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## Contemporary Ukrainian Visual Culture on the Way to the International Cultural Space

### ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the visual culture of Ukraine since independence. It pays special attention to the trends and phenomena of contemporary Ukrainian visual culture that have entered the context of world culture through recognition on international cultural platforms (competitions, festivals, biennials, etc.). The considerations concern the development of various trends in contemporary Ukrainian art, which use various artistic media: photography, installation, performance and film. In particular, Ukrainian conceptual photography was the most interestingly represented by several generations of photographers of the Kharkiv School, who combined radical bodily imagery and social criticism. The Ukrainian installation is represented by the works of artists of the REP (Revolutionary Experimental Space) group, which is focused on the unity of art and politics and considers artistic creation as a political act. An interesting sub-direction of the installation is the video installation, which delivers an original combination of contemporary Ukrainian artists with site-specific art and artistic means of reflecting on the traumas inflicted on Ukrainian society by the war. The article pays special attention to the development of contemporary Ukrainian cinema. The author demonstrates the connection between the work of contemporary Ukrainian filmmakers and the traditions of Ukrainian poetic cinema. In addition, other trends in Ukrainian cinema are identified: the experimental search for a new film language, the development of documentary cinema, on top of the convergence of fiction and non-fiction artistic languages in the work of contemporary Ukrainian filmmakers. The dominant issues of contemporary Ukrainian films selected for screening at leading European film festivals are identified: inclusiveness, reflection on Ukrainian history, war trauma, psychological rehabilitation of combatants, etc.

**KEYWORDS:** Ukrainian visual culture, contemporary art, conceptual photography, installation, documentary and fiction films

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## STRESZCZENIE

Współczesna ukraińska kultura wizualna w drodze do międzynarodowej przestrzeni kulturowej

Artykuł poświęcony jest ukraińskiej kulturze wizualnej od czasu uzyskania niepodległości. Tekst zwraca szczególną uwagę na trendy i zjawiska współczesnej ukraińskiej kultury wizualnej, które weszły w kontekst kultury światowej poprzez zdobycie uznania na międzynarodowych platformach kulturalnych (konkursy, festiwale, biennale itp.). Badany jest rozwój różnych trendów we współczesnej sztuce ukraińskiej, które wykorzystują rozmaite media artystyczne: fotografię, instalację, performance i kino. W szczególności ukraińska fotografia konceptualna była najciekawiej reprezentowana przez kilka pokoleń fotografów szkoły charkowskiej, którzy łączyli w swoich pracach radykalne obrazy ciała z krytyką społeczną. Ukraińską instalację reprezentują prace artystów z grupy REP (Rewolucyjna Przestrzeń Eksperymentalna), która koncentruje się na jedności sztuki i polityki oraz traktuje twórczość artystyczną jako akt polityczny. Interesującym podkierunkiem jest instalacja wideo, będąca oryginalnym połączeniem współczesnych ukraińskich artystów ze sztuką site-specific i odzwierciedlająca traumy zadane ukraińskiemu społeczeństwu przez wojnę. Artykuł zwraca szczególną uwagę na rozwój współczesnego kina ukraińskiego. Pokazuje związek między twórczością współczesnych ukraińskich filmowców a tradycjami ukraińskiego kina poetyckiego. Ponadto zidentyfikowano inne trendy w kinie ukraińskim: eksperymentalne poszukiwanie nowego języka filmowego, rozwój kina dokumentalnego oraz konwergencję artystycznych języków fikcji i non-fiction w twórczości współczesnych ukraińskich filmowców. Zidentyfikowano dominujące tematy współczesnych ukraińskich filmów wybranych do pokazów na wiodących europejskich festiwalach filmowych: inkluzywność, refleksja nad ukraińską historią, trauma wojenna, psychologiczna rehabilitacja bojowników itp.

**SŁOWA KLUCZE:** ukraińska kultura wizualna, sztuka współczesna, fotografia konceptualna, instalacja, kino dokumentalne i fabularne

Russian military aggression against Ukraine has been motivated not only by the desire to seize Ukrainian territories and destroy Ukrainian statehood, but also by the desire to obliterate the Ukrainian national identity and erase Ukrainian culture from the cultural map of the world. A tragic symbol of these criminal intentions was the destruction by Russian artillery of the museum of the prominent Ukrainian philosopher Hryhorii Skovoroda in the village of Skovorodynivka, Kharkiv region.

According to the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, since the beginning of the full-scale Russian aggression on February 24, 2022, 423 monuments

of Ukraine's cultural heritage have been destroyed or damaged. 128 of them are immovable cultural heritage sites that have the official status of monuments. 147 were religious buildings. Almost a third of them are historical or architectural monuments or landmark historical buildings. Another 46 sites are memorial monuments in honor of historical figures and events, 33 are museums, 59 are cultural centers, theaters and cinemas, and 40 are libraries. Almost a hundred objects have been completely or almost completely destroyed.

