

Between Confession and Subversion: Ideology, Eroticism, and Laughter in *Levitan* by Vitomil Zupan

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This article analyzes Vitomil Zupan's novel Levitan as a politically subversive and hybrid narrative that interrogates totalitarian ideology through grotesque aesthetics, erotic vitalism, and confessional narration. This analysis draws upon Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque function of laughter, emphasizing how Zupan utilizes subversive narrative strategies to deconstruct official political discourse. The grotesque and erotic vitalism function as subversive narrative strategies that confront the symbolic authority of Titoist socialism. The prison setting and ideological representation in Levitan is interpreted through the lenses of Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and surveillance, Louis Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses, and Fredric Jameson's understanding of the political unconscious. Furthermore, Vladimir Biti's concept of the "ideology of originality" provides a theoretical framework for understanding the question of whether Jakob Levitan's narrative autonomy becomes complicit in the very ideological mechanisms it seeks to resist. Within this framework, Levitan emerges as a complex literary artifact that resists ideological representation of reality through a synthesis of confessional introspection, grotesque aesthetic, and narrative innovation.

Keywords: Slovenian novel / Zupan, Vitomil: *Levitan* / literature and ideology / political prose / subversiveness / laughter / eroticism

Introduction

Vitomil Zupan's novel *Levitan* (1982) articulates grotesque humor and erotic vitalism as subversive ideologemes that confront the symbolic structures of totalitarian ideology. Framed through a confessional first-person narrative, the novel not only critiques political repression but also exposes the paradoxes and limitations of ideological view of reality from within. Zupan's prose is shaped by modernist narrative principles, marked by a sustained emphasis on psychological interiority and the subjective dynamics of motivation. Written under postwar censorship and published several decades after its initial composition, *Levitan*, like Zupan's other major works *Klement* (1974) and *Menuet za kitaro* (1975), continues to resonate with contemporary readers. These works remain critically relevant for their satirical engagement with themes of individual agency, state control, and narrative experimentation. In this context, *Levitan* stands as both a literary act of resistance and a deeply self-reflexive inquiry into the very ideological frameworks it seeks to subvert.

In the period of Yugoslav literature, especially within the genre of the novel, elements of the de-ideologization of reality persisted, including anti-colonial and anti-imperial tendencies from the early 1950s. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, these tendencies evolved into literary engagements with themes of totalitarianism, namely, the exposure of totalitarian consciousness within ideological state apparatus. Among these was the Yugoslav state apparatus itself, which increasingly began to embody such characteristics. Within this context, it became crucial to abandon the myth of "brotherhood and unity" forged during the National Liberation War (NOB), and to demythologize revolutionary forms of consciousness. The ideological relationship to the NOB was most explicitly articulated by Zupan in *Menuet za kitaro*, but his most subversive and direct critique of ideological dogma appears in *Levitan*.

Zupan's work emerged in this period as an aesthetic and political confrontation with the censored narratives of the Yugoslav state. His literature challenged the very foundations of collective memory and ideological loyalty. *Levitan* is a literary resistance against ideological conformity. Positioned within the genre of the political prose, it engages not only with the physical experience of incarceration, but with broader questions of state power, moral autonomy, and the repression of human desire and laughter.

Vitomil Zupan was a controversial and subversive writer during socialism, and both his life and work generated public consternation

during his time, largely because his literature was primarily perceived as anti-communist and decadent. His biography is among those intriguing and unusual life stories of talented individuals whose lives appear simultaneously turbulent and adventurous. This biographical quality lends Zupan's novels a particular sense of realism and testimonial authority, a point emphasized by Vladimir Biti, who cites an emblematic line from *Levitan*: "It is very difficult to fairly describe events and states that one has not experienced oneself," reflects the protagonist, thereby asserting 'the right to speak the truth about the world and life over those who function within the recycled circumstances of a second-hand shop existence'" (Biti 45). The next chapter will examine *Levitan* as a paradigmatic novel wherein the figure of the political prisoner becomes a symbolic ideologeme, both revealing two sides of existence, the official and the unofficial, in the Yugoslav society and resisting the ideological apparatus of the Yugoslav socialist state.

