

# *Methods for designing strategic narratives in the description of the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian war in documentaries*

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The article discusses methods of designing strategic narratives in teledocumentaries created by various production teams and distributed through the YouTube platform. The authors underline the important role of teledocumentaries in creating an emotional and intellectual response to geopolitical topics among television viewers and attempt to analyse six documentaries focusing on the current war in Ukraine. The aim of the research was to determine key narrative patterns that are presented by production teams from various countries in the context of the armed aggression of the Russian forces in Ukraine. From this research, we can outline three main narrative templates: identity issues ("Us" vs. "Them"), temporal cognition and feeling of "stopping the time", the image of enemy intertwined with death, unforgiveness and fear.

**KEYWORDS:** Ukraine, teledocumentaries, documentaries, documentary, television, war, narration, Russian aggression

Teledocumentaries are extremely efficient means of delivering important social information, a kind of emotional alternative to news stories. A documentary, in contrast to news, gives a voice to the immediate participants of events, and gives the viewer an opportunity for compassion.[1] On one hand, it can be noted that in this case it does not mean absolute impartiality in presenting what is depicted, which is a certain ideal of journalism. However, on the other hand, the viewer becomes more deeply involved due to emotional intelligence.[2]

During the period of the major challenges Ukraine and the whole world are experiencing now, the socio-cultural role of teledocumentaries is only growing, which is proved by a significant amount of film footage being shot by the film directors from different countries. Due to high factual precision and credibility in recording events, and

[1] C. Borum Chattoo, W. Jenkins, *From reel life to real social change: the role of contemporary social-issue documentary in U.S. public policy*, "Media, Culture & Society" 2019, no. 41(8), pp. 1107–1124.

[2] Ibidem.

an approach on the part of the author which involves combining facts and artistic devices as well as new technological possibilities, teledocumentaries have become a means of helping viewers comprehend the deep-seated social contents of the events being depicted.

In most contemporary teledocumentary footage, one can trace individual people's storylines and original stories; sometimes a film director builds a scenario around a person's or a family's story, i.e. teledocumentaries have taken on a form of visual storytelling. Through emotional compassion this content has a powerful impact on the viewer, penetrating in such a way into personal and mental areas, creating the constructs that become notions and then beliefs. It is important to research such constructs in the situation of creating a new crisis media context related, in particular, to understanding the situation of war occurring in your country or another country. The narratives of documentary films based on certain initial constructs are important to create the vision of the situation with the eyes of film makers, with the eyes of a certain nation. These narratives, often resulting from bigger, national, international, general human narratives, are based on a certain historic experience, similar narratives of other periods, on the values, which are national or panhuman.

In 2022 Europe and the world experienced a bloody invasion not seen since World War II, one that brings into question democratic values, and the international agreements and ideas about security developed during the last century. The intellectual and emotional comprehension of these events is extremely important for the mental experience of all people in the world, and it is documentaries that make it possible to have two areas of perception involved – intellectual and emotional.

Due to modern information delivery channels such as YouTube, Netflix, etc., information becomes quickly available for wide circles of viewers who request not simply news information but the fixation of facts and experience. This also boosts the popularity of the documentary. Thus, the topicality of the research is specified by modern-day society's demands for historic truth, a need to assess the specific nature of documentaries' impact on the information consumer through the narratives being transmitted, and to analyze the focus and sources of these narratives in the Ukrainian cultural field and cultural fields of other peoples.

Scientists the world over have studied the special tools documentary uses for its impact, particularly: emotional impregnation, dramatism, means of visual influence, scenario approaches natural, etc.

In particular, the researcher Patricia Aufderheide poses a question about the nature of teledocumentaries themselves as art or historical truth, specifying that a documentary is "a movie that does its best to represent real life and doesn't manipulate it." She notes that teledocumentaries still have a notable subjective impregnation: "And yet? There is no way to make a film without manipulating the information.

Selections of topic, editing, mixing sound are all manipulating.”[3] The author draws attention exactly to the ambivalent nature of teledocumentaries – on one hand, journalistic documentation of events, and on the other one, a piece of art with all its subjectivism:

We do not demand that these things be portrayed objectively, and they do not have to be the complete truth. The filmmaker may employ poetic license from time to time and refer to reality symbolically... But we not expect that a documentary will be a fair and honest representation of somebody’s experience of reality.[4]

It is important that in her monograph Patricia Aufderheide draws attention to an important social task of teledocumentaries – to be a speaker of society’s expectations, groups of people, and, correspondingly, to form ideas about these groups of people:

The importance of documentary is thus linked to notions of the public as a social phenomenon... A public is a group of people who can act together for the public good and so can hold to account the entrenched power of business and government. It is informal body than can come together in crisis if need be.[5]

In his work, the researcher Tony Grajeda analyzes several documentary films about war, determining the specificity of the directors’ and cameramen’s work, as well as establishing the level of the possible impact on the viewer, which is also topical for our research.[6]

Dean Williams,[7] Rachel Gabara,[8] R. Stones,[9] Alexandra Juhasz, Alisa Lebow[10] were also involved into researching the documentary as a phenomenon of journalism and cinematic art.