What is more, this figure is incomplete, as it is impossible to count the damage and destruction of cultural sites in the temporarily occupied territories. Many Ukrainian museums in Mariupol, Kherson, Berdiansk, Donetsk, and Luhansk are currently under occupation. The Russian occupiers, according to various reports, managed to loot and take away more than 2000 valuable exhibits to Russia.<sup>1</sup>

Russian chauvinism, which has long sought to suppress any manifestation of an independent and self-sufficient Ukrainian culture, denied it the right to exist and develop independently.

Putin's Ukrainophobia is a continuation of the policies of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union towards Ukrainian national identity and Ukrainian culture.

The cultural rights of the Ukrainian people, i.e., the right to their own language, literature and art, historical memory, etc., were flatly not recognized by the Russian Empire. Suffice it to recall the circulars and decrees of the Russian government banning the study of the Ukrainian language<sup>2</sup>, and the publication of Ukrainian books, which had been published since the 17th century. These include the infamous Valuev Circular (1863)<sup>3</sup>; the Ems Ukaz<sup>4</sup> (1876); and the decree of Nicholas II on the abolition of the Ukrainian press (1914). The policy of restricting the cultural rights of Ukrainians was also practiced in Soviet times, when all manifestations of authentic Ukrainian cultural creativity were effectively banned, and Ukrainian culture was to exist only in its Soviet version, as an artistic form of glorification of communist myths and ideologemes.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's independence opened a new stage in the development of Ukrainian culture. The Constitution of Ukraine (1996) enshrined provisions on the status of the Ukrainian language as the state language, the unity of the Ukrainian cultural space, the

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1 <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/mariupol-museums-russian-looted-artworks-city-council-1234627187/>

2 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russification\\_of\\_Ukraine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russification_of_Ukraine)

3 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valuev\\_Circular](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valuev_Circular)

4 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ems\\_Ukaz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ems_Ukaz)

consolidation and development of the Ukrainian nation, its historical consciousness, traditions and culture, thus emphasizing that the state is interested in the development of national culture. It is the national culture that, in its free development, is able to consolidate society on a democratic value basis, revive national traditions and identity, and contribute to the country's civilizational progress.

Fundamentally new opportunities for protecting and defending the cultural rights of the people have opened up. First of all, this involved the assimilation and introduction into the context of cultural life of the previously suppressed vast national and cultural heritage, the works of such creators as M. Kostomarov, P. Kulish, M. Maksymovych, M. Drahomanov, I.M. Hrushevskiy, S. Yefremov, V. Vynnychenko, writers and artists of the “executed” Ukrainian revival of the 20th century, including V. Pidmohylnyi,<sup>5</sup> V. Polishchuk,<sup>6</sup> M. Voronyi,<sup>7</sup> M. Kulish,<sup>8</sup> M. Khvylovyi,<sup>9</sup> M. Semenko,<sup>10</sup> Ye. Pluzhnyk,<sup>11</sup> M. Zerov,<sup>12</sup> L. Kurbas<sup>13</sup> and many others who were executed, died in concentration camps, or committed suicide. In this context, we should mention Ukrainian cultural dissent and the best cultural achievements of the Ukrainian diaspora.

The era of Ukrainian state independence, despite all its contradictions, opened up a wide scope for the creation of modern Ukrainian culture in literature, theater, cinema, painting, and music. During the years of independence, a plethora of talented young artists emerged in all fields of art and cultural life, creating a huge original cultural layer that combines deep national and ethnic traditions with a new artistic language, a new vision of the world, and new spiritual energy. After the Revolution of Dignity (2013–2014), Ukrainian artistic culture received a powerful impetus for further creative development.

However, it is important that this great cultural capital does not remain only for domestic consumption, but is widely manifested in the global cultural space. Unfortunately, Ukrainian literature, philosophy, and art, both classical and modern, remain little known or completely unknown outside of Ukraine. Therefore, one of the ways to defend the rights of the

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5 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valerian\\_Pidmohylny](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valerian_Pidmohylny)

6 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valerian\\_Polishchuk](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valerian_Polishchuk)

7 [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Вороний\\_Марко\\_Миколайович](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Вороний_Марко_Миколайович)

8 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mykola\\_Kulish](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mykola_Kulish)

9 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mykola\\_Khvylovy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mykola_Khvylovy)

10 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mykhail\\_Semenko](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mykhail_Semenko)

11 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yevhen\\_Pluzhnyk](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yevhen_Pluzhnyk)

12 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mykola\\_Zerov](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mykola_Zerov)

13 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les\\_Kurbas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Kurbas)

Ukrainian people today is to actively promote its latest cultural achievements and include them in the broader process of international cultural interaction. The importance, relevance and prospects of such work can be demonstrated by the example of Ukrainian visual culture.

One of the most interesting trends in contemporary world culture is the visual or iconic trend (Mitchell, 2002; Boehm, 2009; Moxey, 2013), which emphasized the special significance of visual images and visual communications in culture. In this context, the study of Ukrainian visual culture (photography, installation, painting, media art, and cinema) of the independence era is extremely relevant.

