

REVIEW

for Rumen Ilkov Skriniski's dissertation

"Vasil Levski in feature and documentary cinema: Narratives and interpretations"
for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor"

The valuable scientific analyzes of life, work, death and the subsequent heroic immortalization through the elevation of Vasil Levski to the highest pedestal of the Bulgarian national pantheon are inevitably marked with elements of academic challenge and public responsibility. An essential problem is the fact that in our national consciousness the exceptional person being studied has a specific dual essence - historical and mythological. This creates hard-to-surmount obstacles both for the social sciences engaged in this issue, and for the almost century-old attempts to get the universally recognized Bulgarian Apostle an adequate film adaptation. It is precisely this discourse that Rumen Skriniski has targeted with his cultural research. By coincidence, the procedure for his defense coincided with the critical resonance of the film "Botev" and the series "The War of the Letters", presented to the television audience by the public BNT. In this situation, his work is indeed relevant both from a scientific and social point of view.

The dissertation has a volume of 141 pages. Structurally, the text contains an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography. The thematic principle is applied. This structure is regular, and through the topics fixed in the titles of the chapters, the ambition for a comprehensive analysis of the researched scientific problems is stated.

The introduction formulates the problem of the interaction between the historical Levski, his public image, his mythologizing and the variants of the national hero's cinematic image. The cultural contrast between the European "Belle Epoque" and the specific Balkan "Orient" is highlighted in the context of Eric Hobsbawm's thesis about the "long" 19th century. It has been concluded that this "long" century contains a "total discourse" for political modeling of the European continent. According to the author, the grand narrative of the 19th century is actually the narrative of contradictions, and for the Balkans, this narrative predetermines the "history of the search for sustainable identity" that continues to this day. In this part, the introduction would probably benefit from a brief introduction to the modern European and Balkan nations and their respective nationalisms that were formed in this very century. The claim that Vasil Levski was chosen to be heroized during his lifetime seems controversial. In this sense, it cannot be assumed that the memories of companions and contemporaries of the Apostle are testimonies from Levski's time (p. 4). Special attention is paid to the historical sources with an emphasis on the epistolary legacy of Vasil Levski. The author is based on Dimitar Strashimirov's two-volume book, but should also introduce the subsequent documentary editions (Vasil Levski. Documentary heritage. Sofia, 1973; Vasil Levski. Documents. T. 2. Sofia, 2009), including analytical explanatory notes and historical commentaries of high scientific value. In the introduction, the main goals of the dissertation work are logically presented - to investigate the formation, development and modification of the public image of the Apostle through his film adaptations.

The first chapter, entitled THE LEVSKY NARRATIVE, contains 9 paragraphs. The first of these treats the early Levski narrative. Two parts stand out in it - the historiographic descriptions based on data from the sources and the pathetic narrative of fiction. In the first part, the author rightly draws attention to the fact that the conspiratorial national-revolutionary being of the Apostle is a significant reason for the limited, both in quantity and quality, authentic sources embedded in the early Levski narrative. Against this background, the study would benefit from the information in the memoirs of Dr. Hristo Stambolski about Levski's visits to Constantinople and his meetings with representatives of the local Bulgarian community - a problem thoroughly and critically analyzed by Plamen Bozhinov (Bozhinov, Pl. Constantinople Bulgarians between the reforms and the revolution 1875 - 1877. Sofia, 2012, pp. 86 - 123). The contemporary scientific contribution of Maria Todorova is emphasized, presenting the various aspects that generate the process of heroization in the "Levski" narrative. It would be good to note that a pioneer in this academic direction is Nikolay Genchev with the innovative survey "Vasil Levski in the Bulgarian historical memory" (Genchev, N. Vasil Levski. Sofia, 1987, pp. 129 - 218). The author succinctly and accurately characterizes the three evaluative directions in the entire early documentary account of the future national hero: admiration, restraint, dislike (p. 18). Central attention in the second part of the paragraph presenting the narrative "Levski" in the earliest literary works dedicated to him, is naturally given to Vazov's "Apostle of Freedom". The author rightly defines Levski's charismatic essence, described by the genius pen of Ivan Vazov, as a "full-blooded folklore - mystical image of a national hero" (p. 22). In this sense, it is under the suggestion of the "Patriarch of Bulgarian Literature" Vasil Levski to be thought of as a kind of "Bulgarian Christ". Without explicitly indicating the final chronological limit, the paragraph obviously ends with the tragic finale of the wars that the Kingdom of Bulgaria waged according to the precepts of irredentism (1912 - 1918). The second paragraph is labeled "Narrative of Recognition." Its chronological range covers the period 1918 - 1944. The text emphasizes the rise of Levski as a universally recognized national hero - a process that is a counterpoint to the national catastrophes associated by the critical public consciousness with the traditional political elite until that time. In this sense, the author accepts as legitimate the use of the "Levski" narrative by both left and right political ideologies (p. 25 - 26). The emphasis in the first case on the ideology of the Communist Party, and in the second case on the chosen example of the Bulgarian National Legions, is well founded. As an opportunity not used by the author, we can note the idea of how the two volumes with documents about Levski, published at that time by Dimitar Strashimirov, affected the Bulgarian society. Rumén Daskalov's historiographic overview of both the mythologizing of our Revival as an archetypal epoch and the heroized Apostle of Freedom would be useful for this section (Daskalov, R. How is the Bulgarian Revival thought. Sofia, 2002, pp. 257-259, with . 321 - 354). The third paragraph analyzes the Levski narrative in new research. According to the author, new research begins with the first edition of Ivan Undzhiev's large-scale scientific biography of the Apostle. It is a well-founded assessment that Iv. In all probability, Undzhiev was guided by the idea that the public perception of Levski should "remain in the realm of scientific arguments, but also correspond with hard-to-shake hyperbolized theses" (p. 29). The paragraph traces the development of the "Levski" narrative in the academic works of Nikolay Genchev, Doyno Doinov and other prominent

