

REVIEW

For acquiring the educational and scientific degree Doctor, professional direction 8.4 Theater and Film Art by **Zlatina Dimitrova Valchanova**, Institute of Art Studies – BAS, Screen Arts Department

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STREAMING PLATFORMS AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION SERIES

Zlatina Dimitrova Valchanova's dissertation “Streaming Platforms and Transformations of the Contemporary Television Series” is a comprehensive academic study, which consists of 311 pages, including an introduction, four chapters, conclusion, bibliography, filmography and appendices. The minimum national requirements of the procedure for obtaining the PhD degree according to the LASRDRB and the Regulations for its implementation of the Institute of Art Studies - BAS have been met and exceeded, including six published scientific articles, some of them in refereed journals, as well as six participations with papers in international scientific conferences and conferences with international participation. The required examinations have been passed and the required number of credits has been obtained. The abstract and the contributions correspond to the content of the thesis. Zlatina Valchanova's text is novel and original, no research has been borrowed in whole or in part from other authors.

The dissertation “Streaming Platforms and Transformations of the Contemporary Television Series” is a scholarly study that explores the relatively new academic territory of different types of film communication brought about by the rapid development of streaming platforms. At the same time, the main thesis of the PhD focuses on the aesthetic and dramaturgical changes and transformations that occur in film structures under the influence of altered communication conditions. Changed attitudes and audience expectations have a significant impact on form-making in the field of audiovisual works - series and films. The increased role of viewer feedback, including through social media, activates a new level of interactivity that influences authors already in the process of conception and creation.

Scope and Relevance of the Study. Zlatina Valchanova has limited the temporal scope of the analysis to the last fifteen years, which implies relevance. The dynamics in the explosive development of audiovisual communication during these years implies numerous changes in the nature of the viewers' perception, which through video streaming differs significantly from the perception under the television principle of programming. Interactivity, a concept introduced in the era of traditional television, is now taking on new dimensions, and multi-platform communication principles offer new channels for interaction, including paradoxical character profiles on social networks. Even though the period of the research is limited, the PhD student has drawn many significant parallels with previous historical stages in the development of television, video and cinema communication to create a complete picture outlining the genesis of contemporary trends. Bearing in mind that the contemporary industry for the creation of such a profitable product as the series has become virtually limitless due to the sheer quantity of series and films offered by streaming platforms, I believe that the PhD student has done a tremendous job with an almost limitless amount of material, drawing valuable and contributory conclusions from it and defining new phenomena and patterns.

Methodology. The main scientific principles that guide Zlatina Valchanova are interdisciplinary and correspond to such a complex object of research, which requires, in addition to traditional cinema approaches, the use of scholarly apparatus from a wide range of sciences - psychological, philosophical, media, social, statistical, economic, etc. At the same time, Zlatina Dimitrova introduces into scientific circulation concepts that are very topical and seem to change rapidly over the years. In this sense, she also has a methodological contribution, which lies in her ability to maintain with scientific precision changing definitions such as interactivity, multiplatform, multiscreen, binge-watching, convergence, etc.

Exposition and contributions. The first chapter of the dissertation, *Television Series, Streaming and Interactivity*, focuses on the historical analysis of the development of the television series and the transformations it has undergone. The direct dependence of screen arts on the development of technology, changing audience perceptions and increasing viewer activism clearly emerges.

Zlatina Valchanova draws attention to how the possibilities of choice and, consequently, control of viewing is mediated by the technological development of streaming services and the subsequent artistic and cultural phenomena. The first major step in terms of viewer control was the advent of remote control, but the contemporary situation of choice in streaming platforms is realized on a qualitatively different level in terms of the removal of the programming barrier. In her overview of the historical development of television and cinema, the PhD

