

REVIEW

of the PhD Thesis

“The Amateur as a Cultural Phenomenon”

by Maria Danielova Ivanova

for the award of the educational and scientific degree “PhD”

in the professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences (Cultural Studies,
Cultural Anthropology)

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1. General presentation of the PhD student

Maria Ivanova is a PhD student at the Department of History and Theory of Culture, Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University “Saint Kliment Ohridski” in the period 2019–2023. In the same department Maria Ivanova graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in Cultural Studies in 2017 and a Master’s degree in Cultural Anthropology in 2019. During her PhD studies she participated in research projects related to the topic of her dissertation – “Self-Artistic Creativity in Cyberspace. A cultural anthropological analysis of visual representation from collages, memes and gifs, Bulgaria in particular” (April–December 2021) and “Pop Culture, Pop Politics: the Digital Turn. Interdisciplinary Analyses of the Intersection between Media, Cultures and Politics” (2021–2024).

General characteristics of the PhD Thesis

The dissertation “The Amateur as a Cultural Phenomenon” by Maria Ivanova consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography and an appendix in a volume of 255 pages; there is full correspondence between the publications and sources of information cited in the text and those reflected in the bibliography. The dissertation is a continuation of the author’s research interests in the field of visual arts and fan practices, which are expressed in her Bachelor’s theses (“LARP Games in Bulgaria”, 2017) and Master’s thesis (“Cosplay in Bulgaria”, 2019). However, by focusing on amateurism as a cultural phenomenon, Maria Ivanova rewards and further develops her own anthropological analysis of cultural practices specific to the digital situation and sheds light on

previously unproblematized aspects of them, which will be discussed in the scientific contributions section of the dissertation.

The **introduction** of the dissertation presents the social and scientific rationale for the choice of the three cultural practices – live action role-playing (LARP), cosplay and meme activity – through which the amateur as a research object is studied. On the one hand relatively new for the Bulgarian context, on the other hand still poorly studied by the social sciences in Bulgaria, the three cultural phenomena are placed in the perspective of generational changes in Bulgarian society and global pop-cultural dynamics. These two lines of analysis are sustained and deepened in each of the chapters devoted to the respective cultural practice, which allows to outline both the general and the specific aspects of the amateur artist in the contemporary Bulgarian cultural context. The research questions that guide the dissertation research are clearly formulated: “What is the interaction of the object under study with other cultural practices? In what terms might groups of people engaged in similar hobbies be thought of? Are there discernible local specificities associated with these activities or is their practice related to assimilation and imitation of global subjects? Can these phenomena be considered a profession? What is the relationship between the online and offline behavior of participants? Is there a distinction between high (elitist) and low (popular) or is it largely blurred? Can the activities studied be seen as a new form of festivity, a new folklore and collective creativity?” (*PhD Thesis*, p. 11). The analytical orientations of the reflection are outlined through the choice of concepts from post-subcultural theory such as Maffesoli’s “neo-tribe”, Straw’s “scene”, Jenkins’ “fan practices” and “participatory culture”, Lessig’s “remix culture”, Claude Lévi-Strauss’ “cultural bricolage”, Roland Barthes’ thesis on the death of the author, etc. The methods applied (participant observation, in-depth interview, review of websites, Facebook and Instagram pages) are adequate to the research object, and the research strategy of “auto-ethnography”, where the researcher narrates his/her own involvement and interaction with the community under study, allows to highlight important epistemological questions about the way and limits of achieving a scientifically grounded truth about the phenomenon under study.

The **first chapter** is devoted to live action role-playing or the so-called LARP culture. This chapter can be seen as a kind of model of analysis of the other two cultural practices, which begins with a refinement of the conceptual and theoretical framework for understanding the phenomenon, moves on to examine its predecessors and varieties in a global perspective, situates it in the Bulgarian cultural context, focuses on its specific manifestations in order to explore the common and the specific in the practices of consumption of the respective cultural phenomenon in Bulgaria and in the global pop culture, in the profile of the created community and in the behavior of consumers-creators of culture. The conclusion about LARP as a “serious actors’ game” is the result of an analysis of its

conceptualizations in the foreign literature, of a methodical study of the interaction between the signifier, setting the direction and setting of the action, and the interpretation and engagement of the amateur actor, of a participant observation of two LARP events – the largest Bulgarian LARP with international participation “The Fog” and the urban LARP “Night of the Old Gods” (both inspired by their international editions) and of in-depth interviews with organizers and participants of the live role-plays.

