

La Sapienza

Revisione esterna dottorandi DAVIDE PASSARELLI e GIACOMO TRAINA 35° ciclo

TRAINA GIACOMO

Za zgodność z oryginałem
Wydział Humanistyczny
specjalista
Podpis
mgr Karolina Konieczna-Montak

Evaluation form for PhD dissertation

Evaluation form

Title of the thesis

UNIwersytet Śląski
W KATOWICACH
Wydział Humanistyczny
41-200 Sosnowiec
gen. Stefana Grota-Roweckiego 5

The Voice that Carries Everything: History and Confession in Viet Thanh Nguyen's "The Sympathizer"

Affiliation of the reviewer

University of Messina

Report

The dissertation "The Voice that Carries Everything: History and Confession in Viet Thanh Nguyen's 'The Sympathizer'" is an interesting, well documented, and original work of research. Divided in two sections plus the Conclusion and an unpublished, riveting interview with the author, Traina's doctoral dissertation analyzes in depth Viet Thanh Nguyen's 2015 novel The Sympathizer and connects it to two academic fields: American literature about the Vietnam war and Vietnamese American diasporic studies. The main point of the thesis is showing the complexity of Nguyen's political and aesthetic projects that aims at rethinking the memory of the Vietnam war, not only by questioning the old ways of narrating and filming it, but also by (dis)proving the ideological positionings that such narratives entail. In order to demonstrate Nguyen's innovative re-framing of the war history and its memorial legacy, the candidate discusses what he calls Nguyen's "strategy of implausibility," that is a deliberate twisting of literary and filmic genres, modes of narrating, historical data, real places, stereotypes, and cultural assumptions. Section one focuses on literature. First, it provides a particularly documented overview of the reeducation literature that

served as a source for the confessional section of *The Sympathizer*; secondly, it revisits the reeducation camp as a site at once material and metaphorical; finally, it analyzes Nguyen's many innovations, such as reclaiming the camp as a Bakhtinian chronotope that becomes the narrative center in which all textual elements and critical definitions collapse into one another. Another innovation transforms the Christian, the bureaucratic, and the policing modes of confession into a narrative frame, thus suggesting a connection between the coerciveness of the peculiar self-criticism essay produced in the Vietnamese reeducation camp and that of the expectations that the American publishing market puts on ethnic literature. I find such comparison stimulating, and I would have liked the candidate to have given it more space to achieve a higher level of clarity. In fact, it begins a rich second part of the first section in which Vietnam and the US are compared through the compelling idea of "refracted histories," which distorts the history of both countries to highlight the continuity of the power mechanisms within them. Critical comparativism is then redirected to the history of US wars, making the past and the present mirror each other in a genealogy of national violence. The final part of the first section brings the argumentation back on cultural aspects through the concept of "historical diversions" that allows a rewriting of the stories of real individuals by mixing them with the mythologies produced by mainstream culture. When it comes to cultural constructions and mythologizing processes, the argument could benefit from a deeper analytical insight into Asian American history and critical discourse. In the metaliterary analysis of the multiple meanings and functions of the confession, the candidate refers to the long history of Asian American heated debates on autobiography as a means of positioning Asian American identity and conveying the community's experience in the US. This critical horizon, although correct, appears to be a bit weak both in terms of space devoted to it and of theoretical knowledge, especially if compared with the much more substantial philosophical and theoretical framework grounded in Western thought to which the candidate resorts in his analyses. Whereas the dissertation is a considerable source of information and data unknown to most on the culture of the Vietnamese diaspora inside and outside the United States, I think that a further rooting of the research in Asian American Studies could greatly benefit this study, considering also Nguyen's self-inclusion and invaluable contribution to Asian American discourses. Section two plunges into American filmography about Vietnam. This part connects the Hollywood film production on the Vietnam war, especially but not exclusively *Apocalypse Now*, with the making of the film *The Hamlet within the novel*. The point the candidate makes is that Nguyen's criticism of Francis Ford Coppola is informed of Chinua Achebe's postcolonial critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The Vietnamese are in fact treated as meaningless props in the American tragedy and as such are not only visually killed a second time, but forced to play a perverse game of interpreting their own misrepresentations. The candidate convincingly argues that Nguyen draws on every possible source relating to the making of the film in order to parody the Hollywood legend of Coppola and of his film that "is not about Vietnam but is Vietnam." Thus, Nguyen's satire is aimed more at the aura of *Apocalypse Now* than at the plot of the film or at questioning its artistic value. As Traina effectively demonstrates, once again, to the distortions of Hollywood Nguyen opposes his own deconstructive narrative distortions. I enjoyed reading this section and learning the many ways in which "Coppola's Vietnam is not a real place as much as a repository of Western imaginary." The candidate provides many little or not known at all details and backstories that are once again very informative, however at times redundant. Were this part a little more concise, it would gain in effectiveness. Overall, "The Voice that Carries Everything" is an excellent dissertation. The candidate moves with mastery between literary and visual texts, combining acute and original close readings with the appropriate and effective use of a broad knowledge of many critical theories and approaches. Therefore, considering its noteworthy merits and very minor weaknesses, I believe that Traina's dissertation can be admitted to defense as it is.

Confidential report (it will not be shown to the candidate)

I truly believe that Traina's dissertation is an interesting, original, well-documented, and well-written contribution to American literature about the Vietnam war and to Vietnamese American diasporic studies. The only doubt I can express is that sometimes (not always, I stress it: sometimes) one gets the feeling that the theoretical references are a bit "obliged," a bit didactically offered through a fine array of major Western and Vietnamese thinkers, and with an excessive parallelism between what is in the novel and what is hypothesized by scholars. Other times, but very rarely, one gets the feeling that the reference to a text or a theoretical concept is not essential. I am thinking, for example, of the almost en passant references to Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida. Finally, especially in the last part, there is some indulgence in the novel's details which are too many and too articulated, thus hindering the breath of the speech that would benefit from a few more slowdowns and pauses.

Evaluation file (optional)

Presentation and clarity

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The reviewer should be able to read the text without difficulty. This implies that the dissertation is clear and 'user friendly', without duplications or repetitions.

Integration and coherence

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The manuscript should present logical and rational links between different parts of the thesis.

Introduction to scientific background

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The text should contain a satisfactory introduction to the scientific background which is relevant to the research, preparing the reader to the exposition of the problem.

Review of relevant literature

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The candidate must have a detailed knowledge of original sources, have a thorough knowledge of the field, and understand the main theoretical and methodological issues.

Statement of research problem

None Poor Average Good Excellent

A clear statement of the research problem should be made, together with specific hypotheses, predictions, or questions which the research is designed to address.

Originality

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The research must be the candidate's own work. The degree of independence may vary according to the research topic.

Contribution to knowledge and scientific relevance

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The dissertation should be substantial enough to be able to form the basis of two articles on refereed journal, a book or research monograph.

Mastery of the English language

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The candidate must be proficient in written English and show mastery of appropriate scientific/technical language.

A major goal of the review process is to evaluate if the present version of the thesis is:

- 1) adequate as is
- 2) require minor revision
- 3) require major revision

for admission of the candidate to the defense of the work in front of a national evaluation board.

Accept as is Minor revision Major revision

Date: 4/2/2023

Reviewer: Sarnelli Fulvia