

From “Symphony” to “Cacophony”: metamorphoses of Donbas’ representations in Ukrainian documentary

От „Симфония“ до „Какофония“: метаморфози на репрезентациите на Донбас в украинското документално кино

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Abstract: The article deals with the evolution of Donbas’ representations in Ukrainian documentary of the Soviet period and since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014. The formation of the Soviet myth of Donbas is illustrated by “Enthusiasm: The Donbas’ Symphony” (Vertov, 1930), whereas its deconstruction is traced in “The Cacophony of Donbas” (Minaiev, 2017) and “War Note” (Liubiyi, 2020). Distinct representational paradigms in these documentaries are discussed through the lens of Ranciere’s conception of spectatorship.

Keywords: Vertov, cine-truth, myth, propaganda, Russian invasion

Абстракт: Статията проследява еволюцията на представянето на Донбас в украинската документалистика от съветския период и след нахлуването на Русия в Украйна през 2014 г. Формирането на съветския мит за Донбас е илюстрирано с филма на Вертов „Ентузиазъм“ (1930), докато неговата деконструкция е проследена в „Донбаска какофония“ (Минаев, 2017 г.) и „Военна тетрадка“ (Люби, 2020). Различните парадигми на представянето в тези документални филми се дискутират през призмата на концепцията на Рансиер за зрителското участие.

Ключови думи: Вертов, киноистина, мит, пропаганда, руска инвазия

Introduction: The Land of Freedom

Donbas is a conventional name for the region in the East of Ukraine that includes parts of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts. Donbas’ history embodies the constant metamorphosis of its status and collective representation. In particular, Donbas has been traditionally identified with coal mining and steel production. Since the fifteenth century, this territory of the frontier Wild Fields attracted Cossacks. They led the Ukrainian national liberation movement till the late eighteenth century when the Russian Empire destroyed their democratic military units. In the nineteenth century, Donbas developed into a massive industrial region, whose dwellers worked at the coal mines and steel factories established by German and British capitalists. Later, in the first third of the twentieth century, Donbas became a symbol of Soviet rapid industrialisation. However, people suffered from the totalitarian policies of Russification, artificial famine (Holodomor), and repressions that

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caused thousands of victims. Nevertheless, Soviet propaganda created an image of this region as a utopian place of revolutionary breakthrough and harmonious and inalienable industrial work.

Despite the brutal and complicated history of this region, Donbas has always been perceived as the “land of freedom” in Ukrainian culture (Kuromiya 2002). At the turn of the 1990s, there were powerful coal miners’ strikes, whereas, in 1991, over 80 per cent of Ukrainian citizens there supported Ukrainian independence at the All-Ukrainian Referendum. However, their striving to live in an independent state did not result in a long period of prosperity because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014. Since February 2022, Donbas has become the main battlefield for Ukrainian independence in the full-scale Russian war.

The palette of the distinct images of Donbas at different historical stages struggling for its collective identity can be fruitfully traced and considered in Ukrainian art, in particular, documentary cinema. The first prominent film devoted to Donbas that reflects a Soviet perspective on this region’s representation is Dzyga Vertov’s “Enthusiasm: The Donbas’ Symphony” (1930) – the first Ukrainian sound film, highly appreciated by the world’s artistic community for its avant-garde aesthetics.

Industrial Symphony in Vertov’s “Enthusiasm”

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring common place milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action.

(Benjamin 2007: 236)

This idea of a film as a means of social transformation and engagement in the genuine reality invisible to the audience without camera’s mediation expressed by Benjamin is fundamental for the creative work of his contemporary Dzyga Vertov – a founder of Ukrainian and Soviet documentary cinema. In his newsreels and documentary films, Vertov intends to reveal the cine-truth (“kinopravda”) of “life caught unaware” (Vertov 1984: 41). In Vertov’s modernistic view, only documentaries can communicate cine-truth through the cine-eye free from representational frames that makes “invisible visible, the unclear clear, the hidden manifest, the disguised overt, the acted nonacted, untruth truth – kinopravda” (Vertov 1984: 131). According to Vertov, documentaries liberate the audience from the mystified outlook shaped by the narrative cinema and syncretic art that distort vision. Documentaries, thus, can show the audience what it “does not know how to see” (Ranciere 2009: 29) because of the limitedness of human vision.

Vertov creates his prominent film “Enthusiasm: The Donbas’ Symphony” (1930) as an expression of cine-truth that can unite the masses by bonding proletariat together through visual and audial representation. In the film, Donbas is shown as a symbol of social progress in the Soviet Union and a center of industrialisation that has evolved from the pre-soviet times – the dark ages determined by the authority of religion and church over the poor people. Those people were unaware of their social responsibility to the state.

