

## OPINION

by Petya Alexandrova Alexandrova

Professor and Doctor of Sciences in field 8.4. "Theatre and Film Art"

on obtaining Doctoral education and scientific degree in professional field 8.4 "Theatre and Film Art" by Antonia Milcheva, a PhD student in "Film Studies, Cinema Art and Television" at the Department of Cinema, Advertising and Show Business at NBU

Antonia Milcheva's dissertation entitled *The Feature Films of Rangel Valchanov - Transformations of Authenticity* fits into the trend of searching for an original and individual approach in the field of research of the bright figures of Bulgarian feature cinema history. The dissertation contains 139 pages of main text and is comprised of an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion. A bibliography and other sources used follow the conclusion.

The introduction outlines the parameters of the topic. Antonia Milcheva immediately "takes the bull by the horns"; she begins by specifying what is meant by authenticity in feature filmmaking and where it overlaps, intertwines or distinguishes itself from realism, objectivity, "transparent directing" and truthfulness. The subject and object of research are Rangel Valchanov's films from socialist times. The task is to trace how the balance between artistic integrity and style is realized in each particular film in historical sequence.

The limitations that Antonia Milcheva sets herself are two: the study is limited to Rangel Valchanov's feature films only and more specifically those made in the period until the changes in 1989. I accept this narrowing as a motivated stance of the PhD student although I would have liked the topic to be considered in his overall oeuvre.

It is difficult to refrain from rehashing what the PhD thesis covers chapter by chapter as specific analyses of films, individual scenes or performances of roles are so insightful and thorough that they call to be rehashed. In these cases, one notices the personal bias of where Antonia Milcheva sees the artistic achievements in Rangel Valchanov's films. Among my favorites are the review of how objects are used in *On the Small Island*, the final episode of *First Lesson*, the description of the character in *The Inspector and the Night* which is not in noir style, the overlap of character and authentic figure in *With Love and Tenderness*, to name a few.

I will hereby summarize the PhD student's achievements, which I think lie in several directions:

1. The very choice of Rangel Valchanov and the authenticity theme, which are neither topical nor aesthetically modern; they are not obvious dissertation choices for someone who is not a contemporary of the director;

2. Demonstrated in-depth knowledge of Rangel Valchanov's films and their detailed examination and analysis;

3. Refraction of the peculiar directorial style through the prism of ideology, censorship and socialist realism;

4. Ability to place Rangel's films in the context of world processes;

5. Skilful interweaving of neorealism and its elements with Bulgarian cinema in general and specifically in *On the Small Island* and *The First Lesson*;

6. Choosing the chronological approach which is the "cleanest" one yet often unsusceptible to interpretation; without ignoring less than brilliant directorial achievements or glossing over them for the convenience of pre-conceived propositions;

7. A broad interdisciplinary approach: the research combines artistic, creative, political and general cultural fields.

Noteworthy **scholarly contributions** of the text:

1. The analysis of the authenticity concept in relation to cinema and specifically to filmmaking, set against the background of the understandings of authenticity of major representatives of author cinema;

2. Tracing the development and variations in the filming of non-actors in the films of Rangel Valchanov;

3. The constant inclusions from literature (Georgi Markov, Valery Petrov, Czeslaw Milosz, Anna Švirčinská) that originally crisscross the analytical approach with poetry.

I would also like to point out the fine structuring of the text. Specialized literature is duly and correctly cited; archives and transcripts have been used as well as specialized print media, some historical studies and analyses, academic literature related to Rangel Valchanov's place in Bulgarian cinema.

As a drawback I would point expendable lengthiness which the dissertee falls victim to. For example, it seems to me unnecessary to explain again and again the story of the reaction of Bulgarian writers to the Solzhenitsyn case. Sometimes the framework of the object under study, namely the films in their aesthetic entirety, gets lost and the text strays into more general ideological reflections on the time in which they were made, particularly when referring to documents. It is as if the doctoral student is not secure enough in her own reasoning and resorts to the safety of authorities. Having demonstrated a good knowledge of world cinema of Rangel Valchanov's time, she rarely places it in the Bulgarian film context, as is usually expected.

**Personal qualities of the author:**

My first impressions of Antonia Milcheva are in her capacity as director of several short films - *Linda*, *Dragon's Wing*, *Ginka*. I immediately liked the lack of ostentatious spectacle and the search for action. What the films have in common is a female perspective, a delicacy and a marked attitude to injury.

In her capacity as a colleague of mine at NBU, I could say that her character and professional behaviour reflects the traits displayed in her directing; there is this respectful and attentive attitude towards people she works with, especially evident to me when writing thesis reviews. As Georgi Dyulgerov's assistant in the master classes, she is of particular service to students with her specific and detailed guidance. She exudes modesty sometimes even bordering on shyness, and a dedication to cinema and the cinema cause at NBU, especially since she also took over the seminars showing and discussing films, unfortunately interrupted by the pandemic.

**Conclusion.** To sum up, I consider the dissertation in its entirety, its conclusions, propositions, examples and analyses, to be a meaningful text which gives me every reason to evaluate it as a meritable independent study and to propose to the members of the scientific panel **to award Antonia Milcheva doctoral education and scientific degree in field 8.4 Theatre and Film Art.**

Sofia, March 15th 2022

Sincerely:

Prof. Petya Alexandrova, DSc