The Ukrainian visual culture of the post-independence period developed in many directions that defined the uniqueness of this cultural period and ensured its integration into the context of the leading trends of world culture. An important trend in Ukrainian culture since independence, especially in the 1990s, was the overcoming and rethinking of the Soviet cultural heritage, as for a long time Ukrainian culture was limited by the strict control of the totalitarian state. The peculiarity of the Ukrainian visual culture of the late Soviet period was that, despite the strict ideological control, it learned to overcome censorship restrictions due to the ambiguity of visual images. This is the paradox of visual culture: it can be inscribed in the dominant discourses of power, but at the same time it can carry an excess that goes beyond ideology and, indeed, overcomes it.

The work of the Kharkiv School of Photography, a unique phenomenon in the history of not only Ukrainian but also global visual culture, is indicative in this context (Bernar-Kovalchuk, 2020). Back in the early 1970s, a group of photographers who lived and worked in Kharkiv united under the leadership of Borys Mykhailov into the artistic group named Chas. The photographers of this group created a unique visual style that had a significant impact on post-Soviet visual art. In particular, in Borys Mykhailov's photographic projects we can identify features that will later be inherent in other representatives of Ukrainian art: social (sometimes socially critical) issues, special attention to non-standard manifestations of bodily experience, and irony characteristic of conceptual art, which can be seen in Mykhailov's photographic project, *Red Series* (1968–1975). In the 1990s, with Ukraine's independence and the disappearance of censorship, all these features were more radically manifested in the works of the Rapid Response Group, an artistic association in which Mykhailov was joined by younger photographers Serhii Bratkov and Serhii Solonskyi. In 1997–1998, Mykhailov created his most famous series, *Medical History*, in which he captured photographic portraits of Kharkiv's homeless. Mykhailov compared himself to the artists of the late nineteenth century who turned to depicting the lives of the disadvantaged. But in addition to

the obvious social message, Mykhailov, as a conceptual artist, also turns to performativity in this series: Homeless people show the photographer their bodies affected by diseases and recreate scenes from their daily lives. The series has become known among Western European art critics as Mykhailov, like other photographers of the Kharkiv school, created art focused not only on the representation of the visual image, but also on the artistic articulation of a space for reflection (Beshty, 2005; Christen, 2007). In 2000, Mykhailov's work was awarded the German Hasselblad Foundation International Award in Photography, one of the world's highest recognitions in the field of artistic photography. The photographic projects by Mykhailov and other photographers of the Kharkiv School overcome the fixation on photography as a specific and unique medium that was inherent in modernist photography and thus create postmedia art (Krauss, 2000), combining image, text, context and performance.

This combination can be fully seen in the work of Kharkiv-based photographer Serhii Solonskyi, who continues the traditions of Ukrainian baroque culture in completely unique visual forms. Solonskyi's photographic series "Bestiary" (1991–1998) combines Baroque pretentiousness with the search for modernist art of the first half of the twentieth century. Using the technique of collage, Solonskyi created deformed bodily images through analog photography, challenging the normative notions of corporeality presented in Soviet propaganda photography and in the new capitalist visual pop culture that came to Ukraine in the 1990s. Photography as a challenge to the power of the bodily norm is one of the themes of the work of another Kharkiv photographer, Roman Piatkovka. In a series of radical photographic projects, Piatkovka addressed the visual representation of corporeality in Soviet and Ukrainian mass culture. In the "Soviet Photo" series (2013) Piatkovka combines images from the Soviet magazine "Radiatskie foto" with his own provocative photos, creating an effect of visual complexity. In this way, Piatkovka deconstructs the propagandistic content of Soviet photography, presenting a transgressive bodily experience that seems to be hidden behind it. In 2013, Piatkovka's works from this series won the Conceptual Art nomination at the renowned Sony World Photography Award in London. Today, the traditions of the Kharkiv School of Photography are continued by the younger generation of Kharkiv photographers, including Serhii Lebedynskyi, Vladyslav Krasnoshchok (Shilo group), Ihor Chekachkov, and others. The works of the photographers of the Kharkiv School put Ukrainian photography in the context of the world's leading conceptual art, articulating important features of the contemporary Ukrainian visual culture: self-reflection, social criticism, deconstruction of ideological visual narratives, and interest in the representation of the excluded and disadvantaged.

Since the end of the twentieth century, Ukrainian art has been adopting contemporary art techniques that go beyond the modernist medium-specific (Greenberg, 1971) understanding of art and combine different media in artistic practice. In particular, installation art is developing in an interesting way in the Ukrainian context. The generation of artists who entered Ukrainian art in the 2000s used installation not only to create the effect of immersion, as in total installation projects, but also to analyze Ukrainian society and its transformations. Art and politics are closely linked in the work of the artists of the REP (Revolutionary Experimental Space) group, which emerged in 2004 in Kyiv during the Orange Revolution and brought together artists Zhanna Kadyrova, Mykyta Kadan, Ksenia Hnylytska, and others. Mykyta Kadan is one of the most interesting artists in this group. In Kadan's individual projects, the installation becomes a tool for reflecting on the presence of layers of past culture in contemporary Ukrainian culture. Thus, in the exhibition "The Ruins Project," presented by the artist in 2019 in Vienna at the MUMOK Museum, the artist, using installations, objects and drawings, tried to grasp the Ukrainian avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s in the context of current Ukrainian public discussions about the politics of memory. Inspired by the works of prominent Ukrainian artists of the historical avant-garde, Vasyl Yermilov and Ivan Kavaleridze, Kadan raised the question of understanding the artistic heritage of the Soviet era in his project. By emphasizing the Ukrainian line in the avant-garde, the artist demonstrates the dissolution of national markers in Soviet culture and the importance of their new discovery and focus on the present. Kadan's work is characterized by the involvement of artistic projects in an intellectual context, and his works simultaneously become research projects (Lozhkina, 2019). Kadan's exhibition "(Un)marked", presented in 2017 at the Lviv Center for Urban History, is an attempt to artistically comprehend historical photographic documents of crimes committed on the territory of Ukraine by totalitarian regimes. In addition to the artistic component, the exhibition "(Un)marked" necessarily involved interaction with research projects by Ukrainian and European historians. In "(Un)marked" the artist refers to the images of the tragic history of Ukraine in the twentieth century in order to grasp the problem of representation of historical events and documentation of crimes in an unbiased way.

