

## Review

Of the Dissertation of  
**Nikolay Genchev Genov**  
**„The Virtual Body in Science Fiction:  
An Essay on Phantomatics”**

2.1. Philology (Theory and History of Literature – Theory of Literature)

Reviewer: Assoc. Prof. Darin Tenev

Nikolay Genchev Genov's dissertation presents a bold intellectual effort in a field as contemporary as it is difficult. The challenge is at least twofold. On the one hand, the issue of virtuality today is not just a theoretical issue, it is a question of the world we live in, our daily practices, the direction in which more or less humanity is moving. In this sense, the problem of virtual worlds and virtual bodies is urgent, pressing. On the other hand, the topic of virtuality is over-discussed, over-determined, which also means mined, dangerous, because not only is there a lack of agreement even on basic points, such as how to understand the virtual, but there is such an abundance of books, articles, works on the subject that entering this field can imperceptibly turn into endless wandering in its vestibule with an endless and doomed attempt to present what has already been done and what has already been said (which should include also the vast literature preceding the contemporary debate, such as the literature on the concept of mimesis or the writing on the concept of *dynamis* from the time of Aristotle and his interpreters, through his medieval reinterpretations to present-day ontologies of the potential; etc.).

Nikolay Genov has developed strategy of his own so that he can draw his own trajectory in this overdetermined field, say something new, offer a different take on the history of the discourse on the virtual and point out directions for the development of the problematic from now on. Usually the most difficult thing in writing a dissertation is not what to include, but what to exclude, while maintaining the depth and scope of the research. In the case of virtual reality and the virtual body, as I have just mentioned, this difficulty is even greater, but Genov's strategy involves a triple move approach to tackle with it, and with the same gesture he manages

not only to set the conceptual framework for his research but also to outline the structure of his text. What is this triple move, what is the doctoral student's strategy?

First, Genov chooses a good *starting point* to provide a categorical matrix for his research. This starting point is the idea of phantomatics (as part of phantomology) by Stanislaus Lem, developed in his *Summa Technologiae*. Such a choice is not accidental, and the doctoral student himself traces the way in which Lem is a real forerunner of the ways in which virtual realities were produced and thought. In Lem, phantomatics is the field that deals with "the creation of artificial environments similar to ours to the point of indiscernibility" (p. 11). In the dissertation, phantomatics is taken up and developed as a "model for thinking virtual reality" (p. 142). Two remarks should be made here. One is that Genov does not take phantomatics as a ready-made and completed concept, but as an instrument that he himself perfects. The first chapter of the dissertation is practically devoted to the introduction and discussion of phantomatics and the whole conceptual network to which the concept belongs, and here phantomology with all its parts is tested as an analytical apparatus on the works of its author, Lem. In careful and precise analyses Genov outlines both the limitations in the position of the Polish writer and the possibilities for unfolding the conceptual network beyond *Summa Technologiae*. The development of the concept has continued throughout the work. The second note is related to the analytical role that phantomatics plays, because it shows the double advantage of the choice to start with Lem – both historical (including literary-historical) and theoretical. In an impressive move, Genov's work shows the connection between the historical and the theoretical; the theoretical helps to clarify the historical dimension, and the historical shows the contextual grounds behind the theoretical moves. (And let it be mentioned in brackets that, along with all the strong and inspired theoretical construction, the work develops in the background an exceptional historicization of the theme of virtuality in literature and thus lays the foundations of a literary history of science fiction dealing with virtual reality, which is based on serious conceptual work on the very concept of the virtual.)

Secondly, and already through phantomatics as a model of virtual reality, a *focal point* has been chosen that centers the work, and makes it simultaneously more economical (and economy, as it has already become clear, is extremely necessary in this problematic) and more heuristic. This focal point is the virtual body. Focusing on the body is key to the study, because the body reveals both the relationship of the phantomatic and the real, and their discrepancies between the two (see, for example, p. 94 et seq., and p. 54). The dimensions of the body turn out to be directly related to the dimensions of the realities it inhabits; through the focal point

of the body one can pose questions about space and time in virtual reality, as well as their relationship to reality. Quite naturally, the third, last chapter of the work, which is the culmination of the whole research, deals with the body-world relationship in phantomatics.

