

Contested Identities, Hunger, and Emigration: Themes in Ukrainian Cinema to Explain the Present Day

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling is an essential aspect of the creation of a community of the mind. Shortly after its invention, film became instrumental in cultivating national identity. States and national groups are keen to have their stories told in order to reinforce a sense of identity internally and claim relevance externally. This paper explores how film and popular culture help to explain politics and identity in Ukraine, examining how films are reinterpreted, reformulate a canon, and facilitate new political arguments. Therefore, through the films of Alexander Dovzhenko, we can see how the struggle to balance political ideology and national identity depicted in them helps to illuminate and explain politics today. A feature of Ukrainian cinema that is often overlooked is how films made by the diaspora perpetuated national identity, language, and culture through periods of hunger and subjugation. These films are both a statement of political and cultural identification and the basis for current political claims.

KEYWORDS

Ukraine, cinema, identity, diaspora, Holodomor, nationalism

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INTRODUCTION

In June 2022, a few months into the invasion of Ukraine, in a library display in the small town of Mullingar, Ireland stood a display of books and films from and about Ukraine. Four months after the Russian invasion, Ireland had already pledged to accept one million Ukrainians fleeing the war. At that time, while several books remained in the display, most of the films were already gone – a symbol of how much people rely on popular culture, and especially the motion picture, to understand the world, politics, culture, and history. What is perhaps not readily recognized by most scholars, is how much people rely on popular culture to understand what is most familiar: their own history, culture, and identity are often translated through popular culture.

Most people do not read massive academic tomes, carefully researched and meticulously cited, about the history or culture of their country. Written history is usually given a narrative quality that emphasizes causal relationships and a rational sequence of events (WHITE 1973: IX-X, 4–5, 7–11). This is even more evident when history is filtered through the lens of the more accessible popular culture, in which case it is usually presented with a definitive narrative. The complex thus becomes simplified. While we might recoil from the idea that popular culture is the beginning of our understanding, it is difficult to imagine a person developing a deep understanding of a topic without a spark to prompt it. There must be an introduction; it is with further investigation that one finds alternative explanations and complexity. But as we know, the process of research and investigation is never complete. Yet, for many who have neither the time nor the luxury for deep research, cinema, because of its expense and spectacle, creates a patina of authority that fashions an illusion of the definitive interpretation. Hence, addressing cinema's role in politics, history, and identity is important.

This paper explores how cinema produced in Ukraine is a reservoir for national memory and identity by remembering stories that make the country unique. Like in many other countries, in Ukraine the growth of popular culture in the early twentieth century became a medium through which language, culture, and ideas could be expressed to the masses (SHEVELOV 1987: 126). Consequently, film is a statement of nationhood, which

thereby is also a claim to statehood. From the beginning of the art form, national myths, nationalism and patriotism, religious beliefs, and historical justifications have been important subjects for feature films. While international relations theory focuses on the historical claims of states/nations, I argue that art and cultural claims are frequently overlooked in it.

Thus, after a short literature review, the article will explore the films of Alexander Dovzhenko from the silent era, which are highly regarded and serve as an inspiration for today's filmmakers. The themes and claims made in those films are passed down to a new generation of filmmakers, replicating the ideas of nationalism and national identity, though with slight changes, from one generation to the next. Historically adjacent to the silent period, the turbulent years of Ukraine's 1930s were a time of violence, displacement, persecution, and hunger. Much like today, the violence and displacement resulted in a massive wave of emigration from Ukraine. Motivated by the impulse to preserve their language and culture, exiled Ukrainian artists and performers created motion pictures and other forms of popular culture. But as time passed, and the events surrounding the Holodomor and pogroms slipped into memory, their films focused less on what actually happened and turned to the more aspirational desires of Ukrainian migrants in North America. By examining these films, we can discern several themes and ideas that help us to understand Ukraine, including the complexity of identity, the struggles of creating a clear narrative, and the role of emigration.

George Orwell postulated that artists, especially those who work in fiction, are trying to deliver a message (ORWELL 1940: 47). The role of art is not merely to entertain, but to educate, to persuade, and/or to offer different perspectives. Art is part of a culture conversation wherein, through symbols and reactions, societies ruminate, negotiate, and argue about pressing, and trivial, issues of the day (POSTMAN 1985: 4-6). More specifically, popular culture (novels, music, films) serves a similar role, but its reach, as its name suggest, is more widespread. Ideally, we would like to believe that it helps in illuminating problems, inequalities, and alternatives. Often though, it reinforces cultural norms and biases to such an extent that some groups and artists may challenge that (those) dominant narrative(s). Nevertheless, we should also be cognizant that art, and by extension popular culture, does not always represent minority perspectives equally.¹

Similarly, the national identity and memory in Ukraine have changed over time. Stories of tribulations and injustices have given way to stories of more recent events, beginning with the Holodomor. Yet a narrative of interference and dominance from Russia is central to understanding the current national identity. A member of the Ukrainian parliament described the current conflict as follows: "...[a] 1000-plus year fight for our identity, for our pure existence of Ukrainian nation [sic], for our language, culture, and all that, is happening right now" (BBC 2022). Thus, many Ukrainian films revolve around the idea of preservation and persistence. While not a subject for this paper, Russian-Soviet cinema, likewise, responds to external and internal debates as well (GALEOTTI 2022: 253).