In Ukrainian scientific discourse, one can distinguish several works important for our research. It draws particular attention to how A. Chervinchuk in the publication *Concept of “Enemy”: Representation in Ukrainian Military Documentary Films (2015–2018)*[11] establishes that the concept of the “enemy” is one of the most constitutive for the Ukrainian media context in depicting the events of Ukraine’s armed resistance to Russian aggression. L. Pidkuimukha[12] also works in

[3] P. Aufderheide, *Documentary Film. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford – New York, NY 2007, p. 4.

[4] Ibidem.

[5] Ibidem, p. 5.

[6] T. Grajeda, *The winning and losing of hearts and minds: Vietnam, Iraq, and the claims of the war documentary*, “Jump Cut” 2007, no. 49, pp. 1–23.

[7] D. Williams, *Australian Post-War Documentary Film. An Arc of Mirrors*, Bristol – Chicago 2008.

[8] R. Gabara, *War by Documentary*, “Romance Notes” 2015, no. 3(55), pp. 409–423.

[9] R. Stones, *Social theory, the civic imagination and documentary film: A past-modern critique of the Bloody Bosnia seasons the roots of war*, “Sociology” 2002, no. 2(36), pp. 355–376.

[10] *A companion to contemporary documentary film*. Chichester, eds. A. Juhasz, A. Lebow, West Sussex – Malden, MA 2015.

[11] A. Chervinchuk, *The concept of enemy: representation in the ukrainian military documentaries*, “Вісник Львівського університету. Серія журналістика” 2021, no. 49, pp. 90–98.

[12] L. Pidkuimukha, *The Image of “Friend” and “Enemy” in the Modern Ukrainian Military Documentaries*, “Dialog der Sprachen – Dialog der Kulturen: die Ukraine aus globaler Sicht” 2019, <http://ekmair.ukma.edu.ua/handle/123456789/21324>, pp. 633–643.

a similar problematic, researching the image of “friend”/“enemy” in military teledocumentaries.

I. Havran and M. Botvin consider the place of documentaries in contemporary onscreen discourse.[13]

Małgorzata Hendrykowska actualizes the topicality of the metaphor of WWII in the material under research, which, as the media materials in question show, remains productive with regard to the world's historic memory about sanguinary wars: “The persistence of WWII as a «master metaphor» can be heard resonating into the current debate over how to frame and rationalize the «war on terror» (which will be addressed shortly).”[14] Małgorzata Hendrykowska's study contains one more definition, which she formulates based on John Grierson, characterizing the documentary film as a “creative interpretation of reality”.

Two studies by Mirosław Przyłipiak of *Poetics of a documentary film* (2000, 2004)[15] provides a complex approach covering the history of Polish documentary filmmaking; also, the studies by Mikołaj Jazdon (2002),[16] Kazimierz Karabasz (2009),[17] Marek Cieśliński (2006),[18] and Katarzyna Mąka-Malatyńska (2012)[19] are important in Polish scientific discourse. The journal “Kwartalnik Filmowy”, which is completely devoted to reflections on documentary films (not only Polish ones), and a collective study *Zobaczyć siebie. Polski film dokumentalny przełomu wieków* (2011)[20] are of special importance for studying Polish documentary. There are also several documentary-oriented events such as the *Visible Evidence* Conference in 2022 in Gdansk,[21] Poland, as well as educating young people in terms of documentary through Documentary Schools such as the Wajda School.[22]

In M. Kaldor's opinion, the purposes of modern wars are in the area of politics of identity contrary to geopolitical and ideological purposes of traditional wars. This means the claims to power are based on a particular identity – national, clannish, religious or linguistic. New politics of identity mean claims to power based on labelling. As a rule, this relates to idealized nostalgic ideas about the past. Narratives of the politics of identity really depend on memory and traditions, and

[13] I. Havran, M. Botvyn, *Documentary Cinema in Contemporary Screen Discourse*, “Bulletin of the National University of Culture and Art. Series: Audiovisual Art and Production” 2020, no. 1(3), pp. 11–19.

[14] *Historia polskiego filmu dokumentalnego (1945–2014)*, ed. M. Hendrykowska, Poznań 2015, p. 10.

[15] M. Przyłipiak, *Dialektyka powierzchni i głębi w filmie dokumentalnym*, “Kwartalnik Filmowy” 2006, no. 54/55, pp. 146–162; idem, *Obiektywizm i procedury obiektywizujące w filmie dokumentalnym*, “Principia”, no. 26, pp. 35–53.

[16] M. Jazdon, *Dokumenty Kiesłowskiego*, Poznań 2002.

[17] K. Karabasz, *Odczytać czas*, Łódź 2009.

[18] M. Cieśliński, *Piękniej niż w życiu. Polska Kronika Filmowa 1944–1994*, Warszawa 2006.

