

Review

by *Prof. Plamen Shulikov, PhD* (Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen) written for the procedure of awarding a doctoral degree in professional field 3.5. Public communication and information sciences (Media and communications - photojournalism) to Tsvetan Todorov Tomchev, a full-time doctoral student at the Department of Press Journalism and Book Publishing in the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication (Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski), for a dissertation titled **Photography and propaganda in the Bulgarian press in the 1919 – 1944 period**, written under the academic supervision of *Assoc. prof. Georgi Lozanov*

Tsvetan Tomchev's dissertation *Photography and propaganda in the Bulgarian press in the 1919 - 1944 period* is part of a series of theses on photography submitted for public defense at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Information (Sofia University) over a relatively short period of time. This intensity of research interest can be explained above all by the lack of systematic research on photography which existed for almost 50 years of political censorship in science and culture in our country. In the urge to fill the obvious gaps in research in the field of photography, one can detect a certain compensatory dramatism, caused by the striking asymmetry between the systematicity of the Western critical reflection, on the one hand, and, the fragmented knowledge about photography in our country, on the other, which can be found in informal communities researching its history, and its ultimate mission of an impartial visual sociologist, which communist authorities in their ubiquitous crusade against realism in art perceptively saw as subversive, especially when targeting photography because of its inherent technological "graphic sadism" (V. Benjamin).

In a similar, albeit too schematically outlined, context, T. Tomchev's study naturally positions itself as another stage of the two-volume essay reconstruction undertaken by him ten years ago (*The Great Photojournalists of Bulgaria*, 2011 and 2012) of our native photojournalistic heritage, scattered in fragmentary historical inventories, in periodicals covered with library dust, in hard-to-catalogue archival funds, in numerous presumed and unsuspected family albums, in personal memories resisting systematization. Through all three texts by the author, the essentially photojournalistic criterion for the value of the photographic image is filtered, the "enlivening of the photographs from static to motion, and search of psychology in the frame through the method

of the *candid camera*' (p. 78). Additionally experienced by the author, because of his long-term photojournalistic practice, this axiological criterion has the value of a valid chronological reference point in the historical growth of photographic self-understanding in general. It projects two historically significant trends – firstly, the long-term and periodically accompanied by special dramatism (including economic) transformation of the sedentary studio photographer, passively waiting and actively directing the events, into a mobile documentarian who feverishly pursues them, and, secondly, not the less significant value shift from the pictorialism of the traditional visual convention to the newly invented axiological sovereignty of photography precisely as "photographic photography" (A.R.-Pach), as photography freed from humiliating stylistic apprenticeship to pictorial models, at the same time discovering its own value autonomy in the non-staged depiction of authentic life through a *candid camera*.

Almost completely devoted to these essential questions, Tomchev's text pleads for the rehabilitation of the value conceit of Bulgarian reporter photography from the period between the wars. Besides, why not from the beginning of the century, if we judge by the ahead-of-its-time position (1904) of the meritorious St. Georgiev from Kazanlak, correctly quoted by the author: "When we photograph... a living scene of people, we have to kind of hide our intentions, so as not to draw the attention of the people and make them look at the camera." (p. 81) From this early recommendation by St. Georgiev, aimed against the immutable monumentalization of the image in Horace's style (*exegimonumentum*), to the formulation "invisible apparatus" (p. 149) by P. Morozov, a literal copy of the "hidden camera" of Dr. E. Salomon, there is only a small step, made, however, with some delay. After all, A.R.-Pach's famous article "Targets", which legitimized the value shift, even a coup, in world photography, appeared only in 1927. The inertia of the pictorialist receptive stereotype can be witnessed (even in a clinical sense) through critical bewilderment, with which none other than V. Benjamin and B. Brecht (K. Gelderlos) greeted his photobook "The World is Beautiful" in 1928 (A. Renger-Patzsch. *Die Welt ist schön. Einhundert photographische Aufnahmen.* - München: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1928).

