

## REVIEW

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. DSc Lubomir Todorov Halachev

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The candidate **Tamara Valerieva Peshterska-Iordanov** has presented her PhD entitled: The Work of the Film Director on Documentary Portraits

Dear colleagues,

I will not dwell in detail on Tamara Peshterska's biography, which undoubtedly shows a deep interest in the processes of cinema and many years of work in this field. Undoubtedly, this is a positive characteristic of the candidate. Moreover, despite not a few analyses in the field of documentary cinema and the director's work in it, it is in the genre of the film portrait that we have no separate study. I therefore commend the interest of the author as well as the efforts of her supervisor to work on this topic. I have worked in this genre and have often asked myself questions, which the author shares here and tries to answer. In that sense, I find this work very useful.

The proposed text has standard length, has a clear and well-organized structure, and provides answers to the questions posed. I believe it has all the qualities of a well-written scientific paper. It is structured in seven parts, a form that, in my opinion, provides ample opportunity for setting out a scientific thesis and for its full development.

The Introduction is followed by:

Chapter 1-The Evolution of the Portrait Genre. Historical development and tendencies of documentary cinema in the context of the construction of the image of man.

Chapter 2- Credibility and subjectivity in the construction of the image in the documentary-portrait.

Chapter 3- Directorial practices in the director's work with the character.

Chapter 4 - Typology of Portrait Cinema. Types.

Chapter 5 - The documentary hybrid. Portraiture in the age of computer technology.

Chapter 6- Directorial ethics in revealing the image in the documentary-portrait.

Of course, we also have all the reference apparatus, bibliography, filmography, appendices, etc.

Throughout the thesis, consistently and methodically, with the flair of a good researcher, the PhD student has traced many sources - both European and Bulgarian - that give insight into the state of the sector under study. The author has used various sources - theoretical and practical - which enable us to look at the matter under study. It is noteworthy that she has used statements and quotations from interviews conducted in person, in which well-known directors share their observations on the topic under study. This approach instils confidence in the doctoral student's ability to access the opinions and reflections of participants in the cinematic process to form a conviction in the topic thus developed. Also, all the analyses and references to competent authors who have worked theoretically on the topics of documentary films sound convincing and logical. I accept the proposed dissertation as useful for the whole cinematic community.

As I said before, I have a particular interest in the subject and in anything that is written about documentary filmmaking in general. I will therefore take the liberty in this review to include not only my assessment of the written work, which is obviously positive, but also to argue in places with the text as I find it right that a dissertation should give rise to the desire and opportunity for professional argument.

However, I must say that the introduction unnecessarily turns to the history of the visual arts to explain the importance of talking about film portraiture. I believe that visual arts history themes have been used in enough, I would even say hundreds of dissertations, and today the reader is prepared to start this conversation right from the cinema era - in the chapter "world historical trends in film portraiture". I suggest that these pages from the beginning fall out of the study; it will lose nothing by their absence.

As well as later, on page 47 in the chapter "subjectivity and verisimilitude"- it seems to me that in this otherwise well-structured chapter the initial 3-4 page are an unnecessary return to the introduction in which we explain all the theoretical premises for the distinction of the film-portrait with its requirements for verisimilitude. It seems like an unnecessary return to the basics of theory since in the previous 50 pp the author moves briskly towards more interesting examples from world cinema and more serious generalizations. This chapter is small and stands relatively idly in an otherwise well-structured work. Perhaps it should be removed altogether. I mention such details because it seems to me that they would only lighten the work in a possible future publication.

The dissertator has obviously familiarized herself with many films which she has skillfully analyzed in her desire to find that model (method) which by its very participation in the work will bring us success. She does this both as an analyst and as a filmmaker. Of course, at the end of the dissertation, she herself admits that there is no such universal method - it is all a matter of the director's conception and view of the documentary's protagonist. Yet sometimes we return to famous examples from history to add to our knowledge and understanding of cinema.

It seems to me that the most emotional chapter in the dissertation is chapter two - "Credibility and Subjectivity in Image Construction in Documentary Portraiture".

Why? Because the author's emotion (insofar as one can speak of emotion in a scholarly work) is very strong along this very line - how believable the presented image of the character is. And she proves her attachment to this theme throughout the work. This is understandable - when it comes to a documentary, viewers care if the image they see on screen is real. Credibility, objectivity, truth - these are all synonyms for the basic requirements of film when analyzing the finished film-portrait. If the director brings out a concept, a moral, at the end the viewer should know - to believe or not to believe in this image. I fully support the author (p.54) who says that directorial "objectivity" is a non-existent concept - I have developed this thesis in my dissertation "Documentary Cinema- Between Truth and Fiction". But how do we reconcile the director's objective view of the character (devoid of external emotions, contextual considerations, etc. etc.) and the director's desire to be as close to the character as possible. I fully agree with what Neda Stanimirova said (p. 166) that "the portrait genre is a love genre" for the filmmaker. When you treat your character with love, no matter who they are or what they are known for in society, you always get the bonus of an audience that is willing to be positive about the character. This look at working in the portrait genre shows exactly how a director can be both objective and creatively biased. And I accept that the author argues this point convincingly enough.