Jakob Levitan and the politics of imprisoned subjectivity

Jakob Levitan, the main character of the novel *Levitan*, is a political prisoner who fights for his freedom of thought and expression. Jakob Levitan's name is symbolically charged: it is a synthesis of two biblical narratives, framing him as both a religious archetype and a narrative subject engaged in a political struggle against secular "gods" of power. He is the chronicler of his own life, having experienced life and its pleasures, pleasures that are tabooed by politics, and thus becomes, as Vladimir Biti puts it, "from a sage to a chronicler" (Biti 45). Levitan narrates his life in the first person, from prison, in the form of an interrogation that led to his confession of a fabricated betrayal, intended to result in his conviction during trial: "He asked me how many years I got. When he heard the sentence, he shook his head sadly. Why? Politics, I answered" (Zupan 77).

His primary identity is that of a political prisoner; as such, he is an isolated individual, a social outcast detached from the community and its conventions, without a voice in society, labeled an anti-communist, but above all, a sexual deviant. This creates a conflict between the individual and the collective. Thus, the main characteristic of this literary figure is political. He is guilty because he engages in politics, and his sin, sexuality and hedonism, through ideology becomes a punishable crime the moment it deviates from the ruling ideology. The punishment is the loss of bodily freedom and ideological re-education.

In this context, Levitan's sexuality extends beyond the realm of personal transgression, emerging as a politically charged site of resistance. His erotic hedonism functions as a subversive force against the socialist regime's efforts to impose moral regulation and uphold a dogmatic vision of social hygiene. From this perspective, mechanisms of power exert control not merely over behavior, but over the vitality, desire, and sensory experiences of the body itself. Levitan's pursuit of pleasure outside the boundaries of ideological utility thus represents a radical act of political defiance.

Prison literature, along with narratives emerging from concentration camps, is a significant testimonial genre in the twentieth century, particularly under communist regimes. The voice of Jakob Levitan transforms into a chronicler's confession, and the confession includes a collection of randomly assembled poems or letters smuggled out of prison, notes from the period of apprenticeship, hence a series of surveys, sketches, and portraits.

Jakob Levitan as the chronicler denies the value of any official historical perspective; he wants "to cut through every 'historical perspective' and place things where they belong" (Biti 45). His life before prison, his immense life energy and instincts toward women, toward exploring life and all its phenomena, in prison turns into a thirst for knowledge, collecting information, and reading a vast number of books. His narrative subject, divided into the experiential and the knowing subject within the structure of the novel, through his consciousness, is split into past and present life before prison and life in prison.

This tension between lived experience and retrospective interpretation stresses the crisis of testimony within totalitarian regimes. The question, then, is how one can reclaim authorship when even memory is subject to political regulation. Zupan's concept of a "second-hand shop existence" mirrors the chronicler's crisis, as he is compelled to distill truth from deceptive ideological fabrications and rhetoric that manipulates reality and public opinion. In this manner, Levitan's fragmented narrative functions as an act of resistance.

In political prose, the view of reality and politics is of exceptional importance, as it reveals the traits of the main character, whose personal characteristics or political values often become their tragic flaw. Considering the genre nature of *Levitan*, and the fact that Zupan, in line with the literary fashion following the Second World War, auto-poetically defined his work as "a novel that is not a novel," his typically parodic postmodern gesture reflects the nature of the prison story that resists full fictionalization of discourse, that is, the absurdity of life in

prison. The genre nature of the novel has been discussed by Željko Milanović and Slobodan Vladušić in their recent comparative study “Vitomil Zupan i Borislav Pekić: od zatvorskog iskustva do žanra”:

The realization of the limited narrative potential of a protagonist in prison, which inevitably leads the text toward an essayistic discourse, creates a work that cannot confidently name itself a novel—a work that, through its unstable genre, manages to merge the autobiographical with the understanding of human existence as one of constant imprisonment within a civilization that is deceitful, and in which the discovery of prison becomes a means of humanizing the individual. (70)

This genre instability mirrors the ideological instability faced by those caught within state apparatuses. *Levitan*’s refusal to conform to a stable ideological identity is reflected in his rejection of a stable literary form. As Milanović and Vladušić observe, the text’s transition towards an essayistic style of discourse indicates the shift in focus from plot to intellectual survival in prison literature. This hybrid literary form, a novel incorporating elements of memoir and diary, reflects a divided narrative subject that mirrors the disintegration of subjectivity under conditions of prison control and ideological surveillance.

