

Filmmaking as Cultural Aggression^[1]

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The article discusses *cinematic depopulation*, the strategy of appropriation of the colonized by the colonizer widely used in the Soviet and post-Soviet cinema made in Ukraine and Russia and, until now, never analyzed in academic literature. The *cinematic depopulation* is a mode of filmic representation whereby a given ethnoscape (Ukraine) is cleansed of its national community (Ukrainians) and instead is populated by the colonizer (Russians) as if it were an integral part of his historical territory. As a form of cultural imperialism, this strategy has, until quite recently, been widely used in both Soviet and post-Soviet Russian and Ukrainian filmmaking to promote the idea of Ukraine conceivable outside of and without the Ukrainian language, culture, and other attributes of Ukrainian identity.

KEYWORDS: cinematic depopulation, cultural imperialism, hybrid war, Ukrainian film, Russian film

The Ukrainian cultural revival and the growth of national self-awareness in the 1920s introduced new topoi into literature, arts, and other spheres of artistic expression. Writers whose imagination was until then limited to village life, history, and folklore discovered modernity and the city. The modern city as a new locus of Ukrainian culture, initially more imagined than real, emerges as an important theme in fiction, poetry, theater, painting, sculpture, and architecture. "[...] city is not simply a theme or a topos, or a type of landscape, argues Solomiia Pavlychko. The city is the symbol of a particular type of mentality inherent both in the author and his character. This mentality is fairly refined, formed by the library, not nature; it experienced philosophical doubts, disappointments, the pain of loneliness, alienation, and internal disharmony. In the Ukrainian literature with its fixation on the people, the natural rural person, the reorientation toward the city occurred in a particularly slow and uncertain manner. The city had always been hostile to the Ukrainians linguistically and socially."^[2]

In contrast to the literature, Ukrainian filmmaking quickly discovered the city and, without much hesitation, started colonizing it. For the first time ever, the viewer encounters Ukrainian characters residing outside the colonial reservation of the village, characters which populate the urban space in such film genres as political detective

**The colonial context.
Ukrainian cinema
discovers the city**

[1] The first shorter and less developed version of this article was published in Ukrainian in: "Miscellanea Posttotalitarna Wrastislawiensia" 2021, no. 9.

[2] S. Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi*, Kyiv 1999, pp. 206–207.

(*Ukrasia*, 1925, directed by Piotr Chardynin, *Agent Provocateur (In the Web)*, 1926, directed by Viktor Tiurin, *PKP (Piłsudski Bought Petliura)*, 1926, directed by Heorhii Stabovy, *The Blue Package*, 1926, directed by Favst Lopatynsky, *The Diplomatic Pouch* 1927, directed by Oleksander Dovzhenko), social drama (*The Arrest Warrant*, 1927, directed by Heorhii Tasin, *On the Wrong Road, Ukr. Ne podorozi*, directed by Marko Tereshchenko, 1929, *The Museum Guardian*, 1930, directed by Borys Tiahno), comedy (*Vasia the Reformer*, 1926 and *Love Berry*, 1926, both directed by Oleksander Dovzhenko, *Self-Seeker*, 1929, directed by Mykola Shpykovsky), psychological drama (*Two Days*, 1927, directed by Heorhii Stabovy, *The Night Coachman*, 1928, directed by Heorhii Tasin), melodrama (*A Pilot and a Girl*, 1929, directed by Oleksander Perehuda), industrial drama (*Explosion*, 1927, directed by Panteleimon Sazonov, *Boryslav Is Laughing*, 1927, directed by Pavlo Nechesa, *Fresh Wind*, 1927, directed by Heorhii Stabovoi, *The Wind from the Rapids*, 1930, directed by Ivan Kavaleridze, *The Italian*, 1931, directed by Leonid Lukov, *The Mine (Donbas)*, 1931, directed by Oleksii Kapler,[3] *Ivan*, 1932, directed by Oleksander Dovzhenko, *The Hegemon*, 1931 directed by Mykola Shpykovsky), action movies (*A Man from the Forest*, 1928, directed by Heorhii Stabovoi, *The Storm*, 1928, directed by Pavlo Dolyna), documentary films (*The Eleventh Year*, 1928, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929, *The Symphony of Donbas (Enthusiasm)*, 1931, all three directed by Dzyga Vertov, *In Spring* 1929, directed by Mikhail Kaufman).[4] Those and other films radically expanded the mental topography of the Ukrainian identity into the areas that had been off-limits to it. Early Soviet Ukrainian filmmaking settled Ukraine's past and present with Ukrainian characters that viewers finally found it possible to identify with.

Starting with the first Ukrainian "talking" movie *Ivan* (1932) by Oleksander Dovzhenko, Ukrainian became the language of cinema. The director ruptured the colonial association of Ukrainian identity exclusively with rural culture by expanding the sphere of Ukrainian language use to include the entire society: workers, technical and university intelligentsia, and Communist Party functionaries. He linked Ukrainian with industrialization and progress, with the future, while Russian becomes a symbol of a narrow bourgeois mindset, reaction, and the capitalist past in *Ivan*. Instead of regarding nation and social class as irreconcilably antagonistic, Dovzhenko synthesized them as mutually complementary traits of a new socialist Ukrainian nation. This synthesis of the national and the social is evident in the revolutionary fighter Tymish, the protagonist of Dovzhenko's war drama *Arsenal*. Such a vision of the Ukrainian people that was in the process of decolonization dramatically clashed with the Russian imperial stereotypes of Ukrainians as only rural, provincial, folkloric, and therefore anti-

[3] L. Hosejko, *Istoriia ukrainskoho kinematohrafa*, Kyiv 2005, p. 70.

[4] Short descriptions of these films can be found in V.N. Myslavsky, *Faktograficheskaia istoriia kino v Ukraine. 1890–1930*, vol. 1, Kharkov 2016.

thetical to modernity. The Russian imperial mind viewed Ukrainians as (1) simply a variety of Great Russian people, the so-called Little Russians, (2) avowed enemies of the empire, treasonous and two-faced *mazepists*, or (3) the faceless human material without a history, culture, and language, which was traditionally referred to by the racist slur *khokhols*.^[5] In other words, Ukrainians were allowed to exist either as indistinguishable from Russians or as a collectivity vested with traits that made them unattractive and incapable of competing with Russians for prestige and social stature, much like the village culture cannot compete with the culture of the city.

