

REVIEW

For acquiring the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 8.4. Theatre and Film Art to **Angela Angelou Gotsis**, Institute of Art Studies - BAS, Screen Arts Department

by **Prof. Dr. Nadezhda Mihailova [Marinchevska]**,

according to the order № 535-PD of 7 October 2022 and according to the decision of the Scientific Council of the Institute of Art Studies, BAS (minutes № 8, item 5 / 30.09.2022).

Angela Gotsis's dissertation, *Contemporary Experimental Cinema - The Development of Visual-Artistic Practices*, consists of 221 pages, a bibliography of 120 sources, a filmography of 181 titles, and 62 illustrations. The requirements of the procedure for obtaining the PhD degree under ADAS and the Regulations for its implementation of the Institute of Art Studies - BAS have been met and exceeded, including five published academic articles in refereed journals. The required examinations have been passed and the required number of credits have been obtained. The abstract and the contributions correspond to the dissertation text.

Contemporary Experimental Cinema - The Development of Visual-Artistic Practices is a work that explores relatively new scholarly territory in which experimental cinema is analyzed in aesthetic, technological, communicative, and distribution terms. This implies the interdisciplinary methodology used by the PhD student, which includes terminological concepts from film studies, philosophy, cognitive psychology, media studies, receptive theories, art history, etc. The interdisciplinary methodology enriches the analysis of specific film examples by contextualizing it within contemporary art, particularly in the field of visual image processing and manipulation.

The scope of the study focuses on the world's leading visual-artistic practices used in experimental cinema, in the broad range of the 1930s and 1940s to the present. At the same time, however, the text draws broad parallels with avant-garde cinema since the late nineteenth century and the film experiments of Georges Méliès. This requires the PhD student to have a broad knowledge of film and visual arts theory and history. She also demonstrates her ability to analyze in depth the technological aspects of analogue and digital imaging that are largely at the heart of experimental cinema.

Angela Gotsis distinguishes between avant-garde and experimental cinema at the very beginning of her research, despite some common features between them, similar aesthetics, and techniques of production. The doctoral student finds a major difference between the two phenomena in the cultural being of both phenomena - the group realization by like-minded individuals in the avant-garde, creating communities and "currents", and the individual visual-artistic practices of experimental cinema. An extensive survey of the European avant-garde of the 1920s

is made, with emphasis on its various forms - French Impressionism, "pure cinema," abstractionism, surrealism, Dada, German Expressionism, *Kammerspiele*, etc. The analysis of the contributions of Louis Delluc, Jean Epstein, Marcel L'Herbier, Germaine Dulac, Abel Gance, Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling, Man Ray, Léger, Robert Wiene, Wegener, Fritz Lang, and many others highlight the specific place of these artists in the development of film language. Particular attention is also paid to the avant-garde in the USSR and its significant directors such as Vertov, Kuleshov, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko. Here, as well as later in the text, Angela Gotsis shows her ability to detect and highlight various influences from the aesthetics and technological techniques of the avant-garde on the authors of experimental cinema (e.g., Marie Menken, Maya Deren or Jonas Mekas, as well as the influence of surrealism on David Lynch or Schwankmaier, among others.) The effects of various avant-garde movements on Czech, Polish or Yugoslav cinema, which have not been so extensively studied so far, are traced.

An interesting nuance is the exploration of experiments in photographic technique and their influence on cinema. Stasis, the photogram, cyanotype, etc. mark stages in the movement of photographic innovation towards experimental cinema. "Visual music" is another angle through which Angela Gotsis analyzes the work of avant-gardists such as Walter Ruttmann, Hans Richter, and Viking Eggeling, and the concept's resonance with the later work of Len Lai, Norman McLaren, Mary-Ellen Booth, Susan Pitt, Stephen Woloshen, and others. The development of abstract cinema and its impact directly on the viewer's senses through rhythm, movement, color, and the dynamics of form is an important focus for understanding "subliminal" effects on audiences.

