

Review by Prof. Dr. Ingeborg Bratoeva-Darakchieva
On the dissertation of Tamara Valerieva Peshterska-Iordanov
The Work of the Film Director on Documentary Portraits

For acquiring the educational and academic degree *doctor*

Tamara Peshterska's dissertation *The Work of the Film Director on Documentary Portrait* is on the one hand an in-depth analysis of the most important aspect in the creation of the portrait film, and on the other hand offers a detailed study of the genre itself from a historical, sociological, and cultural perspective. The author's two ambitious aims are: first, to systematize and analyze the various directorial methods of working with the protagonist in the creation of the documentary portrait film in its two versions - archival and contemporary; and second: to show the dynamics in the development of artistic means over time, and especially the changes occurring with the introduction of the rapidly developing new technologies. By focusing her attention on the two thematic areas, the past and the present, the dissertation can analyze in detail the approaches, techniques, relationships, and artistic results and to present a comprehensive picture of the functioning of the *film-portrait genre* primarily in Bulgarian cinema. A valuable quality of the work is the consistent mapping of contemporary phenomena onto the historical tradition, done with erudition and an ambition for completeness. Even more valuable is the analysis of the ways in which digital technologies are changing contemporary documentary filmmaking. All of this is successfully achieved thanks to the precisely set and clearly formulated object, subject and scope of the research, the clear setting of the research tasks and the well-founded interdisciplinary methodology with which the scientific issues are interpreted. These positive qualities of the dissertation derive in large part from the fact that Peshterska undertook her research from the position of a successful documentary filmmaker and screenwriter, with considerable professional experience in film and television. Hence the knowledge of the creative processes in detail and the ambition for the work to have 'applied value' for the future work of documentary filmmakers.

The theme of the work is undoubtedly topical, given the fundamental changes associated with digital technologies in the understanding of documentary films and art in general. Therefore, one of the main questions that the author poses at the very beginning of the work is "what makes a portrait a true film work and not an extended television reportage". This is a very important question for our film practice that has not received the serious theoretical attention it deserves. The result is that in practice there is less and less respect for the differences between journalism and documentary art, which distorts the discourse on the subject and leads to a blurring of criteria, especially among the youngest generation of filmmakers and journalists. In chapter three, Peshterska clearly declares that she is guided by Werner Herzog's notion that "cinema is first and foremost a story that someone tells you. And this story implies an

author's insight and conception, and reality is better sought in journalistic reports" (p. 79), and in chapter four she herself clearly draws the line between the two screen forms: "if television strives to convey as accurately as possible the informational generality and veracity of an event, documentary portrait cinema is not interested in the essence of the event itself, but in the behavior and psychological feelings of the character(s) who "live" ("live") in this event. Unlike television, which claims topicality, documentary filmmaking has no claim to the topicality in question. In it, an event is important above all if it carries characterization and emotion for the protagonist. Documentary cinema seeks more lasting and artistically meaningful themes and visual solutions, it is characterized by a psychological approach to the hero and the comprehension of the complex conglomerate of events that are present in his life. This is achieved by the director through precise insight into the emotions of the man, in capturing the nuances of his/her behavior, in searching for the roots of phenomena and uncovering their causal relationship" (pp. 110-111). I think that positing and clarifying this distinction is contributory, although it is not in the list of contributions of the work.

I would also like to draw particular attention to contribution #4: an analysis of the changes in the documentary film language due to the use of digital technologies and a presentation of the *hybrid* forms and new trends emerging before our eyes, their specific aesthetic qualities, and the emerging ethical issues (Chapter 6. The Documentary Hybrid. Portraiture in the Age of Computer Technology.) Peshterska conceptualizes the entry of new technologies into the art of the moving image as an opportunity to open new horizons for filmmakers, generating a new film language, new visual narrative patterns, and a new screen aesthetic in which types of cinema flow into one another, creating hybrid films.