[19] K. Mąka-Malatyńska, *Widok z tej strony. Przedstawienia Holocaustu w polskim filmie*, Poznań 2012.

[20] *Zobaczyć siebie. Polski film dokumentalny przełomu wieków*, eds. M. Jazdon, K. Mąka-Malatyńska, Poznań 2011.

[21] The details of the event and the full conference programme are available here: <https://www.visibleevidence.org/conference/visible-evidence-xxviii/> (accessed: 29.12.2022).

[22] This ongoing initiative is described here: <https://wajdaschool.pl/> (accessed: 29.12.2022).

in the conditions of the corrosion of other legitimacy sources there are attempts to reinvent them.[23] This is extremely topical for our research, since Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine involves, first of all, the genocide of Ukrainians due to their national identity, cultural difference and language.

Thus, those researching documentary films pay attention to the specific possibilities of this type of journalistic content, the peculiarities of its impact on the information consumer, and individual aspects of covering a war in the documentaries at different times, as well as specific narratives being transmitted through the documentary films. Instead, as yet, there is no research devoted to covering the war narratives in documentaries on Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 because this material is being created just before our eyes. This research is topical at present, when the war is on and is permanently being demonstrated in the media landscape of all countries.

The films chosen for the analysis include *War on Ukraine – Life in Kherson* (DW; 2022), *Fight for Kyiv* (Ukrainian: «Битва за Київ») (1+1; 2022), *Ukraina. Walka o Europę* (ciekawehistorie, 2022), *Occupied* (BBC; 2022), *Mariupol. Unlost hope* (Ukrainian: «Маріуполь. Невтрачена надія») (2022), *The Column* (Ukrainian: «Колона») (1+1; 2022), and *Ukraine. Torn land* (Ukrainian: «Україна. Роздертий край») (2015, TVP). All the films are freely available to the wider public on YouTube, which is especially important, as it encompasses a bigger audience and is accessible to viewers interested in that topic.

We can see a great number of views as of moment of writing this paper, in particular: *War on Ukraine – Life in Kherson* – 215,000, *Fight for Kyiv* – 843,000, *Ukraina. Walka o Europę* – 1.3 million, *Occupied* – 641,000, *Mariupol. Unlost hope* – 929,000, *The Column* – 2.5 million, and *Ukraine. Torn land* – 9,000. Hence, the viewers' interest is quite high.

The purpose of the research is to determine key narratives related to elucidating Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine in documentaries produced by different countries.

**Methods of research:** content analysis as a systemic research method for the objective description of available content of communication in media material; method of analysis, comparison, synthesis, narrative analysis.

In the research, one of the key notions is that of the narrative, particularly, a strategic narrative, i.e. important for forming general national or political discourse based on several important narratives.

M. Ozhevan defines strategic narratives as follows: “the means used by political actors to construct senses and meanings of «big politics» – both of domestic and foreign, both state and corporate ones, civil, etc.”[24]

[23] M. Kaldor, *New & old wars: organized violence in a global era*, Stanford, CA 2012, p. 41.

[24] M. Ozhevan, *The Global war of strategic narratives: challenges and risks for Ukraine*, “Strategic Priorities” 2016, no. 4(41), pp. 30–40.

In the news and other media messages, strategic narratives become the perspective which determines the emphasis on certain aspects of the problem, and the selection of the problems to be presented, and this is completely manifested in teledocumentaries. Moreover, a special emphasis is notable in narratives based on norms and values generally accepted for the civilized world, for example, such as the value of life, integrity of the country, and safety.

M. Ozhevan notes: "Without intensive international activity of modern narrators able to deliver the truth about their country to the international audience, it is impossible to ensure the legitimacy not only of domestic but also of foreign politics."<sup>[25]</sup> Particularly, while depicting war, it is very important to accentuate both universal and national strategic narratives, especially in the situation of that war of the narratives that becomes a result of a hybrid war, and moreover, armed aggression. War becomes that special communicative area making you speak the language of the narratives understandable to the whole of mankind in order to overcome a situation unnatural for civilized society.

Regardless of what culture people belong to, they assimilate the senses and meanings of this culture, create senses in the form of assimilation of miscellaneous narratives and stories, part of which reaches the level of metanarratives.

One of the most convincing models of the narratives was offered in 1972 by the sociolinguist William Labov: "Briefly, a fully-formed narrative may show the following: 1. Abstract. 2. Orientation. 3. Complicating action. 4. Evaluation. 5. Result or resolution. 6. Coda."<sup>[26]</sup> A communicative history developed in time which has its pre-history and its end is constructed.

