

## REVIEW

By Assoc. Prof. Elizaveta Boeva, PhD, NBU, Professional Field 8.4. Theatre and Film Art, member of the scientific jury appointed by order of the Rector of NBU, according to the procedure for acquiring the scientific and educational degree of DOCTOR in Professional field 8.4. Theatre and Film Art, scientific specialty Cinema Studies, Film Art and Television regarding the dissertation *Manifesto. Dogma 95. Reflections on the Latest Bulgarian Cinema*“ by Elitsa Stefanova Mateeva under the supervision of Prof. Petya Alexandrova, DSc.

The dissertation work presented by Elitsa Mateeva entitled *Manifesto. Dogma 95. Reflections on the Latest Bulgarian Cinema* comprises 220 pages, including an introduction, three chapters, deductions and conclusions, and a bibliography.

The topic selected by Elitsa Mateeva corresponds to the content of her work.

In the introduction, the doctoral candidate introduces us to the topic, highlighting its relevance and focusing our attention on the issues explored in the study.

As stated in the title, the dissertation consists of three parts focusing on the *Dogma 95 manifesto*, analyzing the *Dogma 95* phenomenon, and considering contemporary Bulgarian cinema through the model proposed by *Dogma 95* (*"Dogma" proposed a different model of behavior, an example of updating the cinematographies of small nations and the youth in cinema*). Regarding the notion of contemporary, Elitsa Mateeva specifies: *"The titles from the latest Bulgarian cinema included in the study are works by directors who are in their mid-30s and 40s [...] Despite some similarities with "Dogma 95," Bulgarian cinema works, though with lower budgets, maintain their stance."*

In the introduction, Elitsa Mateeva presents the main object of her study: *"the essence of the manifesto as a catalyst and its possible multiplications"*; She articulates the objective of her research as follows: *"to map the conceptual space between the ideational imperatives of manifestos and their tangible outcomes, and to critically engage with 'Dogma 95' through an analysis of specific films influenced by the manifesto, alongside discussions on their role in enhancing national cinematography."*

The tasks the dissertation aims to address are also defined, and the research thesis is presented. The methodology of the work is clearly outlined, focusing our attention also on the scope of the study. The introduction concludes: *The research could serve as a good basis for publishing a book dedicated to Danish directors who have filmed according to the "Dogma 95" system, and its content could be expanded with directors who have not been studied to this point. Up to now, no comprehensive work dedicated to this issue has been published in Bulgaria. [...] The study could be useful for students and teachers, various organizations, and individuals considering development options in the field of cinema, film theory, and practical film production.*

The first chapter of Elitsa Mateeva's dissertation is titled *Manifestos and the Theory of Cinema*. The first thing the researcher does here is to familiarize us with the conceptual apparatus used: what a manifesto is, who can be an author of a manifesto, what goals and tasks the creators of manifestos set, etc.

A historical overview follows (starting from the dawn of cinematography): how the perception of cinema by authors has developed, what aesthetic, moral, technical, and economic difficulties they have faced. Elitsa Mateeva presents the most significant cinema theorists in chronological order, starting from Siegfried Kracauer, Louis Delluc, Ricciotto Canudo (also considered a pioneer of film criticism), Abel Gance (the researcher introduces him as a theorizing director), Louis Delluc (about whom Elitsa Mateeva says that "*French film theory can rightly be proud of his work, for he is the first leading author of a film column in "Paris-midi, " who understands the place of film criticism*"), Jean Epstein (who moves from theory to practice), Filippo Marinetti and his understanding of cinema as *an ideal futuristic art* (here Elitsa pays attention to the paradox: there is a futuristic manifesto, but no futuristic cinematography). The next author whose engagement with theory the researcher highlights is Sergei Eisenstein: "*His path in cinema*", asserts Elitsa Mateeva "*is accompanied by manifestos, articles, and notes in his diaries. [...] Through his personal experience with theory, he understands the laws of cinema*". The focus then shifts to the French artist Fernand Léger and his article *A New Realism - the Object*, followed by: Dziga Vertov and his theory of documentary cinema (*referring to the documentary film "Man with a Movie Camera"* – as Elitsa Mateeva defines this documentary; the concept of Vertov's "cinema truth"; *We. A Manifesto Variant* and *Cinema Eyes. Coup* – texts from 1922 and respectively 1923). The researcher finds in the theory of cinema eyes nothing that could be related to "*Dogma 95*" (this comparison is achieved through a quote from the 1922 Instructional Manual to the "Cine-Eye" groups): "*We absolutely do not need either huge pavilions or grandiose sets, nor do we need 'grandiose' film directors, 'great' artists, and 'astonishing' photogenic women. But what we do need are: 1) fast means of transport, 2) highly sensitive film stock, 3) light handheld cameras, 4) similarly light lighting equipment.*" Elitsa Mateeva concludes: *The list of requirements continues, similar to "Dogma 95," seeking simplicity and speed in technical resources.*

