

REVIEW

By Petya Alexandrova Alexandrova, Cinema, Advertising and Show Business Department, NBU, Professor and Doctor of Sciences in the field 8.4. Theater and Film Art on the academic and creative works for participation in the competition for acquiring the academic position of Associate Professor in professional direction 8.4 Theater and Film Art, published in State Gazette issue 41 of 09.05.2023 of the candidate Chief Assistant Dr. Deyan Ivanov Statulov

I. Assessment of compliance with the minimum national requirements:

The presented materials show that Dr. Deyan Statulov meets the minimum national requirements, and in some indicators significantly exceeds them.

II. Research and/or creative activity:

Deyan Statulov applied for the competition with one monograph and two exhibitions, and even separately the monograph or the exhibitions are sufficient according to the law.

1. The monograph *(Re)commissioned Films. Propaganda Practices in Bulgarian Cinema. 1944-1989*

The text consists of 186 pages, introduction, 5 chapters, conclusion, bibliography, filmography, and photographs from films provided by the BNF.

The **introductory words** begin on a poetic-emotional level but name the object of the study: how cinema was used by the authorities to disseminate and enforce ideological norms to manipulate. The archives used are stated; the authors who worked in a similar field; the limitations the author sets for himself - not to deal with animation cinema and not to give aesthetic evaluations and analyses of the films.

Chapter One is a propagandistic reflection, describing, according to one study, generational nostalgia for the 1980s and what the decade was marked by in terms of social, economic, and international events. The conclusion is that "the more the crisis in society, distrust and doubt in power increased, the more the propaganda machine intensified its ostentation."

Chapter two develops the interrelationship propaganda - history - art. It starts with the different definitions of propaganda and its use. As a lecturer of public relations, I would disagree entirely with the view on p. 32 that PR "is inherently a kind of propaganda, the purpose of which is to form opinion about a particular organization, person or brand", but this is a side element where the author gets carried away with the limits of using the term propaganda - there is a risk that any opinion forming could be defined as propaganda once it has a purposefulness. Statulov ingeniously weaves in Bernays's thesis that "in a successful propaganda text there should be only

one main idea that is indispensable to assimilate" and thus equates the propagandistic nature of film messages with clutter, an indirect strike against it. Cinema has been assigned great emotional impact and is therefore sought as a propaganda tool, with examples, logically, taken from Soviet cinema.

The **third chapter** now focuses on Bulgarian feature films. The years immediately after 1944 and the place given by the state to the seventh art to legitimize communist ideology are examined. Beyond the documents and pompous words, the real native cinema was in stagnation. But the state institutions associated with it with their respective propaganda tools were created - the Union of Cinematographers, Film Distribution, the Cinematography Administration, the Committee for Culture, the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Each of these is unfolded by the author through a series of archival documents about their beginnings, aims and implementation during the years of totalitarianism.

The **fourth chapter** is the essence of the text itself, which reveals the mechanisms of propaganda, its methods, and practices. In the section on successes, I was particularly amused at the discrepancy between intentions and results in the early years of the new government, for example the 1951 agricultural film seminar or the 1952 Cinematography Committee's ambitious decisions about what films to make. Between decrees, recommendations, reports, and guidelines, the cinema network grew, the repertoire changed dramatically, the overseers swelled, and there were only a handful of films, and quite uninteresting at that.

The next section, "On Some Problems" of distribution and exhibition, discusses the difficulties of distributing some films from the West and the complexities of balancing them with socialist ones, and here too there is no shortage of amusing detail, especially in the provinces. Film selection is ideologized, co-productions too, and market models are lacking.

A bright cultural highlight is the grandiose program "1300 years Bulgaria". Deyan Statulov situates it in the entire political and ideological context of the 1970s and 1980s, interjects the figure of Lyudmila Zhivkova and then focuses on individual titles: "Khan Asparuh" and its replaced team, "Konstantin the Philosopher", "Boris I", the documentary epic dedicated to Todor Zhivkov "Man of the People". The case of Sergei Antonov and his involvement in the assassination of Pope John Paul II as an unrealized film project is a very interesting and little-known detail that adds poignancy to the text.

Here I have a question that came up from a sentence in a document about a possible screen adaptation of Vera Mutafchieva's novel *Chronicle of a Troubled Time*. I was curious as to why, after her inclusion was so successful (the screenplay of "Khan Asparuh") and the high literary and expert quality of her historical fiction, the opportunity was not taken to make films based on Vera Mutafchieva's books - are there any documents in the archives from which Dr. Statulov can tell why this did not happen.

Especially dramatic is the part about the film propaganda during the Revival process. The political line and the role of people like Nikolay Haytov begins with “The Goat's Horn” and “Captain Petko Voivoda”. A speculative repertoire of "friendship" is selected on sensitive regions and Yılmaz Güney's “The Road” and Alan Parker's “Midnight Express” are used skillfully. The author goes on at some length about the historical events of the Revival process itself - thus shifting the focus away from the films, leaving only “Time of Parting”. The official and open front against the Muslim population continues with it and it is examined in detail. Turning it into a co-production of sorts is a very shrewd move, perhaps I just miss its political failure at the Cannes Film Festival.

