands out as the strongest – we could have seen her in more episodes, but let us be content with what we have. I had read positive reviews for her appearance. Apparently many people are recommending the episode with her to viewers who don't follow the series – because of the excellent story and acting. I agree that the tenth episode stands out with much more convincing actors' work.

Before concluding, I want to say a few words about the product placement. On the one hand, I understand the need and I'm all for it when it's done in moderation – especially in the context of the series, where familiar brands reinforce the realism. On the other hand, sometimes it was discreet, but on occasions – definitely not. It was disturbing to listen to a mysterious conversation that suddenly switches from "something strange is going on here" to "take brand X stimulants against the coronavirus and you won't have to worry."

At the end, I will share the most important, the hope that perhaps *Mamnik* does not close, but opens the way for similar productions in the future. It proves that genre cinema can be made in our country, drawing from our own identity, instead of imitating foreign examples; it proves that there is an audience that seeks it, and creators who can produce it. If we learn the lessons from it – to speed up the pace, cut out the superfluous and rely on strong actors – then the next projects may not by just attempts, but they become real successes. Because when horror is born in our lands, from our forests and from our legends, it cannot help but resonate with us in a way that no Hollywood blockbuster ever could. In the latter, even after experiencing real paranormal horror, not a single character would pour himself a shot of rakia[13] to a fitting conclusion of his or her his story.

Scoreboard:

Story – 5
Characters – 5
Visual style – 5
Elements of surprise – 4.50
Food for thoughts – 4.50
Emotional charge – 6
Speculative elements – 5

[13] Traditional Bulgarian strong alcoholic drink, usually made of grapes or fruits.

Originality – 5
Production quality – 4.50
Marketing, promotion and hit potential – 5.50

Overall score: Very good (5.00)

Dragomir Stoyanov is a fan of science fiction and spy thrillers, who especially likes time travel stories and is a huge fan of *The X-Files*, *Terminator*, *The Matrix*, *La Femme Nikita*, *24* and *Breaking Bad*. He regularly contributes to the Bulgarian online magazine WWW.SciFi.bg. His articles can be found at: https://scifi.bg/author/hillinger3/

Selected links:

TV show Mamnik, trailer

SciFi.bg Webzine

Worm in an Autumn wind, by Liubomir Nikolov

Vintage artificial reality with Eastern European taste from thirty years ago – review of the science fiction novel *Worm in an Autumn wind*, by Liubomir Nikolov, 1986 (Eurocon award for debut novel, 1987, Montpellier, France)

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Thirty years ago Liubomir Nikolov, a young and promising writer at the time, asked the question how one can tell if the surrounding world is nothing more than a computer simulation. He wrote about it in Worm *in an Autumn wind* – a short novel, titled with a line from a classic Bahso haiku.

The simulation scenario is one of the possible solutions of the Fermi paradox. According to it, humanity lives in a simulated Earth, all we can touch and see is nothing more than a product of complex calculation in some gigantic powerful computer, including the distant stars and galaxies that we can not touch. Today this is a popular concept, and there are countless novels based on the same idea. I will mention just one example – *Restoration game*, by Ken McLeod. The premise of thiat novel is well woven into the history of the modern world, offering fantastic explanations of some twists and turns of the historic processes, but most of all, asking ethical questions like whether the suffering of simulated humans is real or not.

Disclaimer: Below I will reveal the story line and the ending of Worm in an Autumn wind. Sadly, I find it unlikely that the book will see (a deserved) English translation.

Back then the young Liubomir Nikolov confronted his characters and readers with the same moral dilemma. The book was split into three parts – the first was an action packed story of the cosmonaut Grem Trool. Vacationing on an isolated planet, all alone (not counting his intelligent black panther) he finds himself in morphing and increasingly strange reality – e.g. the robots that attach him can easily tear apart the shielding of a space ship, bat just as easily fall victims of the rocks that he throws at them. Eventually, everything turns into a grotesque cartoon with bright, single shade colors. The reader can easily recognize the early animation of Disney, but Trool suffers from memory losses and has to struggle with great difficulties to stay afloat in this strange game that the “players”, as he calls them, have imposed on him.

The second part features talking heads. Literally, because most of it takes place in a TV studio where a talk show host tortures, as much as he can, a Nobel prize winner, professor Lembovich. The professor won the award for creating the videonics. Gradually the readers come to understand that this is a technological achievement, rather than a scientific discovery (the question which category he won the prize in remains open). This is “a TV with the randomization of real life”, as one of the characters puts it. We are provided a further explanation by example: in one realization of a video the lead sees a poisonous snake by chance, in another he doesn't; respectively, the story takes different turns. Therefore, the story that happens in each videonic device is unique, different from the stories that happen in the other devices. There are probably millions of “simulations” in that world, as we would call them today. They are part of the households, and the characters from them have grown so close to the people who own the videonic devices, that they are almost family members. Yet, there is no communication between the show and the outside world (much like in the *Restoration game*). The owning is (distantly) reminiscent of slavery, but this parallel is not fully explored. It is rather the viewers' detachment that is criticized, as we will see towards the end of the novel.

Intriguingly, the creator of the videonics rejects the mobile version outright, he can't imagine people walking around and watching the shows – so, no mobile devices are forthcoming in the world of the *Worm*...

The final third part brings the two story lines together. It is revealed that the videonics institute in the country where the inventor has been invited has achieved a major breakthrough: more computer memory, better (as we would say today: Internet) connection and data compression, and the videonics characters are now on the brink of becoming conscious intelligent beings. Or maybe they already have become intelligent beings? Hearing about the experiment, professor Lembovich wants to go straight to the lab, to see what was done, and how. At this point the readers may begin to wonder if the real motivation behind the invitation was to make the announcement in front of a larger audience, attracted by the popularity of the Nobel prize winner.

In the novel's climax Grem Trool appears in the studio and we understand that he is a character from the stock space-opera type simulation that was used in the experiment. It has succeeded beyond the expectation of its creators. The cosmonaut starts to ask them hard questions... The scene is reminiscent of the Babylon-5 episode when Delen, upset with the talking heads on a TV who proceed to trash her and Scheridan's lifelong work, appeared in the studio to give them some trashing on her own.

Trool also proceeds to trash the creators of the simulation: aren't they people, how could they let their creations suffer? Professor Lembovich explains that the simulations can not be tampered, they lack the option to take input from the viewers by design. Just like the movies on TV. Indeed, the videonics turn out to be no more than a personalized TV experience. Lembovish apologizes and admits that the humanity has lost the understanding where the art stops and the peepshow begins.

The readers are offered one final surprise – the epilogue reveals that the story so far was in fact the first videonics movie! It was prepared by an assistant in the research lab that made the very first steps in the development of this new technology. Professor Lembovish doesn't exist, and his Nobel prise appears to be an insider joke between the assistant and the head of the lab. The head was ill, and he is recovering now, while his team keeps working; they did realize the responsibility that the development of the videonics puts on their shoulders, and their first film “production” was an exercise in facing this responsibility. At the end, Liubomir Nikolov turns out to be even more optimistic for the future of humanity than what one might have expected from reading the main body of the novel.