NATIONAL CINEMAS, IDENTITY, AND INTERPRETING POLITICS: A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

The ability to assess the impact of film and popular culture on an audience is, at best, difficult to measure. It is very rare that members of the masses are asked about their political thoughts, ideas, and expectations in any in-depth or meaningful way. Likewise, historically speaking, we rarely have insight into how everyday people might have experienced cinema. Instead, we often rely on participants, critics, and scholars to make suppositions about the way in which a film might have impacted viewers. Because most films are designed for the masses, an interpretation of a film's impact can follow one's predisposition toward the masses. It can be understood either in connection with a more democratic approach to the attitudes or opinions of people or, contrarily, it can be seen as "low-class," mindless "trash," produced by and for the unsophisticated (BARBER 2018: 1, 3-5). As Ranger points out, because the masses do not have access to communicating their ideas and desires, popular culture provides a mechanism by which they can express their feelings, sometimes by something as simple as attending or participating in an event (RANGER 1975: 3-5). It is tempting to see cinema and popular culture as either an independent or a dependent variable acting upon or reacting to the political world (CARY 1990: 37). Yet, Street argues that we must see forms of popular culture, including cinema, as an endogenous variable; one that is not separate or discreet from, but is a part of politics (STREET 1997: 4; STANCIU 2022).

Most scholars who study the interaction of film and politics, especially the politics of national identity, cite Anderson's seminal work on *Imagined Communities*. Nationalism originated, according to Anderson, with the beginning of print journalism in European countries during the Industrial Revolution. The ability to formulate identity communities among large populations, where it would be virtually impossible for all the members to meet one another, is a powerful adhesive bond. Anderson argues that the collapsing of time and space in a group's imagination was a necessary requisite for the creation of national identity (ANDERSON 1991: 134). Critics have pointed out that forms of national identity probably predated industrial Europe, but that does not negate Anderson's important observation that stories and the sense of shared history are important for the creation and maintenance of national identity (WEBB 2018: 74–78).

In thinking about how cinema and national identity might be inter-related, Altman notes that Anderson is only interested in the origins of nationalism. Altman is more concerned with the role that cinema plays in the maintenance of the stories and, hence, identities: "*Anderson concentrates on the moment when a nation is formed and stops there, failing to acknowledge the ongoing nature of the process he has described*" (ALTMAN 1999: 198; ALSO, WILLIAMS 2002: 4). With this understanding, Altman demonstrates how collective films can create genres that contain similar themes and messages, but these genres are not static. Politics, economics, finances, and changing norms, under certain circumstances, can create a redefinition of the messages that are supposed to be conveyed by films (ALTMAN 1999: 199).

The concept of a shifting and evolving set of practices, ideas, and messages that help to explain the nature of genres can also be applied to the concept of national cinemas. Because the urbanization of late industrialization coincided with the invention of motion pictures, the industry tended to develop in major cities where finances, artists, and entrepreneurs could coalesce. It created a milieu of talent and money, but also themes and messages that evolved into what we might call national cinemas. When sound came to film in the 1930s and local languages began to be used on the screen, in combination with the protectionist trade policies of the time, it had the effect of reinforcing the idea of the *nation* in national cinemas (CELLI 2011: 3–5; WILLIAMS 2002: 2). Higson argues that there are several ways in which one can conceive of a national cinema, most notably in terms of

where a film was produced, the display of national characteristics in it, the intended audience, and/or attempts to display the “higher” culture of a nation. Each designation can provide utility, but they also point to why using national cinema as a conception is probably fraught with difficulties (HIGSON 1989). Nevertheless, films can be used as *“experimental grids or templates through which history can be written and national identity figured”* (SHOHAT – STAM 1994: 366).

The tendency to use national cinemas as a unit of analysis has limitations. As Thompson (1996B: 259) notes, while the definitions look straightforward, such a state-centric approach tends to emphasize forces and trends without reference to external pressure and influences as well as parallel external developments. Nevertheless, during the silent film period there was hope that cinema could become an international artform; that is, since only a few translated intertitles could be spliced into a film, it was easy to make film into an art that could cross linguistic and cultural barriers. But the widespread introduction of sound, and the protectionist policies of the 1930s, helped to create and introduce national culture on a grand scale. Furthermore, sound films in local languages helped national film industries to compete with films from Hollywood (CELLI 2011: 2–3; SZCZEPANIK, 2021: 1–2, 5–7; FALKOWSKA – GIUKIN, 2015: VII–IX). If film helped to preserve the nation of some groups by preserving the language, Lin points out that it can also help migrants to maintain cultural connections with their place of origin (LIN 2019). In certain instances, it can also help preserve cultures and languages that are threatened with extinction (PETERSON 2011; DEGER 2006; WATSON 1996).

