

## **Report**

Prof. Boyan Manchev, Doctor of Letters  
(New Bulgarian University)

on the PhD thesis

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

for the award of the scientific and educational degree “Doctor”

2.1. 2.2.1 Philology (Theory of Literature)

Department of Theory of Literature, Faculty of Slavic Philology

Sofia University

PhD candidate: Stefan Vasilev Goncharov (Praskov)

Academic Supervisor: Prof. Todor Hristov, PhD

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The thesis is 318 pages long. It consists of five chapters, including the introduction and the conclusion. The bibliography contains 198 titles in Bulgarian, English, French and German. The multimedia contains 189 titles of films, videos, etc. The annexed materials include 31 figures and images.

Due to the limitations of the genre, I will limit myself to an extended commentary on the metatheoretical and methodological dimensions of the thesis, as well as on a few issues. I will have to postpone substantive discussion of a number of details of the thesis's proposals for future exchanges.

I begin with a metatheoretical comment concerning the most general epistemological and institutional prism of the work. The main problem and question I face with respect to Stefan Goncharov's work transcends the work itself as far as its institutional framework is concerned. To what extent is it professionally justified 2.1. Philology and its corresponding research unit to be offered work on an audiovisual genre ("video essay") whose methodology is based on ontological philosophical theory?

I pose this question not so much rhetorically, insofar as it is clearly not within the scope of the thesis's institutional competence (but his reflections and comments on the matter are, of course, welcome), as to underline its importance and to try to argue for the chosen position in this public forum, all the more so as an external member of the scientific jury.

Obviously, the answers to this question have a counterfactual scope, i.e. they could be mutually exclusive, hence the conclusions based on them. In my answer, I am basing myself on the requirement of impartiality, objectivity, and critical distance on which scientific ethics must be based, without separating it from the imperative of critical thought, which has difficulty working with schematic taxonomies.

Insofar as the framework in question is institutionally legitimated, that is, insofar as it is a condition of the work itself, judgment on it should not substitute for judgment on the merits of the work itself. The condition in question is set and institutionally guaranteed by the scientific unit that has supported such a topic and such an approach. To the extent that I feel sympathetic to the principles espoused by the scientific unit that supported such an atypical I stand by them. For this

reason I adopt this metatheoretical disposition. My motive for endorsing this eccentric choice is the broad grasp of the young reflexive discipline of literary theory. I have never concealed my conviction that its origins, roots, and foundations cannot be divorced from philology and the history of literature, nor from linguistics, philosophy, and the social sciences, much less from art theory in general. This broad understanding undoubtedly transcends the often restrictive and unreflective requirements. I am not simply referring to contemporary ideas of interdisciplinarity or even transdisciplinarity, but I am referring to the conceptual and meaning core, respectively the forms of expression of humanities, and not only humanities, knowledge that precedes its current disciplinary discriminations. The genre of the essay is itself its expletive - are the fragments of Novalis, Kierkegaard or Nietzsche, as well as of Montaigne himself, literary or philosophical?

The above considerations motivate my answer to the question posed. In a scholarly environment in which contemporary experimental, radical and avant-garde, innovative approaches in philosophy and the arts are very rare, providing an opportunity for such work is significant in itself. At the same time, it places an additional responsibility on the candidate, the supervisor, and the research unit to carry out the opportunity to the required standard. And the demands placed on an experimental work are always higher insofar as, in eschewing established conventions, it takes certain risks. It has to propose sound alternative principles - even if they are dynamic, plastic, transformative. To put it bluntly, a thesis on the video essay should not run the risk of being essayistic (in the conventional sense of the term). (Perhaps the awareness of this rosy risk led the author to complex and unexpected and daring methodological decisions, which will be discussed shortly).

To conclude this metatheoretical introduction, I will point out that I applaud the courage of the Department of Literary Theory for deciding to allow the possibility of such work. Certainly, the PhD candidate could have eased the position of his research unit, and that of his jury, if he had not simply flagged the fact of the absence of an "unwritten thesis" (I refer to subsection 2.3. The Narrowing of the Field, or "About an Unwritten Thesis"), but had made an even more consistent effort to ensure a smooth transition between the question of the literary and philosophical essay and the film and video essay. Yet he had the intellectual honesty to expose the difficulty he faced and the need to rethink the direction of the research. On the other hand, the work's introduction attests to the candidate's acute sensitivity to these metatheoretical issues, as well as his fluency in navigating the described problem field and mastering its metatheoretical dimensions. In it, the author also offers his working and essentially philosophical definition of the essay: "This thesis, however, will

not rely on such a 'relativist' strategy, but will attempt to speculatively delineate the amorphous and mutable boundaries of the essayistic, conceived as a 'universalizable' set of operations and techniques for saying 'almost everything about almost anything'. In other words, I will be concerned with how experience (might) work, not with what it necessarily is (in general, I do not think such a question can be answered)" (p. 28).

