

REVIEW

**From Assoc. Prof. Galina Goncharova, PhD,
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of dissertation for the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "PhD"
in the professional field 3.1 "Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies"

Topic of the dissertation: **“The Amateur as Cultural Phenomenon”**

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Scientific supervisor: **prof. Ivaylo Dichev**

The content of the dissertation submitted for defense includes an introduction, three main chapters divided into numerous subchapters and paragraphs, a conclusion, an appendix, a bibliography and 43 color images (mostly photographs, within the exposition). The total volume of the latter amounts to 255 pages (of which 3 pages are appendix). The bibliography totals 170 titles, of which 30 titles in Bulgarian, 109 titles in English, 4 titles in French and 27 online publications and materials. The abstract and the publications on the subject fully comply with the educational and scientific criteria for obtaining PhD degree.

Undoubtedly, Maria Ivanova's dissertation is the result of consistent and long-standing research efforts to achieve a solid knowledge and analytical understanding of globally relevant and popular amateur/amateur cultural practices in Bulgaria in recent decades. While not directly stating it as such in the title, it identifies and focuses on LARP or live action role-playing, cosplay and meme production. Accordingly, she examines and draws conceptual connections between three distinct case studies of non-professional engagement with cultural subjects and artefacts, drawing first on her personal experience of cultural consumption through technology and the internet, her book on the Bulgarian LARP community, and most importantly on field research conducted between 2015 and 2021. This striking combination between a long-term interest in a given scientific topic, gradually moving beyond the youthful curiosity, and a sustained, committed "settling" into the field of anthropology also sets the highly informative character of the work, combined with a strong self-reflexivity and creative invention in the presentation of the research intentions and/or results. Already in the introduction, and before discussing the state of contemporary research on the topic, Maria

Ivanova goes back to her childhood and nostalgic memories of her most beloved games, magazines, websites, etc. to show that the emergence and spread of LARP, cosplay and internet memes cannot be understood outside of certain generational contexts and constructions of amateur identity.

This regime of confessionalism or of seemingly spontaneous sharing with the reader personally experienced emotions and engagements is maintained throughout the entire text and is reflected in the selection of the attached photographs, which often show Maria herself "in action". At the same time, however, it finds its grounds with the choice of conceptual and methodological framework. Thus, with the help of auto-ethnography and "qualitative reflexive methods based on in-depth interviews", she on the one hand enters and even takes on the role of the amateur who immerses herself in original cultural practices in a fresh and unprejudiced way, and on the other hand verifies with a scientific toolkit each of her "movements" in the field of anthropological research. In practice, it is this approach that lends coherence to a dissertation, avoiding the risk of disintegrating into three separate textual corpora. To this must be added the mirroring organization and structuring of the content in the major chapters. Although it gives the impression of a certain monotony and repetitiveness, it helps to ensure that the observations made do not fall out of the conceptual framework and remain next to the concrete cases/events of amateur activities. Thus, each chapter includes a brief historical overview, an introduction to basic concepts, an account of different (types of) events and artefacts, highlight of key features and analysis of the process of creating amateur communities.

Indeed, the doctoral student herself is clearly aware of the risks involved, and again, the points of intersections of LARP, cosplay and memetic pursuits are marked in the introduction. The latter are seen not solely as expressions of amateurism, but as those expressions that imply imitation along the fun-serious axis, carry a specific publicity, and involve "crafting" or "material creation" of costumes, inventories, accessories, patterns and codes for generating and reading humorous messages, etc. Insofar as they can be only partially professionalized and commercialized, and largely retain their amateur character, they can be defined through different cultural and scientific traditions, from classical dilettantism and the pursuit of hobbies in modernity to remix culture, participatory culture, bricolage techniques or DIY-industry in postmodernity. At the same time, they have their (trans)local conceptualizations, invariants and dynamics, which are in fact the main focus of the dissertation and are traced in detail in the different chapters, subchapters and paragraphs. Thus, a possible genealogy of live role-playing is marked in Chapter One, which highlights

connections and influences between improvised theatre and the *commedia dell'arte* tradition of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, therapeutic practices in the field of psychoanalysis, and the game Dungeons and Dragons, created in America in 1974. In the Bulgarian context, the first LARP practices were fixed at the beginning of the 21st century and were linked to the activities of young admirers of Tolkien's works.

