

## **CHILDHOOD AND TECHNOLOGY**

Short notes on Genre and Character Picture of Bulgarian Children's  
and Young Adult Literature of the 1920s and 1930s<sup>1)</sup>

**Nadezhda Stoyanova**

*Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski*

**Abstract.** The article is focused on the interpretation of technology in Bulgarian children's and young adult literature of the 1920s and 1930s. The research asserts that it is not possible to talk about technology in Bulgarian literature ignoring the works written for children and youths because it was the Bulgarian children's and young adult literature that started to include more often and to develop consecutively the images of the child and the machine in common literary plots. The first part of the article places an emphasis on the notions 'childhood' and 'machine'. The second part is focused on the particular genres that integrate technology as a topic (biographies and science fiction novels are the main ones), and the third part is about the changes in the character system (the inventor, the worker, etc.) that this topic provokes.

**Keywords:** Bulgarian literature; children's and young adult literature; childhood; technology; machine; genre; characters; science fiction novel, biography, inventor

The personal contact with the machine transforms the time and space experience of people and changes the identification processes of the child and the youth. In the modern and postmodern epoch every generation's childhood is different. We will never know what it is like to be an adult with our children's childhood and our children can hardly understand what our childhood was, because modern time is not cyclic, life does not repeat in generations anymore and the machine is one of the main agents of this forward-looking and constantly changing time. However, when interpreting technology Bulgarian children's and young adult literature of the 1920s and 1930s is not nostalgic; the subject is more often enthusiastic about the technological innovations rather than sad for the lost natural being's "authenticity". This does not mean that the images of machines are typologically alike because they are integrated in various genres and literary plots that modify and complicate their interpretations, and vice versa, the images of machines shape the genre and character picture, as well as the discursive features of the literary works.

In this article I will study how Bulgarian children's and young adult literature of the 1920s and 1930s adopted technology. The analyzed issues in this paper will be:

the correlation between the notions ‘child’ and ‘machine’, the genre modifications and the changes in the character system that this topic provokes. It has to be outlined in the beginning that the concept ‘technology’ is very broad (Li-Hua, 2009: 18-21), therefore, the emphasis here will be placed only on technology that is objectified in the products of engineering work in the time of scientific and technological progress; on technology that is objectified in the *machines* of Modernity. Yet, the machine is not a simple practical sign of Modernity; it is most of all a result of rationalization and “disenchantment” (Weber) of the world. It can be interpreted as a figure that makes the completion of the progressive modern ideas look possible. In the children’s and young adult literature the notions *childhood* and *technology* pair up narratively and conceptually, so that they can “tell” the story of Modernity.

It is not possible to go into details in this short article. Hence this research should be understood as an attempt to make a rough sketch of the way Bulgarian children’s and young adult literature thematizes machines. Most of the examples that will be used are published in the journals *Detska radost/Children’s Joy* („Детска радост”, 1910-1947; a children’s journal) and *Venets/Wreath* („Венец”, 1911-1943; a young adult journal) and the series *Vesela družina/Cheerful Company* („Весела дружина”, 1933-1947).

### **Do the child and the machine meet?**

Many literary works in Bulgarian adult-reader-oriented literature of 1920s and 1930s lay the image of the child in a Rousseauistic paradigm. In poems such as *The Blue-eyed Boy* („Синеокото момче”) by Atanas Dalchev and *A Child* („Дете”) by Nikola Furnadzhiev it is the child who directs his/her eyes to the natural picture and also has the senses not only to recognize and appreciate its beauty, but to communicate with it, which is a reproduction of the Romantic discourse:

И самò то почва да говори  
с лястовиците, със вечерта,  
със помръкналите кръгозори,  
с бога и света.<sup>2)</sup>

(Dalchev, 2004: 86)

пред светлото дете смирен ще спра  
и ведрина от всеки цвят ще пия.<sup>3)</sup>

(Furnadzhiev, 1928: 24)

In a large number of adult-reader-oriented literary works the image of the child is usually associated with the nostalgia of the modern person, who is tired of civilization, for his/her harmonic past, while the image of the machine is associated with anxiety over the unpredictable future; the machine is presented as

an objectification of the human fear of technological superiority and perfection (see the opposition between Romanticism and Machinism as presented and disputed by Tresch, 2012: 3). Therefore, these two images did not often combine in literary plots of the 1920s and the beginning of 1930s. In works by Hristo Smirnenski – such as the poem *The Children* („Децата”, 1921) and the short story *Barefoot Children* (“Босоногите деца”, 1922), children pass by the machines but do not reach them (Smirnenski, 1960: 416 – 417). In *The Children* the train is a figure of progressive time of Modernity that stays away from the poor people (Smirnenski, 1959: 153-154). In the short story *The Factory* („Фабриката”, 1926) by Boris Shivachev, for example, the children are forced to work with machines and they pay with their health, dignity and morals (Shivachev, 1926: 58 – 71). These works prove again that the child and the machine are still interpreted mainly as alternative literary images.

