

## **ATTITUDE OF REVIEWER**

from

**Prof. Stoyan Andreas Stavru,**  
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on

Regarding the dissertation

"THE VIDEO ESSAY AND THE IDEA OF CRITICISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE:  
ATTEMPTS AND EVENTS"

by Stefan Vasilev Goncharov (Praskov)

for the awarding of the academic degree "Doctor"

Area 2. Humanities,

in professional field

2.1. Philology (Theory of Literature)

### **1. Information about the procedure**

I present this review in my capacity as an external member of the academic committee for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" based on the following: the Higher Education Act, the Rules for the Implementation of the Higher Education Act; the Rules and Procedures for the Acquisition of Academic Degrees and the Occupation of Academic Positions at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski," pursuant to the Higher Education Act of the Republic of Bulgaria; the decision of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Slavic Studies from 09.07.2024 (Protocol No. 7); Rector's Order No. RD-38-494/29.07.2024 of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" for the approval of the academic committee; and the decision of the Academic Committee from its first meeting.

This review is based on the materials provided by the author: the dissertation (317 pages); an abstract with a list of publications related to the dissertation topic (52 pages in Bulgarian and 47 pages in English); a list of academic publications for the competition, including two publications submitted in full text; an additional list of publications; a report from 25.06.2024 verifying the originality of the dissertation, prepared by the academic supervisor Prof. Dr. Todor Hristov; a statement dated 25.06.2024 from Prof. Dr. Todor Hristov regarding the anti-plagiarism procedure for the dissertation; and the candidate's academic CV.

### **2. Short biography of the candidate**

Stefan Goncharov (Praskov) completed his higher education at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski," earning a Bachelor's degree in the program "Scandinavian Studies" (2015-

2019). At the same university, he obtained a Master's degree in the program "Arts and Contemporaneity" (2019-2020). In 2021, he enrolled in a PhD program in "Theory of Literature," the results of which are presented in this competition. In addition to being the author of publications in academic journals, Stefan Goncharov is also a translator—having translated two texts by Mark Fisher. He is a member of the research team of an international project, carried out in collaboration with Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski" and Cardiff University, UK. He has participated in 1 student and 7 academic conferences, including 1 international conference, as well as 1 seminar. He has indicated proficiency in English, Swedish, and Danish.

### **3. Compliance with the Minimal National Standards for the academic degree of Doctor of Sciences**

According to the minimum national requirements for the groups of indicators for the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 2.1. Philology, the candidate must have submitted a dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" (Group "A" indicators), as well as be the author of scientific publications (Group "G" indicators), with a minimum value of 30 points.

The minimum value of points for Group "A" is covered, as Stefan Goncharov has submitted a dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" under the sole Indicator No. 1 from this group.

The indicators from Group "G" are also met, with the following considerations.

In the Abstract, three publications related to the dissertation topic are listed, while in the List of Scientific Publications for the competition, only the first two of these are mentioned. In an additional list of publications, a total of 6 publications are listed, 5 in Bulgarian and 1 in English. In the Scientometric Report submitted for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" by the doctoral candidate Stefan Vasilev Praskov from the Department of Literary Theory, Faculty of Slavic Studies, the three publications described in the Abstract are listed. This report will be decisive in my assessment of whether the Group "G" indicators are met. Based on the submitted documents, I conclude that the candidate Stefan Vasilev Praskov is participating in the competition with the following publications related to his dissertation: 1) Goncharov, St. "The Use of Technical Images in the Books of Annie Ernaux." // *Literature*, 2023, No. 31, pp. 203-222, 2) Goncharov, St. "War and the (Un)Imaginable: Between Power and the Reality of Technical Images." // *Sociological Problems*, 2023, No. 1, pp. 36-53, and 3) Goncharov, St. "Beyond the Loop of Reflection: Blog Theory and Hyperfaith." // *Philosophy* 32, 2023, No. 1, pp. 70-80.

Based on the presented documents, it can be concluded that Stefan Vasilev Praskov meets the minimum national requirements for the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 2.1. Philology (Theory of Literature).

