

## REVIEW

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for the dissertation **The Digital Mind: Semiotic Explorations of Digital Culture** by Prof. Dr. Kristian Krastinov Bankov for the degree of Doctor of Science in the doctoral programme "Semiotics", in the professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences.

Professor Kristian Bankov's dissertation, *The Digital Mind: Semiotic Explorations of Digital Culture*, opens with the categorical claim that it is the first of its kind in the world of digital culture. This opinion may alienate immediately and permanently the routine reader, as the reviewer of a Doctor of Science title is supposed to be. However, this text was not unequivocally endorsed, routinely praised and successfully forgotten, as is the fate of such procedural works. For its author is a well-known scholar with an international career, it is right to look much more carefully at the words. The first thing we will find is that the self-praise refers to a narrow sector of semiotics, namely digital semiotics, in addition, it is a work entirely devoted to this section, which may not even exist in the nomenclature of general semiotics. Therefore, the opening sentence is neither exaggerating nor ignoring other works.

This first impression illustrates my personal struggle with reading Prof. Bankov. Many of his statements provoke with bombast and sensationalism, as if taken directly from the objects discussed in the text. Patience is needed, an awareness that before us is not the work of a young assistant Professor new to science, but of a well-versed scientist with experience in many theoretical fields on which to build his own concepts. Already in the opening paragraph, the author lists the inevitable characteristics that his work possesses. The first is heterogeneity, expressed in the fact that he borrows his methods from different fields of semiotics. The extension of the scope of the work to more general areas of the humanities: economics, sociology, history; the descent to the paradigmatic of private sectors such as football, sex, video games, the exchange of money and the values of global commodification, require that the approach is also interdisciplinary. Professor Bankov answers the question of what unites such disparate methods for the study of public life, starting with his own long experience, then listing the names of semioticians whose theories he uses, but also economists, engineers, sports commentators, artists, IT specialists. Overboard fall authors who 'hermitically' and 'militantly' engage with the classics of semiotics: Pearce and Saussure.

Most important in these introductory statements is the enumeration of three tendencies on which the work on the "digital mind" is based. The first and third trends are consequences

of man's entry into the digital age. They are the commercialization of culture and the transformation of identity and publicity – no objections here. As for the second, the critique of textualism as a method of modeling digital culture, doubts arise even at the level of naming, if only because in English *textualism* is, no more, no less, a legal term meaning following the "letter of the law". Kristian Bankov points to Saussure's theory of synchronicity and diachronicity as a source for deriving the term, where the ideal language system is once and for all given, fixed in the text, while *interactive* speech is "abandoned". Just the opposite, Bankov points out, happens on the Internet with speech, where we see its incredible development in every communicative act. Bankov has invested a lot of energy in substantiating this trend and has drawn information from various sources. Thus, we understand that the textual approach to analyzing interactivity, according to Greimas, leads nowhere. Did Greimas inspire the term textuality? The strongest argument for the negative charge of the term textuality, according to Bankov, is that of the "death of the author" first advanced by Roland Barthes. Bankov writes: "From my perspective, the most essential point is that the text as a methodological instrument presupposes a work on a dead body. Text is a discourse fixed in a written form where the usefulness of the results of textual analysis relies on the assumption that *the text always remains the same.*" (p. XIX).

Leaving aside the probably unintentional error that the text is not the discourse, the statement here is both true and false. It becomes even more distorted when Bankov points to a quotation from Barthes himself, where of course there is no trace of such a meaning. Bankov states that once written, the text is fixed and immovable, and when the author dies, it is another confirmed end. It is as if the text dies with the author, or at least freezes. In *S/Z*, Barthes says that the author is no longer a god to his text, the reader is in his freedom of interpretation. It is the language that speaks, not the author; absolute freedom for the signifier, but also assumed impersonality, reaching a point where only language acts, a complete rejection of the author in favor of writing. Professor Bankov even entertains his own thesis that "in the textualist perspective the best embrayeur is the dead embrayeur," whereas in the logic of interactivity, value is created by the potential of the living relations between the actors involved" (p. XIX).