In their seminal work on the history of post-World War II cinema in Eastern Europe, originally written in Czech but translated into English for its first edition because of censorship issues, Liehm and Liehm use Lenin’s description of film as *“the most important art”* to illustrate how the medium inevitably became political: “The personal union between the Spectator and political power binds the film artist to politics. Every word uttered by the artist unavoidably initiates a political dialogue, every attempt to step out of line leads to a political conflict, every show of non-conformism results in political ostracism, or worse” (LIEHM – LIEHM 1977: 1–2).

Hence, as the analysis of the films of Alexander Dovzhenko indicates, film does not prompt settlements or solutions, but a dialogue. It is not my

intention to cover the entire history of Ukrainian cinema below, but rather to selectively use some examples to illustrate a few main points. The analysis of the two sets of films, namely a set of films by Dovzhenko and a set of films from the diasporic cinema, is meant to highlight two themes: first, the original intent of the filmmakers, and then how these films can inspire and be reinterpreted by artists, the public, and the politically active currently. Because films are not only entertainment, but culturally important documents, they help to shape narratives for a community and therefore become essential incorporations into developing narratives. Of course, such a selective choice invites criticism by leaving important examples out. But the work of Dovzhenko illustrates the complicated nature of identity and serves as a source of inspiration. Likewise, the diasporic cinema of Ukraine demonstrates why it helps to preserve the Ukrainian national identity, but inevitably becomes muddled in the politics and identity of the receiving countries. But prior to that discussion, we turn to the resilience of cinema in terms of preserving history and culture.

COMPLEX UKRAINIAN IDENTITIES: THE FILMS OF ALEXANDER DOVZHENKO

Ukraine is a place of diversity and, in many ways, if one's analysis is premised upon the necessity of a common cultural background as a requisite for a stable state, destined for cultural animosities. Yet, nations are artificial constructions, whether in a constructivist or in an instrumental sense, where imaginations play a role (WILSON 2000: XI). Countries such as Canada and Belgium have faced these challenges and in a multiethnic and/or multireligious society, the maintenance and reimagining of identity is an ongoing process. How Ukraine will manage and address its complex identities will be a task for the future.

Nationalists, regardless of their persuasion, tend to be primordialists and consider their nations as eternal. Ukrainian history is complex, and better covered elsewhere, for example Shilkhar (2020), but despite some important precursors, the modern Ukrainian state only emerged after the 1991 referendum. The predecessors are valid and important, but it is only with the turn of the last century that we see the trappings of statehood in this case (WILSON 2000: XII). Nationalism emerges through cultural and linguistic impulses, but not every single person will adopt this identity. It

is a process and a continuous negotiation. In the Ukrainian case, it will also be difficult to disentangle the relationship between those who are Russophones and the rest of society (IBID.: XIII).

Wilson argues that in the 1990s, Ukrainian national identity was a prominent topic of discussion, and found its way into the country's culture and art. Like many post-colonial societies, he argues, Ukraine has renamed places, and recast ideas and practices in a way that privileges the prominence of the Ukrainian language and inventively reshapes identity. But much of the material and ideas emerged a century before, when the idea of Ukrainian nationalism was taking root, but Ukraine's full independence did not occur until the collapse of the Soviet Union (IBID.: 229–230). During the earlier revolutionary period, ideas about what it meant to be Ukrainian, and the stories and legends from a long ago past were conveyed in the popular culture of the time. Literature, poetry, song, and dance were important in this regard, but it was cinema that helped raise awareness about Ukraine in the early 20th century.

The traumatic history of the country is reflected in its art, especially its cinema, from the formative years of filmmaking. There are few names bigger than Alexander Dovzhenko in Ukrainian cinema, as he is revered for his lyrical filmmaking and theories of film. That the national film studios still bear his name, and his films continue to be studied by students of the art, is evidence of this. Dovzhenko was most prominent during the post-revolutionary period, when his innovative films *Zvenigora* (1928), *Arsenal* (1929), and *Earth* (1930) (a trilogy) were some of the most highly regarded films of the Soviet silent period, and they continue to have this status even today. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on the latter two because they are the most related to the topic. Though he was often overshadowed by his contemporary Sergei Eisenstein, Dovzhenko's films were not as straightforwardly revolutionary and propagandistic. Although in many film histories Dovzhenko merits only a few sentences of praise, and in the West he is sometimes relegated to the status of an important but minor figure of cinematic history, for example David A. Cook (1981: 189–191), Wheeler Winston Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (2013: 77), Jack C. Ellis (1985: 110–112), some of this can be attributed to the political trouble the films would eventually cause him. Because of it, he was not able to travel outside the Soviet Union to attend festivals and was relatively unknown in

the West as a result. He was, at once, a Ukrainian nationalist and a committed revolutionary expressing a communist ideology, while at the same time this ideology featured elements of Ukrainian culture and identity

(KEPLEY 1986: 3).

