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THESIS ABSTRACT

on:

"Vasil Levski in Fiction and Documentary Cinema:
Narratives and Interpretations"

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The dissertation "Vasil Levski in Art and Documentary Cinema: Narratives and Interpretations" is devoted to one of the fundamental narratives forming the national mythopoesis of the Bulgarians in the context of the 19th century - the narrative of Vasil Levski, mentioned by the national memory as an acknowledged national hero.

The proposed study is 141 pages long, contains III chapters, an introduction, a conclusion, and a short list of the films and theatrical productions dedicated to Vasil Levski. The text is essentially concerned with some of the narratives and interpretations that Bulgarian cinema has created around the public image of the Deacon of Karlovo. Such a study is valuable, according to the author, for two reasons. Firstly, there have been only cursory and fragmentary attempts at such an analysis, since researchers into the Apostle's life and work seem to have shown little interest in offering reflections on the subject. And secondly, it would be interesting to trace how the systematically constructed public image of the hero also finds its grounds in Bulgarian cinema, which, however, has an unsustainable tradition¹ of narrating Levski.

The object of the present study relates to the public image formed about Vasil Levski through the subject of the research - some of the most iconic cinema and television productions about the Apostle. They participate in the representation of his public self, but also function as a complementary narrative to, figuratively speaking, the 'grand narrative' of Levski's essence. The aims of the study are related to conducting, as far as possible, a deeper analysis of the Apostle's image through the perspectives of selected cinematic productions. In this way, the dissertation also attempts to answer the question of how the narrative of Levski complements and shapes a public image of this historical figure that is constantly subject to interpretation.

The author has set out to trace, systematize, analyze, and offer a rationale for the stages through which the idea of Levski changes, both through the various historical narratives surrounding his public image and through the examination of films that engage with his life and work. Through a clear classification and differentiation, on the other hand, the narrative of Levski in cinema is shown to happen.

The central hypothesis proposed is the belief that the "Levski" narrative, constructed through artistic, aesthetic, cinematic and television techniques, contributes to the mystification and legendalization of this historical figure, placing him even more firmly in the bosom of national

¹ See Editorial Team. Levski is an unreal image in Bulgarian cinema. Webcafe.bg, 2015, <https://webcafe.bg/kino/1005521086-levski-e-nesluchil-se-obraz-v-balgarskoto-kino.html>, last accessed 06.06.2020.

mythopoesis. In order to arrive at an argument for this hypothetical claim, the study firstly examines a brief overview of the most significant thematic entities that offer explanatory models for the nature and work of Vasil Levski.

An attempt is made to orient the reader to the narrative of the historical figure, which is also a direct consequence of a number of complex socio-political processes in the post-liberation period. Thinking about Levski is prefaced by shifting theses, complex accumulations of arguments and sometimes clumsily disguised mystifications. Often it derives and models its justifications from the expectations of the day towards him. At other times, the narratives that shape the Apostle's universally recognized heroic self are the contact points of historical inquiry with the legendary-sacral treatments that serve as an explanatory model for the emerging public image of Levski.

In this sense, the paper proposes an analytical approach to the narrative constructions identified in chapter one. The aim is to trace the accumulations in the modelling of this so monolithic public image of the national hero, which historiography from today's perspective does not question. The analysis of these narratives, which have essentially the same point of departure, provides an opportunity to make sense of another, unjustifiably marginalized narrative of Levski - that of Bulgarian cinema. Through a consideration of the empirical material (selected film productions), it seeks those grounds in the presentation of the hero's image that, through the means of cinematic narrative, offer significant added value to the 'grand narrative' of the revolutionary from Karlovo. Furthermore, the context of chapter two, devoted to film production in the country, and through commentary on the question generally posed, "What is Levski in Bulgarian cinema?", the study offers a systematization of the different aspects of the cinematic narrative of the Apostle. Thus, the exposition also highlights another narrative towards Levski that will provide answers to the central hypothesis.

Sources

As for the sources used in this study, they are of a heterogeneous nature², the commonality between them being the search for examples in making sense of the essence of Levski. Some of the sources are related to the epistolary heritage of the Apostle and his companions. In a number of places in the text, there are references to quotations from letters between committee members and Levski's correspondence with his close associates, which is the basis for a

² Nushev, Ts., T. Tomova. *Levski's Letters (1866-1872)*, S., 2019.

thorough analysis by researchers of the work of the VRO. These primary sources of information include, broadly speaking, the programmatic documents of the committee organization. Here is the place to add the opinions, assessments, and comments about Levski given by his associates. This accumulation of recollections³ is essential especially when seeking insight into the earliest notions of Levski's influence in-and beyond-Bulgaria. As secondary sources for the study are offered the author's interpretations and those involved in constructing the historical image of Vasil Levski⁴ through their own interpretations and documented conclusions. In addition, the study addresses sources that in turn form the legendary-mythological aspect in making sense of the Apostle's life and work, and thus participate in the accumulation of grounds around the national mythopoesis of the personalities and events in the local Renaissance for the Bulgarians. References to theoretical formulations related to narratology and the sense in which the narrative of Levski is treated are found throughout the text.

