

# OPINION

By Petya Alexandrova Alexandrova, Department of *Cinema, Advertising and Show Business*, NBU, Professor and Dr in direction 8.4 "Theater and Film Art", on the academic works and creative activity of Josif Astrukov for participation in the competition for the position of associate professor in professional direction 8.4 "Theater and Film Art", published in State Gazette, issue 52 from 18.06.2024.

## **I. Assessment of compliance with minimum national requirements**

From the attached reference the chief asst. Dr. Josif Astrukov meets the minimum national requirements, in most paragraphs noticeably exceeding them.

## **II. Research (creative) activity and results:**

### ***1. The monograph "Photography as..."***

The book is divided into separate chapters and immediately refers to a faceted perception. Already in the introduction, the classicist attitude is questioned - towards photography as a professional skill, as an art, as a material process, as a passive perception, as... I would say that the whole text is a "questioning", an attempt to reason against the momentary state of the photographic image without exaltation and without criticism, as a "science and art of reproduction". In the first chapter, *On Impossible Digitization*, the author peers in detail into the recesses of technology - from scanners, software, and light sources to processing, copying, and color corrections - to dive into the "infinite multivariable" of digitization with "predictable" or at least "satisfactory" results. He states unequivocally that analogue photography has gone through a long evolutionary process and has a complete and quality technology, but the advantage of digitalization is in the processing. In the second one, *Photography as Pop Culture*, he ingeniously connects photography with tourism (Iceland and Pernik), its massive use with "hiding behind the camera" and the emptiness of quantitative accumulations, the obsession with photo technology with the lack of ideas. The result is a change of the photographic business - of photo services and of the profession, but also the devaluation of the individual image. The third chapter, *The Fleeting Image*, deals with the changed communication through photographs from person to person and from person to society. Most of all with the different attitude - photographs are not taken to remain, but to express an ephemeral state, at once concrete but also unknown. Here I welcome the use of the word "snap" as a term. Chapter Four, "Between Photography and Cinema," delves into the

agitation of photographs, tracing two types and explaining their lack of meaning beyond the digital screen. Chapter five, "The Loop as a Cultural Phenomenon," discusses the endless repetition that digital technology achieves so easily. And sees its screen possibilities in art (installations, animations) for example. Chapter Six, *Hybrid Processes*, focuses on specific analog-to-digital and digital-to-analog processes with an emphasis on printing. The result - an analog copy of a photograph originally obtained digitally (p. 114) - raises in me a question for the author: how would he comment on the meaning of the analog practice in cinema - the transfer of a digitally captured image to film? Is it again a case of "artificially adding value"? It is interesting that in this chapter Josif Astrukov writes about "author" and "authorial intention", which contradicts the previous chapters where the filmmaker is not defined a priori as the author.

Chapter seven deals with 'stock photography' and the possible business models of image banks and platforms that are only seemingly readily available to those offering their own images. The product is the amorphous images that become the "blanks" and kill photography through their artificial look, ideal objects, people and situations, and utopian and unreal impact. But they also reinforce the return to old technologies and the longing for originality. My next question has to do with the possibility hinted at in the text that artificial intelligence will displace stock banks - how does Josif Astrukov see it?

Chapter Eight looks at the copy-paste model and the presence of reference images, which leads to poor imitation, especially in fashion shoots, but also of food. And, to a truncation of the imagination. Chapter Nine looks at old defects for a request for artistry, combined with labor-intensiveness and boutique-ness. Chapter ten is devoted to the obsolescence of the digital photograph - not as a physical medium, which is impossible, but technologically and as an aesthetic of time. Chapter eleven focuses on generated images, indeed on artificial intelligence, though this is an imprecise term. Here the author digresses unnecessarily on the background and Turing test to get to the Midjourney platform and the imitative collages of Stefan Shterev, Katsi Vaptsarov or himself. We are all familiar with the nodal case of what IT chooses and the illusion that the internet has everything. More interesting is the consideration of what ChatGPT has produced as next-generation imitative collages and the development of Chomsky's thought that it is high-tech plagiarism.

In the last chapter, which gives the monograph its title, the author returns to the theoretical justification of what photography is to reaffirm the classical theories of photography by extending them to contemporary practices.

I agree with the author's stated contributions in his self-evaluation. I will not repeat them but will highlight a few merits of this mosaic text. The first is the unquestionable topicality in the choice of subject. Josif Astrukov has included the heterogeneous aspects of the reformatting of the concept of "photography". He has explored a major debate right from the discovery of photography in its development to recent practices - that of the original and its value in the 'age of technical reproducibility'. And, about the changing reality and the non/authenticity of images. About the tendency for reality to no longer be interesting and the turning away from the documentary style of photography. About the border between the limitation of filming itself and the conscious manipulation of events, people and situations with certain ideas and interrelations. About the lack of aesthetic originality in any technical discovery, but the presence of acceleration in uses.

Other remarks are minor: I would note the over-frequent use of "it is paradoxical" for classical contradictions that are regular and devoid of any element of absurdity. Quoting what "visual art" is (p. 141) via Wikipedia is not scholarly - Joseph Astrukov uses it ironically, but doing so ignores the possibility of putting actual boundaries on the term.

## **2. *The monograph Screen and Stage. The New Multimedia Performances.***

The study deals with multimedia performances and discusses the concepts of interactivity, virtuality, motion capture/tracking, cyber performances, and what digital performance is in general. Various experiences are traced chronologically, along with analysis and presentation of visual materials and sources. Here again, Joseph Astrukov demonstrates interdisciplinary thinking and delves into the crossovers between the arts by examining contemporary technologies and concepts. The theoretical systematization of the types of performances presents them with examples from the Bulgarian or international scene. As with the topic of artificial intelligence, this is only the beginning for future scholarly developments, which highlights their modernity.

## **3. *Other publications:***

Josif Astrukov has contributed 5 articles outside the monograph. I won't dwell on each of them separately, I will note a few conclusions beyond those declared in the contributions. The first one is the author's loyalty to his own institution and, respectively, to the forums and publications of the Institute of Art Studies - for years he has been effectively contributing texts to the Art Studies Readings, the journal Art Studies Quarterly, and the Platform for the Arts at the IAS. The second is his

consistency as a specialist in photography in all its aspects, but also continuing to engage with work outside its boundaries (contemporary dance, experimental cinema, the lone viewer...) and claiming more fields. The publications thus reveal Josif Astrukov as a multifaceted and truly interdisciplinary author who enriches the field of research in the visual arts.

### **III. Other activities of the applicant:**

From the academic transcript it is noteworthy the participation of Joseph Astrukov in numerous international and national scientific and applied-scientific projects. But the most striking is his creative activity - the list includes 6 exhibitions, 8 short films (some of them I would also define as experimental), 3 photo albums and dozens of participations as an assistant, photographer and more activities in videos or stage lighting, which are indistinguishable from the author's team on one work. In this sense, Josif Astrukov is not only an interdisciplinary but also a collective "player" in contemporary artistic practices.

Finally, I cannot but add my personal impressions of the candidate as a dedicated, broad-minded and original thinking colleague. This prompted me to invite him to become involved with courses at the NBU, which he has successfully led to this day.

What has been said so far gives me reason to express my opinion that the **Chief Asst. Dr. Josif Astrukov has the necessary qualities to be proposed by the members of the scientific jury for election by the Scientific Council of the Institute of Art Studies to the academic position of associate professor, for which I also vote FOR.**

Sofia, 5.09.2024

Sincerely:

Prof. Petya Alexandrova, PhD.