representatives of the Bulgarian historiographical school. The appearance in 1973 of the new documentary collection about Levski, compiled by Kirila Vazvozova - Karateodorova and Nikolay Genchev, was marked. The author logically supports the thesis that "the documentary heritage is the most direct way to the essence of the Deacon" (p. 34). The problem of the public political use of Levski's ideas during the socialist era was not overlooked either (p. 35). The fourth paragraph presents the narrative about the grave of Vasil Levski, and the fifth - the narrative about sanctity. These narratives have a contrasting nature, as they contrast the mortal grave and possible ecclesiastical canonization. Both the exact identification of the Apostle's grave and the legitimate church canonization of Vasil Levski (hierodeacon Ignatius) turned out to be unrealistic hopes, provocatively seeking public interest and public scandal. The author maintains the thesis that the protection of the Apostle is the entire Bulgarian land, and his sanctity is canonized by the all-Bulgarian public consciousness. The sixth paragraph parsimoniously presents the researched Levski narrative beyond the ideological beginning. Its basis is the innovative for its time approach of N. Genchev in the monograph with an impressive title - "Levski, the revolution and the future world". The alternative approach in the book is emphasized, uniting the achievements of historical science with skillful journalistic techniques. In this way, the narrative goes beyond the ideological matrix of the dominant ideology in socialist Bulgaria, finding a natural haven in the area of democracy and humanism. The seventh paragraph is devoted to the most significant examples of the "Levski" literary and artistic narrative from the middle of the 20th century to the present day. The author has undertaken an impressive short analysis of the literary and social contribution of Stefan Dichev, Yana Yazova, Vera Mutafchieva and Stefan Tsanev on the studied issues. Special attention is paid to Mercia McDermott's book "The Apostle of Freedom", published in English in 1967 in London, published in 1970 and in Sofia in Bulgarian (pp. 47-48). The finding is substantiated that with the methodology used by M. McDermott, the patriotism of the national hero does not collide with internationalism, and the legend does not lose its magic during scientific analysis. The contribution to the narrative "Levski" by Ivaylo Hristov (Hristov, Iv. The media image of Vasil Levski. Sofia, 2017) and the scientific and popular aspects characteristic of some publications by Doyno Doynov, Plamen Pavlov and Ivan Lalev are presented. It is not clear in the paragraph according to what criteria the legal study of the Ottoman investigation and the extraordinary court, which led to the execution of the future national hero, is also included (Zlatareva, M. Legal view of the Trial of Vasil Diakon Levski. Sofia, 2020). The ninth paragraph is dedicated to the so-called "free" narration about Levski. Book and electronic publications connecting Levski with Freemasonry are assigned to it. Citing as an example numerous data from the Internet space, the author emphasizes their predominance uncritical (p. 54). This type of narrative includes commemorative ceremonies and public speeches worn out by society.

