STATEMENT
on the scholarly work of Andronika Martonova
"Wondrous Luminous Images"
"Bulgarian Film Culture – Beyond the Canon and the Familiar"
Prof. Dr. Sc. /in Philosophy/, Ph.D./in History/ Nako Stefanov

The submitted dissertation demonstrates a clearly articulated ambition to broaden and partially rearrange the established narrative of early Bulgarian film culture. Its primary focus is placed on those individuals, archival evidence, and cultural practices which, for various reasons, have remained outside the center of the national film-historical canon.

From the outset, the work formulates the understanding that the history of Bulgarian cinema between the two World Wars should not be regarded solely as a linear national narrative, but rather as a space of interaction between the local and the transnational, modernity and tradition, the native and the foreign. The key underlying premise of the submitted work is that the history of Bulgarian cinema – particularly that of the interwar period – needs to be radically reconsidered because the established canon has systematically marginalized women, while erasing key figures and relying on incomplete or biased archival records. The study employs archival reconstruction, microhistory, and media theory in order to restore the visibility of neglected figures such as Zhana Gendova and Lyuba Kutincheva. It argues that these women were foundational figures in early Bulgarian cinema. Yet they were pushed to the periphery by patriarchal norms, missing archives, and mythologized male narratives.

The dissertation emphasizes that cinema was a modernizing force in Bulgaria:

- Early cinema in Bulgaria during the 1920s and 1930s was deeply intertwined with modernization, cultural exchange, and the formation of national identity;
- The film press flourished, and cinema became a space where the arts, intellectual circles, and new technologies intersected;
- The problem of the archive as an incomplete space is also outlined:
- Drawing on Stuart Hall and Yuri Tsivian, the text argues that archives are not neutral repositories but dynamic and selective activities and structures shaped by power;
- What is preserved, as opposed to what is lost, determines which histories become "official."

According to the study, there was a systematic marginalization of women in the history of cinema. Women were central to early cinema throughout the world, yet their contribution was erased or minimized. In Bulgaria, this erasure was particularly pronounced due to:

- The patriarchal norms prevailing at the time;
- Relatively limited documentation;
- Destroyed and deteriorated film materials;
- A historiography focused on men.

A specific case through which this thesis is substantiated is that of Zhana Gendova. Traditionally overshadowed by her husband Vasil Gendov, she was in fact a co-producer, assistant director, editor, organizer, dramaturgical collaborator, casting director, stunt performer, and the first Bulgarian dubbing actress. Her memoirs reveal her disappointment at having been silenced, as well as her desire for independent recognition. Her work in Germany and her influence on the modernization of Bulgarian cinema is reconstructed in the dissertation.

Another case is that of Lyuba Kutincheva. She is an almost forgotten figure who may be regarded as the first Bulgarian documentary filmmaker. She travelled throughout the Near and Far East, filming ethnographic material and delivering public lectures. Her films have been lost, but press materials and photographs make possible a partial reconstruction. Ironically, she is now publicly commemorated more extensively than Zhana Gendova, although both women were historically marginalized. Around the two major research cores – Zhana Gendova and Lyuba Kutincheva – numerous micro historical and interdisciplinary analyses are developed. The study demonstrates a considerable thematic range, extending from early film periodicals and women in cinema to Japan, Asia, cultural diplomacy, documentary cinema, Esperanto, and international cultural contacts. The research also reconstructs the biography of Bistra Fol, another actress whose presence had previously been reduced to credits and scattered references.

In summary, the study emphasizes the role of women in Bulgarian modernity:

- Women in the arts were active agents of modernization, although constrained by conservative norms;
- Early cinema inherited the stigma associated with actresses and female performers. Authoritative creative roles such as directing and producing remained dominated by men, not only in Bulgaria but throughout the world.

In this context, the relevance of the study is exceptionally high. The reason lies not only in the need to supplement existing knowledge about early Bulgarian cinema. More importantly, the author raises the question of how the film-historical narrative itself is created. This transforms the dissertation from an ordinary biographical or archival study into an investigation of the mechanisms of historical memory.

Particularly productive is the thesis that the archive is not a neutral repository of the past but a dynamic space in which some figures are preserved and canonized while others remain invisible. The author explicitly raises the question of who determines the canon and what mechanisms lead to its stabilization. This constitutes a significant contribution, as the dissertation effectively offers a counter-canonical reading of early Bulgarian film history.