As specified above, researchers have already stated the importance of such a parameter as identity as a foreign-politics trigger.<sup>[27]</sup> In our opinion, the civilized civic development begins exactly from the comprehended value of one's own identity and the identity of others. Instead, the current military standoff is completely built on the objection of the Ukrainians' identity in favour of imperial aspirations to absorption and destruction. Borys Parakhonskyi and Halyna Yavorska, both Ukrainian researchers, specify the following:

The issue of identity is, probably, the most fundamental motive that people follow to kill others, even if they are civilians who do not have arms. The war is conducted against "theirs", "aliens", since they are different and in order to consolidate "ours" because the regime will gain legitimacy this way. This is how the main opposition of the arranged "ours" contrary to chaotic "theirs" is formed.<sup>[28]</sup>

[25] Ibidem.

[26] W. Labov, *The Transformation of experience in narrative syntax. Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*, Philadelphia 1972, pp. 362–363.

[27] M. Kaldor, op. cit., p. 41.

[28] B. Parakhonskyi, H. Yavorska, *Ontology of hybrid war: game of hidden senses*, "Strategic Panorama" 2018, no. 1, p. 9.

**The narrative of identity** is actualized almost in each documentary under analysis. In Ukraine a clear understanding of own national identity has recently formed, which is based on spiritual history, philosophy, culture, and language and is typical for a mature ethnos. Instead, Russia has been promoting the narratives of “common history”, a “common cradle – Kyiv” for several centuries, denying the national individuality of Ukrainians and distorting the historical truth. This has occurred in an especially aggressive manner during the past decade and is based, first of all, on the memory of common Soviet history, which is offered to be taken as the illusive desired future, but which, however, denies the aspiration of Ukraine to be a part of the European community and to separate ultimately from Russia. An especially manipulative discourse relates to the language, because part of Ukraine’s population is Russian-speaking due to the Soviet policy of total russification. The language as identity or the absence of identity for a long time arises in Ukraine as an area of miscellaneous ideological manipulations, instead, currently the perception of this issue has significantly changed among Ukraine’s citizens.

For Ukrainians, everything Russian began to be marked as “theirs”, hostile, especially after the second stage of the invasion in 2022 when Russia started to ruin the whole territory of the state. Moreover, the image of an “alien” – “Nazi”, “fascist”, insecure, and without human qualities is also being advanced in the Russian propaganda narratives. This discourse is not supported by concrete facts; there are only narratives based on mythologization and historic memory, which was also distorted by Soviet propaganda. This discourse offers a view of themselves as the Chosen People that “never attacks others but defends their borders”, the narrative of “we can repeat”, “they started first” and others to justify the politics of foreign aggression, which cannot be justified in any way. This discourse is also supported by the narratives of a “real leader” and “fake Ukrainian people”. As Borys Parakhonskyi specifies, in the:

mythicized reality of the hybrid war, “theirs” cannot look as a form of order, because it is evil and subject to destruction. Instead, “ours” is stipulated as real order – the system of values, basic principles and regulative ideas, although in fact it demonstrates some imaginary world. The parallel world is built following their own logic, with regard to which the decisions are taken, the facts are estimated and the real operations are performed.[29]

Ukraine had already been in the situation of hybrid war begun by Russia before 2014 in order to absorb Ukraine and to take it under total political control for a long time.

A typical feature of the hybrid war is that a special dimension of aggressive behavior is involved, motivated by the creation of a parallel reality as a combination of the real and imaginary realities. A new quality of the war lies in a radical shift in the accents of action motivation to the level

[29] Ibidem.



Il. 1. A frame from the film *War on Ukraine – Life in Kherson* (DW). Meeting in Kherson against occupation. Resistance to the Russian troops



Il. 2. Frame from the film *Occupied* (BBC), Dmytro Bahnenko. Dispersal of an anti-Russian meeting in Kherson, March 2022

of designing an imaginary pseudo-reality. A value-and-sense model organizes the perception of reality as an integral complex of facts and phenomena with the relevant assessment of their importance. What is beyond the general model of the world is marked as peripheral, hostile, and able to ruin reality and thus, it is necessary to guard against it committing certain heroic actions.[30]

The only way for Ukrainians to counterstand the hostile narrative to them during this period of its creation was to form their own identity through territorial, lingual, cultural and value-based self-identification.

The documentaries covering the situation in the occupied regions place a notable emphasis on the idea that residents resist assimilation, absorption and occupation, for example, in the film of *War on Ukraine – Life in Kherson*.

For the occupied towns, the main motto became the only one – “... [name of the settlement – O.R., M.T.] is Ukraine”, as the Russian occupants first hung out their flags on the administrative buildings, in contrast to their propagandistic narrative that they are not conquerors.

For Ukrainians saving their own identity becomes a method of resisting the enemy, which is also implemented through language.

For example, in the film *Fight for Kyiv* the narrative of identity-saving is articulated as follows: “There is something more important – your will to fight, that is why you are supported because you are fighting for your

country”; “One needs to fight for the feeling with which you say the word of Motherland, you need to fight for this warmth”; moreover, it is not just about patriotism; it is about self-identification, self-comprehension and sacrifice. In the same film, the other side of this narrative is expressed. It concerns Russians who can lose their own identity, having lost Ukraine because they identified through ancient Ukrainian history not belonging to them: “Losing Ukraine, they are losing their roots, they will not be able to build their empire without this history.”