Moreover, the chronological listing presented here is not an end in itself: the doctoral candidate seeks not only the prototype of the *Dogma 95* manifesto but also similarities between what Lars von Trier and his colleagues are doing and the legacy of the European cinematic idea. For instance, when discussing the theories of cinema by Epstein, his understanding of the space-time continuum, and the surrealist conception of art, Elitsa Mateeva talks about Lars von Trier's 2012 *Gesamt* project—a project that surrealistically combines (i.e., super associative compilation) architecture, music, theatre, dance, and literature. The works that Trier sets as visual stimuli include: a painting by Gauguin, a grandstand smoothed in Nuremberg by Speer (the chief architect of the Third Reich), a sonata by César Franck, an excerpt from a play by Strindberg (*The Father*), a song and dance study (performed by Sammy Davis Jr.), and the final chapter of Joyce's novel *Ulysses*. Elitsa Mateeva reveals Trier's concept for this experiment: *The works themselves should not be present directly in the short films, but should tangibly inspire the authors.* The doctoral candidate adds with a wink: *There's something rotten in*

*Denmark when a scandalous director with his films lifts the curtain on forgotten artistic provocations. Could it be that Lars von Trier is hinting that cinema, from a visual stimulus, can become a total obsession for our senses so that we can even feel the breath of the characters in the cinema hall?*

Following the presentation of the theoretical concept by Dziga Vertov, Elitsa Mateeva (in the given chronological order) turns to *Aristotle of film criticism* – André Bazin and the concept he introduced, *transparency*. Next, Siegfried Kracauer and his most important works *The Task of the Film Critic, From Caligari to Hitler, and The Nature of Film* (early articles placed in the newspaper Frankfurt Zeitung are also touched upon). In *The Task of the Film Critic*, Kracauer defines: a good film critic can only exist as a social critic. The doctoral candidate adds: *Cinema does not exist in a vacuum but among specific social, cultural, and historical conditions. Cinema is an ideal tool for reflecting these conditions. Cinema is the result of the efforts not of an individual but of a community, the films are aimed at an audience, to be perceived by it.* Further, in her analysis, Elitsa Mateeva focuses on Alexandre Astruc – journalist, writer, director, associated with the French magazine Cahiers du cinéma. His call for the camera stylo becomes a slogan for the directors of the French New Wave (the doctoral candidate defines: *“This image is more a result of journalistic and poetic expression than a long-researched theoretical view. Astruc is aware that cinema in the '50s has achieved much, it has become a language, and as a special language, it is part of the script of every author, because through it he can tell, recreate his thoughts, feelings, ideas”*). Elitsa Mateeva explores Astruc's programmatic publication from 1948, *The Birth of a New Avant-Garde - the camera stylo*. Next, John Grierson and his understanding of the documentary film (Elitsa stops to discuss Grierson's manifesto *The Principles of Documentary Film*). Next: Paul Rotha, who – like Grierson – combines film theory with managing and filming documentary films. The doctoral candidate synthesizes Rotha's thesis that *“The documentarian is not a fighter, not an agitator, not a politician, but must show political and social awareness in his approach to work. The situations sought are not artificial but come from reality.”* The next major author who becomes the subject of study for Elitsa Mateeva is Cesare Zavattini – writer, director, screenwriter, and theorist of neorealism. The doctoral candidate asserts: *In his diaries, filled with humor and humanity, Zavattini shows us how a person can be a neorealist every day. His theoretical views are scattered, but until the end of his life, he remains faithful to neorealism, while his colleagues distance themselves from the direction. In his statements, we can find fantasizing, even utopia, but it all results from the cause that Zavattini advocates through his films - the social and political function of cinema. He is the spokesperson for the idea that cinema must respond to the hunger for reality. The officially sanctioned cinema offers fabrications that bury life. The task of cinema is to restore contact with life. Cinema should be made according to Zavattini with unlimited trust in the facts, things, people.* Zavattini is an opponent of escapist cinema; the director, says Zavattini, should direct the viewer to reflect. Another author, the object of study for Elitsa, is Roberto Rossellini – Italian director, again a representative of neorealism (*to Rossellini, neorealism is an artistic form of truth – asserts the doctoral candidate*).

