

## REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Raina Gavrilova, Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridsky"  
of a dissertation for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor"  
Field of higher education 3., professional department 3.1 Sociology, anthropology and cultural  
sciences

**Author:** Rumen Skrinski

**Topic:** "Vasil Levski in feature and documentary cinema: narratives and interpretations"

### 1. General description of the presented materials

I have been appointed with order RD-38-653 of 14.12.22 of the Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (SU) as a member of the scientific jury for the defense of a thesis titled "Vasil Levski in feature and documentary cinema: narratives and interpretations" for acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the field of higher education 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences, doctoral program "Culturology" (Media image of Vasil Levski). The author of the dissertation is Rumen Ilkov Skrinski - PhD student (full-time) at the Department of Cultural Studies, Faculty of Philosophy, supervised by Prof. Georgi Valchev, Ph.D.

The set of paper materials presented by Rumen Skrinski is in accordance with the requirements of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of the SU and includes the following documents:

- a request to the Rector to disclose the procedure for the defense of a dissertation;
- curriculum vitae in European format;
- departmental board minutes related to reporting readiness for opening of the procedure and with a preliminary discussion of the dissertation work;
- dissertation work;
- abstract;
- a list of scientific publications on the subject of the dissertation;
- copies of five scientific publications;
- declaration of originality and authenticity of the attached documents;
- reference for compliance with the minimal requirements.

The review of all the proposed documents shows that they fully comply with the requirements and follow the rules of the procedure.

## **2. Brief biographical data for the candidate**

PhD student Rumen Skrinkski graduated with a B.A. from the Department of Cultural Studies at Sofia University (2016), where he also completed the Master's program in Management and Socialization of Cultural Heritage (2018). In 2019, he was enrolled as a full-time doctoral student at the same department. Rumen has worked during his studies as a reporter and editor in various media outlets and as an associate at the municipality of Pavel Banya. From May 2021 until today, he is a reporter at bTV national network.

Rumen Skrinkski acquired in the course of his work knowledge and personal experience in the field of video documentation and editing, which turned out to be a valuable asset in view of the chosen topic of his dissertation.

## **3. Relevance of the topic to the current state of society and culture and appropriateness of the set goals and tasks**

Various studies have repeatedly demonstrated the high relevance and value of the past for a large part of Bulgarian society. Whether it is pride in the achievements or justifications for objectionable practices, the trend to seek explanations and justifications in the past has become a constant motif in public speaking. We should add to the picture the growing appetite of quite a number of political organizations to use the past in their propaganda and the for-profit exploitation of the topic by talented and not-so-talented artists. (The kitsch paintings of Vasil Goranov and the historical movies of Maxim Genchev are among the most recent examples). In this environment, the study of the process of formation and popularization of the national iconography is urgently relevant. Rumen Skrinkski aims to follow the building of the public image of Vasil Levski against the background of the political and cultural situation in the different periods. The focus on the film productions is important as the artistic and documentary video narratives have a strong impact, positive and negative, particularly at present when the images are about to completely displace the verbal communication. The thesis is an important step in

the efforts to normalize our post-communist reality. I should immediately add that even if the text is devoid of pathos and evangelization, the proposed observations would be useful to anyone involved in the production, distribution, and viewing of moving pictures.

#### **4. Knowledge of the topic**

Rumen Skriski has set himself the goal of synthesizing the long history of public speaking about Vasil Levski, and the significant research work is evidenced both in the text and in the attached list of the literature used (77 printed works and 52 online editions, among which there are links to the analyzed video materials). Solid literary research is essential as video interpretations grow out of the verbal narrative. The latter, particularly the ones which have permeated popular culture, shape the thinking of the filmmakers, and their complexity is clearly visible in the video interpretations, which follow in the next chapters. The doctorand has familiarized himself in detail with the video production on Levski, as well as with the theoretical, professional, and mass-media discussions, which surround it.