Either way, what is presented is a work on an audiovisual genre that attempts to offer an abstract philosophical theory as a methodological basis for the study. From this point of view, while commenting on the institutional framework of the work, it is worth noting that two of the three professional fields I represent are precisely 2.3. Philosophy and 8.1. Art Theory, which undoubtedly seals my task as a member of the scientific jury and motivates my agreement to join it.

Henceforth begins my substantive analysis of this peculiar, unexpected, and apparently heteronomous work to the usual institutional framework, and to a large extent to the epistemological regime of literary theory.

### **The Theoretical Prism**

The study is based on a peculiar and unexpected theoretical prism, Alain Badiou's ontological project. Insofar as I introduced Badiou's philosophy into the Bulgarian philosophical context at the turn of the century, I cannot help but rejoice in this fact. (It should be noted here that the presence of Badiou's philosophy in Bulgaria is more significant than the thesis makes it out to be - but this is contextual knowledge that was obviously difficult for the PhD student to access. ) I will neither discuss Badiou's philosophy here, which for me is the most serious contemporary philosophical opponent worth the effort, nor will I comment on work on Badiou himself, since the thesis is not concerned with Badiou's philosophical project, but introduces its use as a methodological tool for the study of a contemporary audiovisual genre.

In any case, Badiou's use is unexpected, in some sense heretical; at the same time, it fulfils its main function, namely to extract and clarify unexpected features of the object under study. Thus,

what at first sight appears as methodological improvisation begins to operate convincingly precisely by going into the depth of the field under study, performing conceptual transfers no less curious than those performed by a number of speculative theories in present times. I should note that the transfers that Badiou himself makes from mathematical logic to poetry and the arts are no less surprising.

From this point of view, the methodology of the work can be described as hyperbatonic, in an etymological rather than a strictly rhetorical sense. A hyperbatonic methodology is probably no less legitimate, and certainly more gratifying, than the slow and synthetic-not contributing any synthetic element methodological or quasi-methodological rhythm of applied and not based on rigorous or any methodology research with which we are unfortunately all surrounded. In stark contrast to the tendencies to standardize academic (re)production, Stefan Goncharov's work provides a number of examples of theoretical imagination, of speculative invention. Certainly, if the young scholar were to set his sights on publishing his monograph, I believe there are possible additions, adaptations, structural, methodological and stylistic improvements from which the work would only benefit. I am prepared to make a number of recommendations in this respect, for which I shall have no space here, and which do not affect the judgment of the work as it stands.

However, the fact that a philosophical project whose aesthetic and cultural dimensions are traditional, not to say conservative, has been used to explore the contemporary genre of the video essay remains difficult for me to explain, notwithstanding Badiou's political radicalism. Badiou himself has repeatedly said that "real" art, by and large, ends with Mallarmé; at one point he even calls contemporary art "catnip," an incomprehensible expression that offends in more ways than one.

I will pose a question concerning the theoretical dimension and methodology of the thesis:

Considering the ontological and philosophical sweep with which the thesis approaches its subject, and noting that the categories of *Experience (Essay)* and *Event* are brought out in the subtitle of the thesis, I would like to ask the following. Would you seriously consider avoiding the split between the French and English word, essay and experience, and name the genre you are discussing, *video experience* [*video-opit*]? Certainly, the word essay has acquired a terminological genre value; at the same time, the ontological perspective of Goncharov's proposal should lead, it seems to me, to suggestions for a new experimental vocabulary. The thesis clearly hints at a

possibility along these lines: “In the present thesis, the essay (conceived as an experiment) was posed as an ontological problem – as a kind of (im)possibility that is incarnated at the level of various media as an in-between or as a yawn between document and fiction, objective and subjective, science and arts, criticism and creativity, and so on” (p. 261).

