

## VOLODYMYR VYNNYCHENKO AND THE EARLY UKRAINIAN DECADENT FILM (1917–1918)

*The article is focused on the phenomenon of the early Ukrainian decadent cinema, in particular, in relation to filmings of Volodymyr Vynnychenko's dramaturgy. One of the brightest examples of 'film decadence' in Vynnychenko's oeuvre is "The Lie" directed by Vyacheslav Vyskov's'ky in 1918, discovered recently in the film archives. This film displays the principles of 'ethical symbolism', 'dark' expressionist aesthetics and remains the unique masterpiece of specifically Ukrainian film decadence.*

**Keywords:** *decadent film, fin de siècle, cultural diffusion, cultural split, ethical symbolism, filming, editing.*

The early Ukrainian decadent film as an integral part of the trend of decadence in the world cinema can be regarded as a specific problem for researchers because of its diffusion within the cinematography of Russian Empire. Ukrainian subjects in the cinema of 1910s, on the one hand, had traditionally been related to «ethnographical topics» (to begin with the one of the earliest Russian silents «Taras Bul'ba», 1909, after Mykola Hohol'), but, on the other hand, had been represented partly in Russian film, though totally diffused in its cultural contexts. The brightest representatives of this kind of «diffused film decadence» are the worldwide known actors such as Vira Kholodna, Hryhorii Khmara (both by their origins from Poltava), Ivan Perestiani, native from Donbass region, or the film director Vyacheslav Vyskov's'ky, coming from Odessa, who filmed a number of the truly decadent masterpieces, such as «Satan Married Them» (1917), after an occultist novelist Vera Kryzhanovskaya, or «The Lie» (1918), after Volodymyr Vynnychenko, who was the key decadent playwright of Ukraine.

In this view, the complex 'cinematic text' of Volodymyr Vynnychenko's screenings becomes the special point of our research interest to focus on, as it had totally been unexplored, though taken as the basis for the most authentical pattern of Ukrainian decadence until nowadays. One of Vynnychenko's decadent characters (painter Kryvenko from the play «Memento») wears a black velvet suit over the national embroidered blouse – 'vyshyvanka', which can serve as the best metaphor for Ukrainian decadence of Vynnychenko. His cooperation with cinematography was preceded by his successful cooperation with Russian theatres staging his plays in 1915–1917, all of them translated into Russian by himself. Among those plays, the most favoured one for the film directors was «The Black Panther and The Polar Bear» (1911) describing the story of infanticide for art's sake. There had been three silent screen versions of this play filmed in various cultural and national contexts. The first Vynnychenko's

screening, «The Devil's Staircase», filmed by a Russian producer Georgiy Azagarov in 1917 (released in February 1918) put the central conflict in the area of circus actors. This film had been considered desperately lost. The second «Black Panther» was taken into production by Sygyzmund Kryzhaniv'sky on «Ukrainfil'm» – in 1918. Unfortunately, the production had not been finished due to the regular change of government in Ukraine. Finally, the third one, «Die Schwarze Pantherin» filmed in Germany by Johannes Gutter in 1922 was based on the original Vynnychenko's script. Gutter's film is considered to be a masterpiece of German cinematic expressionism, Ukrainian actors-emigreés from Les' Kurbas Theatre involved for the main parts (Olena Polevytska starring as Rita, the heroine). Apart from that we should mention Soviet cultural contexts exploiting mostly Vynnychenko's children's fiction (the film «Poltynyk's Adventures», by Axel Lundin, 1929).

The Post-Soviet period of Vynnychenko's screenings starting at 1980s shaped the key conceptual points of pattern of Vynnychenko's film decadence. It was based upon the specific Vynnychenko's «ethical symbolism» based upon such re-evaluated concepts as «law», «sin», «truth», «lie» as the key dialectical symbols. This paradigm also includes a system of special motives: 1) infanticide as *thanathoteurgy* (creation by means of death) obviously borrowed from «dannunzianesimo» (from Italian) – 'decadent' lifestyle introduced by the writer Gabriele d'Annunzio; 2) love as hate / love-hate / *Hassliebe* (from German) aiming to the destruction of love object; 3) psychological inter-subjective experiments. This system of motives is supplemented by a number of specific codes: *a code of sacrifice, a code of seduction, a code of pornographism* among them. They are represented in the whole complex of screenings after V. Vynnychenko's works (these are eight Ukrainian productions filmed from 1989 to 2014, the brightest of them by Oleh Biyma: «The Black Panther and The Polar Bear» – 1990, «The Sin» – 1991, «The Engagement» – 1996).

