

# Cinematic Culture

## During the War in Ukraine: Surviving the Year of Brutalities

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Russia's war against Ukraine has brought a humanitarian catastrophe to Europe and disrupted previously established cultural practices and rituals. One such practice has been the making and watching of films, constituting a further blow to the Ukrainian film industry, which has already experienced modifications caused by the VoD (video-on-demand) business mode and the coronavirus crisis. This study intends to highlight how the culture of cinema changed in the cities of Ukraine in 2022 that suffered and are still suffering from shelling and fighting. Its findings are based on ethnographic observations, oral history, and secondary research of public data.

**KEYWORDS:** cinematic culture, the war against Ukraine, film industry

After the massive military attack on Ukrainian cities on February 24, 2022, all public institutions, including cinema houses, were closed. Big chains and cinema houses told employees to take care of their safety and protect their families first, so people mostly left their workplaces.[1] The same situation was true for distributors, the suppliers of popcorn ingredients and products for cinema markets and bars. Ukraine's film industry literally ceased to exist for a certain period, having experienced *clinical death* in terms of economy and logistics. In Ukraine, cinemas stopped functioning due to the constant shelling from Russian troops and massive internal migration, pushed by the partial occupation of a few regions of the country.

Some Ukrainian cinemas were either destroyed, as happened with the *Multiplex* cinema in Zaporizhzhia[2] or the cinema in Lysychansk[3] or were appropriated by the occupiers (as happened with the *Peremoha* cinema in Melitopol). Natalia Dankova from *Detector.media* admitted in early May that:

[1] 'We work in the red, there are almost no budgets', – Dmytro Derkach, 'Planeta Kino', about marketing strategies of the new reality and anti-crisis measures of business, Vector (blog), 3.06.2022, <https://tinyurl.com/46rj46n4> (accessed: 10.06.2022).

[2] A. Belikova, 'We work with NATO, but not with the right one'. *Multiplex CEO Roman Romanchuk about the work of cinemas during the war and the strategy*

*of reconstruction after the victory*, Media Business Reports, 15.07.2022, <https://mbr.com.ua/uk/news/interview/4803-kinoteatr2> (accessed: 15.10.2022).

[3] *Russians Destroyed Cinema in Lysychansk with Airstrike*, espreso.tv, 28.05.2022, <https://espresso.tv/rosiyani-znishchili-aviaudarom-kinoteatr-u-lisichansku> (accessed: 5.06.2022).

Due to the hostilities in many cities, the halls in Kyiv and Kharkiv shopping centers were damaged or destroyed, and some ended up in the occupied territory, for example, in Kherson [...] Some of the cinemas are now in the occupied cities or were damaged by shelling. A shopping center in Mariupol, with cinema halls, was completely destroyed. The cinema in Kherson is in a destroyed building, and now it is impossible to get to it. The shopping centers *Nikolsky* in Kharkiv and *Retroville* and *Lavina* in Kyiv were also heavily damaged.[4]

Russia's full-scale military invasion found many businesses in a state of despair. The owner of the *Planeta Kino* cinema chain Dmytro Derkach acknowledged in an interview in summer 2022 that it had been impossible to plan and think about the future in spring 2022. He compared war with pandemics:

When I was asked in the Covid times what was next, I answered that nothing was clear and it was impossible to predict. But then I at least understood that someday people would be able to go to the cinemas and there will be deferred demand. Now the situation is even worse. It is not known when Ukrainians will return to their cities, how many of them will return and when it will be possible to go to the cinema without air raids. In addition, there is a risk that, at any moment, our cinemas could simply be bombed and destroyed. Therefore, it is challenging for me to give any forecasts.[5]

Such an interview was part of the journalist research conducted by *Vector Media* and *Kama.studios* about creative businesses in Ukraine during the war.[6] Derkach indicated the impact of the first phase of the war (2014–2015) and coronavirus shortages and regulations (2020–2022), events which substantially damaged the film industry in Ukraine. However, he claimed people did not stop visiting cinema houses even when Russia started the war against Ukraine in 2014 and when Ukrainians were afraid of the pandemic. They spent less on expensive purchases and did not travel as before but actively enjoyed cinema culture.[7] Observed after the 'Revolution of Dignity' (2013–2014), people's attitudes gave some hope for future recovery, and present business owners expect that we still have the potential for recovery after the current war.

In private talks and interviews, Ukrainian cinema directors noted that the experience of closing and reopening cinemas during the two years of the pandemic significantly helped them to adapt to the frequent evacuations of staff and viewers necessitated by air raids after February 24. The coronavirus crisis (2020–2021) significantly damaged the film and distribution industry in Ukraine, but it also partially prepared businesses to cope with the uncertainties of wartime. In February 2022, cinema halls had just come out of the holiday season, which typically brings more revenue. Serhii Zlenko concludes that Ukrainian cinema

[4] N. Dankova, *Millions of losses, air raids and free screenings. How Ukrainian cinemas resume their work*, Detector.media, 9.05.2022, <https://tinyurl.com/3kzb38s2> (accessed: 15.06.2022).

[5] 'We work in the red, there are almost no budgets'...

[6] See the results of the project "Vector of New Reality" at: <https://vctr.media/vector-novoyi-realnosti/> (accessed: 15.11.2022).

