

REVIEW

by Prof Milena Bratoeva (PhD),
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of a doctoral thesis for awarding the educational and scientific degree “doctor” in the
Professional field 2.1. Philology, PhD-Programme: Literatures of the Peoples of Europe,
America, Africa, Asia and Australia (Japanese Literature and Culture)

Author of the dissertation: **Mariya Georgieva Simeonova**, full-time doctoral student at the
Department of Japanese Studies, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

Dissertation topic: *Visual Renaissance of Japanese Literature in 21st Century Cinema*

Information about the author of the PhD thesis and the the doctoral program

Mariya Simeonova holds a master’s degree in “Public administration” from the University of National and World Economy. From 2020 to 2023 Simeonova was a doctoral student enrolled in a full-time program at the Department of Japanese Studies of the Sofia University, supervised by Assoc. Prof. Vyara Nikolova (PhD). Mariya Simeonova's PhD thesis entitled *Visual Renaissance of Japanese Literature in 21st Century Cinema* was approved for public defense by the Department of Japanese Studies of Sofia University. The submitted documentation for the PhD-thesis demonstrates compliance with all requirements outlined in the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, its implementing regulations, and the Regulations for the Conditions and Procedure for the Acquisition of Scientific Degrees and the Holding of Academic Positions at Sofia University. The competition documents also meet all legal requirements.

On the PhD thesis and the abstract of the thesis

With her dissertation *Visual Renaissance of Japanese Literature in 21st Century Cinema*, Mariya Simeonova joins the great debate on the relationship between literature and cinema, which began with the appearance of the first examples of the seventh art. As the well-known publicist and film critic Georgi Chernev notes: "Literature and cinema share a symbiotic relationship, constantly influencing and enriching each other. Literature serves as a wellspring of ideas, plots, and compelling narratives for filmmakers, while cinema, in turn, popularizes literary works, making them accessible to a wider audience." (cited in Kadijska, D. (2011). *On the Relationship between*

Literature and Cinema, p. 3)¹. Despite their inherent connection, the relationship between literature and cinema hasn't always been harmonious. Particularly in the early 20th century, some viewed film adaptations with skepticism. Virginia Woolf, for instance, famously critiqued cinema, calling classic novels its "unfortunate victims" devoured "with immense rapacity," and deeming the union between the two art forms "unnatural" (Woolf, 1926)². However, attitudes towards adaptations have undoubtedly evolved. Over time, scholars have delved deeper into this intricate interplay between the mediums, fostering the development of theoretical frameworks for analyzing and interpreting screen adaptations. The subject of Maria Simeonova's dissertation, which examines the cinematic adaptations of Japanese literature in the first two decades of the 21st century, is highly topical. This research contributes significantly to the existing discourse by offering valuable observations, conclusions, and generalizations drawn from an in-depth study of the dynamic between literature and cinema within a specific cultural context, characterized by its unique worldview, philosophical underpinnings, and aesthetic sensibilities. Simeonova aptly highlights the contemporary relevance of her study by noting that "most of the films that captivated audiences and critics in the first 20 years of the new century were adaptations of Japanese fiction, which won recognition at international film festivals such as Montreal, Berlin, Marrakech, Locarno, etc." (p. 3). Furthermore, as the author points out, a notable gap exists in scholarly literature, with a limited number of studies on this subject conducted by Bulgarian researchers (p.4).

Simeonova's dissertation comprises 306 pages, including 201 pages of main scientific text. It consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, eight appendices, and a bibliography of 189 titles in Cyrillic and Latin, including 21 internet sources and 1 video source.

The Introduction effectively justifies the relevance of the chosen topic, aligning with research requirements. It clearly defines the study's aim, subject, and objectives. The employed research methods are appropriately indicated. The interdisciplinary approach is well-suited to the research's object, subject, and objectives. However, I have some disagreement with the statement that the questionnaire method (p. 7) was applied, as the author only conducted a single interview

¹ https://eprints.nbu.bg/id/eprint/813/1/za_vruzkata_m_u_literaturata_i_kinoto.pdf

² <https://www.sabzian.be/text/the-cinema>

with Alexandra Alexandrova, the executive director of the Cinellibri Film and Literature Festival (Appendix 8).