Next, Elitsa *brings forth* an unusual title, highlighting the following sentence: Neorealism, the New Wave, and German cinema from the 60s and 70s of the 20th century, the "discoveries"

that herald the appearance of "Dogma 95". The doctoral candidate's approach here is historical, analytical – explaining in chronological order social, economic, political phenomena and their connection to cinema (for example: For many Italians, neorealist films present images of the ideas of the Resistance). In an intriguing narrative, including the names of key directors and emblematic films, Elitsa presents the French New Wave, mentioning the film festival in Cannes (*the festival of the New Wave*): *The New Wave becomes an event not only thanks to the criticism and directors. It is also an economic phenomenon. The films triumph due to their low budget – two to five times lower than the average cost of commercial feature films at that time. [...] In historical terms, "La Nouvelle Vague" is distinguished by a vitality that seems to have completely renewed French cinema with the creation of strong works that contradict the grain of habits, seeking success. Aesthetically it can be said that the new wave is a striving to incorporate lyricism into everyday gestures. It rejects aesthetics as much as an ethic based on the role of fate with tragic narrative trajectories, falling under poetic realism. The rejection of the straitjacket of narrative often goes hand in hand with moments of lyricism. In this way, the film sometimes interrupts the course of its narrative with moments of happiness outside of time and therefore outside of fiction through addresses to the viewer, incongruous moments, surges of musical or painterly lyricism, links between planes that are no longer hidden but shown.*

Next, an analysis of the activities of a group of young, radical West German directors who in 1962 created their own manifesto in Oberhausen. The doctoral candidate asserts: *By signing this short and fiery manifesto, the new German cinema was born.* The historical context is the following: the German film industry at the time was in severe decline, the production of conventional and politically voiceless films was the usual landscape, and the new directors (Kluge, Fassbinder, Herzog, Wenders, von Trotta, Sander) came with dissatisfaction with the situation. The listed names are leaders of the new German cinema (the cinema that flourished from the late '60s to the early '80s); they reject the standard process of film production – they want financial state support to alleviate the painful limitations of a commercially oriented film industry. Elitsa Mateeva notes: *"Unfortunately, the intention of the New German Cinema to create the new German film is never fully achieved. As reported in a 1977 New York Times article, most of the movement's films were commercial failures and "met with apathy by the German public."*

Undoubtedly, the New German Cinema is a child of the manifesto, as the doctoral candidate asserts. Combining sharp criticism with constructive resolve, the brief statement - its very brevity is an instrument with which it announces "the collapse of conventional German film," repeating the news of its death in the emphatic conclusion that states, "the old film is dead" before expressing some optimism: "We believe in the new." Simultaneously with a devastating forecast and a renewal program, the document insists on retreating from the past and outlines a plan for the future. As might be expected, established members of the film industry and the conservative press reject the manifesto, mocking the young directors and their ambition (linking their rhetoric to that of the great liar Baron Munchausen and hence – calling their manifesto Obermunchausen). But, it turns out, significant resistance is a valuable catalyst for the young creators. The manifesto is followed by an impressive wave of films just in 1966: *The Young Törless* by Schlöndorff, *No Shooting Time for Foxes* by Schamoni, *Yesterday's Girl* by Kluge

– all films highly rated by European film criticism and audience (the films of Schlöndorff and Schamoni are presented at the Cannes Film Festival, *No Shooting Time for Foxes* wins the Silver Bear at the Berlinale, *Yesterday's Girl* – Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival).