The lack of viewer feedback which would have made the simulations more akin to the modern computer games than to the TV does make the *Worm*... a bit technologically outdated; the lack of mobile devices doesn't help, either. However, from a moral and ethical point of view the novel is just as fresh as it can be. In fact, the advances in computational technology have made the problems discussed in the novel much more tangible. It is no surprise, that the themes of the *Worm*... appeared in a score or modern works of fiction: the novels *The girl who was plugged in*, by Jame Tiptree Jr., *Darvinia*, by Robert Charles Wilson, *Surface detail,* by Iain M. Banks, *Time out of joint*, by P. K. Dick, the movies *Tron*, *Nirvana*, *Her*, and indeed the *Truman show* (albeit the simulation there is not computer based), to name a few.

* * *

Liubomir Nikolov (b. 1950, Kazanlyk, Bulgaria) studied for an engineer, but spent almost all his professional life so far, working at national Bylgarian TV and various periodicals. His first two novels *The Court of the Generations* and *The Mole* appeared in 1978 and 1981. *Worm in an Autumn wind* was his third long form work. His novel *The tenth righteous person* (1999) was elected by the fans as the best book of the decade 1990-1999. He has written numerous short stories, and he was one of the pioneers of the gamebook genre in Bulgaria, creating numerous works, many of them under pen names. Liubomir Nikolov gained wide popularity as translator of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (which brought him an award by the Bulgarian union of translators) and other novels by J. R. R. Tolkien, of the original *Dune* novels by Frank Herbert, and many works by

Ernest Hemingway, John Grisham, Clifford Simak and Robert Sheakley.

Valentin D. Ivanov
21-24.08.2015, Munich

The controlled realities in the Bulgarian Science Fiction: a great debate if the technology is a tool to free or to enslave people (nearly spoiler-free review) in three novels: *Worm in an Autumn Wind* by Lyubomir Nikolov, *Orthodox by* Grigor Gachev and *Dealer of Realities* by Nicolas Dimtrov

Worm in an Autumn Wind (*Червей под есенен вятър*), Lyubomir Nikolov (Любомир Николов), 1981
Orthodox (*Ортодокс*), Grigor Gachev (Григор Гачев), 2018.
Dealer of Realities (*Дилър на реалности*), Nicolas Dimitrov (Николас Димитров), 2019

This concept of non-physical reality has an intimate connection with the idealistic philosophers of ancient Greece and India that assumed the Universe existed only in people's minds. The first usage of the term virtual reality in its modern technical meaning dates to the mid-XIX century but the concept enters SF even earlier – in the 1930s with the works of Laurence Manning and Stanley Weinbaum. Among the examples are the *Futurological Congress* by Stanislaw Lem, *The Restoration Game* by Ken MacLeod, *The Matrix* and many others.

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There were very few computers in Bulgaria back in 1981 and most of them were room-sized main-frame type ones, with networks of connected terminals. But the mass computerization was not far off. In fact, two years earlier the Institute of Cybernetics at the National Academy of Sciences (an organization akin to the Max Planck society in Germany) started working on personal computers. The first model, IMKO-1, was an Apple II clone. Three copies were manufactured in 1980, fifty – in 1981.

At the same time the Bulgarian hard-SF was dominated by the dreams of space. Lyuben Dilov has published already his seminal *Icarus Road* (*Пътят на "Икар"*) in 1974 and his great children SF novel *Stellar Adventures of Numi and Niki* (*Звездните приключения на Нуми и Ники*) appeared in 1980 (my kids liked it a lot, some 40 years after its publication!).

This was the technological and genre landscape – broadly speaking – when Lyubomir Nikolov's short novel *Worm in an Autumn Wind* appeared in 1981 in the anthology *Models 2* (the first stand-alone edition dates from 1986). It is a story of the cosmonaut Grem Trool. While vacationing on a quiet far away planet he finds himself in a morphing and increasingly strange reality. Eventually, the readers understand that the cosmonaut is what we would call today a non-playing-character in a simulation. In the culmination Grem gets the opportunity to question the morality of this kind of entertainment. A number of modern day analogs come to mind, from the *Truman Show* to *Free Guy*, together with countless books.

*

Two new books by Bulgarian writers published in the last few years deserve special attention. *Orthodox*, a novel by Grigor Gachev appeared as an e-book in 2006 and as a stand-alone print edition in 2019. Contrary to the expectations for a writer who makes a living working in IT, the novel itself contains very little details about the technical background of the world. But there are extensive appendices to compensate for that. Apparently, in the future humanity has split into separate worlds according to the religion, preferences, inclinations, taste, etc. of the people. The appendix explains that these are physical worlds, but they are tightly controlled, just like the virtual

realities from the other two books considered here. There are high-tech scientifically oriented worlds (we are shown one, pointedly called Academy) and pastoral, religious worlds. The latter is where one of the two main characters, a curious little boy Peter, lives. He continuously investigates and questions the convenient assumptions and conventions around himself. In the course of the novel the boy gets to cross into the Academy, breaking in the process the forced isolation of the pastoral world.

Dealer of Realities by Nicolas Dimitrov was published in 2019 at the same time in Russia and in Bulgaria. This kind of book is possible only in the modern globalized world. The writer is originally Bulgarian, but he has spent a significant part of his life abroad. The book was first written in Russian and translated in Bulgarian by Marta Vladova. It is a story of the birth and the spreading of a technological revolution that makes it possible to implant memories and to create personalized virtual reality much more advanced than any VR headset can do. In fact, it is much more akin to the pharmaceutically augmented reality of *Futurological Congress* by Stanislaw Lem. The book is generously sprinkled with sex and violence and told in a cynical voice. The ending closes on the beginning of the story, and is open to interpretation – it remains a possibility that the entire story takes place in the personalized virtual realities of the main characters – Zoltan and Catherine – but it is also possible that this is true only for the final part… But I promised a nearly spoiler-free review. Influences upon Dimitrov can be traced to the works of Victor Pelevin, Thomas Pinchon, China Mieville, Paolo Bacigalupi but the *Dealer* is definitely not a grim imitation.

*

The novels of Dimitrov and Gachev reflect upon the well-known problems: about freedom and about the lack of tolerance towards others. The two writers – wittingly or not – resort to the same approach to solve the conflict between people, between societies: they conveniently separate them into intrinsically uniform worlds. Extrapolating further, if humanity follows this path, it will inevitably end up with personalized realities, where every human/creature/mind lives in a personal paradise – not necessarily as a king or a superstar, I can imagine that the more masochistically inclined will choose to be slaves. This is a scary world of perpetual isolation or rather of false communication. And it is even scarier that the soft-AI tools already available today are tracing the path in that direction – the cookies-supported search engines use our search history to self-tune and to lead us to pages and (opinions!) that are more likely to reinforce our beliefs. Challenging our opinions is not a problem by itself – if our ideas are correct, they will survive it, if they are not – so much better for us.

I don't blame the two writers – the lack of tolerance is a difficult problem to tackle and there are no easy solutions. The advanced communication and transportation, the open borders of today have facilitated contacts between cultures that hardly used to come across each other before. The social networks have made public us and our personal beliefs, preferences and tastes. We can be criticized about something that we posted ten years ago without thinking. Furthermore, machine learning techniques allow us to learn about things that sometimes we ourselves are not aware of (or prefer not to be aware of).

Instead in a paradise where we can learn from each other and enrich each other, the new technologies brought up a toxic environment of cyberspace bullying, hostility and empty entertainment. Eastern Europe is all too familiar with both the constant surveillance – from the time before the changes in the late 1980s – and with the world of distracting *panem et circenses* where we plunged in the 1990s.

