The Cultural Front in the War for Independence: Ukrainian Identity in Contemporary Ukrainian Cinema

Lora Tseytlin
Columbia University, Barnard College

Ukrainian national identity has historically been subject to Russian imperial aggression not only through military conquest, but also by means of fierce cultural warfare. In the 337 years during which Ukraine was subject to foreign rule, Russia enforced sixty separate prohibitions of the Ukrainian language in pursuit of forced Russification.[1] Under the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, strict censorship of and degrading attitudes toward Ukrainian culture limited national writers, filmmakers, and artists to depictions of Ukrainian national culture as the realm of underdeveloped village life and folklore.[2] Ukrainian artistic expression was deemed suitable only for light color or humor, unworthy of being considered high art. This systematic repression of dignified Ukrainian culture and forced imposition of a Russian view of Ukraine effectively functioned to represent Ukraine's national character as undeserving of self-determination.[3] Hence, for those in the Russian imperial center––as well as the Soviet peripheries and the rest of the world––Ukrainians were represented as merely more rural and pitiful Russians: the so-called "Little Russians."[4] For much of its history, dominant cultural narratives have depicted the Ukrainian nation as nothing more than a backwards and ill-defined province rightfully belonging first to the Russian Empire, then subsequently to the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation under Vladimir Putin.

Film especially has long been weaponized by the Soviet Union to enforce its imperialistic cultural agenda, playing a par-

1. Staff, Euromaidan Press. "A Short Guide to the Linguicide of the Ukrainian Language: Infographics." Euromaidan Press, 21 Sept. 2023, euromaidanpress.com/2017/02/22/a-short-guide-to-the-linguicide-of-the-ukrainian-language-infographics/
2. Joshua First, Ukrainian Cinema:Belonging and Identity during the Soviet Thaw (I.B. Taurus and Co. Ltd, 2022), 20-25.
3. Myroslav Shkandrij, Modernists, Marxists, and the Nation:Ukrainian Literary Discussion of the 1920s, (Edmonton 1992), 173.
4. Shevchuk, Yuri. "Filmmaking as Cultural Aggression," in Images. The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts and Audiovisual Communication. Vol. XXXIV, no. 43, 2023.

ticularly critical role in the representation and distribution of Ukrainian identity to both domestic and international audiences. Hence, after Ukraine's independence in 1991, Ukrainian filmmakers were presented with the opportunity to re-define what it means to be Ukrainian in the eyes of the world. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the imperial narrative of Ukraine as propagated by the Russian empire and the Soviet Union continues to influence certain recent film representations of modern Ukrainian national identity – perhaps in part due to the continued persistence of this imperial narrative in the Ukrainian collective consciousness.[5] This imperial lens through which some modern Ukrainian filmmakers represent their national identity, although often touted as satire, is nonetheless occasionally ideologically aligned with existing Russian neo-colonial narratives. However, it is essential to note that many Ukrainian filmmakers in the past decade have become front-line defenders of Ukraine's war effort on the cultural front due to their successful portrayals of Ukrainian identity as fiercely independent, profoundly distinct, and strongly unified––all while still addressing the inevitable complexities that result from of centuries of suppression and Russification.

SELF-COLONIZATION IN UKRAINIAN FILM

Perhaps one of the most jarring examples of self-colonization in Ukrainian film is the popular 2015 television series *The Last Muscovite*, or Останній Москаль in Ukrainian.[6] Produced and performed by native Ukrainians educated at Ukrainian universities, this comedy show depicts the story of Valera, a distinguished, cool, and modern young man from Moscow who is forced to hide in a Ukrainian village in the Carpathians after his oligarch father is exposed for corruption. Unwillingly uprooted from his lavish life in Russia's capital, Valera must assimilate into his father's native Ukrainian village. However, despite its status as a self-proclaimed "patriotic Ukrainian-language comedy" with good audience ratings, *The Last Muscovite* portrays the Ukrainian nation and its people in a way that is aggressively colonial and directly reflective of harmful Soviet-era stereotypes and definitions of Ukrainian identity. While representations of Russia in the series are limited to scenes of nightclubs and offices in Moscow, Ukraine is depicted as a wild country, consisting solely of farms and villages, lacking basic infrastructure and technology such as roads, phones, and GPS navigation.[7] Because the series is set entirely in the Carpathians, Russia's biggest city is contrasted with only the most incredibly rural regions of Ukraine rather than being compared to its urban centers like Kyiv or Kharkiv. This further contributes to the characterization of Ukraine as grossly underdeveloped in comparison to Russia. Ukrainian villagers, clad in national garb, are frequently compared to farm animals. This comparison is achieved in two ways. This comparison is achieved in two ways. Firstly, shots of farm animals and shots of Ukrainians are frequently sequentially put between each other in the opening sequences of the show, creating the idea that the animals and the Ukrainians are two comparable species which make up the Ukrainian ethnoscape. Secondly, the series's Ukrainians often conduct themselves wildly and with a complete lack of civility. Moreover, Ukrainian culture is treated as entirely incompatible with and even threatened by modernity. The purported incompatibility is crystallized when Valera accidently topples an altar for the tokenized Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko while attempting to climb on top of it in the hopes of access-

