

## REVIEW

by Prof. Svetla Yordanova Hristova, PhD,

Professional field 8.4. “Theatre and Film Art” scientific field „Film Studies, Film Art and Television” for the dissertation **RANGEL VALCHANOV’S FEATURE FILMS – AUTHENTICITY TRANSFORMATIONS**, by **Antonia Vasseva Milcheva**, a PhD student in “Film Studies, Film Art and Television” at the Department of Cinema, Advertising and Show Business, in NBU, for acquiring a doctoral educational and scientific degree in professional field 8.4. “Theatre and Film Art”.

Rangel Valchanov's feature films, despite being a foundation in our national cinema treasury, like other undisputable facts in different areas of Bulgarian culture, is seemingly negligible, and is not subject to the modern research interest. Nor is it subject to study and analysis in our cinema education. Therefore, the theme chosen by the PhD student Antonia Milcheva, in addition to being worth researching, is a good a start for other studies of the work of this unique Bulgarian filmmaker.

Art, in essence, requires the unbiased exploration of human existence, the doctoral student believes, and she as a young director and researcher, justifies her research focus on Rangel Valchanov's feature films from the Socialist Period like that: „ It is difficult for me to imagine how, in a world of continuous, ubiquitous propaganda, one can maintain a clear and sober judgment. It takes a special effort to object, to question what shaped a person's mind, if only within one’s own imagination.” Born after the collapse of the Socialist Regime, she offers a point of view for research, equalling Rangel Valchanov’s originality. The instrument she offers in this reinvention of his films is the authenticity, the originality of his directing, in the face of the fierce ideological censorship and the normative aesthetics of socialist realism.

The dissertation text is 139 pages and consists of: a) an introduction; b) four chapters, each of which examines the authenticity in Rangel Valchanov’s films, starting from a specific moment in his creative development - the Socialist Realism period (Chapter One), then in the Transition Period, in search of new artistic means of achieving authenticity (Chapter Two), going on to examine the aspiration for the artistic conditionality as a way to achieve authenticity (Chapter Three), and creating an authentic world, constructed entirely by the author (Chapter Four); c) a conclusion, d) contributions, e) bibliography, consisting of 62 titles and other sources (personal interviews conducted by the PhD student with the poet Miryana Basheva, the cinematographer Radoslav Spasov, Rangel Valchanov’s daughter, the actress Ani Valchanova, the actress Sonia Bozhkova, as well as director Mikhail Venkov’s personal video archive). I must point out that Docho Bodzhakov’s work, “Film Directing Technology” (2014) is not included in the bibliography, although it is the only work published in Bulgaria and would have been quite useful for the issues addressed in Antonia Milcheva's dissertation.

The dissertation is structured in such a way that it can gradually reveal and justify the PhD student’s thesis, by tracking the natural development of the authenticity in Rangel Valchanov’s directing work chronologically.

In the **introduction** Antonia Milcheva aims to expand the understanding of what constitutes the concept of authenticity in cinema, specifically attributed to the directing of the film. The examples provided by the PhD student, lead her to the valuable conclusion that the effort to create an authentic artistic world necessarily relates to the spirit of the film, to the truth that the director wants to express. In her opinion, authenticity is a worldview, a sense of ethics and truth.

From this standpoint, she notes that the current rules of the American Film Academy limit the means of expression of the contemporary artist and restricts their aspirations for the truth and, not coincidentally, uses the political scientist Ognyan Minchev's definition of "identity racism" as a label for these rules.

Thus, by orienting us in her understanding of the authenticity of directing in cinema, the PhD student points to the **object of her research**: the films of the most prominent among the feature film directors in Bulgaria, during the socialist regime, Rangel Valchanov; she justifies her choice by the obvious fact that his films are varied in genre and stylistics and provide a wide range of research opportunities. **The subject matter**, i.e., the focus of her study, is the way in which the change in the directing means of expression over the years affects the authenticity of his films, while the **methodology** used in conducting the study is of interdisciplinary nature.