In the second chapter, including 10 paragraphs, a deep cultural analysis, which is of key importance for the dissertation work, is undertaken under the title FILM LEVSKY. The author explains in advance the impossibility of studying all film works on the subject. However, this part of the study deals with an impressive volume of completed film projects. The Internet space was used as a powerful social indicator on the subject. The author preliminarily formulates the thesis that "cinema and television "wanderings" between the halo

and the human character, woven into thinking about Levski, are a persistent stumbling block for Bulgarian cinema" (p. 57). The first two paragraphs have a distinct systematizing character - "Data to the historical in Bulgarian cinema"; "Film Levski - narratives and interpretations". The partial preservation of the film productions until 1944 is noted. Both the leading role between 1962-1989 of the state studio for feature films "Boyana" and the commercial problems for film art after 1989 are emphasized. The author substantiates the three main directions of his analysis – adventure films, documentaries and documentary-artistic films (p. 68). The third paragraph under the title "Adventure film narratives about Levski" is a kind of short announcement for the next three paragraphs. Structurally, this title could unite them. The fourth paragraph deals with "The First Levski", created in Vasil Gendov's film "The Rebellion of the Slaves" (1933). The narrative is defined as melodrama. A curious fact highlighted by the author is the suspension of the film due to the diplomatic tension between Bulgaria and Turkey caused by its screenings. After partial censorship, the renewed screenings are aimed primarily at schoolchildren and soldiers. The author also notes an unrealized earlier attempt at a film about Levski, which caused public debates on the issue of whether the national hero should be screened (p. 76 - 77). The title of the fifth paragraph is "The Demon of the Empire - Levski as Robin Hood". According to the author, the miniseries was realized in the context of the ideological productions of the socialist era (p. 77). The claim is in some ways debatable, as the emptying of the streets in any series is an indication of strong public interest. Obviously, the methods in Vili Tsonev's film are in line with both the need for patriotic education of the younger generation and the mentality of several previous generations of Bulgarians, perceiving the "Levski" narrative as a synthesis of historical facts and popular legends. It is also necessary to take into account the technological specifics of that time, when television was just conquering its media space. In addition, the creators of the film probably made an attempt at a patriotic Bulgarian "western" due to the popularity of several western productions of this genre that were shown in cinemas at the time. The sixth paragraph is labeled "Maxim Genchev's Levski: a debate without borders". The film "Deacon Levski" is described as a synthesis between historical drama and magical realism, supplemented with short documentary stories. According to the author, the narrative "Levski" in this case is a story about an action hero. It is acceptable to suggest that the director Maxim Genchev, who appeared in the debates as the strongest defender of his film, probably deliberately sought the public scandal as an advertisement. The seventh paragraph, entitled "Levski - the (un)possible hero?" has the character of an addition to the previous paragraph. The eighth and ninth paragraphs treat respectively the theatrical Levski and the documentary-artistic account of the Apostle. They analyzed the theatrical productions "Vasil Levski", "The Last Supper of Deacon Levski" and the documentary-artistic films "Black Legend", "1872", "Levski before the court of the Gate and of history", "Seven feet above the ground" and some new productions of this type. Here the author swims in his own waters and the text stands out with its contribution character. The last tenth paragraph, entitled "Levsky - from the allegories of the divine to ancestral memory and songs" is a convincing finale to the chapter.

With the title THE IMAGE OF LEVSKI, the third chapter announces the author's desire to explain the effects of the different versions of the film, theater and documentary-artistic narrative "Levski" on Bulgarian society. The chapter is structured in 6 paragraphs with

problematically worded titles: Is it a demon of the empire; Is there an Apostle in "Deacon Levski"?; Theatrical Deacon; Levski as an artistic image in documentaries; Closer to the Christian God; In his private world. There is a justified emphasis on the methods by which a film, theater and documentary-artistic image of the Apostle of Freedom is built - allegories, mythopoetic concepts, hagiographic plots, action and western concepts, insight into Levski the man and the revolutionary strategist Levski.

Apart from the recommendations made on specific passages of the text, to the dissertation troud of Rumen Skrinski, additional critical remarks should be made. The scientific apparatus needs refinement, as the lack of specified pages is noticeable in some of the cited studies. Multiple repetitions of authors and corresponding titles are allowed instead of the accepted short versions (e.g. Cit. op.; Ibid.; author's name and initial part of title). Structurally, the three chapters are burdened with numerous paragraphs, some of which are extremely short in text and could fit thematically into other paragraphs of the respective chapter.

The abstract correctly reflects the structure, main conclusions and contributions of the dissertation work. Rumen Skrinski has published 5 publications on the topic of the dissertation. All the requirements of ZRASRB and the Regulations for its application have been complied with.

The up-to-date nature of the peer-reviewed dissertation work and its scientific contributions give me reason to recommend to the esteemed scientific jury to award Rumen Ilkov Skrinski the educational and scientific degree "Doctor".

Plovdiv, March 9, 2023

Associate Professor Dr. Todor Radev