The three stereotypes of Ukrainians widespread in the Russian Empire in the 19th century and described by Andreas Kappeler are very much alive in both Russian and Ukrainian cinema today. Irene Makaryk writes of the limitations imposed on Ukrainian theater productions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Russian censorship and designed to strengthen the association of Ukrainian identity exclusively with the village, folklore, and museum, the association that has until recently persisted in the Ukrainian collective consciousness.^[6] Ukrainian modernists in literature, theater, and filmmaking like the celebrated theater director Les Kurbas, were acutely aware of and resented the fact that “Ukrainian theater had been either banned outright or deliberately provincialized: the repertoire, language and even roles had been imposed by censors to reflect a Russian image of Ukraine.”^[7]

This essay aims to explore a specific mechanism of the discursive appropriation of the colony by the colonizer when the cinematic topography, the *ethnoscape*, of a given nation is separated from its national community on the silver screen, gets populated by the colonizer, and then presented as his own territory.

Describing the Soviet genocide of the Ukrainian people in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Rafael Lemkin argues that it consisted of four prongs: (1) the blow to the nation’s head, i. e. the destruction of the Ukrainian political, intellectual, and cultural elites; (2) the blow to the heart of the nation, i. e. the destruction of independent Ukrainian spiritual life, primarily the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church; (3) the blow to the body of the nation, the murder by a man-made famine (the Holodomor) of millions of Ukrainian peasants, the primary carriers of the national culture, and (4) the settling of the depopulated areas of Ukraine with Russians.^[8] Something similar to

Three modes of cinematic representation of Ukrainians

[5] A. Kappeler, *Mazepintsy, Malorosy, Khokhly: Ukrainians in the Ethnic Hierarchy of the Russian Empire*, [in:] *Culture, Nation, and Identity. The Ukrainian-Russian Encounter (1600–1945)*, eds. A. Kappeler et al., Edmonton 2003, pp. 162–181.

[6] I.R. Makaryk, *Shakespeare in the Undiscovered Bourn. Les Kurbas, Ukrainian Modernism, and Early Soviet Cultural Politics*, Toronto 2004, pp. 10–14.

[7] M. Shkandrij, *Modernists, Marxists, and the Nation. Ukrainian Literary Discussion of the 1920s*, Edmonton 1992, p. 173.

[8] R. Lemkin, *Soviet Genocide in Ukraine*, [in:] *The Holodomor Reader. A Sourcebook on the Famine of 1932–33 in Ukraine*, eds. B. Klid, A. Motyl, Edmonton 2012, pp. 80–81.

the fourth prong of the genocide was unfolding since the early 1930s in Soviet films about Ukraine, when Ukrainian cities and even villages were “cleansed” of Ukrainian and “settled” with Russian characters, thus becoming a territory alien to Ukrainians.

Analyzing how the image of the nation is created in film, Anthony Smith stresses the importance of the national ethnoscape for the way modern nations see and imagine themselves. [The nation’s] “territory mirrors the ethnic community and is historicized by the communal events and processes whose relics and monuments dot its landscape so that the land comes to belong to a people in the same way as the people belong to a particular land—creating an ancestral ‘homeland.’”^[9] The connectedness of the people to their ancestral land is a central topos in early Ukrainian Soviet films. In such particularly important films as Oleksander Dovzhenko’s *Zvenyhora*, *Arsenal*, *Earth* (sic!), and *Ivan*, this connectedness is their central philosophical idea.^[10]

The end of the indigenization policies and the repression of an independent Ukrainian identity gave rise to new forms of Russian cultural imperialism. Soviet censorship introduced rules that limited the topics of Ukrainian movies and the way Ukrainians were allowed to be portrayed on the screen. According to Joshua First, from 1934 and on, the *folkloric mode* of representation of the nation became dominant in Soviet films. Under a Stalinist mode of ‘national’ representation, the landscapes and peoples of the Soviet periphery achieved recognition as unique within a folkloric visual vocabulary, replete with costumes, dancing peasants, and other evidence of ‘national color.’^[11] During the period of the Thaw, the folkloric mode was supplemented by the ethnographic mode. “It highlighted visual style and circular narration, and the human subject exists within the landscape, unable to stand apart from it.”^[12]

There was also a third mode of representation of Ukrainians in Soviet film that until now has remained unnoticed both by film scholars and the wider viewership, despite the fact that it gained great currency among Soviet and even post-Soviet filmmakers. This mode is the *cinematic depopulation* of the Ukrainian ethnoscape, a discursive rupture between the nation and its ancestral homeland. To appreciate exactly how this representational mode works and its teleology, one needs to consider the role Russian culture and literature in particular has played in Russia’s imperial expansion over centuries. The military capture of new territories and the suppression of their indigenous population, whether Ukrainians, Belarusians, Chechens, Poles, etc., was invariably followed by their discursive colonization. Russian literature represented by such figures as Derzhavin, Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky,

[9] A. Smith, *Images of the Nation. Cinema, Art and National Identity*, [in:] *Cinema and Nation*, eds. M. Hjort, S. MacKenzie, London – New York 2000, p. 50.

[10] G.O. Liber, *Alexander Dovzhenko. A Life in Soviet Film*, London 2002, pp. 85–113.

[11] J. First, *Ukrainian Cinema. Belonging and Identity During the Soviet Thaw*, London – New York 2015, p. 15.

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 79.

and later on, including Solzhenitsyn, Rasputin, and many other important writers have consistently acted as apologists of Russian imperialism, presenting imperial land grabs as a natural process of expansion that is beneficial for indigenous peoples and the captured territories as devoid of the indigenous population, which either disappears without a trace in the imperial narrative or has no culture, language or voice of its own. The Russian colonizer speaks for and about it. Russia's greatest eighteenth-century poet, Gavriila Derzhavin, sets the tonality for his literary successors in the glorification of Russian imperialism, saying "We need no allies. What use alliances? Take a step, O Russia, one step more, and the universe is yours!"^[13]

Ewa Thompson observes that: "In the Russian case, territorial conquests were followed by incorporation into Russia or imposition of governments subservient to Russian interests. Russian literature mediated this process by imposing on the conquered territories a narrative of Russian presence that elbowed out native concerns and the native story. [...] Russian writers abetted the power of the center so as to prevent the periphery from speaking in its own voice and conveying its own experience as narrative subject rather than an attachment to the center."^[14] Thompson offers a detailed analysis of how in the works of Russian writers the indigenous nations of the empire are "erased" and if they do appear then only as such that are on the "threshold of Russification". These nations' ancestral territories are described as if they were Russian and are discursively cleansed from the colonized and appropriated by the colonizer.^[15]

Ukrainians and their historical lands were all too often treated in a similar manner on the Soviet silver screen. Presenting Ukraine as devoid of its indigenous population, Soviet cinema thus does not so much describe Ukraine as *ascribe* it a fictitious Russianness. The cinematic *depopulation* consists in representing Ukraine on screen, its cities, and even villages without its indigenous nation, without Ukrainians. Instead, the viewer sees Russians or Russified Ukrainians in national garb. The depopulation of colonies is a representational mode highly typical of Soviet cinema. It can be argued that Sergei Eisenstein's celebrated *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) is an early exemplar of this mode. The action takes place in two venues: on board the Battleship Potemkin and in the Ukrainian city of Odesa, treated as part of Russia. The first intertitle stakes out the topography of the story in no uncertain terms: "The spirit of revolution soared over the Russian land [...]"^[16] There are some hints of the Ukrainian identity of some protagonists,

What is cinematic depopulation

[13] M. Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine. Literature and the Discourse of Empire from Napoleonic to Postcolonial Times*, Montreal – Kingston 2001, p. 9.