The structuring of the dissertation in four chapters traces the different stages in Rangel Valchanov's directing work in the context of Bulgarian and European cinema in the respective period. Each chapter begins with an introduction to the specific historical context, its peculiarities, an overview of Bulgarian and European cinema and their influence on Rangel Valchanov's work. To analyse the films in question, the author relies on and comments mainly the opinions of the film critics working in the respective year, as well as a wide range of diverse sources, such as Bulgarian cinema historians' works, memoirs, artworks, etc.

In the first chapter, "Authenticity in the context of socialist realism", the PhD student examines the conditions for creativity in Bulgarian cinema, when the director's talent of Rangel Valchanov flaunts, as early as his debut, *On the Small Island* (1958), in the dominating doctrine of socialist realism and the influence of neorealism as a special kind of attitude to the world. Here Antonia Milcheva chooses to quote the exact description of the method of Socialist Realism in our national culture, formulated by a bright literary talent, killed by the communist regime because of the authenticity of his talent – Georgi Markov. The author of the dissertation agrees with his view that Socialist Realism does not allow the artist to explore the complexity of a man and the world through art, but actually helps to present a social utopia as reality itself. What makes an excellent impression is the ability of the PhD student to see through, understand and compile a multi-faceted analysis of all the aspects of directing, as well as her veritable conclusion that only thanks to Rangel Valchanov's natural talent does the film narrative become an authentic artistic world. Personally, I do not accept her interpretation of the compositional sound frame of *On the Small Island*, that it leads to a "semantic contradiction". I believe that she has not appreciated the synergistic effect of this cinematic solution, which has not lost its originality to this day.

*On the Small Island* is at the same artistic level as the European cinema of that time, a testament to the artistic maturity of its debuting director but was nevertheless stopped from screening in cinemas by a party decree and does not participate in international film festivals. Milcheva

appreciates this fact by giving an example of the fate of the film *Generation* by the Polish director Andrzej Vayda. The success of *On the Small Island* does not turn out to be the beginning of the new Bulgarian cinema the way the new Polish cinema starts from *Generation*. And the reason does not lie in the lack of talent, but in the fierce party censorship, which has no analogue in the entire Socialist Camp at the time!

The next two films by Rangel Valchanov with Valery Petrov as a screen writer – *The First Lesson*, (1960), and *The Sun and the Shadow* (1962) are analysed in accordance with the opinion of the current film critics. And this, in a way, in my opinion, has led the PhD student to further develop or refute their opinions, instead of reflecting on the cinematic innovation in the directing of Rangel Valchanov, featured prominently in *The Sun and the Shadow*, has been appreciated and celebrated through the *Best Directing Award* of the Varna Festival, and through awards at international film festivals (the *Award for Most Promising Young Talent* in San Francisco, 1962 and the *John F. Kennedy Peace Prize* in Los Alamos, 1964). The film was ranked first among the five best films dealing with the problem of nuclear war at the Melbourne International Film Festival, Australia. It is hardly possible to appreciate the authenticity in Rangel Valchanov's directing if we look at it through the prism of neorealism. In *The Sun and the Shadow*, the director ignores conventional perceptions of the fabular and surreal development of the film narrative. It is for the first time in our cinema, that a narrative deprived of any events is re-constructed from the expressed feelings of the characters, from a subtext with rich free associations – i.e. it is such a skill to lead a narrative, for which neither in our cinema, nor in our literature has there been a precedent to so far. While such approaches have been applied in France by Alain Robb-Greyer and Alain Renee in *Last Year in Marienbad!* And this is a fact, regardless of the cited personal assessment of Rangel Valchanov for this film.