Identification also occurs through the language. This is an issue that has been used for manipulating the information landscape of Ukraine for a long time: “after what we have seen I understood that I do not want to speak Russian any more” (*Occupied*, BBC, 2022).

## Chronotope of the war narrative

One of the peculiarities of the narrative dimensions during the period of invasion in 2022 is temporal. Particularly, in the narrative of a common person’s life, a *temporal gap* is accentuated – the time of

[30] Ibidem.



freezing behavior related to the impossibility of accepting the reality of events and the expectation of their completion: life was before, life will go on after, but now it has stopped; the boundary between the war and peace, “from a warm summer into severe cold” (*Mariupol. Unlost Hope*, 2022) is comprehended especially clearly.

Olena Honcharova defines the temporal gap as follows: “such a condition when an «extraneous narrative» rushes into the previous logical cohesion the person constructs in their consciousness, ruining it.”[31] Analyzing in another publication the temporal peculiarities of how Ukrainians experienced the first months of the war, the author says: “the war, especially at the beginning, breaks longstanding temporal integrity in the person’s consciousness – gradual and smooth transit between the modes of the past, the present and the future; facilitates the freezing behavior and exaggerated role of individual temporal modes, shifting the focus of attention either to the past, or the present, or the future.”[32]

Experiencing the temporal gap is especially actualized in the documentaries about occupation. For example, *War on Ukraine – Life in Kherson* (2022) shows the stopped life of Iryna (a volunteer), while all the other films reveal Ukrainians’ feeling that their normal life was torn apart instantly: the images of “suddenness”, “loss of life”, and “irreality” return in their thoughts to the pre-war time and aspiration to reach in their thoughts the after-war time. Thus, the narrative of an ordinary life is torn by the alien hostile narrative.

In general, temporality is shown comprehensively in the footage under analysis. For example, in *Occupied* the image of time is depicted as the factor of choice: “the longer it goes on the more we understand that we will not be freed soon”, “as time passes by, we understand that we will have to leave earlier or later” – time stops being an instance and unfolds into a process not specified in the probable end.

The hostile narrative also makes topical the image of time, first of all, as “eternity” – “always”: “Russia has come here forever”, “there will be no return into the past”, “together forever”.

Thus, the temporal aggressiveness of the hostile narrative is opposed to those images of time which are being actualized in the narra-



Il. 3. Billboard in Kherson using the images of Ukrainian children. Photo from the website of BBC Ukraine <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-62694297>

[31] O. Honcharova, *The war as a temporal gap of an individual's existence*, “Topical Problems of Modern Philosophy and Science. Collection of Research Papers” (Following the materials of the VII All-Ukrainian Scientific-and-Theoretical Conference, dated May 19, 2022), Zhytomyr, Ukraine 2022, pp. 66–68.

[32] O. Honcharova, *Temporal orientations of Ukrainians in the conditions of war: past, present and future through the prism of military aggression of Russia*, “Visnyk of the Lviv University. Series Philos. Political Studies” 2022, no. 43, p. 10.

tive of resistance: “that cannot last forever”, “I wanted to see my child’s birthday come – for me it was an important date” (*Fight for Kyiv*, 2022).

Hence, the integrity of the narrative of a normal life in a European country is ruined through the intervention of a hostile aggressive narrative causing a temporal stop, a temporal gap. However, resistance to this hostile narrative is expressed through the image of a designed future – the time of the Victory. In general, one should speak of the specific narrative of the war, which is being implemented in this temporal gap: when the narrative of a previous lost normal life stops in time, the expectations of the future are formed, and another temporary narrative seen in several motives is built in the gap.

For the narrative of the war a certain topological definition is typical – concentration on the awareness of the centre. For example, in the film *Fight for Kyiv*, Kyiv arises as a sacral centre: the enemy wants to conquer the centre of the country to demoralize it, that is why it is actualized that the President stays in this place, giving the people the correct message – “I am here”. It is interesting that in the Russian narrative, Kyiv had to be conquered “within three days” (the number three is sacred in the culture of Slavic peoples, and means fullness, completeness, harmony), which proves the high level of mythologisation of this narrative.

In the perception of space, what is also determined is a place compressed to minimum a – “compressed to the point” (*Mariupol. Unlost Hope*, 2022). This is the light as if folded up as an embryo to be protected, having minimized the area of a crash against the hostile.

One more temporal image, which can be placed organically into the narrative of the war, is the dichotomy of occupied and non-occupied territory – the heroes of the film *Occupied* leave the occupied town and see Ukrainian flags, combatants of their army – “ours”. However, this dichotomy is complicated by the understanding that the occupied territory is also native, “ours”: “we have to leave”, “I do not want to leave very much”, “my town”.

