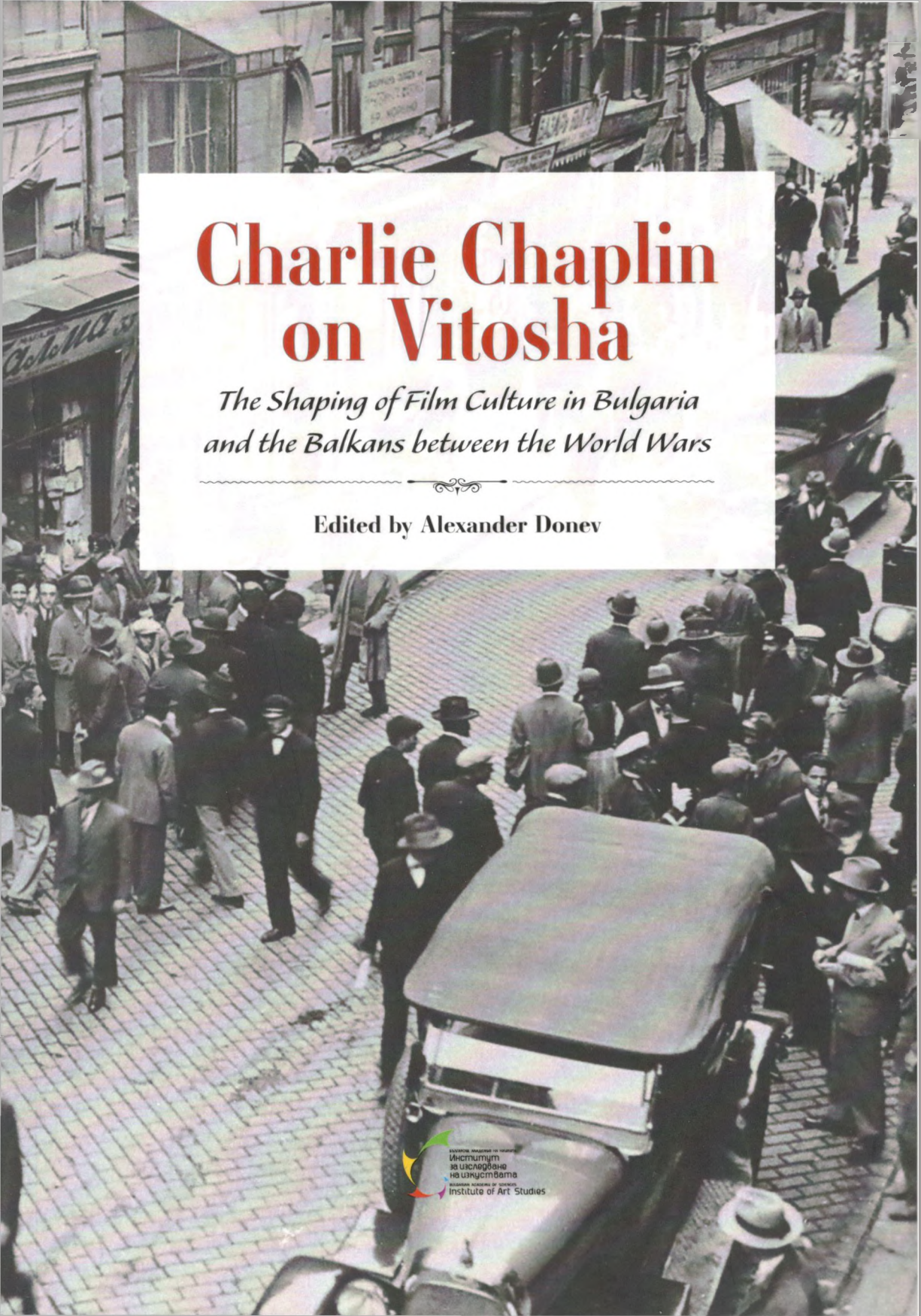




Charlie Chaplin on Vitosha

*The Shaping of Film Culture in Bulgaria
and the Balkans between the World Wars*

Edited by Alexander Donev

Charlie Chaplin on Vitosha

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and the Balkans between the World Wars*

