

Charlie Chaplin on Vitosha

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

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

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ИЗКУСТВО
НАЦИОНАЛНИ
СОБРАЗИ

Edited by Alexander Donev

Reviewers: Petia Alexandrova, New Bulgarian University, Bulgaria

Gergana Doncheva, Institute of Balkan Studies and Center of Thracology,
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

Additional translations and English language revisions: Petar Galabov

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Sofia, 2025

**“The Power of Cinema” – Enthusiasm and Anxieties.
Articles and Artworks by Sirak Skitnik, 1929–1940**

Irina Genova

Abstract: There are relatively few articles by Sirak Skitnik specifically dedicated to cinema. But cinema and its possibilities are a constant subject of attention in his publications: in comparisons drawn with theatre and the impact of the street in the modern city. The first part of the article discusses the enthusiasm and anxieties of the art critic regarding the power of cinema at the time of the advent of talking pictures. In the same years, Sirak Skitnik was carrying out artistic experiments: composing and dynamizing space with ideas from the cinematic frame. The second part of the publication includes examples of drawings and paintings. In conclusion, Sirak Skitnik's work as a critic and artist is full of contradictions in relation to cinema: with anxiety and fear concerning its ability to influence the masses and the commercial interest in following their predilections, but also with excitement about the new possibilities for creating a fantasy world, for mastering time and dynamizing the image.

Keywords: film criticism in Bulgaria; the advent of the sound film; mass culture; film education; drawings by Sirak Skitnik; artistic impact of the film *Metropolis*

**„Властва на киното“ – ентузиазъм и тревоги.
Статии и творби от Сирак Скитник, 1929–1940 г.**

Ирина Генова

Резюме: От края на 1920-те години интересът на Сирак Скитник трайно се насочва към медиите за колективно въздействие: киното, радиото, улиците на големия град – поле за реклама, информация и пропаганда. Статиите на Сирак Скитник, специално посветени на киното, са сравнително малко. Но киното и неговите възможности са постиянен обект на внимание в публикациите му – при съпоставки с театъра, с въздействията на улицата в модерния град, с масови народни забавления, каквото е циркът. Първата част на статията обсъжда ентузиазма и

тревогите на художествения критик относно Властвта на киното в момента на разпространение на „говорящия, монов филм“. През същите години Сирак Скитник прави художествени експерименти – композира и динамизира пространството с идеи от кинокадъра. Във втората част на публикацията са включени примери на рисунки и живописни картини. В заключение: творчеството на Сирак Скитник като критик и художник е изпълнено с противоречия по отношение на киното: с беспокойство и страх от загубата на художествено качество и от способността му да влияе върху масите, но и с възторг от новите възможности за създаване на фантазен свят, за усвояване на времето и динамизиране на образа.

Ключови думи: кинокритика в България; появя на монфилма; масова култура; кинообразование; рисунки на Сирак Скитник; художествено въздействие на филма „Метрополис“

Since the late 1920s, Sirak Skitnik's interest had steadily turned to the media of mass impact. His articles specifically dedicated to cinema are relatively few. Yet, cinema and its influence on the audience constantly drew the attention of the critic: in comparisons with theatre, with forms of mass folk entertainment such as the circus, with the streets of the modern city as a big media screen, and with the radio.

The phenomenon of cinema had a controversial response in Sirak Skitnik's articles¹ ranging between anxieties about the devaluation of artistic quality at the expense of the great masses in pursuit of bigger profits and enthusiasm for a medium capable of creating a hitherto unknown visual and artistic value. The critic studied cinema, just like other art forms, mostly from the perspective of the public. It was not accidental that the section he contributed to, in the *Slovo* daily, was called *Art and Audience*. As for his position, he defined it as being part of that of the enlightened audience.

For Sirak Skitnik the new technical possibilities of the cinematograph were a means for creating both art and mass products of no particular artistic value. What explained the magnetic appeal of cinema to the mass audience? There are films that attract the masses with images of desire. In *Dreams of the Defeated* he presents the relations with the audience like this: “The implausibility of the cinematic event gives hope – it suggests that life has its whims. And millions are waiting for such kind of a miracle that can change their lives. They

1 References to Sirak Skitnik's articles are based on: the bibliography in (Krastev 1974); the published texts in (Krastev, Ed. 1981) and (Stoyanova 2012).

want, require it from cinema – for a single night their dream comes true ...” (Sirak Skitnik 1929b). The stories of the “little man”, of the “little seamstress” and others mentioned by the author of the article did not refer only to banal films. In them, we also recognize talented films, among which Charlie Chaplin’s films.²

The miracle of cinema appeared in other articles by Sirak Skitnik as a metaphor leading to the children’s fairy tale and the historicity of religion. In *Art for All* he stated that cinema was surpassed in its mass appeal only by the magic world of the “circus primitive”.

