

REVIEW

Of the PhD Thesis on the Topic

“The Video Essay and the Idea of Criticism in the Digital Age: Experience and Event”

By Stefan Vasilev Praskov (Goncharov),

Under the supervision of Professor Todor Hristov,

For the purpose of awarding a PhD degree in the Area of Humanities, Section 2.1. Philology
(Theory and History of Literature – Theory of Literature)

By Associate Professor Ognyan Borisov Kovachev,

Theory of Literature Department,

Faculty of Slavic Studies,

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”,

Member of Academic Jury (Mandate № ПД-38-494/29.07.2024)

Information about the PhD Student

Stefan Goncharov obtained a BA degree in 2019, majoring in “Scandinavian Studies” at the Faculty of Classical and New Philologies, and a MA degree in 2020 in the “Arts and Contemporary Studies” programme at the Faculty of Philosophy of the SU “St. Kliment Ohridski”. From 2021 to 2024, he is a full-time PhD student at the Theory of Literature Department, Faculty of Slavic Philology of the same university. According to his professional CV, he is fluent in English, Danish and Swedish.

The thesis was discussed at a meeting of the Theory of Literature Department on July 1, 2024. It was decided that the candidate can proceed on to the public viva voce. I am convinced that all procedures meet the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”.

Dissertation and Abstract Data

The thesis consists of an Introduction, three chapters, a Conclusion, a Bibliography containing 198 items, a Filmography containing 189 items and an Appendix including 31 figures and images, with a total volume amounting to 317 pages. Its main subject – the video essay – is both a relatively recent phenomenon in the realm of digital media and already part of its history.

Thus, on the one hand, its novelty testifies to the innovative and large-scale research project design, and on the other hand, its historicity suggests the need for a variety of resources and pragmatic focus of the argumentation and the potential applicability of the conclusions drawn. With a view both to the definition of the subject and to the analysis of its manifestations and available or possible uses, the author seeks to apply a large set (“bundles” in his terminological statement) of ideas, theories and materials originating from most heterogeneous sources. They range from established disciplines such as Literary History and Theory, Film History and Theory, Media Theory, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, Linguistics, Semiotics, etc., to literary and film works, internet platforms such as You Tube and TikTok and social networks. This heterogeneity testifies to the mindset of the doctoral student, and both the novelty and the historicity of the project together predetermine the interdisciplinary character of the completed PhD thesis.

For example, the attempt at the (im)possible finding of a sustainable definition of “video essay”, which runs throughout the text, begins with: “the video essay is a subjective practice that unfolds as an intervention or self-refracting reflection in the public space. More precisely, it is a reworking of what is available, which produces its subject in the form of an experience, an experiment or a judgment, that is, an *essai*, in some ‘universal’ field (such as art or politics)” (p. 3). There, Goncharov himself calls this formulation “conditional”, since, he writes, “there are many others”. Its conditionality, I would add, is also conditioned by the fact that it is a starting definition, the starting point of the attempted experiment, as well as by the fact that it is based on a choice made also in relation to many other possible ones. It already presupposes the dominant speech mode (discourse) in further considerations that cover multiple aspects of the video essay, both substantive and contextual. The ontological, in other words, the philosophical principle is the steering wheel of their research and analysis, strongly marked by the ideas and method of Alain Badiou.

The final attempt at definition again emphasizes the ontologizing perspective, highlighting also the intermediate or hybrid status of the research subject: in-between science and arts, document and fiction, criticism and creative work, etc. Therefore, “the essay can be considered as the name (or at least one of the figures) of the (non)human experience, which generally marks the gradual unfolding of the (un)realizable event horizon of man” and “this experience is realized in the form of concrete, subjective works/bodies processing the material

(the records) available in an (ontological) situation” (259). These quotations allow us to highlight another two concepts in this thesis: the essay arises, functions and is interpreted in the gap between the concrete and the abstract, and can most adequately be thought of in the paradigm of its (im)possibility and failure. The second characteristic will be discussed later.

