

REVIEW

By Assoc. Prof. Petya Alexandrova DSc, Department Mass Communications, New Bulgarian University, Ass. Prof. in direction 3.5 Mass Communication and Information, and DSc in direction 8.4 Theater and Film Art on the academic works 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

I. Evaluation of compliance with minimum national requirements

The included information shows that Dr. Alexander Donev meets the minimum national requirements, and in some paragraphs surpasses them. And, given that these requirements appeared at the end of the reporting period and there was no way for the applicant to be prepared in advance for the new formats.

II. Research (creative) activity and results:

1. **The monograph *Independent Cinema. From Edison to Netflix*** is an original work in many ways. Above all, it overturns traditional artistic and research attitudes. In Bulgaria after the changes of 1989 and with the advent of new models of film production, which do not deny state participation but do not end there, the topic of independent cinema is especially relevant. Accordingly, consideration of the concept is repeatedly included from a specific definition in a review of a movie to attempts to find a local modification.

In his text, Alexander Donev does not attempt to provide a framework. On the contrary - his thesis is that this frame is reformatted again and again in more than a century of cinema history. And not for aesthetic reasons, but for the functioning of the film process - such as production, distribution and presentation, and also in its relations with the audience. If most attempts have sought in the definition of "independently" to find so to say intrinsic, semantic characteristics, Alexander Donev insists on structural connections with influences from the outside.

As a result, Donev reformulated independent cinema through the institutionalization of the industry. And divides the question into two: independent of whom and independent of what. For this reason, the fluidity of definitions of independence as an alternative to the mainstream, of dominant practices at a given moment.

Regardless of the money, the system, the public relations. However, the purpose of the development (Max Weber) is systematic, not historiographical, though the author traces American film processes from Edison to the present day. He offers us the idea

of dividing independent and mainstream, which makes independent dependent on the mainstream and defined in comparison.

If the book was just a story of independent practices in the American film industry, it would be enough to read the work of one of the authors cited. Donev's main quality as a researcher is the idea that the source of funding does not fundamentally determine the author's ability to realize his ideas and maintain creative autonomy.

"The ultimate goal of an independent filmmaker is not at all costs to succeed - financially or be critically acclaimed. His motive in the first place is self-expression: to get to the public, a screen to express his views, an opportunity to communicate" (p. 165) In this context, Donev looks at the example of Orson Wells and his film *Citizen Kane*, the links with the avant-garde and the auteur cinema in Europe. Independent cinema differs in its manifestations: with Maya Deren we have a connection with new technologies, with Barbara Coppel we look at the initial version of crowdfunding, with the Jonas Mekas group the refusal of promotion and self-promotion is part of the new standard of cinema distribution towards "avant-garde" independent films. These are all elements of the anti-commercial nature of this type of filmmaking. Important in this respect is the conclusion that "problematic for film industry financially are not alternative and provocative low-budget films, but the average, traditional examples of standard film quality, devoid of blockbuster potential, which do not enter new genres, thematic, social or psychological territories".

Another strong feature of the monograph is the clear demarcation of historical features. If, in the 1960s, the pendulum of independent cinema was closest to the vanguard, then the change of model in the 1970s and 1980s reduced the number of films produced at the expense of raise in budgets, and then films such as *Sex, Lies & Video* impose another concept of 'quality independent film', which is in opposition to European influences, with ideas of the author, true art film (p. 87).

In the 1990s, the term "indie" was introduced, with its most distinct features being "the low budget and the presence of one of a series of heterogeneous elements characterized according to Jeff King its specificity: "experimentalism", avant-garde", more accessible to the public "art" or "quality" cinema, political or social commitment, a certain type of overwhelming oddity or eccentricity. Its main feature is its distinct difference from the typical mainstream product"(p. 97) I like Donev's going outside the cinema when considering the modern audiovisual experiments and film performances, reoriented to the exhibition space (expanding the means of expression). And the emphasis on how one understands the social commitment that we often neglect in independent cinema, and in fact, movies with "gender" issues fall right there.

Of course, I cannot get past the merits of the most up-to-date part of the book related to the Netflix giant, which offers a new model of production and distribution, as a result of digital technologies. It is Netflix that has the chance to overcome the

obstacles posed by major film studios to the development of the entire film industry, in particular the independent film industry. I adhere to more moderate optimism about Netflix's practices and, above all, about the motives for diversity and alternative paths, which are channels of self-expression for independents. But I appreciate the logical consistency and refinement of the context in which Donev manages to present exactly what is happening and from where filmmaking can go as a process. His analyzes are a compass for guiding towards the most essential in changing relationships with industry and viewers, the opportunity to leapfrog big studios and big broadcasters as mediators of expected contact and spectacle.

Finally, the finale of the book, with the sole viewer's rehabilitation of Edison, is a strong metaphor for cinema that brings artistry into the field of academic reasoning.

