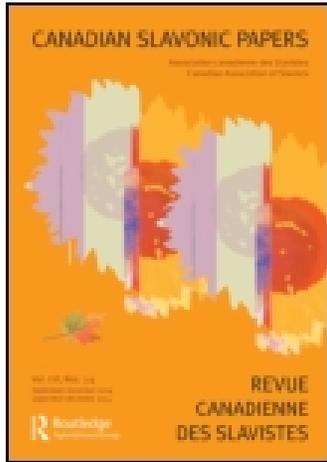


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Serhy Yekelchyk

Thinking Through Ukrainian Cinema¹

Surprisingly, there has never been an English-language history of Ukrainian cinema, a major national school within Soviet cinema best known for Oleksandr Dovzhenko's interwar masterpieces and the "poetic school" of the 1960s, but which in fact includes a far greater number of significant and controversial films. In showcasing recent research on Ukrainian cinema, this special issue prepares the ground for such surveys. Much like the 2009 special issue of *KinoKultura* on Ukrainian cinema, edited by Vitaly Chernetsky,² our collection documents growing Western interest in Ukrainian cinema, as well as the field's move beyond its two best-studied periods, the 1920s and the 1960s.

There are several books in English on the most famous Ukrainian film director, Dovzhenko, including George O. Liber's recent biography and Bohdan Y. Nebesio's series of articles on the Ukrainian film industry of the 1920s, which help put Dovzhenko's oeuvre in a larger context.³ The sixties in Ukraine are finally receiving a comprehensive treatment in English, in Joshua First's monograph.⁴ What the articles in this special issue demonstrate, however, is the enduring continuity of cultural tropes and major themes in Ukrainian cinema. In addition to Dovzhenko's poetic tradition, they include an engagement with the national past and working with (or subverting) ethnographic cultural models.

¹ I would like to thank the editor of the *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue canadienne des slavistes*, Dr. Heather Coleman, for welcoming the proposal of this special issue and all the work she and her staff have done on the articles. The expert advice of Assistant Editor, Dr. Svitlana Krysz, on a number of editorial and formatting issues is particularly appreciated. On behalf of the special issue's participants, I would like to thank Marta D. Olynyk, who edited several articles by non-native speakers and translated one paper from Ukrainian. My work on the preparation of this special issue was supported, in part, by an Internal Research Grant from the University of Victoria.

² *KinoKultura*, Special Issue 9 (December 2009): <<http://www.kinokultura.com/specials/9/ukrainian.shtml>> (Accessed 10 June 2014).

³ See George O. Liber, *Alexander Dovzhenko: A Life in Soviet Film* (London: British Film Institute, 2008); Bohdan Y. Nebesio, "The Theoretical Past of Cinema: Introducing Ukrainian Film Theory of the 1920s," *Film Criticism* 20.1–2 (1995–1996): 67–77; "Competition from Ukraine: VUFKU and the Soviet Film Industry in the 1920s," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 29.2 (2009): 159–180; "Panfuturists and the Ukrainian Film Culture of the 1920s," *KinoKultura*, Special Issue 9 (December 2009): <<http://www.kinokultura.com/specials/9/nebesio.shtml>> (Accessed 10 June 2014).

⁴ Joshua First, *Ukrainian Cinema: Belonging and Identity During the Soviet Thaw* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014).

What should be included in Ukrainian cinema, and why, is a complex issue. In Soviet times the two major Ukraine-based film studios produced, on average, something like a quarter of all motion pictures made in the Soviet Union, but many of these had nothing to do with Ukraine and did not involve ethnic Ukrainian directors and actors. At the same time, some ethnic Ukrainians became major film directors in Russia (Grigorii Chukhrai, Sergei Bondarchuk, Larisa Shepitko), while non-Ukrainian directors often became inseparably associated with Ukrainian cinema (Sergei Paradzhanov, Kira Muratova, Roman Balaian). Dovzhenko, the greatest name in Ukrainian cinema, also worked in Moscow late in his career. Given the constant circulation of directors and actors among Soviet film studios and the often random mechanism of film script selection, which Soviet-era films, then, should be included in Ukrainian cinema?

