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## **GENRES OF POPULAR CULTURE AND THEIR AESTHETIC VALUE**

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**Summary:** In this postmodern epoch, it is an indubitable fact that genre criticism has broadened its perspective. Since questions risen concern not only generic form, but also the coincidence between the aesthetic range of literary work of art, genre, and popular culture, the proposed article wishes to examine the crucial problem – What is the beauty of popular culture/literature? And yet another question: What are the historical grounds of popular literature? Ever since Plato and Aristotle, forms of mimesis (as a certain modes of enunciation, containing specific subject matter) have always been analyzed throughout their beauty and truthfulness. Aristotle gave rise to the “aesthetic” difference between tragedy and comedy, and the other forms of representation. This stratification in the period of classicism was known as difference between high (noble), middle and low (simple) genres. If we accept the argument of the theory of literary reception, we can point out to the questions in a different direction – What are the decisive conditions that determine writer’s choice of particular genre? Is everything acceptable from artistic point of view? This rumination leads us back to the nature of aesthetics and its mixed nature (since the beginnings) that consists of the verisimilar and the artistic (Longinus’ poetic fantasy). We propose a general view of one specific genre in Macedonian popular culture, i.e. column in historical perspective, starting from one of the exclusive genres in the 19-century Macedonian literature – sermon (discourse). In this context, we underline the specific nature of pseudo-fictional columns (narratives) of Macedonian professor and writer Venko Andonovski, whose venture is to combine the factual and the fictional in order to examine the grounds and possibilities of literary conventions.

**Keywords:** genre criticism, aesthetics, column, pseudo-factual, pseudo-fictional

It is undoubtedly true to state that one of the hardest analyses are made in the field of popular culture, since its subject of investigations is current, alive and developing as we speak. One of the advantages of these kinds of inspection is the inquiry liberated from unnecessary historical reconstructions, thus rendering the subject more speculative and methodologically unlimited. However, theory of literature and aesthetics as complementary parts require some paradigmatic terms, and place their requirements on popular culture as well. It is actually our goal to demonstrate how the intersection between popular culture and theoretical/aesthetical analysis can be explained, and also the methodological grounds of the developing genres in popular literature, i.e. whether it is possible for these genres to meet the requirements of aesthetics (the column as a genre of our specific interest).

One of the sociologists of culture, Mike Featherstone clearly notes our concern, claiming that every proper investigation of the widespread (popular) culture should begin from realizing the relationship between the mass production of the capitalism, and the mass culture that tends to devour the culture as a whole, since this connection is actually based on the integration and transformation of human identity throughout new trading goods and their

accumulation (Федерстоун, 1999: 356-357). As Featherstone argues, this kind of dehumanizing perspective of culture is presented in the works of Frederic Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Pier Bourdieu etc. It is actually the work of Bourdieu that reveals how we can investigate the cultural sphere, since the artists, even when negating the economic interest, are concerned with spreading their cultural influence and importance onto the so-called high culture (Федерстоун, 1999: 372-373). This is the reason why Bourdieu clearly defines the cultural sphere as four folded: 1. the stratum of the avant-garde and the myths of the ideal larpurlatism; 2. universities and museums with their own hierarchies; 3. the “creators of culture” that gain their importance into the high society and the production of high-class culture, and 4. the mass culture as a result of its growing acceptance, its “popularity” in the finest nuances of the meaning of this word. The interwoven meanings of the word “popular” can be described properly if we recall the famous dispute between Alexander the Great and Aristotle, an episode described by Alexander’s most accepted biographer, Plutarch, where Alexander, full of righteous indignation, criticizes Aristotle for publishing the esoteric works.

Literary genre criticism, on the other hand, established throughout centuries a well-framed paradigm, that actually involved the subject, the means and the way of presentation of the matter in the literary works of art. It is the famous taxonomy of Aristotle, anticipated by Plato, who differentiated the mimetic (dramatic), narrative (dithyrambs), and the mixed mode (the epic), enriched in the period of Romanticism with the lyric as mimetic, but introspective and non-narrated (according to Charles Bateux). It is throughout the nineteenth century that the opposition between the lyric and the narration as fiction became more relevant (Compagnon, 2001: Huitième leçon, Le système aujourd’hui), and strictly divided the poetic and the prose. Modern genre theories, on the other hand (more precisely the ones Jameson underlined) note the incompatible tendencies that govern modern genre criticism: the semantic and the syntactic (structural), illustrated by the theories of comedy (Jameson, 2002: 93-94). Semantic approaches delineate the mode, or spirit, sense, “world view”, “vision” that a genre reveals, like Bergson’s or Steiger’s theory, while the syntactic theories seek for the schematized, predictable frame that can be found in a certain type (it is Gerard Genette’s difference between genre and mode). Yet again, proper analysis of popular genre require both, since column for example poses structural norms (certain length, form of discourse, known/popular subject), but also reveals a kind of mood, “vision” that encapsulates the readers’ spirit. For the same reason, Northrop Frye’s theory of genre is idiosyncratic, since the four “mythoi” that are actually four characteristics of the myth reveal the specifics of a certain genre: the “agon” (conflict) as a characteristics of the romance, pathos as a subject for