The book "Charlie Chaplin on Vitosha. The Shaping of Film Culture in Bulgaria and the Balkans between the World Wars" is part of the project of the Screen Arts Sector at the Institute for the Study of Arts – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences "Film Culture, Arts and National Images in Bulgaria (Kino.BG). Shaping the Public Significance of Film Culture in the interwar period" and is published with state support under contract No. KP-06-H60/6 of 16.11.2021 with the Bulgarian National Science Fund (BNSF)“



On the cover: a still from the film *Пътят на безпътните*
(In a blind alley, 1928, directed by Vasil Gendov)

The book is available online on the project website
www.bgkino.com/библиотека/

**КИНОКУЛТУРА
ИЗКУСТВО
НАЦИОНАЛНИ
БРАЗИ**

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Institute of Art Studies
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

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Alexander Donev



Sofia, 2025



Text below says:

After the screening of the new Bulgarian movie by our great director, artist, screenwriter and husband V. Gendov, Chaplin was convinced that his movies were not the funniest.

From the above pictures, obtained by our correspondent on television, it is clear that Chaplin, frightened by the competition, was already negotiating with V. Gendov about joint productions.

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The Film Iconography and the Actor in Early Bulgarian Cinema

Joanna Spassova-Dikova

Abstract: The text is part of a larger study of acting in Bulgarian feature films between the two world wars on a project supported by the National Science Fund. In this case, the focus is on visual conventions and codes in cinema in relation to the actor. Aspects such as actor – visual environment – interior, exterior, as well as costuming, make-up, movement, pose, facial expression, and gesture, which assist the actor in creating the image, are analysed. An attempt is made to rethink the interactions between the different arts and the search for a new artistic cinema language. The aim is to outline some processes and trends in the development of acting art in the context of the formation of the social significance of film culture in the period between the two world wars.

Keywords: iconography, visual environment, genre, actor, facial expression, gesture, posture, early Bulgarian feature film, new film language, film culture.

Филмовата иконография и актьорът в ранното българско кино

Йоана Спасова-Дикова

Резюме: Текстът е част от по-голямо изследване на актьорското изкуство в българското игрално кино между двете световни войни по проект, подкрепен от Фонд „Научни изследвания“. В случая вниманието се концентрира върху визуалните конвенции и кодове в киното по отношение на актьора. Анализират се такива аспекти като актьор – визуална среда – интериор, екстериор, както и костюмография, грим, движение, поза, мимика, жест, които подпомагат актьора при създаване на образа. В изследването е направен е опит за преосмисляне на взаимодействията между отделните изкуства и търсенето на нов художествен киноезик. Целта е да се очертаят някои процеси и тенденции в развитието на актьорското изкуство в контекста на формирането на социалната значимост на филмовата култура в периода между двете световни войни.

Ключови гуми: иконография, визуална среда, жанр, актьор, мимика, жест, поза, ранно българско игрално кино, нов киноезик, филмова култура.

The paper discusses some problems which pertain to specifics and trends in acting in the first Bulgarian feature films between the two world wars as a part of a research project of the Institute of Art Studies – BAS. “Film Culture, Arts, and National Images in Bulgaria. 1920–1940” (KINO.BG), financed by the Bulgarian National Science Fund. In this case, emphasis is placed on the problem of iconography (the system of visual signs) in the various film genres, characteristic of the period between the two world wars, in the context of acting in a search for new cinematographic language.

In this text, we shall use the term “iconography” preliminary in its meaning of a strictly established system of rules for depicting faces and story scenes characteristic of a certain type of culture on the way of the elaboration of the still not-quite developed film iconographic/iconological approaches as equipment for interpretation.

Iconography in silent European cinema during the 1920s and early 1930s.