[7] 'We work in the red, there are almost no budgets'...

halls have three “golden periods” for cinemas during a year: from January 1 to 14, the weekend of March 8, and the October school holidays. These days usually fed the industry, helped halls clear their accumulated debts, and allowed them to finance equipment upgrades.[8] Thus after January 2022, various chains and cinema halls could decide whether to slow down or to take risks in February.

*Multiplex’s* CEO Roman Romanchuk, in an interview in mid-summer 2022, admitted that business predicted that the military invasion of the Russian Federation and its war against Ukraine would be hard to withstand, so managers made some preparations even before February 24. There were a few scenarios, depending on how the enemy would pursue its aggression, but most of them could not predict the decision to occupy the capital. Romanchuk declares:

Our action plan partially worked (for example, one of the points was to move the key functions and representatives of the office to the western regions of the country). Still, none of the scenarios was so clear and profound as to predict a full-scale war. It was a psychological point: until the invasion started, it was hard to imagine that we would wake up in a completely different world one morning. Even the scenario that turned out to be the closest to reality we considered purely theoretical.[9]

It was only in late March, a month after the start of active hostilities, that the first cinemas opened in Ukraine. In this most challenging period, film industry representatives, such as directors of cinema chains, distributors, intermediaries, sales agents, etc., began to look for practical ways to resume work and establish logistics. The number of problems they faced in the spring and summer of 2022 was extraordinary. For example, the owners of shopping malls and cinemas had to conduct a proper property assessment to understand the condition of the premises and cinemas. And precisely for this purpose, Roman Romanchuk, the executive director of the largest cinema network in Ukraine, *Multiplex*, personally traveled 5000 km in twelve days to visit each of the cinemas in his company’s network.[10]

The re-opening of Ukrainian cinemas started in mid-late March 2022 and has become a significant challenge for all industry workers. Owners, directors, administrators, and managers of cinema chains and municipal cinemas in the first months after the opening reduced ticket costs significantly and used outdated film repertoire. They had to move the time of screenings through official curfews, and were unable to use the most profitable time of the day – late evening screenings. Businesses needed to negotiate a significant reduction in rent and persuade distributors to release high-profile films, including blockbusters.

[8] D. Badior, *Serhiy Zlenko: ‘There Is Not a Single Cinema That Has Not Been Working in the Red since March’*, LB.ua, 8.12.2020, [https://lb.ua/culture/2020/12/08/472499\\_sergiy\\_zlenko\\_nemaie\\_zhodno.html](https://lb.ua/culture/2020/12/08/472499_sergiy_zlenko_nemaie_zhodno.html) (accessed: 1.11.2022).

[9] A. Belikova, op. cit.

[10] R. Romanchuk, *The national multiplex tour was lucky enough to visit all our cinemas*, Facebook, 6.08.2022, <https://tinyurl.com/572uedmh> (accessed: 20.08.2022).

Many had to develop new logistical ways to obtain products from cinema markets (snacks, drinks, toys, books) while finding opportunities for volunteering and helping the Ukrainian army. Managers affirm that mid-late summer 2022 became a turning point for the Ukrainian cinema business, despite the constant perturbations on the military, economic, energy, and humanitarian fronts.[11] After six months of the war, the Ukrainian film industry had a relative understanding of the new reality and of methods for adapting to it.

For instance, before the war, *Planeta Kino* had nine cinemas in six major Ukrainian cities (one hall was lost after the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, a cinema in Yalta). A co-owner of this network, Dmytro Derkach, reported in 2020 that company sold five million tickets and had 750.000 active customers per year, corresponding to 20% of the Ukrainian market.[12] The network had over one million registered customers, hundreds of thousands of mobile app users, website visitors, etc. In late June, on his personal page, Derkach affirmed that the company was opening cinema halls despite their non-profit turnover, and the motivation is rather ethical – to give people hope. The first cinema hall in this network was reopened in L'viv on March 15, 2022, less than 20 days after the Russian aggression took place in late February.[13] It was more a gesture of courage than a business initiative. Managers lowered prices and offered free sessions for refugees fleeing to L'viv from endangered cities in the east of Ukraine. Derkach stressed that war destroys everything it can reach: it destroys homes, habitual life, and the ability to enjoy simple things. But it is in our power to fight its consequences and stand to the end, helping each other:

It is not easy for us now. We survived the pandemic and are trying to survive during the war. In the current realities, it is more profitable for us to remain closed until victory than work. However, we keep our doors open for two reasons: our mission and our guests.[14]

*Planeta Kino* promised to continue to fulfill its mission and, together with visitors, to do much more. Natalia Baidan, Director General of *Planeta Kino*, estimated the losses of the network at approximately UAH 10.000.000 per month after the start of the full-scale Russian invasion. She was one of the most active initiators of negotiations with foreign film companies and domestic distributors to return full-fledged film distribution to Ukraine and restore the work of the cinema network. After the opening of *Planet Kino*, the company's employees had to face the most difficult challenges, problems, and solutions. *Planet Kino* had

[11] B. Shumylovych, *Stanislav Tarasenko, About film industry in Lviv – interview*, transcript of the interview, October 2022, Center for Urban History of East-Central Europe (Lviv, Ukraine).

