

REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Docho Bodzhakov on dissertation for the award of educational and scientific degree "Doctor " in the field of higher education, Professional field. 8. Theatre and Film Art, Scientific specialty 05.08.03.Film Studies, Cinema Art and Television

Doctoral student: Antonia Milcheva

Scientific advisor: prof. Prof. Georgi Dyulgerov

Topic: "The Feature Films of Rangel Valchanov - Transformations of Authenticity"

I have been disparaging about a number of dissertations I had to read lately, all written in a boring, science-like language, full of hollow phrases, naked pretensions and tiresomely familiar judgments, the rehashing of which makes no sense. Which is why I was genuinely surprised when I was given Antonia Milcheva's text. It turns out that it is possible to write in a simple and understandable way, with clearly posed problems and fascinating reflections on them. I am aware that the readability of a doctoral thesis does not count as a scientific contribution, but for me, accurate expression is more than a serious achievement. I was also impressed by something else. I had the privilege of knowing Rangel Valchanov, I had met him and talked with him, I have watched his films, I have learned from them in my own way. I thought that I would hardly be surprised by facts and circumstances related to Valchanov's personality, a significant figure for our cinema. Yet Antonia Milcheva's dissertation did surprise me. When I finished reading it, I experienced one of the rare pleasures of not only recalling things I knew but also learning new ones as well.

It is clear from the overall content of the dissertation that Antonia Milcheva has done very good preliminary preparation and that she had commenced working on the topic with clear goals and a corresponding scientific toolkit. One could approach Rangel Valchanov's diverse work from different perspectives. Antonia Milcheva has chosen authenticity as the key to making sense of his film world. She has framed her research on the director's works from the so-called "socialist period", i.e. everything created by him in the time until 1989. And this is no accident. For in the said historical period, the problem of authenticity is in constant collision with the dominant ideology in art. Achieving true authenticity on screen is a kind of resistance

of the artist to the dogmatism of the time. By presumption, authenticity in cinema is neither a device nor a means of expression; it is rather an opportunity, a mark of style, a conscious choice of dramaturgical medium, of vision, of acting presence, and not least of all, of message.

The main research method employed by Antonia Milcheva is the scientific analysis of the works of the object of study. This analysis is not essayistically cinematic, but professionally directorial. Films are examined with a clear focus, i.e. how a certain directorial intention is being realized through the handling of the means of expression. Specific circumstances are explored dynamically, on the fly, with the doctoral student focusing on the synthesis of different dramaturgical forms through which a sense of verisimilitude (truthfulness, primordially, genuineness) is achieved. Rangel Valchanov's creative path is portrayed as an upward spiral, in whose curves authentic time and human passions chase each other. I find important the fact that the creative search of this director is not presented in a detached disconnected manner but is rather examined against the background of world film processes. The doctoral student's reflections are exposed in the context of what is happening mainly in European cinema; analogies are sought with the achievements of leading figures in this cinema.

As early as the introduction of her scientific work Antonia Milcheva opens widely the boundaries of the concept of authenticity which far goes beyond its everyday sense to authenticity in human relations and in the conflicts of depicting historical time. The problems of authenticity become a semantic axis around which the PhD student develops her reflections on the stages of Rangel Valchanov's work, on the purposeful and conscious evolution of his means of expression in the series of films under consideration. These films demonstrate an interesting genre diversity. From typical anti-fascist dramas, the director goes through films with criminal plots, through social dramas to philosophical parables and grotesques; he even authors a comedy musical to construct his own world, marked by artistic conventionality and innuendo.

Antonia Milcheva has addressed the works chronologically structuring this genre diversity into four periods looking for characteristic narrative or aesthetic similarities of the films from each period. Thus, the four chapters of the scientific work, which fill its substantive part, have taken shape quite organically. In order to appreciate the contributions contained in the doctoral student's work, we must also follow the journey of Rangel Valchanov's films. I will try not to retell, but only to analyze the author's reflections, arguments and propositions. It is noteworthy that Antonia Milcheva approaches the different thematic chapters with a

flexible synthetic research methodology; in some chapters this methodology is distinctly theoretical, in others highly inductive, even empirical. Conclusions are always based on a sufficient number of scientific facts and problems are addressed through clear and convincing research criteria.