Other sources used comment on themes and issues surrounding the subject and object of the dissertation, specifically focused on the cinematic narrative: these are studies around the history of Bulgarian cinematic productions, their influence and added value to the definition of the public image of the historical figure. The films that serve as the empirical material of the third chapter of the study also fall into this context. They participate as basic material in defining and illustrating the narrative of Levski in Bulgarian cinema, and thus contribute to filling in some previously unexplored angles to this screened narrative.

The varied nature of the sources used provides a basis for bringing them under one of the specific aims of the study - how Levski has been thought and continues to be thought through the different stories about his image. This is important for two reasons. On the one hand, answering the question clarifies some of the approaches to telling the story of the national hero placed highest in the pantheon of personalities. From other, it also establishes the potential for future research inquiries that would discover new narrative patterns beyond those specifically considered.

Chapter I - The Levski Narrative

Chapter I of this thesis provides a brief but necessary overview of the current literature that is essentially concerned with the study and conceptualisation of the narrative of public perceptions of Levski. It traces those most curious moments that nevertheless leave a serious

³ Karakostov, St. Levski in the memoirs of his contemporaries, S., 1987.

⁴ Kondarev, N., Undzhiev. The apostle - pages from Levski's letters, S., 1971.

imprint on public memory. There are several main stages, organized as narratives, which pass through the formation of attitudes around the figure of the designated most legitimate national hero of Bulgaria. The image of Levski is not spared from mythologizing (especially in the earliest stage after the national liberation was achieved). The forging of the national mythopoesis through the exploitation of the symbolic capital⁵ of the Renaissance period is then palpable and to some extent justified in subsequent research pursuits. The dramatic crises that left the Bulgarian state in material, social and spiritual limbo, the collapse of monarchical power and the collapse of human strength in the wake of national catastrophes, are occasions for a search for universal consoling landmarks. With his universal human ideas, republican views and vision for the peoples of the Balkans, the image of Levski is the preferred role model in difficult years.

Far-right and far-left social movements subsequently used the intense symbolic halo that the Apostle possessed to come to accommodate a political-ideological system of government that exploited the notion of the ever-assertive national hero through the theoretical formulations of utopian socialist thought. It was at this time that the large-scale debate about Levski's grave and remains unfolded, organizing around itself a multitude of propagandistic interpretations, scientific justifications, and unproven but publicly stated claims. Finally, the efforts to establish the historical truth in this artifact search are also becoming enormously problematized.

Dissident connotations have been added to the image of Levski. And to make it clear that there will hardly be an institution left that will not take a stand on some aspect of the essence of the national hero, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is also joining the large-scale narrative about Levski. The theme of the Apostle's sanctity is gaining wide public response, which divides opinions in the higher church clergy, but unites strongly the public attitude towards the canonization of the Deacon, who otherwise consciously threw away the rasses. So many arguments and viewpoints intertwined in the case that it essentially became the third big question after bone-searching and treason, a topic that still divides scholars today. In the interest of truth, it is worth mentioning that the idea of formal religious canonization receives substantial arguments both pro and con. However, the debate here, as in the case of the tomb and that of betrayal, suffers from a lack of resilience and boldness among the parties involved to bring it to a conclusion with at least partially definitive theses. At the same time, the formation of the public image of the Apostle involves a number of works of fiction and art that

⁵ See Valchev, G. Zachary Stoyanov and the Symbolic Capital of the Bulgarian Revival. C., 2010.

leave a lasting imprint on the understanding of Levski - again, convincingly in the bosom of national mythpoesis.

Chapters II and III - Vasil Levski as an image in television and cinema productions

As far as the narrative surrounding the image of the Apostle in Bulgarian cinema is concerned, it is the subject of the second and third chapters in the study. It is worth noting that there is no stable and dense narrative that Bulgarian cinema productions follow in terms of constructing a vision of Levski. The preferred approach to its modelling is through the use of adventurous and folklore-mythological components that reinforce the sense of monolithicity in the image of the hero. On the other hand, in the range of documentary productions that have received attention, there have been attempts at a clean historical narrative, in which the documentary heritage acquires visual dimensions and serves as proof of one thesis or another. And if the narrative of the cinematic productions about Levski is not expected to repeat, retell or foreground the other, historical narrative, it is convincingly true that it interprets it, drawing not unreasonably on notions of each particular historical moment. In this sense, the narrative of Levski in Bulgarian cinema is also a narrative of the contexts of the events of these visual productions.

The aim of this study is not to conduct a cinematic survey of available documentary and art cinema productions, as such an endeavour has very limited possibilities. Instead, the study attempts to highlight another generalized direction towards the formation and perception of the image of Vasil Levski through the techniques that cinema, and television, use. To this end, in addition to a brief overview of the more significant authors who have paid attention to the public narrative of Levski, emphasis is also placed on the specific elements of the historical context that support the process of the Apostle's narrative in the cinema. Thus, in the final analysis, a further analysis of the public image of the national hero, which is present as a narrative but not in books but in tapes, is proposed.

The most distinct aspects of the individual narratives that shape the debate about Levski in the public sphere are traced. This approach of reconstructing claims and arguments, on the one hand, exposes the perspectives of scholars who have explained the Apostle's person and work. On the other hand, the aim is also to demonstrate the attitudes of different social circles, political and religious institutions, scientific organizations, particular walks of life, researchers and local historians who shape diverse approaches to the narrative of the national hero. In this sense, the proposed exposition does not represent a strictly defined bibliographical survey of

the author's previous interpretations, but seeks to offer a possible point of departure to particular thematic nuclei that clarify or problematize the grand narrative of the Apostle.