5. Irena R. Makaryk, Shakespeare in the Undiscovered Bourn: Les Kurbas, Ukrainian Modernism, and Early Soviet Cultural Politics, (University of Toronto Press, 2004), 10–14.
6. Gorov, Semyon, eir. The Last Muscovite. Ukraine: 1+1 Productions, 2015, youtube.
7. "The Last Muscovite / Останній Москаль." PopKult, 28 Nov. 2018, popkult.org/last-muscovite/.

ing cellular service and making a phone call. *The Last Muscovite* hence propagates a narrative of Ukrainian national culture and identity as irrelevant, village-like, and wholly inferior, and therefore to be rightfully subjected to Russian national and cultural influence.

Language is another major axis along which director Semyon Gorov imposes a colonialist narrative and propagates imperial myth; *The Last Muscovite* depicts Ukrainian and Russian as mutually intelligible.[8] Throughout the entirety of the show, Valera speaks Russian to the Ukrainian villagers, while seemingly understanding every word of the Ukrainian with which they respond without any difficulty. This enforces the narrative that Russian and Ukrainian are essentially the same language, differentiated only by the social background of the character who speaks one vs. the other. Those who only speak Ukrainian are depicted as provincial and narrow-minded, while being able to speak Russian is, in contrast, a mark of intelligence and modernity. *The Last Muscovite* reaffirms this narrative through the series' only Russophone Ukrainian character: the schoolteacher and Valera's love interest, Ksenia. Ksenia is characterized by not only beauty, but also a degree of intelligence and forward-thinking which greatly supersedes that of any of the other Ukrainian characters. She is thereby the only suitable companion Valera can find to match his intellectual wit;they often engage in flirtatious Russian banter. Ksenia's exceptionalism and modernity compared to her non-Russophone peers strengthens the continuous association of the Ukrainian language with uneducated village life and, conversely, the Russian language with city living in both Russia and Ukraine alike. The show thus insinuates that development and progress for Ukrainians necessitates Russification. This logic, taken to its furthest conclusion, subliminally implies that Russian recolonization would be logical and beneficial for Ukrainians.

Another element of *The Last Muscovite* which bolsters Russian imperial interests is the manner in which Ukrainian villagers are portrayed as both obsessed with and senselessly hostile toward Russians. While Valera is driven to the village via horse carriage, the Ukrainian driver attempts to entertain him by reciting mocking anecdotes about "Muscovites." When Valera, unimpressed, asks if the driver has any anecdotes which don't involve Russians, the driver appears dumbfounded. Hence, *The Last Muscovite* insinuates that much of modern Ukrainian culture revolves around pathetic and infantile attempts to belittle Russians, and would have a limited existence without doing so. Additionally, one of Valera's first experiences in the village consisted of being tied up and kidnapped by three young Ukrainian men who do so solely because Valera is Russian and they want to show the rest of the village what they "caught." Juxtaposed with the savage and prejudiced behavior of the young Ukrainian men, Valera appears especially civilized and pragmatic. Later, Valera and one of the young men who tied him up fall in love with the same woman, Ksenia. Ksenia, however, is only interested in Valera. Though the Ukrainian pathetically attempts to woo her by copying many of the things Valera intends to do, he is painfully unsuccessful; because of this, he resents Valera. Hence, according to the logic of the show, the hostility Ukrainians harbor toward their former colonizers is written off as blind hate stemming from jealousy. This logic then serves to invalidate Ukrainian resistance to Russification by portraying said resistance as paranoid, bitter, self-defeating submission to their own inferiority. Accordingly, this idea is reflected by the underlying narrative of the show, in which Valera, who is staying with his resentful uncle, hopes to foster "unity" between the two estranged brothers, his uncle and father. On behalf of his father, Valera attempts to bond with his uncle who

8. Olga Maxwell, Senior Lecturer. "In Russia's War against Ukraine, One of the Battlegrounds Is Language Itself." The Conversation, 31 Aug. 2023, theconversation.com/in-russias-war-against-ukraine-one-of-the-battlegrounds-is-language-itself-201170.

maintains a senseless and unexplained grudge against Valera and treats him poorly, even trying to abandon him to die in the woods. Consequently, Valera ends up appearing comparatively far more open-minded and reasonable; much of the village is more sympathetic to Valera than one of their own. A clear metaphor for the rift between the two "brother nations," Russia and Ukraine, this plot line further contributes to the narrative that Ukrainian resistance to Russian influence is an unfounded betrayal of their own "brother"––i.e. their rightful Russian colonizer.