From Vertov's perspective, the industrial noise of Donbas sounds like a symphony. Moreover, he exemplifies the dynamics of building a communist society via the audial dimension of the film. Donbas' specific audial dimension structures and frames the vision, whereas the production noise embeds a cine-truth of this region. The radio sound, the classical orchestral music, the industrial noise, the workers' speeches, in which they express their enthusiasm, and Ukrainian farmers' singing constitute the image of Donbas as a utopian region of symphonic communal work. Symphonism as harmony becomes possible only after the collapse of the outdated collective representations – sacred images, religious symbols, and practices of Tsarist Russia. For instance, the choral performance of the national anthem of the Russian Empire is contrasted with the new perceptual and public order represented by authentic production noise. After the technological vision and hearing that constitute a new social reality replace the layers of false perception, the sound of imagined socialist freedom magnetises every image.

The film itself is structured like a classical symphony of 4 movements that, according to O. Bulgakowa, embody the following semantic chain:

1. Sound → Image, Eye → Ear, Radio → Sound film; Church → Club → Masses.
2. Coal → Metal → Masses.
3. Metal → Fire → Masses.
4. Grain → Masses (Bulgakowa 2008: 157).

These films' movements manifest the goals of the first Five-Year Plan – the Soviet state plan of economic development aimed at facilitating industrialisation and an anti-religious campaign. In the conceptual scheme, masses are always the final semantic element: symphony is created by and dedicated to the mass collective body crystallised as a social force. Considering cinema as an exceptional epistemological instrument that expands viewers' sensory and analytical abilities, Vertov also emphasises its role in the political activation of the audience. In his view, art, especially cinema, provides more than a spectacle that has to be watched: it "has to work for a society where everybody should be active" (Ranciere 2009: 63). Vertov demonstrates that passive spectators can gain their subjectness and become active agents only perceiving the cine-truth from the screen.

Within Vertov's conception, documentary is also decisive in the transformation of the collective identity. Vertov illustrates his film theory by depicting workers' training and the performance of machines and mechanisms at factories. These scenes are supposed to encourage the audience to be inspired by the Soviet social project and become shock workers – enthusiastic "udarniks". Moreover, the scene with a transformation of a church into a club, where we see the reverse motion of raising the red star (a Soviet symbol) instead of the Christian cross on the church also embodies the film's transformative mission in shaping the collective identity. The church becomes a workers' club signifying the transition to a society free from prejudice and false perception.

Vertov's "truth" of Donbas appears to be a "mechanical subjectivity" – constructed via montage reality grasped by the cine-eye that is opposite to the

documentation of life declared by Vertov's method (Chamberlin 2006). Vertov's montage makes Donbas visible to the viewers as a symbol of the utopian future communist world free from the alienation of labour, religious "poison", and moral failure – inevitable "vices" of premodern human nature. In the film, the Ukrainian background of Donbas is neglected: the workers speak Russian, although it can be noticed that it is not their mother tongue. The reason for that is that the Russian language is associated with revolutionary progress and Soviet patriotism, whereas the Ukrainian language is presented as outdated backwardness (Chernetsky 2020: 87). Moreover, the film does not relate to the historical reality it tries to represent otherwise too: themes of terror of the turn of the 1930-s that resulted in repressions against farmers, priests, and representatives of ethnic minorities of Greeks, Bulgarians, Germans, and Jews who lived there (Kuromiya 2002) are not addressed in the film.

On the contrary, with the help of the camera, the audience is supposed to see the "optical unconscious" (Benjamin 2007) of Donbas: its "irrelevant" past (church music, falling Christ, groups of drunks, exhausted farmers), "prospective" present (the images and sounds of factories and production process, marching and singing workers, dancing farmers at the background of collectivisation), and encouraging future (dynamism as a general representational principle in the film, educational art instead of entertaining one). Thus, Vertov's representation of Donbas is not reflectional or mimetic. It embodies the revolutionary pathos of the Soviet project forestalling a social realistic method in Soviet art. The "symphony" of Donbas created by Vertov's montage, establishes its collective representation as a place of the Soviet liberation of masses – a path "through the poetry of machines, from the bungling citizen to the perfect electric man" (Vertov 1984: 8).