There is a direct philosophical debate between *Orthodox* and *Dealer of Realities*. The two books illustrate that technology is not good or evil, the way people use it can be good or evil. The novel describes two opposing ways to use the virtual (or semi-virtual and tightly controlled)

realities and we can find the distant precursor of this debate nearly four decades ago in *Worm in an Autumn Wind*.

From a literary point of view Dimitrov's book is more advanced, he is a more experienced and I would say world-weary and world-aware writer, and it shows. The translation is excellent – I only caught one case of a Russian word getting through. Furthermore, the black-and-red illustrations of Nikita Kravstov and Maria Zvolinska give a meaningful visual support to the story and deserve separate praises.

On the other hand, *Orthodox* is the more humane and humanistic novel, in the great tradition of the Strugatsky brothers. While still resorting to the separation of the opposite worldviews in different realities, Gachev argues that the diversity rises even within the initially "uniform" societies. This is an issue that often rises in SF in the context of generation spaceships – while the first generation is ready to sacrifice everything to reach the stars, the following generations find themselves trapped in a prison: *Ray* (*Луч*) by Marina and Sergey Dyachenko, *Journey into Space* by Toby Litt, to name some European examples.

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I think all three books deserve the time to read them. The *Worm...* is somewhat outdated, but not by much. Nikolov wisely avoided technical details, but in his version the virtual reality is used in a fashion closer to TV rather than to the artificial environment that is envisioned today. But I don't think the technical details matter here. Ultimately, all these novels are about freedom. *Orthodox* is by far the more optimistic one – I can tell without revealing too much that the borders between the worlds are dropped, at least to some extent, while the *Dealer of Realities* takes a more cynical stance. I am sure each book will find its readers.

*

Authors' bios:

- Lyubomir Nikolov (b. 1950) is a Bulgarian SF writer, translator and editor. Author of five novels and many stories. He translated Tolkien in Bulgarian. Nikolov is the "father" of the game-books genre in Bulgaria. He has won: EuroCon award (1987), SotsCon award (1989) and Graviton award (2001). His novel *The tenth righteous* was voted by the readers the best novel of the decade 1990-2000.

- Grigor Gachev (b. 1966) is a Bulgarian SF writer, translator, fan and social activist. *Orthodox* is his first novel and he has written about a dozen stories. He maintains the Bulgarian SFF wiki – a precious genre resource.

- Nicolas Dimitrov was born in Bulgaria, but spent the last 30 yrs of his life abroad, studying, and working for the UN and for the World bank. He graduated form the National high school for ancient languages and various universities (Brussels, Washington and Buenos Aires). Dimitrov speaks eleven languages, including some dead ones. *Dealer of Realities* is his debut novel.

Valentin D. Ivanov
Munich, 2-18.02.2020

The Man from Page 54, Martin Petkov: The Human Qualities in People from Other Pages

Erove Publishing House, Sofia, 2024
ISBN 978-619-277-032-7
Editor Petar Tushkov, proofreader Desislava Ivanova, cover Victoria Videvska

We have in front of us a writer's book, and it is not because the lead character is a refowriter—I won't spoil for you what this means—but because the theme of this novel is about the role of literature in our lives. This is just one of the themes, actually. Others include doubting the reality—pretty much following Philip Dick—and the ever important question of freedom—quite like in the novels of Nikolay Tellalov and the Strugatsky brothers. The latter have left an identifiable mark on Martin Petkov's work. Formally speaking, this is a cyberpunk novel, but without offering any particularly extreme technological challenges or solutions. The main stage here is taken by the people.

It is important to note, the book is a feast of our literary perceptions because of the endless analogies, references to other works, and quotes of thoughts or even scenes from well-known books. Furthermore, *The Man...* is conceived and executed as a structural puzzle that constantly keeps the readers on their toes for the next jump from one plot line to another, or for the next surprising storyline turn.

Last but not least, the book is open-ended, and it offers different interpretations. This probably won't appeal to people who like clear and well-defined endings, but the novel reflects well the unfathomable logic of the world we live in, and the author must have been having fun with those who seek certainty, judging by the title and the contents of page 54, as well as a long and explicit musing on the subject within the text.

The lead character is a person, who more or less accidentally found himself in a hostile environment, who tries to navigate it and, as much as possible, to resist it. The first thirty pages create a false impression that this is a story about saving a “damsel in distress”. But in this gloomy world, no one is able to save themselves from big problems, and the lady in question copes wonderfully with the small inconveniences of life on her own. She takes a much more combative stance, but in the end, neither of them finds a better solution than running away. The two epilogues completely destroy any expectations we had from the pseudo-romantic line and offer two new and surprising contexts – I find one similar to *The Matrix*, and the other to *The Noon Universe* by Strugatsky. Both endings seem equally convincing and it is up to the readers to decide which one they like better.

In my opinion, along with the general human questions about freedom and the right of choice, the specific themes that the book raises are how to fight the all-encompassing corporate evil and whether there is even a point in such a fight, because the enemy is so powerful and all-encompassing. I do not think that the escape with which the main text begins and ends is a meaningful solution. The epilogues give hope, albeit in different directions (which I shall not spoil), but they did not leave us completely free from the feeling of certain artificiality (think about the “happy” ending version of *Brasil*). In addition, the novel somewhat blurs the traditional structure of connection-development-climax, which is probably a conscious choice of the author.

The novel is short—by my account about 70,000 words—despite the massive paper brick it is, because of the large font. Probably, both the authors and the publisher had realized that the main readership was going to come from people of age, with degrading eyesight. From a literary point of view, I would say that it is written very well, without undertaking unnecessary experiments, and it significantly exceeds the average level in Bulgarian speculative fiction. The characters are convincing, logical, and I did not notice any logical or psychological contradictions.

Where should we place *The Man...* on the literary map of the speculative? There are obvious parallels with *The Inhabited Island*, *It's Hard to Be a God* and *The Second Invasion of the Martians* by the Strugatsky brothers. From Bulgarian speculative fiction, it is worth mentioning *Orthodox* by Grigor Gachev (2018) and *Reality Dealer* by Nikolas Dimitrov (2019) as landmarks. The brothers' novels are widely known, and the last two books are optimistic and pessimistic cyberpunk, respectively. Along this axis, *The Man...* is closer to *The Dealer...*, but is significantly more humanistic than that novel.

In conclusion: the book deserves high praise and indeed, my ratings below are near the top. It may seem that I always give high grades, but I usually bother to write reviews only of books and movies that I think are worth discussing.

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I came across the book by chance, via a mutual acquaintance with the author, but I follow Martin Petkov's work and probably I would have read it eventually. However, in the context or popularity and reaction, I was struck by the passive response of Bulgarian fandom to a work that is undoubtedly an event in the genre. Unfortunately, this passivity extends not only and not specifically to this novel, but to the written word in general. It seems that paper books are increasingly losing the ability to provoke the imagination and emotions of readers. Sad.