In the 1920s, the republics within the Soviet Union had a high degree of cultural autonomy, and Ukraine was a significant producer of films to meet the demands of its local population (NEBESIO 2009). Celli (2011: 119) argues that because of high levels of illiteracy and the linguistic heterogeneity among the peasants in the 1920s, the silent film period became important for the building of Ukrainian national identity. Dovzhenko's films are an example of the dualism of Ukrainian identity.

Arsenal (1929) keenly examines the end of the First World War and how it dovetails into the revolution in Ukraine, and ultimately the Soviet Union. Made in celebration of the tenth anniversary of the events depicted, the film takes a more jaundiced view of war and revolution, which ultimately would prove to be politically risky for Dovzhenko. Nevertheless, it provides a portrait of Ukrainian peasants that resonated by telling their stories and showing their sacrifices during the turbulent period, rather than focusing on the exploits of revolutionary leaders (KEPLEY 1986: 73–74). The storyline is complex, and filled with vagueness and ambiguity. There are several allusions to people and events from more than a century ago that give the film an immediacy but are probably confusing to modern audiences, especially those who are not familiar with the region. The imagery and story remain compelling, nonetheless. The film opens at the end of the First World War, when Ukrainian soldiers abandon their position in what is considered a pointless war. Then there are scenes of the deprivation, destitution, and want experienced by the people while the Czar writes facile entries in his journals about hunting. *Arsenal* captures the callousness and meaninglessness of the Great War, and probably all wars. The circumstances in Ukraine lead to interpersonal violence and cruelty. Searching for answers to the calamities that have befallen the people, the Ukrainian soldiers and population blame the Russians. For example, one intertitle, fifteen minutes into the film, reads: “*You’ve been torturing us for three hundred years, you cursed Russians.*”

Ukrainian nationalism, however, gives way to revolutionary impulses in the film. Soldiers who are returning home after years at the front, are met by wives with newborns in their arms. They are not the fathers, however. Have their wives been unfaithful or, as an early scene suggests, have they been victims of sexual violence? The question posed through the title cards is, “*Who are you?*” Likewise, when the soldiers try to return to their jobs, they are met by the same question from the industrialists and politicians. Meanwhile, as the revolution consumes Kyiv, a portrait of the Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko seemingly “*comes to life and blows out the candle of Ukrainian nationalism*” (CELLI 2011: 121).² While ultimately the film is a plea for recognizing the necessity of the identity of workers and peasants for revolutionary and economic reasons, *Arsenal* also appreciates that people are not made up of a single identity. Just as we can be a spouse, a worker, and a citizen simultaneously, Dovzhenko is illustrating that one can be Ukrainian and communist at the same time. Hence, toward the conclusion of the film, a mortally wounded revolutionary soldier requests, after years of fighting, to be buried at his home. His comrades, including horses, rush to accomplish his burial before returning for the climactic battle at the Arsenal.

Dovzhenko’s next film, *Earth* (1930), is the film that he is best remembered for, as well as the one that generated the controversy and political trouble. While the first two films in the trilogy focused on turmoil and conflict, *Earth* is a pastoral focusing on agricultural cycles that are endless but infused with new technologies. One of the striking features of *Earth* is the images of nature and food. There is almost a fetishization of food and its production, as it elicits song, dance, and joy among the villagers. The harvest cycle is replicated among the humans, among whom the death and return to the soil of the older generation is but natural.

The plot is rather simple, focusing on the divide in a Ukrainian village over the use of a new technology (a tractor) that would improve the life and harvest yields. This divide, which is both ideological and generational, hides a much more complex and poetical examination of the village, in which collectivization was depicted as the natural order of life, a dialectic interpretation of progress. But the film lingers on the idea and importance of family and tradition among the Ukrainian peasants. *Earth*’s call for a new way was overshadowed by how this transition should occur, seemingly

allowing time for political ideas to develop. Because the transition was viewed as natural, when violence occurs it is considered out of the ordinary. Hence, collectivization should occur through assimilation rather than violence (KEPLEY 1986: 79–84; LEYDA 1983: 275; LIBER 2002: 106–110). This would not be the case shortly after the film's release, when the government resorted to repression and violence to accomplish its plans.