The line that Kadan presents in contemporary Ukrainian art brings art into the field of current scientific and social discussions. Art here, on the one hand, as the founder of conceptualism Joseph Kosuth once manifested, becomes a commentary on art (Kosuth, 1991), and on the other hand, which is especially important for Kadan, it becomes a commentary on current scientific and socio-political discussions. In the project "The Possessed

Can Testify in Court,” presented at the MNCA Museum in Antwerp, Belgium (2018), Kadan uses objects representing the Soviet period in the history of such Ukrainian regions as Crimea and Donbas. Taken out of the Soviet ideological narratives, the objects in Kadan’s installation begin to function like what Ernesto Laclau calls a single element that can undermine hegemony in his social theory (Laclau, 2007), in this case the hegemony of the Soviet propaganda model. In his installation, Kadan deconstructed Soviet mythologies and proposed to create a different view of the history of Soviet Ukraine outside the hegemony of Soviet ideological narratives through the parrhesia of things.

Media installations, based on the use of modern video technologies, are developing in an original way in Ukrainian art. Lviv-based artist Serhii Petliuk uses the language of the media installation to analyze social fantasies, visualizing the collective imagination in paradoxical images. In his work “Dreams of Europe,” presented in 2009 at the ON Gallery in Poznań, Petliuk addresses the deconstruction of stereotypical perceptions of Ukrainians about Western Europe and, accordingly, of Western Europeans about Ukraine. In Petliuk’s work, Western Europe appears as what Lacan calls an “elusive object” (*objet petit a*), which brings absolute pleasure closer and at the same time distances it. The projections of various images of dreamers demonstrate the illusory nature of any social stereotypes, their deceptiveness and fragility when faced with traumatic social reality.

In the site-specific project “Wreckage” (2021) Petliuk seems to decompose urban space into its basic elements: water, metal and stone. The project uses fragments of the Soviet sculpture “Metallurgists,” which represents the Soviet layers of Ukrainian urban culture. “Wreckage” constitutes an “archaeological” exploration of Ukrainian urban space. In this project, Petliuk proposed to see the integrity of contemporary urban space as a heterotopia that combines different historical periods of Ukrainian culture: both those that are a thing of the past and those that are just being born in the digital age. For Petliuk, media installations become an important tool for reflecting on Ukrainian modernity. In his work “The Limit of Understanding,” presented at the City Arsenal in Kyiv (2015), the artist addressed the topic of war. The artist broadcast video projections of naked people on military uniforms lying on the gallery floor, while simultaneously playing audio recordings of conversations. The media installation seems to bring back the images and voices of the fallen soldiers who are on the verge of life and death, while the contrast of light and darkness conveys a ghostly combination of presence and absence, the visible and invisible. Using modern audiovisual technologies in his projects, Petliuk originally combines the study of local Ukrainian experience with the



creation of universal philosophical statements about man, society, and cultural memory.

The “Fountain of Exhaustion. High Water,” an installation by Kharkiv-based artist Pavlo Makov, is a profound artistic and philosophical statement about Ukraine. The artist represented Ukrainian art at the 2022 Venice Biennale. Makov is a well-known Ukrainian creator, a member of the Royal Society of Painters and Graphic Artists of Great Britain since 1994. The installation “Fountain of Exhaustion. High Water” consists of twelve rows of watering cans in the shape of a triangle, through which water circulates. The water is poured from the watering cans into the streams so that less water enters the lower watering cans. A fountain is a traditional symbol of vitality in European art, and a fountain losing water signifies the proximity of death and destruction. At the time of the presentation of the work at the Venice Biennale, the artist’s hometown of Kharkiv was being bombed by the Russian military. Makov’s installation is a powerful metaphor for the destructive power of war, which destroys lives and exhausts society. In addition to creating deep symbolic meanings, Makov’s work is also focused on “producing a culture of presence.” Drawing on the distinction between the culture of meaning and the culture of presence proposed by the German-American cultural critic Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (Gumbrecht, 2004), Makov creates art that is not only open to deep interpretations (or the culture of meaning according to Gumbrecht), but, above all, appeals to the materiality of presence in the world. In Makov’s work, this attitude is manifested through the involvement of visual and tactile experience. It is this focus on combining the tactile and the visual that leads Makov to use the ancient technique of etching. To create etchings, Makov uses his own technique of “multiple intaglio,” in which each etching is cut on many copper boards and the image is created by overlaying them, which ensures the uniqueness and unrepeatability of each artistic project. The etching created in this technique is combined with the visual complexity of the depicted image: Makov’s imagery includes gardens, labyrinths, and maps of utopian cities (Makov, 2005). In the era of dominance of digital communications and simulacra of social experience, Makov returns European art to its origins – basic techniques and images, and the experience of perceiving art – to the bodily dimension. Makov’s art is born from the local Ukrainian context, but at the same time it is a universal statement that appeals to the archetypes of world culture.