With a firm internal composition held together by the consciousness of the main narrator, *Levitan* presents a confessional narrative structure that focuses on the narrator Jakob Levitan, a prisoner of political events. Through first-person narration, the novel represents the protagonist’s inner world as he faces the challenges of prison life, while simultaneously reflecting on his own thought processes, the struggle for survival in prison, and confrontation with institutional limitations. He recounts what he experienced, saw, or heard from other characters, attempting to draw the reader into his world of truth about events. However, his knowledge of events is always limited, narrowed by his subjective perspective. Jakob Levitan places himself at the center of his own world, a world of originality and the truthfulness of the chronicle. Yet, as Vladimir Biti rightly asks: “Doesn’t, in such circumstances, the chronicler’s guarantee of originality and truth ultimately turn into imaginative manipulation?” (Biti 46). The novel’s nature, positioned on the border between autobiography and autofiction, invites the interpretation of imaginative manipulation due to its first-person, subjective narration by Jakob Levitan, a character that is perceived as a political delinquent, rapist, and misogynist, yet embodying the author Vitomil Zupan’s own life and defiance of the communist regime. This manipulation is not

a fictional flaw but a defining characteristic of novels autofiction, where Levitan's controversial behavior serves to explore themes of freedom, rebellion against hypocrisy, and the subjective reconstruction of personal history through a critically reinterpreted reality. Ultimately, this imaginative manipulation allows the author to confront political and societal norms by creating a complex, challenging protagonist who blurs the boundaries between lived experience and literary creation, pushing readers to question both the character's actions and the nature of truth in a repressive environment.

The novel reads as a subversive attack on power and the powerful, whom Jakob Levitan refers to as "gods." In Genesis in the Old Testament, Leviathan is one of the beasts fought by the supreme Jewish god Yahweh, making the symbolism quite clear and direct. The narrative subject of *Levitan* attempts to present himself as a being fighting against the gods, gods as symbols of totalitarian and absolutist power who determine the fate of all those beneath them.

This religious-mythical framing situates Levitan as a kind of philosophical Leviathan, a force of chaos in a rigid, divinely ordered system. These "gods" do not merely punish, they are politicians and rulers, they reshape reality itself, determining the biographies and truths that constitute historical memory. Zupan's choice to mythologize power intensifies the novel's critique: totalitarianism is not just a political structure, but a new theology of control; it represents the dogma of the regime as the new religion.

Gods of an ideology that affirms itself in the manner of a religion. The gods are those who will ultimately be remembered in history by shaping the biographies of ordinary people, even rewriting their autobiographies. According to Jakob Levitan's testimony, prisoners were forced to write their own and others' biographies in prison as dictated by their interrogators. Hence the narrator's turn toward essayistic discourse, as he is an educated character, an erudite, a writer who becomes a political prisoner. Based on certain elements of the interrogation process and the depiction of the prisoner's life and worldview of political rebellion (with revolutionaries declared as traitors), *Levitan* can be seen as the continuation of the literary tradition of Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940). The narrator does not hide the influence and connection of Koestler's novel with his own writing, as he reads it in prison: "With special interest I read Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*" (Zupan 81).

Jakob Levitan is a political prisoner; his speech is subversive toward both politics and bourgeois conventions. He is controversial and

cynical, but through his erotomaniacal and hedonistic view of life, he deconstructs socialist ideology and, most importantly, reveals the true nature and essence of prison as a concept of dehumanization. In deconstructing socialist ideology, he becomes its critique.