*

My grades (2 – lowest, 6 – highest):
Story – 6
Characters – 6
Style – 5
Surprise elements – 6
Emotional charge – 5
Topics of discussion – 6
Speculative elements – 5
Degree of originality – 6
Writing efforts – 6
Marketing, promotional potential – 5
Overall grade: Excellent (5,60)

Valentin D. Ivanov
25.12.2025

How to traverse the Carpathian mountains? Review of the novel *Traversing the Carpathians* by Georgi Tsvetkov

Erove Publishing House, Sofia, 2024.
Cover artist: Victoria Videvska.

This is a book for the admirers of Michel Houellebecq and Christopher Priest. Think of *The Possibility of an Island* or *The Separation*, add a few pinches of drug-induced delirium to taste – just as in the works of another speculative fiction icon, Philip K. Dick – and you have this novel. If that sounds ambitious to you – yes, the author seems to have high ambitions and has tried to take his readers far along the way to them. I will add that Georgi Tsvetkov teaches chemistry at Sofia University.

What is *Traversing the Carpathians* about?

This is the million-dollar question. At the beginning freedom seems to be the main topic. A Hungarian officer, Lajos (a name loaded with meanings, possibly hiding the real-life journalist and revolutionary Lajos Kossuth) returns from the New World to meet Coburg (another charged character, who may be masking the figure of the first post-liberation king in Bulgaria). Lajos is looking for support – his people are fighting against the Austrian Empire, and struggling. I hope it is becoming obvious by now – there are numerous historical parallels in the book, but none of them is explicitly stated, left to the reader's conjecture, erudition and imagination. Only not-so-casually thrown-in words here or there provide material to feed that imagination – if the reader is willing to take the trouble and use it, of course. To the author's credit, the hints are unobtrusive and there is no sense of an annoying authorial presence, we don't hear the writer's voice: "I wrote this sentence so that you understand that you should feel this way and that…"

After the introductory meeting between the Hungarian officer and the probable-Bulgarian-king, the really interesting part begins.

We gradually discover that the ocean level has risen in the mid-nineteenth century, much of the lowlands have sunk, and Europe has found itself crisscrossed with water routes – canals – where high-speed (!) submarines roam. At first glance – directly linked with the consequences of ongoing global climate change, but this is never stated plainly, and although there are submarines, there are no signs of an early industrial revolution on a modern scale. And Coburg's submarines are somehow minuscule and so rapid… They sound almost symbolic.

Symbols, provisions and conventions play a central role in the book, and as the narrative progresses, political... conventions gradually give way to ecological ones, and further on, they are about to make other sharp and unpredictable turns (I won't reveal it here!), which, however, from the perspectives of the readers who have reached the last page, are quite logical and explainable. Keeping the surprise a secret, I can only say that contemporary geopolitical realities are reflected in a distorted mirror in a very wise way…

I will mention instead – and this is clear from the very beginning – that practically every member of the not-melting European society (unlike the ice caps) – from the officers who madly "ride" the submarines, just as a madman would ride a fast horse (there is a reason for his madness!) to their servants – are drugged daily with hemlock (and yes, Socrates is mentioned), with horrendous consequences for the old continent. In this particular case the parallels with our society, "drugged" by the media and social networks, are more than obvious.

The novel is open-ended and the author leaves us to decide for ourselves whether the surprising presence described in the book is an invasion or a rescue expedition – a Chekhov gun, which appears on the first pages, hints at a possible answer.

Tsvetkov takes us on a Tolkien-esque (or Le Guin-esque – remember how the characters in *The Left Hand...* crossed the icy deserts) journey into the heart of Africa. It's a catharsis-level experience that takes the characters back to their absolute roots in a few... specific ways that I don't think I need to mention in this review.

Given enough time and patience, the novel can be traced to more influences than Houellebecq, Priest, and Dick. There are nods to Bukowski, Pynchon, and a host of other disaffected and angry young writers of the 1960s. Gradually, the reader – or at least I – came to believe that I was dealing with a classic case of the "unreliable narrator," as in many of the books by those authors. Here, the method is used to blur the boundaries between physical and mental experience.

I have mentioned only a fraction of the symbols paraded before our eyes; a really attentive reader will probably discover more. To answer the question I asked earlier, this book is about the symbols themselves, about their nature and interpretation, about their power and influence – as much as the novel is about the story, the characters and their development.

Traversing... is an example of quality literary fiction, from my point of view. In Bulgaria, similar literature is written by Zdravka Evtimova, Yancho Cholakov, and, although he does not admit being part of the speculative genre, Georgi Gospodinov, whose *Timeshelter* uses a typical speculative premise – a large-scale social experiment.

It was a pleasure to make my way through the maze of symbols and analogies that Georgi Tsvetkov has woven. I recommend *Traversing the Carpathians*. It may seem like I recommend everything I write about; it is actually the other way around, I bother to write almost exclusively about works that I like.

My rating (2 – lowest, 6 – highest):

Story – 5,50
Characters – 5,50
Writing style – 5,50
Elements of surprise – 5,50
Emotional charge – 6,00
Thought-provoking ideas – 6,00
Speculative elements – 6,00
Originality – 6,00
Writing/editing effort – 5,50
Marketing, promotion and bestselling potential – 4,00 (I guess most of the symbols are too complex and require too strong a literary background and literacy to make the book a bestseller)

Overall rating: Excellent (5,55)

Valentin D. Ivanov
Jan 10, 2025, Garching

The Treasure of Planet Earth by Zora Zagorska – the first woman who wrote a science fiction novel in Bulgarian

The fall of 1967. Late October, to be precise. Two months earlier at the NyCon in New York Robert Heinlein gets the Hugo award in the novel category from the hands of Harlan Ellison for The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, beating to it Samuel Delany with his Babel-17, and Daniel Keyes with Flowers for Algernon, among others. Alas, all those books will remain unreachable for the Bulgarian readers for another quarter of a century, so the young girl Pepa from Pazardzhik, a small town in central Bulgaria, gets another gift from her aunt Delche – the novel The Treasure of Planet Earth, by Zora Zagorska, as we learn from the inscription. Incidentally, this is the first Bulgarian science fiction novel, written by a woman, as far as my investigation of various bibliographic sources indicated – mostly, the wonderful Fantastic Bulgaria (Болгария Фантастическая) by Evgeny Haritonov (Евгений Харитонов). This is the same copy that I ended up buying when I was visiting a friend in that same town of Pazardzhik, in the Summer of 2012.

The 252-page hardcover is printed in 15100 copies (unthinkable print run for a modern day Bulgarian speculative fiction book!), and it appears in the young adult adventure series by the government run People's Culture publishing house. This is the fifth book of the author who specializes in children's adventure.

The story is basic, especially for a sophisticated modern reader: emissaries from a doomed alien civilization arrive on Earth in a search for a better place to make a life, but they contact the wrong people, who hurt them trying to extort wealth and secrets. Eventually, the good earthlings save the extraterrestrials and help them to revitalize their civilization. The advanced alien technology opens deep space to humanity.

Stripped from the details, the story does sound familiar, Many modern day space operas have re-told it, or various aspects of it. The difference is that the novel of Zora Zagorska is highly ideological. As Evgeny Haritonov says, it is essentially a political pamphlet.

