

OPINION

By Prof. DSc Lubomir Halachev, Professor at the National Academy for Theater and Film Arts

For the competition for acquiring the academic position Associate Professor In Film Studies, Film Art and Television (History and Theory of Film Industry), 8.4, at the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, published in State Gazette issue 97, 10.12.2019 for the Department of Screen Arts for the candidate Dr. Alexander Donev Angelov

Honorable members of the Academic Jury,

I will not dwell on the creative biography of Dr. Alexander Donev, as it is presented in detail in the documents and discussed in the peer reviews. I accept as a matter of fact that all the requirements of the Regulations and the procedure for acquiring an academic degree and administrative function and more specifically point 3.3 for occupying the position "associate professor" at the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences have been complied with. I will examine mainly the presented work *Independents in Cinema. From Edison to Netflix*, the additional monograph *Help from the Public*, as well as some articles and academic reports enclosed in the presented documents.

Finally, after many years of anticipation, between the analysis of new films, of old films, of aesthetic tendencies in the world of cinema, a deep and well-presented analysis has come up, which gives us a different view on the film industry. Not as usual from production to distribution, but the opposite – from distribution to the intentions of production and its tasks related to today's audience. I welcome such an attempt to create a detailed 3D image of today's film industry.

Obviously triggered by the massive attack of giants such as Netflix against the movie-goer craved by all major companies, this work develops the subject in both historical and contemporary terms, both in depth and detail. The book contains three chapters, formed as the three parts of the overall look at the spread of the film industry today. Chapter 1 gives an overview of the entire rich history of American cinema, in which the most important part of the process seems not to be to find a "star" or a notorious battle for scenarios, but to monopolize the distribution market. In Chapter 2, we are introduced to today's struggle for the market in the digital era - both as various attempts at the arts and, of course, as a battle to control the financial parameters of the industry. In Chapter 3, the author launches us along the fast-moving flow of the "streaming industry", led by Netflix, with all the inevitable consequences of this journey.

A major feature of US cinema is its prior involvement with distribution - something completely unknown in most European productions. It is precisely the lack of pre-distribution that is sometimes perceived as independent, but this applies only to the vast US market. Maybe for India too, I don't know! But not for Europe. The author has very clearly pointed out the problem with independents in Europe. "A quality independent film is something different from a European auteur film." "Or the "Dogma" films – could we call them independent, since all Scandinavian director defiantly defend the obligation of the state to finance the new, independent cinema. Isn't this a convenient oxymoron that plays an advertising role in most cases?!"

For those inexperienced readers who harbor idealistic feelings about classic American cinema from its heyday (the 1930s and '40s), it will be odd to realize that the biggest money the majors have thrown is to capture the market. And in this sense, the emergence of the "independents" (in quotes because it is not fully understood what "independent" is) was a phenomenon that accompanied the development of American cinema from the market point of view - over the years and to this day. A. Donev proves that you can be "independent" to a certain extent as the author who creates the film. But it is absolutely impossible to be "independent" in relation to the audience - in this field the concepts are blurred and the question remains: "Does the independent yearn for his audience?". I think the answer is clear.

I note and endorse the author's thesis that if we support "independent cinema" as something new and fresh, it must be remembered that former "independents" are major players in the movie market today, imposing their already well-established criteria on a monopolized audience. We should also remind, at least for the Bulgarian readers, that in the early 1990s the independent distributors in Bulgaria were purely and simply pirates. Later some of them, the more sensible ones, realized that if they got legal representation they would become monopolists, which is the most profitable form of trade in any political form of government. Therefore, they hastened to declare that they were already legal representatives of large companies and began to legally fight other small pirates. I quote: "Independence is not always marked by brilliance and positives."

To the unquestionable qualities of the text we must add the attempt its pragmatic view on the spread of independent cinema to accommodate and evaluate the possibilities for creating such cinema - from the themes and scripts to the work of the directors in this, let's call it, constantly changing genre. In the first chapter, in the historical overview, and in the second chapter, when it comes to the possibilities of today's technologies for active intervention in the creative process, the candidate skillfully expresses those points of contact that, if successfully touched, can give quality in the finished product, the finalized film. Here we can also talk about the long experience of Roger Corman (even in Bulgaria), and Menachem Golan and

many others. It is no coincidence that Alexander Donev defines the object of his research as a "cultural, historical and social phenomenon".

I understand the desire of the author to stick to the focus of his work - independents in the situation of the American film market. But since I wish there were more references to the Bulgarian conditions (I hope the promised second part of this study will come out!), I will note that I see a very clear connection with the contemporary Bulgarian market in the idea "problematic for the business in financial respect are not the low budget, provocative films but the average, traditional examples of standard film productions". I think that in our country this fact is confirmed to some extent by the attempts to make ostensibly independent productions with standard parameters of commercial cinema, which are apparently unsuccessful due to those same reasons.

The other problem that needs to be clearly defined when talking about Bulgarian production is the nonsense of spending big budgets on marketing and advertising - as if the Bulgarian market cannot take such a dose of propaganda and redeem the result of its activities. The US formula of 50% of the budget, which operates successfully in the USA to be transferred directly to us - the conditions are completely different. At the same time, some facts of our "independent" production should not be absolutized, such as the mention of 300 student-funded films. In fact, if we are talking about the students of NATFA, they sometimes participate with funding in their diploma work, but the main part - equipment, props, costumes, etc. - is provided by the Academy. Not to mention the creative help with screenwriting and casting, which is valued in professional productions.