Levitán represents prisons, political parties, and religions as state ideological apparatuses that pragmatically use “morality” and serve as mechanisms of repression over people, being hallmarks of totalitarian regimes. He sees them as well-organized systems of a ruling class of deceivers and liars, with no place for people who hold different values: “In every orderly state, the Pharisees represent a tightly connected society within a society, vigilantly watching everyone suspected of not being a Pharisee” (Zupan 57). These societal rules carry the symbolic role of the circular prison (panopticon), elaborated by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* as a metaphor for surveillance and the presence of power structures in Western society; the concept of the panoptic prison is transposed onto society and creates a panoptic society out of it, as centralized power is realized through various discursive practices in the public and private spheres: “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself” (Foucault 202).

The panopticon is a type of institutional building and control system that was invented by the English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century. The concept of the building is designed to allow all the inmates of that facility to be watched by one guard, and the inmates are in constant insecurity and fear of being watched. As it would be physically impossible for one guard to observe all the prisoners’ cells at once, this situation in which the prisoners cannot know when they are being observed means that they are motivated to act. Prisoners are forced to regulate their own behavior. Bentham’s prison is now most commonly understood as a panopticon: “And, in order to be exercised, this power had to be given the instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible. It had to be like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere” (Foucault 214).

Among different power structures, Louis Althusser distinguishes between state apparatuses (SA) and ideological state apparatuses (ISA). State apparatuses are typically repressive and include the government, administration, police, courts, prisons, etc., and they function through

violence. Ideological state apparatuses refer to various realities perceived by observers as specialized institutions: religion, education, family, law, politics, culture, unions, media, etc. Althusser classifies these into the public (state apparatuses) and private (ideological state apparatuses) spheres. Ideological state apparatuses function through ideology. According to Althusser, ideology has no history and can have two faces: ideology is the representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence, and ideology can have a material existence. Ideology exists within state apparatuses, possesses a material dimension, and is only possible if there is a subject whom ideology interpellates and to whom it is addressed.

The genre of the political novel, or rather the type, is referred to by Aleksandar Flaker as “the novel of expression.” In the novel of expression, as in the political novel, the character “moves through time and space while simultaneously being a character who expresses thoughts primarily on ideological themes” (Flaker 161). By reducing the novel to its most important essayistic component, which serves to ideologize the depicted reality, the political in the novel is reduced exclusively to the ideological. Ideology is one of the main components of the political novel, as well as—according to Lennard J. Davis’s *Resisting Novels*—of all novels, just as ideology is one of the components of politics: “Novels do not depict life, they depict life as it is represented by ideology” (Davis 24). Ideology, as represented by certain ideological characters in political novels, is an expression of their dramatic position within the text. Their actions and thoughts serve as indirect characterization, providing the reader with insight into the system of ideas and representations, as Althusser comments on the origins of ideology:

It is well known that the expression “ideology” was invented by Cabanis, Destutt de Tracy and their friends, who assigned to it as an object the (genetic) theory of ideas. When Marx took up the term fifty years later, he gave it a quite different meaning, even in his early works. Here, ideology is the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group. (Althusser 253)

Terry Eagleton, in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, asserts that “every important political battle is, among other things, a battle of ideas” (10). This conception of ideology aligns closely with Karl Marx’s foundational view, wherein ideology functions as a system of dominant power structures on the level of a group and individual. Lennard J. Davis echoes this perspective, characterizing Marx’s theory as one in which

ideology operates as “a reflection of the dominant powers (dominant power/dominant ideas)” (Davis 41). Together, these concepts of ideology highlight the political nature of ideological discourse and its role in legitimizing hegemonic authority.

Fredric Jameson introduces a nuanced view of the concept of ideology, exploring its operation not only in political discourse but also within the very structure of cultural and aesthetic production. Ideological themes discussed by literary works, according to Jameson, mark the moment when we “find that the semantic horizon within which we grasp a cultural object has widened to include the social order” (Jameson 61). The text transforms from a text in the narrower sense, from *zero meaning*, into “the form of the great collective and class discourses of which a text is little more than an individual parole or utterance” (61). According to Jameson, in this transition, the text becomes an *ideologeme*, that is, a unit of ideology, “the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes” (61). Finally, the text, from a mere symbolic act, through the ideologeme, can transition into the third semantic and interpretative horizon, that of the *ideology of form*, where the text is interpreted as “the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production” (62). Accordingly, a character who expresses thoughts on ideological themes could be reduced to an ideologeme. However, by the end of Zupan’s novel, Levitan is no longer merely an autobiographical narrator;¹ he is an expanding, imprisoned, human ideologeme. He embodies the smallest unit of ideological contradiction, where erotic freedom, individual autonomy, and political resistance converge. His war is not just with the prison wardens, but with the gods themselves, the divinized machinery of ideology, memory, and state power. Readers should consider Levitan’s personal struggle as emblematic of the broader fight to preserve truth and autonomy under oppressive systems, prisons as instruments of discipline and punishment, linking individual resistance to collective political realities through writing and confessing.