It would be a serious, and somewhat prohibitive, research challenge for the present analysis to comment on all film and television productions devoted to Vasil Levski. On the one hand, the internet, video-sharing channels and available materials that are dedicated to one or another aspect of his artistic image are numerous. On the other, however, not a few productions are literally absent from the cinematic narrative, as they are deprived of 'legitimation in the public' of the Internet for various reasons, sometimes related to the copyright of the work in question.

The reproduction of the Apostle's image in digital time has added easy opportunities for any user to reconstruct storylines, to model compilations of pictures, to focus their own notion of this narrative on those aspects of the vision of him that are read as intriguing, acceptable. Thus, the multiplicity of video content that lends itself to the conventionality of the short film is so vast that it inevitably functions through the reproduction of clichés, stereotypical models and primary approaches in reconstructions of the notion of the national hero. In such a sense, to comment on all the available video narratives is to remain in the field of the accumulation of highly similar and even identical reflections relying on interpretations of the biographical narrative mixed with legendary-mythological discourses attached to it.

Instead, the study takes a different approach in selecting documentary, documentary fiction and adventure productions. In addition to situating some of these in the respective historical and cultural time in which they appear, those film and television narratives that develop and problematize the image through the respective acting are also selected. It is of particular importance to understand that just as there is no single consensus around the narrative of Levski in historical and artistic proposals in the analysis of his image, so it is even more impossible from the screen to have a monolithic narrative that can even be accepted as uncontroversial and fully acted. The cinematic and televisual 'wanderings' between the halo and the human character, woven into thinking about Levski, are a persistent stumbling block for Bulgarian cinema, which to this day has not chosen the way to narrate the national pantheon of personalities and events associated with the Bulgarian Revival.

Therefore, the analysis focuses on productions that not only problematise the heroes of Levski, but at the same time find reasons to juxtapose the work of the Internal Revolutionary Organisation and the BRCC in Bucharest in the context of the complex cultural and historical wholes of the 19th century era. Moreover, the play of the Apostle is seen through:

- Allegories that describe the path and meaning of human life, which the character has obviously taken with clear goals and objectives;
- Mythopoetic figures and devices aimed at bringing the hero closer to archetypes associated with the origins of the Christian religion, for example;
- Hagiographic storylines, allegorically modelling an image of Levski that weaves in characteristics of martyrdom and sanctity;
- Action and western techniques, adding drama and suspense to the cinematic narrative;
- The 'Levski Man', who is expected to experience 'ordinary feelings and emotions', characterising a variety of life situations;
- 'The Strategist Levski', who is expected to have a measured coolness and logical consistency of action towards the ultimate goal set out in the programmatic documents of the revolution.

This variety of directions to the cinematic narrative of the acknowledged apostle obliges the present analysis to restrict the examples in its interpretations in order to trace as extensively as possible the constructions identified. To each of the conventionally mentioned characteristics, examples are given from films about Levski, which continue to be intensively replicated to this day - especially on the Internet. An attempt is also made to trace and analyse those perspectives on the image that add to the wide range of possibilities for explaining and understanding the apostolic narrative, seen from the perspective of different periods and times; through the eyes of scriptwriters, stage directors, actors, cameramen, directors; through the means of expression that cinema and television offer as impact. What is also valuable in this study is the opportunity to trace the public attitude towards the characters played by Levski in different cultural and historical times. This attitude not only transfers to historical reconstruction and research on the Deacon, it also reflects on cinematic productions about him, constructing or explaining fictions towards the transformation of a historical figure into a heroic one.

To think of the cinematic narrative of the Apostle as an independent unit of the historical storylines that Bulgarian cinema tells is a kind of primary approach. Film productions, and some television productions, would be difficult to interpret without the historical and social context of their conception and appearance. Moreover, they correspond to the grand narrative of the development of the film tradition in the country, which has a complex fate. The tapes illustrating the historical-heroic nature of the deacon of Karlovy Vary hardly fall under the oft-recalled common denominator of commissioned works modelling plots of socialist realism,

say. On the other hand, Levski has been narrated through cinema much more since 1989 than in the period of the ideological staging of socialist thought. But, paradoxically, Bulgarian cinema seemed to experience its first censorship in 1933 with a film dedicated to the Apostle. For diplomatic reasons, essential scenes from Vasil Gendov's film *The Revolt of the Slaves* were removed, but the work received wide public approval.

Beyond this example, the thesis that Vasil Levski is an unheard of image in Bulgarian cinema has been creeping into the public domain at various stages. It took shape more clearly in February 2015, when, mostly in the media, a heavy and at times harsh debate emerged around the film by director Maxim Genchev, *Deacon Levski*. Along with the many critical and at the same time highly positive responses in the patriotic spectrum that were expressed about the film, a more fundamental question was raised that problematized the representation of historical events and personalities in the Bulgarian cinema. Namely, that it lacks a sustained tradition of narrating, without primary pathos, complex contexts of historical time, which it is customary to sound in tune with hyperbolizations and mystifications. In such a sense, cinema is in debt in its narrative of the strategist of the national revolution, as it works more sustainably in only one pole of the narrative of Levski, supplementing his mythopoetic modelling with visual constructions.

