

REVIEW

By Prof. Dr. Emilia Hristova Stoeva

On the procedure for acquiring the academic position of **Associate Professor** in *Film Studies, Film Art and Television* (Digital Technologies and Screen Images), professional direction 8.4 *Theater and Film Art*, published in State Gazette, issue 52 from 18.06.2024 for the needs of the Screen Arts Department of the Institute of Art Studies – BAS

Concerning: The academic activity of Sen. Asst. Dr Josif Astrukov from the Institute of Art Studies – BAS, 2024

1. Details of the competition and the procedure

On August 20, 2024, the Standing Committee on the regularity of the documents met at the Institute of Art Studies, which found that the only candidate for the competition was Sen. Asst. Dr. Joseph Astrukov.

The submitted documents for **associate professor** meet the requirements laid down in the LDASRB and he is admitted for evaluation by the scientific jury. The documents have been received in accordance with the established procedure and within the required time limit. The scientific metrics and their compliance with the minimum national requirements have been checked. There were no breaches of the procedure.

2. Details of the applicant

Senior Asst. Dr. Josif Astrukov graduated in Film and Television Directing in 2007 at NATFA “Kr. Sarafov”. In 2014 he defended his dissertation *Contemporary Experimental Cinema. Hybrid Forms between Contemporary Dance and New Digital Cinema in the Internet Environment* supervised by Prof. Dr. Marinchevska.

3. Description of the application materials

The materials submitted for consideration by the scientific jury, with which Dr. Josif Astrukov participated in the procedure for the competition for Associate Professor, are as follows:

3.1. *Are the new television series a mirror of society*, IAS.

The title takes us back to the studies of the French Enlightenment, particularly Diderot, who defended the thesis that the artist must know life.

Dr. Astrukov's text begins with an attractive quotation, "*Perhaps it is because the anti-utopians have long since sold the human spirit to the machine*" - from a study by Prof. Maya Dimitrova on auteur and art cinema in a digital environment.

We've been talking about mainstream cinema since *Curse of the Blair Witch* (1999), but the series also fits the bill because of its large audience and the clever adaptation of series scriptwriters to it. After the long resistance of colleagues in Bulgaria, let's call our national cinema industry, this is not a problem for serials, perhaps because of the great dependence of the latter on ratings. Astrukov analyses in depth the changing form and content of serials, based on concrete examples around the turn of the new century. No less important for the author is the audience and how each different generation view TV serials. The family environment is no longer relevant, and alliteration is reinforced by differences in the rhythm of life and the assertion of genre preferences. It is important to note that the analyses of the films cited are far from a retelling. Distinctive features are sought - screen plasticity, the possibility of identification with the characters, symbiotic relationships, the degree of physical and psychological violence.

3.2. Generated images. Is the Art of the Artificial Intellect Art?

From the very beginning, Josif Astrukov is quick to point out the need for human intervention in algorithms having the ability to store and enrich the database. The author's thesis on the differences between human and machine intelligence is well defended with his own comparative analysis.

Many of the epidermal imitative collages are rapidly becoming obsolete and equally rudimentary new applications are emerging in their place. Supported with powerful examples is the answer to the question of whether AI creates art. Here is one answer: 'Artificial intelligence is high-tech plagiarism' (Chomsky).

We don't accuse modern installers of being second-rate because they draw inspiration from other arts and create a product where the concept and subtext are at the core of their work. Unlike what is created by artificial intelligence, where secondary and plagiarism cannot be avoided. I would compare the AI created work, to a student remake of a film created by the geniuses of the cinema.

And if the developed essays on the art of mechanical reproduction of V. Benyamin give us satisfactory answers about the visual arts, computer-generated imagery is understudied and at this point polemics dominates. Therefore, I support the open-ended conclusion of the present study by Josif Astrukov.

3.3 The Lonely Viewer

To write this text, the author did research in the key media on the one hand, but also referred to his own long-standing research on the other.

There are at least three main reasons for the success of platforms: technical development, ease of access and alienation in the modern world. The author focuses on the latter with arguments, comparisons and examples. The explosive growth of television in North America in the 1950s (thanks to advertising), "riveted" viewers to the blue screen. The American artist Mac Conner (1913-2019) has wonderful drawings on the theme of "The Family in front of the Television Screen" from the 1950s and 1960s. They visualize Josif Astrukov's thesis about the way of watching in this period - with family and friends. Mac Conner died at the age of 106 and managed to paint the lone viewer as well.

In his research, the author refers to both Bulgarian and international scholars, as well as many statistics and studies. Especially important in the text is the emotional representation of the situation of today. Josif Astrukov writes: "...the rise of socially positive trends that in practice propagate and legitimize loneliness as the norm."

3.4. The Screen of Separated Individuals

Josif Astrukov identifies the 1990s as the beginning of fragmented viewing.

To avoid unnecessarily absolutizing the Kovid situation he looks for other factors that influenced solitary viewing. He also looks for examples from other arts, broadens the horizon and does not consider visuality in isolation. The use of the other arts as evidence is a separate case, rather they serve as inspiration for the artists.

In *The Screen of Separated Individuals*, Astrukov looks not only at the negative changes in the contemporary world. In the author's words, "...one can give direction or meaning to new technologies."