[12] 'We work in the red, there are almost no budgets'...

[13] *In Lviv, the Planeta Kino cinema hall will resume operation*, ZAXID.NET, 14.03.2022, [https://zaxid.net/u\\_lvovi\\_vidnovit\\_robotu\\_kinoteatr\\_planeta\\_kino\\_n1538409](https://zaxid.net/u_lvovi_vidnovit_robotu_kinoteatr_planeta_kino_n1538409) (accessed: 1.06.2022).

[14] D. Derkach, *It Is Not Easy for Us Now*, Facebook, 26.06.2022, <https://tinyurl.com/bdydfd2s> (accessed: 12.08.2022).

to cut its personnel, stop producing snacks and popcorn, an essential part of revenues, and reduce rent expenditure. Advertising was shrunk to a minimum, and the company substantially lowered ticket prices to attract visitors.

Another national network, the *Multiplex* cinema, decided to open its halls after conducting market research with shopping and entertainment centers. This analysis made it clear that the demand for entertainment in Ukrainian society remains, despite the difficult economic and military situation. The first *Multiplex* cinema halls were reopened at the end of March 2022 in L'viv (two screens) and Khmelnytskyi (one screen), and in early April a few more halls in Odesa, Kryvyi Rih, and Kyiv (at the end of April). At that time, the company lost its cinemas in Kherson, Kharkiv, Mariupol, and Kyiv. Roman Romanchuk acknowledged that the company strives to save its employees and continue serving people:

We decide to open certain cinemas by assessing the risks. If we understand that it will be safe, we open the halls [...] We proceed based on the security situation. Unfortunately, for a certain number of our team, we were forced to introduce a suspension of their employment contract. We are talking about the staff in those cities where cinemas were destroyed or damaged. However, we have not fired anyone.[15]

*Multiplex's* top management believes that cinema has a lot of potential, even in times of disaster, as people want to return to the things they were used to before the war and emotionally unload. As Romanchuk affirmed in the interview: "In this sense, movies are one of the best ways to close this request." [16] He remained optimistic that cinematic culture gives people a positive psychological effect and allows them to plunge into another reality for a while.

After ten months of the war, it was still problematic to measure the losses the Ukrainian industry had encountered since February 24. At the end of March, observers reported that out of 121 cinema halls (in Ukraine, twenty cinema chains owned 511 film spaces, and the biggest was *Multiplex*), there were working only 16, predominantly in the western regions.[17] The most significant number of spaces for cinema were in L'viv (31) and Chernivtsi (9), and southern Odesa (7). Thus, having only 14% of open spaces meant a sixteen-fold drop in turnover and revenues. And even if the cinema hall was accessible (for instance, in the city of L'viv), people were often reluctant to visit public spaces due to uncertainty and personal restraint from entertainment. Many individuals reported that they could not watch films in March because

[15] V. Stepanenko, *There is a lot of unpredictability in war. CEO of Planet Kino and Multiplex – about the work of cinemas and upcoming premieres*, nashkiev.ua, 24.05.2022, <https://tinyurl.com/52avn6m3> (accessed: 20.06.2022).

[16] I. Orel, V. Landa, *If there is an alarm, they return tickets. 14% of cinemas work during the war. What films are shown and how their work has changed*, Forbes.ua, 30.03.2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2z5jm346> (accessed: 20.06.2022).

[17] Ibidem.

of their emotional mood, and some Ukrainians still have trouble with audio-visual entertainment. Personally, the author of this text could listen to music and watch some non-political or non-news-related content only in April 2022. Any attempt to watch movies triggered an emotional imbalance and almost physical reactions within the body.

In the middle of summer 2022, Roman Romanchuk told journalists that even after relaunching operations in late March and April, the national chain network of cinema halls decreased two-fold:

If one physically counts the number of open cinemas before and after the war, it has decreased by about a half. Every week the number of operating screens fluctuates but is approximately 300–350, and in the pre-war period, there were 600–680 screens. Attendance in a single hall [...] decreased by almost 2.5 times. Therefore, given this situation, the market has generally reduced by 4–5 times.[18]

We can assess the industry's losses in two ways: damage from bombing, which amounted to tens of millions of dollars, and operating losses, which at the beginning of the war amounted to one million hryvnias per day (25 thousand euros a day).[19] Later, this figure was reduced to 200–300 thousand hryvnias per day, but still not sufficient to run a large business. The number of operating cinemas in Ukraine varies, as the active phase of the war is still ongoing, giving unpleasant surprises to cinema owners almost every week. The shelling of Ukrainian critical infrastructure using Iranian kamikaze drones, power shortages, and military mobilization of industry workers generate many uncontrollable factors. Thus, the war situation forces cinema administrators to adapt to changes constantly. This uncertainty caused by the war is very stressful for businesses, since working in such uncomfortable conditions is extremely difficult.

### Places and practices of film consumption

When Ukrainian cinemas began to resume work, many factors negatively affected attendance because people had not yet adapted to the new living conditions. An important factor was information about screenings: at the end of March, many people could not figure out what was already working and what was not yet, and for those cinema halls which reopened, unawareness of the audience significantly worsened attendance. In addition, the duration of security curfews had a significant impact on attendance. Initially, they started at 19:00 or 20:00, and cinemas had to finish the last showing 1.5–2 hours earlier, so the audience had time to go home. Of course, the number of viewers was also greatly influenced by content availability. There was already a lack of films in March–April due to the lack of international releases. International film studios did not understand the war realities of Ukraine and refused to rent movies.[20] But gradually, they realized that the

[18] A. Belikova, op. cit.

