

REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Kalina Stefanova,

**National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts "Kr. Sarafov", Department of
Theatre Studies and Theatre Management**

of the dissertation titled

"The Manifesto. Dogma 95. Reflections on the Latest Bulgarian Cinema"

**for the acquisition of the academic degree "Doctor" in professional field 8.4. "Film
and Theatre Arts",**

with candidate Elitsa Mateeva

supervisor: Prof. Petya Alexandrova, DSc

Two words serve as the primary key to Elitsa Mateeva's study: *idea* and *material* (for the unfolding of the idea). I refer to them collectively as a singular "key" because they are intrinsically linked because they are inseparable, as are the concepts they represent. Even when they appear to diverge, or when one seems to dominate the other, the latter remains present—like an unyielding shadow of the former, a reminder of the inherent need for harmony and completeness. The manifesto in principle and the manifestos in the first century of cinema, Dogma 95 - the manifesto with which the second century of the seventh art, films following its principles, or at least influenced by them, and its reflection in Bulgarian cinema, i.e., everything that the dissertation specifically addresses, are all opportunities for exploring the relationship between idea and material (for the unfolding of the idea). This is precisely what makes the work highly relevant. Moreover, Mateeva focuses on the centrifugal movements characteristic of our time in this pair: "A century later, the seventh art has divided itself with the idea and directed its gaze towards the material, towards providing the financial resources for the unfolding of the idea," she

summarizes at the beginning of her abstract. (p. 4) However, the relevance of the work lies also in its equal focus on the much-needed restoration of harmony.

As a principled idealist by nature – having known Mateeva since her time at the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts over two decades ago, and having tracked her career progression – she selects *Dogma 95* as the specific focus of her study because the Danish movement "dares" to "show something different, despite Hollywood." (p. 4, abstract) Yet Mateeva is not only an idealist but also a pragmatist, and she makes her choice because *Dogma 95* offers a "specific methodology in principle" (p. 4, abstract), as well as because it provides concrete "ideas for an innovative approach to the development of low-budget cinema in our country." (pp. 204-205) In short, *Dogma 95* is something like a magnet capable of reuniting the idea and the material for its realization in cinema.

I find the pursuit of the practical application of *Dogma 95* "for unlocking the potential of Bulgarian low-budget cinema" (p. 205) to be especially significant. Not only does it serve as a measure of the study's utility but it also serves as an uncommon launching pad for a dissertation: a tangible demonstration of concern and care for the state of domestic cinema.

Having precisely defined her objectives and tasks in the obligatory Introduction, Mateeva constructs a robust foundation for her research in the first chapter, dedicated to the manifestos and theory of cinema. This foundation is solidified because she examines these topics simultaneously from historical, theoretical, and artistic perspectives. Returning to a central theme: Mateeva presents and analyzes the manifestos across the spectrum from their ideological imperatives to their practical outcomes—a goal she identifies as one of the two primary aims of her study. Unlike the typical dry and uninspired style that often characterizes academic research in this field, Mateeva also highlights their stylistic beauty, which reflects their nature primarily as "original and dynamic articulations of artistic aspirations" and "hopes for change," essentially framing them as statements of ideas.

This aspect also carries a significant utility value because the work not only systematizes cinema manifestos (one of its contributions) but through examples of poetic expression with which its creators, critics, and theorists fervently advocated their

innovative ideas, it could inspire future researchers of the seventh art, especially if it were one day transformed into a book. How could anyone remain indifferent upon reading Ricciotto Canudo's definition of cinema: "The screen, this book with a single and endless page like life itself, allows the inner and outer reliefs of the world to be recorded on its surface." (pp. 12-13) Or Abel Gance's words: "A significant film must be conceived as a symphony—a symphony in time and space." (p. 14)

Here, I open a parenthesis to emphasize that Mateeva's own discourse also presents similar instances of beautiful and metaphorical language, which further contributes to the utility factor in this respect. For example: "...like snipers, they dive into the close-up of faces, objects, and details" (p. 26) Or: "The camera greedily surveys, as if trying to devour the entire world around it." (p. 31)

If the first chapter of the study could conditionally be called "before Dogme 95" (with frequent references to it, searching for a premonition/rooting for it in the future), in the second chapter Mateeva focuses on Dogme 95 itself, presenting and analyzing (almost) everything about, because of, through, according to, and after the manifesto. Namely, the set of its 10 rules announced in 1995, the work of the creators who forge, profess, and practice them, their "steps aside," as well as the work of their colleagues, whose films touch at least some of the rules, and finally, even the Bulgarian online media representation of Dogme 95. Thus, the focus is now on the specificity of this "watershed" manifesto and the new cinematic reality it helps create, which Mateeva examines and explores from various angles and multiple levels vertically: general informational, specific portraits (of the respective creators), analytical (of their films), etc. Through Dogme 95, the need to rethink cinema, to restore its pioneering spirit, its role primarily as an art and then as an industry, its connection with the human, with the truthfulness of feelings on screen, is traced. In other words, again everything related to the relationships between idea and material (for its unfolding on screen), but increasingly more about the relationships between their derivatives on a broader basis—in human life, for which cinema is made.