Contemporary Ukrainian artists often turn to traditional art forms in order to convey meanings relevant to Ukrainian society. This creates a conceptual tension: traditional art form versus radical contemporary imagery. This parallax can be fully seen in the work of one of the most famous Ukrainian artists, Vlada Ralko, who was awarded the UN

Women in Arts Prize in 2019. In the graphic series “Kyiv Diary” (2013–2016) Ralko creates expressionistic drawings that convey traumatic female experiences (Ralko, 2014). Ralko’s works from this series are a powerful example of contemporary Ukrainian art that articulates the female experience of bodily trauma in artistic images. Appealing to the viewer’s unconscious perception, Ralko’s drawings evoke a sense of anxiety. The layering of images depicting suffering and pain directly refers to the viewer’s bodily experience and acts as an affective prick or *punctum* (according to Roland Barthes) that actualizes bodily memory (Barthes, 2010, p. 43). Ralko’s art puts the viewer in an uncomfortable position, forcing them to experience the pain of women suffering from violence and humiliation. The artist calls her art political, in the context of the distinction between “art about politics and politically made art.” Working with radical transgressive corporeal imagery, the artist deconstructs the ideal stereotyped representations of the female body in contemporary popular culture: in entertainment cinema, television and social media. The well-known feminist slogan “The personal is political” is consistently embodied in Ralko’s works, which challenge the normative female imagery canonized by pop culture and destroy the power of media images of the female body.

Ukrainian visual art refers to both traditional and contemporary artistic techniques used by artists to articulate their own socially critical position, deconstruct ideological narratives and stereotypes, and comprehend the impact of tragic historical events on the culture and society of contemporary Ukraine.

Particular attention should be paid to the development of Ukrainian independent film in the era of independence, because the cinema, as philosopher Gilles Deleuze has well noted, not only represents national culture, but also invents it (Deleuze, 2001, p. 217). Among the various trends in Ukrainian film culture in recent decades, two main ones are worth noting: The continuation of the traditions of Ukrainian cinema that developed in previous periods and the search for its own original film language.

One of the most interesting phenomena in Ukrainian and world film culture in the second half of the twentieth century was Ukrainian poetic cinema, which emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s. The term “poetic cinema” was introduced into film studies by the Polish film critic Janusz Gazda’s article “The Ukrainian School of Poetic Cinema” (Gazda, 2001), which appeared in the *Ekran* magazine in 1970. The visual language of Ukrainian cinema was formed in the films directed by Serhii Paradzhanov, Leonid Osyk, and Yurii Illienko. The works of these filmmakers combine a vivid depiction of Ukrainian village life with the use of the complex visual language of modernist art, which brought such films as Paradzhanov’s *Tini zabutykh predkiv* or Illienko’s *Krynytsia do sprahlykhh* closer to

visual poetry. Relying on the visual was the only way to overcome censorship restrictions: Through visual images, poetic film directors managed to convey much more complex meanings in the cinematic language than those laid down in the script, which was officially approved and censored by the state film institutions of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. After filming was completed, the films by Ukrainian directors were sometimes banned from distribution and presentation at world film festivals. For example, Ilienکو's films *Krylytsia dla sprahlykh* and *Vechir na Ivana Kupala* were banned. In 1972, repressions against Ukrainian cultural figures intensified, and the powerful rise of Ukrainian cinema was artificially interrupted by the Soviet authorities.

The Italian film director and film theorist Pier Paolo Pasolini identified the predominance of visual imagery over narrative as one of the main features of poetic cinema (Pasolini, 1976). The visual image in Ukrainian poetic cinema is indeed more important than the narrative, which determined the influence of the films of Paradzhanov, Ilienکو, and Osyk on subsequent generations of Ukrainian filmmakers. With the revival of Ukrainian film culture after Ukraine gained its independence, Ukrainian filmmakers have also been returning to poetic cinema as a powerful tradition of Ukrainian independent cinema.

