

## STATEMENT

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for the competition for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"

in the professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences, Doctoral  
Programme in Cultural Studies (The Media Image of Vasil Levski),

for the PhD dissertation "*Vasil Levski in fiction and documentary cinema: Narratives and  
interpretations*" by Rumén Ilkov Skriniski.

The commemoration this year of the 150th anniversary of the death of Vasil Levski was once again an occasion for Bulgarian science and society to look at the image of the Apostle of Bulgarian freedom and to make another assessment of its public dimensions. In this sense, the proposed dissertation research by Rumén Skriniski is topical, timely and provocative. The study, devoted to "*one of the fundamental narratives forming the national mythopoesis of the Bulgarians*" (p. 2), has as its object the public perception of the award-winning hero of the national liberation revolution formed over the years, presented through the analysis of some of the most significant film and television productions about him. Placing the analysis within the broader social, cultural and ideological context of the decades following the Liberation makes this study a contribution to both Bulgarian scholarship and the ongoing public debate about the image of Vasil Levski in the memory of Bulgarians and a constant in the construction of our national identity.

The dissertation research, which consists of an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion, has as its main task "*to trace, systematize, analyze and offer a justification of the stages through which the idea of Levski changed, both through the various historical narratives surrounding his public image and through the review of films that are engaged with his life and work*" (p. 11). At the outset, the author proposes his basic hypothesis that through artistic and cinematic techniques, a contribution is made to mystifying and making a legend of this particular historical figure, fitting him tightly into the national mythopoesis. The idea of proving this hypothesis runs like a red thread throughout the thesis and is presented extensively in the third chapter of the dissertation. In this sense, the research does

not aim to clarify and prove historical facts of Vasil Levski's life and activity, but to analyse and present public attitudes and perceptions of the Apostle of Bulgarian Freedom, oscillating between the historical personality and the mythologized legendary image. This conclusion is necessitated by the diverse nature of the primary sources analysed in the thesis - both the documentary heritage of Vasil Levski himself, the letters between him and the committee activists of the Internal Revolutionary Organisation, and the early recollections of his contemporaries after the Liberation of Bulgaria. To this are added later academic studies and artistic interpretations by the authors, which have contributed to the formation of the legendary-mythological aspect in making sense of the Apostle's life and work, existing studies around the history of Bulgarian cinema productions, as well as emblematic films about Vasil Levski made in different ideological contexts and analysed by the author as empirical material in the second chapter of the dissertation.

The **first chapter** traces the main stages in the documentary and literary understanding of Levski's life and work, which contributed to the formation of public attitudes related to the image of the most legitimate national hero of Bulgaria. In the chapter, which is the review in nature, an attempt is made to present "schematically" (according to the author) aspects of the individual narratives that form the great Bulgarian narrative about the Apostle. An important overview of the uses of Levski's image in different socio-political periods is made, and several narrative constructions are tentatively identified by the dissertator in order to trace key moments around the transformation of a man into the most important historical figure for Bulgarians, examined in the context of the notion of 'national memory'. Skrynski considers the narrative of Levski as a segment of the formation of the historical-national chronotope, which is rethought throughout the so-called 'national memory'. From the first comprehensive biography of Levski by Zahari Stoyanov, where he is naturally proclaimed a 'hero' and a great historical figure, through Vazov's folklore-mystical image of the national hero Levski, embodying virtues transcending time and space, to the retelling of Levski's political ideas on state building by various ideological leaders who appropriated the narrative of the Apostle's recognition. These micro-narratives, using different aspects of Levski's life and work, make the historical Levski possible in different public uses, one of which is related to his image in Bulgarian cinema, to which the next two chapters of the dissertation are dedicated. The author identifies as key the appearance of Nikolai Genchev's innovative book "Levski, the Revolution and the World to Come", in which, through the combination of "in-depth historical research and journalistic techniques", the figure of the

Apostle is relegated to "*a man who had outgrown his time, but at the same time was firmly connected to it*" (p. 44).

The **second chapter**, entitled "The Film Levski", contains the main analysis and contribution of the research undertaken in the thesis. Skrinisky changes the approach in the choice of documentary, documentary fiction and adventure films as well as the perspective of the analysis. Emphasis is placed on the specific elements of the historical and socio-political context that determine the particularities of the narrative of the Apostle in cinema and television productions. An additional analysis of the public perception of the national hero, which is present as a narrative not only in books but in film strips, is also offered. Analysing landmark feature films and series such as Vasil Gendov's "The Revolt of the Slaves", Vili Tsankov's "The Demon of Empire", and Maxim Genchev's "Deacon Levski", the dissertation concludes, that just as there is no unified consensus around the narrative of Levski in historical and artistic interpretations of his image, so too no monolithic narrative can be accepted from the screen as unquestionable and fully acted as a screen presence. The "acting out" of Levski in Bulgarian cinema has been seen through a variety of allegories, mythopoetic figures, and devices, hagiographic plots, and action models describing differently the "Levski the man" and the "Levski the strategist". The conclusion is that "*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*" (p. 57).

As a continuation of the main analysis, the **third chapter** summarizes the narratives presented on the filmic, theatrical, and documentary-artistic portrayal of the Apostle of Freedom in the diverse socio-political and historical-cultural context. I am well impressed by the author's comments on contemporary documentary and documentary-art productions devoted to various moments in the life and aspects of Vasil Levski's work. Building on the overview of the previous chapter, Skrinisky introduces new documentary-art interpretations in productions of recent years into the analysis. While the documentary narrative of Levski is most often differentiated in the form of short productions that are "*information-laden, emotionally twisted, and sometimes even relying on didactic elements in their presentation,*" some recent documentaries have featured projects that manage to capture the necessary connection between historical and visual narratives. In this category, two productions are analyzed for the first time - Docho Bodjakov's "Black Legend" and Alma Mater TV's student

production “1972” - based on a correct contemporary historical reading concerning some details of the Apostle's life. The narrative of Levski is distinguished, according to the dissertation, by a creative taste of presentation, as both films offer content in which his image is taken beyond the mythopoetic tradition, legendary treatments, and high pathos, insisting at all costs to seize the functions of the historical personality to turn it into a heroic one. In this part, the dissertation research contains, in my opinion, innovative and contributory character.

In the conclusion, a summary of the study is made, with the main conclusion that the analysis of the various narratives about Levski in cinema and television represents a challenge through historiography, related to overcoming the various mystifications and unscientific judgments about the image of the Apostle. I agree with this conclusion.

Critical remarks can also be made to the text of the thesis about the shortcomings in the layout and the scientific apparatus. In the eventual publication, the manner of citation should be refined, and omissions such as missing pages, etc. should be corrected. This does not change my positive assessment of the thesis.

Rumen Skrinski has published three articles on the topic of his dissertation. The abstract corresponds to the content of the dissertation and faithfully reflects the conclusions in the statement. The procedure complies with the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its implementation, as well as the Internal Regulations on the Conditions and Procedures for the Acquisition of Scientific Degrees and for the Occupation of Academic Positions at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". The rules of the procedure for the establishment of academic positions and the conditions of admission to the academic staff of the Republic of Bulgaria.

Therefore, expressing my positive opinion, I propose to the esteemed Scientific Jury to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to Rumen Ilkov Skrinski for his dissertation on "*Vasil Levski in fiction and documentary cinema: Narratives and interpretations*" and I am voting positively for it.

09.03.2023

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