“The arrival of *Amar* circus has moved Sofia residents from all walks of life – from Yuchbunar to Oborishte.³ Cinema halls are deserted: the screen sensations, the miracle of the talking film have given way to the circus primitive. And in the evening, crowds of people feverishly descend on *Yunak* sports field, which has turned into a colourful, noisy marketplace” (Sirak Skitnik 1931).

Once again, the “miracle” metaphor appeared in *The Lie that Turns into Truth*: the contemporaries, like an image in the article, “crowd in front of cinemas to believe in a lie that will take them away from the truth of everyday life. In the deceptive lights of the ramp, they wait for the resurrection of the belief in the miracle (which is not a proven truth) to make sense of their own lives and make them lighter.” (Sirak Skitnik 1940). In this publication, the art critic parallels two theses: “the primary dough that turns into art is actually a lie which the artist turns into an enduring truth” and “the crowds also require from art to juxtapose the truth of life to an artistic lie”. Cinema, as (the) art of the 20th century, was also part of this paradigm.

Sirak Skitnik’s concerns about the spread of the “talking and sound film”⁴ were related to the growing impact of cinema on the mass au-

2 Charlie Chaplin was widely known to the Bulgarian public. A grotesque image of his appeared in two Bulgarian films: *Чарли Чаплин на Витоша* (Charlie Chaplin on Vitosha Mountain, 1924, Vasil Bakardzhiev) and *Коварната принцеса Турандот* (The Treacherous Princess Turandot, 1925, Rayko Aleksiev). Cf.: (Kardjilov, Kitova, Krasteva 2022:139, 146).

3 Yuchbunar and Oborishte are code names for the poor working-class district and main street of the intellectuals in Sofia.

4 Cf.: Aleksander Donev. The chronology of the advent of sound in Bulgarian cinema halls. May 22, 2023 <https://bgkino.com/>

dience and the decline of the artistic quality both in cinema itself and on the theatrical stage. In Vasil Gendov's memoirs, we can find lines about 1929 (the year in which Sirak Skitnik published four articles on cinema in the *Art and Audience* column in the *Slovo* daily): in 1929, the first film studio in Bulgaria was founded; it was a year of a great rise in film production in our country, which Gendov called *film rush*; in the very same year "there was an undeniable anxiety, even a sense of threat among those involved in film production caused by the slow but steady advent of the talking film. In all European countries there was already a debate about the future of the talking film [...]" (Gendov 2016: 242-243). Sirak Skitnik's concern was within the wider context of the world cinema and visual culture. This dynamic world change was presented in his vivid article *Panic* through many anxious voices at its beginning (Sirak Skitnik 1929c).

The Bulgarian critic saw a risk both in the mass nature of the cinema audience due to its lack of professional understanding and quality criteria and in "the ignorance of mediocre film directors, theatre directors and playwrights [...]" (Sirak Skitnik 1934). Cinema and theatre were not "to cross means". "The artistic mystery of the live stage" and "the lively dynamic charm of cinema" were two different spheres of artistic impact.

Sirak Skitnik was not that concerned about the possible losses of theatre.⁵ Theatre was a fundamentally different art form: "No matter how seemingly alike cinema and live theatre are in terms of tasks and means, in fact, they differ in artistic parameters, in the setting and the quality of impact and suggestion" (Sirak Skitnik 1934). In the very first lines regarding the consequences of talking film for the theatrical stage, the critic recognized the great risk not in the technical innovations but in the lack of long-lasting traditions in Bulgaria. "In Europe, where there are theatrical traditions – and audiences and actors brought up in those traditions, something can still be saved. Everywhere else, the full power of sound film will soon be felt – the new audiences, brought up by cinema, will impose it" (Sirak Skitnik 1929c). The critic did not categorically separate theatre and cinema as elitist art for the few and entertainment for the masses. He appreciated the successes of the silent films up to that point. He defined the appearance of the new,

Peter Kardjilov. The multi-sound spring of 1930. <https://bgkino.com/library/>

5 The complex relations between theatre and cinema are discussed in **Kameliya Nikolova** (pp. 233 – 246) and **Nikolay Yordanov**'s (pp. 247 – 255) articles in this collection.

talking films, the combination of screen projection with sound as “anti-artistic in its essence” (Sirak Skitnik 1934). But, if in 1934, in his article *Stage and Screen*, Sirak Skitnik predicted that “the viewer would find it hard to get used to the “talking picture” of the newly emerged sound cinema”, then in 1937, in *Stage and Radio-Stage*, he admitted that he had missed “just that adaptability of the human psychological apparatus for perceiving things”.⁶

An uneducated viewer can miss the boundary between sound film and theatre play and can view talking film as an easily accessible substitute for the theatre. In such a case, the ability to distinguish the contemporary tasks of theatre from those of cinema becomes crucial.