Local Ukrainian authorities were hostile toward *Earth*, but Stalin was fond of Dovzhenko and his work. The dictator persuaded the director to relocate to Moscow and from that point protected the filmmaker. The director was considered a sentimental nationalist not committed to the idea of universal communist ideas by Ukrainian Communist officials. Dovzhenko understood his position, and accordingly would make films about topics that Stalin wanted and approved thereafter (MILLER 2010: 64–66). It was informal censorship, but nevertheless Dovzhenko would continue his allegiance to his Ukrainian heritage. The filmmaker would not make another film in Ukraine but when he died in 1956 friends brought handfuls of Ukrainian soil to cover his casket during his burial in Moscow (LIBER 2002: 2–3).

While Dovzhenko's film ended with revolutionary principles, the narrative is complicated. This ambiguity opened the filmmaker to criticism. What was the viewer to take away from the film? It is reasonable to say that the story's conclusion espouses revolutionary ideals, a single path to Marxist development. But the airing of Ukrainian grievances against Russia probably also reflected the growing nationalism in the country as well. As demonstrated above, regardless of the intention of the artist, the viewer has their own perspective when seeing a film or partaking in other art forms. How one interprets it depends on their background and experiences. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that those who watched *Arsenal* and *Earth* might have thought about communist ideologies, but some might have been more intrigued or persuaded by the messages of Ukrainian nationalism.

FORCED MIGRATION, DESTRUCTION OF CULTURE, AND THE HOLODOMOR: THE ROLE OF UKRAINIAN DIASPORA CINEMA

As tumultuous as the revolutionary period was, the Holodomor would prove to be even more eventful, more difficult, and darker. The process of political upheaval, mass starvation, and emigration would help to shape Ukrainian identity into what we observe today. Popular culture would observe these events, react to them, and be shaped by them as well. The consequences of forced collectivization would not be a topic for Ukrainian cinema for more than half a century after it happened. But it did have an impact on Ukrainian-language cinema and popular culture almost immediately. A small, largely unsuccessful, Ukrainian-language diaspora cinema developed in the United States after the Holodomor, targeting the maintenance of identity and heritage. Simultaneously, a Yiddish language cinema with many stories focusing on Ukraine emerged as well. Diasporic cinema can create bonds, secure a sense of belonging, and strengthen cultural affinity among an ethnic community (LIN 2019: 347). But immigrant communities exist within the context of the politics and culture of the receiving country, and their experiences will differ from those who remained behind.

The precarious existence of humans depends upon access to food and clean water, and the line between “natural” and “man-made” is sometimes hard to discern. Yet, there is little doubt the Holodomor (murder by starvation) in the 1930s was the result of policies of the Soviet government under the guise of the collectivization of farming. But forced collectivization, rather than the proposed assimilation in Dovzhenko’s *Earth*, created the Ukrainian Holodomor (murder by starvation) of the 1930s, killing millions of people. The famine is usually understood to be Joseph Stalin’s attempt to punish farmers for resisting government control of agricultural policies and seeking more autonomy.³ The Holodomor is a defining moment in Ukraine’s national identity and is today commemorated on the fourth Sunday of every November. Faced with the prospect of complete community destruction, many worried about the future of Ukrainian culture, prompting the diaspora community to record music and make films to preserve its language and stories. While most accounts attribute the famine to the communist policies of forced collectivization, some have argued that the strategies employed by migrants more closely resemble a reaction to colonial subjugation and suppression (HRYNEVYCH 2021). The Soviet

attempts at de-Ukrainianization usually prohibited Ukrainian language education and its dissemination in cultural life, including radio, cinema, and theater, all forms of popular culture (SHEVELOV 1987: 155). Regardless, the aftereffects of such a devastating event had profound effects on the psychological wellbeing of the survivors (GORBUNOVA – KLYMCHUCK 2020), and provided a galvanizing event, akin to the Famine in Ireland, that has helped to shape Ukrainian identity since. Holodomor remembrances have become a mainstay of Ukrainian political life (STERN – EBEL 2022).⁴

Substantial emigration from Ukraine to North America occurred after the failed attempt to create an independent state during the 1917–1920 revolutionary period. Hence, a defining characteristic of Ukrainian migrant communities in North America was Ukrainian nationalism and statehood (PLUMMER 2018: 48). Faced with increasing persecution and cultural destruction, the Ukrainian diaspora community, particularly in Canada, led efforts to raise awareness and relief for victims, and were also instrumental in memorializing history through art and culture (DOSTLIEVA – DOSTLIEV 2020; NIKOLKO 2019; DOVHANYCH 2019; CIPKO 2017). The development of cultural events, clubs, and organizations, such as dance troupes, choirs, and clubs, had the dual effect of employing emigre artists while at the same time promoting national identity and solidarity. It also served as an entry point for arriving migrants into American and Canadian communities by providing familiar reminders of home. The soft power cultural outreach meant Ukrainians were perceived as talented, artistic, and therefore more desirable in terms of immigration (KUROPAS 1991: 338–347).⁵