In the important essay from 1936, *Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures*, the art historian Erwin Panofsky talked about acting in silent films. There, he argued that

“it was soon realised that acting in a silent film neither meant a pantomimic exaggeration of stage acting (as was generally and erroneously assumed by professional stage actors who more and more frequently condescended to perform in the movies) nor could dispense with stylisation altogether; [...] If the picture was to look both natural and meaningful the acting had to be done in a manner equally different from the style of the stage and the reality of ordinary life; speech had to be made dispensable by establishing an organic relation, between the acting and the technical procedure of cinephotography [...] This was precisely what the great actors of the silent period accomplished... They came instead from the circus or the variety, as was the case of Chaplin, Keaton, and Will Rogers; [...] The style of these “old masters” was indeed comparable to the style of line engraving in that it was, and had to be, exaggerated in comparison with stage acting [...], but richer, subtler, and infinitely more precise. The advent of

the talkies, reducing if not abolishing this difference between screen acting and stage acting, thus confronted the actors and actresses of the silent screen with a serious problem” (Panofsky 1936: 26-27).

At the dawn of cinema, the main challenges for actors were how to portray the character without speaking. How to translate the theatrical language into cinematic? How to play not in continuity but in excerpts on a montage principle?

Susan Sontag also has comprehensive research on the specifics of theatre and film acting. She writes:

“The history of cinema is often treated as the history of its emancipation from theatrical models. First of all, from theatrical “frontality” (the unmoving camera reproducing the situation of the spectator of a play fixed in his seat), then from theatrical acting (gestures needlessly stylised, exaggerated-needlessly, because now the actor could be seen “close up”), then from theatrical furnishings (unnecessary “distancing” of the audience’s emotions, disregarding the opportunity to immerse the audience in reality). Movies are regarded as advancing from theatrical stasis to cinematic fluidity, from theatrical artificiality to cinematic naturalness and immediacy. But this view is far too simple” (Sontag 1966: 24-27).

All the new circumstances and technical innovations of the new art conditioned the necessity of new expressive modes, new iconography, and new usage of the nonverbal proxemic and kinesic codes.

At the beginning of the 20th century, experiments with props, decoration, light, costumes, and make-up started in the search for a new, expressive enough and comprehensible cinematographic language.

One of the first films to strongly promote and draw attention to the creative use of film design was Robert Vine’s landmark *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), with its innovative sets by Hermann Warm, Walter Reimann, and Walter Röhrig. On a global scale, the significant role of design, scenography, and architecture in the development of German silent cinema, which influenced the entire European and world cinema, has been repeatedly noted. (Bergfelder, Harris, Street 2007: 32).

Film theorists argue that set design, in fact, is an element of the whole system of cinematographic codes. In the comprehensive book *Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination: Set Design in*

1930s European Cinema, the scholars legitimately affirm that *with regard to the problem of discussing set design as a separate and independent entity, this reiterates the point that sets on their own do not create space on the screen*. According to them, designed sets are realised cinematically only in conjunction with the work of the cinematographer, who, through framing and lighting devices, animates the fragmentary construction and imbues it with an imaginary wholeness, and the editor, who, during post-production, adds a temporal dimension to spatial relationships, and thereby anchors them in a constructed reality. In other words, to understand the filmic function of set design, it is necessary to consider its interaction with how the set is cinematically processed. Similarly, it is almost impossible to disaggregate the function of the set from a number of other constitutive parts of the mise-en-scène, including elements such as props and accessories, costume, and make-up, and not least the performance of the actors (Bergfelder, Harris, Street 2007: 15).

In this respect of the role of the environment indicative for the 1920s were Eisenstein's ideas about imagery and especially about the significance of the montage who argues that returning to the question of static and dynamic symmetry (the Greek understanding of the term), it should be noted that this tradition came and survived until the latest and highest form of art – the cinema. The film director mentions that after Kuleshov, the works of Vertov and Pudovkin refer to a kind of geometric type of montage. One of his examples is *The Patriotic March* in *The End of St. Petersburg*, directed by Vsevolod Pudovkin (1927).