Despite this categorical denial, I had no doubt that Prof. Bankov, who is a student of Umberto Eco, read Barthes in the original, did not share such a view. And indeed it turns out so. On page 26 he states, "In digital culture, language is no longer the lord of semiotic phenomena; the latter is the communicative disposition of the culture holders. The language is there, together with an incredible variety of visual, audio, kinetic and other expressive forms." In other words, language is anything but a "dead body" when transferred to digital culture! It

is dead in the previous, analog culture, resurrected in the new one! Sensational statements in a scientific text lead to nothing good. In more than a few of his statements, Bankov takes opposing views on the pernicious role of the fixed text. For example, throughout the paragraph *The quest for verisimilitude versus the contract of veridiction*, where the following admission occurs: 'Semiotics as we know it today is powerful when it is realized through "lazy texts" that require strategies for ... simulating the effects of reality, of an active interpreter with a system of expectations shaped by his textual competence' (p. 65).

I want to stress right away that the objections that follow are not so much to the view as to its being unbalanced so as to be easily discredited. Of course, the written text is fixed - with its 'corporeality', its physical presence on a medium. It "is." And here is the most obvious disagreement with this kind of binary representation of "bad" textualism. In one of his most famous creations, "On the Soul" Aristotle regards the "power to cut" as the "soul" of the axe, without which it is a useless object; seeing as the soul of the eye, without which it would be the eye of a statue, say, and the conclusion is that just as the pupil and sight form the eye, soul and body form the living body. But what is the "soul of the text"? It is not the text itself, it is its meaning. It is its "soul," without which it is just a pile of words. Here is the main flaw in Bankov's exposition, which he of course realizes but does not mention. The text signifies, but does not mean; it is significative, but not semantic; it is we who assign meaning to signs, which can change, according to Wittgenstein. And lest we be stuck in the distant age of Aristotle, let us recall the two most characteristic developments about language precisely by Wittgenstein: the "picture theory" of his first period and the theory of relative meanings of the second, where the relation between language and reality is clarified. Of course, in passing, we do not omit Pearce's theory of "existential graphs," which, together with Wittgenstein's theses, directly introduces language into its digital phase on the platform of the "fixed" text. In other words, we decode meanings rather than a series of sensorimotor stimuli. And here is the next paradox - even then we decode linearly, not fragmentarily, simply because that is the nature of thought. This is still true in a digital environment where this process can be fragmented, much more reactive and flexible, even reversible.

For the following chapters of Bankov's work the same applies. We are not exchanging text, goods, products, identity as objects, but as value or function. Thus, fixed text is not a Beta version of W 1.0, but a potential that updates its meanings across all versions, a kind of software of their own. When prof. Bankov says: "An interactive work is a work where the reader can physically change the discourse in a way that is interpretable and produces meaning within the discourse itself" (footnote p. 25), how is this different from working with written text? As we

have already recalled, meaning is up to us alone, though the signs are fixed. Of course, we remember that once a text is created, it refers to a spectrum of possible interpretations that define it as that text by that author. Bankov insists that in interactive communication, we can go inside the discourse itself, change it, continue it ad infinitum, but we do not have as much time as if we were working with a fixed text. Here I will just mention a term that I will not comment on because it is also more than famous - infinite semiosis! No beginnings too. Emergent from text, fixed or not.

More of the same from the author: in digital culture there are no cultural sediments, there is no time for long lasting habits to take place before new ones are requesting adaptation (p. 27). This is disconcerting, because if there are no chains of habits established, what would the new ones step on? Are we doomed to chaos and voluntarism in the coming W3.0 era? At many other points in his work, rehashing quotes or getting carried away in developing his own thesis, Bankov inadvertently utters similar thoughts that contradict his main claim, as already shown. But there is something else that takes away from the thesis' innovativeness, and that is the binary, contrasting representation of the differences between text and interactive communication. Many paragraphs are structured this way, one phenomenon "versus" another, and the characteristics of the objects illuminated are expressed only in comparative degree: something is very, exclusively, or incredibly "more" than something else. Not convincing as a qualitative distinction is "textuality" as presented in the dissertation. I'm not convinced that such a qualitative difference is found in the world either, but here's just a hint: the text of a sentence, even consisting of just one word, is a complete whole, a unity of physical sign and meaning open to interpretation. In other words, text is constructed modularly, from discrete complete wholes, whereas in mediated digital communication it can be moved and broken into pieces that are rearranged on the fly and decomposed anew. Whole (modularity) vs fragment (patchwork). At least this is not another "more".