¹ For more on this subject of autobiographical prose, see Sablić Tomić.

Eroticism and humor as ideologemes of the novel, humor and laughter as political critique and subversiveness

Activating the phenomena of eroticism and humor in his discourse, Levitan reveals the flaws of political systems. When the phenomena of eroticism and humor become part of the literary world, they represent politically subversive literary speech that resists the forces of evil and political power oppressing humans for their own interests: "Autocracy and humor do not go together, just as it is impossible to lock and unlock a door at the same time" (Zupan 46), just as "both authentic tragedy and authentic ambivalent laughter are killed by dogmatism in all its forms and manifestations" (Bakhtin 121).

According to Jakob Levitan, socialist society uses morality for its pragmatic political goals. Political discourse expels all elements of the people's and human spirit and freedom, just as all dogmas have done, especially since the Middle Ages, as Mikhail Bakhtin wrote in his study *Rabelais and His World*. Yugoslav socialism did this in a brutal manner, but not as brutally as Stalinism, according to Zupan's opinion. "Levitan's ideology of originality arises in circumstances that witness the return of the medieval-Renaissance conception of history to the historical scene" (Biti 52). It is precisely this return that is actually hidden in the activation of medieval laughter culture in Zupan's novel:

Privilege of the status of a teacher he earned, with the condition that he successfully rid himself of the blindness of the experiencing subject, so that he can now, *au-dessus de la mêlée*, from a cognitive perspective "laugh heartily." At the sight of a petrified world in the most grotesque positions, a deep laughter of a person awakens, who has seen too much. In this clarity, there is no sad solemnity, no tense gravity, just funny facts, one after another. (Biti 44–45)

Alojzija Zupan Sosič develops the thesis that "eroticized vitalism," a concept that links eroticism with the force of life and resistance against repression, is the main theme of all Vitomil Zupan's novels, and that it is a "typical narrative perspective and source of novelistic dynamism: erotic stories, in which the narrator most often plays a role, summarize the narrative flow, and erotic suspense makes the storytelling more dynamic" (Zupan Sosič 157). Likewise, Milanović and Vladušić note that Zupan's Levitan, for whom "eroticism is omnipresent" in contemporary life, "equates government and the public (public opinion, the people themselves) with prison and the prison world" (Milanović and Vladušić 70). Considering this important genre component that dominates the artistic vision and "ideology of originality" of Zupan's

novel, it demands further attention as both a structural and ideological idea of resistance.

Zupan reveals the dimension of humor, or laughter, that Mikhail Bakhtin famously elaborated:

True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naivete and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness. Such is the function of laughter in the historical development of culture and literature. (Bakhtin 122–123)

Thus, Zupan's humor is humor against autocracy, that is, against dogmatism, ossification, and categorical worldviews. This form of subversive humor does not coexist with the rigidity of totalitarian ideology, nor with its sanctioned seriousness. Political totalitarian regimes do not even recognize open seriousness, nor strict scientific seriousness, because open seriousness, according to Bakhtin, is not afraid: "True open seriousness fears neither parody, nor irony, nor any other form of reduced laughter, for it is aware of being part of an uncompleted whole" (Bakhtin 122). In contrast, totalitarian seriousness seeks to neutralize all ambivalence, all plurality, all forms of ambiguity—precisely what laughter embraces.