[14] E. Thompson, *Imperial Knowledge. Russian Literature and Colonialism*, Westport, CT – London 2000, pp. 1–2.

[15] *Ibidem*, pp. 132–138.

[16] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aiU8cmjJ-SA>, 1:05".

like the recognizably Ukrainian names of the sailors Vakulinchuk and Matushenko, but they appear as part of the “rebellious workers of all Russia”, as suggested by another intertitle.

The mode of cinematographic depopulation became something of a canon for Soviet filmmaking in its portrayal of ethnic territories as early as in the 1930s. The so-called “Ukrainian movies” by the influential Russian director Ivan Pyriev *The Rich Bride* (1937), and *Tractor Drivers* (1939) best exemplify it. The stories of both unfold in the Ukrainian countryside. The Ukrainians in both are more decorative than in essence. They sport Ukrainian names pronounced the Russian way: Marinka Lukash, Pavlo Zgara, Mariana Bazhan, Klim Yarko, Nazar Duma, et al. They sometimes wear Ukrainian embroidered shirts. These characters are colonial stereotypes of Ukrainians or Little Russians, people that in essence do not differ from Great Russians. They are in fact Russians who are paid to pretend they are Ukrainians. They are the Soviet equivalent of *blackface*, a racialized representation of black people by white actors first in American minstrel shows and later in movies from the 1830s until the mid-20th century. Ukrainian characters in such movies speak Russian which is sparingly peppered with Ukrainian exoticisms that do not prevent the viewer who has no command of Ukrainian from understanding the dialogue. These Ukrainianisms are always phonetically Russified so that the voiced /v/ before a voiceless consonant becomes voiceless and is pronounced as /f/ instead of a short non-syllable-forming vowel /w/ (*difchina* instead of *diwchyna*). Consonants are palatalized before the vowel /e/, soft voiceless /ts/ hardens (*trieba* instead of *treba*, *khlopiets* instead of *khlopets*). The Ukrainian voiced velar /h/ is replaced with the Russian plosive /g/ (*garnyi* instead of *harnyi*). As a result, such Orientalized speech sounds like a caricature of the Russian literary norm and presents those who speak it as poorly educated and primitive yokels who are unable to speak correct Russian. A typical instance of such a linguistic representation of Ukrainians is the popular Soviet comedy *Maksim Perepelitsa* (1956), directed by Anatolii Granik and produced at the Lenfilm Studios.^[17]

These and other carefully selected lexical exoticisms substitute the language of the colonized that is already dead, having merged with Russian. The presentation of the Ukrainian language in films as such that differs little from Russian is based on the imperial myth that Ukrainian is not a separate language but merely a “southwestern dialect of Russian”, just as Ukrainians are not a separate nation but a mere variety of Russians. The myth about the mutual intelligibility

[17] – Обиделась?

– Кто?

– Маруся?

– Та чи ты Маруси не знаешь. Зашила, як шкварка и все. Зараз прибудит.

– Прибудит? Она еще про гарбузы узнает.

– Да откуда она узнает? [...]

– Ну шо тым дивчатам надо? Ты подивись на Миколу. Гарный, як намальований. С лица только воду можно пить. А она ему гарбуза!

between Russian and Ukrainian continues to be propagated not only by the Kremlin media but in some academic publications as well.[18] The assertion that Ukrainians as a nation do not exist, that they are “zombified and spiritually sick Russians”, is the logical product of the view which the Soviet movies expressed in a hidden and implied way in the Stalinist era and is spread by the Russian propaganda nowadays.[19]

It is not by chance but on purpose that the leading parts in Pyriev’s “Ukrainian” movies are played by such iconic Russian actors as Marina Ladygina, Nikolai Kriuchkov and Boris Andreev. The wider imperial context within which the discursive appropriation of the colonized by the colonizer was everyday practice ensured these and other “ethnic” Soviet movies a particular kind of reception by viewers and critics alike. The fact that Ukrainian characters are played not by any Russian actors but by film stars who were icons of the Russian identity caused neither objections nor cognitive dissonance in Soviet and post-Soviet viewers’ minds.

There are two varieties of cinematic depopulation: (1) partial depopulation and (2) complete depopulation. A *partial cinematic depopulation* is affected when a Ukrainian ethnoscape is settled with characters who pretend to be Ukrainian but have precious little Ukrainian about them. They always speak Russian with an occasional Ukrainian word. Even though they may have a recognizably Ukrainian name and wear a Ukrainian embroidered shirt, they are colonial caricatures that a Ukrainian viewer cannot identify with and wants no part of. Often these Ukrainians are infantilized. They create an image of Ukrainians that is devoid of prestige and symbolic capital; Ukrainians that are ridiculed, pitied, or even disdained by the viewers rather than celebrated.

A *complete cinematic depopulation* takes place when Ukraine, its cities, and villages are presented as populated only by Russian characters with no Ukrainians anywhere in sight.

A good example of this is Aleksandr Askoldov’s war drama *The Commissar*, made in 1967, immediately shelved as ideologically subversive, theatrically released, and widely praised in 1988. The story takes place in the Ukrainian City of Berdychiv. Its narrative center is the poor Jewish family of the Magazinniks, who are forced to take in a Russian commissar as their tenant. The viewer sees a chain of Russian characters who speak Russian and Jews who speak Russian as well, though they pray in Yiddish and Hebrew. The viewer sees no Ukrainians in

Partial and complete depopulation

[18] K. Maksimtsova, *Language Conflicts in Contemporary Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine. A Comparative Exploration of Discourses in Post-Soviet Russian-Language Digital Media*, Stugart 2019, pp. 121–122.

[19] “On the territory of the former Ukrainian SSR, there are simply Russians, there are zombified and spiritually sick Russians, and there is an artificially created political nation composed of completely

transformed people who call themselves Ukrainians. And all we can and are obliged to do is take back the Russians and what’s Russian, and put a straitjacket on the political nation,” writes one Dmitriy Popov, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2022/11/06/pochemu-putin-zagovoril-o-protivostoyanii-vnutri-odnogo-naroda.html> (accessed: 5.12.2022).