On the other hand, there are grounds for the claim that the *Apostle* is an unheard-of image in Bulgarian cinema to be partly true. The very act of reaching for a figure from the Bulgarian national pantheon in an attempt to rework it through various techniques, retelling and showing it through the viewpoint of directors and cinematographers, is in itself a bold and somewhat daring undertaking. We will recall the uneasy public reception of films such as Vasil Gendov's *The Revolt of the Slaves*, Vili Tsankov's *The Demon of Empire* series, and Maxim Genchev's recent large-scale attempt to achieve an epic grandeur of Levski. Outside of these productions, ambitious for their time both as an idea and as a realisation, Bulgarian cinema has left no other lasting trace in terms of making the historical image of Levski heroic.

Assuming that the systematic underfunding of Bulgarian cinema since its emergence to some extent justifies the lack of tradition in the narration of the Bulgarian historical time and its heroes, it should be no wonder why there is hardly any portrayal of Levski, who is universally acknowledged as unquestionable and definitive in the fullness of his appearance. This problem, however, is not just a crack in the missing sustainable cinematic tradition in historical film. It is a narrative that refers to notions of Vasil Levski's image in national memory. These, in turn,

have been carefully nurtured, modified, exploited, appropriated and even cynically seized by a number of socio-political currents, pseudo-intellectual regimes, caucus organizations, party clubs, etc. Begun at a very early age and while he was still alive, the narrative of the character that Levski possessed is today overwhelmed by mystifications, many of which have become embedded in public memory. The oft-repeated, what has even become the winged thought that 'everyone carries their own Levski within them' is an expression of precisely this nourishment through hyperbolizations of the Apostle's essence and the recurrent narrative of his transformation from historical to heroic life in the minds of generations. Thus, by using only one pole of the narrative, the aforementioned cinematic productions narrate the life and work of a heroic man. On the other hand, he created his image for Levski, the viewer does not remain indifferent in his reactions when the intersections of what he imagines and what he sees are missing.

Although created in different historical and even ideological contexts, the main flaw of the aforementioned cinematic productions is related to the disturbed balance in the presentation of the historical figure. Working through ready-made mythopoetic formulations in the construction of the visual narrative, *Demon of Empire* and *Deacon Levski* in particular attempt through their own means of expression to impose a narrative that rivals that which 'everyone carries within themselves'. In other words, the fundamental problem in telling the story of the Apostle through the artistic and creative techniques of cinema and television is a shared responsibility: on the one hand, to the unsustainable cinematic tradition in our country, which removes heroes from the national pantheon in order to enchant them even more, and on the other, to the directorial vision that imagines Levski as an action hero who, at the same time, ineptly plays the role of an ordinary man with his own weaknesses and faults.

Beyond the aforementioned productions, numerous smaller short stories fill gaps in the missing tradition of the cinematic narrative of the Deacon. Many of them are the result of enthusiasm but also creative inexperience of their authors. Although they also deal with archetypal signifiers of the heroic in the Bulgarian apostle, one must also take into account the fact that there are productions that visualise the historical narrative with the greatest possible distance from mythopoetic pathos.

From this point of view, the available film and television productions about the otherwise universally acknowledged national hero are commented upon in this dissertation under three conventional headings: documentary, documentary-fiction and adventure. The

adventure stories surrounding the Apostle have already been briefly mentioned. Documentary narratives about Levski usually present a specific plot around historical facts and circumstances, or model a concise retelling of his biography, drawing on the epistolary heritage, recollections of contemporaries, documents of the VRO and BRCC, accessible Ottoman archives from the trial before the Sofia Investigative Commission, etc. Such films also repeat some textbook theses on the nature of the revolutionary process in Bulgaria, their documentary nature, however, seizes almost all of the film's time-space. This somewhat deprives the viewer of the emotional imagery that reenactments of certain moments and details can convey to such a narrative.

It is important to note that the documentary narrative about Levski is most often in the form of short productions, which are also suitable for broadcast on television. This narrative is informationally saturated, emotionally charged and sometimes even relying on didactic elements in its presentation. Thus, the viewer tunes in to listen to and perceive a story more than to observe artistic decisions surrounding the story forms. However, documentary productions about Levski model a narrative of the heroic without necessarily seeking the expression of any art forms to illustrate it. As examples, some short films of the Regional History Museum in Lovech ("The Belongings of Levski", 2003, "On the Monasticism of Vasil Levski", 2013, "Levski, Lovech and the Internal Revolutionary Organization", 2013, "Towards the Kukrin Golgotha", 2013) appeared in the context of the 140th anniversary of the Apostle's death, commemorated in 2013. Also the production of "Folklore TV", "House-Museum "Vasil Levski" from 2018, as well as "Levski in front of the court of the Gate and of history" from 1997 by director Andrei Altyparmakov⁶.