This is quite different for the Bulgarian children's and young adult literature of the interwar period. Despite the fact that Bulgarian adult-reader-oriented literature at that time monopolized many of the topics, characters and images, it was the Bulgarian children's and young adult literature that started to include more often and to develop consecutively the images of the child and the machine in common literary plots. Therefore, it is not possible to talk about this topic in Bulgarian literature ignoring the works written for children and youths. The monography *Literature and Technology* by Stiliyan Stoyanov proves that (Stoyanov, 2014: 124, 143 – 144, 198 – 200, etc.). According to the scholar there are two reasons for the easy integration of the new context and characters in children's literature – the first one is that children's literature to a great extent is a function of the audience's expectation; the second one is that the authors feel free not to focus on “serious” topic when writing about children (Stoyanov, 2014: 199 – 200). Thus Bulgarian children's and young adult literature started to modify the literary paradigm by accentuating on particular genres and by modifying some literary characters. In my opinion, this is one of the serious merits of Bulgarian children's and young adult literature of the 1920s and 1930s. But what is more, these literary works show to a great extent the dynamic cohesion between the images of the child and machine – both as images of the new Romanticism of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The machine becomes a function of childhood, a figure that shows the youth as a main feature of the modern world; and also it becomes a means of mythologizing childhood (not as a life period, but as a specific modern view of life). The machine and the child become images of a Modernity that is always open to the boundless future.

### Genre modifications

The Bulgarian children's and young adult literature of the 1920s and 1930s integrates technology in a wide variety of literary genres – poems, short stories, novels, (literary) biographies, travel notes, etc., combined with the popular science

introductions written by famous writers and poets (such as *From the winged dragon to the plane*/„От крилатия змей до самолета”, 1937<sup>4</sup>) and *From the first boat to the steamer-boat*/„От първата лодка до парахода-влак”, 1947 by the famous Bulgarian author of diabolic stories Vladimir Polyakov). Nevertheless, there are two important and quite different genres that have to be outlined: the *biographies* of inventors and engineers and the *science fiction* novels, since they present technology not only as a fact, but integrate it in a narrative that shows the machine’s history: machine as a long-time hope, dream and realization of humanity.

For the literary critics *biography* is a controversial genre because it does not belong categorically to belles lettres. However, its narrative often combines factual and fictional characteristics. In the years after Liberation<sup>5</sup>) till the Second World War many biographies of famous inventors and engineers were published in Bulgaria. Most of the books and articles were highly readable and addressed not only to adult audience but more often to young adults. Some of the biographies were translated, others were originally written in Bulgarian. It can be noticed that many of them are devoted to a few famous personalities – Thomas Edison (1890, 1899, 1922)<sup>6</sup>, Newton (1895, 1933)<sup>7</sup>, Galileo Galilei (1896, 1938, 1942)<sup>8</sup>, Benjamin Franklin (1898, 1929, 1937, 1945)<sup>9</sup>, etc. These books do not have any noteworthy literary qualities but they should be mentioned because they are important for identification and development of the inventor as a significant character of Modernity in Bulgarian literature. The function of these works is informative and educational. They present the inventor as a talented child, a hard-working person and a keen reader, whose family background is essential for his/her development as a scientist and/or an engineer. In fact, many of the stories are not original. For example, the books devoted to the life of Thomas Edison, including the story *Thomas Alva Edison* by T. Kolev (Kolev 1931), repeat identical events from the inventor’s childhood without any difference in the interpretation. The authors often make comments on the social environment and children’s poverty (for example, the short story about the life of sewing machine’s inventor – Barthélemy Thimonnier – H. H. 1931), or on the inventor’s role on his/her home area’s welfare (see the story about the inventor of watches – Daniel Richard – H. K-v, *The Little Inventor*/ „Малкият изнамервач“ – N. K-v 1927). According to these texts the modern person’s aim is to work for the betterment and the prosperity of his/her own nation and humanity. For the young readers these biographies construct the narrative about the history of Modernity.