3.5 Screen and Scene. The New multimedia performances

The exploration of the hybrid between cinema and theatre begins with examples from the dawn of cinema and is supported by evidence. Some of the experiments are in the field of attraction, in others dramaturgy dominates over spectacular overlays. Contemporary artist Bill Viola was inspired by Frederick Kisler's experiments in the 1920s, creating numerous works with water walls.

Josif Astrukov describes in an accessible way the mixing of techniques, the involvement of diaporamas and moving images, and the creation of the first interactive films, with pre-filmed possible plot lines. By the 1990s, the author

examines the development of **technology** and theatre-cinema **experiments** in symbiosis. The development of the Internet brought a seeming dominance of technology, yet the author's quest remained more important for prepared viewers. Josif Astrukov even predicts that there may be a return to classical technologies in the future.

Based on the well-researched history of the hybrid between cinema and theatre, the author examines the avalanche of new digital experiments without extreme bias. No doubt there are hundreds of contenders for new forms in digital performance, but many remain in the realm of amateur experimentation, helpfully assisted by technology. An example of technology's dominance is Javor Gardev's *Quartet* from 2015. Deliberately moving away from structural analysis, Josif Astrukov directs our attention to "...the complexity of the matter, the level of competence required... and most importantly, to the meaning of the deployment of new technologies." Analyzing virtuality and its examples, the author adapts to the vocabulary of the new times, abounding with new, uncrystallized theories in which ambiguity is often presented as subtext.

It is important to note that in the chapter *Types of Performances* (main in volume), many active links are present.

If you ask a curator what is conceptual art? The answer is: "There is no definition, but it is recognizable." Josif Astrukov does not try to formulate definitions of the types of contemporary performances (seven in number), but through visual examples gives the reader a chance to recognize them, but also to get to know them. The author's advantage is his knowledge of technology in creating high-tech theatre. This gives him grounds to comment on the stylistics and visuals as well as the impact of the animated image. Virtual performances are also the subject of analysis, with the caveat that these are not performances in the true sense of the word. I would compare virtual performances to netart, which doesn't "leave" the net, but has enough of a following and an annual festival. In his book, Josif Astrukov deliberately quotes bilingually many manifestos, proclamations, and attempts at definitions written by contemporary theatre artists. Unfortunately, some of them are incoherent and reminiscent of an anecdote from a contemporary art museum. We are left with the hope that the performances are of a high standard, created with good artistic taste, where convention meets abstraction mediated by digital technology.

3.6 **Photography as...**

Josif Astrukov looks at photography today, where part of the problems are the ubiquity of photography and the attempts of the art consumer to become a creator.

Unfortunately, mass photography leads to a devaluation of the image and reflects badly on photography as art. The author knows the technology in both analog and digital photography, but the emphasis is on the changes in scanning, which are thoroughly explored. Photography has outpaced film in the transition from film to HD, and it is also ahead of the curve in digitization processes. The author has done extensive practical research on how to preserve important characteristics when storing digital copy: photographic latitude, color rendition, resolution, etc. He makes no secret of his preference for Her Majesty the film, over the Little Prince High Definition.

The changes in shooting "between photography and cinema" are so rapid that the description of the technologies and the on-screen result is ad hoc.

Loop editing (endless) has "come out" of installations and out of commercials and has become entertainment for all. Adding to the meanings described by the author is the endless. This term has been used for decades in cinema (sticking the beginning with the end of the excerpt).

Josif Astrukov has thoroughly researched the commercial application of photographic banks, disproving the naive slogan: "Make money doing what you love." The roots of stock photography are in the stylized images of art photography, where the whiteness of the background is used to emphasize what is important in the subject. Especially important for beginning photographers and students are the author's analyses in the chapter "Reference Images..." When the inspirations come from the same art, the result is usually secondary. There is no art when you try to imitate already created works, especially the high budget ones. Imitation leads to amorphous or amateurish photographs. There are similar problems in cinema. Sloppiness, because of limitless shooting, has displaced the precise organization of the reality that you are going to shoot.

I hope colleagues at BAS will organize a discussion of this crucial aesthetic problem.

Although not small in volume (209 pp), this work cannot cover all the changes, transformations, conversions, fashions and influences that accompany "writing with light" today.

3.7. Contemporary Bulgarian experimental cinema, touches to the new Bulgarian cinema

The author focuses on three important characteristics of experimental cinema: form, content and performance. Unfortunately, the diversity of experimental films today requires that they be considered in isolation. The author does not find enough

unifying features in both feature films and documentaries. Dance videos (films he knows well) are a special case. Videodance, as a subspecies in experimental cinema, has already created its own cinematic language.

I'll end with a postulate from the author that has become a cliché, but clichés are usually true: "We have no universal method for determining quality - only time can be a criterion."

I have no substantive comments to make on the competition submissions. The texts are both of a contributory nature and of cognitive value.

My personal impressions of his work as a scholar and as an artist are related to the many meetings at symposia, conferences, round tables and exhibitions in which he participated. Also, in the last few years I have been inviting Josif Astrukov to NATFA "Kr. Sarafov" to guest on the Video Art module. The systematically presented and well visualized lectures on Videodance always provoke interesting discussions.

In conclusion, I accept the materials submitted for the competition and I believe that Sen. Asst. Dr. Josif Astrukov meets the criteria and possesses the necessary qualities to hold the academic position of Associate Professor. I vote with conviction YES that his candidature be forwarded for election by the Scientific Council of the Institute of Art Studies.

28. 10. 2024, Sofia

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