

Fifty Shades of (Neo)Colonialism in Russian Filmmaking

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In a 2009 episode of the animated series, *Family Guy*, the characters have an appointment with Putin, who, offering them to appreciate the Russian sense of humor, shows them a deliriously incomprehensible episode from the alleged *Hedgehog in the Fog* by Yuri Norstein. In another episode in Season 10 (2011), little Stewie fears being punished and exiled to Siberia, where a rude woman in a fur coat would feed him wolf milk in a cold cabin, entertaining him with harsh Russian philosophical cartoons with profound allegories.

Obviously, for at least the last few decades, the real success of films from Russia correlates with these exaggerated stereotypical perception of Russian films, combining harsh reality with high considerations. Stories of rude and gruff characters trying to survive in a similarly empathy-ridden society among dilapidated poor homes — but at the same time seeking poetry in everything and sharing wisdom — are classic components of the so-called Russian “seamy side,” so liked by Western audiences. Take, for instance, Lev Andropov's character in Michael Bay's *Armageddon* (1998), a rude Russian colleague met by American astronauts at the *Mir* orbital station: yes, he tends to solve technical problems with wrench strikes, but he saves lives.

In a nutshell, those distant, cold, and obscure fictional worlds hold a certain sublimity, sincerity, and also an exoticism found in the modern, Orwellian political realities of Russia. Andrei Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* (2014) probably is one of the most striking examples of this. It is a tragic story without a happy ending, a story of an obscure person from a remote Russian place who decides to resist the brazen corrupt officials of the Putin regime who are trying to kick the protagonist out of his own home. The story unfolds against the background of beautiful seascapes, poor interiors, and a society where everyone betrays everyone. The characters quote the Bible, their suffering is likened to the story of Job, and the Church itself is subject to the director's criticism. In fact, Zvyagintsev, as in his previous films, speaks of modern Russia through biblical motives — quite in the spirit of the tendency to spice up violence and social collapse with philosophical reflections, the tendency ridiculed in *Family Guy*.

Leviathan was a real international sensation, and Western film critics wrote about the exceptional grandeur and monumentality of the film. It even got the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film from the Hollywood Foreign Press Association in 2014, becoming the first Russian film to win the award since 1967, when it was awarded to another, equally iconic and monumental film, a movie adaptation of Tolstoy's legendary novel *War and Peace* by Sergei Bondarchuk.

So now that the Ukrainian film community is urging their Western colleagues to boycott Russian cinema altogether, it came as a surprise to many. Why do Ukrainians want to silence even the voices critical of Kremlin policy, like Zvyagintsev's? They illustrate all the horrors of Putin's Russia!

As Ukrainian director and film critic Yuriy Hrytsyna recently noted, it's not just that the main message of the allegoric *Leviathan* (and every other Russian “seamy side” film) is boiled down to “don't try to oppose the Russian State, or you shall lose everything and live the rest of your life among ruins, or die.” It is that it's quite possible that *because* of this message, the film was sponsored by the Russian Ministry of Culture. And, again, it's not just that those films, with their fatalism and exoticism, are becoming commercially successful entertainment in the Western film market, selling very well while also enabling Russia's cultural influence. Those films also fuel the Putin regime that they allegedly criticize. Why? Because as long as they are being sold in the West, they remain a means of whitewashing the State and the Putin regime. See, this is Russia, a powerful State sponsoring and giving the world monumental movie pieces on par with *War and Peace*;

therefore, the actions of the authorities (except for some troubles) are correct, because the world tolerates them.

To all of these (significant in their own right) reasons to halt any cooperation with the Russian film industry, add a century of Russia's (neo)colonial policy, which is imposed on Ukraine even in the field of moviemaking. It is noteworthy that when the Russian film industry, representing the great USSR in the world, won the Golden Globe for Sergei Bondarchuk's film adaptation of the novel *War and Peace* (the novel is iconic for Russian culture), Ukraine also produced an equally significant film adaptation from our own literature, *The Stone Cross* (1968) by Leonid Osyka.

The plot, based on short stories by the Ukrainian writer, Vasyl Stefanyk, resonates with more than one generation of Ukrainians. At its heart is the archetypal (for Ukrainian culture since at least the late 18th century) character of a peasant, oppressed by the colonizers (most of Ukraine had long been occupied by the Russian Empire, while its western regions were under the Austro-Hungarian Empire). The main character of *The Stone Cross*, who was doomed to always work the land and live in poverty, dares to emigrate. However, this decision to leave his homeland where so much hope and effort was invested, was like death to the man. Unlike the film adaptation of *War and Peace*, this masterpiece of poetic cinematography has never won high awards, yet in 2021 it ranked fifth in the Top 100 Ukrainian films, according to a survey of national and international film critics conducted by the National Oleksandr Dovzhenko Film Centre.

Of course, trying to answer the question of why, of the two movies produced in the Soviet Empire, it was the *War and Peace* that gained worldwide recognition, while *The Stone Cross* remained in the wings for decades, is naïve for so many reasons, including the movie criticism one. Yet, the question remains: what would have happened to Ukrainian filmmaking in general (and *The Stone Cross*, in particular) had the Ukrainian film industry not been suppressed by Moscow; had the Russian magazines like *Iskusstvo Kino* (Rus. *Art of the Film*) not published chauvinistic reviews, blaming Leonid Osyka for his futility and his perspective of the past being rigid; or had *The Stone Cross*, along with other Ukrainian films, not been removed from the register of permitted films? Those rhetorical questions closely correlate with the calls of the modern Ukrainian filmmaking community to boycott Russian films.