#### **5. Research methodology**

The author does not explicitly clarify his methodology. In a single place he mentions that "to think of the film narrative about the Apostle as an independent unit of the historical storylines that Bulgarian cinema tells is a kind of primary approach" (p.58), an interesting statement that I would like to be commented on during of the defense. The lack of formulations on the methodological frameworks of the research is not, in my opinion, an accidental omission: the protean growths of the image itself and of its reception are difficult to cover with a standard analysis. If I have to reconstruct his approach from the produced text, it can be described in one word: culturalist, that is, complex. The first chapter is historiographical text, arranged chronologically, but the questions it poses are influenced by the approach of narratology. The second chapter reads like an art critic analysis: conception, artistic intentions, and reception of the product, but we constantly see anthropological, sociological and even psychological corrections, related, above all, to the impact of the environment. The third chapter arranges and attempts to classify and prove the validity of the various micronarratives, which I see as a topical analysis.

## 6. Characterization and evaluation of the thesis

The text is organized into an Introduction (13 pages), three chapters (41, 46 and 19 pages respectively), Conclusion, and Bibliography. The task of the study is stated most synthetically on p. 104: "to offer another approach to the thinking about Levski's " and to make "an attempt to gain insight into the interpretations of the Apostle, endorsed by Bulgarian cinema and television", which I read as an attempt for a cultural interpretation. The dissertation begins with a chapter entitled "The Levski Narrative" and retraces the emergence, unfolding, assimilation and appropriation of the public image of the revolutionary. The discussed texts and assessments are well known and commented on many times, but their systematization is an important basis of the subsequent, original parts of the work. The doctorand does not narrate the contents, but elicits the saliences, which shape the image, even when they are quite different: it is recognized and adopted by contemporaries and by memoirists, by early and by late popularizers, by socialists and by nationalists, by totalitarian ideologues and by liberal-democratic reformers. A second essential feature of the outlined public image is the gradual and intensifying mythologization and sacralization, which seamlessly coexist with serious scientific research. As I mentioned above, this part is important, especially for a historically unsophisticated audience. Levski's "narrative" could be compared as a kind of folkloric creation, which unites diverse and disparate fragments without contradiction, and turns the historical figure into a mythical one, into an emanation of everything nationally heroic, in a sense filling all the embarrassed gaps in the Bulgarian psyche. The subsections devoted to the discussions surrounding the grave and mortal remains of the Apostle and the attempts at canonization are important symptoms of this process. On the occasion of the brief mention of the Calvary and martyrology in general, I would suggest a small but interesting direction for possible research into the ways of penetration and dissemination of these powerful parts of the narrative that shape public consciousness. I have in mind the global discussions about the authenticity of relics (including in Bulgaria), of objects such as the Longinus spear or the Shroud of Turin. In general, the role of the receptive public in guiding the debates is only marked and perhaps deserves more extensive attention - besides the media and public speaking in general, a powerful channel of formation of unarticulated but well-known attitudes is education and especially the inclusion of the mentioned texts in textbooks since primary

education. An interesting finale is the section devoted to what Rumen Skriniski calls "free" storytelling (pp. 52ff.), i.e. the social media and the blogosphere mostly because of its relevance and growing influence.

The second chapter "The Film Levski" introduces the main topic of the thesis. At the very beginning, Rumen formulates six lines that represent the character and which vary from the symbolic and abstract (allegories of meaningful life), through popular archetypes (mythical and Christian) to established models of the cinema (the lone hero, the "man" Levski and the "strategist Levski). This articulation sets the direction of the research, but it is also important in order to review material that is heterogeneous in quality and message. It can only be regretted that the material of the chapter is not organized according to this scheme (but then it is taken up again in Chapter Three). Here is a concise but complete overview of the production of films devoted to Levski and the socio-political conditions in which this occurs. The main visual and visual-verbal works are presented by genre and partly by approach, avoiding retelling and rather outlining the problematic points of 'failing' to produce a film narrative - an important thesis of this text that emerges here. A contribution is the juxtaposition of the authors' requests with the audience's response, which will be interpreted more fully in Chapter Three.