“The Lie” filmed by Vyacheslav Vyskovs’ky in 1918 after Vynnychenko’s play written in 1910 is the remarkable example of a decadent film masterpiece emerged and lost on the boundaries of “Forgotten Geographies”. Being a bright piece of Russian pre-revolutionary film and the unique early screening of Vynnychenko, the film got temporally lost in a dramatic split between Russian and Ukrainian cultures, between literary and film contexts, between the pre-revolutionary, Soviet and Post-Soviet. The film had been fully extent (except for subtitles) but obviously had never been released. That did not happen, as most of critics assume, because of the conflagration on “Biofilm” studio in 1918 so that the editing had not obviously been finished and the subtitles had never been written. As a result, no reviews, no titles, no mentioning of this film in film journals. The film keeps being considered unexisting.

Nevertheless, “The Lie” remains the first and the last masterpiece of Ukrainian decadent silent film, screened after one of the most famous plays of Ukrainian modernism, based on Ukrainian backgrounds. Moreover, almost half of the known members of the film crew were coming from Ukraine: apart from Volodymyr Vynnychenko, native from Yelysavetgrad (now – Kropyvnyts’kyi), these were Vyacheslav Vyskovs’ky, the film director, native from Odessa, and Mykola Malikov, the actor for the leading role, native from Kyiv. Nevertheless, no historical documents confirm or disprove the fact that Volodymyr Vynnychenko could be the scriptwriter in this film project. We can only trace the paths of the playwright and the director on their lines of slipping throughout the splitting Russian Empire: in 1918 Vyskovs’ky was moving from Moscow to Odessa (as most of filmmakers of the Revolutionary times) working for several film factories simultaneously. At the same time, Volodymyr Vynnychenko in the very beginning of 1918 escaped from Kyiv (the capital of newly-born Ukraine) and was hiding from both Bolsheviks and Germans in Berdyansk, a small town near Odessa, until he was arrested in summer. By autumn Vynnychenko headed the Ukrainian state again – there was no room for writing and filming. We can assume that Vyskovs’ky could have adapted the play for the screening by himself, though the script is equally absent from Vyskovs’ky’s literary archive in Moscow (RGALI).

As for the film director Vyacheslav Vyskovs’ky, the most important facts of his biography took place in Odessa where he was born in 1881. First of all, he started his career as a decadent novelist writing basically on the subject of death and its aesthetics (two collections of his novels and short stories appeared in Odessa in 1902 and 1904). By 1918 Vyskovs’ky became the brightest director of “*decadent cinema*” in Russian Empire and in this view he

can be equally opposed to the famous Yevgenii Bauer who was “the father of Russian *symbolist* film art”. In 1918 Vyskovs’ky moved back from Moscow to Odessa, as it was mentioned above, and the brightest page of his film biography had been written by him together with Vira Kholodna, the female icon of Russian decadent silents. They worked together in 1918 on a number of films: “The Woman Who Invented Love”, “The Philistine Tragedy”, “Be Silent, My Sorrow” (together with P. Chardynin) among them; Vyskovs’ky had also filmed for Vira Kholodna her own autobiographical story, “The Thorny Way of Glory”, whereby she was featuring as a movie star *Vera Severnaya*. In regards to such a partnership Vira Kholodna could have been invited by Vyskovs’ky for the leading female role of Natalya Pavlivna in “The Lie” but that did not happen for the unknown reason. The reason was obviously not her death as Vira Kholodna died in Odessa in February 1919, almost a year after “The Lie” was completed by Vyskovs’ky as he had also filmed her as a dancer Clo in her last film project “The Last Tango”. Some parts of this film are digitalized and available on the Web.

Nevertheless, it was in Moscow that Vyacheslav Vyskovs’ky had become a film director and replaced the famous Yakov Protazanov as the leading producer at the Teeman film factory by 1915. He almost at once entered the most decadent project of “Russian Golden Series” which was entitled “Glory to the Madness”. His early film “The Wounded Venus” (1916), on sadomasochistic subjects, entered this film project. As a film director Vyskovs’ky became especially interested in Russian decadent female fiction (so-called *démi-littérature* in its relation to *démimonde*) which raised such issues as mysticism and spiritism in works by Vera Rochester (films “Satan Married Them” and “The Marsh Flower”, 1917) and Evdokiia Nagrodskaia (“The White Collonade”, 1915), sexual liberation of women – “Yelena Pavlovna i Serezha”, 1915, after Anastasiia Verbitskaia, sadomasochistic perversions as a point of interest of Anna Mar (“The Wounded Venus”, 1916). In “Satan Married Them” based on the novel “Hell Magic” by Vera Kryzhanovskaya (Rochester), the leading female role was played by Varvara Yanova who acted as Dorian Gray in a shocking decadent screen version of the famous O. Wilde’s novel filmed by Vsevolod Meyerhol’d in 1915. The film historian S. Ginzburg even assumed that V. Vyskovs’ky might have performed functions of producer in the second film by V. Meyerhol’d – “A Strong Person” (“*Mocny Czlowiek*”) based on a decadent novel of a Polish symbolist writer Stanislaw Przybyrzewski [3; 45]. V. Vyskovs’ky had filmed a number of texts by Russian symbolist playwrights, such “Thou Shalt Not Kill” (1916) – one of the most somber plays by Leonid Andreyev [6]. That’s why Vyskovs’ky’s

works had been considered extremely scandalous and decadent by critics before 1917. Nowadays Vyacheslav Vyskovs'ky is almost forgotten due to his inability to fit in Soviet ideological filmmaking and his disappearance in geographical split between Moscow and Odessa which was at that time the splitting Russian Empire.