Askoldov's *Berdychiv*. They are only mentioned as bandits, blood-thirsty nationalists, and anti-Semites. Ukrainians are silent in *Commissar*, Russians and Jews speak for them and about them. Ukrainians are reduced to one convenient imperial stereotype signified by the name of Ataman Struk, chieftain of a marauding gang, who, using a pair of tailor's scissors, first cuts off Magazinnik brother's beard and then his head. Ukrainians are allowed to exist in their own homeland only on the margins so as to create a backdrop against which Jews appear as helpless victims and Russian occupiers as liberators. Thus, completely depopulated of its indigenous people, Ukraine appears in *Commissar* as a no-man's land, a trophy that needs to be taken possession of. A Russian soldier quite in sync with such a view says, "Ukraine will be ours! Sooner or later, she will be ours!"

Ukraine undergoes cinematic depopulation not only in the movies made by such Russian film studios as the Mosfilm, Lenfilm, or Gorky Studios but by the Ukrainian Oleksander Dovzhenko Studios and Odesa Studios. Their movies shaped the worldview and self-vision of millions of Soviet, including Ukrainian, viewers. They created a standard of how the colonized territories were to be represented on the Soviet screen, a kind of norm of perceiving them so deeply internalized by both filmmakers and those who watched and were influenced by their films that neither the former nor the latter saw any problem or lack of verisimilitude in the fact that Russian culture and language were consistently "ascribed" to Ukraine as its defining feature. Such a representational mode went hand in hand with the peculiar speech practice whereby the toponym Ukraine was rarely allowed to be used in the Soviet official discourse without the attributes "Soviet" or "our Soviet", as is exemplified by the title of Oleksander Dovzhenko's feature documentary *The Battle for Our Soviet Ukraine* (1943) or the title of the main organ of the Ukrainian Communist Party, the newspaper *Soviet Ukraine*.^[20]

There is a great number of important and popular Soviet movies with stories placed in a Ukraine completely or partially cleansed of Ukrainians, their culture, language, sensibilities, history, collective experiences, memories, and other elements of their national identity. Partial depopulation means that Ukrainians on screen become a caricature, a collection of two-dimensional and primitive clichés created by the colonizer and imposed upon the colonized. Their identity does not emanate from the Ukrainians as their shared self-vision and the values that unite them into a national community. A Ukraine thus appropriated by the Russian colonizers as their natural territory is presented as an inseparable part of the Russian living space, quite along the lines of the old Soviet-era adage "Moscow is the capital, Leningrad

[20] Y. Shevchuk, *Linguistic Strategies of Imperial Appropriation. Why Ukraine Is Absent from the World Film History*, [in:] *Contemporary Ukraine on the*

Cultural Map of Europe, eds. L.M.L. Zaleska Onyshkevych, M.G. Rewakowicz, Armonk, NY 2009, pp. 359–374.

is a museum, and Kyiv is the place to live.”[21] There are dozens of Soviet films that use this mode of representation of Ukraine. Some of the most popular such movies that shaped the worldview of generations of Soviet moviegoers are: *The Young Guard* (1948), *Maksim Perepelitsa* (1956), *Spring on Zerechnaya Street* (1957), *Evenings at the Homestead near Dykanka* (1961), *The Gas Station Queen* (1963), *The Elusive Avengers* (1966), *Wedding in Malinovka* and *Viy* (both 1967), *Trembita* and *The New Adventurers of the Elusive Avengers* (both 1968), TV series *His Excellency's Aide-de-Camp* (1969), *Twelve Chairs* (1971), *Only Aces Go To Combat*, TV series *The Old Fortress* (both 1973), TV series *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1973), *The Days of the Turbins* (1976) and others.

The mini-series *How the Steel Was Tempered* is a highly typical example of the cinematic depopulation of a colony. It's a revolutionary drama based on the eponymous novel by the Russian writer Nikolai Ostrovsky, whose action unfolds against the background of the Russian Bolsheviks' war of reconquest of Ukraine after the emergence of the Ukrainian People's Republic in 1917, essentially a colonial war of aggression, traditionally described both in Soviet and Western historiography as a Russian civil war.[22] The persistence of this colonial vision in Western scholarship is evidenced by *The Story of Russia*, yet another academic history of Russia by British historian Orlando Figes, published in 2022. The chapter “Revolutionary Russia” dedicated to the period of 1917–1921 does not mention Ukraine's liberation struggle and treats that country simply as the venue of the Russian Civil War and essentially a part of Russia.[23] Ukrainian placenames are transcribed into English from Russian, not Ukrainian: Kiev, not Kyiv, Vladimir Vol[ynsky], not Volodymyr, Kharkov, not Kharkiv, Chernigov, not Chernihiv, and so on.[24] Thus used the descriptor ‘civil war’ implies an effective erasure of Ukrainians from the historical narrative since a civil war is waged within one and the same nation.

All the events in the miniseries unfold around the Ukrainian town of Shepetivka and the city of Kyiv, the historical capital of Ukraine. Both locations are presented essentially as parts of the Russian cultural space, with all the characters speaking Russian. The miniseries was produced by the Oleksander Dovzhenko Film Studio in Kyiv, directed by the Soviet Ukrainian film director Mykola Mashchenko. Its protagonist Pavel Korchagin is played by the Russian actor Vladimir Konkin, but most of the rest of its cast are Ukrainian actors, including the iconic Kostiantyn Stepankov. Nevertheless, the miniseries is a Russian story with Russian characters, taking place in what essentially appears to be Russia.

[21] In the Russian original the adage reads as “Москва – столица, Ленинград – музей, а в Киеве жить можно.”

[22] R.G. Suny, *The Soviet Experiment. Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, New York – Oxford 1998, p. 104.

[23] O. Figes, *The Story of Russia*, New York 2022, pp. 185–210.

[24] Ibidem, p. 184.

**Cinematic
depopulation
and linguistic
Russification**

Cinematic depopulation is a representational strategy that takes effect within a complex set of parameters that are regarded as essential for the national attribution of any given film. In his seminal article “The Concept of National Cinema,” Andrew Higson argues that the concept of national cinema has been appropriated in a variety of ways: economic, text-based, consumption-based, and criticism-led approaches. The one that seems helpful for this analysis is what he calls the “text-based approach to national cinema. Here the key questions become: What are these films about? Do they share a common style or world view? What sort of projections of national character do they offer? To what extent are they engaged in ‘exploring, questioning and constructing a notion of nationhood in the films themselves and in the consciousness of the viewer?’ [25] With the view of the cinematic depopulation, the list can be extended by such questions as: What relationship between a nation and the land it has historically occupied do the films create? What language are the films made in that of the colonizer or the colonized? With what audience in mind are they made? The most effective and frequently used means of cleansing Ukraine from its indigenous people on screen is by Russifying the movie’s characters, making them speak Russian instead of Ukrainian.