### **Video Essay and the Idea for Critique**

The main part of the thesis, the study of the video essay, demonstrates exceptional knowledge in the field of film history and theory, video, and also video art and digital arts. This is where the critical distance becomes more difficult for me as an author - the reader-reviewer meets the more reader-contributor. I was very surprised and euphoric at the discovery that a hitherto unknown young scholar was exploring a number of artists who have been a long-standing passion of mine - more artistic than research, shared with my close associates in Bulgaria and abroad. Many of them, after all, have also been the subject of my classes with art historians and art students in Berlin and Sofia – from Hans Richter and Benjamin Christensen to Chris Marker, Eric Rohmer, Jean Rouch and Chantal Ackerman. A particularly pleasant surprise was the inclusion of visual and performance artists and even choreographers such as Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, Dan Graham, Martha Rosler, some of whom are even friends and acquaintances of mine. In this respect Goncharov’s research is undoubtedly groundbreaking and has only 2-3 serious analogues in Bulgarian art theory. I am familiar with the vast majority of the film and video artists included in the corpus, but, admittedly, I do not know half of the authors included in the literature on the video essay, including the most important of them, as far as I understand, the originator of the concept, Timothy Corrigan. This part, for me, approaches the highest requirements for a modern theory of the arts, a philosophy of the arts, and a theory of quasi- or hyper- or para-literary genres transforming the literary-philosophical essay.

Certainly, the theses of writers such as Lev Manovich have become a quasi-normative convention today, but their use in the thesis is far from convention. Perhaps the most significant dimension of the use of Badiou’s ontological propositions is that through them the study succeeds in breaking a number of theoretical models for dealing with visual works in the present. The candidate summarizes in his conclusion, "The aim was to show that operational homologies are present between Manovich’s notions of recording and quantification, database and transcoding, with

Badiou's notions of presentation and representation, encyclopedia of situation and world-appearance. " (c. 264)

The limitations of the genre do not allow me to set out extensive observations, so I will limit myself to questions that do not set out so much to critique the theses of the thesis as to stimulate the candidate to clarify them during the defense and possibly sharpen them further.

My first question is genealogical. Since I am not familiar with Corrigan's research and am not entirely clear on the principle of his genealogy, I would like to question how it relates to the attempt at cinema-truth (*cinéma vérité*) that tied Dziga Vertov's *Cinema Eye* to the *cinéma vérité* project of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, to which Chris Marker and even Godard were at one point particularly close. In this respect, I agree with the thesis's statement: 'In the same way, I interpret Manovich's reading of *The Man with the Movie Camera* as an (essayistic) film that "decodes the **world**" (and its status quo) in a series of experimental shots (choices) that transform the "database" [encyclopedia], "usually a static and objective form," into something "dynamic and subjective."' ' (p. 253) Let us not forget, however, that Vertov's radical project was to create an 'absolute' language through which objective reality would precisely express itself. Here we should also recall Benjamin's famous thesis of the *optical unconscious of reality*, which I suggest was formulated in direct relation to Vertov's work.

My main question concerns the critical perspective of the video essay and especially its political dimensions. This question is directly related to the relationship between the video essay and the idea of critique, as outlined in the very title of the thesis. I will motivate the question by briefly outlining the perspective in which I myself consider the artistic and cultural processes under analysis.

It seems to me that, in general, the radically critical dimension of the genre, namely the political economy dimension, remains in the background, or even almost entirely absent. This dimension is central to Rancière's analyses, which are directly concerned with cinema and the aesthetic political potentiality of art. Undoubtedly, after the age of revolutionary utopias, it seems that the idea of a transformative function of artistic practice has also been devalued; in the digital age of simulations and simulacrum, the time has come for the uncritical fiction of lifestyle.

Stefan Goncharov has an awareness of the political dimension of the art-media form he discusses. The young researcher makes the following clarification: "I share Comolli and Narboni's sentiment, but I would paraphrase it in a key that is not exclusively Marxist and anti-capitalist, but

'more generally cooperative' - every work/product of art (to one degree or another) conformistically reflects and/or critically refracts the 'state of affairs' (the status quo) that conditions its appearance" (pp. 70-71). Undoubtedly so. But isn't this position structurally akin to the situationists' radical proposal to attack the spectacle in order to open up a new possibility for situations of freely manifest existence? This raises the question of the relation of the cinematic essay to situationist practice.

In this respect, the critical line defended by Goncharov does not entirely correspond to the line of the opponent of the critical tradition, Alain Badiou. In general, and surprisingly, the radical political (Marxist, Maoist) roots of Badiou's philosophy are muted, at the expense of the forward-looking and undeniably significant for Badiou notions of the situationist-hated politically conservative Catholic Jacques Lacan. (The thesis apparently makes use of the English-language version of Badiou that made the French philosopher, long neglected and essentially unknown outside France, a global philosophical name – namely, the translation by the Belgian philosopher Bruno Bosteels, which precisely exposes and contextualizes Badiou in the Anglo-Saxon world in terms of his radical political theory and practice).

