

## REFERENCE

on the PhD Thesis of Nikolay Genchev Genov

“The virtual body in science fiction: a study on phantomatics” –

for the degree of PhD in the professional field 2.1. Philology (Theory of Literature);

Department of Theory of Literature of the Faculty of Slavic Philologies of Sofia

University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

The thesis of Nikolay Genov was discussed and directed for defense at a meeting of the Department of Theory of Literature at the Faculty of Slavic Philologies of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. The PhD candidate has submitted all the documents required by the regulations – the dissertation, the abstract, the reference of contributions, the list of publications and participation in scientific projects and scientific forums, teaching and expert activity, the statement of the scientific supervisor Assoc. Prof. Todor Hristov in relation to the plagiarism prevention procedure.

The presented study is structured in an introduction, three chapters and conclusion; one appendix, bibliography, filmography and ludography have been appended. Its focus is on the phantomatic and the theory of it by the Polish fantasist Stanislaw Lem, stating at the outset an effort to recover Lem's theoretical apparatus and to address “some of the more serious conceptual problems” of his theory. The study draws on works of contemporary scholarship, which are for it either a provocation (such as Marcello Vitali-Rosati’s book “S'orienter dans le virtuel”) (M. V. Rosati's *Navigating the Virtual*), a foundation (Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty through Pierre Levy and Roberto Diodato), or an additional (“technological”) support (Marie-Laure Ryan and Paul Addams). The work thus strives for a clear conceptual framework, functionally applicable to combine with the models of St. Lem. From an literary-historical point of view, I think that the attempt of N. Genov's attempt to supplement and expand the available classifications and critical perspectives by adding to the list of science fiction works “some of the latest discoveries of the genre”.

The work thoughtfully, progressively introduces, steps through, first, Stanislaw Lem's phantomology, focusing on its potential to be used as a research paradigm; then into the mechanics of the phantom machine and its workings; and finally concentrates on phantomatics and the modelling of the relationship between body and world, reading the phantomatic through its various projections. In this way, the author details the object of study in the three chapters of the work, gradually bringing closer to the reader's understanding the horizon line in which Lem's theory of the phantomatic is set.

In the introduction and the first chapter one of the scientific problems that N. Genov sets out to resolve – the “swarming of the discourse on virtuality” that has led to a loss of clarity in the understanding of virtual reality. The study sets out to overcome this obstacle by outlining the lexical development of the phenomenon and, at the same time, reinventing (repairing, adapting and applying to contemporary genre updates) an existing conceptual apparatus that can serve in the elaboration of a comprehensive theoretical model. In the course of the search for a solution, the research reaches the underappreciated role of the fantasist St. Lem, who occupies a key place in it – from his theoretical writings the author derives a model that he imposes on his fictional texts and thus traces the path of phantomatics as an analytical tool.

I would like to point out that stepping into Lem's theory and the discussion in which it participates with different opinions on aspects of virtuality and virtual reality is not some kind of forced involvement of the reader in unrelated discourses. On the contrary, the author introduces the reader in an interesting way to a train of thought and a model that explains and details things that we encounter every day and assume we somehow know by default. The exposition is clear, engaging, layers analytical observations and theoretical syntheses with ease, and accomplishes the two-way movement between abstract and concrete, theory and artistry with equal ease and clarity. The text is purposeful in a particular way, and this has a disciplining effect both in its concise exposition and in its comprehension. The cultural-historical and technological returns along the axis of time and the interweaving of discourses are not ends in themselves, nor do they seek to show the author's literacy. They respond to scholarly tasks and follow the need for conceptual and substantive clarification of virtual reality, and also serve to explain the dynamics of the genre paradigm. Thus, the exposition methodically reaches out to literary studies and the importance of phantomatics for it, explaining the benefits it would have in the discourse of transhumanism, for understanding the virtual as a particular fictionality, for defining genre in fiction, something the work does on Lem's works at the end of the first chapter.

The solution of the scientific problem and the realization of the scientific tasks of the work are carried out step by step according to the author's design. The updating of Lem's theory applied to his own science fiction works, novels and shorter narrative forms, is done with ease. The results can be registered both in the direction of the theoretical model and in the direction of the artistic analysis (structure, plot decisions, characters), which reveals the phantomological projections in the writer's work.

It is particularly inventive for the study to choose the phantomatic machine as its leading subject, which has both productive and destructive relations to science fiction. Second chapter is devoted to it, structured around three generations of phantoms that make up plots that nuance the classification of science fiction works. Here, the authors comment on the conclusions drawn by St. Lem's problems, and the dissertation expands their range, starting from the impact of the phantomatic machine on the full-blooded body, on its subtle "inner" corporeality, untouchable (or not?) to technological invasion. The related problem areas of phantom types, phantom space and phantom time are touched upon. In a sequel, an attempt is made to superimpose the theoretical model put forward on texts by Sergei Lukyanenko, Jason Segel and Kirsten Miller, Vivian Velde; the question of the boundaries between dreaming, hallucination and phantomatization is commented on.

The third chapter of the work registers the successes in the choice of scientific problem, developing further the elements and aspects of virtuality – the phantomatic body and the phantomatic world and their role in the creation of phantomatic fiction. The levels of conflict in phantomatic fiction, the speech, dialectics and rhetoric of the phantomatic are explored.

The conclusion returns to offer inferences on the legacy of St. Lem as an intersection of science, philosophy and fiction, and to outline the perspectives that the study provides for continued development. The communication that literature since Lem has made with cinema, animation, internet culture and video games is outlined. Issues which deserve their own separate study are sought – such as the relationship of local science fiction production to global production and the highlighting of local variations on synchronous phenomena.

I would like to draw special attention to the footnotes in the study. They are heterogeneous, but apart from bibliographical references, they represent observations in their own right, either on the content of the texts commented on in the corpus, or on their reception in translation, or side-lines drawn in a direction worthy of special interest. In this way, the orbit of the study includes additional material that is not the focus but participates in the construction of the context for the clarification and understanding of the scholarly theses. In other words, the notes are transformed from an aid into a field for parallel research observations – with their own important themes, posed and discussed in a rhetorically appropriate form.

The appended glossary of phantomological sections systematizes and enhances the knowledge of St. John's annotated theory of St. Lem and its relation to the artistic realizations.

Comprehensively, Nikolai Genov's work sets out to address a scholarly problem with rich potential, both for theoretical development and for application in critical and research

practice. It has its clear contributions to the study of science fiction literature – conceptual refinement, research modelling, genre classification, interpretive matrix; and it also offers a new understanding of basic phenomena, a new interpretation of images, contents and genre realizations in it. These are accurately described in the dissertation's statement of contributions.

Bibliography, filmography and ludography at the end of the study close it structurally and give it the necessary academic completeness and entirety.

The abstract adequately reflects the content and structure of the study.

In conclusion, based on the merits of the study and its scientific contributions, I propose the Scientific Jury to award Nikolay Genchev Genov the degree of Doctor of Education and Science in the professional field 2.1. D. degree in Philology (Theory of Literature).

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Sofia

Assoc. Prof. Penka Vatoва, PhD,

Member of the Scientific Jury