I will give another example that takes us in another direction. When we analyze "Uncle Tony, the Three Stooges and the Committee for State Security", we should know that the mistakes in this film are mostly due to the premise: "How CSS destroyed an artist's life". And because facts are not sufficiently found to complete the thesis, the portrayal has become artificially dramatized and therefore seems unnatural. I believe that the director was more attracted by the thesis about the influence of the State Security on animation cinema than by the fate of the animator Anton Trayanov. She has treated, perhaps unconsciously and focused on her thesis, with disdain, a character who if looked at in another way might have been given a deeper creative portrait. I'd like to add an opinion of my own, gained after many films - if you don't like the character, you're making a film about, even if you don't love him - you'd better not get into this film.

When we talk about the person being portrayed, about our hero, we necessarily try to fit in, to stand next to him or her as in a general portrait. It's part of the ego of the filmmaker who makes a film-portrait and it's normal to be present in the film. But a successful film is not always a reason for success in a character's life. In this sense, it is not correct to say that "the Kennedy film became the key to winning the election"- in fact, the key to winning the election became the televised debate in which the young and handsome Kennedy successfully won against the less charismatic Nixon. Experts say that if they had talked on the radio, the winner would have been Nixon.

When the filmmaker is close to the character - for example, "The Best Boy" (dir. Ira Wall, Academy Award for Documentary film, 1980). - you can get a wonderful portrait film even if the character is not a celebrity and doesn't shine with accomplishments in life because he is a mentally retarded young man. The director so

unobtrusively and calmly approaches the character (who is followed in his slow development for 3 years ) that he without losing any of his characteristics (mental deficiencies - which is a reality) becomes familiar and close to us, we sympathize with him and want him to get a chance to fit into the life of society. In this way, the director's view receives powerful support from the audience. It is no coincidence that the film won an Oscar.

I think that the chapters "Typology of Portrait Cinema" and "Directorial Ethics in Revealing the Image" could be part of the main chapter of the work - "Directorial Practices in the Director's Work with the Character" , which should tell us how the director actually goes from being an ordinary person to an artist, how he chooses his character, what kind of characters he likes, how he discovers them, how he approaches them, what he does to win their trust. The whole work has the ambition to make general theoretical discoveries, but I think it's a wonderful example of empirical analysis by an author who is more filmmaker than analyst. And there's nothing wrong with that - we need both deep analytical works and works that get into the psychology and fieldwork of authors. I like the systematic and pragmatic division of the sub-chapters, which in seven parts reveal to us the hard work of the filmmaker working on a documentary-portrait. In its entirety and in its individual parts. But I still think that in her desire to cover the director's work on the documentary-portrait in its entirety the dissertation has upset the balance of her interests. That is why I wrote that the chapter "Credibility and Subjectivity in the Construction of the Image in the Documentary Portrait" carries more emotion and seems to suggest that the author takes this topic more to heart. In fact, it is also more comfortable for discussions, it generates a lot of thoughts and questions. But this remark does not diminish the importance of the chapter "Directorial Practices in the Director's Work with the Character". In this case, the dissertator has made her choice (accidentally or deliberately - I don't know) by putting a lot of effort and diligence into this chapter. In fact, it is also the largest in volume.

I agree with the author (and with Oscar Wilde) that every portrait (including film portraits) is very much a portrait of the author - even if it is only in the choice of the character that the director determines his preferences and therefore his image. Here, the author is right that the filmmaker reveals himself to a large extent first by his choice of character and then by his treatment of that character in the finished film. I find this analysis very useful for understanding the emotion that guides the documentary filmmaker's choices. There could even be a chapter analyzing the hero-author relationship (sort of like the hero and his author).