[19] N. Dankova, *Millions of losses...*

[20] A. Belikova, op. cit.

Ukrainian film industry would not die soon and planned to restore business and the economy.

The biggest problems cinemas faced in the first months of the opening were security and safety, and the lack of film content. Until the middle of May, Ukrainian cinemas had to use their old repertoire, films that had already been distributed in the past, such as *Fast and Furious 9* (Justin Lin, 2021), *007: No Time to Die* (Cary Joji Fukunaga, 2021), *Venom: Let There Be Carnage* (Andy Serkis, 2021), *The Gentlemen* (Guy Ritchie, 2019), *Clifford* (Paul Flaherty, 1994), *Uncharted* (Ruben Fleischer, 2022), *Moonfall* (Roland Emmerich, 2022), *Marry Me* (Kat Coiro, 2022), etc. It took some time to return to the film market and provide new content to cinemas. The first premiere took place on May 12, 2022, with the film *Belfast* (Kenneth Branagh, 2022), with a few others to follow, such as *Batman* (Matt Reeves, 2022), *Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore* (David Yates, 2022) and *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (Sam Raimi, 2022).

*Planeta Kino*, which opened only one cinema hall in L'viv in March, operated at a loss, and the same problems had *Multiplex*. Cinema halls could gross something like 50–60 euros per day, while it usually was 600 euros.<sup>[21]</sup> On the opening day, the cinema in L'viv was visited by 143 spectators,<sup>[22]</sup> and on the following days, this number increased 3–5 times. But this is much less than before the war. It is difficult to count the number of viewers per month, as cinemas have to return tickets due to air raids almost every day. Roman Romanchuk from Multiplex admits that this is why more people are coming to halls than cinemas see in terms of tickets sold.<sup>[23]</sup> Cinema halls managers understand that such work could hardly be called a business enterprise:

This is undoubtedly not the attendance that was before the war. But we are happy we can be helpful, that many families with children come to us who now need emotional relief. We show twenty screenings a day with many animated films and comedies. Ukrainian producers offer their films for screening, so we try to show family films and animation, but we consider everything the copyright holders give us for possible screenings.<sup>[24]</sup>

The two major 'cinematic cities' in Ukraine, which have the highest number of visitors after ten months of the war, are Kyiv (the capital) and L'viv (the biggest city in the western part of the country). These cities have the most favorable conditions for the resumption and continuation of film distribution. In late April, the capital of Ukraine quickly returned to cultural life, and cultural or entertainment institutions were reopened, among other things. In addition, residents continuously return to Kyiv, and temporarily displaced persons from different regions arrive here. All this, of course, influenced the opening of the capital's cinemas and

[21] I. Orel, V. Landa, op. cit.

[22] I. Trebor, *Cinema during the war: how and why Ukrainian cinemas work*, Delo.ua, 1.04.2022, <https://tinyurl.com/5dnfen2t> (accessed: 20.05.2022).

[23] I. Orel, V. Landa, op. cit.

[24] I. Trebor, op. cit.

became the reason for the return of distributors to the market. Kyiv is the largest Ukrainian city with the best attendance of cultural and leisure facilities; it has the most significant number of screens and halls. Lviv suffered minimal damage during the war. In the first few months of hostilities, it became a center for internally displaced people, who left en masse for Lviv province bordering the EU, one of Ukraine's calmest and safest regions.

Stanislav Tarasenko, who works in Lviv, for one of the national cinema networks, admitted in October 2022 that he has already differentiated three periods of wartime cinema practices. The first was the period of retrospective screenings (mid-late March and mid-May), when Ukrainian cinema showed mainly those films and cartoons that had already been shown on the big screens. The second was the transition period (starting in mid-May and early June) with the releases of world premieres on Ukrainian screens, though with a significant delay. During this second phase, Tarasenko admits, the industry had no capacity for dubbing blockbusters, and some releases, such as *Doctor Strange 2*, were supplied with subtitles, which is not typical for the Ukrainian film market.[25] The third period of relative normalization of film distribution (early June – autumn) saw the mass return of high-profile and independent film premieres to the big screens with a reduction in the 'premiere delay window'.

Indeed, the relative normalization of the work of distributors and majors came in September-October, especially regarding the amount of film content in this period returned to the number of screenings during the Covid pandemic. Viewers' preferences did not change much after February 24, and people went to the cinema to see films about superheroes, comedies, and interest in family films gradually restored. The audience was quite willing to go to see Ukrainian cinema, and managers were impressed by the results of domestic releases.[26] People went to see *Sniper. White Raven* (Marian Bushan, 2022), *I work at the Cemetery* (Oleksiy Taranenko, 2022),[27] and *Klondike* (Maryna Er Horbach, 2022). But some international and Ukrainian releases were postponed to war-torn, damaged halls that need engaging content for their businesses to survive. In some instances, films were presented publicly, like *Roses. The Cabaret Film* (Irena Stetsenko, 2022, premiered at Sheffield DocFest), and after this, were released in limited cinema halls. However, some Ukrainian films did not go into big screen networks and are waiting for future release, which may bring more returns.