The focus of Chapter Two, “The Transition Period. Search for new artistic means of achieving authenticity” are the films, *The Detective and the Night* (1963), *The She-Wolf* (1965), and *Aesop* (1970). What is precisely and thoroughly interpreted in *The Detective and the Night* is the main components of directing: the choice of material for a film skilfully avoids the historical revolutionary theme and the obligatory schematics in its interpretation by directing a film production based on the work of the outspoken supporter of the communist regime, Bogomil Rainov, whose narrative offers a genre interpretation of criminal history. The director offers a cinematic interpretation of the genre history and builds up on it with an unexpected but accurate choice of lead actor (Georgi Kaloyanchev), what makes a great impression is the work with spaces as a stylized part of the characters, as well as the main character leading the narrative not just with voice-over, but also with his gaze directly into the camera. i.e. eyeing the viewer. The evaluation of all these components of the film director leads the PhD student to the conclusion that, in this film, Rangel Valchanov stylizes film reality in accordance not so much with the requirements of the genre as with the character's subjective perception of the film reality and, with this approach, the director achieves the authenticity of his directing. In *The She-wolf*, the director distances himself from authenticity and the reason lies in the schematic nature of the film, established at dramaturgy level. What the author of the dissertation offers in relation to the film *Aesop* is a convincing judgement that the lack of authenticity is caused by the wrong stylistic solution for the film space, as the viewer struggles to accept the theatre props used to recreate the setting as Aesop's point of view. Another reason for the lack of authenticity has been cited and it is the unresolved question of whether and how to use a foreign language in the film narrative, but unfortunately, the examples presented do not provide a convincing solution for problem.

At the beginning of the third chapter "Strengthening the aspiration for artistic conditionality, seen as a path to real creative freedom" Antonia Milcheva gives a historical overview of the socio-political context in which the so-called "Czech miracle" was born, and describes the stylistic strands of the Czech wave in cinema. And here the PhD student provides a magnificent analysis, both of the *A Masked Face* (1970) – The Czech film, in which the director is also a screenwriter and creates the first entirely authentic author's world in the spirit of the great European cinema of the 1960s, and *Chance* – the other Czech film, again based on the director's script. It is interesting for me, personally, how the Czechs rate the two films, because in the study there is not even as little as a line about their reaction. Just to remind that Rangel Valchanov is the only Bulgarian filmmaker who has shot outside Bulgaria and collecting all possible sources and opinions around this fact is of utmost importance in the era of digital technologies and mass communications!

The film *Escape to Ropotamo* was defined by Antonia as a quest to establish full conditionality and above all as a sign of what the director wants to do in the future. The PhD student intuitively understands that the purpose of this "escape" of Rangel Valchanov is to get away from the compulsion to make a "conformist" film just to be allowed to return avoiding problems with the censorship after years abroad. The theme of the artist's self-isolation as a variation of the escape is reviewed and analysed with high appreciation for its cinematic realization in the film *With Love and Tenderness*. With relation to *The Detective and the Wood*, the PhD student points out that it is the first film in Bulgaria, shot with a direct sound recording on magnetic tape, and this directorial approach (working with sound) allows for a documentary observation of the spontaneous reactions and intonations of the non-professional actress Sonia Bozhkova in interaction with her partners. Thus, the director through the solid dramaturgical basis and direct sound recording achieves the full authenticity of acting. In the final of this third chapter, the PhD student examines and analyses the film *The Unknown Soldier's Patent Shoes*, based on a script by Rangel Valchanov and in her opinion, one of the most authentic universes in Bulgarian cinema is built in this film. Here she again convinces us of her talent to interpret competently and precisely all the components of the film, built with virtuoso ingenuity and taste in the application of the director's techniques for conducting a comprehensive impactful narrative. The very description of Rangel Valchanov how during the filming of *The Sun and the Shadow* at sunrise on the sea he saw two *Zyl* trucks with villagers, who go off and step meekly into the sea singing a sad and moving folk song, the very description of his associations and the feelings these villagers inspired for him with that song, is actually a proof of the very essence of the argument for the authenticity of his directing in this film. „I was speechless with joy, but also with guilt because I had betrayed my aunts... my mom... in my village, in the field, in the forest. (...) In fact, it's only now that I can say that my guilt from that morning by the sea didn't leave me until I finished *The Unknown Soldier's Patent Shoes*.

