

REVIEW

For the competition for Associate Professor in professional direction 8.4 Theater and Film Art, and the academic specialty Film Studies, Film Art and Television (history and theory of the film industry) for the needs of the Screen Arts Department of the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, published in State Gazette issue 97/10.12.2019

Competition candidate: Dr. Alexander Donev

Review by: Prof. Dr. Nadezhda Mihailova [Marinchevska]

Dr. Alexander Donev offers for review for the competition his monograph "Independent Cinema. From Edison to Netflix" (FunTezi, 2019), as well as six academic publications. The candidate meets the requirements of Art. 53 of IPZRASRB, as well as the additional requirements in the Regulations for the conditions and the order for acquiring academic degrees and for holding academic positions in the Institute Art Studies - BAS. From the attached: Information on Annex 2 and Information on the minimum requirements of NCID, it can be seen that the points collected by the candidate Alexander Donev significantly exceed the required minimums for "Associate Professor".

The book "Independent Cinema. From Edison to Netflix" is a serious and in-depth academic study in a field that is poorly developed in Bulgarian literature. This is the first comprehensive work on the mechanisms, specifics, production and distribution dependencies of independent cinema, published in Bulgarian. One of the most significant features of the text is that Dr. Alexander Donev considers the film process not from the traditional film studies point of view, looking mainly at the stylistic or genre features of a given film, but from the point of view of the audience, distribution, presentation and production. In this sense, the research is original and up-to-date, outlines well a current academic problem and in accordance with it applies an interdisciplinary methodology, including historiographical, sociological and cultural approaches, media analysis, etc. The quality of the work is also the fact that the author explores such an extensive phenomenon as indie cinema in its historical and cultural-national *dynamics*. The very scope of the monograph - from the dawn of cinema to today's challenges of digitalization and streaming - presupposes the study of a huge amount of material and at the same time shows the author's ability to select the important facts and trace the essential features of the film process examined in its wider context of social impact.

In the two Introductions to the monograph, Dr. Donev emphasizes on the multiplicity of definitions and the impossibility of defining the term "independent cinema" in a single way. In this sense, his approach, based on the specifics of historical dynamics,

is fruitful and extends further in the text on the constant parallels between the practices of leading American studios (Majors) and independent productions. Defining independent cinema through its non-institutional nature, rather than through its aesthetic characteristics, is generalizing and contributing. This approach is much more accurate and in line with the real state of the film industry than identifying independent cinema with the 'arthouse', one of the most widespread views in Europe. As will become clear in the following chapters, the phenomenon of "independent cinema" can be associated with both box office hits (blockbusters) and low-budget "exploitation" films.

The first chapter, "The Position of the Independents in the American Film Industry (1908-2018)", is a thorough historical analysis of the complex relationships between dominant market strategies and alternative filmmaking practices, from trusts to the age of television and video to the digital transformations of modernity. Alexander Donev historically correctly traces the complex picture of the continuous participation of the same personalities - famous producers and directors - between the mainstream and independent production. The focus is on Roger Corman and his so-called "factory," through which such names as "directors Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Peter Bogdanovich, James Cameron, Jonathan Demme, John Sales, Bob Rafelson, screenwriters and Robert Milius, actors Jack Nicholson, Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, Tommy Lee Jones, Sylvester Stallone and dozens of others" (p. 77) is just one of the examples through which the author illustrates the unstable and changeable nature of the very concept of "independent cinema".

The second chapter, "Current Aspects of the Relationship between the Independent and Dominant Structures of the Film Industry", again comments on the definition of "independent cinema" from different points of view, following the aesthetic one in more detail, distinguishing between different historical periods of development. However here, the author places his emphasis on distribution and screening as the main factors that influence the emerging film structures and aesthetics. In analyzing the various models of financing, production, distribution, advertising strategies and film screenings, Alexander Donev manages to avoid simple oppositions between the mainstream and independent cinema and to outline a much more complex picture of the dynamically developing film process and film industry. Particularly interesting is the analysis of digitalization in production and screening, which opens new market niches for independents as an incentive for self-expression and creativity, but also confirms the technological superiority of the majors. The conflicts between independent cinema and the dominant film industry have also been examined sociologically in the spirit of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his theory of the field of cultural production.

