30 YEARS KOREAN STUDIES AT SOFIA UNIVERSITY

Korea: One Peninsula, Multiple Dimensions

(Connectivity, Challenges, Perspectives)



St. Kliment Ohridski University Press

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AN UNEXPECTED SHARP TURN: THE DPRK IN THE FOCUS OF FILM CRITIC AND WRITER PANTELEY KARASIMEONOV AFTER 1944

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Abstract

This article offers the first scholarly exploration of Panteley Mateev Karasimeonov (1898–1957) and his engagement with the theme of Korea, situating his work within the broader framework of Bulgarian–DPRK cultural relations. Through archival and cinema sources, it sheds light on the under-explored connections between Bulgarian intellectual life, early socialist cultural diplomacy, and the cinematic exchange of the 1950s. A poet, publicist, editor, and film critic, Karasimeonov bridged literature, art criticism, and ideology. His writings in journals positioned him among the pioneers of Bulgarian film criticism. After 1944, his career took a new direction shaped by the ideological realities of socialism, transforming his voice from modernist independence to politically aligned conformity. Yet within this shift, he continued to write perceptively about cinema, adopting the socialist- realist notion of film as a 'weapon of the people.' Central to this study is his 1952 lecture "The Korean People' s Democratic Cinematic Art", which interprets North Korean cinema, particularly "The Young Partisans" (1951) - as a very powerful model of socialist culture. The text, preserved in the Central State Archives, reveals how Bulgaria and the DPRK were positioned as equal partners in the socialist cultural network. Despite ideological compromises, his legacy bridges modernism and socialist realism, illuminating the intellectual negotiations of a generation caught between art, conviction, and political constraint. The study thus contributes to a deeper understanding of how cinema functioned as a medium of cultural and ideological exchange in early socialist Bulgaria. Drawing on extensive archival materials, the article opens a field that deserves further exploration in future research.

Keywords: Bulgaria-DPRK, cinema, culture, literature, archives, socialism

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The history of cultural relations between Bulgaria and the DPRK, as seen through the lens of archives and cinema, is a vast yet still underexplored field with significant potential. It reveals key aspects of early socialist cultural dynamics and preserves archival traces of individuals, artifacts, transformations, and exchanges.[2]

Panteley Mateev Karasimeonov (1898–1957) is one of the figures through whom the trajectory of twentieth-century Bulgarian culture can be traced - from the free experimentation of modernism to the ideological strictures of socialist realism. A poet, publicist, editor, film critic, and distributor, he stood at the crossroads of literature, art criticism, and ideology. His articles on Bulgarian, European, and even Japanese cinema were regularly published in major national cultural and film magazines such as *Ek* (Echo, Sofia, 1924)[4], the leading *Nasheto kino* (Our Cinema, Sofia, 1924–1935)[5], *Kinozvezda* (Film Star, Sofia, 1920–1929), etc.[3]

He co-founded the *Union of Friends of the Film* (1926), which sought to promote cinema as a serious art, presenting its finest achievements and teaching audiences to approach film as a reflective aesthetic experience. As a poet, he shared the humanistic and socially engaged vision of Geo Milev, Hristo Smirnenski, and Nikola Vaptsarov, for whom art was a moral and civic duty. A leftist poet, without doubt - and this is not a judgment, but rather an observation that his talent was less striking than that of the leading voices aforementioned[6].

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[2] As discussed in the works of: Mangachev, P. *A Documentary History of the Relations between Bulgaria and the DPRK (1948–2018)*. Sofia: Kolbis, 2018; Martonova, A. "To Paint the Cinema of North Korea". – In: *On Religious and Cultural Contents in Korea and Bulgaria*. Sofia: Kameya & CIEK, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski and Korean Academy for Korean Culture and Language, 2018, pp. 101–117; Beneva, R. "A Challenge and/or an Opportunity: Is Engaging with North Korea (Im)possible?". – In: *Korea and Eastern Europe – Exploring the Past.* Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2017, pp. 103–117; Martonova, A., & Beneva, R. "Bulgaria – DPRK: Reception through the Screen". – In: *Korean Historical and Cultural Trends*. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2016, pp. 194–211.