The genealogy is doubled with a theoretical excursus on fandom in order to highlight the figure of the cultural bricoleur as merging with that of the amateur and to delineate the space of creative play with different historical knowledge, heroic auras and fantastic narratives so characteristic of the practice of LARP. The space in question is further problematized through notions such as diegesis/subjective diegesis, temporal reality, immersion, and setting, and through dichotomies such as in-game versus off-game activities. All of these draw attention to the individual and collective experience of a fictional reality that is projected onto specific geographical landscapes, bodies and objects. This is why the types of LARP are differentiated according to the venue, e.g. urban or non-urban environments.

Maria Ivanova explicitly highlights the differences in the construction of fictional reality in comparison with, for example, escape rooms and historical reenactments. While in the former the physical contact with fictional objects comes to the fore, in the latter the museification and enactment of a scene of a certain heroic plot, strictly tied to the celebration of national holidays and the celebration of a "glorious past", the larps are distinguished by simultaneity, a greater variety of interpretations and more opportunities for interaction between the participants and between the participants and the environment. Here comes the comparison with the folk art, which also develops outside professional guilds and practices and is based on the experience of festivity in its spontaneity and non-elitism.

In the second part of the first chapter, quite expectedly, the participant observations of the doctoral student find their place, which give both literally and figuratively photographic density and precision to the analysis of the phenomena studied. Focusing in detail on different types of players and characters, on specific outfits and camps, characters and fables, etc., Maria Ivanova comes to the conclusion that, contrary to her initial thesis about those engaged in LARP as indulging in infantile and experiential activities and seeking an escape from reality, participation in live role-playing implies a rather secular asceticism - self-restraint combined with accumulation of knowledge and skills. This asceticism does not so much hinder as assist socialization and coping with everyday situations. Hence, the LARP

communities can be discussed as neo-tribalists who bring global races and heroes into locales and vice versa give universal meaning to local folk traditions.

While chapter two, on cosplay, is structurally very similar to chapter one, it unfolds a slightly different analytical perspective on amateurism, and cosplaying in particular, in the field of popular culture. It brings into focus the problem of prosumers, the producers-consumers of cultural content, and the possibilities of professionalization. To this end, Maria Ivanova draws on theoretical frameworks on participatory culture, fluid identities and global cultural scenes. Once again, the substantive analysis is preceded by a brief historical overview in which the conventions of science fiction in contemporary America and the fan events of anime and manga culture in major Asian and European capitals are traced back to the mysteries of antiquity, the carnivals, Saturnalia and masked balls of the Middle Ages, the living pictures of the nineteenth century and the *laterna magica* of the late Victorian era. These are discussed as complex cultural interactions and exchanges in terms of "the recreation of images...through costume, makeup and set design" that initially took place mostly between Japan and America and which very quickly became competitive and commercial. They also predetermine the specific, insider jargon of the global cosplaying community, which emphasizes different degrees of fandom, forms of belonging, and erotic projections by retaining original Asian terms such as *otaku*, *weaboo/koreaboo*, *wifoo*, *moe*. Along with presenting the commonalities and shared cultural background of cosplay practices, Maria Ivanova outlines some differences, such as the fact that American cosplayers perform stage skits as part of the competitions they organize, while Japanese cosplayers sign or recite the character's motto. As with the first chapter, the Bulgarian context is described in as much detail and density as possible. Traced in the foreground is the growth of interest in traditional and contemporary Asian culture and in Korean/Hallyu wave production among adolescents and young adults aged 12-18 in recent decades, which centers amateur events and forums around k-pop icons and well-known characters from video games, anime, manga, movies, and comics. Of special note here is the observation of the heavy investment of both resources and emotions/erotic desires into making the perfect costume and turning it into a cultural product and fan souvenir.