The answer has to be both inclusive and specific: all films made in Ukraine constitute part of the national cinematic tradition, but the Soviet authorities also supported the development of a Ukrainian “national school” as an important attribute of nation building in the Ukrainian republic.⁵ Originally defined by Ukrainian topics or settings (historical and contemporary) and some connection to peasant culture, the Ukrainian national school quickly developed common aesthetic traits in the form of a romantic, or “poetic,” vision first articulated in the 1920s and reaffirmed in the 1960s. The “Ukrainian school” can thus include the work of non-Ukrainian directors contributing to this tradition, as well as those who went on to directorial careers elsewhere, while still demonstrating their formative “Ukrainian” influence. In contrast, other films made in Ukraine can be discussed as part of the all-Soviet context in which Ukrainian cinema developed.

It is also true that the poetic school’s canonization as a Ukrainian cinema tradition could have a stifling effect on the cinema of independent Ukraine, developing as it has in the age of cultural globalization.⁶ However, the near-collapse of the national film industry in the period of funding “drought” from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s represented a far greater challenge. During the last decade, when Ukrainian cinema has shown hopeful signs of revival, younger filmmakers have often challenged the stereotypes traditionally defining the “Ukrainian school” and attempted to undermine or redefine it from within.

⁵ The first part of my answer is somewhat similar to the approach taken by Vitaly Chernetsky in his excellent introduction to the special issue of *KinoKultura* on Ukrainian cinema, which he edited; he acknowledges applying to film the method proposed in my *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). See Vitaly Chernetsky, “Defining and Exploring Ukrainian Cinema,” *KinoKultura*, Special Issue 9 (December 2009): <<http://www.kinokultura.com/specials/9/introduction.shtml>> (Accessed 10 June 2014).

⁶ Bohdan Y. Nebesio, “Questionable Foundations for a National Cinema: Ukrainian Poetic Cinema of the 1960s,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue canadienne des slavistes* 41.1–2 (2000): 35–46.

Just as Ukrainian cinema is increasingly trying to address universal issues in modern cinematic language, research on Ukrainian film history is developing as a legitimate and even popular subfield in Western academia. This special issue brings together contributions from a veteran Ukrainian film critic and a group of younger academics teaching in North America, some of them of Ukrainian background and others not. Such internationalization of Ukrainian film studies is a hopeful sign for the profession in the same way that recent international festival honours for younger Ukrainian filmmakers are for the revival of native film production in Ukraine. At the same time, the success with Ukrainian audiences of Mykhailo Illienko's *ToiKhtoProishovKriz'Vohon'* [Firecrosser, 2011] has shown their longing for a national cinema. This film became the first Ukrainian movie in a decade to be entered in the Academy Awards competition and receive mass distribution in Ukraine.⁷

The contributions to this special issue cover a wide range of topics. Larysa Briukhovets'ka's essay is concerned with defining the Dovzhenko tradition and tracing its revival in a new form during the mid-to-late 1960s. Mayhill Fowler explains why the prominent Ukrainian theatre director of the 1920s, Les' Kurbas, did not make it big in film. Elena Baraban shows how World War II films fit into the "romantic" cinema of Ihor Savchenko. Joshua First sorts out the often ambiguous policies pursued by the Kyiv Film Studio in the 1960s. Olga Pressitch examines how dubbing into Russian changed the meaning of satire in a popular Ukrainian comedy film from the early 1960s. Vitaly Chernetsky studies a 1973 historical movie as both the high point of the "sixties" Ukrainian cinema and part of a worldwide trend of grand historical costume dramas. Maryna Romanets analyzes a controversial post-Soviet Ukrainian historical film through the prism of post-colonial theory. Finally, Volha Isakava demonstrates how horror films in post-Soviet Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus offer another way of coming to terms with the Soviet past.

⁷ Serhy Yekelchuk, "Memory Wars on the Silver Screen: Ukraine and Russia Look Back at the Second World War," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies* 5.2 (2013): 4–13.