

R E V I E W

by **Prof. PhD. Andronika Mårtonova**, Screen Arts Dept., Institute for Arts Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (andronika.martonova@gmail.com , ORCID:0000-0002-5304-4408, scientific field 8.4. "Theatre and Film Art")

on the dissertation: **Visual Revival of Japanese Literature in the Cinema of the 21st Century**

by PhD candidate: *Maria Georgieva Simeonova*

Scientific supervisor: **Assoc. Prof, PhD. Vyara Vassileva Nikolova**

by field of study / doctoral program

2.1. PHILOLOGY, LITERATURE OF THE PEOPLES OF EUROPE, AMERICA, AFRICA, ASIA AND AUSTRALIA (JAPANESE LITERATURE AND CULTURE)

Department of Japanese Studies, Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology,

Sofia University of St. 'Kliment Ohridski'

Compliance of the procedure with the legal requirements

This review has been prepared in accordance with the order RD-38-642/18.11.2024 by the Rector of the Sofia University "Kliment Ohridski" - Prof. PhD Georgi Valchev. All the documents submitted by the candidate are in accordance with the regulatory and legal framework (Regulations of the Sofia University on the conditions and procedures for the acquisition of academic degrees and academic titles, the Law on academic degrees and academic titles, and additional regulations and acts related to the procedures). No violations were found. There is no evidence of plagiarism. The required deadlines have been met and the requirements for public defence have been met (thesis, abstract, CV, publications, etc.). The abstract correctly reflects the content of the thesis.

Biographical data, academic development of the candidate and personal impressions

The PhD-candidate Maria Georgieva Simeonova graduated from UNWE with a Bachelor's Degree on Marketing (1997-2001) and then with a Master's Degree in Public Administration from the same university. She currently works as a librarian at the Central Library of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; and also as a journalist at the student radio station "Reaction" - organiser, editor and anchor of the radio programme show "Friday Chopsticks" - at Faculty for Journalism and Mass Communication, SU. Her humanities and film interests in East Asian cultures - and especially in Japan (!) - go back a long way and are part of her practice in youth online media.

Moreover, her active writing of short reviews (under a pseudonym) and opinions on Japanese films in the Eastern Spirit forum (a much-frequented territory for Asian cinema lovers, in view of the poor distribution practices in Bulgaria) makes her more than just a fan of Japanese

cinema. Maria Simeonova is a well-respected author who shows very good taste, affinity and understanding for the cinematic richness of mostly contemporary Japanese cinema. As a professional, I must admit that I have followed her recommendations more than once with curiosity, as it is not always possible to follow everything all the time. In this sense, embarking on the difficult path of a PhD student, is a somewhat logical continuation of her pursuits, and the most appropriate place to deepen one's knowledge is precisely the Department of Japanese Studies at the SU. I take the liberty of writing my personal impressions right at the beginning of the review, because I think it is honest and fair.

During her doctoral studies, Maria Simeonova participated in various scientific conferences. As a result, her work on her dissertation was approved. The candidate has four published works:

1 - "Literature and Cinema in One: Osamu Dazai's Short Story "Run Melos!" and its Animated Image" (2020); 2 - "Natsume Soseki: Ten Nights of Dreams - Symbols and Images" (2020); 3 - "Semiotics and Intercultural Aspects in Translation from Literature to Cinema. Ryunosuke Akutagawa's short story "The Spider's Web" and its visualization in the animated series "Evergreen Literature" (2021); 4 - The fourth text is co-authored with her supervisor - Associate Professor Vyara Nikolova and in English. "Literary Texts Through Vision or Reflections on the Sensory Perception of Fiction" (2020), which has been refereed and indexed in the worldwide scientific database Web of Science. Given the new scientific requirements of the Ministry of Education and Sciences and the challenges facing the humanities, I think this is important to highlight, especially as PhD students rarely make the effort (however much they are supported by supervisors) to publish at such a high level, and in a team with an experienced researcher.

Under the supervision of Assoc. Prof. Nikolova (Maria Simeonova is her first PhD student, I should note) - the short film "Hina" was shot under the project "Audio-visual adaptation based on motifs of works of fiction from contemporary Japanese literature", with the financial support of the National Research Institute, Contract № 80-10-186 / 06.04.2021 to the FCNF.

All of this productivity reinforces my view that the Department of Japanese Studies is a place where the creative growth of doctoral students is stimulated by supporting artistic practices. In fact, and through them, the depth and diversity of Japanese culture, history, literature and art are explored.

Scientific interests, PhD-thesis and contributions of the candidate

In this procedure, Maria Simeonova is submitting a rather lengthy dissertation with the title "The Visual Revival of Japanese Literature in 21st-Century Cinema".

The text has a total length of 306 pages, of which 201 pages are pure text. It is well structured and logically divided into an introduction, three main chapters with several sub-chapters, and a conclusion. The scientific apparatus has 332 footnotes, the bibliography counts 189 sources in different languages (Bulgarian, Russian, English, online publications and video sources). The main works of Noel Burch, Keiko MacDonald, Mark Schilling, etc., who are

fundamental in the field of thinking about Japanese cinema, are presented. Important studies of the Bulgarian school of Japonise Studies are also the focus of the dissertation.