In Chapter Four "Authenticity in the conditionality of a world created entirely by the author" Antonia Milcheva analyses and reflects on the transformations of authenticity in Rangel Valchanov's films *Last Wishes* (1983), *Where Are You Traveling to?* (1986), *And Where to Now?* (1988). The common trait these films share is the fact that the director Rangel Valchanov is a co-screenwriter in all of them. Then does the main issue of authenticity lie in the actor selection and working with actors in *Last Wishes* as the PhD student claims, or is it in the dramaturgy? The director's attitude to the system is reflected in the headlines in his last two films before 1989: *Where are You Travelling to?* (1986), *And Where to Now?* (1988), where the PhD student convinces us, with the analyses thereof, that their authenticity is rooted in the

parable nature of their plot, in the credible dialogue, in the persuasive acting, in their meaningful message about both the present and the future, and we agree that this is why they are relevant today.

In the chapter "Conclusion" Antonia Milcheva briefly and clearly synthesizes the main conclusions about the changes in the directing of Rangel Valchanov from 1958 to 1988. According to her, the thread that connects all these films, regardless of how they change stylistically and thematically, is the "continuous cinematic outmanoeuvring" of the impositions and prohibitions of the communist system. Having managed to escape as early as the creation of his debut from the forcibly imposed totalitarian lie about the world achieved through propaganda, the director develops the theme of escaping multilaterally and captivately with cinematographic means in his subsequent films. I do share the author's two conclusions about the reasons that lead to the destruction of authenticity in film directing: "First of all, the decay of authenticity is inevitable when the film serves a certain thesis. A thesis is any preliminary scheme for the world. It makes no difference whether it is an ideological or a political thesis, nor whether it is the result of a public cause conceived with noble intentions or any other opinion on a particular issue, including those common to the entire humanity. The other problem of achieving authenticity is related to escaping the problems of the respective era."

I believe that the conceptual intention stated by the PhD student in the dissertation thesis - to examine the ways in which the expressive means of the director Rangel Valchanov change and how this change affects the various manifestations of its authenticity - is successfully achieved. The dissertation text testifies to the PhD student's insight into the semantics of the images and to perfectly analyse the cinematic expression of the film ideas, to arrange the expressive means of the director Rangel Valchanov in a seamless system for exerting impact on the viewer.

I accept the contributions formulated by the PhD thesis author and I believe that her work is underlaid by in-depth theoretical knowledge in the scientific area and that it proves her abilities for independent research. What I also classify as an important contribution to the topic examined, are the two letters from the personal archive of the director Rangel Valchanov – that by chief editor at the studio *Barandov*, Kunz, about the inability to cooperate in the realization of *The Unknowns Soldier's Patent Shoes*, and that by the director, to Todor Zhivkov, appealing for support for the realization of *The Unknowns Soldier's Patent Shoes*.

My question to the PhD student is: Why is it that there is no information about the opinion and evaluation of Czech film critics about the films of Rangel Valchanov *Masked Face* (1970) and *Chance*, which were shot in the Czech Republic?

I have known Antonia Milcheva since her student years and my personal impressions of her are excellent – she has always been responsible for any kind of questions and tasks related to her collegial presence in the department. I am glad that she, as a young director, with this dissertation text, also places herself as a researcher of the artistic mastery of the director's profession. I wish her, with all my heart, creative success in the field of film directing and teaching.

In conclusion, I consider the dissertation submitted to me for review, "Rangel Valchanov's Feature Films – Authenticity Transformations" of the doctoral student Antonia Milcheva as a comprehensive scientific work in which she proves her knowledge and skills. In terms of the dissertation's academic value and the contributions provided, the work fully meets the

requirements of *the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act* , as well as those of the Rules for awarding a scientific and educational degree, "Doctor", therefore I am convinced to vote **FOR** its author, Antonia Milcheva, being awarded a Doctoral Degree.

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