2. Other publications:

Dr. Alexander Donev offers us another **monograph** *Help from the Audience. Bulgarian Feature Films from the Beginning of the 21st Century and their Viewers in Cinemas* (FunTesi, 2018), which is a publication of his doctoral thesis. In this book the leading topic of public relations is emerging, which will continue in *Independent Cinema. From Edison to Netflix*, and will also diverge in the specifics in individual publications. This speaks about the consistency of Donev's interests, but also about his sense of filling the gaps in Bulgarian film studies - this goes along with the processes of the sought-after, thoughtful, overlooked or accomplished dialogue between films and viewers. The data he uses, the rich picture of distribution he describes, the successes connected with investment, the movie market definitions as "a system of origination and measurement of value" are all ideas perhaps not indisputable, but expertly developed. And the annual reviews of the most characteristic processes and phenomena in the Bulgarian film distribution market for the years 2014, 2015 and 2016 are full-fledged source material and could be used for informational references.

I would group the articles offered in this competition into two thematic cores:

The first is in the area of public-alternative financing, which creates an environment for independent cinema. The article *Bulgarian socialist film industry as an organizational and business model: towards a research framework* focuses on the film industry as a specific vertically integrated system during the era of socialism. The author's contribution is from the position of our current knowledge of the collapse of such a vertical system. It's kind of sequel is *On the Typology of Self-Financed Feature Films after 1990*, in which Donev encounters two possible forms of funding and outlines the types of authors who reach for self-financing. The text *Digital Transformation and Bulgarian Independent Cinema* deals with two simultaneous processes. One is the changed behavior of the consumer-viewer towards greater activity as a result of new technologies and his ability for co-authoring. The other is the growing number of films produced outside the system of state subsidies

and national television. Alexander Donev's contribution in the articles listed is that he finds in these films a greater alternative and a more adequate interpretation of reality, which is not the popular opinion.

The second thematic core are texts inspired by specific artifacts or figures, but allowing generalizations in perception. They reveal Alexander Donev as a critic with a fascinating and insightful style. The article *Aspects of Westernization in Two Contemporary German Films* discusses the contradictions between Western civilizational "integrators" and local people in the films "Western" and "Tony Erdman". The background of the former is Bulgaria and I find a very resourceful and very unique analysis of the relations between the new "colonizers", the peasants and the worker-outsider. The text *"Lesson" in the Context of Bulgarian Independent Cinema from the Beginning of the 21st Century* takes the form of a case study for the first time on a representative artistically significant and internationally recognized independent Bulgarian film. In the article *"The Performative Aesthetics of Christo and Jean-Claude"* it seems at first glance that it is a diversion from the already formed permanent themes of Alexander Donev. Here, outside the film context, he is again engaged in intermedia, with the active role of the viewer as co-author.

A solid list of research shows not only lasting interests in the sphere of independent cinema, its relationship with the public, but also a constant search for new sub-topics and specific examples.

It should be noted that Alexander Donev's field of study is interdisciplinary - he often leaves the comfort zone of aesthetics and cinema and sinks into communication, media, economic, social and even political territories in order to discover the cross-cutting perspective of the objects studied.

III. Other activities and personal impressions of the applicant:

Alexander Donev is very involved in the processes of the film industry, although he has considered among the documents attached to the competition to include only the following activities: as director of the documentary "Ivan Peichev - an Incredible Gladiator", co-producer of the feature film "Stinky Tale", presenter at Sofia Meetings.

Therefore, I will turn to my personal specific working impressions. Fifteen years ago, we co-wrote the weekly BTV television film show *Latterna Magica*. It has existed for 2-3 years, and throughout our time, sharing and working on texts it was easy, effective, rewarding and somehow enthusiastic. The result was well worth it and pleased the entire Cinemaq team.

In the years since, Sasho was author of many texts that I commissioned him for LIK magazine, then for ARTizanin journal. Always accurate and punctual, he revealed in each topic his own and clearly expressed point of view, which he colored with a rich general and cinematic culture and with numerous examples.

As the editor of the monograph *Independent Cinema. From Edison to Netflix*, I was not surprised that our work together proceeded in the same expeditious way. We exchanged notes and opinions, discussed construction, added and changed. But I was constantly respected by the extensive erudition of Alexander Donev and his ability to simultaneously notice and not miss the details, without losing the main thread and adhering firmly to his concept. I must state that in our understanding of independent cinema, we have both overlaps and discrepancies that have repeatedly been the subject of controversy. But I must point out that these disputes were not characterized by personal quarrels or underestimation, but were also motivated by listening to the arguments of others, which is invariably useful for the further development of the topic, as well as for the close presence of Alexander Donev in the team of the Screen Arts Department of the Institute of Art Studies.

All of the abovementioned gives me reason to believe **that Dr. Alexander Donev has the necessary qualities to acquire the academic position of "Associate Professor" and I vote "FOR"**.

Sofia, 04/06/2020

With respect:

Associate Professor Petya Alexandrova, DSc