Eisenstein affirms that the other type of dynamic symmetry montage is represented in his own works, giving as an example the scene *The Odessa Staircase* from the film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), where the assembly rhythm in these constructions cannot be expressed by an arithmetic cut of proportions and multiplicity of a simple module. (Eisenstein 1934: 664-665).

Further in the same paper, Eisenstein describes the role of montage in the “dynamisation” of the acting and mise-en-scène as informal elements.

Eisenstein writes that

“along the line of stage action, we can pass from the mise-en-scène of moving the actor in space to the mise-en-scène of acting in an “own field”. A transitional unit would be a turning of the actor to

the object, where the mise-en-scène of the actor around the object would change to a mise-en-scène of the object in the actor's hands so as to move to a split-fused view of the actor itself".

The director summarises that in this way, via montage,

"we are completely approaching the transformation of the mise-en-scène from a theatrical to a cinematic one – to a montage mise-en-scène, as an immediate continuation of its regularities in a new area and a new quality. The flat surface of the horizontal theatrical platform seems to rise into the vertical plane of the screen, preserving within the frame and in the changing frames the same strict regularities of spatial and temporal composition, which are repeatedly softened in connection with the growing number of means of expression and possibilities" (Eisenstein 1934: 672).

The practically applied montage theory is one of the great achievements of the genius director, who has an enormous impact on the further development of film art.

Finally, I will give one more example of modern searches in the early 1930s in the field of developing new cinematographic iconographic language, where architecture and montage play an important role. This is the film *Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World* (1932). There is a "Bulgarian trace" as far as the director was Zlatan Dudov, the Bulgarian filmmaker with the most successful career in world cinema in the 20th century (Donev 2023: 19-29). The manuscript was by the outstanding playwright and director Bertolt Brecht and the writer Ernst Ottwald. Indicative of the special attention put to the visual environment was the inclusion of the architects Robert Scharfenberg and Carl Paul Haacker in the film team.

Some iconographic aspects of acting in silent Bulgarian feature films (1915–1933)

The first Bulgarian silent feature film, *Balgaran is a Gallant*, appeared in 1915. There were 34 films until the first sound film, *The Slaves' Revolt*, in 1933 (Kardjilov 1987, 74-194). Silent films confronted the actors with new challenges and required the creation of a completely different "silent" cinematic language, consisting of many nonverbal, iconic signs.

Silent film actors emphasised body language and mimics so the audience could better understand what an actor was feeling and portraying on the screen. Silent film acting is apt to strike modern-day audiences as simplistic or campy. The melodramatic acting style was, in some cases, a habit actors transferred from their former stage experience. Styles characteristic of classical, romantic, sentimental, realistic, naturalistic, and psychological gameplay coexist. A main characteristic of the acting art from the period of the early Bulgarian cinema is its eclecticism and theatrical multilingualism, not only in relation to different actors but often in the performance of a single actor. For the most part, the actors of this period, in their approaches to the role, were in the pattern of self-expression. This type of relationship between actor and character was not in the direction of the incarnation but of the actor's personality problematisation through the role. Therefore, the solo acting was typical.

Here, the analysis of the nonverbal codes, psychological gestures, and physical actions is rather important to a better understanding of the processes of adaptation from theatrical to cinematographic modes of expression. The presence of the actor in the screen space – exterior, interior, scenery/scenography, compared to the theatre, was a novelty for the time and posed a number of challenges for artists to solve.

It might not be underestimated that many of the actors invited to play in films were from the National Theatre. Among the theatre actors in the first productions were (in alphabetical order): Bogomil Andreev, Boris Borozanov, Boris Pojarov, Docho Kasabov, Elena Snejina, Georgi Fratev, Ivan Dimov, Ivan Kassabov, Ivan Popov, Jana Gendova, Katja Stojanova, Konstantin Kisimov, Krastjo Sarafov, Mara Penkova, Maria Mijateva, Maria Popova, Milka Lambreva, Mimi Balkanska, Nikola Balabanov, Paskal Dukov, Petar Stoichev, Raiko Alexiev, Stavruda Frateva, Stefan Savov, Stoyan Popov, Teodorina Stoicheva, Vassil Gendov, Vella Usheva, Vladimir Trandafilov, Zlatan Kasharov, Zorka Yordanova and others.

