

**Framing the Periphery: Unveiling the Balkans' Cinematic Legacy Beyond the Center**

Book review of *Charlie Chaplin on Vitosha: The Shaping of Film Culture in Bulgaria and the Balkans Between the World Wars*

PETER AYOLOV

**Рамкиране на периферията: разкриване на кинематографичното наследство на Балканите отвъд центъра**

Рецензия на „Чарли Чаплин на Витоша: Формирането на филмовата култура в България и на Балканите между световните войни“

ПЕТЪР АЙОЛОВ

e-mail: payolov@uni-sofia.bg

ORCID: 0000-0003-0426-011X

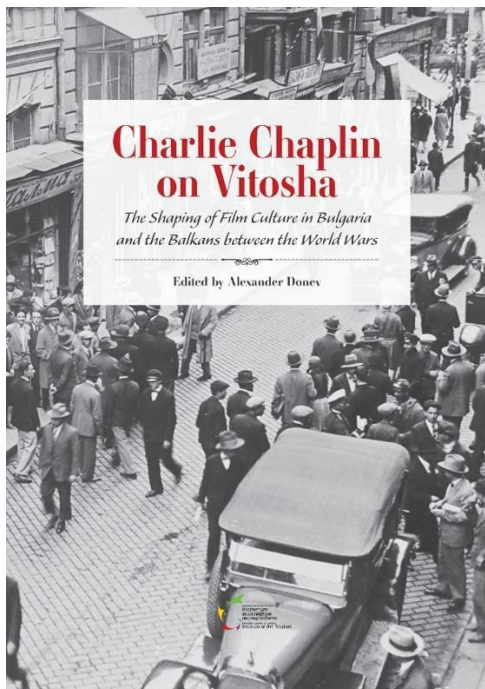
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60060/MLg.2025.17.106-110>

**Abstract:** This review of “*Charlie Chaplin on Vitosha: The Shaping of Film Culture in Bulgaria and the Balkans Between the World Wars*” traces sixteen interconnected studies that chart the rise of Balkan cinema in the interwar years, beginning with an opening essay that situates Bulgaria alongside its neighbors in forging a distinctive film culture shaped by innovation, ambition, and regional exchange. Some early reflections on modernist and avant-garde movements illuminate the ideological ferment that provided fertile ground for cinematic experimentation in the Balkans between the wars.

**Keywords:** cinema, Bulgaria, Balkan cinema, film, culture

**Резюме:** Този преглед на „Чарли Чаплин на Витоша: Формирането на филмовата култура в България и на Балканите между световните войни“ проследява шестнадесет взаимосвързани изследвания, които очертават възхода на балканското кино в междувоенните години, започвайки с уводно есе, което поставя България редом със съседите си в изграждането на отличителна филмова култура, оформена от иновации, амбиция и регионален обмен. Някои ранни размисли върху модернистичните и авангардни движения осветяват идеологическия фермент, който е осигурил плодородна почва за кинематографични експерименти на Балканите между двете световни войни.

**Ключови думи:** кино, България, балканско кино, филм, култура



Each chapter in this volume examines one thread – implicit or explicit – of cinema’s emergence as a modern art form in Bulgaria. Read together, they reveal a multifaceted process of appropriation and innovation, in which writers and critics looked in the mirror of film, directors borrowed filmic devices for the stage, architects built edifices worthy of international comparison, educators embraced the “seventh art” as a teaching tool, and advertisers learned to speak the language of mass persuasion. *Charlie Chaplin on Vitosha* – whether viewed as a clever parody, a publicity stunt, or a genuinely entertaining local comedy – epitomizes this spirit of creative mimicry with a purpose: by invoking Chaplin on the slopes of Vitosha, Bulgarian filmmakers announced their arrival on the world stage. Their lessons remain urgent today, as every new medium – streaming, virtual reality, social video – reopens the question of who speaks for “national film,” and how creative communities stake their claim to the global screen.

In our digital age, these interwar efforts remind us how national cinemas were once built through passion, experimentation, and a fierce desire to be seen and heard on the global screen. Early Bulgarian and Balkan cinema offer a vital missing chapter in the story of European film’s emergence as both a social force and an art form. Long overshadowed by the well-trod narratives of Hollywood, Germany, and France, the pioneering efforts of Sofia’s student cinemas, the Manaki brothers’ schoolhouse screenings in Bitola, Thessaloniki’s Sephardi exhibitors, and Varna’s dance-hall projections reveal how moving pictures permeated everyday life, education, and local identity across the peninsula. Their creative experiments – from amateur parlors and community-center

pavilions to purpose-built movie palaces – demonstrate how cinema was appropriated, adapted, and even theorized outside the major capitals, reflecting regional ambitions, technical ingenuity, and social tensions.