The younger generation of Ukrainian filmmakers combines the achievements of poetic cinema with modern film language and current issues. A striking example of this combination is Marysia Nikitiuk's film *Koly padaiut dereva*, which premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2018. The film is set in a Ukrainian village, a favorite film space for Ukrainian poetic film directors. Nikitiuk's film is also inspired by the aesthetics of Ukrainian poetic cinema on a conceptual level: rich visual imagery is more important than a rather conventional plot, the story of five-year-old Vitka and her sister Larysa, who is in love with the bandit Shram. To convey the authenticity of life in a modern Ukrainian village, the director, as Paradzhanov and Osyk once did in their films, turns not to the Ukrainian literary language but to a dialect spoken by the characters. In her film, Nikitiuk recreates the amazing mythopoetic space of the Ukrainian peasantry. The film shows the lives of villagers through immersion in the world of magical realism, where the line between the real and the fantastical is blurred.

Ukrainian filmmakers often turn to the traditions of Ukrainian poetic cinema in search of a visual language through which to convey a return to the lost or forgotten origins of culture or identity. The visual language of poetic cinema helps to tell the story of characters who have lost their identity and can (re)invent themselves in the mythical spaces of the Ukrainian province. This is how director Roman Bondarchuk works with the

language of poetic cinema in his film *Vulkan*, which premiered at the 2018 Karlovy Vary International Film Festival. The journey of the protagonist Lucas, who accompanied the OSCE mission as an interpreter and got lost in the vastness of the Kherson region, turns into a philosophical parable about the search for self.

The Kherson region and its inhabitants are depicted in the style of Ukrainian poetic cinema. Bondarchuk, who was born and raised in the city of Kherson, builds a cinematic universe of magical realism. At first, this world is alien to the protagonist, but it gradually opens up with various unexpected facets and fascinates him. With such films, contemporary Ukrainian culture seems to be manifesting the search for its own language through the return and rethinking of what has been lost. In literature, the main novel of Ukrainian literature of the 2010s, *Voroshilovgrad* by Serhii Zhadan, is devoted to the same topic. The language of poetic cinema helps to recreate a fantasy journey into the depths of the self, which is what happens in the finale of Roman Bondarchuk's *Vulkan*, which blurs the line between a supposedly realistic narrative and a parable in the best traditions of Paradzhanov's and Ilyenko's films of the 1960s and 1970s.

While Bondarchuk's and Nikitiuk's films try to find a balance between the rich visual imagery of poetic cinema and narrative, Oles Sanin's 2003 film *Mamai* completely dissolves the narrative into poetic imagery. Sanin's film is based on the interweaving of Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar folklore motifs. *Mamai* demonstrates the approach of cinema to visual poetry with incredible expressive power, in which the image triumphs over discourse and ancient myth over rationing.

The rejection of traditional narrative schemes is characteristic of Ihor Podolchak's films. Podolchak's filmmaking is an interesting case, because he came to it from the field of contemporary art. Ihor Podolchak is a Lviv-based artist, a representative of the so-called New Wave of Ukrainian art, and one of the founders of the Masoch Foundation. Podolchak's debut film *Meniny* (*Las Meninas*) (2008) was presented in the Tiger Awards competition program of the Rotterdam International Film Festival. Podolchak brings the vision of a conceptual artist to Ukrainian film culture and creates his debut film *Meniny* as a video art project. Inspired by the visual parallaxes of the Spanish artist Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and continuing the traditions of Ukrainian baroque culture, Podolchak immerses the viewer in a film maze. Like Velázquez's painting, Podolchak's film gives a special role to mirrors, which mark the distinction between the conventionally "real" events of the film and their illusory mirror images. The philosopher Gilles Deleuze defines the ontological status of mirror images in cinema as follows: "a real object is reproduced in a mirror image, as if in a virtual object that simultaneously reproduces the real one: the two

objects are reconciled” (Deleuze, 2001, p. 68). On a symbolic level, mirrors in Podolchak’s film blur the line between the real and the imaginary, the present and the past. *Meniny* is a meditation film that visualizes the workings of memory, which is beyond time coordinates. Podolchak’s films communicate a powerful philosophical statement about the deceptive nature of human perception and the broken connection between space and time.

In his experimental film projects, Podolchak rejects the traditional narrative schemes that directors usually use to build a film narrative and structures visual images through repetition and series. This is how Podolchak’s film *Delirium* is structured, which reproduces the unconscious mechanism of repeating a traumatic event described by psychoanalysis. Instead of constructing a plot, Podolchak demonstrates a series of scenes and images that repeat and intertwine with each other. This decision demonstrates the work of the psyche’s defense mechanisms at the conceptual level, and at the artistic level, it brings cinema closer to video art with its focus on the repeated reproduction of visual images. Like prominent artists such as Matthew Barney and Marina Abramovic, who sometimes turned to the language of cinema, Ihor Podolchak balances on the edge of contemporary experimental media art and cinema. The filmmaker has brilliantly embodied the aesthetics of postmodern artistic experiments in Ukrainian material, deconstructing the traditional components of narrative cinema. In his films, Podolchak brings the hero of postmodern culture to the forefront: a person who has lost the integrity of their own self and is, as Deleuze and Guattari aptly define it, open to the formation and search for new identities (Deleuze & Guattari, 2021).