Location of film shots.

Exterior shots

There were favourite locations for shots, such as the town of Sofia (the streets in the centre, luxury buildings, parks, etc.), Varna (especially the beach), Vitosha mount (nature), Plovdiv (the town) and oth-

ers. Rarely were shots made in Austria, especially in Vienna (Kardjilov 1987, 74-194).

In fact, these places were chosen because they were public spaces, and there was no need for renting. There was no lighting technique, so natural daylight was used.

One of the contemporaries remembers about the film *Lilyana* (1920), directed by Dimitar Panchev: "The shots were only external" (Perfanov 1953: 2). In *Kinosvjat*, it was announced that "the play with a Bulgarian plot *Lilyana* was "worked in the vicinity of Sofia" (Filmat *Lilyana* vav Viena 1921: 9). In fact, the film was shot in Dragalevtzi. Vassil Gendov, in his memoirs, also writes:

"All films before "Bai Ganyo" were shot outdoors because of the sunlight we had to work. Even the script was being drafted with a view to shooting the film only outside. There were no pictures of the interior, as the funds did not allow the construction of the most primitive studio or sets. On the other hand, the lack of light equipment, such as spotlights, special lamps, was almost unknown in our country" (Gendov 2016:157).

In some films, there was a need to make shots in the street or in front of some private buildings. Often, this became a great problem for the pioneers of the new art. In the memories of Vassil Gendov, there are different stories about the *thorny path of cinema*. During the shots of *Balgaran is a Gallant*, it was decided to use the space around one of the private houses of a wealthy owner. Gendov remembers:

"When we found ourselves in front of Sasselov's house, we were fortunate that as we called to get permission to shoot in the yard first, a young lady appeared, who received us very kindly, and our willingness was evident gave permission for the photos. However, towards the end of filming, when we were shooting in front of the house itself, wondered Sasselov himself, who was amazed by this which he saw and, raising his voice, hurried towards us. – Who allowed you, – he began, – to do these masquerades in front of my house? Soon, you will be out of here until I have started with the cane." (Gendov 2016: 77)

Gendov continues:

"A large crowd of onlookers gathered around us who started throw-

ing all kinds of abuse at us, insults, even swearing, such as jokers, clowns, and others of a nature not to be said. Some of the braver ones threw stones at the apparatus, causing Gaetano to cover the apparatus with his hands often” (Gendov 2016: 77).

As for the costumes, props, etc., which were not specially prepared but borrowed or taken from somewhere else an interesting and again disappointing story tells Vassil Gendov about the way how the costumes and the accessories were provided, again with great problems and risks:

“Since the heroine of the film (Balgaran is a Gallant), Mara Miyateva, needed a modern hat, it became necessary to look for one, and I happened to come across the Pavlovi family, whom I visited and asked the lady to temporarily serve with her elegant hat, only with a “noble lie”, that the hat is needed for a performance that will be donated for the benefit of the Red Cross. I received the hat, but the next day, after we had taken pictures with it, Mrs. Pavlova arrived home, and at the very first meeting, she started shouting: - How are you not ashamed to lie to me like that? If I knew you wanted the hat, for to show it in such clownishness in the streets, I would never have given it. How shall I wear this hat tomorrow when you have disguised it thus? The lady got her hat back, with the result of the too-obvious “farce” in our comedy. Our heroine from the film enters a hardware store with one hat, and the day before, we had shot a scene of her entering the store, and that was a foreground, and now she had to continue the entrance and a general shot with another hat. And repeating the picture was out of the question because every square was saved” (Gendov 2016: 77-78).

