FACULTY OF ARTS
OF CHARLES UNIVERSITY
IN PRAGUE

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

8 February 2017

To the Dissertation Defense Committee of Pavel Gončarov,
Palacký University,
Philosophical Faculty,
Dept. of English and American Studies

External examiner's report on a doctoral thesis authored by

Mgr. Pavel Gončarov entitled

"Internet Memes And Their Signifiance For Myth Studies" (2016)

As he puts the matter in his Abstract, Mr. Pavel Gončarov attempts in his doctoral thesis to articulate "that the heart of myth rests with the novelizing and complexifying ritual of post-totemic sacrifice" (3) and moreover in another notable element of the text, "Transhumanism is seen as a tendency and so the dissertation imagines a poet whose practical exercise in the workings of typewriter produced concrete poetry are then tied to the coded ASCII table, emoticons and polychromatic glyphs which are subject to default visual modifications by manufacturers of technology. The dissertation then offers a view at memetic information transmission which is worked into a model that draws on Jacque[s] Derrida's *différance*" (3). Gončarov adds to the basic program, "The dissertation then points out examples of different discharges between complexifying layers of semiotic systems, and together with an analysis of the myth of centaur it offers a schematic model which should aid their diachronic memetic analysis. This is followed by a long-term statistical study of 3,351 western and Chinese web comics—ragic comics and [...] [:baozou manhua:] respectively—in order to draw attention to the workings of myth. The resulting interpretation is then compared with conclusions reached by some of the more notable mythologists" (3-4). So this is the basic trajectory of the dissertation.

The candidate's 166-page study contains an Introduction, four parts, and a Conclusions section, with an additional ensemble of 66 intricate appendixes; the text investigates, through a well balanced empirical methodology with theoretical perspectives incorporated, the abovementioned basic problem of internet memes and their substance for studies of myth. The candidate makes a useful distinction between trope and meme when he writes early on that "the term trope will be used in the sense of a recognizable, fairly complex pattern which is rather common, regardless of its intended or perceived artistic effect. Therefore, all tropes are memes but not all memes are tropes, because memes can transfer information unconventionally for the first time" (12).

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As for the prose, there are a few lapses in style where it could have been a bit more elegantly stated, but all in all the study stands on its own as a very fine linguistic product for acceptance to the next stage in the procedure to be examined for the doctoral degree. Here are some glitches. The candidate needs to rephrase this on p. 23: "I will start with an answer and then try to show how culture has reached what this general consensus." Also "Jacque" should be "Jacques" (3), "the Netherlandes" (35) should be "the Netherlands"; "King Lear" (87) should be *King Lear*; "priviliged" (96) should be "privileged".

As for the substantial content of the thesis, concerning the problem of materialism, I would ask the candidate 1) to explain in a little more detail how it is that "Native American, Buddhist, Christian and other mythologies are at their core non-materialist doctrines" (18) for much recent work on materialism (e.g. that of Slavoj Žižek) would suggest otherwise. (That a certain radical materialism subtends the Christian heritage for example.)

Extensive reference is made to Derrida's celebrated essay on "Différance" on pp. 58-60 to throw light on the problem of the thesis. An important discussion occurs in the text "of this systemic discharge, of this short-circuit between multiple layers of the linguistic sign, can be found in Chinese" (70). A crucial issue and argument made is the following one: "My concern is then the following: When there is a system of signs used by participants in order to communicate messages, could it be that in the long run the signs could influence the debate to such a degree that even though 'the same' story could be told (in other words translated) in an analogous functional system with analogous symbols and symbolic ties, the story would most probably not be originally told in that second language because it would just not fit in the evolving cultural/literary canon?" (91) The candidate then aptly shows why this hypothesis is a valid one, and offers the intriguing and I think valid argument that "the least objectionable way to try to prove the memeticistss hypothesis about the broad workings of the overarching myth is to be concerned with simple everyday stories, with jokes rather than puns, with what one relates to another in a friendly chat, although and because there the myth that we live does not give itself away so blatantly" (92). A distinction between myth and ideology occurs when we read that, "Myth operates one lever deeper than ideology which can be understood as a 'system of ideas that aspires both to explain the world and to change it.' Myth in the most sober act of speech, unlike ideology, tries to be elusive even to itself and not, as is the case with ideology, be recognized as an important message which is in fact a masked self-proclamatory message with a recognizable tendency to strive for domination. Myth is an underlying principle to all associate thinking" (105). What I lack here is a definition of ideology which others have done of course to multifarious effect. It would be interesting in my second question 2) to know the candidate's position on this matter and to even more fine tune this distinction?

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The candidate has successfully persuaded this reader that, as the candidate himself puts it, "my analysis of rage comics and baoman convinced the reader that the system of signs does influence the stories not only of, let us say, rhymed verse, but also of more prosaic, though visual, genres such as rage comics or baoman" (152). Also, the candidate convincingly displays that "the system on memes" (153) has a "tendency towards more complexity and newness" (153). This thesis ends with the tantalizing formulation that, "any debate is a performance, I, purely speculatively, tend to think that many other debates might have been tainted by the necessity of being conducted in a system of expression [...] All performance, then, to me is myth" (156). My last and third question for the candidate is to ask 3) what was the most surprising outcome or result of his researches?

The present thesis could be further prepared for publication, should this interest him, by expanding on this following section that is fertile of meaning and insight: "among the memeplexes that help reveal the arbitrariness and incompleteness of other memeplexes are Derrida's method of deconstruction, Gödel's incompleteness theorem, Barthes's view on myth overarching all culture, Wittgenstein's treatment of the knowability of things, the advent of chaos theory, quantum mechanics, fractal mathematics, Einstein's theory of creativity, and even Hawkins's absence of a big bang on which Penrose builds his idea of time cycles. All these articulate narratives teach us about the unknowability of a complete object and complete interpretation—the complete truth" (23). This is all extremely interesting and would merit further treatment. A nice discussion on poetry with the aid of Gérard Genette occurs on p. 33, and could also be further developed for a book version of the dissertation. The notion of transhumanism is given a good treatment on p. 35 and could also be amplified. The discussion of bubbles on pp. 61-following might benefit from a look at Peter Sloterdijk's recently translated into English multivolume study on *Bubbles* (2011), *Globes* (2014), and *Foams* (2016).

I hereby recommend to the board, as external examiner, that this doctoral thesis be admitted to the next stage for the public defense. For this thesis meets the standard requirements of a doctoral thesis, and I propose the grade of pass.

Sincerely,

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