REVIEW

By Prof. Alexander Donev, DSc.,

Screen Arts Department, Institute of Art Studies, BAS

on the dissertation of Prof. Andronika Martonova, PhD,

for obtaining the academic degree ‚Doctor of Science'

Area 8. Arts; Professional field 8.4 Theater and Film Art

At the Institute of Art Studies, BAS

Subject of the dissertation:

Wondrous Luminous Images.

Bulgarian Film Culture Beyond the Canon and the Familiar

The review was prepared in accordance with the order of the Director of the Institute of Art Studies - Prof. Joanna Spassova Dikova, PhD, № 388-RD/26. O6. 2026 and in accordance with the DASRB, the RADASRB and the Regulations on the conditions and procedures for the acquisition of scientific degrees and academic positions in the Institute of Art Studies.

The dissertation submitted by the candidate was discussed in detail in advance at an extended meeting of the department held on June 2nd, 2026, and it was unanimously decided to direct it to public defence. All supporting documentation adequately meets legal requirements, ll procedures have been followed and there is no evidence of plagiarism. As a reviewer, I also confirm the declared originality of the work of Prof. Andronika Martonova, PhD.

The assessments set out in this review are based on an analysis of the provided materials, copies of the necessary documents and my in-depth knowledge of the applicant's work, gained over more than three decades. I regard her ability to uncover, analyse in depth and present in an engaging manner an ever-increasing number of significant connections, influences and interactions between Bulgarian and Eastern cultures, including in the field of film, as a significant achievement, particularly in recent decades.

It should also be noted that the doctoral thesis has already been published in academic and film studies circles as an academic monograph under the same title (ISBN 978-619-7619-63-8). This publication was produced as part of the scientific project, titled 'Film Culture, Arts and National Images in Bulgaria (Kino.BG). Shaping the Public Significance of Film Culture in the Interwar Period' project, which was supported by the Bulgarian National Science Fund (BNSF) under contract no. KP-06-H60/6, dated 16/11/2021. The project was carried out by researchers from the Screen Arts sector at the Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, in collaboration with a group of external researchers. The review process also requires confirmation of the availability of an abstract that fully meets the procedural conditions.

The candidate has not only met the minimum national requirements (ADASRB and RADASRB, adopted by DCM No. 202 of 10 September 2010, as amended and supplemented by DCM No. No.

56 of 6 July 2018), but has far exceeded them in terms of the thresholds set out in the marking scheme. She presents 24 publications on the subject of her dissertation, published in specialist arts journals (Index G), some of which are peer-reviewed and indexed in international academic databases (meeting WoS and Erich+ criteria). She has also given 28 presentations at prestigious national and international scientific conferences. The candidate's project work also deserves special mention. The research projects in which she is involved are carried out with the support of leading funding organisations (the Ministry of Education and Science /BNSF/, the Ministry of Culture / NCF/) and within the framework of partnerships with renowned national and international research institutions (including Sofia University 'Sv. Kliment Ohridski', the University of Veliko Tarnovo 'Sv. Sv. Cyril and Methodius', the Academy of Korean Studies, Seoul – Republic of Korea, the Chinese International Education Foundation (CIEF), the Confucius Institute, and others). We must also emphasise Professor Andronika Martonova's exceptional work ethic and commitment, as demonstrated by her involvement in a wide range of initiatives, teams and working groups. It is also worth noting her dedicated teaching work at Sofia University 'Sv. Kliment Ohridski', the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts 'Krastyo Sarafov' and New Bulgarian University.

In addition, she is constantly striving to improve herself and broaden the scope of her research. She is also expanding the audience to which she communicates her research findings. These audiences include not only the usual academic recipients, but also curious and interested non-academics. Through her wide-ranging activities, Andronika Martonova has significantly raised the profile of Bulgarian researchers in the arts, including cinema and national culture, within the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the public sphere of our country.