It is not without reason that some television programmes are also included in this documentary strand of the narrative, which, although they do not follow the formal requirements of the documentary film genre, comment on historical productions of the heroic narrative and in this sense inform their viewers. Examples could be given by the Hour on Bulgaria series on SKAT TV and editions dedicated to the 180th anniversary of Levski's birth, celebrated in 2017. These television narratives rely on the "pure narration" of Levski and the stories surrounding his life, rather than on the visual reconstruction of images that would reinforce the picture-led discourse about the historical-heroic figure. The valuable resource of

⁶ In addition to the film interpretations dedicated to the nationally acclaimed apostle, the efforts of director and producer Andrei Alteppermakov, who, in addition to "Levski at the Gate and the Court of History", created films such as "Worthy Eating", "The Apostle's Forgotten Ways", "For Levski", etc., should also be noted.

such a narrative lies in the accumulation of perspectives on one or another aspect of the national hero's fate - possibly devoid of the mythopoetic characteristics that condition other narratives around the Apostle. In recent years, however, interpretations have developed in the television space that follow aspects of documentary, but at the same time deal with increasingly difficult to prove hypotheses. They generally situate themselves around the theme of Freemasonry⁷ and assume a very different narrative of Levski, one that exceeds the current sustainability of historically verifiable circumstances.

As for the second very conditional part, that of documentary-fiction film and television productions, it must be acknowledged that film production puts more sustainable resources into this segment than into the purely documentary one. The possibility of more freedom of interpretation, the reliance on added value in terms of visual solutions and, last but not least, the presence of actors' reenactments at certain moments of the otherwise documentary narrative that the viewer is watching are essential markers that determine the impact of this type of production. In recent years, many have also been produced entirely on the Internet, where the 'monopoly' over the reproduction of knowledge belongs to literally every user.

Documentary-fiction productions about Vasil Levski are characterised by three main distinguishing features: they almost necessarily feature authorities in 'Levski-knowledge'; actors who reproduce images of this knowledge; and visual elements that condense the proposed narrative into pictures. While these productions, like pure documentaries, fill the conventions of the short film, they are a preferred device for representing historical figures and contexts. In the case of the narrative surrounding the Apostle, they are also the most sweeping in manifestation. Documentary-artistic visualizations of Levski's life and work have engaged both professional film professionals and amateurs in transformations of the historical through the means of cinematography. And one more thing. Compared to what are claimed as box-office films that purport to narrate Levski in both historical and adventure-mythopoetic terms, projects that manage to capture the necessary connection between historical and visual narratives are emerging in documentary-art films.

Of these, the following should also be mentioned: especially in recent years, in which the development of technological processes has unlocked a natural massification in the production of short film forms with the Internet as their main medium, the narrative about Levski has

⁷ See e.g. Kerev, St. Vasil Levski and the Secret Societies of Revolutionary Work, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Vf-awm6Y9o>, last visited on 09.05.2021.

become another example of a certain distancing from the monopoly of authority in general, which handles the historical and in this case the 'Leftist scholarship'. This is because documentary-fiction films are subject to other rules and purposes in presenting a historical person or process. And it is here that authority is invoked, invited to give character to the proposed cinematic narrative. Through his knowledge, the monolithic is closed in the art-documentary narrative, which compiles in turn pictures, gestures, sounds, and sometimes short reenactments that illustrate the narrative.

And here are examples that show Levski in documentary-artistic terms. "Black Legend" from 2005, directed by Docho Bodjakov, is considered by many film experts as the best film made about the Apostle. The narrative focuses mainly on two moments: Levski's journey to Lovech, where he has to collect the committee archives after the investigations launched following the raid on the Turkish post office at Arabakonak; the other direction of the film, which is also more extensive, is related to the role of Pope Krustyu Nikiforov. Without making judgments or justifying actions or inactions, the film points out the weaknesses in both Levski's judgments and those of Pope Krustyu and the activists of the Lovech Central Committee. Black Legend spares no detail about the internal contradictions, intrigues and hubris within the committee network of the provisional government of Lviv. They are mainly directed at the main protagonist in almost 2/3 of the film - the priest. The film relies on twisted but skillful reenactments of specific episodes of the historical narrative, which are at certain points, however, so detailed that they illustrate tightly the processes leading Levski to the gallows. "Black Legend is by its nature a brave film, for through these and the arguments of its narrators, an attempt is made to lift the 'hard rock' since Lyuben Karavelov, Zakhari Stoyanov and Ivan Vazov about the Apostle's betrayal. 'Black Legend' is a film provocation to accumulated facts put in more or less mysterious wrappings. The production's limited evaluative judgments and logical tracing of the behavior of the Lovech co-conspirators after the adventure at Arabakonak, lead the viewer to ask a series of critical questions about the state of the committee center and the decisions Levski made surrounding his stay in Lovech. The film directed by Docho Bodjakov and screenwriter Georgi Mishev based the fundamental part of the film on the historical evidence known by 2005 in combination with a feature reconstruction. But its purpose is not to seize the time-space of the narrative. On the contrary, it rather assists, densifies the narrative text through which arguments are cleverly accumulated in the direction of taking the stigma off Pope Krustyu. At the same time, the director's decision is not even about shifting blame for the events surrounding the Kukrinskoe Inn. Rather, the idea is to present in depth the

tension that has arisen in the co-conspirators in Lviv, which also finds its victim in the face of the priest, the de facto protagonist of the production.