#### 4. Evaluation of the contents academic achievements of the candidate

The dissertation comprises 317 pages, though the Abstract lists 318 pages, and the numbering in the digital copy of the dissertation shows 316 pages. According to the information provided in the Abstract, the work references 198 bibliographic sources in Bulgarian, English, French, and German, as well as 189 titles of films, videos, and other multimedia works. The structure of the dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion.

The main focus of the dissertation is the "extremely amorphous phenomenon" (p. 3) of essayistic video clips, described as "peculiar experiments concerning what is happening around us (in the world), both offline and online" (p. 3).

In the **first** chapter, titled "Introduction," a working definition of the video essay is given, which is described as "a subjective practice that unfolds as an intervention or self-reflective action in the public sphere," "a reworking of the available material that produces its subject in the form of experience, experiment, or judgment, i.e., as an *essai* in some 'universal' field (such as art or politics)" (ibid.). The main operative approach is also revealed, combining the ontological theory of the French philosopher Badiou with the essayistic, understood as "a bundle of operations" (p. 6).

The **second** chapter, "Introduction to the Field of Experience," presents the genre of the essay as "something that perhaps does not exist" (p. 14). It is precisely the indeterminacy and negativity of the essay that provide an open horizon for human experience, preventing any "final" answer from eliminating the possibility of further experimentation. Central to this is the thesis that "every attempt creates its own failure... because success would cancel the need for subsequent attempts" (ibid.); "the most enduring product of the essayistic is failure" (p. 28). The experimental nature of every essay reveals it as an operation that "accepts its own failure" (p. 16). Simultaneously, the essay proves to be universal, positioned in the broad field between Montaigne's "scattered" essayism and Bacon's "formal essay." It turns out that the essay is "almost everything" (p. 29) and "an abyss" (p. 30), all at once.

Particularly interesting, at least for me, was the emphasis on the fact that before his retirement, Montaigne was a judge, accompanied by the related quote from William Carlos Williams, who stated that "the essay is not an attempt" but rather "the conduct of a trial" and as such, it is "the most human literary form" (p. 17). While I understand Williams' arguments, also presented in connection with Jean Starobinski's concept of the "verbal swarm," which suggests

that every essay requires "a demanding weighing and judicious examination" (p. 18), I believe there are important differences between the role of the essayist and the function of the judge. At the very least, a judge who continuously fails would have difficulty keeping their job. It is no coincidence that Montaigne wrote his essays as a "retired" judge. I believe a critical examination of William Carlos Williams' views could further enrich the discussion of the essay, comparing it to other (non-)literary genres, such as judicial decisions. This comparative approach would likely be productive in analyzing some of the many other definitions of this "centaur of literary genres" (p. 18)—the essay, considered as an "omnivorous" (pp. 43, 50) attempt at the impossible.

In this section, some of the key concepts of Alain Badiou are introduced, with which Stefan Goncharov will work later in the dissertation: axiomatic decisions (p. 22), democratic materialism (p. 24), ideas (p. 25), events (p. 25), truth procedures (p. 25), fidelity of the subject (p. 25), history (p. 31), and others. Later, in the fourth chapter of the dissertation, additional concepts are introduced, such as sets, degrees of appearance, envelopes, scales, transcendental, and real atoms. Here, Lacan's "constitutive lack" (p. 30) is also present, along with anti-philosophers like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard (p. 36). It is worth noting the points where Stefan Goncharov exhibits essayistic self-reflection towards his own "attempt at a dissertation," demonstrating some of the strongest advantages of the essay as a genre. For example, on p. 39, a brief note is made regarding the choice of the dissertation topic, and on pp. 245-246, Goncharov turns his own name into a character in his dissertation to illustrate an example of "a name represented by the status quo of the situation." Thus, the existing "whole bundle of phenomena that are, to varying degrees, Stefan Goncharov" (p. 246) turns against the situation of the dissertation itself. I believe these self-reflective passages are a good example of academic essayism—a concept to which Stefan Goncharov has dedicated special attention (pp. 44-49).