If for international viewers the language issue is of secondary importance, since the film is screened dubbed or subtitled in the language of the respective exhibition market, that issue assumes political and symbolic significance in the context of Soviet and post-Soviet space, with its relentless Russification and ongoing colonial dynamic that determines who gets the voice: the colonizer or the colonized. Every country appears in the imagination of its citizens and the outside world as historically linked with the language of its titular nationality: England is thus identified with the English language, France with French, Poland with Polish, Germany with German, Japan with Japanese, Greece with Greek, Turkey with Turkish and so on. Countries like Canada, Belgium, Ireland, or Switzerland are exceptions to this rule since they have either more than one official language or inherited languages of their former imperial rulers. However, such an association between a country and a language is often a crude generalization that obfuscates a much more complicated reality and, in particular, the fact that there are dialects and even other languages that coexist with the official one. Citizens of France also speak Basque, Breton, Corsican, Arabic, and German. Spaniards also speak Basque, Catalan, and Galician; Israelis also speak Yiddish and Arabic. Still, the association between a country and its official language, whether real or imaginary, exists as a logical construct supported by the etymological link between the name of the language and the country that is the primary area of its distribution. This logic prompts people to expect, not without good reason, that

[25] A. Higson, *The Concept of National Cinema*, “Screen” 1989, no. 30(4), p. 36.

French is spoken in French movies, English in movies made in England, Spanish in those made in Spain, Greek in Greek films, Ukrainian in Ukrainian films, and so on. However, in the latter case, this is not quite so, or it is better to say this has, until recently, not been the case at all, since there exists a large body of films and TV series that break this logic and instead create an association of Ukraine with the Russian language, culture, and people, erasing Ukrainians from their ancestral homeland. Instead of staying forever in the past, this colonialist policy is still very much with us and may even be gaining momentum due to the easy availability of Soviet and post-Soviet films and TV series on the internet and such platforms as YouTube.[26]

There are films whose stories unfold in one country, for example, Austria, but whose characters are played by actors from a different country, for example, France, who speak the language of that different country—French. Such films do not automatically fall under the representational mode of cinematic depopulation since the essential precondition of the latter is that the nations and cultures involved have a history of colonizer-colonized relations. Thus, Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* (2001) takes place in Vienna, Austria, and three major roles are played by French actors (Isabelle Huppert as Erika Kohut, Annie Girardot as The Mother, Benoît Magimel as Walter Klemmer, all of whom speak French as well as the rest of the characters, at least in the film's international release).[27] Yet the film's representational mode is not that of cinematic depopulation, since there is no context of colonial relations between France and Austria and no body of films that consistently populate Austria with the French and erase the Austrian identity in its homeland.[28]

A textbook case of the cinematic depopulation of Ukraine on the Soviet screen is the love drama *Spring on Zarechnaya Street*, written and directed by Marlen Khutsiev and Feliks Mironer and produced by the Odesa Film Studios in 1956. Its story takes place in post-war Ukraine in a steelworker town. A young teachers-college graduate, Tatiana Levchenko, arrives in town to teach Russian language and literature to what, in a non-colonial situation, should be a grade of Ukrainian steelworkers. Yet what the viewer sees are Russian characters throughout, all speaking Russian. The only vestiges of their Ukrainian identity are their family names: Levchenko, Savchenko, Zhurchenko, Bondar, Ishchenko, Donchenko, Migulko, Revenko, Nazarenko.[29] The movie was shot in two Ukrainian cities, Zaporizhzhia and Odesa, but they come across as a Russian ethnoscape, populated by Russians. The film appropriates Ukraine, its young post-war generation portrayed as Russian, for Russia. It denies Ukrainian identity a future, reducing it to

[26] For instance, the Russian internet resource <http://film.arjlover.net/film/> offers access to some 6,174 Soviet and post-Soviet movies of all genres.

[27] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Piano_Teacher_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Piano_Teacher_(film)) (accessed: 19.12.2022).

[28] My thanks to Argemino Barro for bringing to my attention Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher*.

[29] For morphological attributes of typical Ukrainian family names see: Y. Shevchuk, *Ukrainian-English Collocation Dictionary*, New York 2021, p. xvi.

invisibility. The song *The Spring Will Come*, which is the musical theme of the movie, is also about imperial appropriation. On the surface of things, it is about the sentimental attachment of the lyrical character to the street where he was born, grew up, and met his true love, and, through the street, an attachment to his homeland, for it is the entire homeland that the street is supposed to symbolize:

There are many glorious streets in the world
But I won't change my address.
You, my home street, have become
The main street in my destiny.[30]

In the reality of Soviet-occupied Ukraine at the time of the film's release and today during the all-out Russian war against Ukraine, this otherwise touching song sounds ominous, since it suggests that there is nothing wrong when the Russian viewers think of a street and a city in Ukraine as if it were Russian, it is only natural to treat Ukraine that way. It is in no small part due to films like *Spring on Zarechnaia Street* that Russians viewed then and continue to view Ukraine now as part of Russia. The colonial optic of Ukraine offered in the film has had a long-lasting effect due to the film's great popularity with the Soviet and even post-Soviet viewers, both Russian and Ukrainian. The film is often referred to as one of the most popular movies of the Thaw Period.[31] It was seen by more than 30.12 million people at the time.[32] Its continuing influence is evidenced by the fact that the Odesa Studio undertook the project of coloring *Spring on Zarechnaia Street*, originally black-and-white, and, in 2010, presented it to the Ukrainian public at a special screening with a great fanfare.

Cinematic depopulation in the Post-Soviet era

The cinematic depopulation of Ukraine continued to be widely used after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This strategy marks not some marginal movies or directors but those that enjoyed great popularity and even became emblematic of their time, models for emulation by the younger generation of filmmakers. It is this status that the movies by Kira Muratova both before and after 1991 have enjoyed. Muratova depopulates Ukraine most consistently. With some exceptions, the stories of her films unfold in Ukraine, in the Ukrainian city of Odesa, to be precise.[33] All the characters are Russians or Little Russians on the threshold of Russification. By their narrative, senses, cultural content, and language, her films are Russian stories unfolding in a Ukraine devoid of any meaningful civilizational presence of Ukrainians and represented on the screen as an essentially Russian ethnoscape. Muratova invites the iconic Russian actors Oleg Tabakov,

[30] <https://teksty-pesenok.ru/rus-nikolaj-rybnikov/tekst-pesni-vesna-na-zarechnoj-ulice/1875175/> (accessed: 27.11.2012), my translation.