With research precision and sensitivity to empirical reality, Maria Ivanova redefines concepts, corrects initial hypotheses and presents LARP in Bulgaria as a form of collective creativity, whose participants form a kind of closed community. Its rules, codes and rituals socialize and form specific skills, which are also applied in the non-game reality. Despite its playful nature, however, LARP is not an infantile activity without repercussions on the lives of the participants, nor an escape from reality, as the author’s initial assumptions are. Not only the preparation for participation, but also the participation itself and the subsequent emergence from a play role/entry into a life role are linked to the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, the search for additional information, the borrowing and processing of different cultural elements. This leads the PhD student to consider LARP as “a new art form – an art created by the fan” (*Abstract*, p. 10) on the one hand, and as an activity with specific socializing functions and influence on everyday relationships outside of play on the other.

Chapter two of the dissertation examines cosplay as the “new masquerade”. Similar to the study of live role-playing games, the study of cosplay practices examines their historical roots and origins (the mask, live paintings, Asian traditional and contemporary culture), traces their entry into the Bulgarian context, presents the specific vocabulary of the cosplay phenomenon, compares cosplay with other cultural practices in order to focus on Bulgarian cosplayers and their possible existence as a community. By skillfully combining different research methods and techniques, Maria Ivanova builds the specific image of the Bulgarian amateur cosplayer as a young person (predominantly in his teens), part of a loose event community of geeks, gamers and fans of Asian culture, with a strong emotional and physical attachment to a fictional character, belonging to the professional, internationally acclaimed cosplayers, or to the novice amateurs.

In the **third chapter** of the dissertation, memes as “digital folklore” are analyzed. The contemporary picture of this cultural phenomenon in Bulgaria is presented on the basis of a precise study of the history of the term from meme to internet meme, of memetics as language and grammar, of the difference between meme content and viral content, of the internal structure and external manifestations of memes, of different meme pages in Bulgaria. An expression of joke, sarcasm, criticism, a digital publication combining image and text becomes a meme only if it is creatively remixed and overused. With no trace of authorial origin, memes are the product of a continuous interaction be-

tween “the collective creator and the collective reinterpreting and remixing viewer” (*PhD Thesis*, p. 221). It is in this movement that they create micro and macro communities, are practiced as a hobby, but also have the potential to become a profession and a business, transforming humor into citizenship and political resistance.

The **conclusion** of the dissertation summarizes the answers to the research questions based on the study of the concrete manifestations of the three phenomena of global popular culture in contemporary Bulgarian society.

Overall, the analytical work in the dissertation is carried out on a rich empirical basis. The tools used to collect, process and analyze empirical data are relevant to the research aims and objectives. The theoretical framework and methodological tools are adapted and tailored to the specifics of the research object and the changing research situation and are distinguished by the author’s original handwriting.

The *Abstract* adequately reflects the content of the dissertation, although it presents its logic rather synthesized. The self-assessment of the contributions of the dissertation is realistic. Five publications in Bulgarian on the dissertation topic are listed, one of which was co-authored before the start of the PhD studies. Two of the publications are in the publications of the University Press “St. Kliment Ohridski”, two in Seminar_BG and one in Medialog.

Scientific contributions of the PhD Thesis

The contributions of the dissertation work formulated by Maria Ivanova reflect adequately and accurately the research results. In addition to these contributions, I would like to mention a few more achievements important from the point of view of the development of cultural anthropology of new media and communications.

The dissertation clearly shows that

firstly, cultural phenomena in the digital age represent not only local assimilation of global cultural practices, but also global dissemination of local phenomena (the Korean hallyu wave, memes related to Balkan themes, etc.). The logic and mechanisms of development of these two intertwined processes, however different, are of interest precisely from the point of view of the formation of communities whose communicative potential can have a transformative effect at different levels of social organization;

secondly, in the cultural practices studied, one observes both the overcoming of dichotomies and the emergence of new oppositions. If the forms of cultural consumption mediated or facilitated by digital technologies blur the boundaries between high-low, fun-serious, author-reader, actor-spectator, amateur-professional, their rules, norms, requirements, rituals impose a

closed-selective openness of the community, its own handwriting and anonymity of the participants, a kind of internal hierarchization of “veterans” and “novices”, of “initiated (knowledgeable and capable)” and “uninitiated”. Thus, the post-subcultural character of these practices does not cancel the reproduction of archetypal social relations, and this socio-cultural hybridity deserves to be explored with the tools of both cultural and social anthropology.

In purely epistemological terms, at least two significant contributions of the dissertation should be noted: first, the threefold comparative perspective in which the doctoral student situates the phenomena under study, and second, the problematization of the possibility of scientific knowledge of certain cultural phenomena.