I fully agree with the thesis that ambiguity can be productive, that it can "poeticize the academy" (p. 49) and become an "academic virtue" (p. 48), of course—when it finds its proper measure. It is through the exploration of the essay's ability "to actively reflect on its own conditions" (p. 52) that the necessary separation of truly valuable essays from the oversaturation of uniform attempts in the network, which metamorphose "only and unreservedly into audiovisual chaff, almost completely devoid of artistic value" (p. 52), must occur. Nevertheless, Stefan Goncharov rejects the aristocratic stance of "high" essayism, stating the following: "One of the reasons I believe that essayism should also be examined on the terrain of its popular manifestations is that, from my perspective, the 'mass appeal' of a work does not detract from its value (especially today, when the world is facing global crises and issues that seem to challenge us to think and create in democratic, engaging, and accessible ways about our existential

situation)" (p. 53). Thus, the shared effort of the self-reflective attempt can be not only "the aestheticized conscience of the aesthetic" (p. 54) but also the essayized conscience of the ethical.

An important contribution is also the examination of the different modes in which the essayistic subject operates (pp. 58-60). It is noted that "as a consequence of the failures of the attempt to tell the whole truth about itself and its object," the subject itself "manifests as the error or failure of some expression in the 'symbolic order' of (cinematic) language" (p. 61). This section also provides a definition of "networked" essays—"mass modes of essayism" (p. 73), whose specificity is determined by their existence in the online space, viewed "as a unique shared world" (*ibid.*). The criticism of online essayism by Thomas Elsaesser is highlighted, according to which it "embodies a harmful regime of atomization, self-exploitation, and loss of (the possibility for) identity, self-determination, and freedom for the subject" (p. 75). For this author, "the networked essay (as a form) is a kind of commodity, the content of which (what enters commercial exchange) is ourselves" (*ibid.*). The ideas of Chris Wampole are also summarized, according to whom, although essayism may be "the talisman of our time" (p. 76), contemporary forms of "non-textual essayism" are increasingly driven by "empty egotism and an unwillingness or inability to commit to anything" (*ibid.*). Stefan Goncharov manages to avoid both the accusation against "the all-consuming capitalist imperative" and the temptations of "leftist melancholy," adopting instead a nuanced and open approach: "What is required is an analysis that does not lament the non-existent past of some unscathed subject, but one that considers what subjective experience can achieve today (despite all its presumed atomization)" (p. 78). This openness to experimentation, free from the baggage of a fixed ideology (though Badiou's ideology comes closest to one in the dissertation), is one of the dissertation's greatest strengths.

The **third** chapter examines numerous key works, connecting them with major theoretical frameworks, offering a division of the historical development of audiovisual essayism into retroactive, classical, and contemporary periods. Here, we enter the main topic of the dissertation—film and video essays. A vast number of examples are provided, and any attempt to summarize them will undoubtedly meet the same fate as the essay itself—overtaken by its own failure. I would like to highlight the role of montage (p. 92) and the specific task undertaken by audiovisual essays after World War II (p. 104). Well-presented are the theses that view the essay as a "phantasmatic screen" (after Lacan) against "the most monstrous dimensions of the human" (p. 106). It is through audiovisual essayism that the encounter between "the abyss of trauma" and "the work of memory" is mediated (p. 107).

This section also contains what is termed a "pedagogical excursion" (p. 119), as the dissertation revisits the theme of how the contemporary video essay "breaks the logic of purely poetic academic essayism" (p. 138). One of the many focal points is the Manifesto for Parametric

Videographic Criticism by film scholar Allan O'Leary, which combines the literary experiments of the Oulipo group, the Bataillean concept of transgression and ecstatic "expenditure of resources and knowledge," Alfred Jarry's notion of "pataphysics," and Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto. This complex and pretentious mix is skillfully critiqued by Stefan Goncharov, whose stance can be summarized with the following quote: "As curious, provocative, and even well-written as O'Leary's manifesto is, it turns audiovisual literacy and the essayism connected to it into a self-satisfied academic performance accessible only to an abstract international of privileged professors, eager to ludically practice and affirm the futility and uselessness of the humanities in the contemporary world" (p. 139). Preventing the humanities from "suicidal" practices that isolate them in their own self-satisfaction is perhaps one of the most important tasks of contemporary humanities scholars.