Another important contribution within the chapter is the conceptualization of cosplay as practice that illuminate the "imaginary boundaries of social gender" and carve out "creative spaces for the subject" to parade "narratives of gender difference" (p. 101). The included observation of the holding of the first "dragotilnitsa" in Bulgaria in 2021 perfectly supports the conceptualization. Finally, in the conclusion, Maria Ivanova states that cosplay

should be seen "as artistic expression and social interaction, but also as an in-between zone between art and personal desires" (p. 138), and in the Bulgarian context as a generational fashion and as an expensive and/or lucrative hobby.

The final third chapter is devoted to memes as "digital folklore," including but not limited to "viral" content. Theoretically, it builds on already deployed concepts such as *distributable culture* and *DIY culture*, but adds new ones such as *remix culture*, *culture soup*, *culture jamming* and *deep fake*, among others, to focus on the creation of images and practices that attack and distort certain aesthetic patterns and subvert established cultural contents. Cave drawings, caricature, pastiche, collage, satire, parody, comics, etc. are recognized as precursors to the meme, but left without detailed historical commentary. Instead, the conceptual transition from meme to Internet meme is traced in depth with numerous references to scholarly and popular texts on the subject. Separately, meme creativity is analyzed as imitation, copying, and reinterpretation that creates macro and micro communities and relies on the sharing and knowledge of global and regional themes, patterns, techniques, and humorous codes. Hence its political and commercial uses are specified, making it a tool for invisible, mild ideological pressure and carving out different niche markets.

The relationship between meme and LARP and cosplay practices - the highly interactive and communicative nature, the creation and addressing of well-defined audiences and the development of "networked creativity" - is also pushed in an inventive and intriguing way. At the same time, the intertextuality, 'discursive power' and multimodality of memes is highlighted, making them a digital art that requires an almost expert knowledge of local and translocal cultural codes, attitudes and group identities. It is no coincidence, for example, that Maria Ivanova dedicates a special paragraph to memetics (the grammar associated with internet platforms and social networks and the knowledge of how to work with programs, filters, montages and meme templates), to the types of humour exploited and to meme pages that enjoy particular popularity. Together with other similar paragraphs and the many and varied examples from the web and from the interviews, she successfully defends her definition of memes as "amateur media artifacts" that can both entertain and perform social critique.

The conclusion of the dissertation brings together all the observations and details provided far in a convincing way, deepening and finalizing the comparison between LARP, cosplay and meme practices. Thus, among the similarities the "manifestations of contemporary art", cosplaying or crafting, the potential for professionalization and

commercialization, the immersion in fictional worlds are pointed out, and after the divergences - the belonging to different generations, the consumption of different types of popular culture products, different imitation techniques, etc.

In **summary and conclusion**, the dissertation undoubtedly has the merits of an original scholarly text that tackles highly topical issues and develops an impressive conceptual toolkit. It demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the theory of subculture, fandom and amateurism, as well as an excellent orientation in the cultural and historical dynamics of the phenomena studied. Last but not least, there is the precise playing of the role of a critical insider within the fieldwork, as well as the attractive, almost artistic way of presenting its results. Of course, like any ambitious scientific work, the proposed PhD thesis raises, but leaves unanswered, some important questions about the prevalence in contemporary Bulgaria of certain amateur practices, hobbies and forms of popular art. Although the introduction and several places in the thesis comment on generational communities and fashions, they do not clearly highlight the local and regional contexts in which they are formed, such as the period of post-socialism with its characteristic liberalization of cultural markets and opening up to global cultural industries. There are also a lack of profound comparisons and generalizations concerning the Balkan or Eastern European context.

In view of all the above, I confidently propose that Maria Ivanova be awarded the degree of Doctor of Education and Science in the professional field 3.1 Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies.

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