

STATEMENT

by Prof. Dr. Miglena Ilieva Nikolchina on Nikolay Genchev Genov's dissertation *The Virtual Body in Science Fiction: a Study on Phantomatics* for the award of the scientific and educational degree "Doctor" in the professional field 2.1 Philology (Theory and History of Literature-Theory of Literature)

Nikolay Genchev Genov's dissertation *The Virtual Body in Science Fiction: a Study on Phantomatics* is an innovative advancement in at least two directions: on the one hand, it is a theoretical foray into the contemporary debates on the problem of virtuality and the virtual body, which is explored in the framework of science fiction; on the other hand, it offers an exegesis of the remarkable 1960s work by Polish science fiction writer and philosopher Stanislaw Lem, *Summa Technologiae*, a work that has not altogether gone unnoticed, but which seems not to have been adequately integrated into later reflections on a problematic which Lem anticipated. Returning to Lem's work, Nikolay Genov makes explicit the relevance of Lem's conceptual apparatus, in a number of cases not only interpreting but also further developing the Polish author's heuristic potential.

We often talk about multi- and interdisciplinarity, but in this case it is an unavoidable aspect of Genov's research. While his focus is literary and genre-related, the questions he poses necessarily cross over into all sorts of other fields, not only the humanities, aesthetics, philosophy, the social sciences, but also the "hard" sciences and technology. Indeed, the vast disciplinary scope is one of the striking features of Lem's work, a feature that has made it difficult both for its translators and for its reception in general. Genov, in turning to this work, manages to contain its complex vision. We might say that to be a "summa" and a meta-reflection of available and projected knowledge is perhaps the now forgotten ambition of philosophy: in Lem this ambition finds a foothold in the "constructionist" attitudes of the artistic imagination in science fiction. From a certain point of view, *Summa Technologiae* is also an encyclopaedia of possible science-fiction plots, on the basis of which Lem develops his innovative conceptual apparatus. Genov makes explicit the powerful theoretical resources of this apparatus for understanding virtuality as a contemporary literary and extra-literary phenomenon, and in doing so makes a number of important refinements and elaborations of his own.

I would like to emphasize the elegant and concise way of Genov's cutting the Gordian knot of his subject – a subject topical enough to create a problem for proper analytical distance, and heterogeneous enough in view of the flood of literature that has already accumulated and continues to accumulate around it. I have followed Genov's work for years, and I know that he started with the questions raised by the phenomenon of the virtual body as a literary phenomenon, then he sought to survey the diverse solutions dominating contemporary reflections on virtuality, and ultimately settled on Lem as the heuristically most productive gateway to these questions. What I describe as elegant and concise is Genov's decision to present both the current state of the debate around virtuality, and its millenarian antecedents, through Marcello Vitali Rosati and his analysis of Aristotle's concepts: a task in itself so vast and multifaceted that it could be the subject of a study in its own right. Genov reduces it to an introduction which, by situating the problem of virtuality within the field of literary studies, allows him to get to the heart of his study in the most direct way. Like the main chapters, this introduction comprises exegesis, critique, and Genov's own innovative input.

The main body of the work consists of three chapters, "Stanislaw Lem's Phantomology," "Fundamental Problems of the Phantomatic Machine," and "Phantomatics: Body and World," which lead to the elaboration of the concept of phantomatic fiction as a genre, undoubtedly one of the most important contributions of the dissertation. Genov links this notion to the conceptualization of virtuality as a type of fiction, which opens up avenues of approach through literature to other arts such as cinema and video games. In order to elaborate the concept of virtuality as literary, Genov draws on Lem on two levels: on the one hand as a philosopher and futurologist, on the other as a fiction writer. Essential here are the refinements of Lem's notions of phantomology and phantomatics, and the setting in motion - in concrete literary analysis - of Lem's theoretical propositions. One of the aims of the work - to demonstrate the conceptual potential of Lem's neologisms and the classifications he makes - is convincingly defended by Genov.

The literary theoretical aspect of the work in a number of cases crosses over into discussions of what is technologically possible: perhaps an inevitable temptation when talking about science fiction, a temptation to which Lem also contributes, but which I think in places leads to a certain confusion of the ontological levels of Genov's reflection. Whether, to what extent, and in what precise ways the human body can be virtualized is only a stepping stone, and Genov ultimately does not forget this: literature tells us what is likely to result *if* this virtualization happens. The literary implications outlast their technological justifications: *The Martian Chronicles* do not lose their relevance because of our present knowledge that we will find nothing like that on Mars. The great achievement of Genov's work is, precisely, the exploration of the literary consequences of introducing virtuality and the virtual body into fiction, while not losing sight of the connection to the phenomena of our present-day dependence on new technologies. Ultimately, on the basis of a critical reading of Lem, Genov's work accomplishes the elaboration of a literary conceptual apparatus for understanding virtuality in literature. He shows how novel media developments affect the types of phantomata in literature while insisting that the multiplicity of types and models do not cancel out the universal problems of phantomatics for which Lem offers a remarkable theoretical grid.

Deserving special note is the brilliant style of the dissertation, which contains humor, high poetic moments, surprising rhetorical turns, and precise theoretical formulations. The extended abstract adequately presents the content of the dissertation and yet gives no idea of the style and engagingness of the overall presentation. I agree with the contributions mentioned by Nikolai Genov, each of which individually cannot capture the sense of a major overturning of an entire research field, of freshness, originality and innovation of the overall perspective.

I will confidently vote for the award to Nikolay Genchev Genov of the scientific and educational degree "Doctor" in the professional field 2.1 Philology (Theory and History of Literature-Theory of Literature).

16.05.2022

Prof. Dr. Miglena Nikolchina