[25] B. Shumylovych, op. cit.

[26] N. Dankova, *Cinema in the dark. How power outages affect the work of cinemas*, Detector.media, 18.11.2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2s48ny7a> (accessed: 2.12.2022).

[27] I. Pidhora-Hviazdovskyi, *I work at the cemetery: the break did the film good*, Detector.media, 24.09.2022, <https://tinyurl.com/53ew7ac9> (accessed: 5.12.2022).

In autumn 2021, the Ukrainian film milieu discussed the release of the film *Rhino* by Oleh Sentsov, the first movie by this director after his return in 2019 from imprisonment in Russia. The film was first seen in September 2021 at the Venice Film Festival and later shown at several major festivals. The closed preview of *Rhino* in Ukraine took place on February 15 in Kyiv Cinema House, a week before the war started. The event aroused great interest among public figures: former presidents Viktor Yushchenko and Petro Poroshenko, Ukrainian actors, MPs, musicians, artists, journalists, showbiz stars, and former political prisoners came to the screening.[28] This film was conceived before the Russian war against Ukraine, which started in 2014, when the film director was arrested by occupants in Crimea and imprisoned in the Russian Federation for five years.

A few days before the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Sentsov affirmed that if war broke out, he would go to fight.[29] Indeed, he went to war as an ordinary man leaving his pregnant wife at home and now often reports from the trenches.[30] It is unclear if Sentsov will survive this war, as is true of many other Ukrainian film professionals who have joined the army. While writing this article, film critic Anton Filatov admitted that Russians heavily bombarded his battalion positions, so he is barely alive, and a known film editor from Kyiv Viktor Onysko was shot dead on the battlefield in December 2022. Filatov recently reported from the trenches near Bakhmut:

In the last two days, my psyche began to boil. It seemed to me that Russians were coming from all sides. I decided for myself that I would not surrender. At least, I always kept a grenade at hand. All these 41 days, I was constantly trying to do something to keep my mind off the tension: I was building fortifications, digging, carrying water, food, ammunition [...] We support each other here as much as we can. We try to distract ourselves with conversations, so we don't go crazy. We're fucking tired. But we have no choice. We stand.[31]

Every day the Ukraine's film and cultural industries lose people who otherwise could make interesting movies. Some film operators now work with drones on the front line; others compile military videos for the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which Ukrainian media and social media broadcast daily. Local film professionals feel part of a community of solidarity and suffering and negatively perceive acts of cosmopolitanism and detachment. The film community heavily criticized the political

[28] P. Vernyhor, 'Yanukovych turned Ukraine into a bandit state. I showed where the legs grow from'. Oleg Sentsov and his new film, Zaborona (blog), 18.02.2022, <https://zaborona.com/oleg-senczov-i-jogo-novyj-film/> (accessed: 10.12.2022).

[29] O. Bazar, K. Bilash, *Oleh Sentsov: 'If the Invasion Starts, I Will Go to War'*, LB.ua, 20.02.2022, [https://lb.ua/culture/2022/02/20/506125\\_oleg\\_sentsov\\_yakshcho\\_pochnetsya.html](https://lb.ua/culture/2022/02/20/506125_oleg_sentsov_yakshcho_pochnetsya.html) (accessed: 10.03.2022).

[30] O. Sentsov, *War Is Not Always about Contact Battles, Attacks or Special Operations*, Facebook, 29.06.2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=5325726774177482&set=a.2505542079529313&type=3> (accessed: 30.06.2022).

[31] A. Filatov, *Bakhmut. Direct Speech: B.*, Facebook, 8.01.2023, <https://tinyurl.com/z5abmwX5> (accessed: 10.01.2023).

position of Sergei Loznitsa, a film director from Germany who often spoke in the name of Ukrainian culture.[32] In spring 2022, he was expelled from the Film Academy of Ukraine[33] but in autumn 2022, Loznitsa still favored Russian culture, and critics accused him of repeating Putin's political narratives.[34]

Indeed, the cinematic community in Ukraine is constantly challenged by the war, and people make personal choices about whether to fight against Russians in frontline dugouts or negotiate a reconciliation. Many film professionals have volunteered to help the military and displaced persons or older people. But even if people are not in the war trenches, they often fight mentally, waging an imaginary war. Many of those interviewed recalled that for them, wartime reality constantly reminded them of a movie.[35] In a personal exchange of messages, Kyiv-based film director Oleh Chornyi, who produced a striking documentary about Mariupol in 2016,[36] admitted that he feels anxiety and exhaustion. He wrote:

My biggest horror is that the film about Mariupol and Kharkiv with Hamlet has become even more relevant these days. The city no longer exists as in the film frame [...] Existential horror. When I was preparing the film for screenings in Canada, I was promoting it, and in most of the shots, I wondered if these people were still alive. Those girls with children in their arms, who got into the frame on the road [...] The theater is wholly destroyed [...] Dismantled to a brick.[37]

Chornyi confessed that he has no will and personal drive to make movies after Bucha and all the violence he saw in 2022. Even though he was trying to return to filming and produced a short documentary in 2022, the film profession's future seems uncertain.