"1872" ends its narrative right next to the events in Kukrina. Alma Mater TV's 2012 film presents the last year of Vasil Levski's life in a much broader context. It relates to the reforms in the Ottoman Empire known as the 'Tanzimat', and the virtual bankruptcy of the political machine in the context of the entry of foreign capital. The 42-minute documentary explains the situation surrounding the BRCC and the VRO, the time of revolutionary terror, and Levski's concerns regarding the sustainability of the committee network in the wake of the events of Arabakonak. Particularly impressive are the reenactments of certain episodes of the historical narrative led by specialists. Through hints of detail, chiaroscuro and moving images set against the backdrop of the particularly appropriate music of the ambient formation Ishikhia, the viewer is able to capture the dramatic moments associated with recent efforts to strengthen the revolutionary network. The film explains the reasons for the revolutionary terror imposed by the VRO, as well as some serious lapses in the organization of committee activists that lead to fatal consequences. The graphic elements, unobtrusive animations, stroked reenactments, and popular science narrative make this a skillfully presented student film that approaches the density of the historical narrative of Black Legend. "The documentary "1872" seeks to show a perspective on the Apostle's life little known to Bulgarian society, which is still highly debated in Bulgarian historical scholarship. This narrative is guided by the most eminent researchers of Levski's life and work, who will take us along a difficult path filled with doubts, struggle and sacrifice." developed by students who have no experience in making this type of documentaries, the authors Yordan Boychev, Mina Hristova, Anna Chankova, Delyan Rusev, Iva Yaneva and Angel Zlatkov give a comprehensive overview of the last year of Levski's life. In its striving for vivid closeness to the facts and their correct interpretation, the film approaches the value of Black Legend - precisely in terms of its treatment of historical evidence.

The two documentary-fiction films briefly presented here are, in the author's opinion, perhaps the most representative in terms of the life and work of Vasil Levski when we talk about such short historical-popular productions. On the one hand, they rely on the correct historical discourse that handles documentary arguments, and where a dense proof of one thesis or another is not possible, this is noted in the narrative presented. On the other hand, through a creative taste in the presentation of the reenactments that illustrate the historical narrative, the viewer is offered content that tells a story of Levski beyond the mythopoetic tradition, legendary

treatments and the high pathos that insists on seizing at all costs the functions of the historical figure in order to make him heroic.

The scope of this study, however, stops at three filmic examples that present the image of the Apostle in 'adventurous terms' and place him in situations of complex, dramatic decisions. What *The Slave Revolt* (1933, directed by Vasil Gendov), the miniseries *The Demon of Empire* (1971, directed by Vili Tsankov) and *Deacon Levski* (2015, directed by Maxim Genchev) have in common is a particular drive to organise the narrative of the Apostle around a legendary-mythological beginning. Although *The Slave Revolt* has not survived, historical evidence about it shows that it provoked serious controversy in society - just as *Demon of Empire* and *Deacon Levski* did. Moreover, for both Vasil Gendov's and Vili Tsankov's tapes, the Turkish state reacted harshly to the representation of certain aspects of Ottoman rule in Bulgaria. These productions are part of three very different periods in the development of Bulgarian cinema (insofar as we have written records of the concept and content of the "The Revolt of the Slaves"). These films do not explain the historical figure of Levski, but more or less model a narrative of a national ideal; they do not debunk mythologies, but nurture them on the foundations of historical direction; they do not aim so much at chronological verisimilitude as at contact with the fairy-tale-legendary beginning. In fact, the plots can also serve as a lens through which to observe both the actual steps in the development of the cinematic narrative of the national in general, and to trace the relationship to a figure like the Apostle, periodically removed from the national pantheon to serve different interpretations. The fact that one of the first Bulgarian films to treat the narrative around Vasil Levski at all is very indicative of the importance attached to a figure of such stature. At the same time, the approach to the Apostle through the means of expression of Ivan Vazov in the miniseries *The Demon of the Empire* shows the attempt of an epoch quite different in its social and political postulates to look at the heroic. And Maxim Ganchev's *Levski* exists through stencilled formulations, embedded in the industrial production of 'action classics'.

It should be recalled that the analysis of this dissertation is far from encompassing all documentary or fictional productions around the story of Levski. However, an attempt is made to highlight the most significant among them, which contributed to the construction of the image of 'our best Bulgarian' (after Danail Popov - author's note) through the artistic and creative techniques of the seventh art. For example, on the occasion of the 183rd anniversary of the birth of the deacon of Karlovo, celebrated in 2020, public television is showing two documentary projects - one dedicated to Gina Kuncheva, and the second, treating the topic of

the newly discovered Ottoman documents, with the journalist Yordan Dimitrov. The curious decision, for example, to have the Apostle's Mother played by Meglena Karalambova, who narrates in the present tense the hardships surrounding the loss of Levski, instils the viewer with particular confidence in the entire narrative, built mainly around memories and legends of the special relationship between mother and son. The production takes the viewer into the world of family stories, kept by the Apostle's relatives, as the central focus among discrete reenactments is the appearance of Gina Kuncheva and her reflections on the meaning of sacrifice in the turbulent pre-liberation times. "Testament of Freedom, on the other hand, is a production summary regarding the new documents surrounding Levski and his companions, which were addressed in the overview chapter one. The two state-of-the-art documentaries focus the narrative in different contexts, but what unites their author's effort is the search for verisimilitude in terms of the presentation of the Apostle's image - once through the family histories, a second time through the documentary evidence, which in turn could overturn historical elements before and after the events of Arabakonak in September 1872.