Vasile Auramenko was one of the leading proponents of nationalism among the community and a significant promoter of Ukrainian folk dance in North America during the 1920s and 1930s. Like many others who worked for Ukrainian independence in the years following World War I, Auramenko emigrated to North America, in his case specifically Canada, in 1928. He built schools in migrant communities in the United States and Canada, and dreamed of building a “Ukrainian Hollywood,” where films could be produced to entertain émigrés and preserve the Ukrainian language and culture (PLUMMER 2018: 48; NEBESCIO 1991: 22). A chance meeting with maverick film director Edgar G. Ulmer would eventually lead to two Ukrainian-language films being made, *Natalka Poltavka* (*The Girl from Poltavka*, 1937) and *Zaporozhets za Dunayem* (*Cossacks in Exile*, 1939), both

based on operettas. The films were shot in the United States (specifically, New York and New Jersey) and were screened in Canada and Europe as well, helping to raise awareness about the situation in Ukraine as well as preserving a record of Ukrainian art and culture, including language preservation. The films are rather obscure to modern audiences, so much so that one edited volume about Ulmer does not even mention the two films. Yet, the films remain artifacts of heritage and identity. While the films were not financially successful, they did help to create a sense of identity among the diaspora community, and provided a sense of purpose (KUROPAS 1991: 340).

Ulmer, often regarded as probably the best B-filmmaker in the United States, was born in what is today Olomouc, Czechia (then Olmütz in the Austro-Hungarian Empire). Himself a Jewish migrant-refugee who as a child was relocated to Sweden during the First World War by a Jewish aid organization, Ulmer would identify with exiles and displaced people and would collaborate with several groups in the 1930s, earning him the title of “*the director of minorities*” (PLUMMER 2018: 41; KROHN 1983: 62; ISENBERG 2004: 4). In addition to the Ukrainian-language films, Ulmer would direct Yiddish-language films during this period as well, such as *Green Fields* (1937), *The Singing Blacksmith* (1938), and *The Light Ahead* (1939), films featuring an all-black cast, such as *Moon Over Harlem* (1929), Spanish-language films, as well as several documentary shorts that were designed to help migrants and minorities navigate health concerns.

Both of the Ukrainian-language films directed by Ulmer were meant to capture Ukrainian song, dance, and memory. *Natalka Poltavka* is a story of star-crossed lovers, each tempted away by potential partners with substantial material means. The songs and dances offered ample opportunity to employ the numerous people who would have participated in the various cultural organizations within the émigré community. On the other hand, *Zaporozhets za Dunayem* also features music and dance, but incorporates history as well. Based on an 1863 operetta of the same name, the film relates the story of a group of Cossacks who abandon their fort after refusing to join the imperial forces of the Russian Czarina Catherine the Great in the eighteenth century. With some humorous storylines based on mistaken identity and gender relationships, the Cossacks find refuge across the Danube River in the Ottoman Empire before eventually returning to Ukraine. The film was meant to appeal to first- and second-generation

migrants who were expressly interested in their non-Anglophone forms of identity and culture from their Ukrainian heritage. The film relies on a well-known story, rather than developing something new, so that it would be perceived as more authentic (PLUMMER 2018: 44).

While making *Zaporozhets za Dunayem*, Ulmer used the location and sets for a Yiddish-language film, *The Singing Blacksmith*, which he directed the year before. While the recycling of a set, which many low-budget films would have done, saved money, it also links the two migrant groups and languages together with similar stories. Plummer argues that Ulmer is also making the link between the Yiddish cinema and Ukrainian language films (IBID.: 42–43), further illustrating the complex identity of those who lived, and continue to live, in Ukraine. The two groups shared land, villages, and memories. Although the Yiddish cinema would prove more successful financially, it would effectively collapse with the onset of the Second World War. Films from both groups would live on in the memory of their respective communities as mediums through which stories, customs, and languages would be preserved.

Released just months after the beginning of the Second World War in Europe, *Tevya* (1939), starring the legendary actor Maurice Schwartz, was the most successful of the Yiddish-language films produced in the United States, and one of the last. Based on the 1919 play *Tevye der Milkhiker* by Sholem Aleichem and some previous short stories by the same author, it would eventually become the Broadway musical and, eventually, the film *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971). A trade journal review of *Tevya* assured theater managers that it was one of the best Yiddish films yet made and that the film, although made in the small hamlet of Jericho, Long Island, New York, “assuredly” recreates the look and feel of Ukraine (ANONYMOUS 1939; B.R.C. 1939). Sholem Aleichem fled present-day Ukraine, after several pogroms, in 1905. He then toured the United States with a series of lectures, later returning to Ukraine. But another pogrom in Kiev at the onset of the First World War forced his permanent return to New York in 1914. While a respected literary figure with significant support in the Yiddish community, Sholem Aleichem had difficulty finding financial success, even among the émigré community in New York. His lack of success prompted him to label the culture of United States as philistine, and its emphasis on wealth led him to call it “Dollar-Land” (DAUBER 2013: 205–209).⁶ Like many migrants, he found

the receiving country not to be the paradise and refuge that he had expected. Consequently, his culture shock, his frustration with his unmet cultural expectations and his resulting anger and resentment (OBERG 1960) were profound. Sholem Aleichem wrote to a potential backer, “*I will never permit myself to give in to American taste and lower the standards of art*”, quoted in Alisa Solomon (2013: 15).

