

REVIEW

by Prof. Plamen Dimitrov Shulikov, PhD, (Member of the Academic Jury appointed by the order RD 38-598 of 11.10.2019 by the Rector of St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia) of the materials presented by Senior Assistant Yassen Boichev Borislavov, PhD, regarding the selection procedure (State Gazette, issue 65 of 16.08.2019) for the academic position of Associate Professor in professional area 3.5. Social Communications and Information Sciences (Journalism - History of Bulgarian Journalism)

The very title of Dr. Yassen Borislavov's main publication - **The Bulgarian satirical-humorist periodical press between the two world wars (Sofia, 2019)**, promises to present an intersection of several research areas - history, aesthetics and media science, which, according to the immediate needs of the study can, with some approximation, be interpreted reductively as a chronicle of the collective being, as an aesthetic category (that of the comical) and as a newspaper (at least in most of the 60 periodicals reviewed by Borislavov). A contamination topic, such as for example *A Funny Newspaper Chronicle of Bulgarian Social Life Between the Wars*, should not come as a surprise as the choice of an author who has completed a full bachelor's course in two academic fields - journalism and history. Thus, through the binocular optical system of *conventional history* and *newspaper*, the silhouette of a productive recollection of the 1950s can be discerned. Widely known in media science as an excessive source of reference, it asymmetrically exceeds in importance the "insignificant" fragment, in whose brief genre construction it is somehow bypassed. What is meant here is undoubtedly Schopenhauer's metaphorical reference to newspapers as measuring history, found in §238 of *Parerga und Paralipomena* (Appendices and omissions), precisely as something omitted earlier if judged by the second part of the title. Not a long time afterwards, the relevance of the metaphor was practically verified by both J. Clemenceau and B. Mussolini, whose extensive newspaper experience would prove to be an effective stepping stone to the not-so-game-like "creative workshop" in world history. Permeating media studies to the full, the belief in this dependence inevitably historicizes itself. Even the fact that the only gap through which historicism penetrates into the rather impermeable by default methodological system of Russian formalism is precisely the interest in the media speech, would be a sufficiently symptomatic argument. Existing only as a project in Soviet Russia for political reasons, this research temptation is brilliantly further developed by the Frankfurt school.

Suitably consistent with the outlined tradition is the attempt made by Y. Borislavov to systematize the large number of satirical-humorist periodicals between the wars in Bulgaria on the basis of such an external and non-specific at first glance criterion for assessing the rational nature of the aesthetic category of "comical" as "political tendentiousness". Its application makes a significant contribution to the structural clarity of the study, which distinguishes two main groups of periodicals - the "politicized laughter" and the "entertaining boulevard press laughter."

The first group, color-coded mainly in red and orange, and easily recognizable by its barricade-aggressive, and often rude, provocative, literal tendentiousness, had strictly, although with the opposite sign, adopted Dr. Krastev's famous "instructions" for counteracting the tendentiousness in literature. It is not surprising that with their anti-poetic status they were quite diligently mastered in our satirical-humorist literature after 1944. To quote Borislavov, "the line of proletarian and class humor ... although seemingly peripheral to the general flow of humorist editions in the 1920s and 1930s, in the following decades proved to be most influential in the Bulgarian culture of laughter in the media "(p. 52). I would add - not only in terms of our laughter culture and not only in our media of the "following decades".

