

## STATEMENT

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About the dissertation work 'The Amateur as a Phenomenon of Culture' by Maria Ivanova,

PhD candidate at 'St. Kliment Ohridski' Sofia University, Faculty of Philosophy,

Department of 'History and Theory of Culture',

For the conferral the educational and scientific degree 'Doctor' (Professional field 3.1.

Sociology, Anthropology, and Cultural Sciences)

Maria Ivanova's dissertation serves as a compelling testament to the profound responsiveness of the social sciences to shifting currents in popular culture, influenced by the surge of globalization and technological advances in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Her research explores the realm of amateurism, drawing upon three contemporary cultural practices as examples – Live Action Role Playing (LARP), cosplay, and Internet memes. These were investigated during her PhD program in the Department of 'History and Theory of Culture' under the scholarly guidance of Prof. Ivaylo Dichev.

The dissertation, spanning 255 pages, is structured into an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography and an appendix which includes profiles of the respondents. Using qualitative research methods, Ivanova conducted in-depth interviews and practiced observational studies, supplementing her findings with the analysis of Internet data. The text is marked by a distinct reflexivity concerning Ivanova's stance in relation to the cultural phenomena under scrutiny. The work benefits from over 40 illustrations that effectively visualize the fan practices under discussion.

The introduction lays out the research context and theoretical scaffold within which Ivanova conducts her study, specifically highlighting the interconnection between generational identity and the informational landscape. Each chapter follows a uniform structure, presenting the historical development of the respective cultural practice globally and its particular trajectory in Bulgaria. Ivanova elucidates the numerous foreign terms – predominantly Anglicisms, but also Japanese and Korean phrases in relation to cosplay – utilized in these subcultures.

The author presents her initial hypotheses and provides an evaluation of their validation or refutation during her field work in Bulgaria. The dissertation also features thoughtful commentary on the development of cultural processes amid the Covid pandemic, a period during which part of her doctoral research was conducted. Every chapter culminates in conclusions that delineate the universal characteristics and potential national nuances within the cultural practices studied. Ivanova's work demonstrates a keen grasp of, and application of theoretical concepts pertinent to her research topic.

In the first chapter, Maria Ivanova examines LARP as a hobby created by amateurs, in which global practices interact in Bulgarian terrain. Differences between Bulgarian live role-playing games and other cultural forms such as historical reenactments, for example, which aim to present the past, are highlighted. The author shares personal impressions and experiences from her LARP participation. A scientific contribution is the anthropological observation about the social connections of role-playing participants in and out-of-game, i.e. about forming communities, as well as about the role of play in acquiring diverse skills. Problems that arose in the course of the research, as well as the reception of respondents to the publications about them, are commented on. Maria Ivanova characterizes Bulgarian live action role playing as a new folklore with subcultural elements, which, unlike practices in other countries, does not have a commercial aspect and is performed by closed groups with a relatively small number of participants, with no audience allowed.

The second chapter of the dissertation delves into the world of cosplay fandom, depicting the phenomenon as a modern-day masquerade. The intricate creation and public demonstration of the chosen character costumes play a central role. M. Ivanova differentiates cosplay from other forms of dress-up, such as drag events, Halloween, LARP, and crossplay. She underscores the performative and competitive aspects of cosplay in terms of vision and representation of the favorite character, the influence of contemporary Asian culture, and the elements of escapism and eclecticism within this practice. From an anthropological perspective, Ivanova's study scrutinizes the participants involved in cosplay, emphasizing the unique blend of creator and consumer embodied in the figure of the cosplayer, as well as their creative interpretations in the recreation of character images. M. Ivanova perceives cosplay as not only a form of collective creativity but also a novel type of festivity. Her fieldwork uncovers the existence of a dedicated cosplay fan community in Bulgaria; however, unlike in some other countries, this hobby seldom transforms into a profession here.