[31] https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Весна_на_Зарічній_вулиці (accessed: 27.11.2012).

[32] <https://kp.ua/culture/257708-v-odesse-vpervye-v-myre-proshla-premera-tsvetnoho-fylma-vesna-na-zarechnoi-ulytse> (accessed: 27.11.2012).

[33] Muratova's 1994 love drama *Passions* might be an exception.

Alla Demidova, Renata Litvinova, Nina Ruslanova and others to play lead roles. Ukrainian actors like Natalia Buzko, Heorhii Deliiiev, Uta Kilter, Oleksandra Svenska and even Bohdan Stupka (*Two in One*, 2007), the most iconic Ukrainian film and theater actor of the last thirty years, speak Russian and therefore appear to be Russian in her films.

It would be inaccurate to maintain that there are no Ukrainians in the body of Muratova's movies, although the mode of their representation is informed by the logic of the cinematic depopulation, partial or complete. In *The Long Farewell* (1971), whose plot also unfolds in Odesa, nobody at all speaks Ukrainian most probably because, according to the widespread imperial myth, Odesa is a "historically Russian city."^[34] In her *Asthenic Syndrome* (1989) and *Two in One*, the macaronic mixture of Ukrainian with Russian known as surzhyk is sometimes used. An episodic character in *Chekhov's Motifs* (2002) out of the blue parodies the Ukrainian modernist poet Pavlo Tychyna and, with him, the Ukrainian language as such. Muratova's Ukraine is in fact Russia. One is hard pressed to hear Ukrainian voices in her films and if they do sound, they are voices of the socially marginalized. Muratova's filmmaking has been hailed both in Russia and, strangely, but not unexpectedly, in Ukraine. She did not consider herself to be a Ukrainian filmmaker.^[35]

Muratova has her followers among a younger generation of Ukrainian filmmakers such as Eva Neiman and Aleksandr Shapiro. Shapiro places the action of most of his movies in Kyiv, Ukraine, including such films as *Tsykuta* (2002), *Traveler* (2004), *Happy People* (2005), *Without Porno* (2007), and *Casting* (2008), *Dnieper* (2010), *The Last Day of the Euro Cup* (2013).^[36] In all of them, Ukraine is depopulated, their characters are in effect Russian colonists who live in Kyiv, not Ukrainians. At the end of Shapiro's movie *Dnieper*, the name of the country's main river is uttered with pathos in several languages including Russian. Ukrainian, however, is not one of them.

Eva Neiman's *By the River* (2007) takes place in Berdychiv, the same one that appears in Askoldov's *Commissar*,^[37] the difference being that this time around it is a post-Soviet Berdychiv of the 2000s, yet once again completely cleansed of Ukrainians and depicted as a provincial corner of the Russian cultural and geographic space. The real

[34] This imperial mythology is debunked by Zéev (Vladimir) Zhabotynskii, a prominent Zionist leader born in Odesa:

Even if it was a city in Russia and in my time very Russified in language, Odesa was not really a Russian city. Nor was it a Jewish city, though Jews were probably the largest ethnic community, particularly when one takes into account that half of the so-called Russians were actually Ukrainians [...]

The quote is taken from: P. Herlihy, *Odessa: a History, 1794–1914*, Harvard 1986, p. 250.

[35] In a phone conversation with me in spring of 2005 on the occasion of her retrospective at the Lincoln Center Film Society in New York City, she asked, "Why would the Ukrainian Film Club at Columbia University take interest in my films? They are all made in Russian, aren't they?"

[36] https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Шаніпо_Олександр_Борисович (accessed: 5.12.2022).

[37] In reality, *Commissar* was shot in the city of Kamianets, located in the southwest of Ukraine.

geography of the city seems to be of no importance to the director; it is defined by the Russian language spoken by all the characters – the seventy-year-old protagonist and her mother who go out for a walk. The viewer perceives the city they live in as a Russian ethnoscape. Thus, depopulated of Ukrainians, Berdychiv is cinematically appropriated for the colonizer as a Russian city. The effect of depopulation is reinforced by the fact that the lead roles are played by the well-known Russian actors Nina Ruslanova and Marina Politseimako.

The colonialist nature of the representational mode of cinematic depopulation becomes apparent when one applies it to other countries. Can one, as a matter of thought experiment, imagine a French movie with a Paris where everybody speaks only German, an Indian movie with a Mumbai where everybody speaks only Mandarin, a South Korean movie with a Seoul whose inhabitants speak only Japanese, a Greek movie where Athenians speak only Turkish, a Russian movie with a Moscow whose inhabitants speak American English and so on? These questions seem rhetorical. Such movies are conceivable in the genres of science fiction or in some kind of dystopia, but not as the norm or a representational canon. Otherwise, the viewer would rightly conclude that Paris has again been occupied by the Germans, Mumbai is for some reason occupied by the Chinese, Seoul by the Japanese, Athens by the Turks, and Moscow by the Americans. Such a cinematic depopulation of these spaces and its presentation as the norm of cultural production would provoke a scandal in French, Indian, South Korean, Greek, or Russian societies.

However, this representational norm formed in the Soviet era has so far caused no objections among Ukrainian viewers, criticism among film critics, or desire to problematize and deconstruct it among film scholars both in Ukraine and outside. It is to the strategy of the cinematic depopulation of Ukraine that the imperial myths of Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv and other Ukrainian cities as “naturally Russian-speaking” owe their persistence. Dozens of movies and TV series have been made over the period of Ukraine’s independence where the action takes place in Ukraine without Ukrainians, without any visual cues of Ukrainian culture, without Ukrainian advertisements, street names, signs of institutions, license plates, and other attributes of the *linguistic landscape* indispensable for any other independent country as opposed to a colony.^[38] The specific structure of the linguistic landscape has a direct bearing on the cinematographic ethnoscape. It can serve as a powerful enhancement of the latter if both represent one and the same national culture, in our case study, Ukrainian. Such an alignment is the norm for a non-colonial situation or a nation that achieved complete decolonization. In a colonial setting, linguistic landscape clashes with

[38] Linguistic landscape is understood here as the “visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region.”

R. Landry, R.Y. Bourhis, *Linguistic Landscape and*

Ethnolinguistic Vitality. An Empirical Study, “Journal of Language and Social Psychology” 1997, no. 16(1), p. 23.

the ethnoscape when the former represents the colonizer's culture within the topography of the colony. Such a contradiction between language and place is a salient feature of cinematographic depopulation as a representational mode.