The first chapter, titled *Theoretical Models of Screening*, commences with a concise yet comprehensive overview of key works (in Bulgarian, Japanese Studies, and Film Studies) that underpin the dissertation (1.1.). This review demonstrates Simeonova's foundational knowledge in her research area, enabling her to effectively 'build upon' existing scholarship, as she states. Subsequent sections of the first chapter further solidify the author's command of the most influential theoretical approaches to “cinematic language” and its prominent figures (Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, etc.). I would like to emphasize the section dedicated to the analysis of the visual sign through the lens of semiotics and structuralism (1.3. *Screening and Semiotics*), which effectively elucidates the similarities and differences between cinema and literature as sign systems. A notable strength of this section lies in its clarification of the specific philosophical and aesthetic principles that underpin the messages encoded in Japanese cinema and art, such as "bi," "mono no aware," and "yugen" (pp. 34-36), highlighting their role in shaping Japanese aesthetics and distinguishing them from Western counterparts. Simeonova provides a compelling account of the trends in postmodern screen adaptations, characterized by a remarkable degree of freedom in interpreting and adapting the original literary text, with a particular focus on the significance of intertextuality (1.4. *Postmodern Screen Adaptation*).

The second chapter, titled *Screening as a Visual Revival of Early 21st Century Japanese Literature*, commences with a historical overview of Japanese literature spanning the Nara period (710-794) to the present. While this section serves as foundational context, it primarily functions as a reference point. It then transitions to a similarly broad survey of 'Japanese screen adaptations in the context of the development of Japanese cinema up to the end of the 20th century,' beginning with the 1921 adaptation of 'Mack,' based on Natsume Soseki's novella. Simeonova aptly highlights the significant contributions of Akira Kurosawa and his seminal work, 'Rashomon,' adapted from two Ryunosuke Akutagawa stories: 'The Gate of Rashomon' and 'In the Thicket' (p. 77). This section's greatest value lies in its insightful conclusions regarding the prevailing themes and trends in Japanese literary film adaptations, alongside an analysis of the factors contributing to the decline of Japanese cinema in the 1990s, supported by relevant statistical data (p. 88).

The focal point of this chapter, and arguably its most substantial contribution to the broader study, is subchapter 2.3, titled *The 21st Century Revival of Japanese Literature in Cinema*. This subchapter is thoughtfully divided into two sections: *Japanese film adaptations in the first decade of the 21st century* and *Japanese film adaptations in the second decade of the 21st century*. Within each section, adaptations are meticulously discussed by year, resulting in a presentation that is both coherent and systematic, and ultimately, comprehensive. This meticulous approach lends significant cogency and depth to the conclusions drawn (p. 105; pp. 122-125), particularly within the section *Distinguishing Features of Contemporary Japanese Screen Adaptations of Literary Works* (2.4).

Undoubtedly, the most valuable chapter in this dissertation is **the third**, titled *Text and Vision - The Literary Work Ten Nights of Dreams and its Film Adaptation*. This chapter showcases Simeonova's critical-analytical acumen at its finest, built upon a deep understanding of both Soseki's literary work and the diverse film adaptations of individual dreams by contemporary filmmakers. Underlying the analysis in this final chapter is the doctoral student's profound interest in the themes of dream, memory, recollection, and suicide as they manifest in the ten mini-narratives and their subsequent film adaptations. Simeonova adeptly interprets the 'multiple symbolism,' allusions, and intertextual references within both the literary text and the film adaptations of the ten dreams.

The inclusion of the section on screen adaptations of Japanese literary works presented in Bulgaria (3.4.) disrupts the chapter's overall coherence. This section seems out of place, contrasting with the chapter's predominant focus on the problematic and conceptual aspects of the topic. I believe this section would be more appropriately positioned within the second chapter, where it would align better with the broader discussion of Japanese film adaptations.