student also points our attention at the interpenetration of famous creative personalities - actors and directors - from cinema to television and vice versa. A systematization of the terms soap opera, serial film, series, web television series, etc. is made. Particularly interesting is Zlatina Valchanova's analysis of the "convergence of contemporary television" - the merging of television and internet technology and the blurring of the boundaries between television and internet access. "Convergence does not represent a complete process but is a term that is constantly being upgraded according to the development of technology and its changed socio-cultural meaning" (p.24). At the same time, the doctoral student, quoting Tommy Pallotta, points out that "convergence is the intersection between technology and narrative" (p. 25). Here, an interesting analysis is made of both the technological possibilities for content to flow from one medium or technological platform to another (e.g. smart TV, smart phone, etc.) and the possibilities for narrative and perception to change. Zlatina Valchanova also proposes a systematization of the types of streaming, mainly in terms of copyright compliance and paid or free broadcasting of content, into so-called sanctioned and unsanctioned streaming, streaming 'live' or of an already recorded audiovisual work.

The main streaming platforms are discussed as well as the main features of interactive TV. The author has conducted a broadly representative survey of the reference base in terms of interactivity. The analytical presentation of arguments creates a multifaceted picture of interactivity both in terms of technological possibilities and from the angle of viewership and perception, but also as an opportunity for authors to respond aesthetically to a multitude of varying viewer attitudes.

The concepts of multiscreen and multiplatform are examined by the author in the logic of convergence of contemporary media. Here, however, she focuses on the use of multiple screens simultaneously. A case in point is the practice of users connecting with friends on social media or otherwise to create a shared experience when viewing a work from a different location. I see potential here for future research development that would provide an interesting theoretical perspective in the context of the collective experience lost after the Covid 19 pandemic.

The second chapter, "*Streaming Platforms and Transformations in Viewer Attitudes*," is devoted to the historical classification of television programs that have passed through cable broadcasters and operators to transform into streaming channels such as HBO, Netflix, Disney plus, Amazon Prime video, and others, or into web-based video-sharing platforms such as You Tube. Zlatina Valchanova gives an overview of other platforms such as the popular in China iQiyi, as well as the popular in Europe and Bulgaria platforms. The

problem of video piracy is discussed, as well as a new analysis of existing statistics on audiovisual consumption. Of interest in this chapter is the analysis of the phenomenon of binge-watching - watching multiple episodes at once. Zlatina Valchanova prefers to translate this notion as “watching in one breath” or “swallowing in one breath”, which corresponds to the newly emerged with streaming platforms viewer situation when the user watches without intervals 6-8-10 or more episodes at once until literally falling asleep from exhaustion in front of his/her device. As a matter of fact, the English-language term is much more merciless to the viewer, because *binge* literally means "overeating". The last subchapter, “*Branching Dramaturgy*”, is devoted to the new dramaturgical transformations that are emerging in the creation of series under the influence of the changed communicative situation. The notion of branching dramaturgy derives from computer games (and even more from gamebooks), in which each individual player can take an individual path to develop the action. In this sense, it is branching dramaturgy that is the expression of interactive communication with the viewer to the greatest extent. The branching of the narrative in the composition of the dramatic elements creates new narrative patterns that differ sharply from traditional forms.

The third chapter, "*Transformations of the Contemporary Television Series*," is a case-study, yet goes beyond the specifics of the approach. The titles have been adequately selected, according to a system of belonging to different dramaturgical structures motivated by Zlatina Valchanova. In *Twin Peaks: The Return*, the PhD student highlights the hybrid character of the work, presented to the audience as a serial, in parts, but developed as a film with a specific dramaturgy and way of filming. In *Shame* and *Shame: Austin*, Zlatina Valchanova finds an example of a multi-platform production that is at the same time a web series that can be viewed in fragments on a website or via a streaming platform. The two series blur the line between screen image and real image by building digital identities of characters on social networks, but in addition they allow episodes to be viewed in their entirety or as a collection of individual short scenes and clips. *Mosaic* is based on an interactive dramaturgy set in a multi-platform environment, where two different versions of the work can be viewed on two different screens and the viewer can choose their own point of view. Viewing through a mobile app offers complementary elements to the main version and brings the television work to a second screen. *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* and *The Indomitable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs. the Reverend* show that a series can be a work that in turn becomes a game using branching dramaturgy that invites the viewer to take a more active role, acting out different options for the development of the action. Here Zlatina Valchanova highlights some genre and thematic differences in approach.