From the perspective of the radical political and Marxist paradigm, it seems to me particularly important to stress the relation of the video essay to the experimental cinematic works of the "cinema-hooligan" Guy Debord. Situationists, and Debord in particular, think of artistic practice as political action, hence what the thesis calls the "polemical didacticism of Debord's essays" (p. 109) is in fact a project of active intervention in the social, political-economic fabric - in which they approach the tradition of Dziga Vertov, of *cinéma-vérité*, of the early revolutionary attempts of Chris Marker, and to some extent, with qualifications, of Varda, Godard and other members of the Rive Gauche group. Moreover – a theoretical note – the structural relationship between the notions of experience and event and situation seem to me to be indisputable.

And the actual dimension of this question: what is the actual politics of the use of the video essay – today, in the age of media imperialism? In an age of totalised lifestyles that reduce the very forms of experience and life to commodities and automate events, reducing them to hyperbolised and tautological representation, does amateur video-essay take the vacated place of critique – and not critique as a stronghold of elitist bourgeois culture, but as a form of asserting critical possibilities for new forms of experience and event? It seems to me that a political analysis of the aesthetic not only by Rancière but also by Alain Badiou would be useful in this respect: how is it



possible to appear in the event-truth in an age of totalised media spectacle presenting itself as an overproduction of (pseudo-)events? On the other hand, if we assert the idea of a regime of the true, are we not re-entering a Platonic inertia (that of Badiou?) – and if so, how do we draw a criterion between the true and the untrue? In other words, what is the criterion of a new critique that moves away from the idea of critique – but also of political action?

### **Recommendations**

In addition to those mentioned above, a few technical recommendations. It is clear that it is absurd to expect that the object of study can be expanded indefinitely; it is also clear that the author has made a significant effort to limit it methodologically and pragmatically. However, it seems to me that it is significant, in terms of the direction of the thesis, that more serious attention be paid to both Situationist cinema and the lineage of *Cinéma vérité*, in particular the large-scale and highly influential work of Jean Rouch.

It would be useful for the thesis student to master a level of French that would allow him or her to read or at least make conceptual inquiries into the work of the philosopher central to his or her research, especially since this is the language of the most important debate surrounding cinema in the preceding decades, and of the major figures of the cinema and video essay according to the genealogy proposed in the thesis. It is in relation to French that I will point out very minor linguistic inaccuracies: the legendary critic, theorist and ideologue of the New Wave is not named Serge *Denis*, but Serge *Daney*; Jean *Cayrol*, and the like.

I strongly recommend that the dissertant, as well as all his peers, avoid the Englishisms/Americanisms that are nowadays common in the semi-literate media - parasitic usages that are unreflectively imposed in the Bulgarian language, including at the syntactic level. E.g. in Bulgarian "address" is not synonymous with "refer to" or "discuss". In Bulgarian, issues are discussed, not addressed (not to mention that the English usage is also an inaccurate translation of the French).

And last but not least, there are Bulgarian studies of video that would benefit from an emancipatory treatment of the Bulgarian theoretical context. I note in passing at least the works of Krasimir Terziev (*Re-Compositions*), Boryana Rossa, Vasil Markov (*Time and Video Image*), Ani Vaseva (chapter on Situationism and youtube-formats in *Theatre and Truth*).

## **Conclusion**

The thesis is an original, complex, speculative, inventive study. The thesis shows admirable erudition and qualities for theoretical hypotheses, interpretations of specific works and generalizations. The work is not only groundbreaking for Bulgarian art theory, but also - something rare for Bulgarian theoretical and research texts in the arts - fits into contemporary trends and debates in its field.

The work is written in complex language, at times obscure due to its complexity, but academically correct. The abstract and scholarly contributions (not included in the main body of the thesis) are adequate to the tasks and results of the research. The extensive bibliography fully corresponds to the current state of the scientific field. The attached list of audiovisual works and multimedia catalogue, as well as the visual material systematized in the attached figures, deserve admiration, both for their scope and precision, and for their adequate layout.

All this motivates my high evaluation of the thesis *The Video Essay and the Idea of Criticism in the Digital Age: Essay and Event*. For this reason, I express my positive opinion for awarding the degree of Doctor of Education and Research in the field 2.1. Philology (Theory and History of Literature – Theory of Literature) to Stefan Praskov.