In the context of the criteria relating to fulfilment of the minimum academic requirements and within this procedure's framework, the most important factor is assessment of the submitted dissertation. As the editor of the published monograph, I have a thorough insight into the entire writing process and can categorically confirm that the work 'Wondrous Luminous Images: Bulgarian Film Culture Beyond the Canon and the Familiar', submitted for the award of the academic degree of 'Doctor of Science', is entirely original. It does not borrow from or repeat any of the author's previous research, whether in the form of a monograph or a study, which was used as evidence in a previous procedure relating to the academic advancement of the thesis author.

The dissertation comprises 320 standard typewritten pages (1,800 characters per page), a Preface, three Chapters, a Conclusion, and a 22-page Summary in English. There are also appendices containing illustrative and source material, as well as biographical and chronological tables. The bibliography comprises a total of 276 entries, as follows: 175 Cyrillic titles and 71 Latin alphabet titles (including Romanised versions of Japanese and Chinese). Separately, the bibliography lists works drawn from over 25 archival collections containing a wealth of source material in Bulgaria and abroad. There are 394 footnotes.

The monograph is structured around the lives and creative work of three individuals: two women, Zhana Gendova and Lyuba Kutincheva, and one man, Nikola Kutinchev. They all played prominent roles in film culture and public life during the interwar period, yet they have been largely misunderstood and severely underappreciated. Using biographical narrative to pave the way for serious theoretical research opens up the possibility of applying a variety of scientific methods. These methods allow us to delve deeply into issues that have long been dismissed as trivial and uninteresting. The reasons for the underestimation of both the issues and the individuals involved are primarily ideological. This is due to the Marxist-Leninist scientific

methodology that dominated our country for 45 years and to the male perspective that has been treated as absolute over the centuries when assessing phenomena in public life. Without resorting to the non-scientific term 'sensational', the final scientific result presented by Andronika Martonova can be described as deeply exciting, stimulating, and inspiring for further research based on her proposed research model.

This thesis studies Bulgarian film culture during the interwar period in the context of intercultural interactions along the 'native–foreign' axis. The specific topic focuses on figures that have received little study, are not well known, have not been adequately interpreted, or have simply been deliberately overlooked. The spotlight is primarily on two pioneering women in national film culture who have been marginalised within the incomplete and inconsistent historical narrative of cinema in Bulgaria during this period. The research has two objectives: 1) to demonstrate that Zhana Gendova's contribution to her husband's pioneering work – he made the first Bulgarian feature film, Bulgaran e galant, and ten other feature films up to the end of the 1930s – was significantly greater than recognised previously; and 2) to substantiate the hypothesis that Lyuba Kutincheva was most likely the first female documentary filmmaker in Bulgarian film history. In pursuing these objectives, the dissertation offers an alternative, interdisciplinary interpretation of a significant part of early Bulgarian film history.

The retelling of these two remarkable women's life stories and actual contributions contains not even a hint of feminist activism and is underpinned by a high degree of empirical evidence. In an effort to fill the inevitable gaps in factual information, no attempt has been made to adopt an essayistic style or allow the imagination to run wild. Nevertheless, despite this rigour, the meticulously constructed academic text stimulates the imagination and opens up a vast field for hypotheses, theories and conjectures. These may be of use to future researchers prepared to devote themselves to studying, proving or disproving them.

The main method employed during the dissertation research was a systematic approach combined with a high degree of interdisciplinarity. Approaches from various fields, including film history, cultural studies, media archaeology, archival science, intermedial studies and microhistory, have been integrated. The most up-to-date approaches from the contemporary film studies toolkit have been applied. Overall, both the topic and the methodology employed meet the highest standards of suitability, originality, relevance and significance from theoretical and scientific-applied perspectives.