T. Tomchev rightfully connects the axiological self-understanding of photography in our country with the "Society of Bulgarian and Foreign Journalists in Bulgaria" founded in 1924, in which the concept of *photojournalist*, still valid to this day, was created and legitimized (p. 83). Although it was created during the decade of mass branch mergers, the company was naturally

preceded by the powerful media industrialization in our country, carried out by figures who greatly exceeded their national importance, such as A. Damyanov, D. Krapchev, A. Grekov, even by industrialists such as N .Chilov (position of Chilov) with their large investments in newspaper advertising. Such compression of the industrial environment naturally led to quality photographic achievements, and after the appearance of illustrated periodicals, each of which challenges the reader stereotype through the receptive ease of the pictorial message with a volume similar to that of a photo book - and with a large number of quality images, carnivalizing urban media consumption through figures of legendary broadcasters, even through a phraseological ritualization of the act of broadcasting, which took on the appearance of a festive carnival act. From the rapture with which Tomchev describes this period in the history of Bulgarian photojournalism, transpires an understandable nostalgia for the already devalued public importance of the photojournalist, and for that unforced naturalness in the growth of the branch's skill, which in the contours outlined by the softly painting photo-optics of the time, looks like a sweet last a continuation of the irretrievably lost belle epoque.

In addition to the photojournalistic association founded in 1924, however, there is another parallel center of photographic self-understanding in our country. Immediately after the wars, on 1.12.1919, was founded the Association of Photographers in Bulgaria, which from June 1921 began publishing a monthly (according to its original plan) magazine "Fotograf" whose first editors were F. Grabner, Al. Stoyanov and T. Apostolov. After a three-year break from 1925 to 1928, it continued to be published until 1932 with a successive change of chief editors Hr. Rashev, Al. Galabov (Sasho) and, note, B. Karastoyanov. Subsequently, judging by the authors, the content of the magazine "Fotograf" was transferred to the "Bulletin of the Central Photographic Craft Guid" (BCFZK), with the outstanding figure of Georgi S. Georgiev and one of his articles from 1939 called "The Path of New Photography". In it, he reproduces his position from the very beginning of the 1930s, when, in fact, he introduces the name of A. R.-Pach into the native debate about the valuable essence of photography, reproducing almost verbatim his thesis from "Targets" (1927). I mention this not for the purposes of some historical completeness, which is difficult to achieve otherwise in the presentation of the media pioneers in our specialized photography periodical. Otherwise, we will have to start at least from 1898, when an issue of the magazine "Photographic Review" appeared, turning later into the "Bulgarian Illustrated Collection" of the same year, to go through the important, if eclectic, magazine " Artist" (1905 - 1909) and its editors S. Radev, P.

Genadiev and Al. Balabanov, and Balabanov's debut in the field of photo criticism, etc. I mention it only as an occasion for, I hope, a meaningful addition to the presented by T. Tomchev essay portrait of the photojournalist and editor of "Illustrated Week", Anton Antonov (p. 183-185), whose small but conceptual publication in "Zarya" (issue 2466 of 1929) "Photographers and photojournalists" falls into the center of a noisy, not to say shrill, maieutic debate on the value self-conception of native photography, which lasted until 1930. Then B. Karastoyanov put a symbolic end to it with the pronounced, albeit half-hearted, acknowledgment of the overall benefits of amateur photography photography, resp. - the shooting from surprise on the streets. The provocation for the scandal is an article by Hr. Rashev "Questions of the Day" from 1929, published in "Fotograf", where the associated photographers, recently recognized by the Tsar's decree as craftsmen, plead that the state protection of crafts should only affect photographers with regularly issued master's certificates. Although economic at first, the debate soon turned into a caste antagonism between union photographers on the one hand, and state, municipal, cooperative, union administrations with certification rights, "momentaries," "boxers," "likers," and all manner of "clickers." and photojournalists – on the other hand. To the photojournalists, recognized as the most educated, therefore the most dangerous allied enemies, the eristic pathos is the strongest: "Photojournalists are only photo-amateurs, and not professionals at all. Anyone can, whenever they want, become a photojournalist, and there you go! – he is given... a master's certificate. (...) Photojournalists should not be recognized as masters, but only masters can be photojournalists! (...) We don't want arguments... especially with the newspapermen. But no photojournalist will be issued a certificate just because he is one, if he does not deserve it as a photographer..." Although, as can be seen from his words, quite rightly and reasonably "he does not want disputes,... especially with newspapermen". Hr . Rashev practically gambles on them and, of course, the empire hits back. I am referring to the actual newspaper empire of Atanas Damyanov of the 20s and 30s, whose media coverage T. Tomchev presents thoroughly and with due recognition. Most likely, recognizing itself in Rashev's construction of "illustrated newspapers and dailies", the empire did not hesitate to respond through A. Antonov from the pages of "Zarya". A. Antonov's text magnanimously bypasses the economic "narrowness" of the photo-craft attack. Regardless of the fact that the authors who hold it seek to expropriate the concept of artistry in favor of the photo craft industry, calling the associated photographers (no more, no less) artists, it does not go beyond petty branch interest. It did not succeed in surpassing these interests when, through Mirniy, already