[3] See: Martonova, A. "Crossroads of Modernism". – *Problemi na izkustvoto / Arts Quarterly*, vol. 56, no. 2, Sofia: Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2023, pp. 4–15.

[4] See: Natcheva, Gergana. "The 'Ек' Magazine and Modern Languages of the Epoch." – *Yearbook of Burgas Free University*, 2007, Vol. XV. pp. 244–249.

[5] One of the first serious film magazines in Bulgaria, a platform that both documented and shaped the early history of Bulgarian film production, distribution, and criticism. Around it gathered an active circle of writers and artists, turning the magazine into a laboratory of new artistic ideas. Here I would like to emphasize the following: Karasimeonov's refined aesthetic taste and sense for modern visual culture found expression in his collaboration with leading Bulgarian artists. He worked with Ivan Milev, a key figure of the Bulgarian Secession, for the design of *Ek*, and with the avant-garde Mircho Kachulev for *Nasheto kino*. Their modernist visual language and sophisticated layouts perfectly reflected his pursuit of harmony between art, design, and cinema.

[6] He is the author of numerous poetry collections, including *The Himalayas and I* (1933), *Meridians* (1936), *Barges* (1939), *The Victorious Year* (1945), *Songs for the Republic* (1945), *Poems*

The political change of 9 September 1944 placed Karasimeonov in a new cultural environment, where independent intellectual voices were gradually replaced by the demand for party loyalty. From that moment on, he signed his texts only as Panteley Mateev, abandoning both his pseudonym Pankar and his family name - an act that may be read as self-censorship and adaptation. His postwar poetry was prolific but lost the depth and subtlety of his earlier work, as the personal voice gave way to collective rhetoric shaped by ideological conformity.

This shift was both an adaptation to the new political order and a means of survival. Intellectuals who resisted the ideology were executed, imprisoned, or erased from public memory as remnants of a "bourgeois" past. The regime recast art as an instrument for building socialism and shaping the "new socialist man" in line with party doctrine.

By 1948, these transformations had become radical in the field of cinema as well - through nationalization, a new film law, the establishment of state-controlled film journals, artistic committees, and censorship mechanisms. Within this reshaped system, Karasimeonov adapted remarkably well, reshaping his voice to meet the demands of the socialist cultural machine. The author asserts that realism is the only true creative method; cinema must truthfully depict the life, struggles, and aspirations of working people, uplifting and enlightening them. Unlike the "decadent" Western cinema, which corrupts morals and weakens the spirit, socialist art should follow the path set by the powerful Soviet cinema of socialist realism[7].

Following the establishment of diplomatic relations between Bulgaria and the DPRK[8], cinema emerged as an important channel of cultural exchange in the 1950s, through regular film circulation and several little-known documentary collaborations.

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for Peace (1950), *Selected Poems* (1952, 1957, 1965), *Flag of Friendship* (1954), *Songs for Peace* (1955), and *Poems* (1959).

For further readings, see CSA, f.1509, in.1 a.u. 38, p.5–6; DPRK-themed verses in: Mateev, P. *Flag of Friendship*: *Poems*. Sofia: Balgarski Pisatel, 1952. As well as *Meridians. Poems, Articles, and Memories of Panteley Mateev*. Compiled by A. Karasimeonov. Sofia: Balgarski pisatel, 1989.

[7] See: Mateev, Panteley. *The Cinema in the Struggle between Democracy and Imperialism*. Sofia: Narodna Mladezh Publishing House, 1949.

[8] See: "The Speech of Kim Tu-bong at the Presentation of Credentials of the Bulgarian Ambassador to Korea Dr. Yanko Petkov." – *Rabotnichesko Delo*, No. 23, January 23, 1951, p. 1. The first Bulgarian ambassador to both Beijing and Pyongyang was Yanko Petkov. It is important to note that in the early 1950s, Korean and Chinese cultural initiatives were often discussed together. Visiting Chinese ensembles frequently included Korean performances in their repertoire, which further encouraged Bulgarian critics to write about the arts of the DPRK as a whole. See: Tzenova, Miglena. *Reception of Performances of Traditional Chinese Opera in Bulgaria*. Sofia: Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2024.