In terms of structure, the thesis is well organised and logical. Abrupt shifts in chronology and vivid passages on topics such as the role of jazz, modern music and dance, and the gramophone further enliven the narrative and hold the reader’s interest. The seemingly peripheral figure of the actress Bistra Fol plays a significant role. She accepted the marginalised status of women in filmmaking to such an extent that she disappeared from the screen and public life altogether from the mid-1930s. This is in stark contrast to Zhana Gendova and Lyuba Kutincheva, who fought for their creative and personal independence.

The dissertation thesis makes numerous contributions. These are listed in detail in the candidate’s abstract, and I accept them without reservation. However, I would like to highlight three that I consider particularly important. This is the first comprehensive academic study of early Bulgarian cinema to focus on the work of women and recognise their achievements. Furthermore, Andronika Martonova’s reviewed dissertation broadens and deepens our understanding of not only the film situation, but also the overall cultural landscape in Bulgaria during the interwar period. The work presents a convincing argument that early Bulgarian film

culture was shaped not only by feature film production, but also by a series of mobile, hybrid and intermedia practices.

In this particular case, apart from the mandatory dissertation review element known as 'contributions assessment', I would also speak of particular 'discoveries'. Some of these discoveries are specific and factual, such as publications from the period, archival documents in Bulgarian and foreign collections, and personal accounts. However, others are fundamental and capable of significantly 'shaking up' long-established views, prompting us to reconsider them thoroughly. I would now like to highlight a few key points:

- To provide evidence of the much more active and independent role played by women in public and cultural life in Bulgaria during the interwar period, through an in-depth and unbiased study of the lives and works of Zhana Gendova and Lyuba Kutincheva;
- A significant broadening of the scope for analysing and interpreting phenomena within Bulgarian film culture at its intersection with theatre, literature, popular music, journalism, and wider intellectual and artistic networks active during that period;
- Promoting an alternative distribution network for films and film culture. This network uses a system of 'cinema talks' and similar presentation events organised by community centres (‘chitalishta’), cultural associations and educational institutions;
- Exploring the connection and potential transfer of ideas between Bulgarian Esperanto circles, the religious teachings of Petar Danov and the Japanese Ōmoto movement.

Questions and recommendations for future research – these are directed perhaps not so much at the dissertation author, Andronika Martonova, but rather to all of us as academics who are passionate about the topics addressed in this particular academic text and wish to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the research fields it identifies. Of course, this short list that I am suggesting relates only to the field of cinema, in which I am an expert.

1. The main issue that could be explored further relates to identifying and documenting the contributions of other women who played a part in the development of early Bulgarian film culture.
2. It is worth conducting a thorough study to identify and analyse further evidence of the existence of this alternative distribution network for the presentation of film works and film culture outside traditional commercial formats.
3. In any case, despite the dissertation's undoubted achievements, it leaves a number of open questions that suggest the possibility of further research. For example, there are the scripts of the plays performed by the Gendovs' travelling theatre company, which are preserved in the collections of the National History Museum. While these are attributed to Vasil Gendov, it is reasonable to assume that Zhana Gendova extensively edited and finalised them. Lyuba and Nikola Kutinchev's work contains considerably more 'blank spaces'.

IN CONCLUSION:

The dissertation is an original piece of academic work that fully meets the requirements for the award of the academic degree of ‘Doctor of Science’. The author is not only familiar with the academic literature on the subject, but also greatly expands the bibliography of sources and references from which we can draw, whilst addressing a range of issues closely related to her own. The work is thorough and innovative in its methodology. It has yielded theoretical generalisations and solutions to major academic problems in the field of

Bulgarian cinema history. The scientific results achieved are in line with current research and represent a significant and original contribution to the field.

It is with complete conviction and satisfaction that I offer my entirely positive assessment of 'Wondrous Luminous Images: Bulgarian Film Culture Beyond the Canon and the Familiar', with which Prof. Dr Andronika Martonova is applying for the academic degree of 'Doctor of Science' in the professional field 8. Arts; Professional field 8.4 Theater and Film Art.

Prof. Alexander Donev, DSc.,

Screen Arts Department, Institute of Art Studies, BAS

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