More interesting is the appearance and the development of the *science fiction novel*<sup>10</sup>) – a genre that in its turn constructs for the young audience the narrative about the possible future of Modernity. After the first sci-fi novels in Bulgarian adult-reader-oriented literature (*O-Kors*/ „О-Корс”, 1930 and *Teut Rebels*/„Тейт се бунтува”, 1933 by Georgi Iliev), Elin Pelin wrote the first Bulgarian children’s and young adult sci-fi novel – *Yan Bibiyan on the Moon* („Ян Бибиан на Луната“ – Elin Pelin, 1934). It was written as a part of a two-book series – the first novel

was *Yan Bibiyan: The Unbelievable Adventures of a Kid* („Ян Бибиян. Невероятните приключения на едно хлапе“ – Elin Pelin, 1933). The second novel is about the journey to the Moon that Yan Bibiyan and his friend Kalcho undertake. This journey becomes possible thanks to the spacecraft that Yan Bibiyan has constructed. After this book Bulgarian authors began to write science fiction novels addressed to children and youths and the most active author in this respect was Emil Koralov – a writer with a considerable merit for the popularization of the genre among young readers in Bulgaria although is forgotten nowadays. He published: *The Man of the Future* („Човекът на бъдещето“ – Koralov, 1939a), *A Meeting in the Heavens* („Среща в небесата“ – Koralov, 1939b), *The Country of the Flying People* („Страната, дето хората хвърчат“ – Koralov, 1940b), *The Electric Man* („Електрическият човек“ – Koralov, 1940a), *The Mysterious Submarine* („Тайнствената подводница“ – Koralov, 1940c), *An Airplane without People* („Самолет без хора“ – Koralov, 1941), etc. Koralov used a wide range of literary devices and storyline solutions that were typical of western sci-fi literature at that time. In his novels we read about technical devices that were impossible in the 1930s but now they are a part of our everyday life: in *The Man from the Future* there are wireless phones, in *Airplane without People* and *The Mysterious Submarine* there are unmanned airplanes, in *Meetings in the Heavens* there are machines that look like pagers and even like smartwatches (this is the so-called ‘instrumental marvelous’ – Todorov, 2003: 51, 52). There are also machines that control strange and unknown natural laws, for example, suits that are easy to fly with and walking-on-water shoes (the so-called ‘scientific marvelous’ – Todorov, 2003: 51, 52).<sup>11)</sup> Despite the number of imaginary machines, none of these novels has reached the success of *Yan Bibiyan on the Moon* (by now it has been published more than 25 times) and it is because the models of the plots and characters are quite alike and more influenced by the national ideology of the time.

It should be noted that the novels by Georgi Iliev, for example, often describe the future transformation of this world or a different world that the characters are familiar with. In children’s novels of the 1930s characters usually reach unknown worlds, meet strange creatures or look at the Earth/ the contemporary humans with the eyes of future people or strange creatures. Thereby children’s literary works (in a way different from that of other works) reveal a wide fictional field to present the tensions of a world that cannot be explained and they mark the relationship between the modern self and the otherness. What is more, they have the potential to consolidate childhood not as a period of life, but as a specific attitude that makes the otherness possible; the childhood as a view of life that makes other worlds look accessible. The machine is a metaphor of the human will to make the hereafter present or to touch beyond the human.

These two popular and quite different genres – the biography and the science fiction – of the 1920s and 1930s construct together the integrity and continuity of

the narrative not only about technology, but through technology they construct a narrative mainly about childhood as a factor in the ceaseless progress of the Modern epoch. This is a reason to talk about the child – in the process of his/her maturation – as one of the main subjects of Modernity.

### **Different characters**

As far as machine is interpreted as a figure of Modernity, it is supposed that creating machines or dealing with them is related to the self-reflection of the characters as modern personalities. Three aspects of this self-reflection can be recognized in the characters of Bulgarian children's and young adult literature of the 1920s and 1930s. The first group of characters combines subjects who present themselves as authors of Modernity – they are the *inventors*. The second group are the characters with a clear sense of responsibility and belonging to the Modern epoch – these are the *workers*. The third group combines the characters who perceived Modernity only through its material goods as if they have not any obvious cultural or historical reflection on it – they are the *fashionable people*. For all these three groups of characters machine is interpreted not as something already given but much more as a dream for different future. That is why its uses are often ideologically marked.