In order to create a true context of the historical time in which Rangel Valchanov commenced his artistic career, the first chapter of the dissertation briefly discusses socialist realism - the dominant method of creating art at the time. On the other hand there is neorealism, presented as its counterpoint, i.e. a free creative method developed powerfully in post-war Europe and based on a new cinematic language and the search for ultimate veracity in the depiction of human life. This turns out to be an important parallel. For from his directorial debut Rangel Valchanov will be torn between the obligation to fit into the schemes of socialist realism and his inner attraction to the freedom of spirit that neorealism offers. Such ambivalence will permeate the great director's entire oeuvre from here on - with all the resulting highs, compromises and momentary lows. Antonia Milcheva has captured this very precisely in her analyses of *On the Small Island*, *First Lesson* and *The Sun and the Shadow*. She has done justice to cinematic innovation and the breaking of the canon, to the attempt to take over this canon from within, to fertilize it with a new aesthetic that brings the viewer closer to the human essence of the screen characters. I agree with Antonia Milcheva's position that in the three films mentioned above Rangel Valchanov (together with the screenwriter Valeri Petrov) found his own formula for integrity in art - the possibility of remaining faithful to the truth without making humiliating compromises with censorship.

The director will develop and refine this formula in his future films and it will become something of a trademark of his filmmaking. His sympathizers will welcome his Aesopian language, his enemies will frowningly decry him as an artist bypassing ideology. There will be confessions and devastations, rewards and punishments. But Rangel Valchanov will survive and move on.

While the first chapter deals with the so-called "anti-fascist films" in Rangel Valchanov's work, the second chapter brings together titles dominated by 1960s modernity, a new subject territory with new directorial challenges. Without explicitly highlighting it, the PhD student is aware that Rangel Valchanov's frequent genre-switching is not so much due to a directorial curiosity or search for something different and unmade, but a search for another aesthetic refuge where the combination of constraint and freedom will work painlessly.

I was interested to see how Antonia Milcheva found the theme of authenticity as a common intersection in the films of director Rangel Valchanov's next period - she discusses these in chapter two; the films in question being *The Inspector and the Night*, *The Wolf*, and *Aesop*. What unites them, according to the PhD student, is the existential loneliness in the characters of the protagonists of the stories. I share this opinion. Indeed, both the unheroic criminal inspector from *The Inspector and the Night* and the positively fair schoolmaster from *The Wolf* and the mythologized *Aesop* of the same name are obvious loners. They suffer shipwrecks in their efforts to achieve truth and justice in a reality stifled by negative phenomena. And it is the achieved authenticity of the characters and their surroundings that helps the viewer come to the conclusion that the society in which these three films are set is flawed by default; it cannot be ennobled or repaired, it must be replaced.

As a necessary transition to the third chapter of her scholarly work, Antonia Milcheva examines the genesis and singularity of the 1960s film phenomenon called the "Czech miracle." She presents the latter as the fruit of reformist processes in the socio-political life of a socialist country, similar and yet very different from Bulgaria. Czechoslovakian filmmakers took to an approach in films which wanted to prove that reality should be subject to honest interpretation, that "communism with a human face" was possible. In order to integrate the personality of Rangel Valchanov into the challenges of this process and to explain to us the relatively unknown "Czech" period of his work, Antonia Milcheva devotes sufficient space to the films *A Face Under a Mask* and *Chance*. But she seems to have difficulty fitting them into the theme of authenticity, which is easy to understand. In these films authenticity is somehow blurred by the conventionality of characters, space and time - these films are closer to deformation than reality. They look more like experiments, like "pen tests", than representative works of authorship. They speak of the director's visible intoxication by the freedom of expression he has received, by the possibilities of the dramaturgical form, of the mosaic structure, by all kinds of abstract and paradoxical conceits, by the mixing of reality and timelessness. The reasoning in this case is mine, but it seems to me that Antonia Milcheva is not far from such a notion as she emphasises Rangel Valchanov's inherent attraction to the new and modern trends in avant-garde cinema of that period; in his search she sees aspiration to achieve true creative freedom.

