

OPINION

On the competition for acquiring the educational and academic degree Doctor

Professional field 8.4, Film Studies, Film Art, and Television

Candidate: **Tamara Valerieva Peshterska-Iordanov**

Reviewer: Prof. Dr. Ivan /Ivo/ Ivanov Draganov

The candidate Tamara Valerieva Peshterska-Iordanov proposes for consideration a dissertation entitled: "THE WORK OF THE FILM DIRECTOR ON DOCUMENTARY PORTRAITS".

Dear Colleagues,

The subject of documentaries has been important for as long as cinema has existed. John Grierson, in his landmark work *The Documentary*, introduced the concept of the art documentary specifically in reference to Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*. The year was 1925. I would like to point out that some of the best Bulgarian documentaries are precisely portrait films. I could list dozens, but it is not necessary. The importance of portrait films is very important. I often repeat that in many of its examples Bulgarian documentary cinema is the unofficial history of Bulgaria. This is because history is often written in the interests of winners, to please those in power, and this distorts it. Vladi Kirov, Yuli Stoyanov, Svetoslav Ovcharov, Kostadin Bonev, Atanas Kiryakov, Lyubomir Halachev and many others, through their own ideas and works, have set out to clear the names of many Bulgarians from highly politicized, ideological labels - the result of socialist realism. This is one level of documentary portraiture. The second is the alarmingly high level of conformism and opportunism among Bulgarians, who mainly look at their self-interest. Portrait films present those Bulgarians who perform memorable deeds in the interest of their nation. Deeds that change the status quo for the common good. In the best examples, the heroes are significant figures from our history who face choices. Vasil Levski said it most succinctly and clearly, "If I win, I win for the whole nation, if I lose, I only lose myself!". This is an extremely important motivational argument and guideline for scriptwriters and directors.

Thirdly, since the mid-sixties some documentary filmmakers have demonstrated a strong desire to be fair to the facts of reality. Anyone who has unbiasedly watched documentaries will notice this feature. Particularly against the backdrop of the dominant doctrine of socialist realism among many films showing the organized enthusiasm of the working masses and loyalty to the Party with a capital P, these films were white swallows.

For this reason, the problem of the complex relations between creative intentions and their realization, Aesopian language as an artistic device, the courage to state a

position different from the official one, whose /un/predictable development I do not know has been analyzed in this country so far, and which the candidate Tamara Peshterska-Jordanova presents to us, deserve serious attention. In 1982, Mrs. Donka Akiova, the Director General of the SO "Bulgarian Cinematography" - a well-known name in documentary filmmaking came up with a very diplomatic formula : "Not critical, but problem films" and this encouraged many directors to make films that were fair to the facts of reality.

And I will say right away that Tamara Peshterska-Jordanova has done a good job in posing the problem, analyzing the existing facts, and drawing the conclusions that this analysis requires.

Tamara Peshterska-Jordanova has already had long and varied enough practice, and I can say that she has mastered the subject she writes about. Her creative biography includes important professional positions as an editor, scriptwriter, and director at various television stations. This experience formed during her studies at VGIK - Moscow and by her practice in film and television. She is also the screenwriter of the documentary "Everything...Almost", the latter was awarded the Golden Rhyton Award for Documentary Debut in 2015 and the Bulgarian Film Academy's Documentary Debut Award in 2016. Several publications support her attempts to make theoretical sense of her professional experience. Because of this comes the result of her research - the thesis "THE WORK OF THE FILM DIRECTOR ON DOCUMENTARY PORTRAITS", which she has presented to our attention.

What is the structure of the work? The thesis is 243 pages long, including an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, an appendix, a bibliography of 109 sources and a filmography of 219 titles, which are arranged as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Evolution of the portrait genre. Historical development and trends of documentary cinema in the context of human image construction
3. World historical trends in cinematic portraiture
4. Bulgarian documentary cinema during socialism

- Introducing the problem, she explores it historically. It sets out the PhD student's thesis approach to the problem and outlines the framework of the aesthetic matter she explores. In it, she explicitly stresses that she is most interested in the ethical and aesthetic choices of the director in relation to his character. The doctoral candidate accurately formulates the aims and objectives of her dissertation, the object and subject of her research, which is quite voluminous.

- **The first chapter** presents a historical overview of the development of the genre of portraiture in world cinema with an emphasis on Flaherty and Dziga Vertov and Bulgarian socialist documentary cinema with many examples showing a thorough knowledge of the subject.

Chapter two analyses the important categories and the complex relationship of objectivity - subjectivity, with emphasis on the relativity of both categories. In all the examples one can always question the percentages of credibility and especially the interpretations through different perspectives. But such is the dialectic of life, and documentary film stands closest to life itself. /Perhaps only popular science challenges it for the top spot/.

The third chapter is devoted to the director's practices in working with the character. This chapter contains seven subchapters, each of which is dedicated to a particular method that directors use in recreating the screen image. These are relatively familiar techniques, but in this case are systematized through the lens of the PhD thesis.

In the final sub-chapter, 'Screenplay. Montage. Directorial practices in the use of voice-over', it is worth noting the juxtaposition of script and editing, which is relatively unknown in Bulgarian film studies.

In Chapter Four : "Typology of Portrait Cinema. Types" with 6 subchapters, the PhD student discusses all the known techniques (and possible so far) in the construction of the documentary film-portrait. Here again I appreciate the effort to systematize and organize the diversity of documentary cinema. I am sure that this will be helpful to students of film art and film studies.

In chapter six, the author analyses the problem of the documentary hybrid and the documentary-portrait in the digital age. This is an important, very topical issue, in which there are arguments both for and against the use of hybrid filmmaking. For me, the question of the secondary use of the hybrid as a source of historical information after many years and the relation to credibility, which Tamara Peshterska-Jordanova writes about in chapter two, is interesting.

Chapter seven is devoted to the filmmaker's ethics in revealing the character in the documentary portrait. A complex, multi-layered problem that has been posed with great poignancy in the various decades of cinema's development. Take, for example, the famous film *The Laughing Man* by Heynowski and Scheumann. The film is a portrait of a Nazi notorious for his crimes, and the two authors fool him into thinking they are from GFR television. The purists were outraged by this, not realizing that this mass murderer would never have talked about his past and present crimes had he known that the two were from the GDR.

In conclusion, Tamara Peshterska-Jordanova summarizes her voluminous scientific work and gives a clear sign that documentary cinema as a diversity of creative techniques and stylistic approaches is a vast matter that is still waiting for many researchers. Her contribution will be studied, as, by the way, are all the dissertations defended by the Institute of Art Studies at BAS.

With the above **positive assessment** of the qualities of the scientific work "The Work of the Film Director on Documentary Portraits " I have no critical remarks, but only some recommendations. There is a qualitative discrepancy between the author's scientific-analytical text and the purely informative statements of some colleagues in

newspapers, and this somewhat unbalances her interpretation in the overall structure of the thesis.

Due to all stated above, in **conclusion** I would like to emphasize once again the scientific achievements of the candidate and the specific contributions of the habilitation thesis under review. I am convinced that they fully meet the high requirements stipulated in the ADASRB. That is why I take the liberty to recommend to the Scientific Jury at the Institute of Art Studies, BAS to accept positively the candidature of Tamara Peshterska-Iordanov and to award her the scientific degree of DOCTOR.

14.08.2023

Reviewer:

(Prof. Dr. Ivo Draganov)