Other trends have been gaining relevance in Ukrainian fiction cinema since the late 2000s and throughout the 2010s: focusing on documentary and depicting significant social issues. In fact, the crisis of Ukrainian postmodern culture was caused by its detachment from social issues. The use of such postmodern artistic techniques as irony and pastiche negated the social mission of art. Postmodern art created an artistic lens that excluded the analysis and diagnosis of the complex and contradictory social reality of Ukraine in the early twenty-first century. The conceptual basis of postmodernism is the assertion of the simulated nature of the world around us, which can always be accessed only through intermediaries: sign systems, discourses and texts. The film culture of the early twenty-first century opposes postmodern theories of the simulacrum with a new interest in reality, an intention that philosopher Alain Badiou called the passion of the real (Badiou, 2007). In Ukrainian cinema, this is manifested in the use of documentary techniques in fiction film projects. One of the most interesting examples of such a convergence between fiction and documentary is the film *Plemia (The Tribe)* by Myroslav Slaboshpytskiy, the feature debut of the Ukrainian director.

*The Tribe* received the 2014 Cannes Film Festival Critics' Week Grand Prix and more than 50 awards at world film festivals. The film is dedicated to an important social issue – the lives of teenagers with hearing impairments. The film focuses on the story of Serhii, who arrives at a boarding school for children with hearing impairments and ends up in the criminal organization called the Tribe. The film immerses the audience in the complex world of Ukrainian teenagers with hearing impairments who live in such boarding schools and face cruelty and violence. To create a documentary effect, Slaboshpytskyi invited teenagers who are actually hearing impaired as actors. In the film, the characters communicate in sign language, and the story is told through the language of visual images. Through this decision, Slaboshpytskyi seems to return the audience to the era of early cinema of silent movies, which eliminates the need to translate the film into foreign languages. This is one of the reasons for the film's international festival success – it is understandable for people of any culture.

The visual aspect of *The Tribe* is close to documentary cinema. The film was created using long shots shot with a moving camera, which enhances the effect of immersion. The cinema of the twenty-first century rediscovers the provisions of André Bazin's film theory, which proceeded from the fact that the most important feature of the cinematic language is its photographic nature and ability to capture reality (Dudley, 2010). Accordingly, the use of complex editing solutions and complicated narrative models by filmmakers distances cinema from its natural ability to capture reality in a special way and reproduce it in film images. Long shots, minimized editing splices, a moving hand-held camera and the use of non-professional actors are the techniques that allow the film to become a language of reality. Slaboshpytskyi's directorial method approaches these artistic guidelines by combining fiction and documentary cinema. In contrast to the postmodern aesthetics, *The Tribe* offers a look at the world from the point of view of people with disabilities that are invisible to many members of society. For the duration of the film, the viewer can live a fragment of the life of a teenager with hearing impairments from a specialized boarding school and reconsider their attitude towards such people. With his film, Slaboshpytskyi literally makes people with disabilities visible to both Ukrainian society and the international community.

The combination of fiction and non-fiction is also inherent in the films created by the director Valentyn Vasianovych, who was the cinematographer of Slaboshpytskyi's *The Tribe*. After going to documentary school, Vasianovych began to use the commonly used technique of observation in his first fiction films, such as *Riven chornoho (Black Level)* (2017). But the real recognition for Vasianovych would come with *Atlantida (Atlantis)*,

which won the 2019 Venice Film Festival's Horizons program. The film is set in the near future of Ukraine in the de-occupied Donbas after the victory in the war with Russia. Most of the filming took place in the city of Mariupol. In *Atlantis*, Donbas is depicted as a devastated land where life is gradually coming to a standstill. The film centers on the story of Serhii, a former combatant who is trying to overcome the trauma of war and return to normal life.

In *Atlantis*, Vasyanovych continues to search for a cinematic language that would be closer to reality, and that is why he invited Andrii Rymaruk, a participant in the hostilities in Donbas, to play the lead role, while Liudmyla Bileka, a member of the Black Tulip humanitarian mission that searches for the bodies of those killed in the Russian-Ukrainian war, plays the role of the paramedic Katia. The use of non-professional actors who actually play characters close to their life experience creates a powerful effect of reality. After all, this is not an ordinary feature film in which actors recreate fictional characters. The people who went through war actually recreate their lives and the traumas of the war that they experienced. Vasyanovych's cinematography is as close to a documentary as possible – extremely long shots seem to show complete fragments of the characters' lives, creating a powerful effect of the reality of what is depicted in the film. This is how the aesthetics of contemporary Ukrainian cinema works: Instead of a postmodern play, it is a documentary production of presence (according to the terminology of H.U. Gumbrecht). Such art, as the photographer Boris Mikhailov aptly put it, seems to tear the skin off reality and allows us to see its most complex and uncomfortable forms. The significance of Vasyanovych's film is not only a convincing immersion into the world of people experiencing war trauma, but also a search for answers to the question how to overcome trauma, and is there a way out of it. In this sense, the film is a consistent guide to overcoming trauma: from the suicide of the protagonist's friend, a war veteran who could not cope with his trauma, to the final scenes of love between Serhii and Katia, the audience follows the characters through the difficult path of a person with post-traumatic stress disorder who finds a way out. Vasyanovych contrasts the trauma of war with the only alternative: love, which, according to Dante Alighieri's classic definition, "moves the Sun and Other Stars." By taking the characters through hell, Vasyanovych shows that there is always a way out of a catastrophe, but it requires openness to the other. Thus, in Vasyanovych's aesthetics, cinema becomes a powerful therapeutic tool that can help people whose lives have been burned by the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The war, or rather the traumatic echo of the war, defines the events of Nariman Aliev's outstanding example of contemporary Ukrainian