Elitsa Mateeva presents the influence that the German New Wave and the Oberhausen Manifesto had on conceptualizing independent American cinema (from *Easy Rider* by Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda to the anti-Hollywood aesthetics of Jarmusch, Vincent Gallo, and Harmony Korine). And more: The New German Film presents proto-independent cinema, asserts Elitsa, long before Sundance was created as an institution.

The presentation of the *Dogma 95* manifesto – a manifesto that attracted and divided critical opinion. The doctoral candidate defines the following: *"This code of filmmaking is described as a trick, formatted self-irony, as a provocative challenge to the dominant cinematographic conventions. It is considered as imagination, but also as a transcription of previous film formalisms and art cinema such as Italian neorealism; and as an approach that frees the director and allows improvisation, but also as a restrictive code that establishes strict stylistic and aesthetic parameters. What "Dogma 95" provokes is an exciting reconsideration of issues of film realism, truth, and purity, just at a time when Hollywood represents cinema of attractions, a result of post-production effects and new media technologies such as computer-generated imagery."*

Next, Elitsa reveals what and how influences the creators of the Manifesto in creating *Dogma 95* – undoubtedly the creativity of Rossellini, Vertov, the principles of Bazin, etc. *Dogma 95* is blatantly (and theatrically) political in its intention, asserts the doctoral candidate: *"Because the Manifesto seems to be about restoring ideological purity, as well as film purity, and the productions of "Dogma 95" offer a radically confrontational presentation of Danish society and middle-class family life.* "The dose of theatricality, as Elitsa talks about, is connected to the rhetoric of the Manifesto (rhetoric that undoubtedly reminds us of the rhetoric of numerous political and artistic manifestos from the 19th and 20th centuries).

The rules of *Dogma 95* attempt to create a tabula rasa from conventional film production practices and to allow the emergence of new forms of filmmaking, without defining anything in advance regarding the content or style of the films that must be made as a result of this investigation – this, it seems to me, is a very precise definition of the phenomenon *Dogma 95*

In the second chapter of the current dissertation, Elitsa Mateeva focuses on the magnificent *"Dogma 95"* quartet. She begins this chapter in an extremely intriguing manner: the doctoral candidate draws a comparison between Edvard Munch's "The Scream" (the 1893 version of the painting) and the *Dogma 95* phenomenon. Here is how she explains this unexpected comparison: "When we watch the cinema of the 'Dogma 95' representatives, we discover a fragment of their anxieties about the world, which resembles the emotion of the character in Munch's painting."

A century after the Lumière brothers, the Danes Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg published their authorial manifesto, their ten rules, the Ten Commandments of *Dogma 95*. Elitsa summarizes: "These rules are extreme and categorical, charming in their naivety." What follows

is a description of how the manifesto was created—according to Lars von Trier’s recollections, as recorded by journalist Niels Thorsen. Whether it was so, whether this is part of the personal mythology of the great director, is speculative. In Thorsen’s book, we find the following quote: "I have no doubt about how to tell a story, but for me, it is more interesting to follow rules that prevent me from telling a story in a particular way." It turns out that most of the rules were invented by Trier as a game, a game in which the director plays with himself. When Vinterberg joined him, the corpus of rules was already created (Trier, as we understand from Thorsen's book, insisted that Vinterberg add something to enhance the color and authenticity of their joint endeavor). Directors were then invited to join the manifesto (Trier wanted everyone to unite and, like Kurosawa's samurais, to forge something robust).

Elitsa Mateeva chronologically presents what happens during the introduction of the manifesto, the reaction of the film community, the manifesto itself quoted verbatim, and the accompanying vow of chastity consisting of ten rules for filmmaking.

The films that were shot immediately after the manifesto’s publication are presented; she also identifies the main films created under the rules of *Dogma 95*: Lars von Trier's "The Idiots", Thomas Vinterberg's "The Celebration", Søren Kragh-Jacobsen's "Mifune's Last Song", Kristian Levring's "The King Is Alive", Lone Scherfig's "Italian for Beginners", and Susanne Bier's "Open Hearts".