tragedy, “sparagmos” of the irony and “anagnorisis”, the recognition of the new society as a specifics of comedy (Frye, 2000: 105). It is interesting to research the basic “aesthetic values” (Ingarden) or mood that impel popular genres overall (e.g. blogs, reality shows, stand-up comedies, columns, etc.), because this mood is actually very similar to the one of comedy – the need to subvert the subjugation, to bury the decomposed “body” of the authority and to give away all the unnecessary sentiments. However, it is quite true that ever since Baudrillard’s theory, we are simple more and more aware of the price we pay for such liberty and subversion, since it is the same created hyper reality that takes its toll on us – our indifference to all kinds of reality, the loss of its meaning and the production of values that are only empty signifiers (Бодријар, 2001: 11-12).

In Macedonian culture, the presence of the column as a genre of popular culture has its predecessor, and that is the well-known genre of the nineteenth-century Macedonian literature – the sermon (discourse). Aesthetic characteristics of oratory are meticulously investigated by Hegel in his “Aesthetics” or lectures on fine art, where oratory is actually juxtaposed with poetry. Unlike poetry, based on the unity, particularization and representation, most vividly presented in romantic poetry, oratory in its prose form poses a transformation that stretches from the pole of the individual position (the orator as a situation oriented, free in its moods and explications of the subject) to the pole of narration – the subject matter of the speech is presented as related to a defined circumstances, but also as a universal meaning, something that the recipient should accept and of which should be taught. Similar to the Horace principles of poetry - “prodesse” (to teach) and “delectare” (to please), Hegel underlines the artistic oratory as a form of art in which “the final and supreme interest of the orator does not lie in the *artistic* presentation and perfection of his case; on the contrary, over and above art he has still another aim, namely to use the whole form and development of his speech as simply the most effective means of achieving an interest lying beyond the confines of art” (Hegel: Part 3, Section 3, Chapter 3, The Poetic Work of Art as Distinguished from a Prose Work of Art, The Poetic and the Prose Work of Art, b, β, ββ). In his terms, poetic artistic treatment signifies a free movement of spirit, found in its perfect form (the romantic), where the ideal of the beauty is the primary goal along with the spiritual transformation unlike oratory, whose pragmatic target, in which a general intention can be found is the most important task to be completed, and the artistic treatment is just a decor, and serves to obtain the qualitative improvement of the recipient. Historical investigation of this genre in Macedonian culture reflects the possible transformations – form one form

strictly confined into the limits of Christianity and folk tradition to the more popular, twentieth-century art, based on the artistic recreation of reality and its simulation.

Macedonian literature in its historical development shows some inconsistencies – from the 19-century conventional and situation-oriented genres and forms we arrive to the 20-century novels, underlined by their fastened development. This kind of literary progression clearly postulates the problematic status of Macedonian literature in the context of Balkan literatures overall, as well as its folklore (popular) grounds. This specific generic evolution can be illustrated by the lack of more complex genres of narrative fiction in the 19-century literature (novels, for example), and also by the need for redefining the notion “popular”. In this undermined period of Macedonian literature (both nationally and culturally heterogeneous), popular refers to oral, traditional, conventional and stylistically undefined. This is the genuine background (in cultural sense of the word) of contemporary columns, and that is why we are still faced today with the same determinations and biases – popular is something clearly intended to be received by a variety of citizens, and its aesthetic value is something that can be brought into question according to its content and stylistic modes of articulation.