It is noteworthy that the Ph.D. thesis has eight appendices, which are a very good indication of the preliminary research work that the Ph.D. student has been up to. They concern the tabular presentation of Japanese film adaptations and literary works that won international awards in the period 2001-2020; Japanese literature translated into English that became the basis for film adaptations in the same period; national awards for the best Japanese film in the field of adaptation; Screening of cinematographic works on the same theme within the Panorama of Japanese Cinema in Bulgaria, Sofia Film Fest, Cinelibri (by the way, there is also an interview with Alexandra Alexandrova, the executive director of the Cinema-Literature Forum, which has no analogue in Bulgaria); special emphasis is placed on literary texts by Natsume Soseki and its screen adaptations - this is linked to a chapter of the thesis; a good index of Japanese and foreign authors names whose works are the subject of the thesis has been made.

I draw attention to these appendices because they are a colossal work in themselves. They contain statistics that few experienced researchers would bother to collect. In this aspect, the thesis also stands out for its scientific and applied perspective.

The organisation of the dissertation "Visual Revival of Japanese Literature in 21st Century Cinema" was definitely a challenge for both the doctoral candidate and his supervisor - given the wide field of research. Therefore, I would like to congratulate both Assoc. Prof. Vyara Nikolova and candidate Maria Simeonova for their efforts.

The dissertation tends more towards film studies in some areas, but the focus on the general field of Japanese culture is still clearly evident. And let us not forget that Maria Simeonova is neither a specialist film scholar nor a specialist Japanologist.

The subject of film adaptation, eternal and topical since the dawn of filmmaking, allows us to consider it as a rhizomatic-hermeneutic system: wherever we look at it, from the various points of view of humanistic knowledge, we will always find heterogeneous tools for analysis. In this sense, the methodology of the thesis is well chosen, involving a systematic collection and synthesis of data, a historical approach from a comparative perspective, a description of themes, plots, focal points and analysis of specific artists and works (not only of fictional cinema, but also of animated cinema - which in its own way requires a different type of training for the researcher, because of the different systems of expression! The balance of this multiplicity is complex. But the diligence of the doctoral student in "domesticating" it is visible. I would even say that in some places there is even a slight "spillover" of the exposé, it could have been organized in a tighter version.

It worked deductively from the general to the particular, which is an excellent classical solution. In my opinion, the aims, the objectives, the object of study are very clearly defined. The traced authors are numerous, including Bulgarian ones. They have contributed to the visibility, understanding, promotion and insight into the spirit and emanation of Japanese cinema. For

Bulgaria, this is the doyen Prof. Vera Naydenova (NATFA, I was her student), a film scholar-erudite, who has more than once emphasized her inspiration and synergy with Prof. Boyka Tsigova, Dsc. in Japanese Studies.

In fact, **Chapter One**, by definition, is focused precisely on a review of all the literature on the subject of Japanese film adaptation. The theoretical framework is set out in considerable detail. The Ph.D. student has very well captured the complexity of the nature of screen adaptation: the act of translation from the language of literature to the language of cinema. The main observations are clearly presented: The double authorship - of the author, but also of the director/screenwriter - i.e. the subjective view of reading through the lens of the cinematograph; the screen adaptation as an opportunity to develop dramaturgical models and to promote literary originals; the possibilities of transferring the literary text to different cultural and historical settings, the play of the chronotope in the locus of creation (Kurosawa's genius perfectly set the tone with his films based on Shakespeare, Gorky, Dostoevsky).

However, in this section, I find the judgments made about common human ideas and the reflection on moral categories a little exaggerated and even naive. The reason why I make this comment is because even an original script that is not based on a literary foundation can be impressive in terms of its universality and its ethics. Audiences, local and global, can easily identify with the characters. Perhaps the point that Maria Simeonova wanted to make here is through the aesthetic film realisation. That is, through the visual indications, inspired and validated by the screen, to bring out the supranational Japanese narrative strategies.

The **Second chapter** of the dissertation is historical, tracing the long and ambiguous path of Japanese cinema through the routes of literature. What I find particularly interesting is not so much the history of cinema, which is very respectfully presented and discussed by the doctoral student, but the emphasis and focus on the 21st century.

In this part of the dissertation, Maria Simeonova emphasises artistic and industrial practices, polygenre specificity, trends in literary-filmic contexts. In this part of the dissertation, Maria Simeonova focuses on artistic and industrial practices, polygenre specificity, trends in literary/film contexts, but also on other distinctive segments that characterise Japanese cinema and literature: issues of aesthetics, semiotics of cinema, playing with thematic circles that are equally interesting for reading and viewing audiences in the country as well as in international forums; the national specificity of contemporary Japanese cinema in terms of screen expression, genre systems, intertextuality and original artistic categories. For the sake of clarity, the titles since 2000 are arranged by year. This is another element of the second chapter, which is very much an outline.