Regarding the author's reference to TV movies, I would like to share some thoughts on the difference between TV reportage and documentary. In 2008, at the request of BNT, we did an analysis of the difference between documentary and television journalism, requested by the Board of BNT apparently in connection with BNT's fee policy. To our surprise, our colleagues at BNT completely rejected this analysis, which they described as unnecessarily theoretical, and said that on television all forms are documentaries. But still, the difference between reportage and documentary

remains - it is in the length of the work and the deeper understanding of the plot and the characters. This should be emphasized, if of course one does not look at the financial interests of the authors at BNT. And since most documentaries on television are about portraits there is room for analysis of the way they are made if they have not, of course, gone through the competitions of studio "Ekran". By the way, we are talking here not only about the documentaries of BNT, but also of the other TV stations. Almost every form of television (if it is not a game or a show) is presented as a documentary, which as an attitude marginalizes work on documentary. And since there are now many competitions, festivals, or other events where these forms can receive awards, it suddenly turns out that there are hundreds of documentaries being made in Bulgaria that are receiving awards somewhere. When we talk about the universal forms of working with new technologies and I-movie I would argue amicably with A. Donev that "anyone who wants can work in the movies" (p. 74). It seems to me that the correct expression is "he can try to film what he sees". We should not put an equal sign between amateur videos and documentary filmmaking as a concept even when we only think about the new possibilities of technology. Ultimately, this approach confuses even amateurs who are serious about documentary filmmaking.

The questions raised about staging methods in documentary filmmaking are very important and require more serious treatment than arguing whether it is pure documentary filmmaking and whether the filmmaker has the right to do so. I think that this type of documentary filmmaking, which in the interest of the viewer's emotions uses dramatization and adjustments of the text, is pure manipulation - we professionals may know the whole story of the making of the film and be professionally critical, but the thousands of other viewers in the world will not and will accept the film as a documentary of the character's behavior. The directors who do this are aware that this gives them an advantage over others with the strong emotional charge, which is in fact largely artificially brought in, played, and staged. In some countries (e.g., the US) they take this very seriously. An example of this can be found in the film "Broadcast News" (directed by James Brooks), in which the protagonist tricks the screen to get tears out of the viewers' eyes. But fellow journalists do not forgive him. It should be noted as information that "Lyuben Karavelov - Materials from a Study" is the first documentary in Bulgarian cinema in which the director used the so-called "dramatization" or "reenactment" to introduce historical characters he could not otherwise have. There are two types of reenactments of this kind - one which does not introduce specific characters, but only marks the environment to make it more understandable for the viewer. The second type introduces characters and even creates dialogue as in a feature film. I personally think the first kind is useful for documentary filmmaking, while the second kind is misleading and can mislead us about documentary truth.

The author's reflection on the monologue in the documentary-portrait is very interesting. To what extent this monologue of the hero should be documented, and can it be invented in the "style of the hero". The very fact that the author reflects on these issues proves that she understands and appreciates the importance of text in

documentary-portraiture. And not only does she try to find answers to the questions, but she also sets herself the task of convincing us of the possibility to think, to reflect on these important topics for documentary filmmakers. It seems to me, and I've already said it, that all kinds of reenactments and authorial fictions can be part of the film, but when we bring in actors and give them texts, it becomes a feature film. There are many examples on the border between documentary and docudrama that can point us to the right way out of this situation. In any case, this exit is very narrow - it is only passed through after very careful checks if you want to be true to your character. The quote from K. Bonev is very accurate- "these shots (the staged ones) must become part of the documentary fabric; the director must be ready to "disappear" into the film" . Very well said and I am glad that the author referred to this quote. We can think a lot about hybrid filmmaking, but the facts of documentary filmmaking require certain qualities to use the term "documentary".

On page 53 the dissertation author says that "the author's voice has an ancillary role". I think that in the best performances the narration read by the author is leading, not ancillary - e.g., "Ordinary Fascism" in which M. Rom himself analyses the archives in the film. Like dialogue in fiction cinema, text in documentary cinema is important in clarifying characterization. Especially the author's text which we often refer to as narration text. But the text from direct interviews is also subject to directorial control during editing, which, by the way, the author analyzes in the chapter "Editing". Very often we judge a character not by what he said but by what he could have said but did not. As in the film "Interrogation". Later, when discussing the use of authorial voice in the chapter : "Directorial practices in the use of voice-over" the dissertation discusses in detail the different options for working with authorial text.

I think that the chapter on hybrid cinema and new possibilities in the use of technology is interesting and with its examples gives a basis for future discussions when we will have enough films to analyze in Bulgarian documentary cinema. But again, I have to say that the small size of this chapter leads me to think that it could be merged with another one and thus avoid the impression of fragmentation and fragmentation of the work. When we talk about mixing documentary cinema with animation, we should mention the first such attempt in this country - Anri Kulev's film A Tale of the Road.

I agree with most of the author's examples and analyses and even fully support them, which I note as the conclusion of the work. But I have some remarks, albeit on details of the work, and this is quite normal considering that there is not much analysis on this topic. For example, I think that Dziga Vertov is not an example of a filmmaker who makes film portraits in the sense that the author uses - to analyze the individual. On the contrary - his idea is to capture the general, the main, not the specific. The fate of the individual does not interest him because it is of no interest in terms of the movement of the revolutionary masses in society. Even his theory rests not on concrete impressions of the man, but on presupposed theses about the portrait as a stroke in the general picture of society - for him the man is a "sign-man" like the accent or the question mark in a sentence. Although his use of his method of

observing everything that is going on around us **has been very aptly identified by the dissertator** as a fundamental method of documentary filmmaking.

