

OPINION

on the dissertation paper

Power, Sovereignty and Directing. Experiments on the Performative Power, the Interpretative Freedom, and the Creative Autonomy

Submitted under the procedure for obtaining the academic degree "Doctor".

PhD student: Yavor Gardev Stefanov

Member of the academic panel: Prof. Bozhidar Stefanov Manov, DSc

A necessary introduction: I have been a member of various academic bodies, scientific councils and panels, specialized boards, a superior reviewer in disputed procedures in the former Specialized Academic Council on Theatre and Cinema. I can add many other institutional "memoirs" from the past at least 40 years in this segment of my professional life. And I am accustomed to reading versatile texts for candidate and doctoral procedures, all kinds of academic papers (very rarely theoretical ones, most often historical and critical or even in the field of applied research). So my eye is accustomed to crawling or flying over the text, without much difficulty, without exciting surprises, exhilarating hits or thrilling discoveries, and, unfortunately, most often like a slow flight of a lazy camera drone over a familiar landscape, which neither stuns with unfamiliar locations and details, nor lulls to sleep with a monotonous rhythm of repetitive shots, standard parables, or excessive sharp twists of perspective.

However, the word "necessary" describes the introduction hereby very precisely, because without the drone, without the convenience of editing with a moviola or assembly software, it provokes us (and, at the same time, obliges us) to read carefully, further in the text even attentively, this doctoral thesis that, with its very title, leads the curious observer with vigilant mindset into an "interdisciplinary" dissertation research, entitled with the long but tempting ***Power, Sovereignty and Directing. Experiments on the Performative Power, the Interpretative Freedom, and the Creative Autonomy***

On the other hand, the term "Opinion" as opposed to the respectable "Review" seems to alleviate, lighten or even downplay the content value of my text and reduce it to some sort of formal addition. However, this does not bother me in the least; on the contrary – it is a position in which I see an opportunity to be liberated from the formal frames of expected words, and to share a general impression of an undeniably non-standard, carefully considered, original concept of the author, protected by his practice and proven in his convincing career over the recent years. In a nutshell: my general impressions of Yavor Gardev so far, in his professional role of **director** (but also of him as an **author** of a number of serious publications in our specialized editions) are strongly confirmed by his overall view of the theatrical performance, or should I say theatrical action, exactly because it brings synthetically intertwined components of the main parameters of his current research work, into his professional practice, namely: on the one hand power, sovereignty and directing, and on the other - the authorial idea about their being opposed to the alternative categories: the performative power, the interpretative freedom and the creative autonomy! This is the essence of the creative process in every individual artistic activity! Moreover, in theatre, and even more so in cinema, the author is constantly stretched between these opposing edges of the creative canyon, trying to bridge the abyss between them with the fragile messages that the stage or screen can emit, facing, at that, the risky obscurity of future viewers hidden somewhere in the "bottom of the canyon".

So now let us think about the title. After all, it is the first announcement the author makes; but at the same time, it is the "advertising slogan" of all the work that has mobilized the candidate's efforts for the culmination of the academic procedure. On the other hand (and even more importantly), the topic stated in the title opens the tempting door to an extremely interesting, multifaceted, ancient and quaint, but at the same time a vibrant throbbing knot of at least three heterogeneous but intertwined ingredients: **power** and **sovereignty** as fundamental components of the "social contract" - from Homer, Hesiod, Euripides, Aristophanes or Herodotus, Thucydides and others, all the way to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and modern political scientists, who, thank God, do not write dramatic texts. On the other hand, in the title (ergo in the topic), **directing** is also present as an artistic instrument when interpreting **power** and **sovereignty**, in their incorporation into the performance, their analysis (unravelling) by the director's imagination, in order to be presented to viewers from the stage or screen. That is, the real task and purpose of the research hereby is to illuminate from the individual point of view of a director with extensive and diverse theatrical experience (but let's not forget his outstanding, successful and memorable film *Zift*, 2008), the complex, heterogeneous and ambiguous triad on which the individual creative process rests, lives, survives or triumphs! So, this necessary introduction is an inevitable outline of the analytical and evaluative approach to assessing the proposed dissertation - a profoundly serious and, rightly so, ambitious work! And if at the beginning of this Opinion I mentioned my long-lasting experience in reviewing trivial, if not banal academic texts, in this particular occasion, with this text brought to my attention due to some quirk of fate, the picture is completely different. And thank God, because otherwise it would take severe self-discipline to perform my assessment function.

At the very beginning of the dissertation, the author emphasizes: "The thematic fields of cinema, television, opera, performance, as well as the plethora of other forms of communication, allowing for the structuring and establishing power, as well as the presence of a director's figure or figures similar to that of the director, are not the subject of my research." This is a manifestation of the candidate's being strict and demanding to himself, and I understand and respect it, but as someone working within the cinema domain, I will take the freedom to focus on the "screen" side of Yavor Gardev's directorial work in his very prominent film *Zift*, which left a lasting imprint on my memory.

.....