The PhD student pays particular attention to the impact of avant-garde practices on feature filmmaking in general, not just on film experimentation. Herein lies one of the main contributions of the dissertation - to show how the aesthetic and technological innovations of the avant-garde, which for their time had a limited following and relied primarily on manifestos and radical provocations from like-minded groups, permeate decades (and now a century) later into cinema intended for mass audiences.

Angela Gotsis discusses the modifications that the achievements of the European avant-garde aesthetics undergo in the Hollywood version of genre cinema - for example, expressionism softly transformed into film-noir or horror. She follows the traces of surrealist madness in Hitchcock or David Lynch, the expressionist accents in Tim Burton. At the same time, Angela Gotsis's summary that "The aesthetics of the modern film avant-garde dissolve into the individual styles of different filmmakers is very important. The existence of expressionist, surrealist or Dadaist films outside those of representatives of the respective movement is unthinkable" (p. 82). The doctoral student stresses that the contemporary transformation of styles and approaches from the avant-garde is distanced from the original, but at the same time is perceptible and to some extent utilizes the powerful meaning of modernist film language. She writes: "Avant-gardes are born and die with their representatives, but their aesthetics, though fragmentary, are found in the films of other artists. One could

hardly argue that Dadaist or surrealist cinema is made in postmodernism, but what is certainly recognizable are meaningful motifs and typical shooting and editing techniques" (p. 82). Here, however, the effect of surrealism on Vera Hittilová seems to me to be slightly exaggerated, but instead the work of Jan Schwankmaier is analyzed, who in his being a 'programmatic' surrealist outside the era of 'classical' surrealism of the 1920s is a rare exception in world practice.

The end of the third chapter of the dissertation is devoted to the technological changes that CGI technologies are causing on film language. On the one hand, the author stresses that the accessibility of digital techniques enables more and more people to engage in the creation of audiovisual works, which, however, calls into question whether they can be qualified as "experimental" or even films. On the other hand - Angela Gotsis reflects on a series of Hollywood blockbusters with their technological innovations and constant refinement of software, based however on a strictly constructed narrative. Here, I am no longer confident that a robust, even remote, connection to the findings of the avant-garde can be found, and I recommend that when the work is subsequently published as a monograph, this section be separated into its own chapter or subchapter. The mere fact that a monster appears in a film does not necessarily consign it to expressionism or surrealism. In this case, the "interweaving of reality and sur-reality" (p. 99) is more of a lightweight play, an effect to catch the eye's attention, and is very far from both the ideology and aesthetics of the avant-garde and the ambition of experimental cinema to shock perceptions.

The fourth chapter of the dissertation is devoted to specific authors working in the field of experimental cinema - Jonas Mekas, Stephen Woloshen, Susan Pitt, Paul Wickler, Gunvor Nelsson.

With the rise of digital technologies and new modes of dissemination on the internet, the amount of film experimentation is becoming so vast that it would be surprising if anyone even tried to keep it within the sight of a single academic study. Easily accessible and cheaper technologies make it possible for literally anyone - professional or amateur - to create audiovisual images with a pretense of experimentation almost without limit. In this sense, Angela Gotsis's approach of presenting significant experimental artists who have left their mark on the development of screen styles and cinematic language as case studies is fruitful. The selection of filmmakers and works is clearly motivated by a desire to present a variety of aesthetic positions as well as a host of unusual techniques. Particular attention has been paid to so-called 'hand techniques' requiring specific knowledge, skill, and talent. The selection of creative personalities shows that experimentation in cinema does not consist solely in the invention and use of new technical techniques and effects (which in the most common case is contentless and self-contained), but can also be an authorial outlook, an individual style and handwriting, a distinct poetics. Angela Gotsis explores experimental practices that build on traditional aesthetics in different kinds of cinema - documentary, animation or, conventionally speaking, fiction. Jonas Mekas is represented through his diary films as a pioneer of

