

REVIEW

CONCERNING: The competition 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

Candidate: Chief Ass. Dr. Deyan Ivanov Statulov

Reviewer: Prof. Dr Nadezhda Mihailova [Marinchevska]

The review was prepared in accordance with the ADASRB and the Regulations on the Conditions and Procedures for the Acquisition of Scientific Degrees and Academic Positions in the Institute of Art Studies.

For the competition, Dr. Deyan Statulov proposes as his habilitation the monograph "(Re)commissioned Films. Propaganda Practices in Bulgarian Cinema (1944-1989)", Publishing house Locus, 2023, 186 pp., as well as 9 articles and studies published in peer-reviewed journals, some of them in refereed and indexed in world databases.

I accept the submitted publications as original author research and confirm that there is no evidence of plagiarism.

Assessment of compliance with minimum national requirements

From the attached table we can see that Chief Ass. Dr. Deyan Statulov exceeds the required number of points for the academic position of Associate Professor. Besides the significant number of academic publications, Statulov is an active participant in numerous projects, he is the head of the project of the Institute of Art Studies "Platform for Arts", his research arouses the interest of colleagues, as evidenced by citations of his works.

Research activities and contributions

Throughout the years during and after the defense of his Ph.D. dissertation, Chief Ass. Dr. Deyan Statulov has proven himself to the scientific, professional and film community as a thorough specialist in the field of film art and as an expert in Bulgarian cinema of the socialist period. The habilitation thesis "(Re)commissioned Films. Propaganda Practices in Bulgarian Cinema (1944-1989)" is a continuation of the author's previous monograph "(Im)possible Freedom. Ideological Censorship in Bulgarian Feature Cinema (1948-1989)". Both studies are the result of many years of research, scientific perseverance, and the ability to creatively analyze not only at the

level of thematic-stylistic assessment, but also at the level of theoretical, cultural, sociological or ideological reflection, which gives depth and originality to his texts.

The habilitation thesis consists of an introduction, five chapters and a conclusion, a bibliography of 125 titles and archival items and a filmography. The study examines the overall mechanism of creating propaganda messages by means of cinema in the totalitarian state. Two distinct approaches to the problems are seen - a theoretical generalization and a concrete analytical one. In the first two chapters, 'Propaganda Reflections' and 'Propaganda, History, Art', the text moves smoothly from 'reflections' to a theoretical definition of the concept of propaganda. Deyan Statulov discusses several variants, but in all of them propaganda is seen as a social technology for mass persuasion and manipulation of public attitudes.

Through propaganda mechanisms, certain ideas and values are introduced into society that meet the goals of the government - ideological, political, religious, etc. What *contributes* to Deyan Statulov's study is that he examines the mechanisms of propaganda from a historical perspective and not only in terms of communist ideology. Examples are given not only from other totalitarian societies, such as that of Nazi Germany, but earlier manifestations of propaganda practice as early as the 17th century are also sought. In his previous monograph on censorship, Deyan Statulov also demonstrates a similar approach, there detailing censorship as early as its manifestations in Antiquity, under Christianity, the Enlightenment, etc. In the present habilitation the historical tracing is not so detailed, because propaganda practices and mechanisms are a more recent phenomenon, related to the development of media and information dissemination. The author's observations on the functioning of information in open and closed societies are interesting and contributory: "In a closed society, only authorized information is circulated and monitored by a special censorship institution. This society survives only because a controlled flow of information functions within it. Bearers of unauthorized information can be subjected to repression if they do not recognize the power of the authorities and their control of dissemination. A closed society has more opportunity to shape the minds of its citizens than an open one" (p. 29). Of course, Statulov is aware that the ideal of totalitarian, closed societal systems to create a bipolar (black and white) model is largely utopian, and there is always the possibility that the lean propaganda system will crack (as shown later in the text with the case study of the film *Breathe*).

A significant part of the analysis of the mechanisms of propaganda practices is devoted to negative propaganda, black propaganda, or false sources of information. Despite the clarification of one of the authors cited by Deyan Statulov - Hakob Nazaretyan - that "the concept of propaganda is not always associated with the negative connotation" (p. 31), the main purpose of propaganda remains the active manipulation of the mass consciousness of society. "Thus, propaganda within the framework of this study is seen as the infiltration into society of certain ideas and views that massively influence public consciousness and create a deliberately false picture of the world," writes Statulov on p. 34.

Regarding the technology of propaganda mechanisms, Deyan Statulov points out some of the means that lead to success: the ease of understanding the main theses, the simplicity of the messages that are not burdened with subtext, and finally - the emotional binding of the viewer with the idea that is being suggested to him. Dr Statulov notes that it is cinema as a medium of propaganda that can exert an extremely emotional impact. For this reason, it was also a focus of interest for the communist authorities during the period of totalitarianism.