Totalitarian seriousness is precisely the opposite of laughter, and can subordinate all other forms of seriousness, because it is dogmatic, one-sided, fanatical, unambiguous, categorical, but above all uses fear and intimidation, as religions do, as its strongest weapon for domination. Laughter is perhaps the greatest enemy of political oppressive regimes: "In a metaphysically hollowed-out world, the author recognizes the primacy of art, which by its soothing effect is similar to eroticism. Erotic vitalism transcends decadent, neo-Romantic, existentialist, and socialist realist sketches, or 'holds' them at a fragmentary level, while historical narratives are covered with intimate, 'side' stories" (Zupan Sosič 157).

Bakhtin's description of popular folk laughter as a form of expression that originates from the masses and resonates with their shared experiences is particularly noteworthy. Consequently, humor in politics has witnessed a surge in popularity, with comedians who have transitioned into politics or satire with a pronounced political theme gaining significant public appeal. This form of laughter is frequently regarded as authentic and relatable, stemming from shared cultural

codes. However, folk laughter can also become constrained within ideological or partisan frameworks, thereby losing its liberating potential. Consequently, even laughter, once a symbol of freedom and resistance, can be appropriated, structured, and used as a tool of persuasion or political manipulation. This calls for a critical inquiry: does this laughter still represent the “true laughter” put forth by Bakhtin, or has it, in contrast to his assertions, become susceptible to ideological codification and dogmatism?

Socialism was supposed to replace dogmatic paradigms, freeing people from the shackles of false morality: “You will break through petty-bourgeois morality, where sexuality is banished into toilet writings, dirty jokes, and brothels, drivers, and through clerical virtue, where sexuality is imprisoned within the boundaries of sin; finally, you will reach the so-called socialism, where they will take off the wall quite ordinary female nudes in watercolor, as supposed pornography. Those nudes later ended up on judges’ desks, under review; later I learned that they were burned because I would no longer need them anyway” (Zupan 29). The means of humor in Zupan are the same as those Bakhtin registered in Rabelais. The most important techniques are exaggeration, distortion, deformity, and repetition.

The political novel, in its foundation, is a utopian genre aimed at creating a literary narrative as an alternative world to this political world in which humans live. In the real social system, a person cannot achieve their full existence because it is based on poor assumptions: “This is why we have the right that punishes (including terror), payment systems (including bribery), political incitements, and crises. Is there any society based on bright feelings? On fulfilling bright desires (democracy, normal relations among people, responsibility of those in power), on bright hopes (meaningful goals ahead of a person who does something), on joy and love?” (Zupan 63).

Just as carnival humor originates from the Middle Ages because it turns the entire Middle Ages “upside down,” and thus reflects the entire underside of medieval culture embodied primarily in the carnival, so culture is divided according to the dichotomy Learned–People’s and High–Low. Zupan overturns this vertical model by introducing subversion from the underground, low culture, into the narrative fabric of his novel, through humor and critical satire, to ridicule politics that divides society into high and low.

The society built by politics is not utopian, it is not built on the principles of democracy, much less love or joy. Going beyond the boundaries of ordinary life, that is, the real form of life itself, and not

the artificial theatrical form: Jesters, Madmen, Giants, and Fools are those who free us from the shackles of ideology and its seriousness. Precisely because of their jesting subversive behavior, Jakob Levitan becomes a victim of ideology and political consciousness. Politics thus becomes devoid of all humanistic values; hence politics, or the state apparatus formed as a consequence of politics, are portrayed as evil or negative factors in society. They are the novel's "absent presence," as Stuart Scheingold calls it regarding the political novel.

The genre of the South Slavic political novel itself is marginal and borderline, just as the literature in which it was born is. But its marginality is a consequence of its borderline and marginal character. This stance is confirmed by Scheingold as well:

Political alienation novels are even further removed from the center of politics toward the periphery of politics. Indeed, politics and politicians are mostly invisible in these novels. Politics thereby becomes an absent presence—directing attention to its consumers and victims. Politics creates conditions and circumstances that must be dealt with but are opaque, incomprehensible, and irresistible—thereby suppressing any semblance of political agency among ordinary people. (Scheingold 18–19)

