REVIEW

by Prof. Vladimir Gradev, DSc

of the dissertation submitted by **Prof. Andronika Martonova, PhD**

entitled:

"Wonderful Luminous Images: Bulgarian Film Culture Beyond the Canon and the Familiar"

for the award of the scientific degree **Doctor of Sciences** in Professional Field 8.4. Theatre and Film Arts (Film Studies, Cinema Arts and Television)

1. Significance of the Topic and General Characteristics of the Dissertation

The dissertation under review is devoted to one of the least explored and yet most significant layers of Bulgarian cultural history: film culture during the period between the two World Wars. Prof. Martonova undertakes the ambitious task of reassessing established film-historical narratives by bringing to the forefront figures, archival testimonies, and cultural processes that have remained outside the traditional canon.

The dissertation comprises 320 pages and is structured into an introduction, three main chapters, a conclusion, an extensive bibliography, and appendices. Particularly impressive are both the quantitative dimensions of the research, involving more than twenty-five archival collections, 276 bibliographical references, and nearly 400 footnotes, and the scale of the archival work carried out in Bulgaria and abroad. Throughout the text one can discern many years of dedicated archival research, as well as a remarkable capacity for discovering not only new documents but also new connections that lead to original interpretations and insights.

The topic is unquestionably relevant both to Bulgarian film studies and to broader research concerned with cultural memory, archives, women's history,

and transnational cultural interrelations. In short, Andronika Martonova's dissertation is an ambitious and wide-ranging study which, transcending the boundaries of film history, situates itself at the intersection of film studies, memory studies, gender studies, and the study of cultural exchanges, successfully integrating these perspectives into a coherent and organic whole.

Regarding the procedural requirements, I note that the candidate's publications correspond closely to the subject of the dissertation and that the dissertation abstract is excellently prepared. It accurately reflects the content of the work and concisely presents its research objectives, methodology, arguments, and contributions. I should also emphasize that the dissertation is written with evident scholarly passion. Engaging and intellectually stimulating, it reads almost like a literary work, a quality rarely encountered in the dissertation genre.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The dissertation demonstrates a convincing command of contemporary interdisciplinary methodologies. Prof. Martonova successfully combines approaches drawn from film history, cultural history, media archaeology, microhistory, archival studies, and memory studies.

Particularly commendable is her application of the microhistorical approach through detailed case studies, which enable the reconstruction of broader cultural processes through specific individuals and biographies. The study does not merely enrich the factual history of Bulgarian cinema; it also raises fundamental questions concerning the very construction of historical memory and cultural canon formation.

A notable achievement lies in the treatment of the archive not as a passive repository of facts but as a dynamic structure governed by mechanisms of inclusion, exclusion, forgetting, and the reconstruction of memory. Equally important as the discovery of new archival material is the author's reflection on what it means to return to the archive and to recover forgotten figures from it,

as well as on the broader question of how cultural memory itself is understood today. This meta-historical perspective connects Prof. Martonova's inquiry with contemporary debates on archives, memory, and cultural visibility.

The dissertation offers a detailed mapping of a hitherto unexplored field and enables the author, through profound theoretical reflection, to bring into dialogue cinematographic, cultural, historical, sociological, and psychological analyses. On this basis she arrives at significant philosophical conclusions concerning fundamental cultural values and the workings of memory as viewed through the prism of film history.

The theoretical framework is grounded in the authoritative works of Jacques Derrida, Stuart Hall, Yuri Tsivian, Thomas Elsaesser, Pierre Nora, and other leading contemporary scholars. The secondary literature serves not merely as a background but as a means of illuminating and problematizing the disciplinary fields engaged by the study. At the same time, Martonova's own position remains consistently clear and carefully argued. Most valuable is her continuous effort, through a comprehensive and balanced presentation of the major positions concerning each issue, to stimulate active engagement on the part of the reader, who not only learns a great deal but also becomes gradually involved in a genuinely lively scholarly discussion.

3. Analysis of the Content

The **first chapter** addresses the significant yet insufficiently researched and long underestimated issue of the place of women in early Bulgarian film culture. The author convincingly demonstrates that traditional film historiography has focused primarily on male pioneers while underestimating women's roles as active participants in production, organizational, and creative processes. Particularly noteworthy is the successful contextualization of early cinema not only within the first efforts toward women's emancipation but also within the broader framework of cultural modernity and the social transformations of Bulgaria during the first half of the twentieth century.