It was not only Vira Kholodna who might obtain the leading female role in Vynnychenko's production by Vyskovsky. As the "Biofilm" production should have rather been shot in Moscow, we must assume that this could have been a good reason for involving theatrical actresses playing in the Russian productions of "The Lie". These were the brightest stars of the Russian stage of 1910s: Mariya Andreyeva in Moscow and Yekaterina Roschina-Insarova in St Petersburg. Nevertheless, none of them emerged in the film though they both, on the one hand, supported Volodymyr Vynnychenko not only as a playwright but as a political figure and, on the other hand, participated in "decadent film" of 1910s. Mariya Andreyeva who was the first acting as Natalya Pavlivna, "The Lie's" heroine, on the stage, in Moscow Art Theatre, first appeared on the screen in "The Miserable Ones" (1916) by Alexander Volkov based on the novel of the mentioned Russian decadent occultist writer Yevdokiya Nagrodskaya. By 1918 Mariya Andreyeva had already become the USSR People's Commissar of Theatres. Natalya Pavlivna in Alexandrinski Theatre in St Petersburg, the famous Yekaterina Roschina-Insarova, promoted Volodymyr Vynnychenko on the Russian stage. She appeared on the screen in "Anfisa" (1912) after Leonid Andreyev whom she brought to the film production as a purely decadent playwright and scriptwriter.

Though Vyacheslav Vyskovs'ky might have chosen any of these stars competing for the best performance of Natalya Pavlivna, he preferred a modest «Biofil'm» studio star Maria Goricheva who started her career in the film "The Death Locker" (1914) by the symbolist director Yevgenii Bauer. Her last work was "Dursun" filmed in 1940 in one of the Asian Soviet Republics. Her career is brightly depicted in her own memoirs [2] and in a book of recollections of her partner in "The Lie", Amo Bek-Nazaryan [1].

The plot of the film is quite typical for the decadent drama of the fin de siècle and for Vynnychenko's "ethical symbolism" suspending and subverting the key categories of conventional ethics. Natalya Pavlivna, a *femme fatale*, finds herself in the middle of a complicated love triangle including her husband Andriy (a talented Ukrainian engineer) and two of his colleagues: her young handsome lover Anton and Ivan, a lurid seducer, blackmailing her and pushing towards suicide. The same pattern (archetypal feminocentric triangle) can be found equally in drama plots of Henrik Ibsen, Leonid Andreyev,

Valerii Briusov; the latter defined it as "*Gavriiliada* pattern" (after the title of the poem by Alexander Pushkin) in which three lovers are usually involved: Lord the Creator, the Devil and St Gabriel Archangel. The latter in "The Lie" is performed by a young actor Gavriil Terekhov, which implies also his role in the archetypal triangle. Gavriil Terekhov worked together with Maria Goricheva in various theatrical enterprises in Moscow before the 1914. Between the First and Second World Wars he used to be a prime lover in provincial Russian theatres of Rostov and Saratov. G.Terekhov finished his career in Maly theatre in Moscow when he was around fifty having reached the biggest success as a Soviet film star (in the role of Lauriston, ambassador of Napoleon, in the famous "Kutuzov", 1943, by Vladimir Petrov, whose film won the Stalin prize).

The other two male protagonists are exquisitely important for the history of decadent film. Mykola Malikov who plays Andriy (the husband) was one of the pioneers of Russian cinematography who entered the Russian Union of film producers from its very beginning in 1908. Afterwards, he filmed a number of silents, in particular the famous "White Doves" (1917) on the Orthodox sect, to which the Russian Emperor Alexander I belonged. "The White Doves" (the only saved film by Malikov) appeared the same year as "The Lie" (1918). After his immigration in 1920 Malikov produced a number of silents in Germany and France but had to leave the sound film industry. Malikov's lifetime collaboration with K. Nezlobin's Russian theatre in Moscow and Riga resulted in their common work on "The Lie" on Russian stage in 1916. We can assume that Malikov was the only original performer from the theatrical productions of "The Lie" in Vyskovs'ky's film.

