Opinion for the dissertation *The Video Essay and the Idea of Critique in the Digital Age: Endeavour and Event* by Stefan Vassilev Goncharov (Praskov) with scientific supervisor Prof. Todor Hristov

The dissertation with which Stefan Praskov applies for PhD degree in the professional field 2.1. Philology - Theory of Literature consists of 318 computer pages - introduction, three chapters, conclusion, bibliography, multimedia with films, videos, etc., and 31 figures and images as an appendix.

The specific focus of the thesis is the video essay, and the main conceptual problem – the essayistic, conceived as an attempt/endeavour at critique, and its ontology. The first working definition we find in the very beginning of the text, namely "a subjective practice that unfolds as an intervention or self-refractive reflection in the public space. More precisely, it is a reworking operation of the available that produces its subject in the form of attempt, experiment or judgment, that is, of *essai*, in some "shared human" domain (such as art or politics)" (p. 3). The essayistic is further conceptualized as a bundle of operations or procedures, namely critique, curation and pedagogy (p. 7) and as an inbetweenness, a void, a boundary (p. 4). The conceptual framework of the study is constructed relying mainly on Alain Badiou's ideas and concepts, some psychoanalytic notions and different insights from film theory.

The analysis consists of three thematic layers. Each contains an impressive wealth of information, a careful tracing of the main line of thinking the essay as an endeavour at truth, generally speaking, and a fruitful dialogue with the authors used. In this opinion - as this genre both allows and demands conciseness - I will address some selected key points. The high quality of the work further allows me not to follow all the steps taken by the author and provide detailed comments, but rather to converse with him.

The first thematic layer - the second chapter of the work - aims to introduce the "world of the essay", thematizing its aforementioned negative nature of an inbetweenness between already settled categories - of science and art, prose and poetry, fact and fiction, the private and the public, drama and epic (Summary, p. 6). The ideas of key authors such as Bense and Adorno are reconstructed, and through a number of other important names such as Montaigne, Lukács, Barthes, Lacan, Huxley, etc. the field of the essayistic is further complicated and infused with meaning.

The following characteristics are highlighted as crucial: "1) *the essay is not*, except in the act of writing-experimentation, 2) the 'subject of experience' (the essayist) plays a key role because his or her self is at least one of the subjects of the essay 3) the essayistic is asystematic and 'contrary' to any ideological/illusory 'achieved' truth, and 4) this is one of the reasons it is critical (Summary, p. 8). What follows is a historical overview of important moments in the history of the essayistic to arrive at the contemporary proliferation of audio-visual endeavours - in their new, digital, forms. This brings us to one of the main stakes of the dissertation, namely the critique of 'high' essayism and the affirmation of 'low' essayism. The latter is a product of the massification – it has become "omnivorous, popular, and accessible," a "quasi-institution that, while entertaining us, it in effect sorts, synthesizes, and processes vast amounts of information, making it more accessible to millions of people," or "curates the present" (pp. 43-44). On the other hand, the spokespersons of "high", academic, essayism see this as a threat that could undermine "the special status [of the essay] in cinematic history as an avant-garde form that thoroughly and provocatively explores the conditions of cinema, the contingency of documentary, and the pervasiveness of fiction" (Summary, p. 17). Put differently, here we see the traditional fear that massification leads to a loss of the "heretical potential of the essay," of its emancipatory ambitions, non-

conformism, subversiveness. In this conflict, the dissertation argues strongly for the democratization of essayism since high and low essayism can be united through the refusal of a positive definition, through thinking endeavours as imminent failure (p. 84).

This, in itself, "high" resolution of the problem seems convincing and would appeal to any reader who already prefers democratization and the blurring of boundaries between low and high, masses and elite. On the other hand, however, if we distance ourselves from this high level talk, should we problematize and worry about the effects it (might) produce even if, ontologically speaking, it is always a failure? That is, can an endeavour be both always failing but still having other effects on the world that actually appear to be unintentionally *successful*? The author seems inclined to answer such a question in the affirmative, if we judge from the following comment on p. 83. "such channels vividly demonstrate that the separable qualities of essayism open the way, with equal effectiveness, to the idea of a 'transnational community' and to absolutely anti-cosmopolitan ways of thinking and operating.' Later, on p. 117, we see an attempt to reconcile the dimensions of failure and of having agency in the world: 'even in their most conformist or reactionary dimensions, [we can look for] the (im)possible attempt to produce new truths and shared worlds'. And here the question is, most simplistically formulated, are there - in a normative sense - "good" and "bad" essays in terms of the direction in which they curate the present and act in the world? Clearly, we can't say that the "high" ones are necessarily the "good" ones and the mainstream - those that have more potential to be "bad". But if we define the essayistic purely operationally as the thesis proposes, where does normativity come from? After all, what to do with the "bad" essays - the conformist and reactionary ones?