Third, the whole issue of virtual reality is thought from the viewpoint of literary studies. Literature in general – and science fiction in particular – has been chosen as a *threshold for the observation and analysis* of phantomatics. In the dissertation there is a huge amount of references to modern technologies, real experiments, it also features films, animations, computer games, and it is clear that the doctoral student has studied thoroughly the whole field. And on this basis he has chosen literature as a threshold through which to observe and interpret the virtual. This choice is well-founded – literature has experimented and continues to experiment with diverse, realized and unrealized, feasible and unfeasible possibilities of virtual worlds and virtual bodies. That is why literary studies finds itself in a "privileged position in the vanguard of transhumanism" (p. 21). It is privileged because methods of observation and analysis have already been developed to discuss this problematic. Moreover, in literature one can find intertwined elements of different order, referring to genre theories, narratology, psychology, theory of fiction and fictional worlds, receptive theories – to use a different vocabulary, we can say that it is an intertwining of incommensurable language games, – whose research further reveals the multidimensionality of the chosen issue. With the focus on literature as a threshold for observation and analysis of the virtual phenomena, the stake of literary theory today becomes clearer, as it provides in a unique way corridors for communication between different fields and disciplines.

This triple move of Genov, which gives a *starting point* (phantomatics, used to put in order the discourses on the virtual), a *focal point* (the virtual body, used to center the problematic around a particular problem) and a *threshold* for observation and analysis (science fiction) has allowed him to create an extremely concise and focused text with clear logic and clear stakes.

Such a strategy has helped Genov to develop the phantomatic theory in several directions. He shows how the hierarchy between phantomology and phantomatics is turned upside down (and phantomatics as a species turns out to incorporate the genus to which it belongs); he introduces a distinction, historical and theoretical at the same time, between three types of phantomates (classical, network, and game phantomates, to which he adds the zero type, protophantomates; see p. 72 et seq.); he redefines the trivium of grammar, dialectics and

rhetoric (which other researchers use for describing the virtual) as indicating not only the levels of virtualization but also the levels of conflict in science fiction. The construction of Genov's phantomatics goes through numerous analyses by science fiction writers from all around the world; it is also in a critical dialogue with other theories and conceptions. This has made this theory extremely rich in discoveries (sometimes only cited in footnotes, sometimes developed in the main text), many examples of which can be cited. The theory, for example, allows us to observe and distinguish two types of death in phantomatic experience – death of fiction and death of fictionalization (p. 131). Such discoveries are not a side effect of the theory (in the case of both types of death, it is the way in which dialectics unfolds in phantomatics as a level of conflict), but part of theorizing. Thus, the systematic nature of the theory does not make it closed and inoperative, but on the contrary, makes it an increasingly plastic tool for interpretation and theorizing.

The strict focus of Genov's research are commendable, and it would not be a mistake to say that without them the work could hardly have been so successfully completed. However, there are threads in his conceptual effort that have not been sufficiently traced, threads that as promising as they are yet are only hinted at. I will point out the two cases most easily noticed. At one point Genov criticizes Stanislaus Lem's conception of the body as relying on heavy ontological presuppositions (I would say metaphysical) and refers to Jean-Luc Nancy and his conception of the body as exposure, as entirely external (p. 60 et seq.). Nowhere else, however, is Nancy's vision taken up or used. Moreover, it is not clear why the reference is to Nancy and not, for example, to any other conception of the body that differs from Lem's – it could have been Spinoza, Nietzsche, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze. It is obvious that Nancy's understanding is based on assumptions different from Lem's, and the reader wonders on what basis they are compared, especially considering that Nancy is afterwards completely abandoned. The other place concerns the way in which the status of reality in *Summa Technologiae* remains unresolved. Genov suggests that a solution can be found if one was to look in the direction of psychoanalysis (and the fact that psychoanalysis was not accepted by Lem can explain why the writer did not reach the solution) and he cites a dream presented by Freud and the analysis of this dream by Jacques Lacan (p. 108 et seq.). Curiously, however, neither Freud's conceptions of reality (with the difference between external and internal reality, with the notion of verification of reality, with the principle of reality) are traced, nor is the difference between reality and the real is discussed in Lacan, and thus in a sense the question of reality remains open. A more serious work on psychoanalysis would also point to an