In the section titled "Review of Key Works," pieces such as *Television Delivers People* (1973) by Richard Serra and Carlotta Schoolman, *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue: Dreaming, Dreaming, Winning, Spending* (1982), *Local News Analysis* (1980) by Dara Birnbaum and Dan Graham, *Rock My Religion* (1982-84), *Single* (1979) and *One Image* (1983), *Theme Song* (1973) by Vito Acconci, *Her Story of Art* (1974) by Hermine Freed, *Reflections on the Birth of Venus* (1976) by Ulrike Rosenbach, *Good Night, Good Morning* (1976) by Joan Jonas, *Electronic Diary* (1984-96) by Lynn Hershman Leeson, and many others are analyzed, addressing themes like the role of television, the messages of feminism, and the narcissism of video as a medium, including Shigeo Kubota's thesis that "video is the vagina's revenge" (p. 165).

Chapter **four** introduces the idea of so-called "networked" essays (p. 258) and their modularity, where the effort to reconcile Badiou's theoretical tools (Being and Event) with those of Lev Manovich (*The Language of New Media*) is made. Particularly interesting are the interactions between Manovich's concepts of "database" and "spatial narrative" (the interface) and Badiou's notions of "encyclopedia of the situation" and "world" (the network). Early on, the chapter sets out to examine "the ways in which contemporary essayism stands out as a digital product from its analog audiovisual predecessors" (p. 176). Here, Stefan Goncharov adopts Manovich's criterion of "how a medium measures the world" (p. 177)—an idea combined with Badiou's sets (p. 178-179).

Badiou's emphasis on mathematics is applied to digital media, concluding that "mathematics is literally the 'science of being qua being' of the digital" (p. 180). Mathematics is connected to "the general measure of the digital," for which Stefan Goncharov states: "In a world where mathematics is ontology, it is such a powerful mediating technique—it records singularity

in the form of ones and zeros, and in return, allows these units to be read, thought, and used through some other representation of singularity" (p. 190).

On p. 195, a particularly important question is posed: "What would good artificial art look like?" Unfortunately, the mention of Jonas Cheka's name is accompanied by only a brief analysis (AI is also mentioned on pp. 233-234, but in a different context). This is unfortunate because, in my view, the questions of how artificial intelligence can generate art that possesses value and meaning, and how this art can be perceived and evaluated on par with human works, are critical questions for the future development of video essays. A detailed presentation and critical discussion of Cheka's arguments regarding the definition of "good" in the context of artificial art, and its relation to human standards of aesthetics and creativity, would be particularly interesting to me as a reader of the dissertation. Can AI-generated "critical" video essays be regarded as truly creative agents, or are they more like tools for art creation? Can AI be evaluated by the same criteria applied to human works—originality, impact on the viewer, and meaning-making—or must we seek new ways to interpret the value of AI-produced works? I believe raising these questions would enrich and further expand the horizon of the dissertation, incorporating some possible trajectories for the future of video essays and digital critique—a future that may be a dialogue between the human and the artificial.

Another important topic in this part of the dissertation is related to the role of animation in digital cinema (pp. 226-230) and the pairing of Badiou's notion of the seam with "the polemics and de-/re-montage" (p. 205). Stefan Goncharov is convinced that "if we want to understand one of the functions of contemporary digital attempts, we must point out which 'seams' the status quo of the cinematic situation today tries to conceal" (ibid.). Seams are the place of ghosts, the unsettling point of the unrepresentable, where different political forces (the seamstresses) meet. With the help of authors like Lacan, Jacques-Alain Miller, Jacques-Pierre Oudart, and of course Badiou, the dissertation reveals "the status quo of the cinematic situation" (p. 209), pointing out that "essayistic conformism tries (and fails) to adapt to the ways in which the status quo blindly subjugates it" (ibid.). The ideas of Laurent Forestier on photogenics and the "de-objectification" of cinematography (p. 210) and Laura Mulvey on the ways the viewer can be "ejected" from the film (p. 212) are also presented. The main problem of critique is identified: "even if the director truly intends to unseam (in this case) some of the concepts in the encyclopedia of a typical cinematic situation (logically and sequentially edited), they primarily do this for themselves and for those already sufficiently 'literate' to read (the gram/trail of) their gesture. In other words, even if the creator unseams (seeks subjects co-participatory in some aesthetic event), if their audience is more eager to seam (to conform to the status quo of cinematic representation), the