Those professionals who were engaged in making fiction movies understand that there is no space for such film products now. Scriptwriter Anna Harshyna sadly acknowledges that “when there is a war, there are only documentaries and chronicles; feature films have to mature; it takes years for people to reflect on what has happened to them.”[38] She understands that Ukraine will have to restore and reflect on what happened during this war, so if Ukrainians now start making

[32] O. Chornyi, *Svitlana Zinovieva, The first two days were endless – interview*, transcript of the interview, 8.10.2022, Center for Urban History of East-Central Europe (Lviv, Ukraine).

[33] K. Tolokolnikova, *Loznitsa on expulsion from the Ukrainian Film Academy: ‘This is Nazism,’ Suspilne. Culture* (blog), 20.03.2022, <https://tinyurl.com/bd-v9k5z6> (accessed: 10.04.2023).

[34] N. Klochko, *Director Loznitsa called to cure Ukrainians of hatred to Russians: details of the scandal*, Glavcom (blog), 8.09.2022, <https://tinyurl.com/mu-jd2rr9> (accessed: 20.09.2022).

[35] O. Chornyi, *Svitlana Zinovieva...; idem, Anna Harshyna, When there is a war, there are only documentaries and chronicles – interview*, transcript of the interview, 25.09.2022, Center for Urban History of East-Central Europe (Lviv, Ukraine); idem, *Everyday life has changed dramatically*, transcribed interview, 4.10.2022, Center for Urban History of East-Central Europe (Lviv, Ukraine).

[36] “*Rain Project*”, a Documentary Film about Mariupol and the Artist Hamlet Zinkivskyi, Short Documentary (Kyiv, Ukraine: Inspiration Films, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgZeUITIV8A>.

[37] Exchange in FB messenger (accessed: 25.12.2022).

[38] O. Chornyi, *Anna Harshyna...*

films, then the material would be desecrated, and the tragedy devalued. Therefore, many filmmakers only observe, take notes, record, and try to remember feelings that affect everyday actions.

Many ordinary people and film professionals admitted that they had problems watching movies in March-April 2022, due to psychological disturbances. Some also reported an inability to write texts, which was a typical activity in peacetime. For instance, Chorny returned to writing only in May and still experiences fatigue,<sup>[39]</sup> while my colleague Yurko Prohasko, a literary scholar, had trouble writing texts till early 2023. Anton Filatov, a film critic from Kyiv, had to escape to Lviv from Kyiv in the early stage of the war. Being a typical cinephile, he was almost culturally paralyzed in March and could not watch films or listen to music:

I could not watch anything. I did not watch a single film for about a month and a half after February 24; I did not write about cinema. And only after that, when I was already somehow at a distance, being in Lviv, I started watching some films.<sup>[40]</sup>

Filatov was drafted into the army and has fought against the Russians for almost ten months, so his film consumption mainly comes from a cellphone that he uses in the trenches. He watched media platforms like OLL.TV and Netflix, usually following series such as “*Evil*” *S Is for Silence* (Robert King, 2021), *Ozark* (Bill Dubuque and Mark Williams, 2017), or *Working Moms* (Catherine Reitman, 2017). Some films that Filatov saw in the past have now changed for him. He admits that *The Hand of God* (Paolo Sorrentino, 2021) helped to look at those around him in the army with different eyes. Contexts devise optics and influence the vision of even experienced movie consumers.

The tendency for online film consumption was not new in 2022. In early 2021, Forbes reported that “the competition in streaming media is intensifying” and that “it is shaping up to be a fierce fight for consumers’ time and money.”<sup>[41]</sup> In Ukraine, the increase in online consumption was galvanized by the war. Stanislav Tarasenko, who had an opportunity to talk with film visitors in Lviv cinema halls in spring 2022, recalls the story:

Working closely with cinemas and communicating with temporarily displaced persons I encountered a family from Kharkiv who did not see the point in going to the cinema to watch *Fantastic Beasts 3* – their favorite movie franchise – is quite illustrative. At that time, the third part of the spin-off was already available for viewing on pirate resources [...], so the Kharkiv family, who before the war preferred cinema screenings, in the new realities of war, did not see the point in spending money and time to

[39] Idem, *Everyday life has changed...*

[40] Idem, *Anton Filatov, I could not watch anything – interview*, transcript of the interview, 14.09.2022, Center for Urban History of East-Central Europe (Lviv, Ukraine).

[41] K. Valory, *The Future Of Movie Theaters, And Other 2021 Streaming Media Predictions*, Forbes (Section: Innovation) [blog], 20.01.2021, <https://tinyurl.com/yhd7cj8a> (accessed: 10.12.2022).

go to the cinema, mainly since the air raid could interrupt the session at any moment.[42]

Such a trend to shifting online, even for new releases, amplified significantly in 2022, considerably reducing the demand for cinema consumption in theatres. Tarasenko gives another example, the story of a resident of the Lviv region who visited the cinema four times trying to watch a blockbuster. Three times the air raid prevented him from seeing the film, and only on the fourth occasion did he succeed.[43]