Despite his protestation to the contrary, Aleichem’s most famous work would become the basis of one of America’s most iconic and successful musicals. While critiqued as an example of the American theatrical and cinematic tendency to brighten and gloss over difficult subjects, and to find a “happy ending,” *Fiddler on the Roof* highlights the plight of peasants in Imperial Russia but makes their tribulations more palatable for and accessible to a wider audience (IBID.: 343). Though it is set in 1905, the politics in the film are rather muted. The jokes about the Czar are not specific and could be assigned to any political leader. Among the villagers of Anatevka, their most often expressed desire is to be left alone, and to be allowed to live their lives on their own terms without the interference of the Russian government. Yet, the overwhelming political message of the film is the decline of tradition and the rise of modernity (represented by a sewing machine) and assimilation (romantic love). While there is a celebration of the ideals and markers of the past, survival appears to be premised on adaptation and accommodation. Thus, bluntly, the future of the Jewish community in Ukraine, threatened by Russia, is to adopt the American ideals of modernity and personal liberty. It is an extension of diasporic cinema, but one that has been infused with a good deal of the receiving country’s culture. The legacy of the film and Broadway musical highlights how stories and history morph into entertainment, thereby losing context and meaning. In this significant artifact of American popular culture, the plight of Jewish Ukrainian peasants is laid before a large audience on the stage and, later, on screen but it is mediated through American sensibilities and cultural norms. As Wolitz noted, Tevya became “*an American Type: the Old Country immigrant*” (WOLITZ 1988: 533). A common complaint about *Fiddler on the Roof* is that it risks trivializing the persecution of the peasants.

Fiddler on the Roof does highlight Ukrainian and Yiddish history to an international audience. But it does so without making the viewer aware of the inherent violence and persecution the community experienced. The

film paints a picture, but without providing specifics, context, or depth. Its tendency towards sentimentality and superficiality, as well as the emphasis on material wealth that is often present in American mainstream cinema, diminishes the rather difficult and tragic nature of the events that inspired the material, as Sholem Aleichem feared (BRUSTEIN 2014). It is the dilemma of diaspora cinema and popular culture. A diaspora community can provide moral and financial support, especially in terms of remittances. The community abroad can use their influence to make pleas to garner international support in their host countries. Yet, the diaspora is working within a different political context in which it is also seeking its own interests and accommodation on behalf of the migrant community. In short, they are political actors within the receiving country as well (HANEY – VANDERBUSH 1999: 357–358). Furthermore, their views of politics can be distorted by their own experiences, or their nonexperiences, which might vary significantly from those who remained behind. For example, many migrants in the United States were concerned with remunerative activities and they were not directly experiencing the violence brought upon their family and friends who stayed behind. Consequently, the migrant is likely to focus on more immediate and pressing demands than those that are remote and faraway. In the end, films, and other forms of popular culture, from a migrant community will be distinctively different from those produced in the sending country.

DISCUSSION

As a primary form of popular culture, film has helped to represent the contested and complicated nature of Ukrainian national identity, and still continues to do so. As the literature suggests, it is an endogenous variable that both reflects an ever-changing identity and at the same time helps to build it. But a complicating factor is that the message depends on the perspective of the viewer, and the lessons and messages drawn may differ from what the artists intended. As films are produced, they and other forms of popular culture will reflect and help shape the remembrance of the current conflict. War usually involves not just killing but is often an attempt to destroy the culture of an enemy. As such, military conquest often involves the theft and destruction of critical pieces of a community's art. The destruction of culture is an effective strategy for the destruction of identity, the erasing of history, and the demoralization of people.

But popular culture, by definition, is harder to destroy because it is more widespread, and it is hard to collect and destroy all of its examples and artifacts. Films, despite attempts to erase them, are very difficult to wipe out. A country that records its history and national identity on film does so with the expectation that it will survive. Cinema tends to survive. Prominent films become relics through which the past is memorialized.