artistic choice is likely to remain (un)recognized and (un)interpreted" (pp. 215-216). The crisis of truth is, in fact, a crisis of literacy (p. 231).

Distinguishing as coextensive the two levels of "the signifying semiotics of the database" (p. 248) in the context of Lev Manovich's ideas: "cultural" and "computer" levels, Stefan Goncharov points out that "the ontological basis of the image can be altered (perhaps even eventually) through operations affecting only its surface" (p. 248). It is precisely in this part of the dissertation that the careful and consistent connection along the "Badiou-Manovich" axis is made, including through analyses of spatial narrative (p. 249), the editing of diegetic spaces (p. 252), and the process of investigation, capturing "the logic of decoding" (pp. 255-256).

The **conclusion** summarizes the ideas of the dissertation, beginning with a new definition of the essay, understood as an experiment and an ontological problem: "a peculiar (im)possibility, which manifests at the level of various media as an interval or gap between document and fiction, objective and subjective, science and art, critique and creativity" (p. 259). A significant emphasis is placed on the continuity between authors and generations, which ensures "the unfolding of (non-)human experience as a series of failures" (p. 261). Possible future developments are also indicated, related to the further exploration of key concepts from Lacanian film theory, such as the gaze, voice, and care (p. 263).

The Abstract lists seven contributions, of which I would highlight the fact that the dissertation represents the first detailed study of the audiovisual essay in the Bulgarian context (Contribution No. 1), applies Alain Badiou's philosophical framework to the question of audiovisual essayism (Contribution No. 2), and offers a comprehensive ontological theory of the essay, understood as an attempt at an event (Contribution No. 3). I would like to place special emphasis on the distinct pedagogical function of the essay (pp. 108, 119-127, 235-236, 260). In this regard, I fully support Stefan Goncharov's thesis that "the essayistic, conceived as an (un)ceasing struggle/polemics with the forces of representation (in the name of presentation and the unrepresented within it), requires the (sub)operations of pedagogy to attempt to teach the viewer how to read the images on the screen alongside the essayist (and long after the essayist is gone)" (pp. 217-218).

From the Originality Check Report for the thesis and the Statement regarding the plagiarism prevention procedure provided by the academic supervisor, as well as based on my own review of the content of the dissertation, it can be concluded that no plagiarism is present, and the work expresses the author's original ideas.

## **5. Critical commentary on the submitted thesis**



I have no critical remarks regarding the dissertation. However, I would like to raise the following questions for discussion:

How does the author envision the development of academic essayism and the pedagogical role of video essays in the specific context of academia in Bulgaria?

Is there a connection between contemporary essayism and fake news, and does the effect of the essay change in a world dominated by the idea of post-truth?

#### **6. Personal opinion about the candidate**

I do not know Stefan Vasilev Goncharov (Praskov). I have no joint publications with Stefan Vasilev Goncharov (Praskov).

#### **7. Conclusion**

The proposed dissertation and abstract meet the requirements of the Higher Education Act and its regulations. From the submitted documents, it can be concluded that Stefan Vasilev Goncharov (Praskov) meets the minimum national requirements for the educational and scientific degree "Doctor." The dissertation represents a contribution to the analysis and study of highly relevant issues concerning the ability of the contemporary video essay to provide productive critique in the digital age, and it possesses the necessary qualities for the author to be awarded the educational and scientific degree "Doctor." I vote in favor of awarding Stefan Vasilev Goncharov (Praskov) the degree of "Doctor" in professional field 2.1 "Philology" (Theory of Literature).

24.09.2024

**Signature:**

Prof. Stoyan Stavru