Chapter five goes beyond feature film and tells the story of the symptomatic case outside propaganda - the film “Breathe” - by also talking about its political context.

The **conclusion** explains the difficulty of delineating all aspects of propaganda in Bulgarian feature cinema throughout the period.

The text is written in an accessible manner, skillfully interweaving the dryness of the documents with ironic remarks and critical observations, with a constant desire to feel the context of the filmmaking process that the author was not actually a living witness to.

Now I will try to summarize the monograph's leading features and, accordingly, its merits:

1. It defines propaganda in cinema, placed both in a historical and totalitarian context.
2. The organizations, people, forums, and events that shape the film industry are analyzed with competence and depth.
3. Repertoire and distribution are considered within the filmmaking process as possible levers of state policy enactment.
4. The "1300 Years Bulgaria" program is seen through the prism of the great intentions stated in writing and the difficulties in implementation. This is a different view from cinematic analyses.

There is also a justification in the text for not including whole lines of our cinema, such as the so-called historical-revolutionary films, which were in direct connection with propaganda, whether to deviate from the Party's hard line or by providing it with artistic support. It is enough to look just at the Bulgarian feature films awarded the Golden Rose in the 1960s and 1970s.

But, as far as I know, this will be Deyan Statulov's next topic of research interest, so I accept the impossibility of exhausting the cinematic process in a single text.

2. For the competition, the applicant has also submitted two exhibitions as artistic performances:

"Cinema Stories Between" (Exhibition at the Regional History Museum - Sofia. Opening - 25 November 2021) and **"Censored Films: Behind the Scenes"** (Exhibition at the Odeon Cinema - Sofia. Opening - 10 November 2022).

In the first one, in the attractive space of the former Central Bath, panels were arranged in different halls, describing the beginning of Bulgarian cinema with the first film "Bulgarian is a Gallant" by Vasil Gendov; stories about the films "We Were Young" and "Tsar and General"; successes in the field of children's cinema; details about "The Iconostasis" based on the novel "The Iron Candlestick" by Dimitar Talev. And among them, Deyan Statulov has managed to weave his theme - cinema placed in the field of censorship and criticism and a retrospective of the process of creating the legal framework for our film production.

In the second, which opened together with the premiere of his book *(Im)possible Freedom. The Ideological Censorship in Bulgarian Feature Cinema (1948-1989)* at the Odeon Cinema included unknown working moments from landmark films such as "A Woman of 33", "Monday Morning", "The Attached Balloon", "Brief Sun" and others - all subjects of the book. On the one hand, these exhibitions are directly related to Deyan Statulov's constant themes of research interest, and on the other, they are an artistic complement and an unfolding in an interdisciplinary direction of his works, an open opportunity for another contact and a different audience.

4. Articles and studies

In addition to the monograph, the applicant has attached 8 articles and one study. The study *Film Distribution, Exhibition and Festival Life in Bulgaria in a Post-Totalitarian Environment. Strokes of the New Bulgarian Cinema*. It is part of the project "Post-totalitarian Bulgarian Cinema - Models and Identities" of the Screen Arts Department at the Institute of Art Studies, BAS, realized with the financial support of the Scientific Research Fund. The articles are related to the theme of the monograph (some of them are separate chapters) - it is noteworthy that Deyan Statulov actively participates in the publications, events, and Art History Readings of the Institute where he works - a respectful manifestation of loyalty to the place of work.

III. Other activities of the candidate:

Deyan Statulov's professional interests are indeed many and his activities are both varied and productive. Outside the Institute, he is an active critic (Operational

Criticism Award) and publishes regularly in the journals "Kino", "Kultura", "ARTizantin". But he is most popular, of course, for his weekly film commentary column in the morning block of the national television BTV. He is up to date with current developments in world and Bulgarian cinema and takes a biased attitude, which also makes him a journalist with a sharp eye and pen.

From his previous activities, I would single out the time when he was Program Director of the Cinema House - a difficult and very responsible position.

He is also particularly active in festival politics - he participates in making catalogues and festival diaries of Sofia Film Fest, Golden Rose, and Golden Rhyton.

IV. Personal impressions:

As editor of the monograph *(Re)commissioned Films. Propaganda Practices in the Bulgarian Cinema 1944-1989* our work with the author was very fast-moving and efficient, through notes, discussion of the construction, additions, and swaps. I am impressed by the skill and pleasure with which he handles archival units, reads between their lines, combines them with the general politico-social background, but does not lose his thread to unravel his concept.

At the Institute of Art Studies, Deyan Statulov is a responsive and responsible colleague who is increasingly taking on editorial work as well - he maintains the Platform for the Arts, and now also the Art History Readings, the section on cinema.

And, to end on a slightly more amusing note, my personal impressions include Dido's culinary mastery, which benefits, albeit occasionally, all colleagues, but is professionally based on his experience as scriptwriter and editor-in-chief of the show "Bon Appetit".

To conclude: The provided materials give me grounds to express my opinion that Dr. **Deyan Statulov has the necessary qualities and meets all the criteria to be awarded the academic position of associate professor and I vote "FOR".**

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