

OPINION

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On the habilitation thesis of Dr Deyan Statulov (*Re*)*Commissioned Films. Propaganda Practices in Bulgarian Cinema (1944 – 1989)* for acquiring the academic position of **Associate Professor** in *Film Studies, Film Art, and Television* (History of the Bulgarian Cinema; Archives and Institutions) professional direction 8.4 Theater and Film Art, (published in State Gazette issue 41 of 09.05.2023) for the needs of the *Screen Arts Department* of the Institute of Art Studies, BAS, published in State Gazette (issue 41/09.05.2023) and on the internet page of the IAS

Dr. Deyan Statulov's proposed monograph (*Re*)*Commissioned Films. Propaganda Practices in Bulgarian Cinema (1944-1989)* (Locus Publishing, 2023), is the first study of its kind of the processes in Bulgarian feature cinema from the perspective of totalitarian propaganda during the socialist period 1944-1989. The presented text is a kind of sequel to Statulov's (*Im*)*Possible Freedom. Ideological Censorship in Bulgarian Feature Films (1948-1989)*, published in 2022 which expands and builds on the theme of the ideological dictatorship over Bulgarian feature cinema during socialism.

The monograph offers an original and at the same time profound insight into the ways in which the communist power in Bulgaria used feature films as a means of manipulation - for the dissemination and imposition of the communist ideology in the society, which primarily served the representatives of this power themselves. Therefore, the study focuses on the leading institutions and the main mechanisms used to propagate communist ideology through the artistic means of cinema. Specific vivid examples are given with commissioned films of the use of feature films as a tool for the imposition of party politics.

It is important to note that this approach does not simply remain at the level of declared research intentions but has been developed as an effectively working scientific methodology, tied to Statulov's longstanding work at the Central State Archive and the Bulgarian National Cinematheque. One of the most significant contributions of the work is precisely the publication of unknown documents on the functioning of propaganda, for example the so-called *Functional Diagram of Film Impact*, discovered by the author in the archives of the Creative-Economic Association Bulgarian Cinematography, in which all the units in the system of film propaganda are graphically marked and the interrelationships between the different levels of impact are noted (Chapter III, Subchapter 2. *Institutions of Propaganda*). In this connection, Deyan Statulov justifies his hypothesis that the published scheme "illustrates to a large extent the order and direction in which the institutions work"

and stresses its importance as indirect proof that film propaganda in socialist Bulgaria was based on a clear concept and was the result of purposeful work.

No less contributive and interesting is Statulov's discovery that, according to an available document, in January 1983 the then deputy chairman of the Committee for Culture and director general of SU Bulgarian Cinematography Nikola Nenov sent a letter to the then minister of foreign affairs Petar Mladenov proposing to make a feature film based on the "Antonov case". The letter contained a creative and production plan, including the assignment of the film to Angel Wagenstein (screenwriter) and Lyudmil Staikov (director), the involvement of Western co-producers, e.g., Marcello Danon, etc. This is a previously unknown fact in the history of Bulgarian cinema. Even though the project was not realized for unknown reasons, the presentation and analysis of the archival document clearly reveal the mechanisms used by the communist government during the last socialist decade to maintain its propaganda machine by means of cinema.

The most important chapter, IV of the work *Mechanisms of Propaganda. Methods and Practices* is devoted to the propaganda mechanisms that were developed and applied in Bulgarian cinema in the 1980s. This chapter, which contains the most important findings and conclusions of the author, is a kind of culmination of the monograph. The author's generalizations are based on analyses of the situation in Bulgarian feature cinema after the adoption of the program "1300 Years of Bulgaria" proposed by Lyudmila Zhivkova and the film propaganda related to the so-called Revival Process. Analyzing examples from the Bulgarian historical super-productions created at that time, Statulov traces the different stages of propaganda in cinema during the so-called "mature socialism", when the propaganda efforts of the regime reached their apogee, only to be nullified by the totalitarian system, which was becoming increasingly entrenched in its internal contradictions. The author seeks to uncover the dynamics of the relationship between the authorities and the artists, as it is clear from the documents uncovered that the artists' disputes with the representatives of the authorities were primarily limited to their material retribution.

Statulov examines in detail the stages of the formation of the propaganda pathos of the respective films and reaches almost to the final parameters of the process. Here, however, he remains faithful to his innate delicacy and refuses to write in black and white that in fact those involved with "Khan Asparuh" - Vera Mutafchieva (screenwriter), Lyudmil Staikov (director) and three of the consultants of the super-production - Vasil Gyuzelev, Stanislav Stanilov and Atanas Semerdjiev - were agents of the Committee for State Security. The same applies to "Time of Parting", whose director is again Lyudmil Staikov, and Georgi Danailov (Agent Andrei) is one of the writers. If he had taken this last step, Statulov could have revealed the complete fusion of the repressive and propaganda apparatus of the communist government, as well as the fact that artists were not only objects of influence whose talent the authorities were trying to abuse. Several filmmakers, including some of the most talented, were active accomplices in the active propaganda activities of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Communist Party Central Committee.

One of Statulov's most important contributions is pointing out the roots of the dangerously widespread nationalism today in the propaganda activities of the communist government and the rehabilitation of nationalism, including by means of feature films, as state policy in the 1980s. This is a very accurate observation of the processes that is respectable for its topicality. I appreciate the fact that, regardless of the historical theme, the entire monograph addresses the contemporary existence of moving images. And the problem of the functioning of propaganda mechanisms is tied to the technologies of generating fake news and deep fake and the substitution of reality with propaganda tricks. Historical research is thus conceptualized through the most serious challenge to people in the digital age - distinguishing information from propaganda.

The monograph is provided with a detailed bibliography, valuable above all for its inclusion of hitherto unpublished and unanalyzed documents (archival items) from the holdings of the Central State Archives (CSA), whose publicity and interpretation are one of the major contributions of this text. A filmography adequate to the topic of the study is also appended. These appendices also make the monograph a serious source of information and facts.

Deyan Statulov's style is communicative and readable, without these qualities being detrimental to the scientific value of his habilitation thesis and his other publications. The text of the book *(Re)commissioned Films. Propaganda Practices in Bulgarian Cinema (1944-1989)* is based on clearly formulated theses, original authorial opinions and independently drawn conclusions. The exposition is logical and with a convincing argumentation of the defended views. This is also true of his numerous articles, some of which have been published in scholarly journals, refereed, and indexed in world-renowned databases of scientific information.

Deyan Statulov also has a strong presence in the media. He is the author of a well-known blog about cinema and is the author and presenter of the bTV show Like at the Movies. He is also the editor of the Institute of Art Studies online magazine Platform for Art, actively publishes film reviews and reviews in the media and enjoys popularity among the public. His work as a film critic is appreciated by the professional community and in 2022, he was awarded the Union of Bulgarian Filmmakers Vasil Gendov Award for Operational Criticism.

The required points for the academic position of Associate Professor have been achieved and surpassed.

In conclusion, I would like to categorically state that given the serious, focused and fruitful academic work and proven scientific and creative abilities of Dr. Deyan Statulov, he has all the necessary qualities to take the academic position of Associate Professor and I confidently propose to the scientific jury to support his candidacy in this competition and to the Scientific Council of the Institute of Art Studies to confirm him to the academic position of Associate Professor. I confidently vote yes.

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