Bankov's work, *The Digital Mind*, is an attempt to reformat models from what he calls the textual phase of semiotics into a digital one, and then to demonstrate their applicability to various forms of contemporary communication and economic exchange. This attempt is carried out in the paradigm of a "turn" similar to the linguistic one. Both the strengths and weaknesses of Bankov's work stem from a desire to present events precisely as a turn. Yes, they are a reversal, its effects and consequences are undeniable, but no one is shocked by them either.

The task of the work, posed so dispassionately, deprives it both of a centre and of the complementary points of view that are indispensable for scientific investigation. It is clear that the author seeks to startle his audience; this is understandable when he wants his work to be

pioneering in the field. But it has been shown that in such twists and turns, the collective mind takes time to catch its breath, to catch up with discoveries in technology with new concepts. In the field of reason, development is never by leaps and bounds. Whatever digital progress is made of, it will have to wait for its awareness to catch up with it if it is not to fail.

We have not yet analyzed the individual parts of the work, but have only dealt with its new argumentation, which, by the way, is implicit in the innovative developments about the economy, video games, football, sex, copywriting, branding, "experiences" as a new product, the expansion of matrix-produced videos and series, all from the point of view of a total culture of consumerism. From there we learn new terms, acronyms; schemes, even pictures pass through the gaze. Their aim is to persuade the reader of the task set at the beginning, but the impression they leave is that of mechanical filler to the text, despite the qualifications added, even the style is different. Towards the end, the quality of the exposition drops sharply; individual paragraphs sound below the level of an essay, like journalism (the sections on the Bulgarian flag and identity, for example). Bitter experience shows that if the analyst does not "think" about the new phenomena from the inside, from the positions he defends, they remain at the level of embellishment. They begin to radiate the same hopelessness as the notorious mechanical compound "semiotics of".

So what is the general impression of Bankov's work expressed on the theoretical parts of the claims? It is of something unconditionally pioneering and valuable, despite the substantial disagreements pointed out so far. How is this possible? The thing is that the arguments of such innovative works do not match the examples that support them. What is "syntactically novel" must be assimilated by reason, which is semantic. This invariable rule is confirmed by the strongest part of Bankov's work, on Juri Lotman's semiosphere, which brings out the positives of the whole thesis, making it a solid achievement of the digital culture era. Remarkably, it is here that the author uses an already existing model, which he manages to convincingly conceptualize and even rename with his own term - the Platfosphere (I found no other use of this term on the Internet than that of Kristian Bankov). In explaining why he turned to the model of the semiosphere, Bankov says that, along with that of Umberto Eco's Encyclopedia, these are the two models that have proved prophetic in terms of changing sociocultural reality. They are as open and dynamic as the Internet itself. Already in the introduction Bankov talks about the theories on which he draws, these are the works of four semioticians, to them he adds his own theoretical preferences: the "deep philosophical intuition" of Bergson and the "foundations of discourse" of Foucault, which he expects to lead him to the moment of genius made famous (after all) by the abductive method of Peirce. I think

that by adding the author of the semiosphere model, Juri Lotman, we can consider this an excellent company of researchers. Whether it is because of them or something else, here Kristian Bankov demonstrates the qualities of a scientist able to work in a laboratory calm; to perfectly analyze the classical model of the semiosphere and finally to conceptualize it in detail by describing the new dynamic energies that are about to invade with the digital mind. Here his work resembles, albeit from the side of the digital environment, that carried out by the few holistic philosophers still alive, such as John Searle, who has recently lectured at the citadels of the digital world, the headquarters of Google and Facebook, as well as at the universities of Oxford and Berkeley, to remind us that Artificial Intelligence and digital reality function on a syntactic principle, whereas our minds are set up semantically. And if we want to get artificial consciousness, we need to duplicate, not simulate, the reasons that gave rise to it. But the attempt to write such programs is doomed, because they must repeat literally the same conditions that gave rise to it, which would mean waiting for a miracle.

And so we have before us a text bearing all the hallmarks of a thorough, thoughtful work, with inevitable but fruitful wanderings; with important theoretical developments, warning that as we enter the digital world we are stepping into unknown dimensions for many of which we are unprepared; that we will receive dizzying improvements but also disruptions in our lives from the new, digital mind; but that we should hardly expect the creation of a "digital soul."

This academic text, with all its flaws and many more positive contributions, is useful and necessary for the scientific community in Bulgaria, not only in the humanities. Its developments will be interesting for at least one more field - economics, and will project its value in more sectors of Bulgarian society.

With full conviction, I vote "in favor" the award of the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" to Prof. Dr. Kristian Krastinov Bankov.

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