On Jeans Prose as a Counterpoint to Socialist Realism and Why Its Bulgarian Variant Is the Most… Innocent

Mihaela Ilieva, New Bulgarian University

In the second half of the 20th century, a phenomenon emerged in Eastern European literatures that the Croatian scholar Aleksandar Flaker called *Jeans Prose*. The protagonists in these works are young people who often wear jeans, move mostly in groups, oppose social norms, and speak in their own youthful slang. They are a kind of outsiders within socialist society – a counterculture.

The paper traces the development and characteristic features of Jeans Prose, its influences, and the ways in which this fiction breaks some of the principles of socialist realism – the dominant artistic method in the arts during the period. Through their messages and characters, the authors come close to the ideas of the hippie movement, the British "angry young men" or the Beat Generation. Jeans Prose overturns the structure of the so-called *production novel*. This type of novel typically begins with adolescents or young people portrayed as ideologically unformed and impulsive, but through work and the guidance of a mentor (a Party member), they correct their negative traits and ultimately become full-fledged members of the socialist community. In contrast, the hero of Jeans Prose, set against established social structures and their aesthetic, moral, and ethical norms, is given neither the opportunity for social advancement nor constructed as a role model worthy of imitation. The small private collective of characters stands opposed to the large communist collective – they have their own language, their own clothes, and their own rules. Instead of embracing the great goals of ideology, they wander aimlessly; they choose a free life and small competitions within the group rather than participating in worker's contests. They counter ideological seriousness with a joking, irreverent attitude toward the world. These works exhibit neither *revolutionary optimism* (the vision of a better future through socialist construction), nor *socialistic heroism* and *typification*. The principle of *people-centeredness (narodnost)* is transformed – replaced by the private sphere of the youth: their themes, their language.

The paper also examines the most innocent variant of this fiction. The Bulgarian version of Jeans Prose was dismissively referred to by contemporary critics as "infantile prose." It lacks the boldness in theme and language characteristic of jeans prose in the USSR, Yugoslavia, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. Bulgarian authors are not as daring or cynical, one likely explanation being the specific political conditions in the country. Another probable reason for the innocence of Bulgarian Jeans Prose stems from the "educational measures" imposed by the authorities – during the 1950s and 1960s, many young people accused of imitating Western culture were sent to labor camps, which continued to operate in the country until the fall of the regime in the late 1980s.

Jeans Prose was a short-lived phenomenon; it was quickly exhausted, and its authors shifted to other thematic and generic fields – most often satire. Yet it remains important, as its stylistics left traces in the development of the literary language in the years that followed.