### The image of the enemy

Contrary to the previous period of the hybrid war while manipulating in the information landscape with false beliefs about a “civil war”, “revolted separatists” when Russia denied its participation in the war in the Donbas despite a huge amount of facts proving otherwise, the image of the enemy in 2022 is completely real.

In the BBC film *Occupied*, the image of the enemy is clearly depicted: this is an alien occupant, humiliating the people for being Ukrainians. The enemy-Russian is ready to kill Ukrainians for their language, citizenship, for any word of resistance.

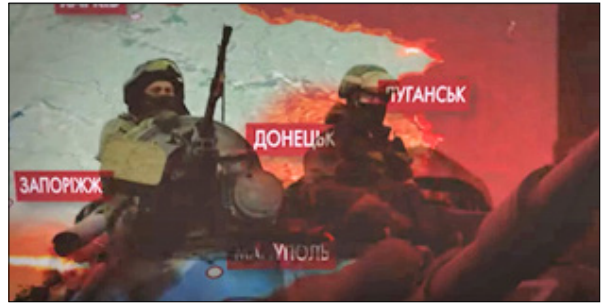
In the documentary *The Column*, the image of mythicized “impersonalized uncontrollable unthought power”: the image of the huge column spread in space (“unlimited”), the image of the Biblical serpent – “like a fiery serpent”, which “begins to turn the life of local residents into the hell”. Individuals lose their existence, being

a part of the hostile force: “The column controlled them like puppets”, i.e. they become dehumanized and a part of mass. The mass of the enemy embodies pure evil, a dark force: “with the column you cannot agree on anything, the column is a pure crystallized evil killing for fun”, “soldiers openly enjoyed their power and nonpunishability”.

Visually, this image is implemented in the images of people whose faces are not seen by the viewer, the images of soldiers with covered faces, as well as a manifestation of the letters with which the enemies mark their vehicles.

The film’s creators obviously appeal to the Biblical animal that makes hell on Earth, because the symbols of this narrative are used intensively. For example, “a dark thousand – handed beast making hell on Earth”; “all wanted to live but did not believe that they would escape from hell”. The image of the serpent or a dragon is traditional both for Slavic folklore and for the folklore of other peoples. It personifies a mythic hostile force not related to human nature. The semantization of the enemy’s image as a serpent, a thousand-handed beast implies moving its image into deep sub-consciousness, appealing to the strata of ancestral memory about the opposition of human and non-human forces, the forces of light and darkness. The narrative of the latter opposition is also actualized in the film of *Fight for Kyiv*. Visually, this narrative is supported in the film *War on Ukraine – Life in Kherson*: the images of people wearing the uniform coming into the city as a chain appear several times. Therefore, we can see the narrative is based on a symbolic mythologisation of the image of the enemy in the folklore-and-literary tradition natural for Ukrainian culture. Such a level of image-building does not meet journalistic standards, particularly the objectivity standard, and proves that as a piece of art, the documentary appeals to deep strata of ordinary consciousness. It is important to note that in this regard, the Ukrainian narrative of war directly opposes the Russian propaganda narrative.

Aggressive methods of social myth formation (information war) in Russia aimed, first of all, at artificial production of an image of enemy of Ukraine and Ukrainians, is based to a large extent on a tradition of cosmogonic myth describing a fight between the forces of light and darkness, chaos and space. Showing the Ukrainian as an enemy-nationalist (Nazi) and Ukraine as a “residence of evil”, the information war started by the Russian Federation on the other side of dichotomy of good and evil formed a need of “legal”



Il. 4. *The Column* film frames (TSN). The image of hostile attack on Ukraine



Il. 5. *The Column* film frames (TSN). The image of hostile attack on Ukraine

transformation of its citizens for “liberators”, “bearers of light” who must return Ukraine from the condition of the chaos to “space order” – into the area of influence of the Russian Federation, to the “Russian world.” [33]

For the Ukrainian narrative of the war, a completely opposite polarization of the forces of light and darkness is typical, as the Ukrainians appeal to the fact that they are defending their own land, that they did not threaten other countries, but are only striving to save theirs.

The image of the warrior of light should be completed with one more component, which is expressively seen in all the films about occupation – the image of martyrdom. Ukrainians undergo torture when imprisoned by Russians (a story by the volunteer in the film of *Fight for Kyiv*), they perish when they are simply killed in the streets and roads (*The Column*), they are pursued for their beliefs (*War on Ukraine – Life in Kherson*), or become innocent victims of a horrible war when the occupants deliberately destroy their city (*Mariupol. Unlost hope*). Opposition between the Ukrainians and Russians in the documentary *Fight for Kyiv* arises in general as an opposition of the forces of light and forces of darkness.

In the documentary *The Column*, the forces of good are also connected with belief – the image of a shot dead priest, who was going to save people in Ivankiv near Kyiv. The image of a shelled church also appears in the film *Occupied*. It is a paradox that Ukrainians and Russians are mostly the believers of the same confession – the Orthodox Church, but in the mythological area the enemies arise as the personified evil contrary to the divine.