In *Levitan*, Zupan stages what Stuart Scheingold terms a "political alienation novel," wherein politics functions as an "absent presence," an omnipresent yet invisible godlike force that shapes the protagonist's reality without revealing a concrete face. Instead of encountering named political agents, the protagonist is subjected to anonymous interrogators and abstract institutional mechanisms that demand obedience without offering transparency or meaning. These imperceptible formations operate in a manner analogous to secular deities, representing an invisible power that is palpable yet eludes complete comprehension. This engenders an ambiance of existential disorientation and ideological absurdity. In this manner, the political realm depicted in Levitan's work does not manifest as immediate conflict but rather as a pervasive, elusive condition that gives rise to victims and subdues political agency. Through this portrayal, Zupan critiques totalitarianism not by exposing its officials, but by revealing how its unseen operations infiltrate consciousness, language, and the body—turning the narrative into a deeply personal account of ideological alienation and resistance.

The political novel within the South Slavic intercultural context has become "a form of narrative speech that represents the system of political relations as the boundary of the human existential circle. ...

Therefore, history and politics are not only the external framework of events, creation, and institutionalization of values, but also the fateful measure of human existence" (Kovač 11). The development of political satire as a defining moment has reached the integration of politics and history into the creation of its inner artistic whole and made them the dominant features of the genre. The literary context limits and defines literary works, just as much as literary works participate in forming the content of that same context, strengthening or disintegrating it.

Ultimately, in Zupan's novel, eroticism and laughter are not aesthetic ornaments but literary modes that act like the core ideologemes through which the ideological representation of reality is dismantled, mocked, and replaced with human vitality. The literary modes of grotesque body and the subversive humor become revolutionary tools, undermining the seriousness of autocracy, the rigidity of ideology, and the very legitimacy of political power.

Conclusion

The literary vision, sharp auto-irony, and original, subversive narrative style permeating Vitomil Zupan's novel *Levitan* reflect a distinct Slovenian literary expression and a true literary innovation within the context of the Yugoslav literature. At the same time, the novel retrospectively illuminates historical and cultural aspects of politics and ideology, disclosing a dimension of the complex context in which the work was created.

Furthermore, *Levitan* embodies a profound critique of totalitarian political systems, utilizing humor and eroticism not only as literary devices but as ideological tools of resistance. Zupan's work exposes the oppressive nature of political power that suppresses individuality and freedom, while simultaneously engaging the reader in a carnivalesque subversion that deconstructs dogmatic paradigms. The novel's fusing of political satire and psychological existential inquiry positions it as a critical voice against authoritarianism, reflecting broader societal tensions and the search for authentic human existence beyond ideological confines. This places *Levitan* firmly within the tradition of politically engaged literature in the South Slavic intercultural context, offering both a subjective historical testimony and a timeless commentary on the human condition under oppressive regimes.

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Med izpovedjo in subverzijo: ideologija, erotika in smeh v *Levitanu* Vitomila Zupana

Ključne besede: Vitomil Zupan / *Levitan* / Bahtin / Biti / ideologija / smeh / erotika / politična proza

Razprava analizira roman Vitomila Zupana *Levitan* kot politično subverzivno in hibridno pripoved, ki preizprašuje totalitarno ideologijo skozi groteskno estetiko, erotični vitalizem in izpovedno pripoved. Analiza se opira na teorijo Mihaila Bahtina o karnevalski funkciji smeha in pokaže, kako Zupan uporablja subverzivne narativne strategije za dekonstrukcijo uradnega političnega diskurza. Groteskni in erotični vitalizem delujeta kot subverzivni narativni strategiji, ki se soočata s simbolno avtoriteto titoističnega socializma. Zaporniško okolje in ideološka reprezentacija v *Levitanu* sta interpretirana skozi prizmo Foucaulteve teorije discipline in nadzora, Althusserjevega koncepta

ideoloških aparatov države in Jamesonovega razumevanja političnega nezavednega. Poleg tega koncept »ideologije izvirnosti« Vladimirja Bitija ponuja teoretični okvir za razumevanje vprašanja, ali Levitanova narativna avtonomija postane soudeležena v samih ideoloških mehanizmih, ki se jim skuša upreti. V tem okviru se *Levitan* kaže kot kompleksen literarni artefakt, ki se upira ideološki reprezentaciji realnosti s sintezo izpovedne introspekcije, groteskne estetike in narativne inovativnosti.

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