alternative mechanism for interpreting the virtual through the principle of pleasure, through the omnipotence of thought in primitive people, children and neurotics, and so on. Undoubtedly, the doctoral student's self-discipline did not allow him to follow these threads and the dissertation does not suffer from this, but it also seems to me that some of the promises made by such hints would lead to fruitful observations and different types of critical distance from the dominant theories of the virtual.

I would like to ask two general questions concerning not only thematic but also operational concepts of Genov, ie. concepts that are used functionally, without being explicitly defined or discussed thematically. The first question is related to the concept of "world". The word is often used, but it becomes the focus of theoretical attention only in the last part of the work. The beginning of the third chapter says that "to create a world is to create a work that you can constantly transform, as scientific production itself can do" (p. 113). But at least according to common understanding, scientific production does not create a world, and creating a work that you can transform does not require a world – it can be a picture, or a piece of music to improvise on, or an experimental poem. On the other hand, the world of a work may not be limited to the work, it may transcend it and lead to other works. Examples would be the world in which Sherlock Holmes lives, or the world of Tolkien, or the world of books, games and movies about the Witcher. There is a reference to Nelson Goodman about the world-making, but there are no quotes or anything to point out what Goodman's position actually is. The phantomatic body and the world are said to be similar phenomena. What then is meant by "world"? How should the world be distinguished from the environment and from reality? Should the world be thought of in terms of totality? How does it relate specifically to the body? And what would a fictional world, a virtual world, a phantomatic world mean?

The second question is in a sense a continuation of the first and concerns the concept of fiction. From the very beginning, fiction has been used in the dissertation to define virtuality: virtuality is a fiction that combines machine algorithm and non-machine imagination (p. 12). Without going into the question of the problem of the opposition of machine and imagination (and before thinking about artificial intelligence, one must ask whether there isn't something fundamentally "machine-like" in the work of the imagination), I would ask: how should fiction be understood? Later in the work, when the phantomatic space is discussed, Genov very correctly points out that he speaks of the virtual, presented in literary works, the fictional virtual. But if the virtual is already a kind of fiction, will it not be a matter of fiction in fiction, fiction of fiction, second degree fiction and what would that entail? At one point in the analysis

on "Dealer of Realities" in the dissertation there is talk of fictions in fiction, but these must be third degree fictions, if we take into account the fictionality of the work itself. The dissertation does not discuss theories of fiction, although it is clear enough that Genov is acquainted with them; but the lack of problematization of fiction to some extent leaves such questions not just unanswered but also not even posed, despite the fact that they seem important for the research problem.

Finally, I would like to say a word about the way the dissertation is written. The structure of the work is very clear – and with that I would like to indicate not only the clear language (which does not take away from Genov's stylistically expressed ironic distance from the commented theories and authors, nor from the complex syntax both on the level of the sentence and on the level of paragraphs, parts, chapters), but also the structure and logical connections between the individual parts. It is clear at all times why what is being said is said and why it comes at this point in the argument. Such a structure suggests an awareness of the difference between the logic of research and the logic of presenting the results of the research, which reveals a research maturity rarely to be found in doctoral students.

The abstract presents comprehensively and objectively the main ideas of the work. Contributions are correctly listed. The research satisfies the criteria for a dissertation and I believe that the esteemed scientific jury should give Nikolay Genov the educational and scientific degree "Doctor".

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