The third chapter, "Propaganda in Bulgarian Feature Films," examines the process of institutionalization of propaganda and its total penetration at various levels - from mass organizations such as the Fatherland Front, through artists' and trade union associations, party structures, etc., all subordinated to one goal - the consolidation of the ideological and political power of the Communist Party and its leader, as well as the canonized rules of so-called socialist realism. The presentation of the main institutions that ensured the propaganda comfort of the government (UBFM, Film Distribution, Committee (Management) of Cinematography, Committee (Ministry) of Culture, Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party) is based on the analysis of numerous archival documents. Here I also see one of the significant applied contributions of the habilitation thesis - Deyan Statulov works with primary sources, discovers new, previously unpublished documents, protocols, letters, etc. It is these original documents that provide credibility to the analysis, and here I want to emphasize the extreme precision and care with which Statulov handles them, comparing, contrasting, and tracing the paradigm shifts of the discourse - for example, from the use of the Maoist-tinged term "cultural revolution" to the more liberal presentations of some functionaries of the government in the 1980s.

The fourth chapter, "Mechanisms of Propaganda. Methods and Practices" examines the strategies through which the government tries to push its propaganda messages in society. Its methods are varied - from sending Bulgarian filmmakers for training in the USSR, to strictly controlling the repertoire of the cinemas and establishing a dominant quota for Soviet films, to the repertoire and production plans of the studios, through which appropriate propaganda thematic fields are provided - for example, anti-fascist films, historical-patriotic film, works dealing with the brigadier movement or the tumultuous construction of socialist life, to genre hybrids such as *The Eighth*, *Black Angels* or *Every Kilometer*, which aim to attract new generations to anti-fascist issues through the use of action techniques.

The analysis of the overall strategy of the program "1300 Years of Bulgaria", conceived and partially implemented by Lyudmila Zhivkova, is contributive. Dr. Statulov manages to cover in full various aspects of this large-scale undertaking - from the manipulation of history for propaganda purposes, through the attempt to internationalize the creative efforts of Bulgarian screenwriters and directors by attracting foreign co-producers and co-authors, to the precise calculations of the budgets of the commissioned film productions, which exceed the budgets of regular films by many times. This subchapter is interesting in another way - for its mention of

productions that were conceived but remained unrealized. It is their sheer quantity that gives an idea of the monstrous ambition of the whole 1300 Years project - an undertaking that would have been impossible outside of centralized government funding and without the personality of Lyudmila Zhivkova as the daughter of Bulgaria's first party and state leader. Subjective factors and propaganda canons intertwine in an interesting amalgam, which Deyan Statulov has managed to unravel and reveal its individual components. In this context it is natural to mention the unrealized project of a film about Sergei Antonov, and here Statulov again demonstrates his ability to present archives and old letters in an attractive way.

Film propaganda and the Revival process are the next topics of the study, with the focus here on the history of the making of the film *Time of Parting*. Here the author, in my opinion, deliberately sticks to a strict and moderate tone in order not to disturb the objectivity of the text by showing a bias towards one point of view or the other.

The fifth chapter "Beyond Propaganda: the film *Breathe*, and its political context" shows the real slippage of the film process out of the grip of propaganda and ideological clichés in the time of Perestroika. Here, Deyan Statulov has captured extremely accurately what is significant in this case - not so much the aesthetic or substantive messages of the film, but the breakthrough in making an unregulated screening of the film banned by the authorities.

I have already pointed out most of the contributions of the habilitation thesis "(Re)commissioned Films. Propaganda Practices in Bulgarian Cinema (1944-1989)" in the field of theoretical definition and analysis of the methods and mechanisms of propaganda practices in cinema. I would like to emphasize once again that the publication of new, previously unknown archival sources, as well as their commentary, constitute a new and original contribution to the study.

I will not dwell in detail on the presented articles and studies by Chief Ass. Dr. Deyan Statulov for the competition. Some of them represent a preliminary approbation for the text of the habilitation thesis and already have wide publicity and citation. They are also a testimony to the author's long and enduring interest in the problems of censorship and propaganda. Here I would like to draw attention to the article "The Personal Funds in the Screen Arts Department Archive in the Context of Public Film Archives in Bulgaria: Problems and Possibilities for their Preservation", with which Deyan Statulov once again proves his deep knowledge in the field of archives.

The habilitation thesis "(Re)commissioned Films. Propaganda Practices in Bulgarian Cinema (1944-1989)" is a thorough and original study by Deyan Statulov, which has managed to occupy a significant place in Bulgarian film studies. The author's erudition and knowledge in both theoretical and historical terms are impressive and places him among established young scholars. At the same time, he is a presenter and author of popular television programs on cinema, a lecturer at the Sofia University "St Kliment Ohridski", an active participant in projects and scientific conferences.

My personal impressions of Deyan Statulov are that of a competent and friendly colleague who is easy to work with and can be relied upon.

Conclusion: The contributions and the volume of the habilitation thesis, as well as the depth and originality of the ideas in the publications of Chief Ass. Dr. Deyan Statulov gives me reason to believe that he has all the qualities to be awarded the academic position of Associate Professor. I will vote positively!

Prof. Dr. Nadejda Mihailova [Marinchevska]

9.10.2023