The examples thus selected and analyzed in detail highlight different dramaturgical and directorial approaches that have emerged as a direct result of the development of the new media situation and in response to changed audience attitudes and expectations. The author's ability to analyze and capture the new forms in the development of the series, the subtle changes applied by the authors to respond to the newly created habits of communication of the younger generations, the need to embrace different platforms, media and channels of communication is impressive. In this sense, Zlatina Valchanova's research is a contribution and a first of its kind for Bulgaria.

The fourth chapter, *Transformations of the Television Series through the Eyes of Streaming and Television Professionals*, is an analysis of the views of leading practitioners in the field of series and streaming, grouped around particular themes such as the definition of the series, transformations in dramaturgical structures, the blurring of film-series boundaries, new narrative approaches, binge-watching, and more. Here, I believe that Zlatina Valchanova's significant contribution lies in the very conduct of a series of in-depth interviews with specialists who have worked on the serials analyzed in the text of the thesis. The conversations conducted through Zoom and Google Meet are focused around problematic areas and contribute to the theoretical clarification of several concepts and trends in the development of contemporary serial. The interviewed specialists are people from practice, but it is their views "from the inside" that enable Zlatina Valchanova to shape her theoretical views in a matter that is in constant dynamics and process of transformation. The respondents of the interviews are Kyle Gilman and Sean Cusack, film editors who worked on the interactive film *The Indomitable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs. the Reverend*; Nicholas Dunn, screenwriter and playwright who worked on the series *Mosaic*; Marianne Furevold-Boland, producer of *Shame*; Karen DiConcetto, screenwriter and producer who worked on the series *Shame: Austin*; Tony Kerns, director of editing on *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*. The very success of conducting interviews with people from the film and television industry, in whose work schedules it is difficult to find time for unrelated activities, speaks of Zlatina Valchanova's exceptional motivation and persistence - qualities necessary for successful scientific research. In addition, similar interviews were conducted with Bulgarian representatives of streaming platforms - Dimitar Noykov, CEO of HBO for Bulgaria and Vanya Dimitrova, manager at Neterra.tv.

Zlatina Valchanova encloses the full text of the interviews in original and in Bulgarian translation.

Zlatina Valchanova's dissertation "Streaming Platforms and Transformations of Contemporary Television Series" is an in-depth scholarly study in the rapidly changing practice of television and streaming communications. The author

manages to highlight the leading trends and changes that have occurred because of the rapid development of streaming, such as the increased viewer activity due to the interactive structuring of dramaturgy, the dropping of the requirement for a clear time frame of episodes, the creation of series through the so-called “story arc”, the trend towards creating shorter seasons for series, etc. This also leads to the analyzed changes in the narrative, genres, language and thematic scope of series. Zlatina Valchanova manages to define the changing conceptual apparatus and to refine the use of several concepts such as interactivity, multiplatform, binge-watching, etc., which is of particular importance for the scientific accuracy of the study.

I know Zlatina Valchanova as a PhD student in the Screen Arts Department of the Institute of Art Studies. She impresses with her analytical qualities and professional approach to many areas of film creativity. Her thoroughness and persistence in scholarship have earned her the respect of her colleagues.

CONCLUSION: The contributions of the thesis, the high quality of the publications and the mature professionalism of Zlatina Dimitrova Valchanova give me reason to believe that she is a serious and talented researcher in the field of cinema, television and new media communications. Her dissertation is a contributory study of aesthetic and communicative phenomena in contemporary audiovisual creativity.

I support the dissertation and vote "FOR", recommending to my fellow members of the scientific jury to award Zlatina Dimitrova Valchanova the educational and scientific degree Doctor in professional direction 8.4. Theatre and Film Art.

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