The devil is in the details, so let's dive into them. The novel opens at an astronomical observatory in the Soviet Union, somewhere on the Pacific ocean coast, as we would find out later. The time frame is set by the cursory comment that an elderly professor is a veteran from the revolution and the civil war in the early 20-s. A young assistant brings to him the latest photographs of the sky which show a maneuvering object – an early version of somewhat similar plot element that we have seen recently in Neil Stephenson's Anathem and Ken MacLeod's Learning the World. The object appears to land, and the astronomers realize that its trajectory will take it into a foreign country, tellingly named Dollarland. The next chapter takes us to a lonely back road in that country where the formerly unemployed Jack Molnar walks to the bus station, to his new job, jealously looking at the passing cars. He wants to be rich and when fate makes him the first human to meet the aliens, he tries to make the best of this sudden opportunity.

The story unfolds. The aliens eventually are discovered by the police and a prominent senator invites them to a party – a fund-rising event, as we would have said today. The mafia sees an opportunity here as well, kidnapping two of them. Their disappearance can't remain unnoticed, and the senator is cornered – he wants to use them to gain political advantage, but his ties to the mafia prevent him from taking real steps to free the aliens. To remove them from the public eye he sends the remaining group on an excursion to a gold mine, but soon the relations between the extraterrestrials and their hosts deteriorate to the point that the police just tows the space ship away with its passengers locked inside. Eventually, the aliens escape to the ocean, saving a black man about to be hanged by Ku KluxKlan, and use their craft as an ordinary ship, just to run into a nuclear test which damages the vehicle.

Luckily, the ocean currents and the will of the author take them to the coast with the

observatory, where their approach was first detected. This is the opening of the second part of the novel. Two boys – a Russian and a Bulgarian (his dad is an architect constructing buildings in the area) discover the aliens and after a minor misunderstanding they are taken to the old astronomer who promptly establishes excellent relations with them. The aliens are offered medical help, technical assistance to repair their ship. Linguists soon make inroads into their language, and by the end of the novel the extraterrestrials speak very decent Russian.

We discover the story of the alien civilization. They created an advanced and progressive society, until a small tribe turned violent and used weapons of mass destruction to nearly destroy the planet that already suffered from shortage of water for natural reasons. A small band of survivors escaped to the mountains, and later to space where the nearly completed interstellar spaceship waited. They selected a few to go and search for either a new home or for help. Here the constant excitement of the aliens from seeing the abundance of water and from the lush life on the Earth is explained. The mutual understanding resembles somewhat the relation of the Federation member races in Star Trek. It is only mired by the reappearance of Jack Molnar who shows government issued papers claiming that the aliens are citizens of Dollarland, and tries to take them buck. But the atmosphere of the new place, the friendliness and the openness of the people have such an effect on him that he soon revises his loyalties. Jack goes back to Dollarland just to help free the remaining aliens from the mafia and to bring them to the Soviet Union, making great personal sacrifices.

The book ends on an optimistic note, in a communist version of the Jack McDevitt's Academy series world – the space ship is repaired, and a second one is built so the extraterrestrials can take to their home (it turns out to be a planet in the Alpha Centauri system) some people. The two groups form joint crews, instead of separating each into their own ship. The aliens make statements about building a proper communist society, the humans make statements about conquering space. Everybody is happy.

* * *

The trouble is, even stripped from the political rhetoric, this would not have made a good book, on too many levels: starting from the unbelievable cardboard characters, and ending with the poor and repetitive language. Unfortunately, the book feels like something written by a teenager. There are scientific errors, (Alpha Cen is not visible from Crimea). The novel feels like a missed opportunity, because excellent examples already existed in the Eastern European Science Fiction, both from social and scientific point of view – the first novels of Ivan Efremov had appeared a decade earlier, the first novels of the Strugatsky brothers were out five or so years earlier. By 1967 the Bulgarian SF had already seen some excellent early works of Lyuben Dilov, Pavel Vezhinov, and Atanas V. Slavov, not to mention the novels and stories of Svetoslav Minkov from the 1920s.

Is there a reason to read this book, and perhaps, others like it? – I think so. Despite all its shortcomings, The Treasure is a curious glimpse into a different epoch, it is a historical document (rather than a work of art). I find particularly interesting the representation of Dollarland's life because the book is more a document of the perception that people in the East held of the Western lifestyle than anything else; or rather it is a document about the perception of the West that was cultivated in the East at that time. Unfortunately, the novel didn't challenge me, neither emotionally with some characters that I could identify with, nor with some deep ideas that I would think over and over. As much as I was trying, I couldn't find a deeper layer than the obvious one.

Later on, many women would leave strong marks in the Bulgarian speculative fiction. I wrote elsewhere about Miglena Nikolchina (sffportal.net), and others deserve to be mentioned: Vesela Lyutskanova, Elena Pavlova, Ani Ilieva, etc..

*

Who is Zora Zagorska? We can learn a lot about her from the extensive afterword, written by Dimiter Dobrev. She was born on Apr 5, 1910, in Bitola, now in Macedonia, in the family of teachers. Her father studied in a Music School in Odessa, and was in Russia during the 1905 revolution. Reading between the lines we can guess that he joined the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization upon his return, and later the communist party. He died after police torture. His daughter followed in his footsteps, entered a string of youth communist organizations, and after 1944 became a functionary in the Ministry of Education. She started to write as a child, but her first book appeared only in 1962. The biography hints that she was better known for many textbooks for future teachers than for her books.

Valentin Ivanov
31.12.2012

Note (1.06.2026): This review is different from *Dear Zora* that appeared in *Letters to Tiptree* (eds. Alisa Krasnostein and Alexandra Pierce) featuring Zora Zagorska and a time traveling fan.

A handbook for science fiction readers and writers: a review of *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, by Yuval Noah Harari

The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed, wrote a popular science fiction writer. The future is already here – it's just not visible, because it's hidden inside our heads, would have probably written Yuval Noah Harari, if he wanted to pun the famous line of William Gibson's. Harari, born in 1976, gained fame in 2015 with his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. As the title may suggest, he is a professional historian with a Ph.D. from Oxford. He is currently a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

In *Homo Deus, his* next bestseller, Hariri makes the transition from the past history, addressed in the *Sapiens*, to the future history. The concept of future history is well known to any science fiction fan who has read Heinlein, Bujold, Bova or … well, it is a long list that deserves a study on its own. One thing in common among all these attempts is that the road to the future is long, winding, painful and… unpredictable.

Homo Deus tries to peek into the future, standing on the shoulders of the past. In three parts the book traces the ascent of the human kind from a powerless toy in the hands of the gods to an anthropogenic force of nature and traces the age-old tendency of a gradual displacement of the deities by humans.

Why might a science fiction reader or even a writer might find *Homo Deus* an interesting read? - I think there are two reasons. The obvious one has to do with the interesting historical facts and social evolution theories that Hariri describes. A good example is the theories why the religions have risen in the ancient times. Hariri speculates that it has to do with the need to place some order in the strange and incomprehensible world that surrounded the people back then. The belief system made the world predictable and explainable, even though those explanations may seem irrational and contrived today. This theory is interesting in another aspect – today, as we approach the Singularity, the world is becoming just as strange and incomprehensible as it was back then for the prehistoric people, explaining the modern rise of the esoteric. We, as humans, have gone a full circle.

We learn from the book how important the discovery of fire is. It goes beyond the obvious implications to generate warmth and as a defense against wild animals. The fire was also important because it made cooking possible. A chimpanzee spends about four hours per day chewing raw food. Instead, humans need an hour or so to process the cooked food. An interesting conversation might extend our lunch or dinner, but on the average the cooking lets the human kind spend more time on making tools, art, war, love and self-improvement.