As it has already become clear, biography and science fiction are two genres that widely develop and interpret the *inventor* as a literary character and cultural hero. The inventor tries to improve the world by inventing things. He/she, convinced in the “disenchantment” of the world, thinks that nature is insufficient or imperfect and it should be “repaired” by humans. Therefore, the inventor is the protagonist of Modernity, one of the subjects that make Modernity possible. Apart from the biographies, there are few literary works in Bulgarian literature (adult-reader-oriented) that include this character in their plots and most of them, with the exception of the short stories by Svetoslav Minkov, are not very famous<sup>12</sup>. Bulgarian children's and young adults interwar literature to a great extent popularized the inventor as a character with works such as *Yan Bibiyan on the Moon* by Elin Pelin and *A Meeting in the Heavens* (Koralov, 1939b), *The Electric Man* (Koralov, 1940a), *The Mysterious Submarine* (Koralov, 1940c), *The Flying Car* („Хвъркащият автомобил“ – Koralov, 1934) by Emil Koralov, etc.. Most of these personalities are typologically alike because they have a common ideological basis. The inventors are presented as national heroes with a global significance in the context of the mass media society of the 1930s. They are not only creators of technical innovations but also wise leaders because they usually restore the social order and the peace between different nations on the Earth or on another planet (as in *Yan Bibiyan on the Moon* or *A Meeting in the Heavens*). Their second social role, on the one hand, marks the necessity of ideological identification of the characters, and on the other hand, it is a sign that the function

of invention is still insufficiently understood; it is a sign that the biographies and other genres have not yet created an adequate context for unfolding the narrative potential of the inventor.

One of the important educational tasks of the children's and young adult literature is the initiation of the audience in the variety of roles and positions that young people are supposed to adopt in society. The most common use of technology in Bulgarian interwar children's and young adult literature is in the context of the play with *different professions*. Unlike many literary works published earlier, there is no moralizing, although the ideological connotations – either socialistic, or nationalistic – are not easy to hide and cannot be ignored.<sup>13)</sup> Many of the works present an attempt to heroize and/or aesthetize the figure of the modern worker as in the famous poems by Nikola Vaptsarov *A Motorman* („Машинист“) and *A Train* („Влак“). The machine is described as a separate person, a partner<sup>14)</sup> or even an enemy. The worker is not supposed to handle it physically, but above all mentally:

Ах, ти жалка самохвалка –  
машиниста се обажда, –  
как във твоята глава  
толкоз глупости се раждат?!

И защо са тез хвалби?  
Ей сега, ако река  
да натегна с таз ръка  
здраво твоята спирачка,  
мислиш ли, че можеш ти  
да направиш поне крачка?<sup>15)</sup>  
(Vaptsarov, 1983: 155)

These works usually do not try to educate the readers so much in the importance of labour, but to inspire in them the new romanticism of the epoch. They suggest that people be up to a new kind of time and space experience:

Виж из пътя към пазара  
иде старец на магаре.

През полето влак пуфти  
като черен змей лети

А в небето – с тях наред,  
забръмчал е самолет.<sup>16)</sup>  
(Bosev, 1940 – 1941)



Typical of the third group is that the machine is interpreted mainly as a sign of *social status*. A good example is Стрина Зайка/Aunt Doe-Hare – a main character in the poem of the same name by Chicho Stoyan. She killed her children and exposed herself to mortal danger because of her reckless passion for a car (Chicho Stoyan, 1929). Another humorous interpretation of technology is the short story *In a Car* („В автомобил“) by Ran Bosilek (Ran Bosilek, 1929 – 1930). Instead of a nice drive by the fashion car, the characters sank with it into a river. These two comic works are not an example of a non-reflective attitude to the machine, they reveal that the machine is not a simple sign of the human will to obey nature. As in the science fiction novels, the machine turns into a figure of the human impossibility to control the world and its meanings and thus it could awaken the skepticism and the modern self-irony of the young reader.

Probably one can list many other types of characters. However, the aim of this exposition is not to particularize but to mark the different direction of the children's self-identification that the topic of technology suggests.

