

# OPINION

on a dissertation

## **“Detectives, intelligence, Cold War: criminal and spy literature in a comparative perspective”**

by **Maurice Fadel**

1. Concerning the work of Assoc. Prof. Fadel, first of all it could be noted that on its topic and pathos this is a strictly corporate dissertation, in which an institutional will rules. In other words, it fits into the large-scale research “project” of the New Bulgarian Studies Department at the NBU for the study of literature from the so-called era of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria.

During this period, the author has chosen to focus on a very specific genre, which in a number of respects has a unique place and role. What is this unique place? – On the one hand, formally, the crime genre in general, in all its subgenres, occupies one of the lowest positions in the usual genres hierarchy. On the other hand, it has an extremely high ideological functionality, which is not insignificant in the era of the People’s Republic. This combination between “low” and “high” is not a paradox, and a profitable marriage of convenience. – But as Assoc. Prof. Fadel’s research will tell us, it does not happen easily and suddenly. Nor is it inherent only in strongly ideologized socialist literature.

2. Before devoting to synchronous research, the dissertation deals with the restoration of the “vertical” paradigm of the genre to reveal a duality of origin, which will be preserved as the essence of the genre, including in its socialist version. Namely, the merging of crime (actually the criminal component) with espionage and counter-espionage. (It is still present in the early classics of the genre, such as Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, who constructed and set the genre paradigm in general.) – This is the first comparative perspective that the study unfolds – historically.

Such genre archeology was undertaken in the first part of the dissertation, using appropriate theoretical tools (researchers such as Krakauer, Boltanski, Dubois, and in part Carlo Ginsburg).

Central, leading thesis of the author is the modern character of the genre: both the late historical moment of its appearance and its own specifics reveal the criminal genre in all its forms (detective, spy, “noir”) as a symptom of modernity. They connect it in a fundamental way with other modern phenomena in the literature of the second half of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. – This fact gives reason of M. Fadel to use some approaches of “high” modern and postmodern theory (the inevitable Paul De Man), although he does so in a minimal amount, unobtrusively, resisting the temptations of extreme speculation that pursuits of such a highly normative genre undoubtedly offer.

3. In second part dissertation enters into its real subject – the reception of this genre in Bulgarian literature between 1944 and 1989. Namely “reception” – this is a key concept in this part, which works in different senses. In a narrower sense, techniques of receptive theory are used, albeit in a negative way, insofar as it is in this genre that the reader is the least co-author of the author. But – as mentioned – this is done without going into great depths. (In general, here M. Fadel, unlike his previous two books, overcomes theoretical and philosophical temptations, although the very topic of the research offers them – so much so that according to me above the book hovers a sense of missed opportunity.)

But more important is a second, non-terminological meaning – the reception of the genre by Ideology. This is exactly what M. Fadel is dealing with from now on, which is the essence of his work. This reception has its dynamics in the historical period under consideration. Initially, immediately after the change in 1955–45, they found themselves in a state of confrontation, of a radical clash, as far as the criminal genre was perceived as a retrograde remnant of the previous era – the “bourgeois” in its purest form. *The Blue Sunset* – Pavel Vezhinov’s novel, border in every sense – Is an emblematic example, including its genre impurity, the blurring between the “criminal” component and “bourgeois-general” one. This non-belonging of the criminal genre to the “new era” in its early years is based on the very foundation of Ideology – Lenin’s statements: in an ideal society, the crime by definition has no place, and as far as it really exists, it can be the work only of former elements external to the new society. – These productions predetermine the ideological uses of the genre in Bulgarian literature in the socialist era, where the “former” (“former people”) has long been a stable marker.

But novel *The Blue Sunset* – an example closely focused on this part of the study – is illustrative in another way – that it belongs to an author who will later become one of the classics of the crime genre – through collaboration with the ideological norm, with the requirements that Ideology will soon impose on the genre to a strong, extreme degree.

4. It is this cooperation, the successful incorporation of the criminal genre that is the subject of the following Third and Fourth Parts: the appropriation of the criminal genre by Ideology. The narration continues to be fast, sparingly constructed, remaining at the lower limit, incomplete and incomprehensible, fragmentarily fragmented, focusing on particular representative names and titles – mainly the “system” authors (if I may use conceptual jargon from another field) Bogomil Raynov and Andrey Gulyashki, created successful its own models of this genre and its own iconic heroes. (B. Raynov is also a skilled theorist, albeit in a negative sense, insofar as in his manner of elusive duality he realizes the postulates of the Western “*roman noir*”, which he stigmatizes as a theorist.) To Raynov and Gulyashki was added the “unsystematic” P. Vezhinov, author of number successful works in different periods of the historical development of the criminal genre in Bulgarian literature. (But the inconceivable mass production through which the crime genre established as the true mass, highly ideological literature of the socialist era has been missed.)

5. To return to the developmental structure of the study. There is a smooth transition from Part Three to Part Four, in which interest is gradually shifted to some microstructural elements of the genre in order to reconstruct its mechanisms of functioning, which, on the one hand, benefit from all the rules of mass culture. On the other hand, in this mature phase, phenomena such as the appearance of irony at the expense of naive ideological pathos from the early years have been observed.

In general, the study leads to the conclusion that the laws of the genre are stronger than the external ideological imperatives on this side and beyond the Iron Curtain: the characters are mirror doubles (Boev – Seymour). The same observations that make up true comparative optics – horizontally – have been further developed and confirmed in the Conclusion.

6. In turn, I would conclude by summarizing my observations as follows. After a book by N. Aretov and a few separate articles (Inna Peleva), the work of Assoc. Prof. Maurice Fadel is the first comprehensive study of this subject in Bulgarian literary theory, developing its own perimeter, different from Aretovs own. It focuses on a specific, highly productive period in the development of the criminal and spy genre in Bulgarian literature – the Cold War period,

whose external ideological context reflects on the poetics of this genre, but does not change its general patterns. It is this functional interaction that has been studied.

Another merit is that a basic part of the modern western theory of the criminal genre is introduced into scientific circulation (despite a partial presence in translation, such as Krakauer).

On these grounds, I would like to propose to the esteemed Scientific Jury to award the author Maurice N. Fadel the degree of Doctor of Science in the doctoral program Theory and History of Literature, professional field 2.1. Philology, for which he pleads.

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