The story of Levski is an element of other grand narratives that contain the history of the Bulgarian liberation movement - narratives that represent the 19th century in Europe and the Balkans. In such a complex context, the accumulation of myths, legendary interpretations and folkloric references is natural, and even logically justified. The narrative of Levski is a fundamental part of the great historical-national myth of the Bulgarians, which is explained and understood through heroic-symbolic capital and legitimated through topoi such as the Balkan, the church, the school, the battlefield, the secret committee nuclei, street-home, freedom-slavery oppositions, etc. This historico-national myth is dynamic, pulsating, and develops through generalizing patterns largely embedded in the statements of Renaissance writers and poets. They seek out, and where they do not exist, build the foundations of heroic-national self-confidence through examples inspired by the great revolutionary narratives that characterized the nineteenth-century era in the Balkans.

The grand narrative of Levski is a sufficiently representative narrative in the history of national liberation movements in Bulgaria - an inseparable meaning construct from the ideas of political rights and freedoms for peoples under foreign influence. Thus situated, the narrative of the Apostle cannot be fully understood without considering the cultural and historical processes that influenced the formation of the mythopoetic characteristics with which the Bulgarians charged their local Renaissance. In addition to inherently significant issues such as the shaping of the New Bulgarian language, the struggle for an independent Bulgarian church, the

establishment of mass secular education, and the accelerated transition from tradition to modernity, the question of political equality and independence was no less important to the contemporaries of the era. Thus the text "Levski" enters only at first glance in the variety of micro-narratives about the significant personalities of the time. But this narrative cannot, and does not, lag behind in its development, as is the case with other otherwise heroic figures of the Renaissance.

Some possible reasons why this is so are discussed in the exposition of chapter one. Others have to do with the special status that Levski acquired in his lifetime, when primary impressions of him began to take shape, formed on the basis of retold incidents, direct encounters, or expectations of the peculiar nature of the work undertaken to form secret revolutionary nuclei. Thus, because of his recognizable role, Levski is designated as the first apostle of the revolution being prepared by an otherwise limited circle of persons, dreamt of as a national revolution. Returning briefly to the very beginning of this analysis, it should be recalled that it was not only the Deacon's close associates in Karlovo who saw in him a wise strategist and a well-organized practitioner. Fictional heroic tales, and even legends, are told about Levski as he made his rounds in the Bulgarian frontiers of the Ottoman Empire. This narrative, which began more as folklore-sacral than historical, continued to develop in popular memory long after the monk of Karlovo and his associates were no longer among the living. Thus, the narrative perpetuated by contemporaries gives rise to subsequent interpretations that hyperbolize the public image of the Apostle, while scholarship attempts to reason about Levski through historical sources and his epistolary legacy.

To the conventionally referred to as early narrative "Levski" perhaps the most complete information, based on oral tradition, is provided by Stefan Karakostov's collection *Levski in the Memories of His Contemporaries*. Explicitly stressing that these collected memoir narratives rely on veracity in their exposition, Karakostov practically creates a biographical text about the Apostle, but modelled through the perspectives of the people with whom the revolutionary strategist had direct contact. However, as has become clear, these recollections do not present an entirely positive early narrative of Vasil Kunchev. On the contrary, they are dominated by the assessments of contemporaries, which are often located at both poles. It was only later, when Bulgarian literature began to interpret what it saw as important Renaissance processes that possessed the vital resources to model the of the national mythpoesis, the image of Levski will be gradually purged of the earlier negative connotations with which he was associated.

When it comes to the heroic presentation of the narrative about him, credit goes to Zahary Stoyanov. Through his biography of the Apostle, he consciously enforces the transformation of a historical figure into a heroic one. This line of thinking is reinforced by later biographers of the Karlovo Deacon, who, while working through the multiple grounds of historical sources, narrate Levski as a national role model. In fact, Ivan Vazov also sees him as such, who quite consciously in his works turns Levski into a metaphor of the national spirit - an expression of sacrifice for the ideal of freedom.

The accumulated biographical narrative (see the biographies of Z. Stoyanov, D. Strashimirov, I. Undzhiev, etc.), in which the ideas of the Internal Revolutionary Organization, for which the Apostle also advocated in his letters, were repeatedly discussed, began to be used by the social and political movements that emerged in the years after the constitution of the Bulgarian state. Far-left and far-right formations read the Levski narrative, interpreted it for its universal character, and incorporated it into their vision of social and political organization. Some of the Apostle's visionary views were recognised and exploited by the socialist state when the most acute debate around Levski developed: that over the recovery of his remains. Added to it, though it began at a later time, the idea of canonizing the otherwise consciously unmoored deacon began to gain popularity. The narratives of the grave and sanctity provide essential insight into how a national hero is thought of as in the context of the demands of the day, in which political, scientific, dogmatic, religious, and societal expectations are intertwined. Various usages have been applied to Levski, and his image has been used to fit into cabinet models that rely on the selective permeability of facts and arguments. The whole point of clarifying the two debates about the grave and sanctity suffers from excessive expectations for which there are insufficient arguments. These are debates that problematize the narrative of the national apostle far more than they help to publicly clear it of political-ideological and societal hoaxes.