in a direct confrontation with A. Antonov, it tried to answer the question "Who is the true representative of photographic art?". Only the short newspaper text by A. Antonov hints at an answer about the nature of photography in comparison with conventional visual arts. Indeed, his text comes somewhat out of the blue precisely from the photojournalists, whose contribution to the growth of native photography until then remained unmentioned in the specialized photographic periodicals of the 20s, as if it did not exist. It may come as a surprise, but it is not at all illogical. The series of wars in which Bulgaria was involved in the second decade of the 20th century provided Bulgarian photojournalists with an endless field exercise in photorealism. It is enough to trace any of the illustrated newspapers since then (e.g., "I Know Everything," "Panorama Around the World," "Illustration Light," etc.) to see how even within a single periodical, Bulgarian journalism rapidly makes up for its lack of photojournalism experience. The photo images appear in relative synchrony with the resulting events, and the photo plots themselves gradually but surely break with the characteristic staging and static, imposed as a widely accepted pictorial norm through long-term studio photo practice. It is the "outdated way" of photographing "static figures, arranged with flowers in hand, with inscriptions and with the eternal *don't move, cheerfully look, smile*, - one - two - done" is the first target in A. Antonov's short text. Through the formulation "the world in its movement and natural development", he clearly names the specific subject of photography, which derives directly from its technology and which defines its representational sovereignty among the other visual arts. The question of the social significance of the photo images, through which the photographers, "well acquainted with the society,... aim to present in the press pictures what cannot be conveyed in words, nor make an impression", are also mentioned by Antonov. Finally, he does not fail to touch the *studio*, the last stronghold of the "professional" photographer, drawing perhaps the most terrifying prospect for the settled photo-craftsman who, according to the photojournalist, "must not wait for events to visit him" in his ivory tower, but to actively search for them or at least follow them according to their social significance. Thus, A. Antonov's short text acquires the value of a lapidary introduction in general to the upcoming Bulgarian photorealism, in the sense of reporter's impartial *frankness* of a witness.

I will take advantage of the opportunity that the last word *candidness* provides for a brief, but probably not too significant, etymological comment on the distinction between the semantic ranges of the concepts *candid camera* and *direct photography* (pp. 149-150). The obviousness of the "French connection" in the first concept (*candid*, from French - pure-hearted, sincere and frank)

can hardly be transferred to the supposed causality between the concept and Voltaire's novel "Candide, or Optimism" (1759). In it, the main protagonist, Candide, is a powerful argument against the optimistic conviction of the German philosopher G. Leibniz that, based on his axiomatic premise of the "pre-established universal harmony", the present, available world is the best possible world, since, if it could there is a better one, surely God would have built it, in stead of the one we live in. It is very likely that Voltaire's authority, mainly the worldwide popularity of his novel, is the reason for the term's conceptual extrapolation in the field of photography. At the very beginning of the 20th century, however, the concept representing the idea of social frankness in the early Anglo-Saxon social photo tradition (e.g. J. Thomson and A. Smith. Street life in London, 1877-78, J. Rees. How the Other Half Lives, 1890) is not exactly the concept of "candid", as if it has usurped in its current photographic usage the right to name the uncompromisingly candid representation. At the very beginning of the 20th century, the term "good straight photography" or simply "straight photography" was codified. We encounter it in the first volume (1903) of the magazine "Camerawork" published by A. Stieglitz, in a text by the photography-obsessed art critic Otto Walter Beck, professor at the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn. In his definition, "straight photography", "ringing with honesty and directness", is opposed to imitative, forged, even fake ("faking") photography, and in this sense "laid on the hard bank of science", it "sides from luxury, from suggestions, from dreams, from life-picture". As for the viability of the two "competing" concepts *straight photography* and *candid photography*, I assume, without particular bias, of course, that precisely the connotations *cruelty*, *brutality*, historically anticipating and shocking sensibly imposed by Voltaire on the attribute *candid*, have provided it with an indisputable nominative advantage. When I present even these brief reflections on conceptual etymology, I cannot shake off the feeling of a grave scholastic sin. This *frank* admission says that, regardless of the common etymological basis of the two concepts, they are able to single out autonomous semantic perimeters, as long as their nominative specialization is sanctioned by social consent, which is clearly the case in the photographic community, and that is quite sufficient.