Despite the vulgarity and reckless detriment with which Ukrainians are depicted in *The Last Muscovite*, the show was coined a "truly patriotic Ukrainian series" solely because it was partly in the Ukrainian language; at the time it premiered, most Ukrainian media was produced and distributed in Russian. Hence, the term "patriotic" often goes hand in hand with any use of the "Ukrainian language," regardless of the fact that the series propounds patently distorted and infantilizing views of Ukrainian culture and national identity. Although Ukrainian characters have recognizably Ukrainian names and wear Ukrainian embroidered shirts, they are nonetheless colonial caricatures largely devoid of depth or character development.[9] The widespread propagation of such degrading, appropriated representations of Ukrainian identity prove dangerous as this continuation of Russian and Soviet propaganda instills itself within generations of Ukrainians to the effect that a young person born in Ukraine would not have any desire to relate to and identify with a distinctly Ukrainian identity. Ukrainian language and culture is then not considered relevant or appealing to audiences and hence up-and-coming filmmakers would then be deterred from making media which dignifies Ukrainian language and culture, replicating the process of self-colonization across generations. Colonial dynamics in Ukraine are unique due to the extent to which imperial narratives persist and are propagated in culture and media by Ukrainians themselves, often without any questioning among most viewers or any attempts to problematize it among scholars both within Ukraine and outside. *The Last Muscovite* continued on to have three successful seasons, the last of which premiered in 2020.

FRONT-LINE UKRAINIAN FILMMAKERS

Many Ukrainian film directors have chosen to counter both imperial narratives and narrow,outdated definitions of Ukrainian identity especially in the wake of the 2014 Maidan Revolution and subsequent emergence of war in Eastern Ukraine.[10] The conflict represented not just a territorial dispute but a question of the integrity of Ukrainian freedom and independence in light of its complex national identity. Hence, documentation of the conflict through film depicts not only the strength of Ukrainian nationalism, but also explored and expanded the idea of what it means to be Ukrainian across linguistic and cultural lines.

Perhaps one of the most ambitious and effective of these films is Akhtem Seitablayev's *Cyborgs: Heroes Never Die*.[11] The 2017 film depicts the true story of five soldiers who fought to defend Donetsk International Airport, one of the most significant strategic maneuvers of the Ukrainian Army fighting against armed "separatist" groups sponsored and supported by the Russian Federation. However, what makes this film especially significant when examining the articulation and construction of Ukrainian national identity in Ukrainian film is that although the soldiers (the "cyborgs")

9. Shevchuk, Yuri. "Filmmaking as Cultural Aggression," in Images. The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts and Audiovisual Communication. Vol. XXXIV, no. 40, 2023.
10. Haring, Melinda. "Nationalism Is on the Rise in Ukraine, and That's a Good Thing." Atlantic Council, 29 Aug. 2019, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/nationalism-is-on-the-rise-in-ukraine-and-that-s-a-good-thing/.
11. Akhtem Seitablayev, Cyborgs: Heroes Never Die (2017), Ukraine.

share a common goal of liberating Ukrainian territory from occupation by Russian-backed "separatists," each soldier represents different political views, ages, social strata, and motivations for fighting.[12] In the film, each soldier has varying levels of degree of knowledge of Ukrainian and Russian – some speak either one or the other completely, and some speak a combination of both. They represent various levels of knowledge and connection to Ukrainian cultural history and iconic Ukrainian historical figures. They also represent different ethnicities; a Crimean Tatar later joins one of their ranks. However, the soldiers are ultimately united in their fiercely Ukrainian identity and every one of the Cyborgs is portrayed as a true patriotic Ukrainian hero, despite their differences. Hence, the Ukrainian identities of the soldiers are complex and independent of whether they speak Russian or Ukrainian, the god they believe in, the level of their connection to historic Ukrainian culture, or any other single definitive characteristic. The Ukrainian identity of the "cyborgs" in Seitablayev's film is defined by their loyalty and love for their homeland and commitment to fighting for its rightful existence as a free, democratic, and independent nation.