Shortly after their debut films, the directors-authors of the rules gradually withdrew from *Dogma 95*, not filming a second movie under the system. The film movement officially disbanded in 2005. Within a decade, 35 films with a certificate of belonging were released. Ten of them were Danish productions. In 2008, the film movement was awarded the European Film Award in the category for Best European Contribution to World Cinema.

Contemporaries and colleagues of the Dogmatists published a parody version (*Dogma 99*)—a version filled with exotic and ludicrous rules such as: Always have a dog or cat in the film; No sex with the boss; *Always have a character who is a director by profession; The film's director is the least important after the screenwriter, editor, and producer—only their names appear on the screen.*"

Elitsa Mateeva concludes: "*These playful rules suggest that in the world of cinema, each subsequent period and creative energy bring boutique chic with their presence. The fate of cinema is that every so-called avant-garde is marked by a retreat from its principles. And we, the ordinary seekers of cinematic sensations, are in eager anticipation of the next authorial impulse, which will proclaim itself as the only true and faithful art communicator with the cinematograph!*"

It is expected that the act of packaging films in uniforms (i.e., the strict rules imposed by the Manifesto) would lead to standardized products; however, no. Although uniform in a certain sense, the films created under the canon of *Dogma 95* are not just distinguishable from each other, they are even extremely individualistic.

It is important to note the following aspect of the Manifesto: the list of rules is primarily technical and formal in nature; there are no political exhortations, no denunciations of other creators from past schools and movements in art. *Dogma 95* more resembles a guide, modestly called by Elitsa a "Do It Yourself" manual for those aspiring to something new. That is, the flame of the currents in visual art from the early 20th century, the fire of the avant-garde from the 1960s—everything has been replaced with practicality. However, undoubtedly, although no specific political or social commitment is expressed, the Dogmatists' Manifesto has tremendous political and social power. Elitsa asserts: *"The political power of the project by the Danish directors should be sought in the way rule-governed activities encourage production conditions that are feasible in the context of small countries. The 'Dogma 95' project is motivated by the belief that if small countries want to compete successfully with Hollywood in the era of globalization, they somehow need to change many rules of the game to challenge established views on what is considered a film."*

Further in her work, the sub-chapters present the pioneers of *Dogma 95*, starting, of course, with Lars von Trier. Elitsa defines him as a collector of monsters: *"Over a period of about 40 years of disciplined modification of his personal cinema philosophy about man, the Danish director Lars von Trier has shot monstrous stories, with which he defines without any scruples the evil hidden in the unsuspected depths of human nature. Lars von Trier's films are The Trumpet of Jericho, with which a dreamer, turned into an ironic cynic, managed to overcome the fortresses of the mind, to introduce us with a bang to the chaos of emotions tearing apart the descendants of Adam and Eve."*

In several concise paragraphs, the doctoral candidate emotionally presents the creative path of Lars von Trier, highlighting the essence of each mentioned film. Numerous awards received for these films are also noted (even the audience award at the Sofia Film Fest for the film *Dogville* is mentioned).

I would like to share here a personal memory from the premiere of *Antichrist* at the Cannes Film Festival, which I attended: during the screening, continuous outraged exclamations were heard; many people in the audience left the hall. But in the end, a real storm erupted when the screen showed that Lars von Trier dedicates the film to Andrei Tarkovsky—people were stomping their feet, hitting the seats, waving their outerwear... It was like being in a football stadium, such a lively and emotional reaction, a true storm of indignation was sparked by this premiere.

Then (in a similar way—presenting the life and creative biography in chronological order), Elitsa turns to Thomas Vinterberg, Søren Kragh-Jacobsen (the veteran in the quartet of directors who invented the rules of *Dogma 95*), and Kristian Levring. It turns out I am least familiar (of this quartet) with the personality and work of Levring. On one hand, unlike Lars von Trier, he has a restrained demeanor, not attracting the attention of the world press with spectacular media appearances. On the other—his films do not receive the kind of attention from world film festivals that the films of the rest of the quartet do. But in preparing my review of Elitsa's dissertation, I watched five (out of a total of eight) of Levring's films and see that—as to this point—her description of the films, what she focuses on, and the conclusions she draws—

strongly align with my understanding of what I saw. And it is Levring who probably is the person (from this quartet) who in *The King Is Alive* concludes: every rule eventually loses its meaning.