In his articles on cinema, Sirak Skitnik also raised the issue of the need for education. Can the risk of lack of education, greatly multiplied by the box office revenues due to the millions of cinema-goers, be managed via educational means? In the *Slovo* Daily, the critic published a column on the opening of the Bulgarian Film University in Sofia. For him, the power of cinema was indisputable:

“A contemporary can relate either negatively or positively to it [cinema] but no one can deny its great impact on its audience of millions, over whom it rules. We can find traces of that impact in all manifestations of life – in adults and young alike. Having conquered time and space, it creates a new psychology of the masses: it destroys, elevates, and suggests directly and immediately – like no other means of impact on the human mind and feeling.” (Sirak Skitnik 1929a)

Even in this case, anxiety is intertwined with enthusiasm. Cinema can become a successful means of education. Here again, the metaphor of the miracle appears: according to Prof. Zlatarov, the first lecturer at the Film University, “cinema as an educational tool has done miracles for a short period” in Sweden, Norway and Denmark (Sirak Skitnik 1929a). The optimistic perspective in time was the successful fight for artistic and scientific films.

Mass media, the so-called “machine media” also leads to mass taste. Walter Benjamin analyses this effect of cinema in depth in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, which

⁶ This change in Sirak Skitnik’s observations is also pointed out by Stilian Stoyanov in his book Literature and Technologies (Stoyanov 2014).

has been widely referenced over the years. According to Walter Benjamin:

“With regard to the screen, the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide. The decisive reason for this is that individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response they are about to produce, and this is nowhere more pronounced than in film. The moment these responses become manifest they control each other. [...]” (Benjamin 1935-1936 / 1969: 234).

Benjamin’s fears of having the taste of the street imposed and creativity subordinated to revenues are an expression of the anxieties of the epoch.

Sirak Skitnik polemically discussed the worldwide trend of massification of taste in art, which he called “problem-free art”. In the general wave of artistic production aimed at the mass audience, it was possible for films based on world-known novels to destroy the complexity of the literary masterpieces, to ignore the insight into the drama of human nature, “safeguarding” them by reducing them to entertaining plots: “It is well known to anybody that Dostoevsky in a Hollywood suit is not only far from dangerous but also turns into an amusing crime writer. His problematics and he, as a writer of a certain physiognomy, explode in front of the cinema projectors and what remains of his essence is just cinders and naïve speculation with the writer’s name” (Sirak Skitnik 1939). The author claimed that among all arts cinematography had the greatest possibilities for trivialization.

I will allow myself a digression. During the scientific conference in Bansko, a short discussion arose spontaneously around the concerns related to any globally impactful technical innovation: photography, radio, cinema, digital technologies, and, in recent years, Artificial intelligence. Is photography art? Does sound cinema have any artistic value or is it just an illusion machine? Can humanity manage AI or will its development be perceived as a disaster? Even today, Sirak Skitnik’s comforting view remains valid: it is necessary to stand by, in time, any new technology that is beneficial for humans, and, today, that of Artificial intelligence.

* * *

In the same years, Sirak Skitnik made artistic experiments in drawing and painting: he composed and dynamized space with ideas from the

experience of cinematography. The State Archives keep drawings that were not shown in public by the author (Sirak Skitnik Archives. CSA, f. 44k, inv. 1, a.u. 5, 6, 8, 9, 12). Those drawings became known and accessible to viewers in *The Unknown Sirak Skitnik* exhibition in 1993 in Sofia with a small exhibition catalogue (Genova, Dimitrova 1993). Some of the drawings are signed, attesting to their importance to the artist. The series of compositions with geometrized and dynamized forms expresses his interest in Futurism, intensified by Marinetti's visit to Sofia in 1931. Unfortunately, they were not dated by Sirak Skitnik. A few drawings have some notes, added later, which specify the moment of their creation, for instance, “After Marinetti's visit to Sofia, Sirak drew a couple of “futuristic” sketches” (Sirak Skitnik Archives. CSA, f. 44k, inv. 1, a.u. 6, doc. 10) (Fig. 10).