With Cyborgs, Akhtem Seitablayev created a film that candidly addresses what it means to be Ukrainian and what Ukrainians are truly fighting for.

This depiction of Ukrainian national identity as almost entirely contingent on progressive and inclusive civic values very effectively eludes the colonial narratives propagated by media such as *The Last Muscovite,* which instead characterizes Ukrainian identity as distinguishable from Russian identity solely through tasteless myths regarding the uncivilized and backward nature of those who speak the Ukrainian language and reside within the Ukrainian ethnoscape. The use of both Russian and Ukrainian by Ukrainian soldiers in the film as well as the broader and more accurate depiction of the complex realities that accompany a colonial past and largely Russified present renders *Cyborgs* an incredibly accurate reflection of a reality that many Ukrainians identify with. The film promotes a conception of Ukrainian national identity that is modern, inclusive, and relevant, as well as fiercely distinct and independent. Seitablayev doesn't obfuscate but rather emphasizes the intricacy and diversity of Ukrainian identity. In doing so, the film undermines imperial narratives which seek to hijack linguistic and cultural complexity within Ukraine to allege imperial subordination to Russia. With *Cyborgs*, Akhtem Seitablayev created a film that candidly addresses what it means to be Ukrainian and what Ukrainians are truly fighting for.

The emergence of the 2014 war in Eastern Ukraine as well as increasing ideological hostility with Russia also unleashed a wave of Ukrainian films which depict imagined futures for an entirely decolonized Ukraine. This wave of curiosity was sparked by the conflict's harsh reminders of the dangers of Russia's omnipresent influence. A prominent example of this mode of postcolonial representation is Valentyn Vasyanovych's *Atlantis* (2019).[13] Like *Cyborgs: Heroes Never Die*, *Atlantis* exists within the context of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The story takes place in 2025, one year after Ukraine wins the war and liberates all occupied territory. Only Ukrainian is spoken in the film, a demonstration of complete victory over the residing effects of Russian imperialism. However, this victory has come at the profound cost of the livelihood of its people; the film's characters are depicted as intensely traumatized and subjected to an uninhabitable

12. Miller, Christopher. "Art of War: Ukraine Explores Donbas Conflict on Screen, in Books." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 8 Dec. 2017, www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-film-cyborgs-donetsk-airport-battlepremiere/28903701.html.
13. Vasianovych, Valentyn. Atlantis (2019), Ukraine.

environment and a failing post-war economy. Despite the dismal conditions however, the characters willingly choose to stay in Ukraine. *Atlantis* ultimately evolves into an intimate love story between two people who collect the bodies of the dead and deliver them for post-mortems. They find solace in each other as they together grapple with the consequences of a necessary war. Furthermore, Vasyanovych refrains from undermining the steep costs of winning both the territorial and ideological battles of Ukrainian self-determination. He instead argues that the Ukrainian character is distinguished by shared experiences of the struggle for independence and the undeniable value of service to the homeland. These directorial nuances render Atlantis an especially pertinent articulation of Ukrainian identity in a post-Soviet world.

Another prominent example of this mode of aspirational post-colonial representation in Ukrainian film is the 2021 coming-of-age drama *Stop-Zemlia* (Стоп-Земля in Ukrainian).[14] Written and directed by Kateryna Gornostai, the film depicts the emotional and reflective stories of sixteen-year-old Masha and her friends as they navigate the turmoils of growing up and finding their places in the world. However, the significance of Stop-Zemlia lies in the linguistic politics of the film. Despite being set in Kyiv, where both Russian and Ukrainian are spoken, all characters in the series use exclusively Ukrainian to communicate - Gornostai rejects the still dominant colonial paradigm in which Ukrainian cinema relies primarily on Russian or a combination of both Russian and Ukrainian.[15] The only hints of Ukraine's Russified past are the characters' Russian names (Maria is Masha instead of Mariyka, Semyon is Syuoma instead of Sim), as well as the periodic mistakes and corrections some characters make in their pronunciations of certain Ukrainian words. In the film, Kyiv appears in a state of transition from a former colony into complete victory over the residual effects of Russian imperialism. Through this, Stop-Zemlia imagines a new and entirely liberated reality for Ukraine without stripping away the complications of its long imperial history. In doing so, Gornostai illustrates an aspirational postcolonial future in stunning clarity––a future which people can both strive toward and identify with.