Of course, such incidents with interruptions of film screenings, which are of massive and tangible importance for the entire film consumption, remain an unsolvable problem for the Ukrainian cinema industry. Only the cessation of the Russian-Ukrainian war or at least the creation of safe zones can contribute to the growth of cinema audiences, observers argue.[44] But during the war in Ukraine, the change in the habitual practice of going to the cinema in favor of watching online platforms had another dimension. For many, films were associated with emotional work and caused mental instability; thus, interviewees were constantly attached to their phones. Stanislav Tsalyk, who moved to Krakow in Poland during the war, still had trouble visiting cinemas. He watched films online on mobile devices, becoming dependent on media: “I felt I needed to reduce the news. I taught myself not to watch them every hour, once a day in the evening.”[45] Yaryna Hordiienko, a film actress, stresses that her phone turned into a unique device:

Every day I wrote on Facebook about everything I saw and did; the texts were aggressive, but posting them made me feel like I was still alive. People started to donate to me, and my phone became my salvation; it was like the only thing I had left: I could communicate with others, raise money, and save people with my phone.[46]

She perceives video culture and cinema as cultural spheres that can overlap but are entirely different: “They may not even be in contact with each other, but they are both essential because they both enrich us.”[47]

### Instead of conclusions

The theatrical presentation is no longer the primary venue in which films are consumed. But even as it is being transformed, cinema seems to survive in new forms of moving image culture. Indeed, the war changed cultural practices, fragmented audiences, and influenced people’s decisions regarding cinema. Alla Petrenko-Lysak, an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at Taras Shevchenko National

[42] B. Shumylovych, *Stanislav Tarasenko...*

[43] *Ibidem*.

[44] *Ibidem*.

[45] O. Chorny, *Stanislav Tsalyk, It was this work that saved me from madness – interview*, transcript of the interview, 25.09.2022, Center for Urban History of East-Central Europe (Lviv, Ukraine).

[46] H. Danyliuk, *‘I found my place in this war’: Stories of three volunteers about love, mercy and acceptance*, Divoche.media (blog), 16.01.2023, <https://tinyurl.com/dy96eu8f> (accessed: 20.01.2023).

[47] O. Chorny, *Yaryna Hordiienko, There have been a lot of changes – interview*, transcript of the interview, 10.09.2022, Center for Urban History of East-Central Europe (Lviv, Ukraine).

University of Kyiv, whose research interests include everyday urban life, asserts that she could not watch films in late February and March 2022. She admits that listening to music or watching movies in the first month of war was impossible, since her consciousness was continuously alert. “I needed to listen to what was around me so I would not miss the alarm sound behind my apartment window,” confesses Alla.[48] Immersing herself in watching movies or reading a book could distract her from reality, and she could return to her usual cultural practices only in April 2022. Olha Yaskevych, a psychotherapist and associate professor in the Department of Psychology at the Ukrainian Catholic University, comments that it is normal for a person to be fixated on reality when external forces endanger their self. If one is set on the here-and-now, it gives the illusion of control. Reading a book or watching a film may take a person into an imaginary reality with scattered attention, which is perceived (almost on the level of corporeality) as disparaging.[49]

Yurko Prohasko, a literary scholar from the Ivan Franko Institute of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine and a practising therapist, argues that people generally may have two strategies regarding cinema culture: some cannot watch films in wartime, and their body and consciousness refused this activity, while others do not want to watch movies intentionally restraining themselves from this activity.[50] Some did not feel like being distracted from authentic sounds and avoided emotional activities, while others could not just focus on the film. Stanislav Tsalyk confirmed in the interview that: “I know that many of my friends wrote on social media that they could not read or watch movies because they could not concentrate on the plot.”[51] Yet, another group could have mixed feelings when cognitive thinking dominated their emotional practice.

This argument supports previous observations that people who took an ethical stance, argued that “instead of giving time to win the war, you watch some movie,” and they perceive this activity negatively.[52] For Yaryna Hordiienko, the film is a story and gives space for reflection, and this is one of the reasons she cannot visit cinema houses during the war: “Someone is starving there, and I’m sitting there watching a movie – I can’t.” While video culture on the phone is a companion for her everyday life: “The phone seems to be saving me, and I’m saving others, helping others – it’s cool! Yes, I spend a lot of time with my phone, shooting, filming, looking for direction.”[53] People construct various discourses among decisions about why to watch a film in wartime (it is entertainment?) and what kind of emotions

[48] B. Shumylovych, *Alla Petrenko-Lysak, On cinematic culture during war – interview*, audio interview, 18.01.2023, Center for Urban History of East-Central Europe (Lviv, Ukraine).

[49] Idem, *Olha Yaskevych, Self and reality – interview*, audio interview, 18.01.2023, Center for Urban History of East-Central Europe (Lviv, Ukraine).

[50] Y. Prohasko, *The difference between “I can’t” and “I don’t want to,”* audio interview, January 18, 2023, Center for Urban History of East-Central Europe (Lviv, Ukraine).

[51] O. Chorny, *Stanislav Tsalyk...*

[52] B. Shumylovych, *Alla Petrenko-Lysak...*

[53] O. Chorny, *Yaryna Hordiienko...*

expect from a film (is it good?). These discourses “explain me to myself and me to other people”<sup>[54]</sup> so that we realize the meaning of our cinematic preferences.

