

REVIEW

On the dissertation

STREAMING PLATFORMS AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION SERIES

For awarding the educational and academic degree "Doctor"

Candidate: Zlatina Dimitrova Valchanova

Reviewer: Prof. DSc Bozhidar Stefanov Manov

The question of the relevance of doctoral dissertations as a timely scholarly reflex to obvious realities in audiovisual practice is fundamentally important.

In this sense, it was time to look at streaming platforms as a powerful global 'continent' in the worldwide distribution of audiovisual content and to come the focus of proper scholarly inquiry. And why should it not be the doctoral dissertation of just a representative of the "streaming generation" that increasingly watches movies or other screen products in a digital cinema, on a stationary computer, laptop, tablet or even phone in the pause of another event, and perhaps "in step" between two other annoyances.

With this introduction, I would like to congratulate Zlatina Dimitrova Valchanova for the choice of the topic, which, of course, should also be credited to her supervisor Prof. Dr. Ingeborg Bratoeva - Darakchieva.

These words could be perceived as banal and standard, but in this case they are not. Because the real research work in the field of contemporary audiovisual sphere in our country is not so vast that I would have not noticed if there are other similar publications with serious content and thorough elaboration. Otherwise, I've come across lightly winged texts with superficial journalism and (possibly) enthusiastic pathos here and there in non-academic and non-certified publications. But an attempt at scholarly reflection on the current process in the repertoire of streaming dissemination through relevant internet-based platforms has not been made in this country, and the terrain is open for scholarly reflection. Which is exactly what the PhD student Zlatina Valchanova proposes.

And this is the place to point out that the proposed dissertation is not merely and simply a first in-depth study in the noted scholarly field, but a well-thought-out, thoroughly unfolded, in-depth investigation and convincing systematization of the major sub-themes of the work to fully organize them into a unified scholarly whole as a complete research text. That is to say, the proposed respectable 311-page volume is not a mere accumulation of text, but it has been systematized, arranged, analyzed, and summarized in an expedient manner for the research work and its comprehensive

integrity. And in such a light, the research task formulated by the PhD student sounds not only sufficiently dissertationable, but also too important for making sense of contemporary practice in television (more generally audiovisual) series, namely: “**The central hypothesis** of this thesis is that the influence of video streaming platforms is changing not only the way in which series reach audiences, but also the way in which they themselves are structured. **The object** of the study is the existence of the contemporary television series in the time of streaming platforms, and the **subject** is the transformations that occur under their influence.”

For the competent reader, it immediately makes a positive impression that the author, with a dose of restraint and sound logic, speaks of a “basic hypothesis” rather than some “definitive thesis”. And she further distinguishes between the object and subject of the study, which is not always realized in many such early scholarly works! And one more thing: it articulates two other important concepts, the aim and objectives of the research, which are also not always clearly stated in some scientific texts. And it is through these that the work acquires essential and useful components.

Logically, the substantive body of the work begins with arguments about the relevance of the problem, which is undeniably an objective observation from real life. The first chapter sensibly and needfully begins with a brief historical overview of the development of the television series, which is not surprising but undeniably necessary. The second chapter, however, is inevitably necessary, as it illuminates the core of the thesis by examining the emergence and development of streaming platforms. The novel focus of the research is set in a true starting point, as in our country this matter is not summarized and exhausted in similar scholarly texts. The categorization of some of the most popular streaming platforms is useful both with certain statistical data and as a prerequisite for outlining audience attitudes and the undeniable change in audience behavior. Here, I believe for the first time in our research, the so-called binge-watching (watching in one breath) as a phenomenon in the global streaming audience is commented upon. And in a useful addendum, the issue of so-called branching dramaturgy in the making of some TV series is touched upon. The third chapter is in a sense illustrative, as it contains analyses of television series beyond those usually found in standard TV practice, and it is examples such as these that broaden the understanding of viewers' preferred story sequences and summarize different approaches to their creation with a view to active distribution via streaming platforms.

I will focus a bit more on the fourth chapter, which is essentially an authorial text - an analysis of the interviews conducted with specialists from the American and European film and television industry, as well as with respondents from the teams of some of the most famous streaming platforms in the country. These conversations and interviews are undoubtedly a useful basis for reflections, analyses, and generalizations. However, I would like to note my general impression that several recent dissertations contain similar so-called 'appendices', which are undoubtedly also

original work with possibilities for useful integration into the research text. However, this is still a kind of “raw material” that is of no equal value to the actual qualities of the dissertation text. It is like the washed cubes of sand behind the gold digger from which he has extracted a few flakes or nuggets of gold! That's why I always read appendices like this like the fine print lines in the customer contracts of monopolist companies!

However, after this delicate remark, I would like to underline that the Contributions Report leaves a definitely positive impression. These are judiciously and sparingly noted, without the common “self-promotion” or overestimation of candidates. Zlatina Valchanova correctly notes real qualities of the work, which she objectively defines as her contributions in 6 points. For indeed, the dissertation “is the first study in Bulgaria to address the way streaming platforms impact not only the distribution of television series and marketing, but also viewers' attitudes.” As well as “the systematization of streaming platforms that frames the development of television art in a digital environment.” Of the same order of contribution are the formulation of the main trends and transformations in the creation of television series, as well as the argument that the work is a useful basis for future research related to the topic with a targeted focus on specific genres, hybrid forms, interactive approaches, etc.

In conclusion, I return to the opening lines of this review, and this means also to the so-called **basic hypothesis** marked at the beginning of the thesis. Because already at the end of her thesis, the PhD student formulates an important observation, which I quote, “The research presented in this thesis confirms the scientific hypothesis that under the influence of streaming platforms, transformations occur not only in the way television works reach the audience, but also in the way they are created.” i.e. she formulates a concluding thesis! Whereby the work unquestionably justifies the research effort, and the thesis arrives at a clear scientific result!

And a minor note, but still with an NB: In the text of the thesis (and therefore in the Abstract), the phrase "storytelling" occurs when referring to a particular screen work. And if its plot is contemporary, what “storytelling” is it then? Of course, I pretend to be „smitten" and misunderstood naïf for this oh-so-popular phrase in almost every text or verbal comment. Because we are talking about a careless reinterpretation of the English-speaking lexicon.

And the difference between the extremely popular English words *Story* (narrative, short story, tale, plot, legend, fable, rumor, etc.) and *History* (historical science) but used in the Bulgarian linguistic context with their lexical meaning are unified with the translation as *story*! As Balzac would say, “Stupid as fact!” Not a petty quibble, but a call for clear, unquestioned professional vocabulary and precise language (and especially used by an academic) to distinguish ourselves from some unskilled journalists!

In conclusion, I formulate my summarized and succinctly expressed opinion as a reviewer: the dissertation "Streaming Platforms and Transformations of the Contemporary Television Series" is a comprehensive scholarly work that explores an important area of the new production and technological conditions in the creation and distribution of audiovisual content (in this case, television series). The thesis meets the requirements for the successful defense of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"!

Therefore, I vote YES!

11 April 2024.

Prof. DSc Bozhidar Manov