As a preferred teacher of slogan tendentiousness, the humorous press affiliated with socialist and agrarian parties between the wars must probably recognize P. R. Slaveykov - an affinity mentioned in Borislavov's study. Judging by the subtitle of "Gaida" (a satirical newspaper for raising awareness...), back in the 1960s, he somehow intuitively "adjusted" Bulgarian criteria of the aesthetic value of the comical to the rigid classicistic covenant of Nicolas Boileau, according to which the truth chooses the satire as its weapon, as well as to some unequivocally medical results of the relentless treatment of the audience through "demonically uncontrollable laughter,... emanating from the beast in man" (Y. Badev). Understood as an outspoken healer of public ills, satire in Slaveykov is akin to criticism, as can be seen in his first Bulgarian manifesto of our literary criticism "Neither for pleasure nor for fear". In the spirit of this tradition, the first fierce critic of the Balgaran-related humor, A. Protich recommended S. Mihailovski's satire as the most productive, but not appreciated by the "Bulgarian" value benchmark. Commented by J. Borislavov, the surprisingly short-sighted stance of otherwise educated art historian Protich evokes genuine satisfaction, above all, with the fact that Balgaran writers had not complied with it. With regard to the satirical "line of proletarian and class humor" in our periodicals between the wars, the value of J. Borislavov's patience should be welcomed, especially in surviving the difficult test of presenting it, to put it mildly, inspiring picture. It was probably only the researcher's historical objectivity that helped him in this task. The writer of the present review, who, fortunately, is not faced with such an overwhelming task, honestly admits that he would be completely satisfied with the lapidary but precise evaluation made by Y. Badev. According to the appointed literary critic of "Slovo", the periodicals of this line, presented most fully by "Cherven smyah" and "Div Dyado" do "a strictly partisan service ... for them, a man is identical with partisan, and life - with the party. The humor in them has nothing to do with artistic humor "(Y. Badev). Borislavov's decision to place this text by Badev ("Our Humorist Magazines", 1923) in the appendix to his book is praiseworthy. It would also be good to include A. Kamenova's article "The Humor of the Humorless (1929), commented on conscientiously by the author. A sufficient testimony to Y. Badev's competence on the question of the aesthetic nature of the comical would be Chudomir's opinion that after Badev, who was the first to publish a review of his stories, all other critics merely repeated what he said (Chudomir. Dnevnik).

The second group of periodicals (that of the "entertaining boulevard laughter") is also characterized by distinct value-related differentiation. For example, the axiological abyss is unsumountable between the second "Balgaran", trying to resurrect his charismatic appearance

from the time of fin de siècle, and, say, "Chervenata ti Vruzka", whose transient 8-week existence had been stopped because of pornography with a Ministry of Education decision in September 1923. It should be noted that in Y. Borislavov's book the systematization of the publications which deliberately avoid partisan tendency is complicated by additional classification criteria. The "Papagal" papers are distinguished on the basis of their visual exoticism, so-called "scourges" - for their extortionate usefulness (a particularly interesting sociological phenomenon deserving a separate study), "Shturets" - because of the apparent dominance of its aggregate artistic dignities in the context of all humorist periodicals. Each of these criteria, of course, is indisputable. At the same time, however, as a collective manifestation, periodicals form their ideosyncrasies (both thematically and stylistically), primarily through the reproduction of the societal mentality embedded in their initial motivation. Behind every team event with periodic frequency transpires the code of the authors who in most cases, or at least the most representative, stable and monolithic among them, are members of a friendly circle with common axiological creed. And this common creed, this common value-based "faith" has not only newspaper or journalistic manifestations, but is also reaffirmed through a multitude of genre-wide acts of the protocol of the friends' everyday life, such as letters in poems, impromptu, artistic stylizations, epitaphs, greetings, season's greetings, parody manifestoes and other gestures attesting to the sense of ideological community. In this sense, I would name friends' circles, commonly referred to as Bohemian companies, as a particularly reliable, sustainable criterion defining the team community of the significant periodicals. They are the most natural living environment in which shared value beliefs are reproduced without compromise. For example, if we exclude "Vesela Bulgaria", a publication which did not turn into a periodical, but whose essence is contained in Aleko Konstantinov's texts, the first "Balgaran" is actually the "sleeve" from which (like in Gogol's "Shinel") appears the high aesthetic norm of Bulgarian humor, the high technical mastery of our intellectual irony, subsequently reproduced in the Circle of Podvarzachov, and in the periodicals "Baraban", "Smyah i Zakachki" in "Zora", and in "Shturets", mainly because of the friendship of the main figures in their teams. If Aleko had not died too early, surely his sketch portrait, painted by A. Bozhinov, would have presented him among the star company of Bulgarian authors in the "Literaturen sbornik na balagaranovtsite" of 1906. In my opinion, with some corrections resulting from inevitable changes in the authors' teams, and by tracing the Bohemian companies it would be possible to build a convincing classification of humorist publications in our country, understandably by 1944.