In this context, the author raises the extremely important question of the preservation of credibility in documentary cinema (p. 178) and in the film-portrait. This problem is discussed in the text on several levels in different contexts. Related to its resolution are the clarification of the term's *reenactment*, *staging* and *intentional situation*. According to Peshterska, *reenactment* is the reconstruction of events from the character's life that have already happened and cannot be filmed again. Moreover, she believes that "in portrait documentaries, this method is clearly and openly stated by filmmakers. It appears visually distinguishable to the viewers, being perceived by them as a kind of schema, i.e., with an existing conditional presumption that what is happening on screen "documentary", does not claim to be one hundred percent true, but is a presumed authorial one." In the case of the staging, according to the author, "the boundary between the mixing of the documentary and the fiction is not clearly stated, it is difficult to grasp for the viewer. ... Sometimes in staging, the boundary between documentary and fiction is deliberately obscured by the directors" (p. 128). This distinction may be accepted purely in theory, but in practice it is not certain that audiences are able to distinguish between the two methods of presenting events at all. Further attempts to differentiate the two terms eventually lead the author to agree with Petya Alexandrova's view that the definition of "staging" is more accurate and includes both approaches because "authors, even in accurate documentary

description, depicting it through actors or extras, inevitably depart from dense verisimilitude" (p. 260).

Another aspect of the impact of the digital age on film portraiture is the question of the representation and self-representation of the authors of screen portraits. Peshterska has adequately addressed the problem of the "mask of behavior in front of the camera" (p. 63), which has acquired unprecedented dimensions because of the development of social networks, in which anyone can falsify their own image and present arbitrary images of reality. In the text, this topical issue is identified rather than analyzed in detail, and I think it is worthwhile for the author to continue her research in this direction. Moreover, her dissertation traces the dynamics of the hero-director relationship and develops the thesis that the documentary-portrait is not only an image of the hero, but like any work of art, it is above all a portrait of its author.

In the film *Everything ... Almost* she also must solve a complex task - to create a script that includes an interview with the hero (Vladislav Ikononov), observation of his everyday life, events to enable him to reveal himself, staged situations, use of film and photo archives and excerpts from Ikononov's own films, i.e. the construction of a multi-component dramaturgy, through which she seeks to build the "living" image of Vladislav Ikononov, who does not aim to tell his story only as a string of biography and facts but based on his lived life to share his worldview and feelings about the world in which he lived and lives" (p. 168).

Finally, it is important to point out the great attention that Peshterska pays to the ethical issues involved in the making of the film portrait. The results of her analysis on this aspect of the topic are summarized in contribution #5. The entire seventh chapter, "Directorial ethics in revealing the image in the documentary-portrait is devoted to them, but along with that the issue is addressed in some way in all the other chapters and constitutes one of the main thematic lines of the dissertation. The author discusses it with a sincere and deep sense of responsibility and an unreserved respect for the people who agree to become the protagonists of documentary-portraits by revealing themselves to the camera. From the position of a working documentary filmmaker, Peshterska takes the position that "ethics towards the hero is the moral unit that should stand high above the creative ego and ambitions of the filmmaker" (p. 189) and defends it by demonstrating knowledge of almost all the "pitfalls" in the filming and editing process that could destroy the trust between the filmmaker and the filmed, and in relation to this she analyses in detail the use of hidden and false camera. The problem of directorial ethics in films about people from the past and the responsibility in constructing their images is also seriously addressed. Instead of a conclusion on the subject, the German Copyright Act on Works of Fine Arts and Photography is quoted, according to which "portraits may only be published or distributed with the consent of the person portrayed. The aim is to ensure that each person can decide for himself how his personality is to be represented in the public domain", which could serve as an example for legal regulation of this issue in our country.

The volume and structure of the main text of the dissertation (192 pages), the scientific apparatus of 110 cited sources and the publications on the topic of the dissertation meet the requirements for acquiring the scientific and educational degree of *doctor*. In relation to the sources cited, I have a remark regarding the way in which surveys, part of the already successfully reported project of the Screen Arts Department funded by the Ministry of Education and Science, are cited. In the framework of the project Tamara Peshterska participated in conducting surveys with Bulgarian documentary filmmakers and is of course entitled to use the information obtained from these surveys. It is somewhat disconcerting that she cites them as belonging to her personal archive, whereas they are in fact the property of the Archives of the Institute of Art Studies. Moreover, she has attached to her own dissertation parts of the surveys themselves, the work of a collective. In such a case, good scholarly practice suggests a joint publication by all participants, as I recommend, they do. I think that this case is the result of ignorance, and in no way do I consider it a malicious act. I make this remark because it is good to know the rules of scientific ethics to be able to follow them.

I am convinced that all the contributions mentioned in this thesis are the personal work of the author.

The presented text and the creative biography of Tamara Valerieva Peshterska-Iordanov has the necessary qualities to be awarded the educational and scientific degree *Doctor*. I vote YES and recommend that the scientific jury also vote positively.

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