Cinematographic depopulation in today's post-Soviet context has been legitimized by the business practice that I will, for lack of a better word, call the *Lozhkin doctrine* or the assertion that the Ukrainian-language cultural content does not sell. In the second half of the 1990s, Kharkiv-based businessman Borys Lozhkin founded the United Media Holding Group, a conglomerate that subsequently became one of the biggest in Europe and included printed press, radio, television, and the internet, as well as the publishing rights for such international magazines as "Forbes" and "Vogue." Not a single product of his media empire was made in Ukrainian because, as Lozhkin notoriously claimed, a Ukrainian-language product does not sell in Ukraine, even Ukrainian consumers allegedly do not buy it. Therefore, his consistent refusal to produce Ukrainian content was informed not by his animus for things Ukrainian but simply by commonsense economic calculations.[39] The aforementioned Ukrainian cities that are "naturally and historically Russian-speaking" are perceived that way only because Russians who populate them speak for and about Ukrainians, while Ukrainian voices are silenced.

This business philosophy was also motivated by the desire to sell movies and TV series that presented Ukraine without Ukrainians in the much larger, and therefore more profitable, market of the so-called Commonwealth of Independent States, a Russian imperial shorthand for the territories of the former USSR, where Russian continued to be widely spoken. As was explained to me on more than one occasion by Ukrainian filmmakers who made such films, in addition to shooting them all in Russian, the linguistic landscape they presented also had to be by all means Russian, not Ukrainian, since the Ukrainian street and commercial signs, license plates, advertisements, and other similar things irritated and repelled Russian audiences.

Another often-heard justification for not using Ukrainian in film dialogues is the assertion that nobody speaks it and using it would be in contradiction with the objective reality of Ukraine, the implication here being that filmmaking ought to reflect that objective reality rather than create a reality of its own. The *objective reality argument* is colonial in its essence and is invoked only to legitimize the imperial mythology implanted in the viewers' minds that the Ukrainian language is not spoken in Ukraine. When reality contradicts this mythology, the quasi-reality of the "historically Russian Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv, Sevastopol, etc." is then manufactured on screen. Meanwhile, the reality in Ukraine has

[39] https://galinfo.com.ua/news/ukrainomovna_pre-sa_nevygidna__glava_ap_lozhkin_164510.html (accessed: 5.12.2022).

always been different from imperial mythology. According to the latest Ukrainian population census of 2001, 67.5% (+2.8%)[40] of Ukrainian citizens declared Ukrainian to be their mother tongue and 29.6% (-3.2%) Russian.[41] In the Province (Oblast) of Odesa, 46.3% (+5.1%) of citizens declared Ukrainian to be their mother tongue, while 41.9% (-5.2%) Russian; in the Province of Kharkiv, this correlation was respectively 53.8% (+3.3%) and 44.3% (-3.8%),[42] in the city of Kyiv it was 71.1% (+14.5%) and 25.3% (-15.8%).[43] However, the viewer of Soviet and even post-Soviet films comes away with an impression that Ukraine is populated not by Ukrainians but by Russians. Such a rhetorically fabricated Ukraine implanted in the mass imagination is the very simulacrum that Jean Baudrillard wrote about: “To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn’t have. [...] simulation threatens the difference between the “true” and the “false,” the “real” and the “imaginary.”[44]

The practice of cinematographic depopulation proved to be so successful and effective that many generations of Soviet and even post-Soviet consumers of film products were conditioned to react to the Ukrainian language in movies as something “unnatural,” “phony,” and contradicting the reality of life. The colonial paradox here is the Ukrainian film and TV content production industry appears to be more and more at odds with the pronounced tendency of the growing number of citizens who switch to Ukrainian and the concomitantly decreasing numbers of Russian-speakers in the country. Thus, in August 2020, 73.4% of Ukrainian citizens considered Ukrainian to be their mother tongue and 22% Russian.[45] According to the more recent national poll published in late March 2022, 77% consider Ukrainian to be their mother tongue, while 20% consider it to be Russian.[46]

New forms of cinematic depopulation on television

After the Soviet collapse, the depopulation of Ukraine continued and assumed new forms in TV content production both in Russia and Ukraine. This representation mode was widely used in Ukrainian movies and series meant not so much for the national but foreign market, which comprised all the former republics of the defunct USSR and the Russian-speaking consumer in the Soviet diaspora in such countries as the United States, Canada, and Israel. A typical representative of the long list of such titles is the love drama *The Button*, directed by Volodymyr Tykhyi and written by Irena Rozdobudko. In it, Kyiv is a completely

[40] The corresponding value of the 1989 census is given in parentheses, where a plus sign indicates an increase and the minus sign a decrease.

[41] <http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/results/general/language/> (accessed: 5.12.2022).

[42] <http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/results/general/language/kharkiv/> (accessed: 5.12.2022).

[43] http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/results/general/language/city_kyiv/ (accessed: 5.12.2022).

[44] J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor 1994, p. 3.

[45] That is according to the public opinion poll conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Fund and the Razumkov Center, <https://prostirsvo-body.org/img/ck341/plugins/filemanager/browser/default/images/Stan.pdf> (accessed: 5.12.2022).

[46] https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/language_issue_in_ukraine_march_19th_2022.html (accessed: 5.12.2022).

Russian city, and if one hears a Ukrainian word, it is usually presented as an exoticism that is phonetically Russified.

The first episode of the popular Russian series *Silver Spoon* (2014) begins with immediately recognizable views of the Ukrainian capital. The National Opera House, Bohdan Khmelnytsky Street, Khreshchatyk, and Independence Square – all stake out the spatial parameters of the series. Its venue is Kyiv, but the city is not Ukrainian; it is occupied by Russian characters who speak Russian with a clear Moscow inflection, produce and operate with Russian senses and work as Russian policemen wearing Russian uniforms and insignia. The linguistic landscape is clearly and unequivocally Russian. The viewer is served this idea that the Russian colonizer had not yet translated into the reality of the year 2013 but translated it into the cinematic reality quite convincingly, if to judge things by the series popularity in Russia, Ukraine, and other countries, translated it with the participation of Ukrainian talent.[47]

Other popular Ukrainian TV series that actively resort to cinematic depopulation, whether partial or complete, are *The National Guard* «Гвардія», [48] *15 Vladymirskaiia Street* «Володимирська, 15», [49] *The Prosecutors* «Прокурори», [50] *Nikonov & Co.* «Никонов и Ко», [51] and *The Snoop* «Нюхач-2». [52] The latter was the first Ukraine-produced TV series to be streamed on Netflix. [53] Curiously, the Russian website www.kino-teatr.ru correctly describes these series, all made in Ukraine, as coming from the “near abroad” rather than from Ukraine, probably because there is little about it that is Ukrainian. All of them were released after the outbreak of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014.