Naturally formed in terms of value, the friendship-based associations lead a team life of "technological" workshops of a kind, with uncompromising clarity, both in relation to the poetic technique of the comical, and in terms of the management of meaning in general, and, last but not least, regarding the moral measure by which this knowledge is practically applied in speech use. In this sense, one of the questions facing the reviewed monograph, without even formulating such a specific purpose in it, relates to the specification in the native cultural context of the ideas about the technical specifics of the comical, about the logical mechanisms by which it arises as an affective reflex. Along with the main aim of his work, Y. Borislavov pays due attention to this issue as well, presenting the main lines of reasoning in classical aesthetics and their reflections in Bulgarian criticism, from the famous controversy between

P.R. Slaveikov and T. Burmov to the present day. In general, he is betting on a reliable line, initiated by Aristotle and strengthened by his authority. According to it, the comical is a mistake or a deformity that does not cause suffering. This view still holds its relevance in a narrower definitive use, say, in the distinction between humor and satire. It is through its prism that Y. Badev and P. Bitsili see in the 1930s the peculiarity of the humanistic humor in Chudomir. However, this traditional definitive perspective is applicable to the ethical specificity of the different types of comical. The actual technical question of "how to construct speech which provokes laughter", according to Schopenhauer, was first formulated by Cicero, who himself admitted that he had come across "some Greek books with [an example] title *About the Comical*", apparently lost by then. And although he refuses to answer the question on the pretext that wit is not subject to scientific inquiry, since "no one can be trained to be witty in any way" (Cicero. *On the orator*), the question of the poetic mechanism of the comical finds a clear, fixed, written formulation for further generations to reflect on. If a series of subsequent definitive attempts are dismissed (eg those by R. Descartes, T. Hobbs, B. Spinoza, etc.), even Kant's notion of laughter as an "affect of the sudden transformation of tense expectation into nothing" (along with Jean Paul's theory) was dismissed by Schopenhauer as inconsistent. It was Schopenhauer who defined the comical as an affective consequence of a logical operation - "a suddenly realised incongruity of the concept and the real object imagined in it," that is, "a conflict between thinking and contemplation." He even defined the generic nature of the comical as a formally logical operation, as a syllogism whose great premise is indisputable, while the little one manifests itself conspiratorially under the guise of a sufficiently transparent, sufficiently recognizable "alien" mask. It is precisely this two-sidedness of speech construction (Schopenhauer proposes a metaphorical replacement of the comical by an angle formed by the intersection of *two lines*) was discovered much later, in 1924, in the definitive notion of a Bulgarian author whose important work¹ J. Borislavov appropriately refers to. Mikhail Dimitrov, then still an assistant professor of experimental psychology at Sofia University, spoke of the "disparity of ideas", of the "double positioning of consciousness", both in the production of the comical and in its perception. Thus, taking into consideration another important text of a Bulgarian researcher from the 30's², it becomes quite clear that at that time Bulgarian critical reflection already perceived laughter as a supreme manifestation of intelligence, as a technical virtuosity of thought, as a meaningful self-worth of sophisticated technical ability to construct witticisms and paradoxes. In such a deep understanding of the poetic technique of the comical, one can see traces of H. Bergson's *Laughter* (1900). In it, laughter is seen as a rational manifestation of pure reason that needs a brief anesthesia of the heart, traditionally perceived in a romantic manner as a metaphorical repository of irrational affective states. In this sense, the self-sufficient technical skill in constructing the ridiculous, which, turned into a valuable intellectual game, shows indifference to any ethical regulations, would be a valid axiological criterion for the systematization of humorous artifacts, including periodical humorist press. It is worth mentioning here that Protich's criticism of the first "Balgaran" relates precisely to the