road-movie, *Dodomu (Homeward)*. The film premiered in the Un Certain Regard competition program at the Cannes Film Festival in 2019. The film focuses on the tragic history of the Crimean Tatar people, which is told through the story of a Crimean Tatar family. The film follows the journey of Mustafa, a Crimean Tatar who, together with his younger son Alim, transports the body of his eldest son, who died in the Russian-Ukrainian war, from Kyiv to Crimea. The central conflict is based on the complex relationship between different generations: father and son find it very difficult to understand each other. Throughout his journey, experiencing various difficult situations, Alim gradually discovers the meaning of his cultural roots. The journey to Crimea in Aliiev's film is both a story of exiles returning to their homeland and a story of searching for the lost foundations of cultural identity. Aliiev uses the road-movie form to create a powerful metaphor for the wanderings of the Crimean Tatar people, who are forced to relive the suffering of the Russian occupation of Crimea.

Reflexivity is one of the most characteristic features of new Ukrainian cinema. The film language helps Ukrainian filmmakers not only to comprehend the present artistically, but also to turn to the past and reflect on it. This is the focus of Oleh Sentsov's film *Nosorih (Rhino)*, a film that addresses the Ukrainian criminal world of the 1990s. Sentsov is a Crimean who was arrested by the Russian occupation authorities for protesting against the Russian takeover of Crimea and spent five years in a Russian prison. *Rhino* is the first film Sentsov has made since his release from prison. The world premiere of the film took place in 2021 at the Venice Film Festival. Turning to the 1990s, a crucial period in Ukrainian history in which the out of modern Ukraine were formed, allows Sentsov to see the origins of many problems that would haunt Ukrainian society in the twenty-first century – crime, corruption, ineffective law enforcement, etc. Sentsov created a feature film at a high artistic level, but at the same time addresses the Ukrainian mass audience. In *Rhino*, the director attempted to revise the crime thriller genre as it was imposed on post-Soviet countries by Russian mass culture. Sentsov created a warning film and tried to offer a different path for Ukrainian society, which should be different from many post-Soviet countries that have failed to rethink and overcome the experience of the traumatic 1990s.

The representation of Ukrainian cinema in the world is often assessed through the presence of feature films at world film festivals, but this is not always true, as Ukrainian documentaries have been actively developing in recent decades. One of the most successful examples is the film *Zemlia blakytyna, niby apelsyn (The Earth Is Blue as an Orange)* by Iryna Tsilyk, which won the award for best director at the Sundance Film Festival, the main American independent film festival. The title of the film refers to



a poem by Paul Éluard, which embodies the principle of surrealist art – the combination of the incompatible. This surreal title conveys the insanity of the life of the film’s protagonists, 36-year-old Anna and her children, in the frontline town of Krasnohorivka, Donetsk region. Russian shelling, air raids, and explosions are the daily routine of the family. Anna’s daughter enters a Kyiv university to study film directing and makes a film about life in Krasnohorivka as an academic assignment. The process of making a movie involves the whole family: They write the script together, watch movie classics, and shoot the film. At the end of the story, the residents of Krasnohorivka gather in a small hall where the young director shows her work about the life of the town during the war. We do not see the movie itself, but it does not matter: we realize that it is an unprofessional student work by a novice director. But we can see the faces of the residents of Krasnohorivka, people who suffer daily from the actions of the Russian military: they cry and laugh when they see themselves and their lives on the screen. Tsilyk demonstrates the powerful therapeutic power of cinema. Film can be not only entertainment, as in mass culture, not only an intellectual attraction, as in postmodernism, but also a means of social therapy. Cinema, even in its most naïve forms, helps to reflect on the experience, to look at it from the outside, and to learn to contrast trauma with the healing power of art.

The Ukrainian visual culture of the post-independence era has gone through a difficult path of overcoming and critically rethinking the Soviet ideological narratives that had long influenced its development. Integration into the contemporary European cultural space has brought new artistic practices to Ukrainian visual culture: conceptual photography, installation, political performance, video art, and experimental film-making. However, the appeal to the newest artistic forms in Ukrainian art of the last thirty years has always been closely connected with the powerful traditions of Ukrainian culture: the heritage of the Baroque era, the achievements of Ukrainian romanticism and critical realism, the achievements of the Ukrainian avantgarde, and the modernist search for visual arts in the 1960s. Ukrainian visual culture of the twenty-first century is open to the search for new artistic forms: by approaching the documentary, mixing different artistic media, combining artistic expression with scientific research. This search was embodied in the achievements of Ukrainian photography, conceptual art, video art, and cinema, recognized by the world’s leading artistic platforms. Contemporary Ukrainian visual culture is an integral part of the European cultural space and has a powerful potential not only to reproduce the advanced artistic searches of our time, but also to open its own original ways for cultural development.

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