The third chapter - "The image of Levski" aims to "order the different aspects" (p. 104) of this image. At the very beginning, the author states the core of the new approach, promised at the beginning: "If it is possible to set a general framework for the already mentioned films, regardless of their genre and conceptual task, then it would be connected with the aspiration to achieve the comprehensiveness of the image of Vasil Levski". I am not aware of the more recent studies (Lalev, Hristov) to verify the originality of this statement, but I find it informative and offering not only a new way of assessing them, but also a key to the explanation of the drama with the continuous disintegration of the narrative into small narratives (in the case of films) and the unarticulated ambitions of the authors to achieve precisely this scale and complexity. If I may be permitted a comparison, an artist can with equal success convince the whole audience that he has painted the true image of God. The author traces and comments on the "stringing" of

qualities (a well-found metaphor), which in most cases would fail any artistic endeavor, but, nevertheless, fails to deter the search for the "true" "complete" image of the Apostle.

The conclusion summarizes and repeats the observation and theses of the chapters, but also offers some firmer formulations: "The story "Levski" is a fundamental part of the great historical-national myth of the Bulgarians", located in the "foundations of the heroic-national self-confidence" (p. 123 ).

## **7. Original contributions and relevance for science and practice**

Rumen Skriniski has not formulated himself the contributions of his work (as is the tradition), but they can be deduced from reading the text. First of all, the carefully stated but convincing conclusion that a consensual visual (and any other kind) image of Vasil Levski can never be achieved, because he has long since become an idea that entered both science and culture. Moreover, in popular imagination it is a mythological image that can have interpretations but not definitive dimensions. This is especially true of visual reenactment, which engages not only the audience's rational response, but also the emotional one. The hypothesis that "the "Levski" narrative, built through artistic-aesthetic, cinematographic and television techniques, contributes to the mystification and legendization of this historical figure, placing him even more tightly in the bosom of the national mythopoesis" is convincingly proven. I find the six hypostases formulated (allegory, mythic hero, saint, action hero, human, genius strategist) useful tools in exploring the unfolding narrative. The collected and summarized material, especially in the second and third chapters, is an important addition to the "Levski" canon and could support both further historical studies and the cultural understanding of the realities of modern Bulgarian reality.

## **8. Evaluation of publications on the dissertation work**

The doctorand has attached five publications on related topics that develop individual themes of the larger issue and demonstrate established research skills.

## **9. Personal participation of the doctoral student**

Throughout the period of his studies, Rumen Skrinski has developed his interest in the imprint of the past on modern life. His experience both in municipal administration and in various media has provided him with personal impressions and an understanding of public attitudes and sensitivities. His work reveals a good balance between researcher objectivity and empathy for the dramas of national self-esteem.

## **10. Abstract**

The abstract correctly conveys the content of the dissertation.

## **11. Critical remarks and recommendations**

Apart from the recommendations mentioned above, I would recommend one more editing of the text. Repetitions of themes and conclusions are noted between Chapters One and Two and between Chapters Two and Three. Purely stylistically, some strong epithets and adverbs such as "incredible" or "трафаретен" should be used more sparingly. Recommendations for additions can always be made to a dissertation, but it seems to me that the analysis of the construction of the narrative (Chapter One) would benefit if other media are added in which the ideas exist and are perpetuated - for example, the textbooks on Bulgarian literature or the scenarios of the public celebrations.

## **12. Personal impressions**

I have known Rumen Skrinski since the third year of his studies at SU, and I have always been impressed by his self-discipline, thoughtful personal opinion to every issue raised, and diligence. I see these qualities in his texts as well.

## **13. Recommendations for future use of the thesis**

There is no doubt that the topic can be developed into research on historical films in general – as the author himself mentions. Despite the fact that few people read theses and scholarly books,

the public discourse must develop - especially in times when the public space is taken over by irresponsible "patriotic" talk.

## CONCLUSION

The dissertation exhibits scientific and applied results and meets the minimal requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ZRASRB), the Regulations for the Implementation of ZRASRB and the relevant Regulations of SU "St. Kliment Ohridski". The dissertation work shows that the doctoral candidate Rumen Skrinski has in-depth knowledge and professional skills in scientific field 3.1 Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences, demonstrating qualities and skills for independent scholarly research. Therefore, I attest my positive assessment of the research presented by the above-reviewed thesis and I propose to the honorable scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "doctor" to Rumen Skrinski in the field of higher education: 3. Social sciences, journalism and information and professional direction 3.1 Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences, doctoral program "Cultural Studies".

03/01/2023

Signature: .....

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