In the narrative of war, the message of fear born among civilians by invading occupants is transmitted very powerfully: “I feel fear due to the violence of the enemy”; fear, spite, desperation and helplessness are what a civilian feels to the hostile invasion; an unlimited, animal fear when a bullet flies into the windscreen (*The Column*); horror unacceptable for mind – deaths, shootings, desperation - reality is taken by the consciousness “as in a film” (*War on Ukraine – Life in Kherson*); the expectation that “they will come for me” (*Occupied*); the helplessness of a civilian in the face of the war’s events – “You see everything, hear everything but you cannot do anything”, Serhii Pavluik, a theatre director (*Occupied*); in occupied Kherson you can be killed only for going outside, “no freedom, no rights” (*War on Ukraine – Life in Kherson*).

The uncontrollability of the events occurring, no mechanisms of defense, no logic of what occurs – these all carry an inexpressible fear. In *Fight for Kyiv*, the hero explains how first he thought it was possible to reach an agreement with the occupants; he said that he had to take his mum away, but on the way back their car was shelled. The fear and the pain they experienced bear non-forgiveness – “what they

[33] I.K. Vitiuk, *Methopoetical symbolism of the Russian-Ukrainian war in the media landscape: mystical-and-mythological narratives*, “Zhytomyr

Ivan Franko State University Journal. Philosophical Sciences” 2022, no. 1(91), p. 119.

did to civilians, children is impossible to forgive, because it contradicts humanity” (*Occupied*). The motif of non-forgiveness becomes one of key ones in the narrative of war during Russian aggression in Ukraine, which generally contradicts the narratives of Ukrainianness in the peaceful time – value of forgiveness, joy, generosity and kindness.

Due to the propaganda brainwashing the soldiers of the Russian army have fallen for, they stopped seeing Ukrainians as people, the same people as they themselves; Ukrainians became for them dehumanised, that is why this war provides so much confirmation of actual, mindless torture and death among the civilians. The pleasure with which they tortured and killed civilians is emphasized in all the documentary footage.

In the information landscape, the comparison between Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and World War II is actualized with regard to propaganda, the logic of the aggressor’s behavior, even in the use of symbols (symbolic letters are frequently shown on the occupant’s vehicles in the documentaries about the occupied cities).

The image of a fascist is expressed in the film of *Mariupol. Unlost hope*: “The Russian world is fascists, and those who they call Nazis lived near us and did not kill us”. In *War in Ukraine – Life in Kherson*, the Russian invasion is compared to Hitler’s: “I feel as if it was 1941”, “the soldiers of the Wehrmacht”. The fascist invasion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century became a kind of symbolic field of common history for the whole of humankind, that is why in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the media constantly appeal to this mental experience, in this way including the events occurring now into the historic picture already developed by humankind. Russian propaganda also plays on the image of a fascist, “Nazi”, with an eye to the domestic consumer, appealing in this context to the Soviet experience inherent to the “major people” of the USSR, when any demonstration of national self-identification, national freedom was marked as nationalism. The use of similar images in opposing contexts is a conflict of historic memory or so-called “war of historic memory” used in the narratives of the war, one of the fundamental principles of which is that “ours” are always the bearers of “good” and our opponents – “others” are the bearers of universal “evil.”[34]

In this context, the memory of the historic enemy for Ukrainians, as for Russians, is connected with great war and great victory; for Ukraine it is also complicated by the almost total ruin of the country during World War II, which Russian propaganda does not mention, as well as the participation of Ukrainians in the defense of their land. Hence, the appeal to the historic image of the enemy is an appeal to constant images of ordinary consciousness, its rooted constructs.

To the symbolic image of a “fascist” from World War II is added the even closer in time image of “green men” – uniformed

[34] V.M. Tkachenko, V.V. Yakuba, *Wars of historic memory: social motives*, “Problems of World History” 2020, no. 3(12), p. 9.

Russian soldiers without insignia who appeared during the Crimea occupation, and who did not specify their belonging to the army of the aggressor-country. For example, “call us «green men»,[35] this is who we are for you” – a self-produced name used by the enemy (*The Column*). The construct of “polite men” is directly connected with the construct of “green men”. This definition arose simultaneously with the first one and relates to the narrative of non-admittance of responsibility for aggressive foreign political actions. The fact that Russian soldiers use this narrative, as it is specified in *The Column*, can signal their unwillingness to be involved in the actions being committed, subconsciously distancing themselves from them. Lately, this narrative has become so strong in the information landscape of the Russian propaganda that it has become a part of collective subconscious.

The film *The Column* actualizes one more image of the enemy – “the wild horde”, which is associated in the historic memory of Ukrainians with destruction, fire, and massacres. In *Occupied*, one more untypical but contemporary image of the enemy is used, when a little child says: “I have seen robots, they wanted to kill me.”