The above explained condition of Macedonian 19-century literature can be reviewed in the light of the tendencies in the English and the American literary canons of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, where pseudo-factual novel inspired the emergence of the fictional, imaginative story-telling. Underwood explains that this can be seen in Defoe’s novels, where some fictional characters or events are veiled by a kind of “empirical validity”. Consequently, he is trying to redefine the term “journalistic novel”, according to the notion “journalistic literature”, since it refers to the semi-fictional prose works “that are built around real people and real life events” (Underwood, 2008: 3). The problem is even more complex if we take into account the fact that these authors were first involved in everyday journalism at the beginning of their careers, and after that they started to write fiction, combining their methods and literary conventions. Underwood underlines the following criteria by which one writer can be called “journalist-literary figure”: author’s attention to the popular audience that receives and interprets the publication, general themes and topics in the article, and some stylistic requirements (clear enunciation and liberation from writing schemes and formulas that prevent the artistic effect, but also reinforce the commercial benefit). In the 19-century Macedonian literature, there are various writers that emerge and dwell into fictionality after being journalistically prepared (as journalists, editors, publishers, etc.), thus crossing the limits of the factual and the fictional. It is undoubtedly true that orally based utterance (that

can be seen in Macedonian discourses/sermons and acknowledged by the repeated formulas – amplifications, retardations, repetition of synonyms) actually impelled the aspiration for literary (and fictionally) transformed texts, where fictional is enhanced not by its existence as a neutral element (phantasm), but as a result of the textual strategy. This process can be illustrated with the first short story in Macedonian literature (“Proshedba”/”A Stroll” by Rajko Zhinzifov), whose form of reportage is used as a background for the appearance of the fictitious, mainly found in the atmosphere and the story-telling of the old men Stojan.

Another issue that should be examined according to the problem of fictional truth is the problem of verisimilitude and the probability as the main aspects of what we call fictional. In this context, we find the ruminations of Roland Barthes most valuable, since they focus on what he calls the readerly and the writerly text: “(...) Reading is nothing more than a referendum. Opposite the writerly text, then, is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the *readerly*” (Barthes, 1990: 4-5). These statements actually explain the importance of the text development through ages, and its meaning (significance) that cannot be limited to one stable verbal meaning (as E.D. Hirsh contended). These views can be connected with some previous Barthes’ assertions (in the text “L’Effet du réel” from 1968), where he explains the problem of the real (factual), and its effect on reading. As Chatman underlines (Chatman, 1978: 144-145), Barthes is analyzing Flaubert’s “Un Coeur Simple” and points out to the barometer in Mme. Aubain’s room as a “useless, a kind of luxury of narration”. These statements are clearly a distant evocation of the ancient Greek difference between history (and its prose form, focused on what is “genuinely real”) and the verisimilitude of the poetic form. What Barthes really contends refers to the fact that in the modern literature signified is completely eliminated in order to develop a kind of new verisimilitude: “This new verisimilitude is a ‘referential illusion’. Things depicted no longer need meaning, they simply *are*: that is their meaning” (Chatman, 1978: 145). This kind of subversion of the classical text and its probable to the “objectively real” is actually a new way to produce probability, since the referent in the modern text is a sort of phenomenon, unveiled and manifested as an instrument to produce the meaning. We believe that these statements paved the way to Barthes insistence on the gnomic (cultural, referential) code in the writerly text, which creates an imagination and fantasy by its interplay with the four other textual codes.

The problem of this illusion of reality can be especially foreseen in the specific “marginal” genres that cannot be framed (well enough) into the hierarchical stratification of literary genres. Column as a genre can only provoke those historical doubts about the

interferences between fact and fiction, and define a parameter that can help us examine this problem. Macedonian professor and writer Venko Andonovski promotes a kind of discourse that compels us to find the unconfined, plural self, disintegrated into the intersection of the polemical, fictitious, and the historical background. We tend to delineate his important role in the popular sphere of journalism, and affirm that he can be seen as a representative of the so-called “new journalism”: “Today, ‘new journalists’ such as Tom Wolfe, have made a variation of this claim by arguing that the methodologies of journalistic research, combined with the narrative techniques of the novel, are producing more vibrant and compelling forms of literature than those written by conventional contemporary novelists who have become fixated upon rarified stylistic techniques” (Underwood, 2008: 4). We claim that this postmodern approach to the problem of the real and the fictitious develops novelistic techniques even further, transforming the identity of the author and the narrator, as well as projecting a probable story based upon causality into the field of the real experience. Story (plot), its contingency and causality are actually only an external element in the columns, they can be incorporated into the realistic frame through the process of reading or not, so the reader can come up with two solutions of the presented factual problem – efferent, grounded into the materialistic logic of the contemporary societies or fictitious, aiming at one’s recollection of fairy tale structure and its ideological points. We can only presuppose what these new techniques do to the Horatio’s claim that the instruction and the amusement are literature’s primary goals.