A series of other drawings are related to the theme of the city in his work. Though also done in the spirit of Futurism, they create a different impression. While doing my research in connection with the present conference⁷, I had the idea to revisit Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927). So, I made my little discovery: some of the hitherto difficult-to-contextualize drawings by Sirak Skitnik reflect his impressions of the visual aesthetics of this film (Fig. 1, 6). Although I cannot find any written evidence by the critic's pen, the artist's immediate reaction unequivocally proves that Sirak Skitnik watched that film.

Metropolis was screened in Bulgaria in the year of its premiere. *Kino* magazine dedicated a special issue to the film with an insert on 26 September 1927. In Shumen, the *Metropolis* newspaper was published – a single but impressive issue dedicated to the film. In the survey conducted by *Nasheto kino* magazine (No. 97–100, 1.I.1928), the film gathered 644 votes and ranked seventh among the most successful titles of 1927.⁸ Of course, not all reviews were positive.⁹

For Sirak Skitnik, the city in modern times was a central topic. The streets and factory chimneys in the industrializing city were, for example, one of the themes in Sirak Skitnik's first exhibition in 1933 and

7 CINEMA IN BULGARIA BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS: INFLUENCES AND INTERRELATIONS WITH ART, MEDIA AND INSTITUTIONS, Bansko, May 9-11, 2024

8 On the reception of *Metropolis* in Bulgaria see: (Kardjilov 2020) and (Kardjilov, Kitova, Krasteva 2022: 161-162).

9 Rosen Spasov mentions that Fani Popova-Mutafova “defines *Metropolis* as a weak film” (Spasov 2023).

in his participation, in the same year, in the *Exhibition of the Seven*, a group exhibition in Belgrade¹⁰ (Fig. 8).

The vision of the industrial city in the film *Metropolis* with its gigantic, non-human scale, and with the harsh structures of the buildings casting long shadows in the harsh spaces devoid of nature must have been impressive (Fig. 7). This new vision – terrifying, oppressive, yet exciting the imagination with the unceasing rhythm of movement, with the speed of trains and aeroplanes – was only achievable by the “machine tools” of cinema. However, the artist’s enthusiasm for the visual achievements of *Metropolis* was expressed in his experiments with drawings. It is enough to compare specific compositions with frames from the film to become convinced of his elation (Fig. 4, 5). We can only speculate whether Sirak Skitnik liked the film as a whole and how he perceived its social criticism.

Sirak Skitnik’s visual interest in compositional diversity and the dimension of “time” in cinema was also expressed in his articles. The film *След пожара на Русия* (After the Fire in Rusia /1929/), in his words, “has a real film rhythm, variety, and is even amazing with the taste shown in the cropping of the pictures [...]” (Sirak Skitnik 1929d). He also commented in *Stage and Screen*:

“... The motion picture, made up of thousands of fragments given from different perspectives, gives such a compositional variety that it is ridiculous to even think about the live theatre using this specific pace of cinema. Today, our apparatus for following a cinematic performance has adapted to such an extent that we hardly realize the complexity of film editing.”

Film editing, the act of adjusting the images and fragments shot into a time rhythm, is a fundamental novelty in cinema as an art of the moving image: “We quickly follow, connect, and weld thousands of pictures, guided only by the inner line of the event. This dynamics in time and space, satisfying the contemporary, is the most typical in the mechanism of film production” (Sirak Skitnik 1934).

In the static image, the Futurists made attempts at mastering time by introducing the notion of “simultaneita” (simultaneity) of different moments in the composition; Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Marc

¹⁰ Today, two of those paintings are part of the collections of the National Gallery in Sofia.

Chagall, and the Surrealists – in their fantasy and dream images, also connect visual fragments in different modes. In terms of visual style, Fritz Lang was inspired by different art movements and architectural styles: Cubism, Constructivism, Functionalism, Futurism, Art Deco, and the experience of Bauhaus. This language of the avant-garde in art is also recognizable in Sirak Skitnik’s drawings as well as paintings from the short period of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

In some of the artworks with a recognizable response to the film *Metropolis*, Sirak Skitnik made an effort to combine various viewpoints: a close-up view – with a fragment of a human figure/face and a distant view – a vision of the modern city (Fig. 2, 3, 9). In others, he tried to dynamize the composition via highlighted diagonals and marked objects, creating a sense of movement. Compared to freeze-frames from the film, the drawings show an unmistakable closeness. This gives us reason to date them back to the screenings of *Metropolis* in Bulgaria, namely 1928, or, at the latest, the beginning of 1929.¹¹

Concluding notes:

Sirak Skitnik’s work as a critic and artist reveals his controversial attitude to cinema. It shows anxiety and fear of its technicality, its potential as an illusion machine, and the lack of human presence in contact with the audience, generally – of the ability of cinema to influence the masses. But there is also excitement about the new aesthetic qualities, about the possibilities for creating a fantasy world, for assimilating time and dynamizing the image, and last but not least – for opportunities for mass education.