Publishing these interwar studies in English is more than an exercise in translation: it is an invitation to reframe film history from the margins toward the center. By gathering scholarship on avant-garde manifestos, health bureau documentaries, critical manifestos, and architectural typologies, this volume illuminates the networks of artists, educators, projectionists, and entrepreneurs who actively shaped Balkan film culture. It encourages comparative scholarship that recognizes how, for instance, a lost Chaplin parody on Vitosha, a Macedonian newsreel of Ilinden celebrations, or a student-cinema lecture in Sofia all contributed to the same European modernity. Understanding these peripheral cinemas enriches our grasp of film's social role – its power to educate, entertain, and forge collective memory – and underscores the need for scientific research that extends beyond established canons. In an era of global streaming and digital archiving, revisiting and translating these early Balkan narratives ensures that the full mosaic of European cinema, including its vibrant borderlands, receives the scholarly attention it deserves. Only then can we appreciate how every region, however small, helped to invent and redefine the “seventh art” for new audiences across the continent.

First cluster of essays explores national contexts: one reconstructs Macedonia's amateur pioneers and public-health filmmakers; other examines Jewish cinema entrepreneurs in Thessaloniki and their resilient networks; a third surveys the arrival of sound, from technical installations to home-grown dubbed features; a fourth decodes the silent-era actor's visual vocabulary; a fifth profiles the critics whose reviews turned cinema into a serious art; a sixth uncovers a novelist's newly discovered treatise on film theory; and a seventh uses psychoanalytic stages to show how Bulgarian filmmakers moved from mirroring Western models to asserting their own cinematic voice. Together, these pieces reveal how diverse local

agents – enthusiasts, exiles, technicians, and cultural elites – laid the groundwork for national and regional film industries.

The second half of the volume turns to cinema's crosscurrents with other media and social spheres. One study delves into Sirak Skitnik's ambivalent essays and Futurist drawings, capturing the era's excitement and anxieties about mass spectacle. Other shows how leading theatre directors grafted montage, projections, and film-inspired acting onto major stage works, while a companion piece maps the lively debate positioning cinema as rival to, yet collaborator with, live drama. A further analysis brings in the gramophone record, tracing "intermedia assemblies" where songs, films, and print ads fed one another. Attention then shifts to the buildings themselves: mixed-use halls, converted theatres, and purpose-built "movie palaces" that transformed the urban landscape. Two final studies explore cinema as an educational tool – from student-cinemas and government-backed newsreels to a pioneering 1930 Cinematography Law – and the refinement of print advertising strategies, which evolved from small text notices to large photographic display ads that enticed mass audiences.

Here is a list of the articles and the authors in the volume: *The Shaping of Film Culture in Bulgaria and the Balkans Between the World Wars: A preface* by Alexander Donev; *In the Shadow of the Canon: Texts of Late Bulgarian Modernism and Avant-garde. A Literary- Historical Reconstruction: An Introduction* by Elka Traykova; *National Film Culture in Regional Context 3. Film Culture in Macedonia between the Two World Wars* by Atanas Chuposki; *Jewish Film Entrepreneurs under Greek rule. A Prosopographical Approach to the Social History of Cinema in Thessaloniki* by Mélisande Leventopoulos; *When the Screen Started Singing and Speaking in Bulgarian* by Peter Kardjilov; *The Film Iconography and the Actor in Early Bulgarian Cinema* by Joanna Spassova-Dikova; *Profiles of the First Bulgarian Film Critics (1920-1940)* by Rosen Spasov; *Dobri Nemirov in the Thought of Cinema: An Approach to the Unknown* by Andronika Martonova; *Bulgarian Cinema*

*in Search of the Self* by Boyan Tzenev; *“The Power of Cinema” – Enthusiasm and Anxieties. Articles and Artworks by Sirak Skitnik, 1929–1940* by Irina Genova; *The Influence of Cinema and Cinematic Language in Theatre Productions of Hrisan Tsankov and Nikolai Masalitinov in the Late 1920s and the 1930s* by Kamelia Nikolova; *Theatre and Cinema in Bulgaria between the Two World Wars. Oppositions* by Nikolay Iordanov; *The Gramophone Record and the Intersections Between Media, Cinema and Music in Bulgaria in the 1930s and 1940s.* by Ventsislav Dimov; *Architectural Typology of Cinemas in Bulgaria during the Interwar Period* by Stela Tasheva; *In Search of the Historical Roots of Interactive Education in Bulgaria* by Irina Kitova; *Promoting Film Art in Bulgaria via Print Advertising in the Interwar Period* by Nikola Vangelov.

#### Bibliography:

Donev, Alexander (ed.) (2025) *Charlie Chaplin on Vitosha. The Shaping of Film Culture in Bulgaria and the Balkans between the World Wars*. Sofia: Institute of Art Studies – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

**Peter Ayolov**, PhD, has two Master's degrees: in „Literature“ and in „Cinema“, and a PhD in Mass Communication. He has more than 10 years of experience as an assistant professor at Sofia University and more than 15 years of experience working as a director and writer in television and cinema. Dr. Ayolov teaches university course in Creative Scriptwriting. His research topics include the propaganda model of the media, media bias, and manipulation.

**Д-р Петър Айолов** има две магистърски степени по „Литература“ и „Кино“, и докторска степен в областта на масовата комуникация. Той е с над 10 г. опит като преподавател в Софийския университет “Св. Климент Охридски”, над 15-годишен опит като режисьор и сценарист в телевизията и киното. Преподава „Сценарно майсторство“, а неговите изследователски интереси са пропагандният модел на медиите и медийната манипулация.