¹ M. Dimitrov. Psihofiziologiya na smeha// Godishnik na SU, t. XXI, 1924. Later, Dimitrov published a shorter article based on this large-scale study: M. Dimitrov. Psihologiya na smeha// Filosofski pregled, 1929, v. 3, pp. 44-53.

² K. Cholakov. Psihologiya na teatralniya sharzh// Filosofski pregled, 1935, v. 1, pp. 78-81.

demonstrative self-intoxication of the mastery of technical capabilities, and to its authors' disrespectful and contraventionary "buffoonery", with which they "apply rhyme and rhythm to anything that met [their] eyes"³.

Obviously delayed in our country, the notion of comical as a rational manifestation of pure reason was ultimately imposed with the mediation of prestigious European models. Specifying the periodicals that influenced the native criteria for the artistic value of the comical, Y. Borislavov, points to the Munich edition of "Simplicissimus", perhaps the most authoritative of such editions. I am tempted to add two additional arguments. The first one is found in the poem of Podzavachov "Rodina", where the name of the magazine is explicitly included in the composition of a macaronic rhymic couplets („Vse taj si detski zhalka ti/ i v robstvo, i vuv nezavisimost –/ taj vazhno-vesela – pochti/ izmisljena za *Simplicissimus*”). The second argument is indirect. It is given by Zmey Goryanin in his sad "confession of an intellectual", self-ironically called "Shega". In it, behind the name of the aforementioned German artist Kathe Kollwitz, most probably transpires the Munich Humorous Magazine, where she is a regular contributor ("A sega sam vlyuben v edni/ prizratsi sas zhenski drevi: bolni, gladni i razplakani zheni/ ot kartinite na Kathe Kollwitz"⁴). *Simplicissimus'* Munich address suggests another influence coming from the same place. It is a local *Fliegende Blätter* leaflet with an even longer tradition dating back to 1845. The influence of this weekly humorist magazine, with its highly indicative title, transpires in the titles of more than 10 pieces of flying and loose sheets, including even one "Hvarchasht Balgaran" from 1907. The magnetic impact of the German edition on our native culture is also evident in its so-called "serious" extensions, such as for example Geo Milev's projects "Lirichni hvarchashti listove" and "Hvarchashta biblioteka", or in the general collective term "flying magazines" introduced in the late 30s by Y. Badev.

Finally, I would also point out the relevance of a question rhetorically asked by Y. Borislavov at the very end of his research - "is an image ... more effective in its impact than a word?" (p. 173). The inevitable interactions between an iconic and a verbal image in periodicals, especially in "fast" editions with intense periodic frequency, can become the focus of a possible future research on our periodicals. Y. Borislavov's enduring interest in this aspect of our national culture makes me believe that it is quite possible.

The second monograph, presented by the author (**Bulgarian journalism between the two world wars (1919-1939) - Sofia: Avangard Prima, 2010**), fully meets the criteria of a quality textbook on the history of Bulgarian journalism, creating a picture of the media environment from the period with the range providing the necessary comprehensiveness and systematicity of the studied phenomenon. The author also focuses on the periodicals, the Bulgarian radio, the journalist organizations, and the legal regulation governing the access to the media market of journalistic, and last but not least, entrepreneurial initiative. At the risk of repeating myself, I would like to reiterate that, productively combining the competence of a historian and a media researcher, the author outlines a sufficiently representative socio-

³ A. Protich. Balgaran// Misal, 1905, p. 129.