T. Tomchev traces the development of photography to that state of professional maturity in our reporter photography, which is indisputable according to the criteria still valid today. It provides a sufficiently broad argumentative background, spread over historical, political, economic, technological, media-contextual and personal prerequisites, contributing to the process of photographic self-understanding in our country. Such are the studies on the compressed history

of the time of the wars, on the media concentration undertaken by A. Damyanov at the same time, to turn his illustrated editions into a current field photo gallery, on the social consolidation in Bulgarian photojournalism, on the stimulating influence exerted from outside by high media models such as the "Berliner illustrierte Zeitung", on the inspiring mastery of star photojournalists, on the increasingly probable hypothesis of the amphibolic use of photographic images, especially in the context of censorship restrictions, on the technological growth in photography and printing. At first glance fragmentary, these essays ultimately piece together a comprehensive picture of a public context whose traditionally contemplative speech communication stereotype increasingly finds it difficult to withstand the furious pressure of rapid iconic photo-lettering, brought down as if by *deusexmachina* to match the staggering pace of history with the imperfectly receptive human capabilities.

At the same time, the narrative kaleidoscopic nature of the dissertation text allows the readers to focus their perception according to their passions and value criteria on chosen individual thematic highlights. One of these highlights is rightly placed on the native illustrated periodicals ("Illustrated Week", "Illustrated Politics", "Nashenets", "Illustrated Bulgaria", as well as newspapers with a clear taste for photo-argumentation such as "Utro", "Zora", "Zarya" etc.). The author's choice to prioritize his attention on "Illustrated Week" is justified with the high quality of the photo reproductions, due to the "deep copper print on fine glossy paper" (p. 103), as well as the constellation of talented photojournalists such as A. Antonov, L. Antonov, the Yuskeselievi clan, D. Katsev, etc., who have set the high standards of the frank non-staged photo narrative. The photo images presented in the text are only a small, representative part of the huge photographic evidence collected in the process of research by T. Tomchev. Moreover, as he himself admits, there are serious difficulties in the attribution of many photographs (p. 156). Therefore, I think that he could devote to our illustrated periodical a separate, far more detailed text, of course, if he considers this idea appropriate. There is yet another argument for such a perspective. As a graduate of the National Vocational High School of Printing and Photography, which has produced some significant figures in our modern visual culture, he has a solid knowledge of analog processes in both fields, which is also evident from the biased comments on printing and especially photography that abound in his text especially with regards to technopoetics of the discussed samples from the studied period. This educational resource, partially applicable to the artifacts of our digital age, is absolutely necessary in the interpretation of their analog predecessors.