However, before focusing on the ontology of visual essays, such as film, digital, and network ones, Stefan Goncharov dwells in detail on the genealogy and etymology of the essay as a verbal phenomenon. Its writing is also placed on a boundary – both dividing and connecting literary and para-literary (critical, aesthetic, philosophical, memoir, moralistic, scientific-experimental, etc. subjective) forms. Its ancestry can be traced from the well-known Renaissance writings of Michel de Montaigne and Francis Bacon (including XVII century English essayists who are fairly unknown to me) to XX century authors such as Virginia Woolf, William Carlos Williams, Robert Musil (mentioned in passing), the Mexican Robert Zaid and the American Philip Lopate. One cannot but notice in this colorful mosaic of nationalities and prestigious names, the absence of such canonical European essayists as Andre Maurois and Stefan Zweig, particularly if we remember the pejorative coinage "Zweigism" that branded the essayistic literary criticism in our country during the 1970s and the 1980s. I suspect that the main reason for this omission lies in the sources that the PhD student chose or had the opportunity to use.

The tracing of etymology, including theoretical approaches to the literary essay, enjoys more in-depth attention. As tradition dictates, the origin of the term and its meaning is derived from Latin, in this case from the verb *exigo* and the derivative noun *exagium*. Next comes the French noun *essai*, which sets the acoustic form of the notion in a number of other languages as well, its basic meanings being *experience*, *attempt* and the name of a literary genre. Here I will express my disagreement with the author of the PhD thesis. In my opinion the consistent use throughout the work of “experience” as a synonym for the generic name “essay” is not relevant, whatever its grounds might be. Such a synonymy raises the question, for example, is the “subject of the experience” always identical to the “subject of the essay” in this work? If the answer is yes, it is confusing to me, because in Bulgarian “opit” has a much broader meaning than “ese”. As a generic name “opit” much more hinders and obstructs than mediates understanding.

Alongside the origin, the author is also looking for the theoretical, chiefly aesthetic and philosophical, foundations of his work, and this second plan soon becomes dominant. He draws on ideas from Theodor Adorno, Max Bense, Jean Starobinski, the aforementioned Lopate,

Gyorgy Lukács, etc., paying attention to the variant meanings and aspects of the French word that expand the semantic volume of the concept. Thus, it acquires a greater interpretive potential, which Goncharov repeatedly takes advantage of, especially when he examines the varieties of the audiovisual essay. A good example of this is Aldous Huxley's ingenious nomination of desire as the "family mark" of any essay in an attempt to define it as an entity with "almost" no limits (26-27). The transition to the study of the new technological and media nature of the phenomenon is carried out through two main channels: the Film Studies one, relying mostly on Timothy Corrigan's seminal work *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*, and the philosophical one, where leading role, doubled as a film theorist as well, plays Alain Badiou, behind whom the powerful influence of Jacques Lacan and Gilles Deleuze, also strongly tempted by film theory, can be seen. The cinema channel welcomed researchers of the film essay and the video essay, such as Nora Alter, Thomas Elsaesser, Linda Roscaroli, Hito Steyerl, etc., filmmakers such as Chris Marker, Jean-Luc Godard, Haroun Farocki, but also proto-essayist cineastes such as Dziga Vertov, Jean Painlevé, Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter and Joseph Cornell, and, last but not least, a plethora of creators of *video* (or *network* as the PhD student prefers to define them) essays.

The 3rd and 4th chapters contain the essence of the work and its most significant contributions. The amount of cited, systematized and analyzed visual products in them is strikingly impressive and also contributes significant information. The third chapter, eclectically corresponding to the aesthetics of the products themselves, combines the author's subjective selection with commentaries of video contents and theorizing reflections on their production and messages. The fourth chapter is more comprehensive and consistently theoretical. In it the author does not so much quote and explain cinematic and philosophical ideas and theories, as he seeks to further develop and apply them in his own analyses. This creative approach brings about both major achievements, and some shortcomings, which I will dwell on below.

As for the abstract, it accurately and clearly presents the content of the thesis. I consider the contributions indicated at the end to be well founded.