The narrative of war relates to comprehending the permanent possibility of seeing death, even experiencing one’s own death, which can come at any time: the killing of civilians (*Mariupol, Occupied, The Column*), “you have to finish your last things to do on this earth” (*Occupied*). Death becomes an integral component of the narrative of war at all times, including the enemy’s death, which is not taken as the death of a person – “the column was getting putrefied and corrupted” (*The Column*).

Individually, the narrative uniting two Polish documentaries about the events in Ukraine: *Ukraina. Walka o Europę* and *Ukraine. Torn Land* should be established. Both films outline the historical sources of the events occurring in 2022, and it is important for the integrity of the narrative of the war in Ukraine.

The film *Ukraina. Walka o Europę* constructs the general history of Ukraine’s independence from 1991 until the present day with a permanent emphasis on the facts that Russia had intervened in the domestic affairs of Ukraine and wanted to keep influencing it. It concerns Putin’s influence on Ukraine’s presidents and the movement of the country towards east and west, in its intention to distance itself from Russia. The statement that Ukrainians differ from Russians shows its political will and defends its democracy, and since 2014 Ukraine has been constantly moving westwards, deserves special attention. The film *Ukraine. Torn land* (TVP, 2015) relates the story of the Russian

[35] According to Pocheptsov, “green men” are military servicemen showing the signs of civility; See: H. Pocheptsov, *Гібридна війна: інформаційна складова [Hybrid war: Information component]*,

MediaSapiens, 25.10.2015, [http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/trends/1411978127/gibridna\\_viyana\\_informatsiyana\\_skladova](http://osvita.mediasapiens.ua/trends/1411978127/gibridna_viyana_informatsiyana_skladova) (accessed: 29.12.2022).

invasion of Donbas. It provides many facts attacking the Russian propaganda narrative about their non-presence in Donbas, civil war and the land being bombarded by Ukrainian troops (the motive of the current narrative of a “special military operation” and Russian revenge for Donbas). The film states that residents of Donbas are hostages of Putin’s policy.

The footage analyzed proves that the documentaries about the war are based, on one hand, on facts, and on the other, on emotional-and-semantic cultural strata of certain people or periods. For documentaries, a specific art direction and emotional intensity are natural. For example, the film *The Column* uses reconstructions strengthening an artistic component of the text, and hence, its emotional impact. The remarks by the film’s characters also cannot be distanced and emotionless because they are witnesses of scary events and must deliver their vision of truth to the viewer. In the film *Occupied*, one of the central images is that of a child, deeply touching and in direct contrast to the image of death. The film *Mariupol. Unlost Hope* becomes a symbolic background for the horrible events unfurling in the city and it contrasts with the images of devastation. The picture created by the artist becomes, in general, a part of the internal narrative of the film. Emotionality inherent to documentary films is a necessary instrument of the impact on the viewer because the main task of this content is precisely to have an impact.

In general, the ratio of “truth” and “not truth” becomes the area where the notions of “ours” – “theirs”, “light” – “darkness” are determined because an idea what “they say about us” is expressed, i.e. how they excuse the massacres of civilians, bombarding, invading another country. The TV set appearing in the first frames of *The Column* becomes an illustrative image of the propaganda narrative.

The truth for a person who is within the limits of a particular narrative is an undoubted value, and the content of the truth depends, correspondingly, on his/her identity, which, according to Ch. Taylor, “is determined by the obligations and identities creating the frame or horizon where I can try to define again and again what the virtues for me are...”[36] Comprehension of the value of the events faced, “life experience”, becomes accessible for an individual through comprehension of chronothopic constructs and motives of the narrative that value-based for them.



Il. 6. *The Column*.  
A Russian viewer  
watching TV

[36] C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Harvard 1989.

## Conclusions

This study is important for further integral comprehension of the role that teledocumentaries play in forming the narratives of war and peace in the common historical-and-cultural area, and allows grounded analysis of these narratives' typology.

The articles analyses key narratives of teledocumentaries available on YouTube: *War on Ukraine – Life in Kherson* (DW), *Fight for Kyiv* (1+1), *Ukraina. Walka o Europę* (ciekawehistorie), *Occupied* (BBC), *Mariupol. Unlost hope*, *The column* (1+1), *Ukraine. Torn land* (TVP, Poland).

In the general narrative of the war, the following motives classified:

- the motive of a temporal and special gap and compression – time before and after, time that has stopped, space occupied and non-occupied, space of the centre, space compressed;
- the motive of the opposition of “ours” and “theirs”, “we” and “they”, “good” and “evil”, “light” and “darkness”; moreover, this opposition occurs in the area of comprehending one's own identity through the language, national belonging;
- motive of fear and unforgiveness, torture and death.

The key image in the narrative of war is the image of the enemy – alien, a part of the dark, undefined but scary force, a fascist, a horde man without humanity.

The study reveals whole mental strata through which the narrative of war is implemented in teledocumentaries, as well as the ongoing war of narratives with the opposite marking of the same mental images and images of historic memory, which makes the further study of these issues important.

Olena Rosinska is the lead author of the article.

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