I will use a quote from work to suggest the attitude to the situation in Bulgaria (though not explicitly stated by the author): "The term independent cinema should be used more about the work itself than the way it was financed" - in this sense, independent cinema in Bulgaria cannot exist as a separate category, because we do not have mainstream standards against which to distinguish the aesthetics of independent cinema. In other words, in order for a wave of independent films to emerge in a film industry, a steady amount of films must be stabilized to carry a certain aesthetic, artistic and societal standard of expression.

The candidate duly notes that the big players' reproach towards the so-called "independents" of the 1990s that they are using new technologies to facilitate piracy and to impair the quality of the entire filmmaking process were accurate. The majors obviously intended to eliminate competition, but in essence they were right. Today the situation is completely different - new technologies are neither as cheap nor worse than traditional filmmaking. I would rather write that classic cinema is cinema, and what we are watching now must have a different name. But this is not about using a movie or digital camera for shooting, but about the whole complex of technology of the form used, which in one case gives birth to *2001 a Space Odyssey* and in the other

case no more than *Harry Potter*. One is cinema and the other is a new form of entertainment.

The detailed spreadsheet analyzes of US market earnings, cited skillfully and accurately in the work, make me think that we should ask for such information from the Bulgarian National Film Center (this is an indirect benefit of this academic work!). For over thirty years of existence of this institution, I have not understood how much revenue one film or another has made and how it has affected its producer. With all the conventions of the market, state subsidies, co-production as technical assistance, etc. This is one of the most well-hidden secrets in Bulgaria. Even Bulgarian National Television, which is obliged to make continuous reports, does not give a clear answer to the question: "How much did one or another series distributed in over 100 countries bring?" And these answers are very important if we are to properly structure our production.

In the discussion "pro" and "against" Netflix, the author categorically presents us with a positive view - the platform does not destroy the distribution system, but complements it by targeting people who do not traditionally go to see films in cinemas. It's important for these people to watch movies, because otherwise for us, the producers, it's a lost audience. We all remember how, in the early 1990s, people left cinemas in order to close themselves in their homes and watch pirated copies of VHS in poor quality and poorly dubbed. Only so that they can feel the home theater that their adherents in the United States or Western Europe have already experienced. It was a huge blow to movie distribution. Netflix is trying to bring in an audience that wants to watch films differently - and how much this glory will continue no one yet knows. Probably by the next technical invention. Netflix offers its products everywhere, anytime - this process is very much like the advent of fast food after World War II. First in the US, and then around the world. After some lurching along this line, many people realized that fast food and lunch in a real restaurant were not mutually exclusive. Perhaps this will happen with the distribution of films. Who knows?!

The author's reflections in Chapter 3 on Netflix's research into the tastes of the public are interesting. I don't think that would jeopardize the creative aspirations of creators because no one believes one hundred percent of this research. As David Mamet said, "If the pre-screenings were a guarantee of the film's success, there would not have been so many failures." What will happen in the next 10 years is not clear. But one thing is certain - Netflix from a fast-paced, mobile and modern company is gradually becoming a giant fighting for a monopoly in the entertainment world. Or at least the author's impressions of the snapshot of the market are such. It is curious whether Netflix, like the dinosaurs, will suffer from its greed and lack of "food" for its greed - this is yet to become clear. It is good that it is at this moment that the studies of Dr. Alexander Donev create an extremely interesting and rich environment for reflection

and consideration on the topic. Everyone will be able to make analyzes and predictions on their own.

In conclusion, I would say that the candidate very cleverly avoids the specific answer to the question "What is an independent cinema"? And this is correct! I think he is not consciously trying to impose on us his framework formula for independent cinema, because obviously such a formula would be wrong in the context of changing times. And so the following definition gives us the greatest opportunity to think about the positives and the opportunity to be independent in the contemporary world of the film industry: "A fresh perspective, an innovative spirit and a personal position! Maybe that's part of the formula for independent cinema. "

The work *The Independents in Cinema. From Edison to Netflix* contains extensive and seriously documented material, supported by a solid bibliographic and motion picture reference. It is written in a very good literary language, which in my eyes makes it extremely suitable for students from our universities. I think this is a quality for any academic work. I share the academic contributions described - both for this work and to the report *Digital Transformations and Bulgarian Independent Cinema* and the monograph *Help from the Public*. However, the latter is already an indispensable part of the teaching material of the Master's Degree in Screen Arts in NATFA. The limited volume of the opinion does not allow me to expand extensively on all the candidate's works.

Bearing in mind the overall positive review and my personal impressions of the candidate, whom I have known professionally for many years, I propose that the Academic Council of the Institute of Arts Studies at BAS to offer Dr. Alexander Donev Angelov the academic position of Assistant Professor of Film Studies, Film Art and Television (History and Theory of the Film Industry), 8.4. Theater and Film Art.

I vote positively.

Sofia, 3/16/2020

Reviewer:

Prof. DSc Lubomir Halachev