

Opinion

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elitsa Rumenova Stoilova,

Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski"

Member of the scientific jury for the dissertation of Maria Danielova Ivanova

"The Amateur as a Phenomenon of Culture" for the award of the educational and

scientific degree "Doctor" in the professional field of

3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences

Maria Ivanova's dissertation examines contemporary cultural phenomena through the specificity of amateurs, who are thought as their carriers and creators. As Ivanova herself defines the object of her research, this is the "new amateur", which she presents through three different cultural practices. The research focus on live action role-playing games (LARP), cosplay practices and a phenomenon existing in the digital space- the internet memes. At first glance, these cultural practices may not be recognized as interconnected, but it is the understanding of the manifestation of non-professional creativity is the unifying focus the researcher. Various elements of what is understood as the 'new amateurs' are presented, and the specificities of their manifestations in the three cultural phenomena are presented. The work is definitely a contribution, not only because of the topicality of the chosen issue and the filling of the missing anthropological and cultural studies analyses of the chosen cultural forms, but also because of the attempt to look for parallels between them and to consider them not as separate cultural manifestations, but in a comparative perspective. Thus, certain specifics of LARP, costume and meme culture are revealed, local parallels of universal global cultural forms are analysed. M. Ivanova examines each of the three selected phenomena as contemporary cultural practices related to the participation of their consumers in the creation of certain cultural patterns. This co-participation is analyzed in the context of new strategies of transmitting and creating cultural knowledge, cultural and creative content, but also of constructing personal identity, namely through the ideology of "Do it yourself" (DIY).

The research is based on long-term observation of the phenomena under study, field materials, a significant number of interviews, as well as an autoethnography approach. The dissertation consists of 255 and contains an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography and an appendix. The three chapters are devoted to each of the cultural phenomena under consideration. The bibliography lists 170 titles in Bulgarian, English and French, as well as 27 Internet sources. To visualize certain cultural practices as well as to present the specificities of the meme genre, the dissertation also contains 43 figures.

The introductory chapter sets the research problem, the methods, the aims and objectives of the dissertation, as well as the main theoretical concepts that the author will use. Here, the central issue is the problematic of fannishness and the so-called crafting (making something with one's hands) as indispensable elements in the three cases studied. It is also shared that "what unites the three phenomena (LARP, cosplay, memes) is that they are practices that any amateur non-professional could be engage in" (p. 9). This statement is later rethought by showing the different cultural contexts that practitioners themselves construct, contexts in which willing new 'amateurs' do not always manage to sufficiently acquire the necessary knowledge and skills or become part of these specific communities. The exposition fulfils its role of introducing the issues and setting a broader framework, although the coherence of the text is lost in places.

The first chapter is devoted to the study of LARP culture. It begins by introducing the specificity of live-action role-playing games and their development in a historical context. The chapter established basic concepts to aid the understanding of the LARP community and the specificities of the practitioners of this live role play. The in-group folklore and specificities of LARP in Bulgaria are supported with numerous quotes from the interviews that help to build comprehensive theoretical and explanatory models. Four research hypotheses are clearly stated and further developed and transformed at the end of the chapter. LARP events are considered in the context of a new festivity in which there is a particular time-space outside the usual and certain roles are played and social positions are taken. The specificities of the LARP community, in-group hierarchies and positions, as well as its closedness and desire to preserve its unprofessionalism are examined.

The second chapter, although devoted to the specifics of cosplay and its manifestations in Bulgaria, includes an analysis of another cultural phenomenon- that of the drag show. Interesting parallels are drawn between cosplay and this other way of creating and reformatting identity and its various forms. The two phenomena, in different ways, enable those involved to invent a provisional vision and interpretation of the self that is outside the everyday. If in a drag show the choice can be much more creative, due to not being tied to a specific character and plot, but related to the personal sense of self, in cosplay the proximity, the identity with a chosen existing fictional image is sought.

The second chapter reveals the creative and imaginative practices in cosplay, as well as the self-learning and knowledge sharing that reveal the specificities of do-it-yourself culture. A similar analysis is absent in chapter one, where the focus is on the 'construction' of the game image as carrying an individual biography that develops within the game. A more

detailed analysis of the process of costume-crafting, building the setting would provide more profound understanding of LARP. A distinction is also made between a professional cosplayer player and a novice. Professional is not just understood as having made the activity a profession, but as a more experienced and more recognised by the community. Again, the material provided in chapter one also makes similar positions of power and hierarchy visible in the LARP community. My question is: Why in the analysis of LARP culture is there no discussion on the professionalization - within the game on the one hand, and in the experience of creating objects needed for the game? On the other hand, advancement in the hierarchy leads to a position of knower and know haw, of a skilled player with a significant "biography" and game experience, of someone who knows the rules and plays with them. A more in-depth analysis of the do-it-yourself culture of cosplay provides another contribution to the thesis, namely the broadening of the understanding of this concept, not only as it relates to the 'craftification' of things, but also of identities (see p. 137).

The third chapter is devoted to digital space and memes. As here the specificities of these new expressive forms and their local interpretations are re-presented. The meme is presented by the author as a way to translate different ideas across cultures. They are replicating cultural forms in which the idea of authorship is blurred as they become a collective product, also based on the principle of do-it-yourself (DIY). For M. Ivanova, the existence of memes is only possible in their sharing, reposting and constant process of transformation, of adaptation by their different users and recreation. The consideration of memes as a form of digital art is well argued and allows new understanding of the significance of art in contemporary times as well as the emergence of new cultural forms.

I would like to ask the following two questions: to what extent can cosplay, drag shows, and even LARP games be considered of as new art forms? To what extent the lack of institutionalization and commercialization (becoming a profession) are markers of lack of specialization?

In my opinion, the work would more fully represent the specifics of the issues explored if it delved further into the understanding of amateur and professional and the blurring of boundaries between them in contemporary times. An interesting analytical approach could also be through the prism of the co-construction of biographies that include not only real events and solidified identity markers, but also new ones that are based on the fictional, the self-invented, and even digital identity. The dissertation sets many new fields for the development of research on global cultural phenomena and their local manifestations, as well

as for rethinking different cultural genres and their role in the construction of personal and collective identity.

In conclusion: the dissertation faithfully and accurately summarizes author's main conclusions. The abstract correctly reflects the content of the dissertation and presents the main points and conclusions of the research. In summary of everything stated so far and based on the scientific contributions of the dissertation, I support the award of the educational and professional degree Doctor to Maria Ivanova in the professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences.

18.06.2023г.

Plovdiv

Elitsa Stoilova