The second thematic block - the third chapter of the text - is a history of audiovisual essayism in which Stefan Praskov distinguishes three periods - retroactive (until the end of World War II), classical (from the late 1940s until the advent of digital media) and contemporary. The whole chapter is extremely informative, very well structured, interestingly written and presented. Here we also see a return to the theme of the democratic stakes of audiovisual essayism, this time through a critique of the confinement of this practice in the academy in the form of university workshops. Such confinement (pp. 135-136) transforms it "from an accessible critical practice into an exotic new product of the 'academic avant-garde' that not everyone can access." In this context, we see a relatively extensive critical commentary on the notion of affordance. According to the dissertation, such a focus (pp. 137-138) motivates "an overtly unreflective educational practice ... that perpetuates 'doing the permissible' and 'producing the possible'". As I understand this, affordances are thought of as limitations and therefore as a confinement in the available. Since here I do not have the space to comment in more detail, I will only mention that the notion of affordance enjoys intensive interdisciplinary attention for quite some time, and a number of authors apply it beyond the spheres of psychology and design, interpreting it in a positive sense, as something, that the environment and the material objects offer us (offerings), as resources, as participating in a contextual and very specific mutiality and intimacy that grows between us - as embodied beings - and the things we come into contact with, or the materiality of the world. One recently published study, for example, applies the concept precisely in the context of critique, activism and care, formulating the idea of "activist affordances" (Documaci, A. 2023. *Activist affordances*. Duke UP). It seems to me that if conceived in a similar way, this notion might be seen not as a threat but as an additional conceptual tool that might be of use in the section of the dissertation on stitching, for example.

The third thematic block - or chapter four - examines the theoretical-philosophical paradigm that underpins the research (Summary, p.32) unfolding Badiou's conceptual framework, foregrounding its media-theoretical stakes and commenting it against Lev Manovich's ideas. Again, we have a precise and

highly reflexive application and dialogue with the authors used, and I consider section 4.5 to be an undisputed contribution of the dissertation.

In relation to this chapter I would like to highlight, simply as a comment, the need, in my view, for a more reflexive treatment of the idea of mathematics as ontology. In contrast to the extraordinary critical reflexivity that Stefan Praskov demonstrates throughout his text, regarding Badiou's use of mathematics, it is somehow absent. This is understandable insofar as, as he says (p. 181), "this emphasis on mathematics is one of the main reasons I chose Badiou for my analysis of the digital world... His 'Platonic realism' implies that we inhabit a strictly formalized reality woven of mathematical objects, which when it comes to the ontology of digital media, seems to me irrefutable."

First, it should be noted that the claim that ontology is mathematics does not mean that being itself is mathematical - this conflates the notion of ontology, which means discourse on being, with the being itself to which that discourse refers. Platonism, in relation to mathematics, says that mathematical objects exist independently of human consciousness, language, practices, not that the world as such is mathematical "in its essence".

Second, and more generally, I think that the direct use of mathematics in the humanities requires at least signaling that the author has an idea of the problematic nature of such a move. Put another way, it's not that such a use could and should be banned, but it must be shown - at least in my view - that the criticisms and skepticism of it are taken into account - even if they are subsequently discounted or deemed irrelevant in the particular context. The fact that Lacan, Badiou or Agamben are inspired by mathematics does not mean that there is no problem in such use. There is no need here to go all the way back to Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont's (1998) or Richard Dawkins' very famous critiques of such uses of mathematics by postmodern authors, because it can be argued that this type of critique is not entirely intellectually honest either. But the question of how far results formulated in strictly formal systems can be seamlessly transferred into completely different fields, and whether they are no more than analogies or metaphors, I think is absolutely valid. And this applies to Russell's paradox, Gödel's theorems, set or category theory, Mandelbrot's fractals, and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle - all these being favorite protagonists of social scientists and humanities scholars. The least that needs to be kept in mind is that there is no consensus on the ontology of mathematics itself - Platonism is only one option, and the fact that Badiou's theory works solely under this interpretation, shows, in my opinion, the limited validity of the conclusions drawn. This is why Badiou criticizes the constructivism/intuitionism of Poincaré, Brower and Heyting for example - such a view of mathematics just doesn't work for him. In this sense, it seems to me incorrect to speak of "mathematical arguments" (p. 23) in favor of Badiou's work; rather, the mathematical arguments are accommodated to serve his already formulated theory. Of course, there is nothing wrong to make analogies or use metaphors - I am convinced that the humanities should be free, including to abuse "sacred cows" as mathematics and the natural sciences - but we should use with caution the notion that it "proves" - strictly speaking - anything about being, subjectivity, absence, void, revolution, etc.

What I've said so far falls entirely in the genre of a dialogue with this really mature study, from which I've learned a lot, enjoyed reading, and hope to see it published. I will therefore reiterate the obvious, namely that the thesis demonstrates unequivocally that a remarkable job has been done, both in terms of information accumulation and serious reflection. The skills of precise analytical work, effective application of and productive dialogue with relevant theoretical traditions, and critical reflection, including sharp self-reflection, are clearly evident. In this sense, the research conducted is an evidence

for an undeniable research potential. Thus, my opinion is highly positive and I strongly recommend voting in favour of receiving the degree "Doctor of Philosophy" of Stefan Goncharov (Praskov).

October 25, 2024
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