Perhaps the most notorious and well-known recent case study of the partial cinematic depopulation of Ukraine with extraordinarily far-reaching consequences is the TV series *Servant of the People* with Volodymyr Zelensky in the lead role. Produced by Studio Kvarstal 95, founded and co-owned by Zelensky, [54] it premiered in November 2015, when Russia had already launched a war of neocolonial aggression against Ukraine and the Ukrainian territories of Crimea and Donbas had fallen under the real, as opposed to cinematic, Russian occupation. The comedy series is about a humble history teacher, Vasyly Petrovych Holoborodko, in a Kyiv secondary school who, by a quirk of fortune, is elected President of Ukraine. Ukraine in the series is presented as if it were already discursively occupied by Russians. It is populated by Russians. All principal characters speak Russian, behave and think like

[47] Seasons 1 and 2 of this Russian series were streamed on Netflix.

[48] <https://www.kinopoisk.ru/series/893995/> (accessed: 5.12.2022).

[49] <https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/post/117193/annot/> (accessed: 5.12.2022).

[50] <https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/post/118386/annot/> (accessed: 5.12.2022).

[51] <https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/post/116771/annot/> (accessed: 5.12.2022).

[52] <https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/post/107540/annot/> (accessed: 5.12.2022).

[53] <https://life.pravda.com.ua/culture/2022/12/12/251805/> (accessed: 12.12.2022).

[54] https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Студия_Квартал-95 (accessed: 5.12.2022).

Russians, and invoke Russian symbols and values. Russians are dominant in the Ukraine of Zelensky, which is cinematically cleansed of its indigenous people. The linguistic landscape of this series is Ukrainian inasmuch as institution and street signs are in Ukrainian. The language of dialogues is Russian. Essentially Russian characters totally dominate the government, education, business, and city streets in the series. There are no Ukrainians in the conventional sense of the word, ethnical or political. Instead, an occasional actor pretends to be Ukrainian while most, including the protagonist, sporting a recognizably Ukrainian name, does not even bother to pretend. In one emblematic dialogue, the protagonist, who as the President of Ukraine is required to read a speech in Ukrainian, the nation's official language, says in Russian, "No, I'll stay who I am and will speak Russian!"^[55] Ukrainian is used as a decoration designed to mitigate the total hegemony of the Russian language, Russian senses, values, and culture in the series. An occasional extra will utter an occasional word, phrase, or even sentence in Ukrainian as if to signify a Ukraine on the verge of complete Russification, a Ukraine alien and hostile to things Ukrainian. Other occasional extras are crude racist caricatures of Ukrainians—racism in this series, as in most TV content produced by the Studio Kvartal 95, parades as comedy. The series' authors use comedy, humor, and parody to protect their messages that are deeply colonialist and even racist against criticism. They deploy postmodernist discursive technique to make their messages acceptable to the general viewership. This strategy has been exposed concerning a different film product broadcasting Russian propaganda and Russian imperial stereotypes of Ukrainians:

The most cannibalistic ideas are wrapped in irony and even self-irony. On this principle, in essence, modern trolling is based. Putin and the stars of his agitprop like Vladimir Solovyov, Dmitry Kiselev, Maria Zakharova and Margarita Simonyan, among others, have proven themselves to be masters of the genre. The inability to distinguish the statement of a view from a parody of it and vice versa has become known in internet jargon as "Poe's law:" "without a clear indicator of the author's intent, every parody of extreme views can be mistaken by some readers for a sincere expression of the views being parodied."^[56]

The public reception of the TV series "*Servant of the People*" indicates that Ukrainian society is still deeply beholden to Russian culture and its imperial values/anti-values. The series undeniably colonialist messages including Ukraine as the country populated by caricatures of Ukrainians, messy and chaotic Ukrainian politics as a function of Ukrainians' inability for self-government, and others provoked scathing criticism by scholars, journalists, and analysts together with accusations

[55] <https://www.svoboda.org/a/27470700.html> (accessed: 5.12.2022).

[56] M. Lipovetsky, *Brother 2 as a political melodrama. Twenty years later, Balabanov's film serves to justify war with Ukraine*, https://russiapost.info/society/brother_2 (accessed: 5.12.2022).

of Ukrainophobia,[57] of denigrating the Ukrainian language, identity, and national dignity.[58] However, the general Ukrainian viewership proved so well-conditioned by such colonialist representations of their culture that yet another instance of cinematographic depopulation of Ukraine provoked no protests in larger society. On the contrary, the series went on to its second and third seasons and proved so wildly popular that it became a universally shared view among political observers in Ukraine and abroad that the series propelled Volodymyr Zelensky from the fictional to the real office of the President of Ukraine four years later by an unprecedented landslide victory of 73%.

The representational mode of cinematic depopulation is a variety of cultural aggression aimed at erasing a colonized nation, its identity, language, and culture from its historical territory and at the discursive occupation of its territory by the imperial culture as if that territory were part of its own living space. It relies on a set of strategies that include: (1) replacing the language of the colonized with that of the colonizer, or (2) replacing the language of the colonized with an expressively limited and socially stigmatizing macaronic mixture (surzhyk); (3) deploying demeaning racist stereotypes of the colonized people as a reductionist representation of their identity and thus encouraging the viewers to reject their own cultural selves and “voluntarily” embrace the imperial culture as superior, more modern, and prestigious; (4) cleansing the linguistic landscape of the colonized of all visual cues of their culture and marking the landscape with visual cues of the imperial culture; (5) populating the colony with characters that are cinematographic equivalents of colonial settlers, bearers of the imperial identity. Cinematic depopulation implants into the consciousness of the viewer, both imperial and colonized, the idea that it is possible to imagine the colony without its indigenous population, without its indigenous culture, language, and stories.

Ukraine and Ukrainians have not been the only targets of this form of cultural aggression. It is not inconceivable that other former and current Russian colonies, such as Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tadjikistan, etc., received similar treatment in Russian films of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. It is the consistent depopulation of the Crimea of its indigenous Crimean Tatars on the Soviet silver screen that enables the Kremlin propaganda today to aggressively peddle the idea of Crimea’s sacrality to the Russian self-vision, another imperial fabrication that is reiterated both in Ukrainian and Western media often without due critical examination and factual verification.

Conclusion

[57] https://web.archive.org/web/20170206172143/http://vgolos.com.ua/articles/ukraina_bez_ukraint-siv_yak_naslidok_patriotychnoi_rusyfikatsii_228406.html (accessed: 5.12.2022).

[58] <https://web.archive.org/web/20161013144746/http://www.nasze-slowo.pl/пострелволюційна-патріотична-русифік/> (accessed: 5.12.2022).

The cinematic depopulation has been and continues to be an element of hybrid aggression, information war, and neocolonialism, meant to conquer Ukraine, not by military but cinematic and discursive means, and, in doing so, prepare its physical occupation, its re-colonization.

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