In **the Conclusion**, Simeonova presents her findings in detail, effectively arguing her main thesis that 'film adaptation revives the literary work and strengthens interest in it' (p. 199). The eight Appendices to the dissertation offer significant scholarly and applied value.

Regarding the stated **scientific contributions** of the dissertation, I have reservations about the phrasing of the sixth contribution: 'Reception of Japanese screenplays in Bulgaria through the study of cultural exchange between Japan and Bulgaria through cinema' (p. 203). In my view, the topic of the reception of Japanese adaptations in Bulgaria necessitates a more in-depth exploration

of how Bulgarian audiences 'respond' to these adaptations. This could involve employing research methods such as surveys and interviews.

Overall, **the Abstract** accurately reflects the content and structure of the thesis.

Finally, while the dissertation demonstrates a strong foundation and insightful analysis, it contains minor stylistic and orthographic inaccuracies. These instances, while present, do not significantly detract from the overall merit and value of the work.

For example:

- The sentence "The dissertation also aims to contribute **to the ways of promoting fiction through cinema**,... (p.1). The dissertation could contribute **to the research, study, etc. of the ways of promotion**.....
- One of the tasks formulated in the introductory part is "**to systematize literary screen adaptations in the 21st century in Bulgaria**" (p.6). It seems to me that the wording is not precise enough, because the thesis refers to the screen adaptations **presented in Bulgaria**, and the meaning of the sentence thus formulated is that these literary screen adaptations **have taken place in Bulgaria**.
- The sentence "**From Ivaylo Znepolsky's research on the subject of cinema, one comes to the conclusion** that cinema manages to synthesize all the other arts in itself, being able to speak their language - that of music, painting, literature, etc." (p. 24) This is a characteristic of cinema that has been brought out in dozens of studies and we could hardly conclude it only on the basis of the research of prof. Znepolsky.
- The sentence "The twenty-first century was a time of unstoppable pace of development of modern society, which allowed man **to master the Cosmos, to create the computer**,... (p. 26). - It seems to me that this happened already in the twentieth century.
- The object of study in the Abstract is formulated differently than in the dissertation, namely "**the systematic representation of Japanese cinema** that draws on Japanese literature, which has served as one of the sources of narrative for the construction of Japanese cinema in the first twenty years of the 21st century. "The

object of this dissertation is **the Japanese literature**, which serves as one of the sources of plots for the construction of Japanese cinematic art in the 21st century, and more specifically, the revival of Japanese literature through the prism of cinema, which provides a new interpretation of the literary original" (p. 5). Which do you think is more accurate?

On the publications related to the Doctoral Dissertation

Maria Simeonova has listed four scholarly publications related to her dissertation topic (PhD-thesis, p. 201; Abstract, p. 26), three of which are in Bulgarian and one in English. These publications were presented as papers at national and international conferences. In addition to these publications, the doctoral candidate has included a presentation of a short film ("Hina") based on a short story by the Japanese writer Ryunosuke Akutagawa, which she directed. The film was produced as part of the project "Audio-visual adaptation based on works of contemporary Japanese literature," with financial support from the National Science Fund (Contract No. 80-10-186 / 06.04.2021) to the Faculty of Philology, under the supervision of Assoc. Prof. Vera Nikolova. The four listed publications meet the minimum national requirements for obtaining a doctoral degree.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Mariya Simeonova possesses the requisite academic qualifications and skills. It successfully fulfills the academic requirements for the preparation of a doctoral dissertation in the field of 2.1. Philology, Doctoral Study Programme "Literature of the Peoples of Europe, America, Africa, Asia, and Australia" (Japanese Literature and Culture). Based on the aforementioned scientific and applied contributions of the dissertation, and considering the topicality of the subject, I recommend to the Scientific Committee that Maria Georgieva Simeonova be awarded the degree of Doctor of Education and Science.

January 28, 2025

Prof. Milena Bratoeva