

OPINION

By Prof. Dr. Svetoslav Ovcharov

On the dissertation
Zlatina Dimitrova Valchanova on the subject

STREAMING PLATFORMS AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION SERIES

The study has a volume of 311 pages and is structured the following way: introduction, four chapters and a conclusion. It contains the necessary reference apparatus: bibliography in Cyrillic and Latin, filmography and appendices. There is an attached abstract of 19 pages, including a description of contributions. The materials thus formatted meet the requirements for a dissertation.

At the beginning of her work, the PhD student (quite in the spirit of the notion of “convergence”, which she discusses on pages 25,26) simultaneously creates a historical panorama of the emergence, development and future of television, but also introduces fundamental concepts of her work such as streaming, downloading, etc. The process of creating the conceptual apparatus is also an introduction to the psychology of watching television and/or streaming platforms, and it is done simultaneously, with many references to authorities and examples from different technological and cultural fields. All of this shows us Valchanova’s ability to handle the material that is the subject of her research fluently and to delve deeply into its problems.

The choice of the topic has predetermined the answers to some questions that the authors of such research set themselves. When phenomena and trends of the last few years are at the center of the research, it is inevitable that the research deals not only with analysis and synthesis, but also, in a certain aspect, with discovery. Whether we like it or not the Kovid-19 pandemic has changed humanity. The rise of the streaming platforms the author examines has certainly been aided by these extraordinary circumstances for humanity. The statistics (on page 42) show us that in China or the US the number of people who subscribe to video streaming have multiplied many times between 2020 and 2021. It appears that technologically humanity has matured for a qualitative leap, and the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic forced it to do so faster than expected. The fact that technological giants such as Apple have reached out to create their own streaming platforms is indicative of the interest of big capital. The data on (page

53) shows how demand for video streaming service has outpaced even the expectations of those offering the service.

The author's observations on the influence of advertisements on the perception of content on streaming platforms are interesting. The detailed examination of this issue and the possibility of “skipping” ad-supported content or even ordering ad-free content is grounded in statistics and observation of multiple video content distributors. In the dissertation, this becomes an important topic that is examined from both an economic and psychological perspective¹. The gradual 'education' of audiences into watching video content via streaming platforms and the segmentation of the market by audience preferences is examined by the author. Along these lines, there are also reflections on the development of different trends in watching series 'in one breath' or 'with relish' (see page 66 and on). Obviously, every art (like culinary art) has its fast food, its gourmet and its 'fusion cuisine'. But, as it is stated in the text, in a quoted interview (p. 132) "People (...) watch in one breath because we're addicted. People drink a lot, eat a lot of chocolate. It starts with just one piece of chocolate and then... just one more and one more... “)

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Exploring the blurring of the boundaries between film and series, interactive dramaturgy, and the multi-platform approach to content creation is interesting in its analysis of the trends that define the contemporary face of video streaming. What used to be a film becomes a series, what used to be a series becomes a video game and vice versa. „The owls are not what they seem!“ could become the motto of the contemporary approach to video content not only because David Lynch is one of the participants in this process. The analysis of examples from the industry that show different approaches in this process is cleverly drawn upon by the PhD student as evidence of the diversity of trends that are currently developing. Some of the possibilities of interactive dramaturgy offered by contemporary series (such as *Bandersnatch*, for example) are frightening because of the viewer's need to make decisions that are fatal to some of the characters and seem to objectify even the darkest fears of the person faced with a choice. In this sense, such films are touchstones not only for the filmmakers but also for the viewers, for the limits of their moral foundations. It is possible for such films to become prophecy, as has happened many times in the history of cinema (one need only think of the 1966 Bradbury/Truffaut film *451 degrees Fahrenheit*, in which Julie Christie's

¹ The major video content providers are also guided by people metric studies of "traditional TV" audiences, which show unequivocally that with the start of each ad block, most viewers immediately leave the channel, only to return to the same channel again after the ads end. I have direct observation (as one of the owners of the cable channel "Fiesta TV" between 2007 and 2017) that in Bulgaria the people metric agencies for years reported the opposite - at the beginning of the ad block the viewership increases. The abnormality of this statement is obvious, but it is a fact that most people metric agencies in the country are owned by organizations that are owners (directly or indirectly) of broadcasters. This has led to the creation of various people metric agencies, each denying the other's data, touting their results as the only valid ones, and in fact all equally biased.

character anxiously awaits her turn on live television.) The possibilities of interactive dramaturgy obviously blur another boundary, that between spectator and author, in which the former has been assigned the passive role of consumer. If viewers used to say, “Who made that up?”, now they can proudly say, “I made that up, I'm the author!” Down with the hierarchy! Two important components in the process of creating art - the author and the viewer - have swapped places.²

This process of change (or return to cinema) of filming methods in contemporary serials is discussed in detail in the fourth chapter of the thesis and can be seen in even greater detail in the appendices. Claims that the authors want “serials to look like film”, “to work with more money”, etc. show that no matter how much the creation of television content for video streaming is moving away from cinema, it is returning to the source - traditional cinema - again and again. Many differences are, of course, explored - in all the stages of pre-production, production and post-production that occur in the creation of a dramaturgical, shooting and editing situation that is huge in scope (compared to traditional cinema). Streaming changes the way authors think. Some of the FCC's restrictions are loosened and now there is “more sex,” “more violence,” and vulgar language is “more vulgar”.

The mechanisms for audience choice have also changed, because with video streaming, the choice is not “whether” to watch a piece of content, but rather “when” to watch it. All of this is also placed in the context of video piracy, which is older (and growing just as steadily) than video streaming, in the dissertation's work.

Cinema is not the same anymore. At least the cinema we knew fifteen years ago. Especially in its distribution. On page 19 of her thesis, the PhD student quotes the opinion of Netflix representatives that “in a few decades, terrestrial television will be like the landline telephone” i.e. a rarity. I have met with Netflix representatives and heard the same claims. Apparently, the leading representatives of this platform have the same ‘interesting’ language, because my interlocutor, when asked what all the sales agents and distributors will be doing in a few years' time, replied laconically, “Selling coffins!”. So, in just a few words he nailed the future of traditional film distribution. And he may turn out to be right. Zlatina Valchanova's work is just in time to prepare us for the grand burial of traditional film distribution and for its next resurrection.

² I'll take the liberty of giving an example of "interactivity" in Bulgarian. While I was writing the script of the series *"The Tree of Life"* - season two, the nature of the work was such that the team was filming while I was still working on the next episodes. At one point, one of the producers called me and said "This actress must die! Her pretensions have become excessive!" and I hastily introduced the "Spanish disease" into the film, which really killed a lot of people in the early 1920s. One actress died. She called me afterwards and asked, "Why did you kill me!" "Ask the producers!", I told her. Such are my interactives.

Zlatina Valchanova's research systematizes the ways in which streaming platforms influence the creation and perception of video content for TV series. The contributions mentioned by the author are objective and correspond to the content of the thesis. The author has the necessary publications in specialized journals.

I will conclude by saying that I found it interesting to follow the author's erudite thought and to observe her reflections on the trends in the development of a field to which I am addicted. I am convinced that this scholarly work will take its place in the study of the issues it deals with and would be of interest to screenwriters, directors, producers and managers of television companies in addition to researchers.

All this gives me reason to vote for awarding the educational and academic degree Doctor to Zlatina Valchanova.

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