the popular social media video format "vlog". The analysis details his specific approach to framing and editing, as well as his unconventional treatment of sound and voice-over. Paul Winkler also works predominantly with documentary material, but this is totally transformed through the 'optical printer' technique, disintegrating familiar spaces and vistas into a multiple screen structure without distinct edges. In Gunvor Nelsson's work, Angela Gotsis emphasizes her desire to weave the filmed material into a "screen puzzle", including animated collages, drawings under the camera, an optical printer, etc. The Swedish director's feminist sentiments still retain a certain ironic distance, which characterizes her memorable style. Suzanne Pitt has been chosen to be presented with animation filmmaking through a wide variety of creative approaches and techniques, from classical plate animation to cut-out, sand techniques or drawing on film. The surreal worlds created by the American animator have become her trademark style. However, here the question arises about its classification as experimental cinema in general. The manual techniques mentioned above have long been inherent in the animated form of cinema, and Susan Pitt is not the inventor of any of them. Although these techniques are not very common, they are an essential part of the history and present of animation and Suzanne Pitt did not experiment with them. Surrealist delights are also inherent in the work of many animators, so Pitt's presence in the selection of significant experimenters needs further justification.

For me, the most interesting artist analyzed by Angela Gotsis is Stephen Woloshin. His works with painting under the camera or scratching the film emulsion to achieve visual music are impressive, but his experiments with the destruction of celluloid film are significant and innovative contributions to experimental cinema. Burying film stock in soil for several months or boiling filmed material in water and soda creates unpredictable effects of the overall decay of the world.

Summarizing the features of hand techniques, Angela Gotsis writes: "In the field of experimental cinema made with hand techniques, aesthetic imitation is difficult to achieve [...] Regardless of the cinematographer's expertise, the application of hand techniques hides an element of surprise and transcends the control of the auteur" (p. 103). At the same time, however, this unpredictability is usually accompanied by repeated labor-intensive experiments to bring their author to the desired result.

The last chapter of the dissertation presents experimental cinema in the internet space and points out different curatorial platforms, video channels and authorial initiatives. Changes in the communication environment also cause changes in audience reception and attitudes. It also causes changes in creativity. Angela Gotsis sums up, "The contemporary experimental filmmaker has no need for establishments, associations and groups of like-minded people to distribute films. The relationship between artist and audience is unmediated, direct. Search engine algorithms are improving by the day, and the audience's horizons are becoming more and more enriched, which inevitably leads to a change in the perceptual and cognitive apparatus" (p. 203). "The visual experimentation undertaken by the avant-garde cinematographers is no longer for the few, nor is it marginalized; it is becoming an evolutionary phenomenon of

visual perception. The change of means, methods and forms of communication inevitably leads to a transformation of people's cognitive abilities. This transformation has begun, its pace is markedly rapid" (p. 205). These observations by Angela Gotsis accurately reflect the changed communicative situation and could form the basis for a future more extensive study.

The dissertation *Contemporary Experimental Cinema - The Development of Visual-Artistic Practices* is an in-depth study of the dynamics and development of avant-garde movements in cinema and the impact of their achievements and aesthetic, political-social and cultural characteristics not only on later experimental forms, but also on cinema intended for a wide audience. Such a large-scale work requires of its author a broad erudition and knowledge of both the history of screen arts and of specifically professional technologies. Angela Gotsis has met both requirements and shows maturity of generalization and independence of thought. The remarks do not challenge the contributions of the dissertation but are intended to improve the text when published.

I have known Angela Gotsis for several years as a PhD student in the Screen Arts Department of the Institute of Art Studies. She managed to impress with her analytical skills and actively participated in discussions and debates at a high professional level. Her participation in academic conferences, as well as her publications, are distinguished by the desire to discover new and little explored thematic fields, to develop border and hybrid forms in art.

Conclusion

The contributions of this dissertation, the mature professional qualities and the publications of Angela Gotsis give me reason to believe that she is a serious researcher and a talented analyst of complex processes in the development of cinema.

I recommend to the scientific jury that she be awarded a PhD.

I vote YES.

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Prof. Dr Nadezhda Marinchevska