The second reason that made me think some genre readers and writers might want to get acquainted with *Homo Deus* has to do with the specific first-principle-based approach that the author has adopted. There is a saying that a physics student stranded on an uninhabited island should be able to recreate the entire modern physics based on first principles. Hariri follows, if not the same idea, then the same method, or at least he tries it. History and social sciences are not as clear cut logical disciplines as physics and math, so Hariri has a vastly more challenging task than Robinson-the-physics-major-student, but he tries to be as objective as possible. As a result many reviewers accuse him of being "cold" and "heartless". I take these accusations as good signs, they mean Hariri has succeeded at least partially to shrug off the emotions.

This line or rather this method of thought is most visible in the main conclusion of the book. *Homo Deus* starts as a list of human achievements: e.g. the famine and many diseases have been purged from a large part of the world; war is still with us, but it is rather an exception than a norm. If you don't believe that any progress may have been made in those areas, just remember that a hundred years ago influenza killed more people than WWII and that in 10-th century every human being on the planet, to the very last one, lived in an analog of modern Somalia and Syria.

However, as the book marches through human history, we find that the new powers and the new godlike status that we have reached soon turns on us. The last part of *Homo Deus* is a warning against human hubris. Just like the ancient Chinese wise man was pointing in that fable, drawing circles on the ground to represent human knowledge – the more we know, the more we know that we don't know. The more we know, the less we understand, I would rephrase it. The lack of understanding had not stopped humans from toying with great powers before, it is not likely it will stop us in the future either. We have already entered an era when machines do better than us not just the manual, boring and repetitive tasks, but they surpass us with an increasing speed in areas that seems forever reserved for humans. One example is medicine where computers even today do better diagnosis than human doctors, e.g. recognizing tumors. Car driving with all the object recognition required for that is another example. The advance in big data analysis allows us to predict our habits, our sexual orientation, our opinions (and our voting preferences!). To this brave new world we will be just a set of algorithms, claims Hariri and concludes: we can be predicted and we can be simulated, perhaps at lower cost than it would take to sustain human life as we know it. I find here some parallels with the ideas of another futurist – Nick Bostrom from the University of Oxford.

Concluding, I think *Homo Deus* deserves a few days of the reader's time. It is a dense book that offers an entertaining and a demanding reading experience at the same time, because of the rich historical and sociological background, because of its complex ideas. While it lacks the fictionalized layer, it can easily become the basis of a dozen science fiction novels with its predictions about the future of our civilization.

Valentin D. Ivanov
14.06.2018, Munich – 24.08.2018, Wien

~~Antiduring~~ Antihariri or *Helium 3*, a novel by *Jarosław* Grzędowicz

The novel *Helium 3* occupies a remarkable place on the science fiction landscape. On one hand, its first pages can easily lead the reader to the conclusion that this is a book about the world of Rick Deckard and Rachel Rosen, with the action taking place some decades before they were born or created. On the other hand, the novel is a midnight nightmare, a story about a world where the social networks have "won", where the only thing that matters is the fifteen minutes (or seconds) of fame, the numbers of visitors and likes. Just like today. But worse. As true cyberpunk, the book asks which reality is more real – the physical or the virtual – and gives the appropriate answer for this sub-genre.

The title – referring to the famous lunar energy source – is misleading, and for the first two-thirds of the text, the action has nothing to do with space. The author, who is Polish, and one of the leading contemporary science fiction writers in that country, skillfully introduces us to the near future realities. This brave new world is not beautiful, few readers probably would like to live in it. Russia has become a New Soviet empire, whatever that means. A united Europe is caught in a trap of "sustainable development" that has nothing to do with development, and very little with sustainability. Few Europeans have traveled farther than what they can walk – I am nearly citing the book here. At the same time, sustainability standards differ for the territories corresponding to the former Eastern European countries (including Poland) and the former rich countries of Western Europe – a direct extrapolation of today's idea of two-speed Europe. China and America are mentioned only in the context of their corrupt leadership. Not that the local Polish leadership is any better.

This bleak future is presented in great literary language – as far as I could tell, having read the book in Russian translation (sadly, a Bulgarian translation is not available and very likely will never be) – with interesting and likable characters (as long as they are not from the ruling elite). The protagonist Norbert is an eventer, a word that comes from the English event and describes the latest degradation of the profession of journalist at the time of the action; these are people who make superhuman efforts to film a thirty second clip of a terrorist attack or beheading of hostages. In fact, our acquaintance with Norbert happened when he was doing exactly that in the Middle East. That region is no exception to the overall picture – there is no shortage of oil in the future, but no one wants to buy it, and the funds the sheikhs have amassed to recover from the oil era have proved insufficient.

The book provokes comparisons with the *Futurologic Congress* by Stanislaw Lem. It is only in the last third of the *Helium 3* that it becomes clear why Grzędowicz chose this particular title, and here similarities with *The Adventures of the Star Navigator Pirks* appear, but to me neither of these works of fiction is the main comparison benchmark for the novel. I think this role belongs to the non-fiction by Yuval Noya Hariri – Israeli historian, author of many popular science books on anthropology. Through most of them, like a red thread, runs the idea that humanity is facing a problem – the way of life we maintain now cannot continue in the future. The endless exponential expansion of production, sales and markets is or soon will be crashing against the limited resources of the planet. Hariri is a modern-day prophet of the olden idea of the Malthusian catastrophe, caused by the prevailing struggle in modern society for more markets, more sales, more customers, more... "The more, the is more" as a popular children's book character says. I refrain from going into details to let the readers enjoy the surprises that *Helium 3* offers.

I find the main problem of the novel to be philosophical in nature: as a panacea for the described problems – that are actually existing and well-recognized today – the author offers nothing else but more of the same: insane and unlimited expansion, but this time in space, the next round in the spiral that leads to yet another catastrophe, without humanity having learnt anything from the previous experience. Sadly, Grzędowicz lacks ideas on how to solve the problems that he

has described. This seems to be a common trend among modern East European authors. The recent novel *Dealer of Realities* by the Bulgarian writer Nicolas Dimitrov (published in 2019 simultaneously in Russia and in Bulgaria) comes to mind because of the same issue – he imagining a future, frozen in the realities of today. Cory Doctorow, Ian M. Banks and Kim Stanley Robinson are among more prominent counterexamples that show – fortunately, for the genre readers, one can think of possible solutions.

I must underline that the lead character in *Helium 3* is sympathetic and his presence is a testament to the author's excellent writing skills. This is the case with Nicolas Dimitrov as well, and it raises the question why otherwise talented writers turn to such retrograde ideas – it is unclear to me if the answer lies with the market pressure or they really hold dear these worldviews.

Too bad, because I liked how the book was written. To the lively protagonist (and convincing secondary characters) and the rich language, I can add the dynamic action and the exotic surroundings that Grzędowicz describes. Last but not least, Grzędowicz includes references to Lem, *Solaris* and some ancient Slavic gods, successfully creating some Polish national atmosphere, without crossing the line of irritating nationalism.

The finale offers several surprises, including crypto-historical and purely science fictional elements that have to do with Fermi's paradox. But they remain unexplored, perhaps as fishing hooks that should lead the readers to potential sequels.