M. Ivanova observed that cosplay in Bulgaria lacks distinctive traits and its enthusiasts do not constitute a tightly-knit community, instead existing as a subset of larger fan groups. Consequently, she posits the term ‘scene’ from post-subcultural theory as a more fitting descriptor. Her research indicates that cosplayers in Bulgaria exhibit a distinct generational profile with a notable female majority. The study also offers observations on the evolution of home cosplay during the pandemic, and the pivotal role of photography in cosplay, which intriguingly blurs the line between amateur and professional.

The third chapter of the dissertation focuses on memes as a form of collective creativity and digital folklore, highlighting their potential for variation and innovation. M. Ivanova’s anthropological analysis examines interpretations of this cultural practice by several creators of meme pages. She presents various thematic clusters of memes circulating within the Bulgarian sphere, identifying their unique traits and global characteristics. The study brings attention to nostalgic and political themes, folk psychology stereotypes, and gender dimensions in the creation of memes by often anonymous authors. Ivanova also discusses the requirement for specific contextual and visual knowledge to fully comprehend the content of particular meme. She underscores the genre’s primary functions as a hobby, marketing tool, or business, its artistic merits, and the initiatives to preserve digital content as a source for understanding the context of meme creation and recreation.

The conclusion consolidates the key findings gleaned from the research. Based on her field observations, Ivanova revises her initial hypothesis regarding the entirely amateur nature of the examined cultural practices and identifies their potential for professionalization. She validates the pivotal role of the technological and informational landscape in enabling the pursuit of specific hobbies. M. Ivanova notes that, over a relatively brief period, new technologies have shaped generations with distinct cultural practices. While fandom is not a novel phenomenon, the advent of the information age has broadened the avenues for interaction with new fictional worlds. Ivanova situates LARP, cosplay, and meme culture in Bulgaria within a global culture marked by imitation, eclecticism, and collective participation. In her view, this collective creativity constitutes a new, supranational form of folklore that serves socializing, communicative, and educational purposes.

However, does the author’s assertion that all three phenomena represent a new form of festivity hold up to scrutiny? For cosplay, this is a clear-cut case, and live-action role-playing (LARP) also embodies such elements. Both LARP and cosplay derive from the

collective enjoyment of a hobby that transcends the typical temporal and spatial boundaries of everyday life. Conversely, a meme, much like a joke, is more intertwined with everyday culture. Memes are consumed, experienced, and recreated via the omnipresent mobile device, in any given space and time. This seamless technological integration of the genre also facilitates a smoother transition from amateurism to professionalism for its creators. The differences between cosplay and LARP versus meme-making stem from the performative nature of the former practices, wherein practitioners momentarily adopt identities distinct from their day-to-day personas.

Maria Ivanova's dissertation stands as an innovative exploration of contemporary forms of popular culture, predominantly crafted and consumed by a generation that has grown up in a starkly different technological and informational milieu compared to their predecessors, thus leading to differing leisure preferences and hobby choices. The study's methodological approach is reflexive, drawing on personal field observations and demonstrating sensitivity towards the anthropological facets of the subject matter. The investigation into leisurely cultural practices, fandom, and the figure of the amateur unveils contemporary trends in the quest for an alternative reality that satiates the craving for entertainment and instils life with meaning. The dissertation also raises the increasingly pertinent issue of deciphering cultural codes in an environment proliferated by subcultures, with their own 'languages' and niche repertoires of cultural practices. This evolving context underscores the ever-growing necessity and societal relevance of anthropological research.

The dissertation's content is accurately encapsulated in the abstract. Maria Ivanova's academic contribution includes five publications, one of which is co-authored, all featured in volumes listed on the National Reference List maintained by NACID. The accumulated points from these publications surpass the required 30 points for the public defence of a PhD thesis.

Based on the considerations outlined above, I am compelled to endorse the conferral of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to Maria Danielova Ivanova for her dissertation titled 'The Amateur as a Phenomenon of Culture' (Professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology, and Cultural Sciences).

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