

OPINION

For the PhD dissertation “Amateur as a Phenomenon of Culture”

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For awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences; doctoral program Cultural Studies (Cultural Anthropology)

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Maria Ivanova’s dissertation paper is a comprehensive study of the changes in the culture of fan groups, role-playing games and new forms of cultural interactions that develop along with the advancement of digital technologies.

The timeliness of the dissertation is indisputable. The culture of entertainment and show business develops at a rate that is increasingly difficult to create a “past” of phenomena, some of them can only be explored as “lasting”, as the author of the dissertation works writes, as a process. Fast-growing technological phenomena determine the life of an entire generation and leave their traces through the culture of youth groups, then pass into routine work, but there is no shared knowledge between the generations of even the most commented and marking “phenomena”. The culture of sharing on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok has become a distinct line of age choices that audiences make.

All this determines the significance of the presented dissertation paper, as the detailed studies of Bulgarian authors show how basic practices and the structure of relationships in fan groups and communities have changed under the influence of the internet over the past almost 10 years. Maria Ivanova presents in detail all three micro-studies that she has done. I find her work with the text accurate whenever she clarifies terms, slang, the “vocabulary” of the researched groups and social actors on the internet.

The paper consists of an introductory part, three chapters, a conclusion, in a total volume of 255 pages. The list of reference literature describes accurately 170 titles, of which 109 are in English, 30 in Bulgarian, 4 in French, and 27 online sources. The Annex includes 43 illustrations.

The doctoral student has achieved the tasks set out at the beginning of her study: to use different approaches to the topic of the changed repertoire of audience-actors-artists-creators-users-trainees and trainers in the creation of content and game scenarios. A particular line in her analysis is the relation between commercial ideas and political uses of cultural phenomena. These processes have been analyzed for a long time and the

mediatized meaning of “interactivity” has shown abuses and good practices in the use of this characteristic of the media. However, Maria Ivanova deals in her work with questions about the essence of interactivity as a feature not only of the media and of the game, but also of the interaction between them. For example, the “closing” of some of the participants in LARP groups, due to the “infantile” labeling by the media, is explained in detail. This is the key merit of the dissertation paper, i.e. what are the role repertoires chosen by “trainers” and “trainees”, “narrator” and “players”, how the authority in the group is challenged, how to build “respect” to the narrator of the “knowledge” how to play. The second approach to the research is looking at the commercial element and the market as an ideological construct that determines content. LARP games have no commercial element; they are structured around group practices in which there is a clear hierarchy and consistency in rituals and ceremonies for its affirmation. However, Cosplay and meme culture are related to market products, advertising and marketing. Therefore, it is worth noting the consistent search for comparisons of what happens to the player, pretending to be another person who “works” and who acts this “pretending” into another character, protagonist, collage in their spare time. The author draws several substantive conclusions regarding the non-professionalization of LARP games and, on the other hand, shows foreign examples of how the “unprofessional” has been transferred to a very important area, perhaps the most important one: history education. A symbolic assimilation of the hobby and the game in a field on which all political parties rely. By analyzing three different cultural phenomena, the doctoral student has managed to identify the most important political and social reflections: protests, the organization of online groups that cannot be communities but influence each other, satire, and especially the internet form of parody: meme collages, as an echo of reality. All the subjects studied in the dissertation are analyzed taking into account their characteristic of cultural practices, which “recast” events of reality added with the game of history, satire, or carnival. In this part, the interpretations of the new forms of “craftsmanship” in the production of attributes for LARP games, graphic and video images, role models in the “conventions” of parades imitating Eastern cultures are particularly interesting. From the research, we understand that the “crafts” have been transformed from a professional sphere into “hobby”, into contriving done in leisure time.

A comparative analysis is made of what gives rise, as reactions to reality, to this tension between “leisure time” and “working time” when we observe “live” games and online games, sometimes with anonymous participants. The games and playing, per se, are definitively related to entertainment and leisure time, and the players/actors in this case are regarded as “workers”, almost (semi-)professionals as authors and creators of images.

The author shows a good knowledge of basic theoretical developments related to the study of subculture, game patterns of behavior, education through games, and partly about social networks. The theoretical model of the research has served to build the analysis of the three micro-studies, and it is further developed in each chapter.

The study of games in a different “live/virtual” mode gives the author a reason to draw a very important conclusion: the internet is of great importance, but it is not fundamental to converting local game models into global collective creativity with repetitive or multiplying local images. This happens thanks to the reversed roles or resistances in guarding the boundaries of a professional author and a non-professional. Therefore, it is valuable that the analysis pays special attention to the statutory regulation of the rights of

the author and the distributor of content – as an opportunity to keep these boundaries or to destroy them.

It would be good to reduce the increased scrutiny of the researcher's self-description and role. While the self-reflexive study of the difficulties and limitations of the "researcher" who works with methods and field observations from anthropology before the internet and now makes sense, it needs to be further developed. This task will be assigned to the doctoral student vis-a-vis future research: distance is needed, even with the included field observations.

The contributions formulated by the doctoral student could be presented in a more summarized form so that the specific scientific contribution becomes visible. The separation of the contributions related to the delineation of the ideological framework of the participants in the three cultural practices is considered to be correct. While the study of jargon and terminology, per se, is not a contribution, there is a contributing aspect in the description of a specific "language and grammar" of meme actors/artists, of LARP players, of cosplay actors, as well as the separation of realities that are spoken in these specific game "languages". The doctoral student herself rightly notes another contributing aspect: the outline of the changes in the funny, the comic, the entertaining, after the improvement of digital platforms and networks. The paper corroborates the definition of memes as global collective creativity and a symbolic reservoir of social movements and political discourses. The approach to LARP games, cosplay, and meme practices as educational practices, on the one hand, and as a business, on the other, can be added as a contribution. From the very beginning, the author indicates that she has given up the analysis of narratives and has used anthropological research to study the playing as an act.

The question remains if it is possible that we witness a "global collective of actors" who have no relationship with each other as a community, as a society, because some of them remain hidden behind the avatars/rolls/masks they choose.

The thesis is accompanied by a dissertation abstract, which presents the paper accurately and shows the doctoral student's ability to self-reflexively outline the limitations of her work. Five publications are presented, four of which were made within the period of full-time doctoral studies. One preceded this process and has been used in the paper, as it is on topics on which the author has been working.

What has been written so far leads to my definite conclusion that the dissertation is an important scientific work with significant contributions. I am voting for the award of the scientific and educational degree "Doctor" in the professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences – Cultural Studies (Cultural Anthropology) to Maria Ivanova.

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