Alas, it was at the end of the theatre season, that, due to absence from Bulgaria, I failed to watch *The Merchant of Venice* at the National Theatre (NT), (and especially the two performances with Yitzhak Fintzi instead of Vlado Penev). I hope to do so at the beginning of the next season. However, to my partial compensation, I remember well, for example, Martin McDonagh's *Fluffy* (season 2004) at the Varna Theatre and *Hamlet*, also at the National Theatre (season 2012). Here I also allow myself to expand my memories with *The Goat or Who is Sylvia* (NT, season 2009) or *A Behanding in Spokane* (again at NT, season 2011). Not that I will use them as specific illustrations for my arguments in this Opinion, but it is no coincidence that it is them that my memory summons when reflecting on the topic set by the dissertation.

So, the "glass" (transparent) parallelepiped in "Fluffy" is not just a stage designer's solution proposed by Ficho (Nikola Toromanov), and it is not some self-serving originality with the sole intention of shocking the viewers around him. Apart from the organic visual structure of the setting, it is also a no less declarative, interpretative freedom and creative autonomy of the author-director! Because in this space he vividly, categorically, unquestionably, and expressively declares, asserts, and defends with a powerful performative force his directorial "power and staging sovereignty"! Symmetrical arguments and reasoning with the same efficiency coefficient are also possible when analysing episodes of *The Goat or Who is Sylvia* or *A Behanding in Spokane*. But with these performances, the main bet placed on the "roulette green felt of the stage" is not on the stage design solution, but on actor's "game chips", as far as both the author's texts and the director's key rely on a powerful,

dense, convincing actor's presence. It is the balance between adequate scenography and strong acting accents that builds the overall staging structure of *Hamlet* (NT, 2013) with the distinct surprise of Leonid Yovchev, led and encouraged by directing to his acting presence. It fits subtly but convincingly into a kind of "synthetic scenography" in which the director's power and sovereignty ensure their interpretative freedom and creative autonomy! Alas, there were long and difficult sentences to digest, but the author's dissertation text is not easy to read, much less is it easy to analyse!

As is well known, I am not a person of drama and theatre. I am from another "drama" - Bulgarian cinema! This justifies the temptation to cite only one example from the only completed (so far) film by Yavor Gardev – the abovementioned *Zift*. Those who have seen the film cannot help but remember at least some of its particularly vivid scenes from the overall very expressive visual "text". Recall, for example, the scene in the bathroom and the (im)possible parabola of the artificial eye that flew out of the eye cavity of Van Wurst (the Eye), and after an overwhelming parabola splashed into a bowl of soup, and then into the pool. But this is just a molecule from the fully constructed screen story about the crooked fate of the Moth. Because his free will as a fated male is irresistibly trapped in the invisible but iron bars of power repression, with an unappealing prison biography as its vivid concretisation. Let us take a breath and "read" the film plot in the frame of the polar opposition of the dissertation thesis. On the one hand Power, Sovereignty and Directing. By the will of fate and the decision of the authorities, the Moth is deprived of individual sovereignty. But this is the point of realization of the intervention of the director Yavor Gardev, who uses performative power to interpret - in the most categorical of ways - the freedom of the character to sign his creative autonomy!

I realize that the verbatim reading of this clumsy explanation makes it somewhat inconclusive and "fabricated" to fit the convention. But I believe that a well-intentioned reading will overcome the didactics in it in favour of credibility.

.....

What follows is not the most important part, but it is necessary at this point, towards the end of this Opinion. I feel obliged to allocate a few lines about the so-called "Contributions" chapter. It is (not) always a dependable, albeit indirect, litmus test of the qualities of the work and the self-evaluation of the author. Suffice it to say that a bona fide evaluation of the author's contributions requires using several humble words with specific references to real, if modest, achievements of the dissertation research, in order to make its appearance and recognition meaningful. But alas, in my role of a reviewer I have read lists of contributions that are not only abundant, but also obscenely overloaded with inconclusive simplistically worded statements, betraying at least two things: a lack of authorial self-esteem and a lack of reliable criteria for real assessment of the presented work. I have even come across an absurd "Contributions" report of 12 (twelve) pages full of uncontrolled authorial megalomania, successfully coupled with a total lack of subjective self-knowledge.

I took the freedom to add this annoying deviation, in order to be able to formulate my statement simply: after getting acquainted with the interdisciplinary dissertation of the candidate Yavor Gardev, it is more than enough to read just the few lines of his Chapter 5 "Contributions", where he uses the phrase "to make my proposition prominent...". That is, he delicately avoids the pretentious and inconvenient word "contribution" and replaces it with the duly reserved and humble "proposition"! Let us not forget that he uses the working term "experiments" in the title. And why not? The word is not a trademark only for the classic Michel de Montaigne! Yavor Gardev can also use it for a reason! And that is enough for me to know what I am reading and to trust the author. And so, it is much easier to formulate the legally required and mandatorily clear conclusion:

I accept the interdisciplinary dissertation *Power, Sovereignty and Directing. Experiments On the Performative Power, the Interpretative Freedom, and the Creative Autonomy* by the candidate Yavor Gardev for the awarding of the academic degree "Doctor" as a dissertation paper that is successfully prepared and convincingly defended.

I vote YES!

12 August 2024

Prof. Bozhidar Manov, DSc