We may preliminarily conclude that film requires people’s emotional and cognitive reflection and, as a practice, demands time and effort; therefore, for those who needed to stay attached to reality and not lose the self, a mobile phone with video content or news was preferable. Prohasko admits that war showed a simple thing again – people are different and act differently, and the war is diverse, with its own time.<sup>[55]</sup> As if being on a religious fast, many Ukrainians wanted to join the suffering of others, at least mentally, to become part of those who were in misery or fighting in the war.<sup>[56]</sup> Furthermore, those whose bodies and emotions ‘allowed’ them to watch films may have had ethical restrictions or could not find relevant content. Olha Yaskevych stresses:

The appropriate movies before February 24 suddenly stop resonating, they don’t fit, even to the point of disgust. This situation continues until you recover, verify yourself in new circumstances, find your ego-ideal again, and start recognizing yourself in old mirrors and stories again.<sup>[57]</sup>

Obviously, cultural content changes together with us, its users. Alla Petrenko-Lysak declares that for many people the new *Avatar*, with its plot of family protection, being a refuge, and fighting a war, was seen through the prism of Ukrainians’ combat against Russians.<sup>[58]</sup> Thus, in this regard, film genre matters, and for many people, it isn’t easy to find the most appropriate plot and story, visuals, and effects. Yaskevych stresses that art should reflect the actual feelings of its users; it should resonate with the person, otherwise, it does not work.<sup>[59]</sup>

During 2022, many Ukrainians adapted to the challenges and cruelty of war. One of the indicators is active film consumption, especially those with light content. On December 29, the romantic comedy *Neighbor* (Natalia Pasenyt’ska, 2021), produced by F FILMS with the support of the Ukrainian State Film Agency, was released nationwide. Over the two weeks of its release, *Neighbor* became the highest-grossing Ukrainian film of the wartime period, grossing UAH 5.436.545,<sup>[60]</sup> and the first Ukrainian romantic comedy to be released during the full-scale invasion. Olesya Nogina, producer and co-founder of F FILMS, claims:

In releasing this film on New Year’s Eve during a full-scale war, we had one mission: to give Ukrainians the opportunity to move to a more optimistic reality for an hour and a half, to escape from the news and remember how incredibly beautiful our life was a year ago [...] we are sincerely happy for every positive response from the audience because

[54] Y. Prohasko, op. cit.

[55] Ibidem.

[56] Ibidem.

[57] B. Shumylovych, *Olha Yaskevych...*

[58] Idem, *Alla Petrenko-Lysak...*

[59] Idem, *Olha Yaskevych...*

[60] Company F Films, *Neighbor Became the Most Grossing Ukrainian Film of the Wartime Period in Two Weeks of Its Release!*, Facebook, 18.01.2023, <https://tinyurl.com/y58fnux6> (accessed: 20.01.2023).

if we managed to improve the mood of such a large audience, it means that everything was not in vain, and we will soon return to normal life and new comedies.[61]

People want to return to normality. As former film actress and now active volunteer Yaryna Hordiienko admits, she and millions of others want to live peacefully and enjoy simple things such as traveling.[62]

The full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war, which began on February 24, 2022, has radically changed citizens' consumption habits as regards cinema. Attendance in cinemas, their closure or destruction, changes in ticket prices, fluctuations in the repertoire, the outflow of customers due to mass evacuation/leaving the country, and the difficult economic situation of the majority of the Ukrainian population – all this directly affected film consumption. Among the main changes that negatively impact cinema attendance is that the total number of regular customers, typical moviegoers, has decreased. Compared to L'viv or Kyiv, which retained relatively high numbers of average cinema visitors, such big Ukrainian cities as Odesa or Kharkiv lost substantial sections of their film audiences.

If there was something like a Ukrainian film audience before February 24, it was substantially fragmented, changed, or, in some cases, had ceased to exist by December 2022. Even in Kyiv or L'viv, cities with the highest audience activity in the country, the body of active viewers was fragmented within the cities in 2022. There was a segmentation among cinema consumers who began to prefer more distinctive cinemas in the city centers, which are easy and quickly accessible, refusing to use multiplexes on the outskirts due to the high fuel cost and possible air raids that often cut off movie screenings. In some cases, such cinemas have experienced a fatal decline in attendances, which was not observed even during the pandemic.

War distorted a well-aligned system of work between all representatives of the industry. It changed or destroyed the logistics chains developed over the years and made working in the entertainment sector difficult. Wartime forced the displacement of industry workers, caused unprecedented internal and external migration, with many people leaving their jobs or going to serve in the army. Displacement and shortages in the workforce led to a noticeable reduction in the number of specialists in the film industry, while layoffs, which began in February, continue to this day. These reasons triggered a significant slowdown in the overall development of the Ukrainian film industry, which had increased the number of screens in recent years. Some cinema halls in Ukraine have been physically destroyed, and some have closed at least until the end of hostilities and, at most, forever.

[61] T. Yermashov, *Within two weeks of its release, Neighbor became the highest-grossing Ukrainian film of the wartime period!*, Facebook, 17.01.2023, <https://>

[tinyurl.com/2p94kjkw](https://tinyurl.com/2p94kjkw) (accessed: 20.01.2023).

[62] O. Chorny, *Yaryna Hordiienko...*

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