OPINION

by

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Kristian Bankov has submitted as a doctoral thesis his book **The Digital Mind: Semiotic Explorations in Digital Culture"** (Springer, 2022, ISBN 978-3-030-92554-3). The book consists of 226 pp. (including illustrations, lists of references, name and subject indexes), plus a 15-page Introduction. There are 13 chapters, organized in 3 parts. The first part deals with the theoretical premises of the study, the second one comprises a number of case studies, developing the notion of experience economy (after J. Pine and L. Gilmore, 1999), and the third part deals with issues of identity in the digital era. In my opinion, the book does not have the characteristics of a doctoral dissertation; it is rather composed of separate articles, revised and organized in a monograph.

The book is a major contribution to the reassessment of the classical semiotic patterns and theories, as it suggests how to turn the latter into adequate tools for the study of digital culture. K. Bankov has not articulated the goal, research tasks, methods and expected results of his study. However, in the Introduction he insists that the "classical" semiotic patterns should be reconsidered in a manner that would allow using them in the study and comprehension of the processes of communication and the cultural phenomena in the Internet era. According to me, the goal of the book is twofold: on the one hand, to enrich the study of digital culture with the methods of semiotics, on the other, to contribute to the methodological development of semiotics itself. The significance of this goal is out of question because, as Bankov says, the massive introduction of Web 2.0 platforms of social interaction in everyday life has led globally to significant transformations in people's thinking and behavior. These transformations call for closer scientific attention. The above-mentioned transformations have changed science as well – its subject and

research conditions, its methods and concepts. The author shows excellent knowledge of the sociocultural transformations in the digital era, as well as of their analyses with the tools of various fields of science. He reveals that the new reality is often at focus in semiotic studies and this calls for critical review of the semiotic tools and patterns.

The critical review and suggested transformations of the semiotic patterns made in the book are its greatest contribution. In the Introduction the author develops a mapped systematic overview of the leading semiotic patterns and theories with their specific features, divergences, as well as convergences. Such a systematic synthesis would be impossible without the author's comprehensive knowledge of the theory and history of semiotics and without his active participation in the semiotic debates of today. Bankov has demonstrated which semiotic approaches are most relevant to the exploration of digital culture; furthermore, he suggests which features of a given approach should be changed in this respect. Thus for example, according to Bankov, the pattern of the semiosphere is most suitable for the study of culture, shaped under the impact of Web 2.0 platforms (he introduces a new concept – platfosphere – in order to adjust this pattern to the modern communication realities); the pattern of textualism in its turn is based on fixation, thus being at odds with the interactivity of digital culture, that is why it cannot be directly used in exploring this culture.

In terms of method, Bankov's book is quite heterogeneous - his discussions are based on key concepts introduced by specialists in various fields of study, as well as on diverse statistic data and results of qualitative research, specific case studies, etc. The author does not elaborate on his method of analysis. There is no original empirical research underlying his analysis. Rather, what the reader sees is semiotic analysis of analyses (or, of secondary sources). Umberto Ecco's and Jeremy Rifkin's influence is very strong throughout the book. Bankov admits that these authors have methodologically inspired his work. In my opinion, this influence, along with a few key terms defined by other scholars – e.g., culture of access, experience economy, ego-economy, etc. - tie up the diverse chapter into a coherent monograph.

In his book, Bankov makes references to publications from various disciplines, but his work is dominated by the semiotic approach and the economic perspective. In the first part of the book he discusses the possibility for developing a new semioeconomic approach based on reconfiguring many of the methodological achievements of textualism. K. Bankov claims that the logic of semiotic translation of offline everyday life through interactive digital technologies is

commercial, economic and algorithmic (p. 32). The chapters in the second part elaborate on this idea. They deal with various phenomena in the digital era – copyright, cinema texnologies, football, sexuality, transaction, and money. Despite their methodological and structural heterogeneity, these chapters elaborate on the idea about the commercial foundations of online communication and on the specifics of this new economy: people buy access to services and experiences rather than goods, consumers' time and attention are a major resource. In the third part, also rather eclectic in character, the author focuses on reconsidering collective and individual identities in the digital era. He deals here with issues such as national identity, the demise of encyclopedic competence under the impact of the Google-effect (culture of erudition v/s culture of navigation), emoti(c)onal discoursivity, the transition from textualism to hypertextuality which has deeply affected education, and, finally, consumer rituals in Facebook.

Bankov's book makes a number of contributions, some of which I have already mentioned. It is the first monograph in semiotics of digital culture. The author critically revisits the classical semiotic patterns and demonstrates how they can be transformed and turned into effective tools for the study of this culture. The work is of cross-disciplinary interest with its subject and method. It could contribute in the applied sphere, too, as it contains insights about education in the digital era (unfortunately, the latter is just sketched in the book).

There is a 35-pages abstract of the book in Bulgarian which correctly summerizes the content of the book. It contains abstract of each chapter (12 pp.), the lists of references after each chapter (18 pp.), the contents of the book and the contents of the abstract.

In addition to his monograph, K. Bankov meets the minimal national requirements for the "Doctor of Sciences" degree with 8 articles published in international journals refereed in world-famous databases of scientific information, 5 articles published in peer-reviewed volumes, 7 chapters of collective monographs. He mentions 7 references to his publications in journals, reviewed or indexed in worldwide databases. Available information in Google Scholar Citations justifies that Kristian Bankov's works are cited by many international scholars. His lectures, research and organizational work at NBU and in universities abroad, as well as his prestigious position in the International Association for Semiotic Research reveal that he is a respected scholar, whose work reaches diverse academic audiences.

I also have a few critical remarks regarding his monograph. Most of its chapters present independent case studies which are not so coherently connected in the monograph. The chapters

are not of equal value – to me, the best are the chapters regarding money and transaction. The author regards his work as cross-disciplinary but he doesn't go beyond the semioeconomic perspective. He refers to a few studies in sociology and anthropology but he does not develop in the book a synthesis between these disciplines and semiotics. Thus for example, in the last ten years anthropological studies on soccer have mushroomed. Despite Bankov's interest in the same subject, he does not refer to the existing anthropological debates, nor does he build on them. In stark contrast with the academic practice in sociology and anthropology, Bankov's book is not based on an empirical study or fieldwork of his own. His work suffers from some terminological faults. The author does not define or question the key term of digital culture, he just takes it for granted. He overexploits the term culture without any critical reflection. His analysis omits dealing with ethical issues which are central to any type of culture. In his text, concepts and ideas of other authors are brought to the fore and often repeated. I would recommend emphasizing on the author's original ideas and using them as the foundation of the monograph. I do not appreciate the fact that Bankov makes no references in his book to the work of other Bulgarian semioticians. It is hard to understand this, taking into consideration that he is the successor of the founders of the Southeast-European Center for Semiotic Research at NBU.

In conclusion, I would say that Kristian Bankov's book *The Digital Mind: Semiotic Explorations in Digital Culture* is a contribution to modern semiotics. When it comes to awarding the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences", however, a high-quality dissertation is required, and this book, despite its qualities, is not a dissertation. That is why I cannot articulate a definitive recommendation based on the book. I do believe that Professor Kristian Bankov, Ph.D. is fully capable of producing a full-fledged doctoral thesis in the near future.

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