The brightest movie star in "The Lie" was Amo Bek playing Ivan Stratonovych, the seducer. This was a screen-name for Ambartsum Bek-Nazaryan who became later a founder of the Armenian national film art after the October revolution. As a director he produced the first Armenian feature film "Namus" in 1925, then the first Armenian sound film "Pepo" in 1935. Above all, he directed the film "Zangezour" on establishing the Soviet regime in Armenia, which became a Stalin prize winner in 1943. Nevertheless, at the dawn of his career in Moscow Amo Bek used to be the most decadent "Asian film lover" playing both the Devil in "Devil's Scherzo" (1916), a decadent poet Harold in "The Keys to Happiness" (1915) and the prince Felix Yusupov, the major murderer of Grigoriy Rasputin, in three various films on Rasputin's death released simultaneously in 1917 [2; 56–71].

Apart from them, the second female character in "Lie", a truthful and innocent girl, was Olga Gladkova (Polonskaya), an actress from Maly theatre in Moscow, mostly known for her husband, an actor Vitold

Polonsky, who was a star of Russian symbolist art-house. Polonsky had suddenly died in 1919 (half a year after “The Lie” was filmed) from Spanish flu (as well as the mentioned Vira Kholodna, his partner in “Life for Life” by Y. Bauer etc.). In the film “The Lord’s Ball” after A. Vertinsky’s chansonette Polonsky appeared together with their daughter, Veronika Polonskaya, who had later become an actress and the Soviet *femme fatale*, the ultimate love of Vladimir Mayakovskii, as she was the witness and the cause of his suicide in 1930. As opposite to her starred husband, Olga Gladkova had a very modest film experience though she had already worked together with Vyskovs’ky on his decadent drama “The People of Ardent Passions” (1917).

There is the sixth character and the sixth actor in the film appearing in the first two parts of the six. He was absent from the play but we can indicate him in the film as an expert of the Belgian aircraft company ordering the engine to Andriy’s engineering team. The name of the actor remains undefined. In Vynnychenko’s play it was not an expert but the engineer’s father, a plain Ukrainian peasant, invited to his house. The folk element of Ukrainian decadent drama had partly influenced the Ukrainian decadent film as well. For example, the characters of the original version of the play sing together at the banquet “The Will” by Taras Shevchenko, which was replaced in Russian translation by the author’s remark: “sing-ing something sad” [5; 48].

There are six parts in the film. Parts from 3 to 6 correspond almost strictly to the text of the play but the first and the second parts are added by the script-writer who made his main character an aircraft engi-

neer (as he is simply a technician in the play) to substantiate the choice of his wife who literally sacrifices herself to heavens. In the final sixth part we can see unfinished editing by Vyacheslav Vyskovs’ky whereby the same scenes are repeated for several times, in particular, the suicide of Natalia Pavlivna.

To conclude, «The Lie» as a *lost and found* silent film had never been discussed in academic circles, which explains the chosen approach in this article: a purely factographical reconstruction of chains of artefacts and documental evidences in their interdependence in relation to the culture of decadence / *fin de siècle* engendering this kind of cinematic text and context. This should become the basis for the further interpretation of the film after its broad release. The author of the article had done the reconstruction of titles and inter-titles based upon the Ukrainian original of the play and the Russian translation of “The Lie” produced by V. Vynnychenko in 1916 for a number of Russian theatres in Moscow, St Petersburg, Saratov and, supposedly, Kyiv. We have already presented the rough cut of “The Lie” with the re-constructed inter-titles twice: in London (Conference “*Forgotten Geographies in the Fin de Siècle*”, 1880–1920, July 2016) and in St Petersburg (Jubilee of the first night of “The Lie” in St Petersburg, Alexandrinsky theatre – 10th March 1916–2016). The analogous copy (the film) is being kept in Russian Film archive “Belye Stolby” still it would be fair if the official digital video with the restored editing of the film were released in Ukraine, by the centenary of “The Lie” by V. Vyskovs’ky and V. Vynnychenko, and the centenary of the independence of Ukrainian state that owes to V. Vynnychenko though not one.

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### ВОЛОДИМИР ВИННИЧЕНКО У РАНЬОМУ УКРАЇНСЬКОМУ ДЕКАДЕНТСЬКОМУ КІНЕМАТОГРАФІ

Статтю присвячено феномену раннього декадентського кінематографа та проблематичному статусу його «українськості»; зокрема ранні (німі) екранізації творів Володимира Винниченка розглянуто у цьому контексті. Фільм Вячеслава Висковського «Брехня» 1918 р., нещодавно віднайденій автором статті у кіноархівах, можна назвати найвизначнішим твором українського кінодекадансу в період його виникнення, з відповідними рисами експресіонізму, принципами етичного символізму та ознаками авангардного динамізму.

**Ключові слова:** декадентський кінематограф, *fin de siècle*, культурна дифузія, культурне розщеплення, етичний символізм, екранізація, монтаж.

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