Although in Bulgarian adult-reader-oriented literature of the 1920s and 1930s the images of childhood and technology are often presented as opposed, Bulgarian children's and young adult literature of the same period proves that they can be easily combined conceptually, narratively, and ideologically in the context of Modernity. By developing the theme of technology, the children's literature changes its genre and character system. It transforms the understanding of 'a child' from a simple literary character into a metaphor of Modernity. Therefore, it does not duplicate the messages of Bulgarian adult-reader-oriented literature, but adds new, modern and modernistic aspects to them.

## NOTES

1. The article was written within the Literature and Technology. Inventing Modernity in Bulgarian Literature project funded by the National Science Fund of Bulgaria, ДМ 10/1 – 13.12.2016.
2. "And on his own he starts to talk to the swallows, to the eve, to the darkened horizons, to God and to world." All translations of the lyrical works in the article are mine – N. S.
3. "I will stop before the bright child humble and I will drink the freshness of every blossom".
4. In the monography Literature and Technology Stiliyan Stoyanov has commented on this book (Stoyanov 2014: 123 – 124).
5. Liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman Rule in 1878.
6. Edison (Едисон“, 1890, without author, transl. from Russian); Edison: His Life and scientific and practical activity („Едисон: Животът и научно-практическата му дейност“, 1899) by Andrey Kamenski (transl. I. Керов); Thomas Edison: The Life and Deeds of the Great Inventor („Томас Едисон: Животът и делата на великия откривател“, 1922) by Genyo Dochev, etc.



7. Newton: His Life and Scientific Work („Нютон: Животът и научната му дейтелност“, 1895) by Mihail Filipov (transl. F. Pavlenkova); Isaac Newton: Biography („Исак Нютон: Биография“, 1933) by Todor Kolev, etc.
8. Galilei: His Life and Scientific Work („Галилей: Животът и науч. му деятелност“, 1896) by Evgenii Predtechenski (transl. from Russian B. M.), Galileo Galilei: Biography („Галилео Галилей: Биография“, 1938) by Todor Kolev, Galileo Galilei („Галилео Галилей“, 1942) by George Nurizhan, etc.
9. Franklin: His Life, Social and Scientific Work („Франклин: животът, обществената и научната му деятелност“, 1898) by V. Abramov (transl. from Russian), Jean-Baptiste Lully, Benjamin Franklin („Жан Батист Люли. Вене-амин Франклин“, 1929) by M. Nikolski (transl. M. Nikolaev), Aleksander the Great; Byron, Benjamin Franklin („Александър Велики; Байрон; Вениамин Франклин“, 1937, without author), The Autobiography of Franklin („Автобиография на Франклин“, 1945) by Rusi Rusev, etc.
10. This paragraph is a small part of my presentation on the interpretation of machine and childhood in Bulgarian sci-fi children's and young adult novels of the 1920s and 1930s that will be published in a post-conference volume *Slavic Worlds of Imagination*, Krakow, 2018, 227 – 240 (under print).
11. About the science fiction machines in Georgi Iliev's novels see Ruseva, 2017.
12. The works that can be mentioned are the novels *O-Kors* („О-Корс“, 1930) and *Teut Rebels* („Теут се бунтува“, 1933) by Georgi Iliev, *The Inventor* („Изобретателят“, 1931) by Boris Shivachev and *Utopin* („Утопин“, 1941) by Zdravko Srebrov, etc.
13. On the function of the airplane and the figure of the pilot see Chavdarova, Enchev 2016; see also Stoyanov, 2014: 133 –134.
14. „И машината до мен/ кротко ще ми пее,/ в сини дрехи всеки ден/ ще стоя до нея.” (Asen Bosev, *Printer*, DR, 41 – 42, br. 5) (“And the machine near me will sing me kindly; I will stay near it in blue clothes every day.”)
15. „Ah, you pitiful boaster” - the driver said – ‘how in your head such nonsense is born?! And what are these praises for? If I decide I will bend with this hand firmly the brake, do you think you can take at least a step?’
16. “Look on the road to the market there is an old man on a donkey. A train through the fields snorts as a black dragon flies. And in the sky – side by side, an airplane drones.”

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✉ **Dr. Nadezhda Stoyanova, Assist. Prof.**

Department of Slavic Studies

Sofia University

15, Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd

Sofia, Bulgaria

E-mail: [nadezhda.sto@slav.uni-sofia.bg](mailto:nadezhda.sto@slav.uni-sofia.bg)