A particularly illuminating document from this period is Karasimeonov's preserved lecture "The Korean People's Democratic Cinematic Art." In this text, Karasimeonov analyzes the North Korean film *The Young Partisans* (1951)[9] and describes the cinema of the DPRK as the supreme expression of socialist culture. Dating from around 1952, the lecture is written in the style of socialist-realist publicism, blending factual exposition with rhetorical pathos and strong ideological conviction. At its core lies the notion of cinema as a weapon of the people, echoing Lenin's dictum that film is the most important of all arts. The author traces the emergence of Korean cinematography after 1945, the wartime destruction and reconstruction of the Pyongyang Film Studio, and its rise as a symbol of spiritual resistance. This essay, likely written for presentation at the Union of Film Workers, was almost certainly intended for internal professional circulation - a common practice in the early 1950s.

Particular attention in the lecture is devoted to the film's international reception, especially at the 6th International Film Festival in Czechoslovakia (1951), where *The Young Partisans* received the "Prize for the Struggle for Freedom," alongside the Bulgarian film *Alarm (Trevoga*, 1951, dir. Zahari Zhandov). These symbolic parallel positions the DPRK and Bulgaria as equal participants in the socialist cultural network. The festival thus emerges not merely as an artistic event, but as a diplomatic stage for ideological solidarity.

Karasimeonov's personal archive, donated by his son in the 1980s, is substantial yet incomplete. Missing are most materials from his early creative period, perhaps deliberately withheld. Among the surviving documents, however, stands out a typescript of ninety-nine lectures, titled "Introduction to the History of Cinematography"[10]. Undated, it reads as a return to his analytical voice of the 1930s: measured, methodical, and reflective. Naturally, a few obligatory references to Lenin and Stalin appear at the beginning, along with affirmations of socialist realism in cinema—standard rhetoric of the time. Yet when the text turns to the silent and early sound eras, the decades in which Karasimeonov lived and wrote, we rediscover an erudite intellectual: a refined critic and insightful historian, deeply attuned to film's form and aesthetics. Beneath the ideological surface, his true voice reemerges - informed, precise, and sensitive to the language of cinema.

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[9] CSA, f.1509, in.1 a.u. 135, pp.16–22. '*The Young Partisan*' / 소년 빨찌산 (*Sonyeon Ppaljisan)*, 1951, dir. Yoon Yong-kyu / 윤용규. Genre: war drama / revolutionary patriotic film. Plot: a group of young boys join a partisan detachment and fight against American forces during the Korean War.

See also: Kim, M.-H. "A Comparative Study on Director Yoon Yong-gyu's Films Produced in South and North Korea: Focusing on A Hometown in Heart (1949) and The Young Partisan (1951)." – In: *Journal of the Korean Society of Design Culture*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2021, pp. 495–504.

[10] CSA, f.1509, in.1, a.u.132.

Karasimeonov remains a figure of inner conflict - between the poet and the functionary, the modernist and the dogmatist. Despite his ideological compromises, he stands among the pioneers of Bulgarian film criticism, an author who, as early as the 1930s, articulated aesthetic ideas about cinema on par with contemporary European thought. His early openness to Asia, social engagement, and later return to analytical reflection shape a vivid and complex portrait of the twentieth-century Bulgarian intellectual - torn between conviction and conformity, faith in art and the constraints of ideology. While his early contribution is well established in Bulgarian film studies, his socialist-period work remains largely unexplored. This forum represents the first academic attempt to examine his post-1944 archive and his engagement with DPRK themes.

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I dedicate this paper to my two mentors: Prof. Dr. Aleksandar Yanakiev (1955–2015) of the Institute of Art Studies, who inspired my interest in Asia and instilled in me a lasting passion for archival research, and Prof. Dr. Aleksandar Fedotov (1956–2018), founder of Korean Studies in Bulgaria, whose wisdom, kindness, and lifelong dedication to Korean culture remain an enduring source of inspiration.

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