Further in her dissertation, Elitsa Mateeva examines the others, i.e., those directors from the *Dogma 95* movement who gradually joined the four main ones.

The first on this additional list is Oke Sandgren (I am not well acquainted with this director, having seen only *True Man*; according to Elitsa, "True Man" is the most interesting experiment of the "Dogma 95" Manifesto, because it contains everything that every act articulating as provoking change, conditioning change, carries).

The doctoral candidate devotes an entire sub-chapter to female directors in *Dogma 95*—specifically, Lone Scherfig, Annette Olesen, and Susanne Bier. And more specifically: the first film by a female director in the style of *Dogma 95* is *Italian for Beginners* by Scherfig, created in 2000.

The third, final chapter of the current dissertation presents the response in the newest Bulgarian cinema to *Dogma 95* (exclusively about films created in the period 2014-2023). Elitsa claims that “ *The selected titles and directors are united by the marker—ordinary characters in extraordinary stories, focused on the content of contemporary reality—the common thematic aspect is the existential choice to live with dignity or to survive in the name of domestic compromise. Similar to the Danish directors from "Dogma 95," the visual solutions in the proposed films approach the feeling of authenticity—as if the viewer is part of the story and can naturally identify with the vicissitudes of the characters. The peculiar approach and merging with reality are also a result of the technical language of means used in making the films.*”

The Bulgarian films examined here are: *Lesson*, *Bezbog*, *Irina*, *Lessons in German*, *Women Do Cry*, *The Good Driver*. Among the films listed, I hold in highest regard *Lesson* by directors Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov. In my view, the entire trilogy—*Lesson*, *Glory*, *Father*—represents a significant achievement in contemporary Bulgarian cinema. This trilogy not only invites comparisons with *Dogma 95* but stands on par with the most compelling and innovative film experiments worldwide.

In conclusion, Elitsa Mateeva summarizes: “*Manifestos in the world of art provide an opportunity for free expression of certain ideas from the sphere of the creative process, related to the perspectives of art. In the realm of cinema, they start from reality because it uses life as the basis of its searches. Without knowledge of the intellectual-aesthetic, ethical, philosophical, social, and other insightful aspects of the manifestos, film theory, and the filmmaking process are unable to truly understand and analyze their development and future.*”

An appendix provides a summary of the contributions of the dissertation; among them, I can highlight the following: the manifestos in cinema are systematized (including detailed portrayals of individual key directors).



In conclusion of this review, I can summarize: the dissertation by Elitsa Mateeva is exceptionally in-depth and, for me, very, very interesting. On one hand, the description is richly informative, yet the data is presented succinctly, with attention to detail, aiming for the most accurate emphasis, and selection of intriguing additions. Most importantly: the numerous authorial remarks, conclusions, comparisons, and repartees—all this is extremely captivating; it turns Elitsa's text from a dry history of cinema on a given topic into a lively narrative about some of the most significant cinematic processes in European and Bulgarian cinema.

I remember Elitsa Mateeva since the days when we studied (at the same time) at NATFA. She has always distinguished herself with her astonishing erudition, competence, and work ethic. Her current engagement in Varna (working in cinema with children and adolescents) is truly a worthy endeavor—an educational activity of the highest order. Elitsa speaks about her students with passion; she dedicates her whole heart to their intellectual and aesthetic education.

I am convinced that the current dissertation should be turned into a book accessible to the general public.

In conclusion: I believe that the dissertation meets the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for its application, as well as the requirements of the Internal Rules for the Development of Academic Staff at NBU. It contains original contributions and proves the doctoral candidate's theoretical knowledge. This gives me grounds to propose to the esteemed jury to award Elitsa Mateeva the educational and scientific degree of *Doctor* in professional field 8.4. *Theatre and Film Art*.

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Member of the scientific jury:

Assoc. Prof. Elizaveta Boeva, PhD