The very poetic realism of the films stamped with Dogme 95, as well as those close in spirit and some of the rules, acts like a manifesto, now advocating for a reconsideration of the "values" of today's world. Minimalism opposes the consumerist multitude and the

encouraged thirst for more spectacle and speed; authenticity opposes ubiquitous imitations; and unfiltered reality confronts themes that overlook the genuine problems of ordinary people... Ultimately, what is achieved in depth in this chapter is a concentrated focus on the root of some of the most pressing issues of our time. Specifically: "...that we no longer distinguish between soul and body, between heaven and hell, that we are cowards and monsters." Precisely what, according to Mateeva, Trier continues to film boldly "in the era of political correctness," because that is "what matters to him." (p. 98) A major advantage is that she achieves this focus unobtrusively and imperceptibly, as if in her analysis she uses the special "narrow format" (p. 193) of Dogme 95 filming. Entering the spirit of the subject of one's study is not at all easy, neither in criticism nor in theory. Thus, I particularly emphasize this achievement of Mateeva in her dissertation work.

In her conclusion, at the end of the study, the doctoral candidate uses the phrase "the curious researcher-artist", a phrase that I find particularly apt and shall borrow here to make two general observations. First, regarding her own persona: I follow Mateeva's professional development with surprise and admiration. I continue to be amazed by the ever-expanding range of her interests. From theatre criticism to photography and directing, pedagogy, and dramaturgy... And when one reads her three books on cinema themes and now her dissertation, it feels like, instead of Theatre Studies and Directing (her actual education), she has studied Cinema Studies—such is the depth of her knowledge of the cinema material.

The aforementioned statement also encapsulates one of the main strengths of the chosen methodology for the research: its interdisciplinary approach. In her analysis, Mateeva employs the perspectives of film studies, art studies, philosophy, and sociology, integrating references from literature, music, painting, and theater. She adeptly navigates various types of analysis—historical, theoretical, and comparative—the latter being particularly crucial for adding depth and coherence to her study. Evocative of cinematic technique, she adeptly maneuvers the camera (in a manner reminiscent of Dogme 95), presenting diverse viewpoints and framings on her research subject.

Moreover, it is important to note that Mateeva handles this figurative camera not only with skill and expertise but also with evident passion. This is another reason I am

convinced her dissertation will prove enriching for students. While Mateeva may adopt a contemporary approach in her method of research and presentation—characterized by its fragmentary nature and multidirectional analytical threads—her engagement with the subject matter is fundamentally traditional, treating it with the reverence and affection one reserves for beloved objects. This approach aligns with the poignant description by Sir Roger Scruton, who spoke of traditional teaching in the humanities as engaging with subjects "as towards objects of love—here, something I love, try [to love it] too." (From his lecture, "Apprehending the Transcendental," delivered at the Cambridge Centre for the Study of Platonism and Ralston College, on August 2, 2018, in Cambridge, England.)

This is especially evident in the last third chapter of the study, dedicated to the reflection of Dogme 95 in the latest Bulgarian cinema. It presents six of our films from the past ten years, searching for specific similarities or at least points of contact with some of the rules of Dogme 95 and, more importantly, with the general spirit of the Danish manifesto applied in practice by its creators and advocates. Indeed, although the conclusion of Mateeva is naturally dedicated to the generalizations of the entire work, it ultimately directs attention to our cinema and the promising conclusions from Dogme 95. "Dogme 95 succeeded, therefore, in addition to ideas and concepts for cinema, we need love and more faith in our own strengths," she writes on page 203.

Before this, Mateeva sets the stage in her introduction by situating Bulgarian cinema within the specific challenges it faces. She notes: "Given the lack of a constructive state policy for the development of national contemporary cinematography, the Danish model is difficult to apply in Bulgaria. A primary obstacle, in my opinion, is the absence of conditions that unite the efforts of the creative cinema guild; on the other hand, our country's regulatory framework for cinema continually fosters community disintegration." (pp. 7-8) This acknowledgment early in the text that her study is anchored in real-world issues is a strength, as it extends the discussion beyond insular theoretical confines.

This relevance is not confined to the discussion of local cinema but applies to the broader cinematic landscape: "Today, with the advent of new, advanced technologies, anyone can shoot and edit a high-quality film using their phone," Mateeva observes in her conclusion. – "The real challenge, however, is how to craft a compelling story with this

technology, one that enriches us?" (p. 203) With this, she comes full circle, delving deeper than the surface specifics of her study and addressing a critical modern dilemma—not just in cinema but across many forms of cultural expression: how do we move beyond the pervasive mantra of 'entertainment' to achieve something significantly more profound—goodness?

Despite the numerous strengths of the study already highlighted, it does have some shortcomings, primarily of a stylistic nature. These may stem from a rush to finalize the manuscript, evidenced by punctuation errors, inconsistencies in grammatical tenses—fluctuating between past and present narrative forms—as well as occasional omissions of prepositions or words. Additionally, the formatting of subtitles could be more precise. I would also recommend adhering to the Bulgarian standard for formatting new lines and corresponding paragraphs. Addressing these issues would likely require just one thorough revision.

As for the formulated contributions of the work, they are fully justified. The study shows that Mateeva undoubtedly possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge of the chosen topic and capabilities for independent scientific research. The bibliography is very impressive, and the six scientific publications related to the study and attached to the abstract are in prestigious editions and are of the necessary high level.

In conclusion, I want to state with full conviction that the dissertation work of Elitsa Mateeva possesses the necessary qualities that give full reason to award her the educational and scientific degree of "doctor." I recommend scheduling its defense.

Prof. Kalina Stefanova, PhD

27.04.2024