In the following third chapter, the history of the film *The Inspector and the Forest* is explored in great detail. Here, along the lines of authenticity special emphasis is placed on the palette of unconventional directorial decisions in the making of this film - from the choice of

dramaturgical material (a completely true-to-life story), to the choice of a non-professional actress for the lead role (law student Sonya Boykova), to an important technological innovation (direct sound recording). The PhD student comes to the conclusion that the same directorial approach was applied to the film *With Love and Tenderness*. Again, synchronously recorded sound; again a non-professional plays the main role - this time Alexander Dyakov, bright as a personality and unique as a sculptor. For the sake of verisimilitude, Valery Petrov's script is enriched with continuous improvisations in order to adjust the dramaturgy to the true nature of the amateur actor. Along the lines of verisimilitude, the work with the other actors is subject to a drastic measure - not to act, not to overdramatize the action, not to let any falsity creep in.

In this chapter, the PhD student's reflections on the topic are supported by specific examples from individual films, quotations from members of their artistic advisory bodies, impressions from interviews and personal conversations with participants in their realization. The analysis draws parallels and analogies with other films authored by Rangel Valchanov, all of which accurately and appropriately selected. Here (and elsewhere) the handling of quotations is very functional, i.e. nothing is superfluous, nothing is repetitive, nothing is wasteful. Antonia Milcheva adds her own reflections to film criticism to Rangel Valchanov's works over the years, this time from contemporary perspective.

Every proven filmmaker has one big, one very personal and unique film in which he has embedded himself as a shadow. For Rangel Valchanov such a film is undoubtedly *The Patent Shoes of the Unknown Warrior*. It is a phenomenon of a film, anthological in nature and untouched by the passage of time. It also seems to provide the widest scope for reflections and conclusions on the subject of the thesis, i.e. authenticity. And Antonia Milcheva has taken full advantage of this opportunity. She has studied both the background of *The Patent Shoes of the Unknown Warrior* and the stages of its realization. She has highlighted its most important features. A non-linear narrative built on the logic of children's emotional memory. The fantastic and the documentary are synthesized in a subjective author world in which the characteristics of time and space derive not so much from the factual as from the imaginary. An extraordinary unity of content and form. The phases in the creation of this new magical reality are explained in detail by the PhD student and rounded up with the conclusion that *The Patent Shoes of the Unknown Warrior* is "one of the most authentic author universes in Bulgarian cinema".

The fourth chapter of the dissertation is devoted to the particularities of authenticity in the construction of a much more contingent and heterogeneous author world. Here Antonia

Milcheva first outlines the peculiarities of the new genre territory that Rangel Valchanov masters with his next three films. The historical reality in *Last Wishes* is subjected to a strong grotesque deformation and this, according to the PhD student, somewhat puts our sense of authenticity to the test. Whereas in *Where Are You Going* and *And Now Where To* the harmonious balance achieved between imaginary and realistic elements, between primordality and magic, becomes a metaphorical narrative. In a particular kind of allegorical narrative about the impossibility of man to escape from himself and make free choices in an unfree world manipulated by a retrograde ideology. In these films, the constructed screen reality resembles a cage knit by addictions, and man is like a bird trapped in it. The bird cannot fly away with its cage, it must break it. It is to such a rebellious impulse that the characters in Rangel Valchanov's films come. The doctoral student has not only established this fact, but has eloquently developed it as her scientific thesis.

The closing part of the thesis makes a final recapitulation of the themes examined and their scientific and applied science solution. For Antonia Milcheva, authenticity is not some objectively existing artistic measure; it is a variable quantity and is dictated by the subjectively set creative intentions of the director; it derives from his inner sense of truth and from the truth of the time in which a film was made.

To sum up, the dissertation proposed by Antonia Milcheva is the first comprehensive study of authenticity as an artistic trait in the film work of Rangel Valchanov. This thesis has a readable style of exposition, a clear scientific character, contains convincing conclusions and a unified conceptual code. In the course of research, the PhD student has managed to broaden the understanding of authenticity as part of the aesthetic nature of cinema and to reinforce the importance of this concept in a way that has not been done before in Bulgaria. Antonia Milcheva also offers us a workable scientific toolkit for the study of authenticity in any film work. I am convinced that what has been said so far confirms the contributory character of her PhD thesis.

In its scientific integrity, this thesis meets the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria. Its author possesses the necessary theoretical knowledge and has a convincing professional background in the field of feature cinema. Her work proves she is competent to research, analyze, summarize and systematize her own and others' achievements and to draw scientific conclusions from them. For all these reasons, I support the award of doctoral education and scientific degree to Antonia Milcheva.

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Reviewer:

Prof. D. Bodjakov, PhD