Furthermore, Stop-Zemlia demonstrates the total self-sufficiency of the Ukrainian language in a modern context. As previously discussed, Russian and Soviet propaganda often depicted the Ukrainian language, and by extension Ukrainian identity, as incapable of progress and unsuitable for modernity. This enforced an imperialist narrative which penetrated deep into Ukrainian national consciousness, resulting in many Ukrainians choosing to speak primarily Russian instead of Ukrainian. Gornostai in *Stop-Zemlia* resists this marginalization by having many of her characters explore liberal themes such as mental health, sexual identity, career choice, environmental awareness, and existential loneliness all while speaking the Ukrainian language and living in an entirely de-colonized modern Ukrainian society. In the film, Ukrainian is used for many different professional purposes as well as for casual conversation between friends, riddled with slang. Unlike many other depictions of Ukrainian-speaking characters, the teenagers in this film, unified in their use of the Ukrainian language, are introspective, multi-dimensional, and relatable. The audience is invited to identify with the characters and envision and hope for a world in which this level of widespread Ukrainian-language use is indeed reality. For these characters, the Ukrainian language and Ukrainianization is liberation.

Additionally, as the ability of a language to fully articulate and convey progressive topics can become an indication of the receptiveness of the correlated identity to modernity

14. Gornostai, Kateryna, director. Stop-Zemlia . ESSE Production House, Mar. 2021.
15. Shevchuk, Yuri. "'Стоп-Земля': Повернення Мови На Екран." Збруч, 3 Feb. 2022, zbruc.eu/node/110301.

and progress, *Stop-Zemlia* sets a precedent of Ukrainian-language cinema which directly defies the uncivilized and stagnant narrative of the Ukrainian identity which has been cultivated by the Russian imperial aggressor for centuries.[16] In doing so, Gornostai contributes to an ideological arsenal of Ukrainian-language films which refute imperialist allegations perpetuated by Russian and Ukrainian film alike to this day. This arsenal is only bound to grow.

CONCLUSION

Ukraine's history has always been influenced and characterized by Russian imperial aggression, either through direct violence, cultural warfare, or both. Often one has informed the other, as both strategic propaganda and inadvertently harmful portrayals of Ukrainian national identity to this day perpetuate a colonial narrative which attempts to legitimize Russia's brutal military invasion. During the Holodomor, the Soviet Union targeted Ukrainian cultural elites in particular, such as writers, artists, and poets. During the Holodomor, the Soviet Union targeted Ukrainian cultural elites in particular, such as writers, artists, and poets. This systematic destruction of Ukraine's cultural class was an attempt to neutralize the threat imposed on Russia's colonial order by their existence––the existence of a national cultural class indicated the reality of a refined, developed, and modern Ukrainian identity. Such an identity necessitated, and still necessitates, nationalist independence. The fate of the Ukrainian nation as a free and independent state has always rested on the free expression and development of Ukrainian national identity, especially culture such as film that represents and reaches the Ukrainian people.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, despite optimism regarding Ukraine's long deserved independence, it was evident that Ukraine was far from rid of the insidious and pervasive cultural effects of centuries of Russian imperialism. Ukrainian media such as *The Last Muscovite* serves as recent attestations to the internal colonization of many Ukrainian people. Media of this sort reinforces self-deprecating narratives that undermine efforts toward complete cultural independence and, consequently, effective decolonization. However, progress toward true liberation has been made nonetheless, especially in the last few years. In films such as *Cyborgs: Heroes Never Die*, *Atlantis,* and *Stop-Zemlia,* Ukrainian film directors articulate and construct Ukrainian national identity in a way which escapes the colonial framework entirely. These films, rather than drawing upon particular Ukrainian cultural, historical, or religious tropes to define their heroes, instead create modern heroes of the present who define their identities through their strong values, irrevocably linked to the values of their nation. This approach provides a framework for resistance against the imperial tactics of appropriation and degradation of Ukrainian culture.

Film is a critical intellectual front in the war against imperialist thought and an important component of the formation of a national consciousness. Thus, the increased emphasis on national values and the articulation of Ukrainian identity in film indicates a heightened awareness among many Ukrainian filmmakers of their power to influence domestic and international conceptions of the Ukrainian national character. In light of the 2022 full-scale invasion, it is apparent that a greater appreciation regarding the significance of reclaiming the cultural narrative of Ukrainian identity has finally seeped into the Ukrainian collective consciousness, with greater measures taken to promote Ukrainian language, and a progressing environment in which self-deprecating and self-colonizing shows like *The Last Muscovite* would no longer be produced. Regardless of the military outcome of the current war, a final and crucial victory on the cultural front is well within reach.

16. Shevchuk, Yuri. "'Стоп-Земля': Повернення Мови На Екран." Збруч, 3 Feb. 2022, zbruc.eu/node/110301.

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