This article is meant to highlight how film, and popular culture more broadly, has a symbiotic relationship with politics, using Ukraine as an important example. Not only does film help to reflect and shape questions of identity, but it is also a tool to achieve political aims. For filmmakers it can be used to call for change, remember, or reframe. For governments and nationalists, film can be a tool for coalescing and distinguishing communities. Groups can use films, sometimes in subtle ways, to demonstrate their existence and to collect and disseminate stories. The danger that popular culture poses to existing power structures and authoritarians is evident because of the impulse to suppress, censor, and destroy that which is not found acceptable. But popular culture, because it is widely disseminated, is difficult to destroy once it is created. Ukrainian cinema has demonstrated all these tendencies over its history. Dovzhenko's films illustrate the complications of capturing identity, especially in a time of tumult and change. His films advocate both a celebration of national identity and the need to industrialize. On the ground, politicians and revolutionaries were unwilling to embrace both impulses. Similarly, Ulmer's Ukrainian films, and Yiddish-language films more broadly, illustrate the complications in a different way. As Ukrainian migrants moved further away from their homeland, both physically and temporally, the focus of their concerns was more immediate and less about what was happening, or had happened, in Ukraine. Nevertheless, taken together, the popular culture of this time period creates a panorama for us to explore and understand, so long as we do not take these stories literally.

As with many national cinemas, the lessons drawn from Ukrainian films are multifaceted and complex. Viewed collectively, any survey of cinema is mired by selection bias, and probably leans closer to what *should be* than to *what is*. Thus, film is often not an accurate representation of reality. While popular culture, and, in this instance, film, can be a source of

understanding, it should not be viewed as the definitive guide to national identity, nationalism, and/or political culture.⁷

There are also limitations to this approach, as we are only seeing films that are reaching an international audience. Yet, the films that reach the international market do so for a reason. Presumably, they are thought to have some resonance outside of Ukraine. Hence there is an interchange between what a national cinema sends out and what the international market is willing to accept that helps to delineate Ukraine's interaction with the rest of the world. In effect Ukrainian films are a reservoir of how Ukrainians see themselves and how they want to be perceived by outsiders. Furthermore, Ukrainian films can shape the international audience's perception of Ukraine. They humanize Ukrainians, make the country's history tangible, and invite empathy and understanding. The dilemma for the analyst is a nagging question: Are the examples chosen representative or are they exceptional? Because we are dealing with the ever-changing nature of identity, the answer could change depending on when the question is asked, or even from where. When films and actors are celebrated, written about, and screened, it is done for a reason. They have a resonance; there is some kind of effect, even if it is difficult to measure.

Art, culture, and literature are powerful tools. They all help to shape the identity of the given community. In turn, popular culture helps to spread that identity far and wide. From the outset of the current conflict, there has been no doubt a tremendous loss of cultural treasures. Libraries, works of art, and important buildings have been looted, damaged, and destroyed. Sometimes the purpose seemed to be to wash away unpleasant or inconvenient histories, such as those in archives that document Soviet repression (FARAGO ET AL. 2022; GETTLEMAN – MYKOLYSHYN 2023; MARCHE 2022). When a people are denied their stories and heritage, it is an attempt to destroy history. Moreover, the destruction of documents, such as birth, death, and marriage certificates, undercuts the claims of statehood. It will likely not succeed in the long run, but significant damage will be done. But the prospect of recovering and destroying every copy of every Ukrainian film is difficult to imagine, even in the long run. But it is interesting to posit that, as the term implies, popular culture is ubiquitous and widespread, making its eradication very difficult. The declining cost of capturing and distributing images, coupled with humans' propensity to record, through

photographs and films, for legacy and memory, means that it becomes even more difficult to *completely* destroy culture. The power of cinema, especially when it reaches viewers internationally, is significant. As such, political actors, including states, nationalists, and diasporas, seek to immortalize their identity by presenting it through cinema. Films can set the agenda and act as an accessible treasury of memory artifacts, even if not precisely accurate. Films are political and powerful, generating collective memories. As with other art forms, their interpretation, and reinterpretation, is an essential facet of politics in the modern world.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Okediji (2003: viii) argues that numerical majorities provide a justification in a democratic society about the correctness of depictions and representations in a dualistic vision. Hence, "so long as the majority is right, the minority is wrong."
- 2 The Russian authorities destroyed Shevchenko's house in 2016 (Interfax-Ukraine 2016).
- 3 The exact number of victims is difficult to ascertain, but the most estimates place the number at a minimum of 3.5 million people (Wolowyna 2021; Radonić 2018).
- 4 No film about the Holodomor would be made in Ukraine until 1991, when *Golod-33 (Famine '33)* was shown on television across Ukraine on the eve of the 1991 referendum on independence (Holden 1993; New York Times 1991).
- 5 One reviewer, Henry Beckett for the *New York Evening Post*, after seeing a performance of the Ukrainian Folk Dance and Ballet, called for unrestricted immigration from Ukraine (Kuropas 1991: 343).
- 6 See also the documentary film *Laughing in the Darkness* (2011), directed by Joseph Dorman.
- 7 For a more comprehensive review of Ukrainian cinema, see Shlikhar 2020.

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