⁴ Zora, 3.10.1932.

political context, in its inevitably causal relations of the overall media image. For example, the political agendas for a social class based executive power, partly realized in the agricultural governance (indeed, not at all isolated from the agrarian tendencies in the politics of Europe at the time, such as the Croatian Rural Party of Ante and Stepan Radic), are intriguingly concurrent with the growth of specialized press (p. 6), which enthusiastically responded to the particularly popular cooperativist doctrine in our country in the 1920s - a timely echo of the "collective" power realized during the wars. Similar is the parallelism between the public fatigue from internal political conflicts, which ultimately led to the banning of political parties in 1934, and the gradual, but sure, transformation of the newspaper of the idea (political tendency) into the newspaper of information (p. 62).

The profile of the communist press of the period outlined in the book is intriguing not so much with the inevitable findings of its apparently dominant physiognomic features - boredom, dogmatism, doctrinaire language, Russian wirts (eg "da se otpochne", p. 34), hate speech, but with the intra-party deviations from this, so to speak, "leading" style guidelines. The special emphasis on the articles by a left-wing journalist, such as Dimitar Naydenov in a left-wing edition such as "Pogled" ("The Language of Our Press", "Sectarianism in the Press", p. 36) is an appropriate choice with a clear pedagogical contribution to the authenticity of the media picture. Far from being an annoying repetition is the overall context recalled by Y. Borislavov, with the legendary Communist historiographer A. Strashimirov's assessment of Tsankov's government "they massacred their own people more brutally than the Turks did". Students, and other people as well, should be aware that in the assessment of Strashimirov, the "bloodthirsty tyrants" satanized by the long-standing propaganda panegyric are equal to those who have "forsaken the hopes of the masses and fled" (Dimitrov and Kolarov), to engage in cynical calculations of the political results of the September hecatomb.

Conservative publications are also presented in a pacifying counterbalance to the blisteringly biased political press, some with a certain inclination towards the political right and others politically independent, but at the same time professionally dedicated to their mission to inform. In Borislavov's account transpires the author's bias for this segment of the general media picture during the wars. Completely understandable for a media researcher, it is due, in my opinion, to two reasons. The first, related to journalistic ethics, is well substantiated by Y. Plachkov. His professional "manifesto" ("short and fair writing; no hate and partisan writing; no lie ...", p. 55), although specifically tied to the "Mir" newspaper, has the value of a general program for most of the major conservative periodicals. The second reason I see in the pursuit of public consolidation, which, as a kind of "conspiratorial" path of the conservative press, is not a guarantee of idyllic relations even in this relatively unified media segment. Suffice it to cite the article in "Zora" by D. Krapchev ("Monologue of the Press", 1929), through which he sharply disputes, in particular, with "Utro" - A. Damyanov's "faitondzhijski vestnik", but in fact with Damyanov himself and his newspaper empire over the press monopoly.

Promising in research perspective are also such topics as, for example, the emergence of the professional reporter, professional photojournalist, the use of credible government information channels, the typographic "Americanization" of the newspaper, etc., which have

the resources to substantiate the status of the then conservative press in Bulgaria as a productive model relevant even today. It is these editions of the 1920s and 1930s, however, that codify the so-called "Chilov's position", widely acknowledged and massively referred to as the undoubted Bulgarian contribution to the world advertising practice to this day.

The qualities of the applicant's monographs, the sufficient number of his publications in refereed editions, from his previous qualification procedure up to the present moment, the fully satisfied administrative criteria under this procedure, the results of his last attestation, his gift as a the storyteller, his ability to construct effective formulations depicting the essence of the discussion matter, as well as his overall presence as an author with original ideas, give me full confidence to propose to the esteemed quorum to promote *Senior Assistant Yassen Boichev Borislavov, PhD*, to the academic position of *Associate Professor* in the professional field 3.5 Social Communications and Information Sciences (Journalism - History of Bulgarian Journalism).

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