I disagree with what the author says, "the interview method is not a particularly impressive method of image construction in contemporary documentary filmmaking" (p.119). I think any method can be good or unnecessary depending on how it is used. In this sense, to deny or favor a particular way of working is wrong. It would also be interesting to consider the "hidden camera" method - decades ago this was a staple of documentary filmmaking, and the author refers to this method repeatedly in her dissertation. Nowadays in the EU "no one can be filmed without their consent"- this legal requirement poses obstacles to the "hidden camera". Just imagine working on films like "Look at the Face", which the author talks about at great length. I can't imagine making a documentary if you must ask someone's permission every moment! Or to cover with a mask the faces of those people you have photographed without permission. Obviously, this circumstance will change the possibilities of documentary filmmaking greatly. And add to that the question of copyright of random clips that travel around the networks and can be used in a documentary - the questions to the work of the documentary filmmaker become too complex. And what the work of the filmmaker would look like in such an environment - it's hard for me to imagine. I think that the future has prepared interesting and complex questions for us, so it is not superfluous to start thinking about them and looking for the necessary answers.

Not all the quotes from B. Nichols are original, some just sound boilerplate like "auteur documentary filmmaking is remarkable precisely because its language is individual..." (p.83). Or - "most film schools don't offer courses in ethics" - this is not only untrue as a formal remark, but also as a remark of sense. Even in those schools that do not have lectures on the discipline of "ethics," documentary film professors analyze these concepts clearly and thoroughly enough in their lectures. No lecture on documentary filmmaking ends without talking about ethics! The quotes from Aybarsha Bojeeva's work sound the same way. It would be good to consider their presence in a future edition. When we talk about ethics in the work of the documentary filmmaker (p. 190), we must necessarily mention the Italian filmmaker Gualtiero Jacopetti, who shot exceptional footage for his documentaries all over the world in the 1960s. The films themselves were very often in violation of basic human morality - for example, footage of rebels being shot in some African country - but they were widely advertised and shown, even somewhere accepted as the unquestioned products of the true documentarian. We are talking here about the film "Modo Cane".

"The socialist system has been replaced by a post-socialist one" (p.173) - I think this definition does not stand up to scientific analysis although it is often used. Nor is it correct to use the term "post-socialist cinema" if we cannot determine when it ceases to be "post-socialist" and becomes contemporary documentary cinema, as we have today. At least I make contemporary documentaries, not some other kind of documentary. Another remark is to the phrase "In the middle of the last century ... technique was cumbersome." (p.123). It must be the turn of the century, because after

the 1950s, a lot of mobile technology entered cinema, which started the various "new waves" in cinema across Europe. Of course, compared to today's technique it was a cumbersome 35mm technique, but back then it was downright revolutionary.

The stagnation of documentary filmmaking in the 1950s (p. 31) is explained not so much by the advent of new technology as by the rush of feature film directors to embrace documentary specificity in their work. We are talking about the French New Wave, the English New Wave, the Czech Wave, Polish cinema, etc. which are so influenced by the documentary mode of filmmaking as to make documentary redundant - at least for the moment. I'll just give "Cleo from 5 to 7" as an example.

I don't find an analysis of one of the most interesting group portraits in contemporary documentary filmmaking - "Buena Vista Social Club". It would be interesting as a narrative when talking about portraits of artists working together - like this orchestra. We could add here "Pottery" by N. Volev and Hr. Iliev - a striking example of working on a film-portrait of a person who is engaged in art and again the old argument between Mozart and Salieri.

I would also advise the author, if she decides to publish this work (I highly recommend it), to merge some of the parts to create a clearer picture for the reader at the outset of where the author is taking us and what the focus of her research is. It is very helpful in a publication to give the text to an editor and proofreader - there is always such a need.

**With a clearly positive assessment of the qualities of the scholarly work "The Work of the Director on Documentary Portraits", I have no significant critical remarks. The remarks or clarifications mentioned were intended to clarify certain concepts and issues and to help the candidate in the publication of the work.**

**In view of all that has been said so far, I would like to conclude by once again emphasizing the candidate's scientific achievements and the specific contributions of the dissertation under review. I am convinced that they fully meet the high requirements laid down in the ADASRB. That is why I take the liberty to recommend to the Specialized Scientific Jury at the Institute of Art Studies, BAS to accept positively the candidature of Tamara Peshterska-Iordanov and to award her the educational and scientific degree of DOCTOR.**

**I vote positively.**

**7 August 2023**

**Reviewer Prof. DSc Lubomir Halachev**