Here's another telling story. In the 1920s, Ukraine was the world's second largest movie exporter to Germany (with the first largest being the USA). Ukrainian films were released in the United States, France, and Japan. Apart from Oleksandr Dovzhenko and Dzyga Vertov, the world knew the names of other Ukrainian directors, like Georgi Tasin, Georgi Stabovyi, Petro Chardynin, and others. This rise of Ukrainian filmmaking was largely due to the effective work of a special filmmaking agency, VUFKU (*All-Ukrainian Photo- and Filmmaking Administration*, Ukr. *Vseukrayinske Fotokinoupravlinnia*). Just a few years after it was founded in 1922, the organization increased its film production tenfold. They established cooperation with foreign companies and reached a point where they could use their own money to buy materials and new films for Ukraine. In addition to their economic success, VUFKU was very effective in, for example, networking with Ukrainian intellectuals. Prominent writers, such as Yuri Yanovsky, Mike Johansen, Isaac Babel, and Volodymyr Yaroshenko worked on the screenplays.

Such success couldn't go unnoticed by Moscow, which, back then, already was trying hard to centralize every activity in every sphere of every conquered member-state of newly founded Soviet Union. This is how the *Sovkino* Association was set up as a successor to Russian film companies. Although VUFKU retained some autonomy, *Sovkino* saw the Ukrainian film agency as a competitor and undermined its success by creating conditions where only Moscow would be the main film center in the entire USSR. Having gained a monopoly on both the export and import of films throughout the Soviet Union, *Sovkino* frequently interfered with VUFKU's international cooperation and sometimes even illegally substituted the filmmaker's brand for a Russian one. In addition, *Sovkino* launched a sabotage campaign against Ukrainian films in Russia: while Ukrainian cinemas had 20 Ukrainian films running, Russia only bought 6 Ukrainian films. They further imposed centralized procurements and distribution of motion pictures film strips, saving about 65%

of it for *Sovkino* and only giving VUFKU 20%. A few years later, in 1930, after the All-Union Party Conference on Cinema, the Ukrainian agency ceased to exist altogether. Instead, *Ukrainefilm* was created, with the new agency no longer having any autonomy as it was directly subordinate to Moscow. Over the next few years, the world witnessed Ukrainian artists being persecuted and executed, including Mike Johansen (1937), Volodymyr Yaroshenko (1937), Isaac Babel (1939), and other Ukrainian artistic intellectuals. That phenomenon has come to be known as the Executed Renaissance. That shameful terror was the cause of economic and creative stagnation for many years to come. What might Ukrainian filmmaking be like today, had Russia not artificially restricted its development?

At present, the neo-colonial means of suffocating our country have only improved. We could spend hours going on over the production of the Russian TV series which, because they were cheap, took over Ukrainian TV channels prior to 2013; those series exploited Ukrainian characters, portraying them as stupid, funny, or greedy people, and thus creating a collective caricature-like image of Ukrainians. Examples include the main character, Vika, in *My Beautiful Nursemaid* (Rus. *Moya Priekrasnaia Niania*, 2004 – 2009), and Ensign Shmatko in *Soldiers* (Rus. *Soldaty*, 2004 – 2014), just to name a few. And all this came after a long period of Ukrainian intellectuals being suppressed and eliminated! Let's imagine for a moment the number of people in Russia involved in this machine. This answers the question of whether Putin alone is responsible for the country's chauvinistic policies and the current war.

We have another example of Russia's neo-colonial practices in filmmaking. Let's start with clarifying that any foreign movie release begins with the acquisition of license rights from the copyright holder, mainly from the distributor or producer. Despite the fact that Ukrainian film professionals are quite capable of and seek opportunities for doing business with their foreign colleagues directly, it is still quite common for the Western right holders to redirect Ukrainians to their Russian colleagues. The reason is simple: Russian companies are obtaining rights for running the Western movies in the entire so-called "region", meaning the territory of a phantom imperial union, the CIS, in which the territory of Ukraine still gets included despite the country having terminated its participation in the union. This business practice is not new, but the cynicism of the situation and its neocolonial nature is that even after Russia occupied Crimea and started a war in the eastern regions of Ukraine, the Ukrainian film industry has repeatedly faced an outrageous choice: either pay the aggressor or deprive themselves of access to a number of world movies.

One of the theses used by Putin (as early as 2008) to explain Russia's right to occupy Ukraine was that, unlike Russia with its ballet, literature, and filmmaking, Ukraine has no history of its own, no works of Ukrainian art were included in the world culture treasury, and Ukraine doesn't have Tolstoy, Bondarchuk, or Zvyagintsev. But does the world know how many beautiful paintings created by Ukrainian artists were doomed to stay in the wings of Imperial Russian culture? And how many of those works were not created because of that Imperial Russian culture? After all, didn't the Russian Empire put Tolstoy, Bondarchuk, and Zvyagintsev in the spotlight after the brutal massacres in Bucha, Gostomel, Irpin, and other towns and villages in Ukraine?

By cooperating with Russian filmmakers at a time when Russian missiles are destroying Ukrainian cities, our foreign colleagues and partners are, unfortunately, unintentionally supporting Russia's imperial policy. Because neocolonialism is first and foremost a desire to retain one's spheres of influence, despite everything.