

Opinion

for

dissertation thesis "**The price of reality and possible worlds of literature. Conrad, Kafka, Camus**" by **Assoc. Prof. Maya Gorcheva, PhD** for obtaining the degree of **Doctor of Sciences** in professional field 2.3. Philosophy, scientific specialty "Aesthetics", to the section "Culture, aesthetics, values" in the "Institute of Philosophy and Sociology" at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

by Assoc. Prof. Vassil Vidinsky, PhD, Department of History of Philosophy, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", member of the scientific jury according to order № RD-09-154 from 27.04.2022 of the director of the IFS of BAS.

1. Procedure, minimum requirements, and technical parameters of the dissertation

The dissertation of Assoc. Prof. Maya Gorcheva has **successfully passed** the internal defense of an extended scientific seminar on March 22, 2022, in accordance with Art. 39 of PPZRASRB and Art. 9 (1) of the Regulations of the *Institute of Philosophy and Sociology* (BAS) on the terms and conditions for acquiring scientific degrees and for holding academic positions.

According to the presented scientometric data, Assoc. Prof. Maya Gorcheva has a total of **440 points** (distributed in the four indicators 50 + 100 + 160 + 130) the requirement being 350 points (in four indicators 50 + 100 + 100 + 100) and thus formally covers and exceeds the minimum requirements for obtaining the degree of "Doctor of Sciences".

Assoc. Prof. Maya Gorcheva's dissertation is 411 standard pages long and consists of an Introduction, two Parts, Conclusion and Bibliography. Part I is divided into two chapters and Part II into four chapters. The cited sources in the respective chapter are listed after each of the six chapters. The overall bibliography contains 271 titles, of which 43 are primary sources, 35 are other literary works, and 193 are secondary literature. The bibliography is in English, French, and Bulgarian.

There are 7 publications on the topic of the dissertation (one is in print), including two studies and the monograph "Albert Camus. The Possible Worlds of Literature" (2022).

2. Content analysis of the dissertation

In general, the dissertation develops an **anti-mimetic concept of creativity** where the creation of possible worlds and the idea of **co-experience (empathy)** or reception of the work are essential. The research is informative and heuristic from the literary studies perspective; it covers truly diverse primary material as well as secondary literature from various scientific fields. This is thesis's greatest merit, but on the other hand it is also its most serious and difficult problem.

From the point of view of literary studies and comparative studies, the dissertation deserves positive evaluation. However, when it comes to its philosophical theoretical framework, the conceptual distinctions inside, the instrumentalization of the philosophical terms, the dissertation thesis poses more problems than it provides solutions for.

Objectives of the dissertation

The goals of the dissertation thesis are formulated in similar but different ways. **[Group I]** "The study aims to consider the possible world as an aesthetic concept" (Dissertation, p. 4). This simply means that the abstract-formal term "possible world" will be specified, enriched (and thus narrowed in content) through aesthetic and historical contexts. In the abstract this is stated as follows: "to make sense of the imaginary worlds created in aesthetic activity through the logical-semantic concept of possible worlds" (Abstract, p. 5; see also p. 11) "...and to show how the concept of possible world is integrated in understanding the specifics of aesthetic work" (A, 7). However, throughout the study it is not clear why the *formal, logical* term 'possible world' was necessary at all, and how it is *used in* the analysis, since its abstractness does not distinguish aesthetic from non-aesthetic uses. This instrument does not have a sufficiently good resolution in view of the objectives of the study. **[Group II]** A further, more complicated step is outlined later in the dissertation: to consider these possible worlds "as a conceptual understanding of reality" (D, 8). There are also many other similar but slightly different formulations of this goal that I will not cite. It is not clear why the experience through works of art (with their possible worlds) is called *conceptual*—in the analyzes of the works themselves the conceptuality is not clearly demonstrated. The scope of this goal is also not specified: the dissertation thesis sometimes discusses literary creativity (literary work), but sometimes it refers to creativity in general (aesthetic work). I would like to note that the conclusions from these two subordinate areas cannot be identical.

In general, in both aspects—**[I] and [II]**—these groups of objectives have not been achieved adequately, and in some sub-cases not at all. The literary analysis of Conrad, Kafka, and Camus is, in fact, completely independent of this general theoretical, philosophical framework, and the framework seems external to the research.

"Possible worlds"?

Unfortunately, it is not clear what is meant by the most key concept, which is also present in the title, "possible world". This verbal expression can be conceptualized or terminologized in many ways—this is seen already in the outline, which is presented a little chaotically in the thesis (D, 3-62). But despite the diverse and incompatible understandings of the term "possible world", all these views are presented together: Lubomír Doležel, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Dimitar Vatsov, Saul Kripke, Gottfried Leibniz, Ruth Ronen, Alexander Kyosev, David Lewis, and many others. Admittedly, *the thesis does not argue that all of the above authors think alike about these "possible worlds"* but on the other hand it is not entirely clear in the dissertation itself whether the notion 'possible world' is characterized only by counterfactual statements, or whether it is some enriched aesthetic category (if so, this must be *demonstrated* and not simply stated), whether it has connection to the ideas of possible ontological worlds from which God chooses (Leibniz) or ontological worlds in the sense of David Lewis. It is said that "The real world contains all possible worlds" (D, 20), but since the possible worlds are "wider than the real and may include what is impossible in the real" (D, 20), it is obvious that without clarifying at least the difference between "contains" and "includes", these statements would be contradictory or, at best, extremely vague. Unfortunately, the dissertation does not contain the necessary clarifications in this direction. No systematic attempt has been made to distinguish between the contextually (im)possible, the physically (im)possible, the metaphysically (im)possible, etc. (D, 24, 43, 226, 348)