The dominant mythos of the Macedonian columns, especially the ones of the Macedonian author and professor Venko Andonovski is the comic, the “anagnorisis”, the new-born social order founded on the grounds of the destructed social ranks and authorities. This mode also defines their popularity – column begins to create a certain parallel reality, in which it is easy to live harmoniously, and the excessive sensuous potential is finally discharged. In a way, in the Macedonian contemporary society, disintegrated by the newly risen capitalism, the column as a genre becomes a kind of “productive simulacrum” (in Baudrillard’s sense), a place integrated into the margins of the repressive politics (Бодријар, 2001: 157), driven by the constant desire to express the accumulated energy, similar to the suppressed potency of the victim. This kind of promised liberation is anticipated in Andonovski’s column “Columnism and communism”, where writing columns is seen as the “professional prevention from the politics”: “(...) The whole nation, every one of us should write columns. We demolished the communism and now I propose that we change it into – columnism. The marxist idea will be fulfilled: the time will come when everybody will be writer, they will

paint and write. Columnism or our emergence as columnists will be just a transitional phase to that artistic paradise!” (АНДОНОВСКИ, 2001: 135-136). This metatextual comment can be analyzed in the light of the genre’s mode (its comical mythos), but also through the lens of the fictitious – this deletion of the structural and the stylistic frames of reality and fiction can only end into a creation of a new “objectively real”, governed by the principles of novelistic causality as a distant promise of the utopian dream.

Baudrillard argues that this kind of “imaginary” only duplicate the models that destroy the fictive opposite of the reality, thus leaving us only in the recurrent power of the simulation. Yet again, column does not only reject productive simulacra, but also the “simulacra of the previous simulations” and this process can be seen through the word games and puns, such as communism/columnism, mediocrities/mediumcrities, Nazism/narcism etc. In order to articulate the previous simulacra (since everything that we know of communism, mediocrities and Nazism is also a historical hyper-real product, something learned in school through media), column finds itself in a position to amuse the ordinary citizen, while in a way constantly transforming itself into an instrument of the dominant social power relations. It is the illusion of democratic order that allows this kind of discourse, since its simulative “reality” cannot be harmed in any way, it is only multiplying. In the famous article “An anxiety of opinion”, Andonovski reveals the problematic status of the truthful and the kind of fiction that most of the media in Macedonia place. This question interferes with the problem of the verisimilar, as well as with the social stratification and its reinforcement: “When we say ‘independent medium’, we usually think of a medium that should *objectively* represent the reality. In what way will this *objective* medium represent reality *objectively*? Well, in a way that if there are two sides in the incidents, i.e. if there are two versions of the same event, the medium *will reveal them both equally*. And then it will become silent. The medium will refrain itself from its own stand, from commenting” (АНДОНОВСКИ, 2001: 209). In order to present the continuous interplay between the fictional and the factual, we select a part of the same column that underlines the impossibility of confining the aesthetic response of the reader (since it is determined by his own attitude towards the text as aesthetic object), as well as the referential illusion as a higher order of objects’ existence: “I claim that one should have opinion on what the truth is. Even Engels, who acknowledged that Balzac’s novels are *most total* in the sense of representing the reality, and that he learned about societies much more from them than from economy and sociology textbooks, affirmed after all that in the civil realism one cannot find the part of the reality of character that we call *bedroom*. There is no intimacy. Even when the characters are in their *bedroom*, they are sitting around the

agonizing bed of their predecessor and discuss financial issues: the inheritance, for example. But Balzac *chose* the part of the reality that would be considered as truth” (Андоновски, 2001: 212).

It can be an equally difficult task to envision the structural characteristics of column as genre, since its hybrid structure – the interdependence between the speculative understanding of the current social/political/public problems and the integrated fictitious element is constantly changing and evolving into a multiplying relations. On the one hand, column primarily serves as an incorporated medium into a more widely opened medium frame (that of the newspaper), and this integrated medium rearranges the practices of the first (the author comments not only on the subjects mainly affirmed as interesting by the editor, but also on topics and problems that affect the readers overall). This business logic is the starting point, and it is adequate to the perspective of the “readers’ tampon zone”, a secure, save place to comment along with the author’s statements. On the other hand, it is an independent medium that combines the practices of the subjective (confessional) narration, polemic tone of the publicist and/or the invention of a similar, story-like event. This process can be seen in the column “The Ears of Grandpa Freud”, that affirms the problem of the autobiographical acts (integrated into the political problem of phone-tapping) as a textual transformation of the historical “I” into the narrating “I”, and the narrated “I”, as well as their transformation into a polyvalent ideological “I” (Smith and Watson, 2010: 72-78). In order to present the government’s manipulation into the privacy of the citizens, Andonovski creates a Freudian atmosphere, a scene from his childhood (obviously made up, just as Freud claimed that every memory from the early childhood is an imagination), revealing the constant need of the consciousness to experience itself as someone else: “I remember one episode from my early youth: I had a girlfriend, it was a pleasant summer evening without a moon, we were walking around the city park. I had all the preconditions fulfilled to be happy. I was discovering the first words of the body language. All of a sudden, in a bush, I heard a woman’s giggle. There was someone else in the bush except her; I heard his baritone (saying and I remember this even now: ‘Don’t be mad!’). In that moment I wished I was *there* (...) In the next moment, I thought that I should *also be there* and that life is cruelly and unavoidably passing me by” (Андоновски, 2001: 158).