Critical notes and recommendations

In keeping with the hybridity of the subject of the PhD thesis, I will begin my critique with praise. Stefan Goncharov's determination to choose for his PhD project a subject that is still

little studied academically on a global scale, and not least in our country, deserves high praise. No less impressive is the choice of instrumentation, which for the most part is known and applied by few film researchers. The combination of these two aspects (discourses) of film studies and of philosophy – irreducible to each other for many – ultimately turns out to be highly productive in the reviewed text.

Due to the peculiar mental attitude and, above all, the extremely alien political and other extremism of Alain Badiou, I will refrain from commenting on his theses, judgments and messages, since this is not the place to conduct such an absentee dialogue. Nevertheless, I will kindly request the dissertator to elaborate on three excerpts from his text where ideas and concepts of the French philosopher are applied. In a footnote on page 254 one can read: “Overall, I will treat audiovisual essays as bodies, as Badiou understands them from the perspective of the event as that through which the subjective is manifested and constructed in a given world. At the same time, they could also be read as “organs” in the context of some larger body. It is clear, for example, that *Man with the Movie Camera* can be considered as an organ in the body of the Russian cinematic avant-garde.” First, the use of the future tense regarding the subject of the dissertation at a point where its text is coming to an end is illogical. Second, the “bodies” and “organs” in the quoted phrase may be concepts implicitly appropriated from Deleuze, but what is the rationale for such treatment of the audiovisual essays? Even more questionable is the functionality of such a treatment, i.e. how does it work beyond its taxonomic function? On the same page, another puzzling claim asserts that the new interface operations (if I've recognized the subject correctly) “allow one to navigate the world as a virtual diegetic space of mounted links.” A third surprising statement, despite the stipulation that it is not meant to be so, comes as a conclusion in the comparison between Lev Manovich's and Badiou's concepts: “All this should not be surprising given the fact that Badiou is practically a philosopher of the impossible.” (p. 253)

Of course, my inability to understand may be due to a wide range of reasons: either my ignorance or misunderstanding of what Badiou wrote, or inadequate rhetoric, grammar, and argumentation, or over-reliance on favored or unverified sources in the thesis. An example of the latter can be the description of the American film director David W. Griffith as “rather a conservative populist with a penchant for racism.” (p. 87) The result of a grossly distorted interpretation of the message in his film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), this characterization of the

sineaste still finds support from a truly populist black anti-social racism. One of the few, unfortunately, examples of poor grammar is the following sentence: „Затова и ще си позволява да дообобща проекта на Бадиу най-вече с примери от кинематографичните полета, в които досега сме работили, като ще се фокусирам само върху най-ключовото” (с. 242).

I will take the liberty of recommending a more detailed highlighting of the differences between the video essay and the film essay, as well as between the film theory of suture and its Lacanian version maintained by Miller, Oudart, Badiou, etc. It is necessary mainly for the purpose of clarifying the operations of pedagogy (education) of the viewer, which are an important task of the video essay. Last but not least, I would recommend a careful editing of the text, especially with regard to spelling, syntax, and the correct form of names and work titles in which an exceeding number of inaccuracies have been allowed.

Conclusion

The dissertation proposed by Stefan Vasilev Praskov (Goncharov) on the topic “The Video Essay and the Idea of Criticism in the Digital Age: Experience and Event” is an original, complete work that meets the necessary requirements for a successful defense, regardless of the recommendations made. Their implementation only would improve it, especially with a view to a future publication. In the course of reading and re-reading the thesis, I was more than once faced with the difficulty of how to explain the repeated “to articulate some clearly separable positive mark” (p.84) or “to give up attempts at a positive definition of the essayistic” (p.85) etc. Doesn't the apophatic strategy based on notions like *failure*, *absence*, *lack* and *nothing* create a conceptual dystopia? And it was not until writing this review that I found a satisfying answer, perhaps due to the quote from Beckett with which the dissertation ends. An answer that might be better phrased as a question. Isn't this apophasis an expression of the clear awareness of the primary essayistic nature of human knowledge?

Based on all of the above, I will vote “yes” for the successful defense of Stefan Vassilev Praskov's (Goncharov) PhD thesis on the topic "The Video Essay and the Idea of Criticism in the Digital Age: Experience and Event".

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Associate Professor
Ognyan Kovachev