Jarosław Grzędowicz (b. 1965) is a polish science fiction and fantasy writer. He started publishing in 1982 and has to his credit more than half a dozen novels and anthologies. He won a few times the highest national Polish genre award named after Janusz A. Zajdel in both short and long form categories.

Valentin D. Ivanov
8.12.2021

The evolving world of planets in the Universe and in SciFi

The four billion year old Solar system may seem to any human like a structure that has been around forever. But has it really?

The first exoplanet around a solar-type stars, the hot jupiter 51 Peg b, discovered in 1995 by M. Mayor and D. Queloz, surprised the astronomers, because our expectations for exoplanetary systems were based on the Solar system and it does not include giant gas planets that move around its host stars closer-in than Mercury. Hot Jupiters could not have formed in situ because the tidal forces from the star prevent the collapse of the protoplanetary material into planets. They must have formed further away and then migrated inwards.

Exotic exoplanets were featured extensively in Science Fiction, their migration – not so much. A rare and early exception that makes this point is the vintage novel *The Photon Starship* (1964) by the Bulgarian SF writer Dr. Dimitar Peev (1919-1966). His degree was in Law, but he worked as a science journalist for his entire life. The plot follows a sub-light-speed expedition to Proxima, the third component of the nearest star system Alpha Cen. It is important to remember that the primary is a close stellar binary known as Alpha Cen A and B. The crew faces the usual "meteor attack, radiation attack, malfunctioning robotic kitchen" problems, with the added complication of raising children born during the journey. Nevertheless, it presents a hopeful look at an optimistic future.

Shortly before arrival, the fictional astronomers in the book find hundred and seven planets orbiting Proxima. They fall into two distinct classes: the orbits of many are nearly circular, similar to the planets in the Solar system; the orbits of the rest have high ellipticity (and presumably – random orbital inclinations). Peev does not address whether this is a stable configuration, and we will follow suit. The scientists in the book speculate that the objects in the former group have been formed in the protoplanetary disk that once has surrounded Proxima itself, much like the planets of our system have formed in the protoplanetary disk around the young Sun.

The notion of an evolving planetary system is introduced with the second group: these planets are likely descendants of captured planetesimals – this is a fancy word astronomers use for relatively small bodies that become building blocks for planets - ejected from the neighboring Alpha Cen A and B early in the history of that system, before Jupiter- or Saturn-sized giant planets could have formed there.

Modern abundance analysis demonstrated that the chemical composition of Alpha Cen A and B is different from that of Proxima. Therefore, the central pair has formed together, while Proxima was accreted during a stellar flyby. The moment of this flyby is unknown, but the probability that it might have happened early enough while the central binary still contains multiple small planetesimals is not negligible, but low – just because the disk with the planetesimals disappear after a few tens of millions of years. This is a much shorter interval than the multi-billion year age of the stars in the system. On the other hand, stellar flybys are quite frequent. Our Solar system went through one only about 70 thousand years ago. These events are difficult to detect, because the encounters are statistically more likely to involve low-mass, cool and intrinsically faint stars, just because they are more numerous than massive bright stars.

What about the large number of fictional planets around Proxima? Today, the majority of richest planetary systems are found around M stars, just like Proxima. A good example of that is the seven-planet TRAPPIST-1. It is an observational fact that low mass stars tend to be orbited by more, but lower mass planets, in comparison with Solar type stars. This was explained with the limitations of the planet formation in the protoplanetary disks – it is easy to understand this intuitively: the lower the stellar mass, the lower the mass of the protoplanetary disk, the lower the

mass of the planets that can form inside them and as a result the disk material is converted into a larger number of relatively small planets. In addition, the effect is boosted up by a bias: lower mass planets are easier to discover around lower mass stars, than around higher mass stars.

Dr. Dimitar Peev correctly guessed the richness of planetary systems around late type stars and most importantly – the fact that planetary systems evolve, the planets migrate, their orbits change. Trying to make his fictional world as realistic as possible, he included a physical phenomenon – the scattering of protoplanets. The inconsistencies could only be recognized based on information that was not available at the time when the book was written.

The Photon Starship is an overlooked example of a hard-SciFi novel that comes from outside of the anglosphere and is written with careful consideration of the physical reality. Together with the hopeful streak this makes it a satisfying reading.

Valentin D. Ivanov
13.01.2022

Desert blooms.
Time to fall in love.
Spring on Mars.

Сезон любви.
Колючка расцвела.
Весна на Марсе.

Време за любов.
Кактуси цъфтят.
Пролет на Марс.

These are three translations of my lame (Have mercy upon my soul! I am not a poet, these were put together, not written to make a point) taken at SF haiku: in English, Russian, and Bulgarian, respectively. Strictly speaking, none of them is the original, so they are not really translations, I was writing them in parallel, to illustrate a point.

They are identical (more or less), yet they are so different, they will hardly leave their readers in the same state of mind.

*

Let's consider the English one. My guess is that the first line will bring up associations with the American Southwest and the few weeks during which the desert is painted with various colors. Typically, this happens in March, but in Southern Arizona it may be a bit earlier, in Feb, making every trip to see the flowers a romantic outing.

The haiku ends with a punch-line of sorts: yes, it is a desert, yes, it is time to fall in love, but this is a Martian desert! The fantastical element becomes clear at last – there is someone who can fall in love on Mars, there is someone to fall in love with, too. It is left to the reader's imagination to figure out who they are, but falling in love in Spring is a human tradition, so most likely these are Earth colonists, setting up their lives on the red planet.

*

Next, comes the Russian version. For the benefit of the English speakers I will translate it once again in English, this time literally:

Season of love.
Prickles bloom.
Spring on Mars.

At first, it does look very similar, but the Russian version contain a word that changes everything: ***колючка*** (prickle; it doesn't have the negative Western connotation of prick, though). The famous Soviet/Russian SF writers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky used it to describe a species of the Martian flora. To the readers of their Noon Universe (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noon_Universe) books the prickles are Martian flowers. They bloom

in red and blue but only once every five Martian years. The falling flower leaves on the surface of the prickle a brilliant circle. You can tell how old the flower is by just counting these circles.

This single world transports – I hope – the reader in the Utopian Noon Universe where everybody has love, trusted friends, and a satisfying work (not a satisfying job, mind the difference). The characters of the Noon books were household names in Eastern Europe. This was the world we wanted to live in, when we were kids, and even more so when we grew up.

The simple haiku becomes a gate to that world, a bridge to the dreams of the reader's youth. The chances are that even those who are too young to have encountered the Noon books before the fall of the socialist system, would have heard of them (for example, from the recent Russian blockbuster *Inhabited Island*; http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0972558/), and may find in these three lines an invitation to cross the bridge and explore further the Noon Universe.

*

The Bulgarian version is identical to the Russian one, except for the prickles. It uses the Bulgarian word for cacti instead, and this is not because the Noon Universe is strange to the Bulgarian reader but because another powerful image inhabits the Bulgarian culture, and I wanted to take advantage of it.

The 1993 movie *Arizona Dream* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arizona_Dream) of the Serbian Director Emir Kusturica rocked the world of the Bulgarian intelligentsia. The posters advertising the movie in Sofia at the time had a cactus, and a fish. The title of the movie became a euphemism for leaving poverty-torn Bulgaria. Just as Johny Depp's character left his unpleasant job to live among the Arizonian cacti, many Bulgarian young men and women wanted to leave the country in search of opportunities. Some stayed, others left, and there were those – like me, – who ended in Arizona, of all places. Regardless of the chosen path, the cactus from the old movie poster has a special significance for all of us.