Setting out to analyse live action role-playing, cosplay and memes as amateur cultural practices, Maria Ivanova explores them once in relation to my global sources and analogues, a second time in relation to other similar cultural practices, and a third time in relation to each other. In all three cognitive procedures, comparison does not mean co-measuring against the measure of the other phenomenon, but placing the phenomenon under study in a relation of equivalence with the other phenomenon, which makes it possible to highlight both similarities and differences while respecting each phenomenon’s own specificity. As for the author’s self-reflection on the relationship with the studied community during the fieldwork, it does not simply refer to the classical social science question of access to the respondent, nor to the postmodernist epistemological attitude towards the respondent as co-producer of knowledge. Maria Ivanova explicates and problematizes a new epistemological situation in which the study of cultural practices related to the digital turn may find itself blocked by the very specificity of the cultural phenomenon, not because of the need for specific knowledge on the part of the researcher, but because of the closed nature of the cultural community itself, which does not accept non-actors, i.e. participants in the role of observers (as is the case with LARP-communities).

The constant epistemological vigilance over the limitations and self-limitations arising from the auto-ethnographic approach followed, as well as the continuous adaptation of the methodology to the phenomenon under study, are among the undoubted merits of the thesis.

Critical comments, questions, recommendations

From the point of view of Maria Ivanova’s further work in the field of anthropological research on new media and related cultural practices, I would like to draw attention to several underdeveloped aspects of the dissertation analysis and the issues arising from them.

First, the emphasis on cultural practices leaves the amateur as the central object of study in the background. The way LARP, cosplay and memes are examined as cultural phenomena presents the

amateur as a function of fandom, of cultural practice itself, rather than as a “cultural phenomenon”. To the extent that the activities, emotional attitudes, interpretive qualities, knowledge, and skills of the participants in the practices mentioned, as well as the relationships within and outside the community, have been methodically examined, it would be more appropriate to speak of amateurism as a cultural phenomenon rather than as a figure of the amateur.

Second, although the study reveals the different professional, age and cultural status of the practitioners, there is no analysis of their motivation for engaging in collective amateur creativity. The dissertation would have contributed to a deeper understanding of the amateur if the in-depth interviews had focused on understanding the meaning of the participants’ own engagement in recreating, building and sustaining a fictional world. What does the imagination, confronted with/against reality, or the reality included in the imagination, “hide” or “reveal” in the rational, market-economic everyday, moreover with the investment of personal time and one’s own material and financial resources? Can we associate the professionalization of an amateur practice only with the possibility of securing income? Conversely, do professional actors, designers, and gamemasters become amateurs when they engage in a non-income generating cultural practice? These are just a few possible questions that future research work might develop.

Third, insofar as cultural practices are a social phenomenon, the dissertation does not answer questions related to the social antecedents and projections of LARP, cosplay, and meme activity. To what extent are LARP as an elitist hobby, cosplay as an expensive hobby, and meme activity as requiring a set of specific skills moving away from their pop culture roots and losing their potential to become a mass cultural movement? Is there a contradiction between the collective creativity of which they are both a product and an expression, and the specific knowledge, skills and resources they imply, which remain unevenly distributed in contemporary societies? As far as Bulgaria is concerned, with the observed trends of declining functional literacy, is there a danger that these cultural practices will become encapsulated, precisely because participation in them presupposes a certain level of verbal, visual, digital literacy? Although sociological in nature, these questions are important because they relate to the social weight of the cultural practices studied.

General evaluation of the dissertation, the attached publications and the personal contribution of the PhD student

In its entirety, the dissertation contributes to conceptualizing and analyzing the figure of the new amateur by exploring cultural practices related to the digitalization of media and communications and to building an adequate conceptual and categorical apparatus. Considering that

it is a question of cultural phenomena poorly studied by researchers in the social sciences and humanities in Bulgaria, the value of Maria Ivanova's dissertation research increases.

All the publications presented by the PhD student are related to the dissertation, address issues developed in the dissertation, and bear the author's thought and research style. Both the publications and the dissertation are the personal work of the doctoral candidate.

Personal impressions

I know Maria Ivanova from her participation in the research project "Pop Culture, Pop Politics: the Digital Turn. Interdisciplinary Analyses of the Intersection between Media, Cultures and Politics", supervised by Assoc. Prof. D-r Zhanna Popova. Her work is distinguished by a high sense of responsibility, solid theoretical knowledge and skills for independent work and teamwork.

Conclusion

The dissertation "The Amateur as a Cultural Phenomenon" shows that the PhD student has formed a high analytical and research culture. Taking into account the full compliance of the dissertation and its accompanying documents with the normative requirements of the legislator and the primary scientific unit, the mentioned achievements and scientific contributions of the dissertation, I confidently give my positive assessment and recommend the esteemed members of the Scientific Jury to vote unanimously for the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "PhD" to Maria Danielova Ivanova in the professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences (Cultural Studies, Cultural Anthropology).

June 18, 2023

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