The mention of the relationship between theatre (i.e. playwriting) and film is interesting - touched on a little (p.121), as are some remarks on the collaboration between manga and cinema. I find the conclusion of the PhD student (p.144 of the thesis) relevant: *'In many cases, Japanese films explore emotions and feelings through a new, different take on familiar themes. This is particularly true of adaptations based on works of fiction, which are reworked to fit contemporary*

conditions and realities". This is relevant not only in terms of purely Japanese cinema, but also for authors who are able to enter into this artistic system with ease - such as Wim Wenders in "Perfect Days".

The **Third chapter** is the most profound and interesting in terms of analysis. It is entitled "Text and Vision - The Literary Work Ten Nights of Dreams and its Film Adaptation". It steps out of the vast "cinematic-literary Japanese ocean" to focus on a specific example through the method of case studies. The choice of Natsume Soseki's narrative is justified as follows: *"The example under consideration is a rewarding material for research, as it is basically segmented and recreated on the big screen. The means by which the author conveys his messages refer to rich stories, multiple metaphors and symbols from Eastern and Western culture. The portrayal of some characters also reflects the author's own life. As for screen adaptations, modern masters use the possibilities of new technologies to offer viewers another universe of images and ideas, rich in references and codes"* (p. 147 of the work). The subject itself, Natsume Soseki and cinema, deserves its own dissertation.

Maria Simeonova departs from the inoscientific to make numerous cross-references to different cultural models (e.g. from China), through the fundamental works of Mircea Eliade, the work of Prof. Dr. Gergana Petkova from the Department of Japanese Studies, linked to the fairy tale (another of Prop's foundations, very important for screen dramaturgy). The rhizomatic potential of Natsume Soseki's work is unleashed by the infinite possibilities of filmmaking. The works of the great masters - Akira Kurosawa, Takashi Shimizu, Kon Ichikawa and others - as well as the animators Masaki Kawahara and Yoshitaka Amano are highlighted. The analyses are fair and present a multidimensional reading along the literature-cinema axis.

However, I would like to make the following remark: the subchapter, part of chapter three, concerning the adaptations presented in Bulgaria, is for me short of the whole very qualitative presentation of Natsume Soseki in Japanese film culture. This last part isn't part of it. In the public defence, the doctoral candidate can justify her choice as to why it should not be set out separately, or as part of the first or second chapter. **Actually, this is my first question as a reviewer.**

The second question relates to my personal resistance to the phrase "visual revival" in the title. Could you explain why you chose this, because purely exploratory, this title sounds a little over-exposed to me, and also suggests forgetting. It suggests something like "cinema brings back the memory of literature, reviving through the screen something that was enslaved, shadowed, frozen in its historical existence". When I read the thesis, I wasn't convinced either.

I accept the conclusions drawn by Maria Simeonova and the contributions made as quite adequate.

Despite the above remarks and my subjective critical "inflammations", I find the work important and valuable in the dialogue of the Literary Studies-Japanese Studies-Film Studies. Of

course, I encourage it to be published as a book, but it would be good to correct some small mistakes (stylistic, linguistic) in order to tighten up the exposition. Overall, the dissertation is very light and pleasant to read, but one can feel the "slight fan fade" in places. Which has its charm, but we are still in an academic environment. And this can be remedied with good editing.

However, there are other criteria that are important: the successful attempt to systematize and organize a huge amount of material and to subject it to a scholarly analysis. Maria Simeonova's knowledge of Japanese cinema is excellent. Her desire to deepen her knowledge in her chosen field is clearly evident.

The work is important, a colossal effort considering the professional background (bachelor's and master's degrees at UNWE) of the Ph.D. student. Again, I would like to emphasise its high scientific applied value, which leaves a visible and lasting mark on the cinematic processes not only in Japan, but also in terms of cultural communication between Japan and Bulgaria (through the prism of screening films from the Land of the Rising Sun). The data presented by the doctoral student will be used in future research. It will save a lot of work for the researchers who come after us. I am aware that this has been a challenging, labour-intensive and time-consuming process, so once again my congratulations go to both the supervisor and his PhD student.

In the end, we have to acknowledge the following: the cinema today back us to act of reading. The cinema cannot live without a good literary basis. This is very clear in the thesis. The process of translation between textual and visual languages is achieved. It is not an easy task for directors and writers. They could simply drown the work in gibberish and it would no longer be cinema. And it's very pleasing that Maria Simeonova avoids the elementary judgement that sometimes accompanies the ordinary viewer/reader when it comes to film adaptations: "Well, the book is better...".

Conclusion: Considering the precision, the importance of the subject, the contributions and the relevance of the work "The Visual Revival of Japanese Literature in the Cinema of the 21st Century", I do not hesitate to propose to the members of the scientific jury that Maria Georgieva Simeonova be awarded the educational and scientific degree of "DOCTOR" (PhD).

Sofia, 28.01.2025

Prof. Dr. Andronika Mártonova