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¹¹ Alexander Donev supposed so during the conference in Bansko.

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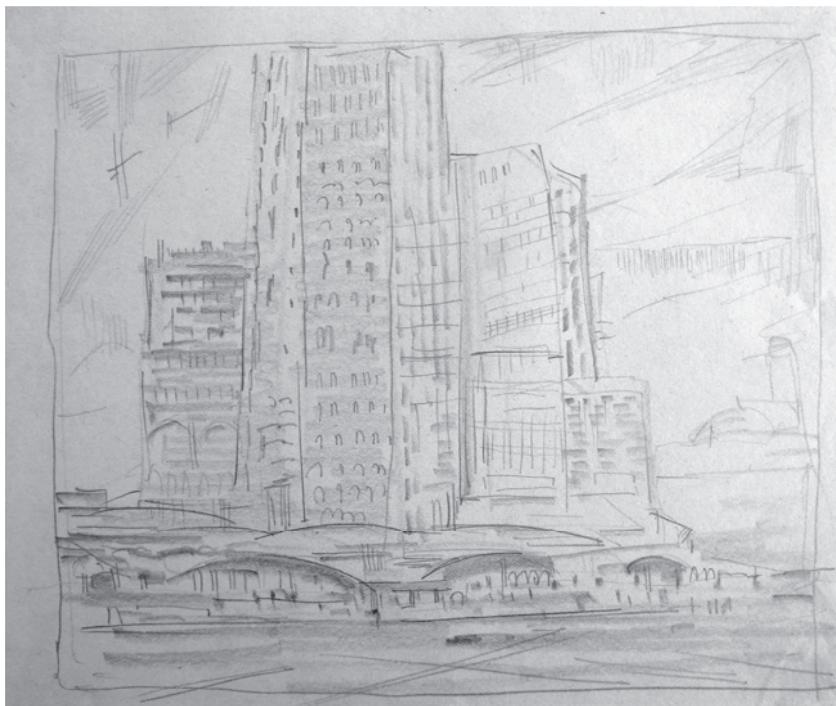


Fig. 1. Sirak Skitnik. *Untitled*, ca 1927–1928, pencil on paper.
CSA, f. 44k, op. 1, a.u. 12

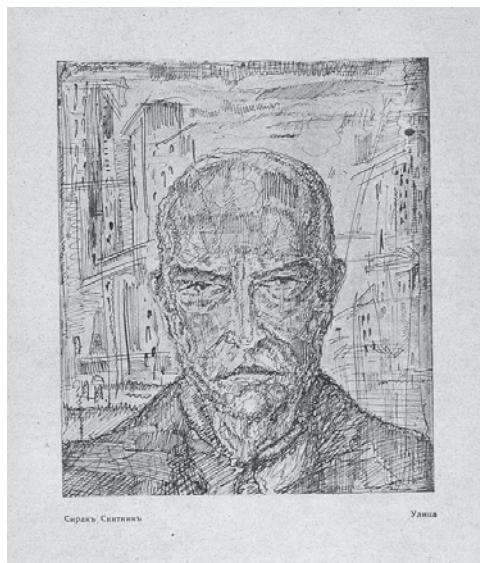


Fig. 2. Sirak Skitnik. *Street*, published in Hyperion magazine 1929, 5–6

Fig. 3. Sirak Skitnik. *Untitled*, ca 1927–1928, pencil on paper, 24,7 x 20 cm. CSA, f. 44k, op. 1, a.u. 9



Fig. 4. Sirak Skitnik. *Untitled*, ca 1927–1928, pencil on paper, 16 x 21 cm. CSA, f. 44k, op. 1, a.u. 12



Fig. 5. Freeze-frame from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, 1927

Fig. 6. Freeze-frame from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, 1927

Fig. 7. Freeze-frame from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, 1927



Fig. 8. Sirak Skitnik. *City*, early 1930s, oil on cardboard, 64 x 92 cm, National Gallery, Sofia



Fig. 9. Sirak Skitnik. *City*, late 1920s – early 1930s, oil on cardboard, 32 x 32 cm, National Gallery, Sofia



Сирак Скитник „Надежда на заре“
Сирак Скитник „Надежда на заре“

Fig. 10. Sirak Skitnik. *Untitled*, 1932 (?), pencil on paper. CSA, f. 44k, op. 1, a.u. 6