*

I refrain from claiming that every reader will perceive this haiku as described here, and I am sure the more observant readers have noted that the associations I was describing here became more and more personal. Indeed, this is how I interpret my own haiku, and those are the associations that made me use one word or another. But this goes beyond words, into the realms of the cultural backgrounds that are so different if you use English, or Russian, or Bulgarian. This is both wonderful and tragic, because using different languages we can enrich the experience, and but choosing one of them we miss some of that experience.

I have no recipe for how to find the optimal path between the gain and the loss, and every reader has to make his or her own choice. I feel I am lucky to be able to draw on three or even four noticeably different cultures.

Valentin D. Ivanov
21-12-2009, Cerro Paranal, Chile

WHERE CAN YOU FIND BULGARIAN SPECULATIVE ART AND WRITING IN TRANSLATION, AND LEARN MORE ABOUT IS?

The following is an incomplete listing, and hopefully it will grow up soon.

Bulgarian fiction by various authors in German:
- *Kontakte mit dem Unbekannten: Neue phantastische Erzählungen aus Bulgarien* (*Encounters with the Unknown: New Fantastic Tales from Bulgaria*; anthology, ed. Erik Simon, 1989) – in bookstores
- *Sternmetall: Bulgarische Phantastik* (*Star Metal: Bulgarian Speculative Fiction*; anthology, eds. Juri Ilkow, Erik Simon, 2018) – in bookstores

The Human library offers a selection of books by Bulgarian writers in English: https://choveshkata.net/blog/?page_id=8419
One of them is the almanac *ФантаStika* with short fiction by various authors: https://choveshkata.net/dl.php?key=78fc47d4b76640f8c48207dc1bbc1c8c46541b0e
Novels and a novella in English by Genoveva Dimova:
- *Foul Days* (The Witch's Compendium of Monsters, #1; Tor) - in bookstores
- *Ace Up Her Sleeve* (The Witch's Compendium of Monsters, #1.5; Reactor.com) – freely available at: https://reactormag.com/ace-up-her-sleeve-genoveva-dimova/
- *Monstrous Nights* (The Witch's Compendium of Monsters, #2; Tor) – in bookstores

A novel in English by the famous writer and dissident Georgi Markov (1929-1978):
- *The Right Honourable Chimpanzee*, written together with David St. Georgr (Secker & Warburg Publ, 1978) – in bookstores

Short stories in English by Elena Pavlova:
- *Love in the Time of Con Crud* (Future SF, Issue 3, Aug 2019): freely available at: https://future-sf.com/fiction/love-in-the-time-of-con-crud/
- *Two Moons* (Compelling Science Fiction, Issue 15, May 2020): freely available at: https://compellingsciencefiction.com/stories/two-moons.html
- *A Pilgrimage to Memories Tattooed* (Samovar, June 2023; nominated for British SF Association Awards): freely available at: https://samovar.strangehorizons.com/2023/06/26/a-pilgrimage-to-memories-tattooed-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5-%D0%BF%D0%BE-%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%82%D1%83%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D1%81%D0%BF%D0%BE/
- *Renting to Killers* (Asimov's, May/Jun 2024): https://tangentonline.com/print-bi-monthly/asimovs-may-june-2024/

Short stories in English by Haralambi Markov:
- *The Language of Knives* (Reactor, Feb 2015): freely available at: https://reactormag.com/the-language-of-knives-haralambi-markov/
- *The Drowning Line* (Uncanny, Issue 10, May/Jun 2016): freely available at: https://www.uncannymagazine.com/article/the-drowning-line/
- *Nine Tongues Tell of* (Eurasian Monsters, anthology, 2020, ed. Margrét Helgadóttir) – in bookstores

- *The Mysterious Theft of St. Aureline's* Arboreal Collection (in Lackington's, Fall 2021): freely available at: https://lackingtons.com/2022/08/03/the-mysterious-theft-of-st-aurelines-arboreal-collection-by-haralambi-markov/

- *Bones Are Stones for Building* (Uncanny, Issue 46, May/Jun 2022): freely available at: https://www.uncannymagazine.com/article/bones-are-stones-for-building/

Short story by Adriana Kantcheva:

- *Salvaged* (Escape Pod 857, October 6, 2022): freely available as audio and text at: https://escapepod.org/2022/10/06/escape-pod-857-salvaged/

Short stories and poems by Valentin D. Ivanov:

- *How I Saved the World* (in Dimond in the Sky, anthology, 2009): freely available at: https://www.mikebrotherton.com/diamonds/?page_id=134

- *Dear Zora* (in Letters to tiptree, anthology, 2015) – in bookstores

- Kielwasser (in German, phantastisch!, Issue 74, 2019) – in bookstores

- Galactic Archivist (poem, Star*Line, Issue 33.2, Spring 2021): https://sfpoetry.org/wp/starline/starline-44-2-spring-2021/

- *The Secret History of the Greatest Discovery* (in Life Beyond Us, anthology, 2023) – in bookstores

- *Convention in the Times of Market Crises* (in Automobilia, anthology, 2024) – in bookstores

Illustrations for speculative fiction by Kalin Nikolov are freely available here: https://www.pinterest.com/kalin_nikolow/

Covers art by Georgy Markov:

- Clarkesworld Magazine, Issue 42, March 2010: freely available at: https://clarkesworldmagazine.com/artbio_42/

- Clarkesworld Magazine, Issue 55, April 2011: freely available at: https://clarkesworldmagazine.com/artbio_55/

Speculative art by Stefan Lefterov (Стефан Лефтеров) can be seen freely at: https://trubadurs.com/2015/12/22/stefan_lefterov_nezaslujeno_zabravena_kosmicheska_saga/

Drawings by various other Bulgarian speculative artists can be seen freely here: https://spisaniekino.com/%D1%85%D1%83%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B6%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B8-%D0%BE%D1%82-%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D1%84%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B4%D1%8A%D0%BC-%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%B3%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BC-%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0.html

Videos in English about the fandom scene and and speculative fiction and Bulgaria:

Bulgarian Speculative Fiction - past and present in 20 min - a talk at IASFS meeting, 17-18.11.2024: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AWf8aVg3Vg

Genoveva Dimova on bringing Slavic fantasy to readers with her books Foul Days & Monstrous Nights: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVoZ7nAVYas

Selected links:

Bulgarian books in English

Genoveva Dimova

Elena Pavlova

EDITORIAL INFORMATION

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Valentin D. Ivanov is a Bulgarian fan, promoter and writer in his free time, and a professional astronomer during the working hours. He authored a non-fiction book with essays on the genre *Thoughts on the Speculative* (2017), created the podcast *Bulgarian speculative fiction* (2016-) and was among the organizers of some recent Bulgacons – the national Bulgarian conventions – editing the fanzines *Bulgacon 2022/3/4*. A review of Bulgarian and Romanian speculative genres by him and Cristian Tămaș appeared in Locus. His stories, poetry and non-fiction have been translated into English, German and Russian.

Selected links:

Valentin D. Ivanov

Thoughts about SF, essays