At one point, among all this multiplicity of concepts, it is stated: "Relativism is a pragmatically certain solution and such a conclusion seems indisputable..." (D, 20). It is not very clear what practically follows from this relativism for the analysis of Conrad, Kafka, and Camus. Because of all this complexity, it is further stated: "The purpose of this research is not at all to clarify theoretical models, nor to arrive at a consistent understanding of possible worlds" (D, 58-59). Yes, it can be assumed that the dissertation will not deal with theoretical clarifications, but there is a clear and non-contradictory understanding of 'possible worlds' in most of the presented views—that is why they are important and influential. However, if Assoc. Prof. Maya Gorcheva seeks a consistent understanding *between* these different views, then this, of course, cannot be obtained, precisely because the authors use different *concepts* of a possible world. The overall impression from the thesis itself is that there is no real distinction between the expression "possible world" and the notions of "possible world".

Two more complications follow. Immediately after the last quoted passage, it is stated that the research will focus on specific texts that will be understood "through the literary-theoretical concept of a possible world" (D, 59). This seems more reasonable, but again it needs to be specified further, as there is no such single concept. Unfortunately, in the next sentence, even this seems abandoned because it is argued that the concept of 'possible world' will eventually be "emancipated from theoretical models and taken as an analytical tool (for a neutral-descriptive characteristic of the concept, cf. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, SEP)" (D, 59). First, if it is an *analytical tool*, it must be presented very clearly what this tool will be, what can and what cannot be done with it—saying that it is just an instrument does not reject or cancel the need of theoretical modeling (at least one of the proposed models must be used). Secondly, the clarification in the brackets is even stranger—the encyclopedic articles in the SEP are not "neutral", although they look like objective reviews. However, the real problem lies elsewhere. In the article "Possible Worlds" (2021) Christopher Menzel discusses many different and incompatible notions (all of them within the analytical tradition) —thus, we are suddenly back to our starting point, where there are plenty of different 'possible world' notions, and it is not specified which one is used as a tool in the thesis and how exactly it is used.

The content analysis of the dissertation can easily demonstrate that it was not necessary to talk about possible worlds at all, because the research is based on motives, topics, values (D, 3-7, 390-394; A 33), existential and social observations (D, 390; A 33), or the "transformation of the world" (D, 3, 216, 296-335, 339, 393), etc.

Scientific contributions

The contributions mentioned in the abstract are five. **The first** one is very important and interesting, but unfortunately it is not elaborated and argued in the dissertation itself, only stated. Hence, I would not consider it a real contribution, because—without the necessary argumentation—it turns out to be a very *trivial statement*, namely: creativity can affect us by making some kind of transfer between author, work, and reader. The problem with the first contribution automatically undermines the next contributions, which are based on the understanding of possible worlds. **The second** contribution is very general: "The thesis of aesthetic creativity as an autonomous act of constructing a possible world is defended." Does absolutely every aesthetic work create a possible world: every sculpture, every haiku, every architectural work? If this is so (because such a position is possible), then the notion of a possible world is completely trivialized again, this time it simply means

"creation." Contributions **three** and **five** link the creative act to values, philosophical and political ideas in an interesting way. Insofar as this relation is not a necessary characteristic of all possible worlds, nor of creativity in general, these are only partial observations. The second part of the **fourth** contribution is undoubtedly important, and **it should have been central to the thesis itself.**

Additional comments

The comparison between Conrad, Kafka, and Camus is heuristic and interesting. It may be a little surprising that in the dissertation the connection between the three authors is presented as arbitrary: "According to the purely formal principle of alliteration, the focus of research interest was Conrad, Kafka and Camus ... (5-6)". On the other hand, the specific analyzes in the thesis are valuable in their own right, and although at times they sound very essayistic, they are enriching, meaningful, and important.

The first part of the title remains inexplicable. "The Price of Reality" is a curious and artistic phrase, but it is not clear what is meant by it. This expression does not appear even once in the thesis, and it is not even thematized to give any key to the general framework. As a side effect, although often mentioned, the relationship between socio-historical reality and possible art worlds (aesthetic reality) remains unclear.

Conclusion

The general impression of the dissertation thesis is that **it would be defensible** in the *history of literature* research field. It contains enough heuristic and valuable observations on the work of Conrad, Kafka, and Camus, and together with the long-term research practice of Assoc. Prof. Maya Gorcheva, this is the basis for awarding the "Doctor of Sciences" title. Unfortunately, from a philosophical and aesthetic point of view, **I do NOT think that the dissertation thesis is defensible in professional field 2.3**, as it contains serious philosophical shortcomings. Of course, It would be interesting to hear the defense of Assoc. Prof. Maya Gorcheva.

June 23, 2022

Assoc. Prof. Vassil Vidinsky, PhD



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