The **second chapter** constitutes one of the dissertation's most substantial achievements. A major contribution is the introduction into scholarly circulation of previously unexplored documents, memoirs, and archival testimonies that make it possible to reconstruct the authentic image and role of Zhana Gendova in the creation of Bulgarian cinema. On the basis of extensive archival material, investigated with unprecedented depth and systematic rigor by Prof. Martonova, the chapter offers a new interpretation of Gendova's role, demonstrating convincingly that she was not merely a talented actress and the wife of Vasil Gendov, but a genuine co-creator of the project of "Bulgarian cinema." Her work as co-producer, assistant director, casting director, editor, strategist, and organizer of film productions traditionally associated exclusively with Vasil Gendov is analyzed with exceptional insight.

The **third chapter** is the most ambitious, original, and innovative part of this remarkably strong dissertation. The author rescues from oblivion and reconstructs the now nearly forgotten lives and activities of Lyuba and Nikola Kutinchev. Their fascinating story comes alive through persistent and genuinely detective-like research involving the discovery, collection, and organization of countless dispersed fragments of evidence. Andronika Martonova has carried out truly remarkable pioneering work in uncovering these materials. Every trace left by the Kutinchevs in Bulgarian, European, and Japanese archival sources has been patiently investigated, illuminated, and contextualized.

As a result, new evidence emerges concerning Nikola Kutinchev's film screenings and public lectures; Lyuba Kutincheva's journeys, travel writings, and documentary work; their connections with the Japanese Ōmoto movement; and their participation in international Esperanto networks. Their role as cultural mediators between Bulgaria and the Far East is delineated with exceptional clarity.

At this point, the study transcends the boundaries of film history and becomes an investigation into distinctive forms of communication between

distant cultures during the first half of the twentieth century. Importantly, this thematic expansion does not weaken its focus on cinematic processes; on the contrary, it provides a new perspective from which these processes can be reconsidered and understood more fully.

Main Scientific Contributions

In my view, the principal scholarly contributions of the dissertation are the following:

- For the first time in Bulgarian film studies, the role of women in early Bulgarian cinema is brought to the forefront as the subject of a comprehensive and in-depth investigation.
- A convincing reconstruction is offered of Zhana Gendova as a co-author and active participant in the creation of Bulgarian cinema.
- A substantial body of previously unknown archival documents and testimonies from Bulgaria, Europe, and Japan has been identified, studied, and analyzed. The greatest strength of the dissertation lies in its exceptionally extensive yet meticulously detailed archival research and in its ability to bring forgotten biographies and networks of interaction vividly back to life.
- The activities of Lyuba and Nikola Kutinchev are systematically examined for the first time.
- Previously unknown links are revealed between Bulgarian film culture, Esperanto movements, Bulgarian-Japanese cultural relations, and especially the religious movement Ōmoto.
- The history of Bulgarian cinema is examined not only in its national dimensions but also within the wider context of cultural processes and exchanges during the first half of the twentieth century, particularly in the interwar period.

- A persuasive new model is proposed for interpreting early Bulgarian film culture as a dynamic network of cultural interactions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the dissertation **„Wonderful Luminous Images: Bulgarian Film Culture Beyond the Canon and the Familiar”** constitutes an independent, original, and significant scholarly achievement. It substantially enriches our knowledge of early Bulgarian film culture, introduces new sources and research questions, offers innovative interpretations, and opens promising avenues for future investigation.

Andronika Martonova demonstrates a high level of scholarly culture, outstanding competence in working with archival materials, and, above all, a capacity for original academic thinking.

Based on the above considerations, I give an unequivocally **positive evaluation** of the dissertation under review. It occupies a worthy place both in contemporary Bulgarian film scholarship and within Prof. Martonova's own body of work, representing the fruit of many years of tireless research.

I therefore declare that I shall vote **without reservation and with full conviction IN FAVOR** of awarding **Prof. Andronika Martonova, PhD**, the scientific degree **Doctor of Sciences** in **Film Studies, Cinema Arts and Television (Professional Field 8.4)**.

31 August 2026 Prof. Vladimir Gradev, DSc