Interior shots

In the beginning, the interior shots were very difficult. Gendov affirms that:

“In the film “Bai Ganyo”, interior shots were required, which could not be avoided under any circumstances. After the proposals I made, only the “Renaissance” theatre agreed to rent me sets on the condition that they would be built in the theatre courtyard (sets for the editorial office of the newspaper published by Bai Ganyo). These sets

would be built in the South-East on the facade so that we could use the sun all day long. However, there was an inconvenience. We noticed that at the slightest movement, the decor swayed, and the walls swayed with the barely perceptible wind. We had to wait a few days for the weather to calm down and then do a few rehearsals of careful entry and exit to avoid the slightest swaying of the sets. During the filming, we had to interrupt the work many times due to the appearance of a weak wind. Still, my surprise was great when, on projecting the copy, I noticed that the walls of the sets swayed and that the window curtain when the windows were closed swayed as well, and the shadows that reflected the sun from the furniture showed that the pictures were taken outdoors in sunlight. A clear contradiction to all the laws of architecture and light. In any case, these were the first “inside” photos in our country” (Gendov 2016: 157).

There is another case with interior shots, preserved in memories of the artists of the period regarding the film *Street Idols*, where internal shots were unconditionally necessary, which could only be done in some of the existing theatres in Sofia. The National Theatre refused, despite the proposed high rent, on the condition that filming would only be done at night, so as not to interfere with the work of the theatre. Only the Cooperative Theatre remained, which accepted the offer (Gendov 2016: 254). Gendov continues his story:

“For the second time, the tried-and-tested system of Bai Ganyo was imposed in 1922. Decorative outdoor staging in the courtyard of the theatre. So, it happened. However, the result this time was more deplorable than that of Bai Ganyo. While in the first case, the setting occupied a small area, which was more easily exposed to external influences, here the conditions required a relatively large hall, which, however protected, was easily exposed to the slightest influence of the air. And this time, the audience had to swallow the bitter bite of the deception of a space, walls, windows and doors which sensitively swayed during the action. On the other hand, these interior photos taken in Bulgaria, with only two Jupiter lamps, came out unexpectedly brilliant. These interior photos made a striking impression on the public, who critically closed this impression with the words: “just like Europeans” (Gendov 1929: 6; Gendov 2016: 255).

Special environment: pavilion, studio, etc.

The use of specially constructed environments was quite rare during the period. There were almost no films with scenery, décor, or furniture prepared for the case.

The historians indicate a few of them. These were:

Bogdan Stimov, 1916, directed by Georg Jacobi in the Union Film Pavilion in Berlin, Tempelhof district;

In the Clutches of Vice, 1927, director Johan Rosenblatt;

Land, directed by Petar Stoychev, with the artist Donkov, 1929, where, for the first time, a room was adapted for film shots (Yanakiev 2000: 389). The interior shots of this film were made by *Tempo Film* and arranged by German film engineer Schlesinger in the former tobacco warehouses of the Enige factory. (Petar Kardzjilov, Irina Kitova, Zornitsa Krasteva 2022: 92).

Iconography specific to a given genre

The nonverbal acting expression was very dependent on the film genre. The main genres of the times were: melodrama, drama, and comedy. There were also historical dramas, fairy tales, parodies. The top of the statistics of the genres during that period in the Bulgarian films were the melodramas – 14 in number, followed by 11 dramas and 6 comedies.

It cannot be said that there was a great difference in the locations, sets, props, costumes, make-ups, postures, gestures, mimics, and the general manner of acting in the first Bulgarian feature films from the three main genres. There were some shifts in the level of exaggeration of the mimics and gestures, which were more explicitly “comic” in comedies. There were even in comedies clownish costumes, make-ups, etc.

But as the pioneer of Bulgarian cinematography Vassil Gendov said, whatever was done as innovation between the two world wars, it was for the first time in Bulgarian film culture (Gendov 2016). The thorny path of the Bulgarian cinema was outlined.

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