This openness of the genre is also enriched with many types of mixed narratological signs, although we cannot label this genre as fictitious. The subjective part of the column generally reflects the author’s dilemmas, or even better (as in our case) it forms a plot by extracting an event from the so-called personal experience (e.g. author’s direct confrontation



with the readers that are more than aggravated by his writings). The polemic tone, interwoven with the professionally created plot impels the readers' interest even more – in one of the columns of Andonovski, we can detect this kind of illusion creating that explains the net of advertising – advertisements are a sort of fairy tales, aiming directly to the recipients' potential to imagine or fantasize (АНДОНОВСКИ, 2001: 88-89). Analyzing the structural possibilities of this genre, we stumbled upon the problem of the narratee, defined by Seymour Chatman as interlocutor, listener, reader, etc. Narratologically, the narratee (and the implied reader) can be equally present as a character or totally absent, affected or not by the narrated events, but its essence is seen primarily in his ideal interpretation of the narrator's (author's) intentions (Chatman, 1978: 253). The fact that there can be various types of relations between the narrator and the narratee clearly explains the narrative logic, or the creation of verisimilitude (Riffaterre, 1990: 29), a story-like discussion filled with comic, ironic comments and statements that permit the entrance of the ideological values. The spiritual, humanistic ideology that Andonovski's columns proclaim is actually opposed to the governments' statements, and in the non-political columns it is confronted with the primitive, the outrageous, and the small talk logic. Even in the columns where the periphery is opposed to the center (the stigmatized peoples of the Western Balkan), the aesthetic quality is achieved by the reverse imagology, in which the "primitive savage" is again more civilized than the Western citizen. Consequently, Ferid Muhic (Муџиќ, 2001: 11) is quite right in qualifying these columns as a specific cultural memory. It is the reception, and the form of dramatic irony that create a distinctive logic in the text, forming and transforming the present world of the text. On the other hand, we are still aware of the enormous power of the simulacra and this columnist world as a residual, an outcast that is equally true as the imaginative world (Бодријар, 2001: 185), and they both underline the simulation without any present real meaning, diversifying its nature and power.

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## **ЖАНРОВИТЕ НА ПОПУЛАРНАТА КУЛТУРА И НИВНАТА ЕСТЕТСКА ВРЕДНОСТ (Резиме)**

Во нашата постмодерна епоха е сосема јасно дека жанровската критика ја прошири својата перспектива. Прашањата кои се покрената не се однесуваат само на жанровската форма туку и на блискоста меѓу границите на литературното уметничко дело, жанрот и популарната култура, па затоа овој труд го истражува круцијалниот проблем кој се однесува на фактот како се дефинира убавината на популарната култура/литература, како и проблемот на нејзиното соодветно историско позиционирање. Уште од времето на Платон и Аристотел мимезата и нејзините форми се анализираат во врска со нивната убавина и вистинитост. Аристотел ја поставува „естетичката“ разлика меѓу трагедијата и комедијата, како и меѓу другите форми на репрезентацијата. Во класицизмот тоа ја поттикна разликата меѓу високите, средните и ниските жанрови. Ако се согласиме со теоријата на рецепцијата, тогаш прашањата можеме да ги поставиме во поинаква насока. Кои се одлучувачките услови кои го определуваат изборот на авторот во врска со даден жанр? Дали сè е прифатливо од естетичка гледна точка? Ова промислување нè води назад кон природата на естетиката и нејзината мешана природа, која се состои од спојот на веродостојното и уметничкото (Лонгиновата „поетска фантазија“). Овој труд дава општа согледба на еден специфичен жанр во македонската популарна култура – колумната, која има свој историски претходник во еден исклучителен македонски жанр – беседата (словото). Ние се задржуваме на псевдофикционалните колумни (наративи) на професорот и писател Венко Андоновски, чиј потфат се состои во мешање на фактичкото и фикционалното со цел да се испитаат границите и можностите на литературните конвенции.

**Клучни зборови:** жанровска критика, естетика, колумна, псевдофактичко, псевдофикционално