Another thematic emphasis, already stated in the title of the reviewed text as a direct research task, is the propaganda use of photographic images. The definitive scope of the concept of "propaganda" is defined by the author through the christological text of the same name by E. Bernays, which could be supported by the equally well-known studies of W. Lippmann (1922), as well as H. Laswell, whose work "Techniques of Propaganda during the World War" (1927), apparently directly devoted to the problem, preceded Bernays's text by a year. There are, of course, compensations, such as D. Kazasov's "Newspaper of the idea and the newspaper of the news" (1933) and S. Vasev's "The Newspaper and the Propaganda" (1943), which present the conception of propaganda and its uses as understood by Bulgarians, which are important for Tomchev's argumentation. There is an additional reason for the second text to attract attention. The double bottom of the propaganda, which Slavcho Vasev undertook to publicize towards the end of the war, turns out to be related to the double moral subjection of the author, as a deputy chief and editor-in-chief in A. Damyanov's "Zarya" (1936-44), and from 1944 a member of the Bulgarian Communist party. His career in the post-war years marked a rapid rise, passing through the post of a press attaché in Moscow, from where he happily found himself in the "Literary Front" as his ch. editor. It is not clear when exactly this happened, but the always rightfully angry R. Ralin happened to see a photograph in which Vasev, who usually uses the pseudonym Vas, is pictured smiling broadly in the friendly company of German officers, so R. Ralin flashily inscribed on the back of the photo the merciless pun "Was ist das?/ Das ist Was." This brilliant small story, which Prof. Nikola Georgiev told me years ago, sounded to me for a long time like just another sample from the endless corpus of anecdotes about R. Ralin. Quite recently and quite by chance, however, I came across an article by the historian V. Migev, where it is written that "on February 17, 1946, *Narodno Zemedelsko Zname* published a photo taken from *Zarya* on April 29, 1941, which shows how Slavcho Vasev pays homage at the grave of the first Hitlerite soldier who died in the Balkans" (Vl. Migev. *The non-communist literary press in Bulgaria (1945-1947)*// *Epochs*, 1998, No. 2, p. 136). I am telling this only as an additional stroke to Tomchev's comments on the wonderful moral transformation of Vl. Topencharov, who, regardless of the tireless efforts of communist propaganda, still remains in the history of native journalism, first of all as the collaborator of the magazine "Utro", who on 09.09.1944 stormed into its editorial office with a gun to stop it (p. 133). Perhaps because "Utro" is known as "the coachmen's newspaper", according to A. Damyanov's own words, by the way. I would mention Tomchev's obvious though fully justifiable hesitation on

the use of "powers of the propaganda" before the 20s and 30s of the 20th century. I would like to resolve his hesitation. At least until 1947, when Stoinov's study "Standardization and *economic propaganda* in the placement policy of cooperatives..." was written, the concept had a legitimate double meaning both in the field of political propaganda and in the field of economic advertising.

To conclude my observations on Tomchev's dissertation, without having presented, of course, all his curious and often very curious galleries, I will allow myself a brief comment on the photographic genre taxonomy proposed by him. Even just two arbitrarily selected positions, such as, say, *technique and patriotism* and *portraiture* (p. 196), point to an internal contradiction in the taxonomic logic between thematic and morphological definitive criteria. Similar contradictions exist in the genre taxonomies of most conventional arts, with the exception of young photography, although they have been backed up by a thousand-year-old critical tradition. Thus, for example, the lyrical sonnet genre is impossible beyond the imperative formal requirement that it define itself within exactly 14 lines. Conversely, even perfectly formal constructions, such as the *heroic hexameter* consisting of 6-feet spondee, manifest unconcealed genre claims through their apparently thematic attribute of the heroic, so when we say heroic hexameter, we understand Homeric heroic poems, similarly to self-defined poems such as novels in verse, or novels as poems, classified as such for completely counter-morphological reasons. The difficulty of upholding a strict taxonomic logic lies in the simultaneous double confession of the notion of genre, historically irretrievably oscillating between thematic and morphological criteria, at least because of the usage tradition, by virtue of which even formal constructions such as verse meter inevitably acquire a "semantic halo" (M. L. Gasparov). This seems to exhaust my comment, so I can conclude that such logical breakdowns in genre taxonomies are more than usual, and that the essential criterion of nominative correctness in this case seems to be the immanent operability of the concepts.

Based on the topicality and the broad thematic scope of dissertation, on the candidate's high motivation with which it is imbued, on the considerable number of collecting and researched sources of information, to which part of the most essential contributions of the study are owed, and based on the analytical capabilities of the author, his bibliographic awareness, the sufficient number of candidate's publications on the topic of the dissertation, as well as the strictly met administrative criteria, I strongly suggest that *Tsvetan Todorov Tomchev* be awarded the

educational and scientific degree of *doctor* in professional direction 3.5. Public communications and information sciences (Media and communications - photojournalism).

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