At the same time, under the gaze of censorious criticism, the story of the Apostle is literally reinterpreted by Prof. Nikolai Genchev. By adhering to the ideologically unencumbered factology, Genchev analyses the narrative "Levski" through modern concepts based on universal value orientations of the state and social structure. Although in a romantic pathos, the narrative of the national hero receives an intriguing glimpse through Mercia McDermott's biographical account, and later Bulgarian literature adds new techniques in conceptualizing the Apostle as a man facing the fateful choices of his time.

When an attempt is made to add mythopoetic characteristics to the narrative of Levski, the process follows precisely the national tradition associated with the formation of the symbolic pantheon of personalities and events characterizing the gradual constitution of the nation-state for the Bulgarians. The fact that mythological and legendary narratives are told about the deacon of Karlovy Vary, while he fills with content the mandate of the first Apostle, given to him by the BRCC, shows the beginnings of the first stages of the poeticization of the historical personality. To become a legend, Levski must be told as such. For the mythologies surrounding his image to gain monolithicity, they must pass through the imaginative connotations of popular memory. The narrative of the national apostle is told through the narrative of the modeling of aspects of the nation-state. It is of particular importance that one of these aspects is related to the legendalization of the historical figures assembled in the national mythopoetic pantheon. Once created, it is gradually even sacralised, and the participants are given qualities that serve as an overall value model to emulate. To be enduring, the national pantheon must be constantly fed with mystified judgments as well as told through them.

The narrative of Levski in this complex plot of symbols is perhaps the most representative example, as it has been repeatedly exploited, retold, appropriated, and appropriated. Maria Todorova gives a clear material summary of what has been presented so far. "The literature devoted to Levski grew in geometric progression: in the first 54 years after his death, up to the 100th anniversary of his birth, some 740 titles were published; by the end of World War II, the number had doubled; and in the next 40 years, up to 1986, nearly 3,000 more titles were added. This figure does not enter the avalanche of publications about Levski in the late 1980s and in the 1990s". In other words, this narrative begins to look through the contexts of historical time, periodically returning to the mythopoetic resources of the national pantheon, acquiring new meanings and contents through the current conventions of the day, and accumulating characteristics beyond formal scholarly discourse.

It is quite understandable that the mythological narrative of Levski took shape within some of its conventional boundaries relatively early in historical terms. This is because the memorial, biographical and poetic-legendary narrative of Levski actively participates in the important process of shaping the national mythopoesis, the necessities of which are most evident in the years of the three national catastrophes for the Bulgarian state. "Thus, in the 1920s, the myth of Levski finally took shape and the whole mechanism for its transmission was in place - a sacred text that was disseminated through textbooks, a regular educational system that reached every child everywhere with the help of normative texts, and a complex commemorative ritual.

' Subsequently, the narrative of the national apostle undergoes complex ideological accumulations, and to contemporary trends, two intriguing processes are observed which will only be highlighted in this brief conclusion.

On the one hand, the access to new archival materials, through which revisions of certain formulations of the historical narrative of the Apostle are possible, acts encouragingly for Bulgarian historiography. There are not a few problematic fields that need to be clarified after the events of Arabakonak in September 1872, for example. These relate both to the investigation surrounding the action of Dimitri Общи and his cronies and, more fundamentally, to the case surrounding Levski's betrayal and the trial in Sofia. This narrative of the last months of the Apostle's life has generated and continues to generate the most significant dividing lines among researchers. The hopes that this narrative might be further substantiated in its elucidation are, of course, linked to access to the Ottoman archives in Istanbul and their precise analysis.

On the other hand, at the adjacent pole of contemporary interpretations of Levski, stands the free representation of the vast body of historical accumulated knowledge for the hero of Karlovo. Its accessibility gives rise to an uncritical use of expressive means and claims unproven by historical science. Furthermore, through the undeniable range of possibilities of the internet and social media, the narrative of Levski is often broken into micro-narratives that are easier to mystify and present to audiences.

This is also a feature of some film productions, which are discussed in detail in the text. Although Bulgarian cinema lacks a sustained tradition of narrating Levski, it attempts to view the national hero through ready-made stencil formulations reminiscent of the biblical account of the God-man, the poeticization of the heroic in the individual, and the imposition of folklore as a compensation for some controversial biographical narratives. Narratives of Levski in film and television are undeniably an essential element around understanding and shaping his public image, as they draw ground from a variety of directions. This in turn poses challenges for the historiography that narrates Levski. Challenges at least related to refuting mystifications and unscientific judgments.

During the work on the dissertation, some additional research by the author was published that directly or indirectly concerns the Levski narrative:

1. How Levski is thought through the narratives of the grave and sanctity. Doctoral Readings of the Sofia University "St. Doctoral Studies in Sofia University, Faculty of Philosophy.
2. Power uses of the past in the context of the 1300th anniversary of Bulgaria. Sp. Contemporary Linguistics. Contemporary Linguistics. Kliment Ohridski. Issue II (2021): pp. 35-48 ISSN 2603-4425
3. Exploitations of- and identifications with the image of Vasil Levski in social networks. The text Levski - readings in own and foreign context, International Student Seminar, Karlovo (2018). ISBN 978-619-90207-1-5