The third chapter, "Streaming Independence", focuses on the latest transformations of distribution in the digital age, dominated by the global network. Alexander Donev considers streaming platforms as a kind of "end of the monopoly of a single model

for the production, distribution and screening of films" (p. 210). The new market principles of Netflix and other streaming companies with their different financing policies, payment of rights, feedback, etc. are discussed in detail. And the effects of the ever-expanding influence of streaming services are also having an impact on the traditional film market. Today's situation in the development of the screen market creates new opportunities for filmmakers and is an alternative to institutional cinema.

Although the monograph is devoted primarily to American cinema, it draws constant parallels with important world authors and tendencies - from the European avant-garde, through neorealism and the underground or Maya Deren's cinema and even experimental performances. In many places in the text Alexander Donev pays special attention to the Bulgarian independent cinema, with which puts our practices in the context of world experience. Donev is also in the process of working on his next monograph with the working title "Independent Bulgarian Feature Film in the Twentieth! Century: Attempts at Definitions and Characteristics".

The monograph "Independent Cinema. From Edison to Netflix" is an in-depth study of the film process and industry, in which the author shows extensive erudition and knowledge of the subject. The reference to a wide range of theoretical sources in three languages and extensive filmography makes the text rich and support the original and contributing ideas of Dr. Donev.

Alexander Donev is also the author of the book "Help from the Audience. Bulgarian Feature Films from the Beginning of the 21st Century and its Audience" (2018), based on his defended dissertation. The two monographs already have a wide resonance in professional circles, and their author ranks among the leading researchers of the film industry in our country.

The six academic publications proposed in the competition are a testament to the high academic level of Dr. Donev as: researcher of the film industry ("Bulgarian socialist film industry as an organizational and business model: towards a research framework", "On the Typology of Self-financed Feature Films after 1990", "Digital Transformations and Bulgarian Independent Cinema"); as an inspired critic with a sharp eye for the aesthetic and social problems of contemporary film ("Lesson" in the context of Bulgarian independent cinema from the beginning of the 21st century", "Aspects of Westernization in two contemporary German films"); or as an esthetician and philosopher ("The Performative Aesthetics of Christ and Jean-Claude"). These articles, some of which are referenced and indexed in world academic information databases, give only a glimpse of the author's broad scientific interests. The extended list of academic publications may include titles that explore film theory, history and contemporary aspects of Bulgarian cinema, copyright, film education, advertising strategies, digitalization, film criticism, television series, etc.

Dr. Donev's list of citations includes citations in publications with academic review and abstracting - 6, in monographs and collections - 4, in specialized publications - 7,

five of which are in articles in foreign languages. He actively participates in academic conferences at home and abroad, the last one of which - in Oxford - was, unfortunately, postponed due to Covid 19.

Alexander Donev is also a long-term lecturer in higher education institutions - NATFA "Krastio Sarafov" and New Bulgarian University, where he teaches courses in his own programs. At the same time, he is a producer, screenwriter and director of a number of Bulgarian films, for four of which he has received awards.

My personal impressions of Dr. Alexander Donev are of a very erudite colleague with extensive knowledge and experience. For 10 years he has been an active member of the Screen Arts Department at the Institute Art Studies, BAS - initially as a doctoral student and later as a colleague. His contribution to discussions of works in various fields of film studies has always been significant and substantial. He has never been stingy with the "gift of an idea" and has contributed to every topic discussed with his reasoned opinion.

Conclusion: Serious and in-depth scientific monographs and articles, professional, creative and pedagogical qualities, as well as the contributions of Dr. Alexander Donev Angelov give me reason to believe that he has all the necessary qualities to take the academic position of "Associate Professor". I propose to the Academic Jury to support him and to the Academic Council of the Institute of Art Studies to approve him for the academic position of "Associate Professor".

With conviction I vote "Yes".

Prof. Dr. Nadezhda Marinchevska

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