One of the major strengths of the work is its conceptual framework. The dissertation does not restrict itself to the traditional history of films, directors, and actors. Cinema is examined as a cultural phenomenon, a social practice, a mediator, a means of cultural exchange, an instrument for constructing images, a component of modernization processes, and a space for the formation of professional, national, and regional identities. This makes it possible to place early Bulgarian film culture within a broader European and transnational context.

Particularly valuable is the use of the concept of "counter-archival potential." This concept designates dispersed, unread, and underestimated archival traces as an opportunity for expanding historical knowledge.

The following may also be identified as innovative contributions:

1. Reconsideration of women in the history of Bulgarian cinema.
The study does not simply "add women" to the narrative; rather, it reconstructs the narrative itself by demonstrating how women shaped early cinema as creators, organizers, cultural mediators, and international intermediaries. This reconsideration challenges decades of historiography focused predominantly on men.

2. Methodological innovation – the combination of microhistory and media archaeology.
The study employs micro historical reconstruction, archival fragments, analysis of memoirs, press materials, and international sources, such as *Cinémonde*. This approach reveals hidden structures of influence and corrects long-standing distortions.

3. Recovery of lost or unknown sources.
The research introduces newly discovered passages from memoirs, rare periodicals, correspondence in the foreign press, and unpublished archival materials. These sources significantly expand the factual basis of Bulgarian film history.
4. Critical reassessment of the formation of the canon.
The text reveals how patriarchal norms, mythologized male self-narratives – particularly those of Gendov – archival destruction, and institutional prejudices shaped what came to be regarded as "canonical."
5. Internationalization of Bulgarian film history.
The study examines Bulgarian cinema through the lens of German film culture, European modernism, and global patterns of women's participation. It places Bulgaria within the broader framework of cinematic modernity rather than treating it as a peripheral curiosity.
6. Reconstruction of lost films and activities.
Even in the absence of surviving film copies, the study reconstructs production processes, aesthetic tendencies, and international visibility. This approach demonstrates how film history can be written even when the films themselves no longer survive.
7. I would particularly like to note another contribution of Prof. Martonova that extends beyond the field of cinema.
This contribution concerns a significantly broader area – the rediscovery of the relations with Japan and, more generally, with the countries of the East. More specifically, it concerns the communication between representatives of Bulgarian cinema, such as Lyuba Kutincheva, and the politico-religious organization *Ōmoto-kyō* (大本教). The The small line above the vowel indicates the length of the sound, i.e. Oomoto-kyoo.

This is a Japanese new religious movement of Shinto origin, which emerged in 1892 around the prophetic revelations of Deguchi Nao and was subsequently transformed by Deguchi Onisaburō into a universalist religious, cultural, and social movement advocating the spiritual transformation of humanity, interreligious unity, international brotherhood, and peace.

The organization, led by Deguchi Onisaburō – in accordance with the Japanese convention, the family name comes first and the given name second – was established in Japan at the end of the nineteenth century. It had complex and contradictory interactions with state authorities during the interwar period. It also played a specific role in the practice of Japanese nationalism.
Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of the martial art Aikido, was a member of this organization and was strongly influenced by its philosophy.

Deguchi Onisaburō also founded the secular organization Jinrui Aizen-kai (人類愛善会). Its name may be translated as the Society for Universal Human Love and Benevolence. Its aim was to disseminate throughout the world the ideas of world peace and human well-being. Esperanto was chosen as a means of communication.

Lyuba Kutincheva communicated in Esperanto through this organization. In this sense, this rediscovery represents a contribution to Bulgarian Japanology and to research on East Asia in Bulgaria.

It should also be added that this organization, which still exists today, established relations and exchanged literature with the Universal White Brotherhood, founded by Petar Dunov (the Master Beinsa Douno).

Undoubtedly, some critical observations could also be made, but they are insignificant in comparison with the high scholarly merits of the submitted dissertation.

In conclusion, *"Wondrous Luminous Images. Bulgarian Film Culture – Beyond the Canon and the Familiar"* is a serious, original, and scientifically significant research work. It transforms the history of early Bulgarian cinema from a narrow, male-centered narrative into a multifaceted, dynamic, and inclusive cultural history. This history is not only comparable with the best European and even global examples of the interwar period. In certain respects, particularly those concerning the place and role of women within it, it may serve as a positive example for others.

It is precisely in this that the overall and creative contribution of the work lies, together with its exceptional innovative potential.

Dear Members of the Jury,

I shall conclude by stating that the work demonstrates qualities corresponding to those required of a dissertation for the academic degree of **Doctor of Sciences**.

My overall assessment is positive, and I fully support the awarding of the academic degree of **Doctor of Sciences** to **Prof. Andronika Martonova**.

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