The Image of Donbas in the Ukrainian Documentary of 2014–2022

80 years later, in April 2014, the occupation of Donbas by the Russian Federation began. It resulted in the 8-year hybrid war that in February 2022 escalated into a full-scale Russian invasion. Documented by Ukrainian soldiers and artists at the frontline, the war itself deconstructs the Soviet tradition of this region's representation. Completely destroyed Ukrainian cities and towns of Donbas, such as Mariupol, Mariinka, Rubizhne, Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and many others with no industries left there oppose a Soviet myth. Razed by Russian bombs, these cities have become spaces of the war cacophony: explosions and shelling define their soundscapes at the moment. Still having been destroyed, they continue to exist in artistic considerations by Ukrainian documentary makers.

The metamorphosis of Donbas became a subject of Ihor Minaiev's examination in his documentary film "The Cacophony of Donbas" (2017). In the film, Minaiev confronts the Donbas' representation in Soviet documentaries, especially, Vertov's "Enthusiasm", with the witness of Ukrainian citizens who went through Russian captivity in this occupied Ukrainian region. Minaiev is interested in the sources of the "(post)posttraumatic identity" (Matusiak 2020: 188) of the Donbas residents, who have become the objects of both Russian military aggression and

Russian propaganda. The director deconstructs the staged documentary videos and images of Donbas of the Soviet period as the Soviet archival canon. The proletarian myth becomes the film's main character that Ukrainian society and the general audience have to dispel. The narrator helps the audience to get through the Soviet totalitarian politics of memory explaining how the myth of Donbas has become a fake premise for Russian aggression.

Another perspective on the Donbas' metamorphosis is presented in the documentary film "War Note" (2020) directed by Roman Liubiyi. The film is based on private video recordings of Ukrainian militants and volunteers filmed on cellphones that document their life at the frontline. It is a weaving of personal stories that contain no director's commentaries or explanations and no names of geographical settlements. The film's main focus is the actors' war experience, which can be intersubjectively comprehended and lived through by the audience.

The narration develops, according to Liubiyi, "from summer to winter, from the soldier who has held the weapons for the first time to the experienced warrior" (Slipchenko 2021). Despite all the challenges, both newly arrived and experienced soldiers share an optimistic perspective on life and Ukraine's future. This seeming lightness of being even in the liminal situation reveals the multiple dimensions of life during the war. There is a place for jokes, dancing, writing poems, celebrating a birthday at the frontline, caring for animals as well as rescuing Ukrainian civilians from Russian shellings and surviving in trenches.

Unlike Vertov, Liubiyi does not perceive social activation to be the purpose of documentary filmmaking. The director dispels the praise of the individual agency as an opposition to passivity or victimhood: through the film's form, the director demonstrates the "preparedness to act appropriately out of one's perceived situation as an (in principle) universal human trait, while the opportunities to achieve an impact are unequally distributed" (Dahl 2009: 404). His film "War Note" provides a space for the authors of the videos to equally make performative claims and becomes an artistic platform for their communication with the audience without suggesting pre-determined meanings. Thus, the film aims to create "an emancipated community of narrators and translators" (Ranciere 2009: 22) and neglects an opposition between viewing and acting. The audience's role is not contrasted with the actors' function: every spectator is considered as "already an actor in her story" (Ranciere 2009: 17). That means the film is seen not as a direct visual premise of certain behavior but rather as an intellectual and artistic challenge that encourages spectators as equal participants of the communication to reflect on the myth of Donbas, the war, and its consequences that define Donbas' metamorphosis.

Conclusion

The tradition of Donbas' representation in Soviet cinema was founded by Dzyga Vertov in his "Enthusiasm", creating a myth of this region as a symbol of social progress and emancipation that has to activate the audience. This myth is dispelled by the current reality – the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine as well as it is artistically deconstructed by contemporary Ukrainian documentary film

directors whose films embody the evolution of the Donbas' collective representations. Minaiev's and Liubiy's films undermine the Soviet canon, examining the roots of the Soviet propaganda, giving the floor to Ukrainian victims of war and warriors at the frontline, and inviting the audience to deliberate together as equal agents about Donbas' metamorphoses.

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Summary

This article deals with the representation of Donbas as the “land of freedom” in Ukrainian documentaries from the 1930s and 2014–2022. It is shown that in Vertov's film “Enthusiasm” (1930), which is the artistic basis of the Soviet myth of this region, Donbas appears as a utopian place of zealous dedication to work and prosperous collective life, which in fact does not reflect the cinematic truth. Instead, “The Cacophony of Donbas” (Minaiev, 2017) and “War Note” (Liubiy, 2020) present the transformation of the region in the wake of the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine, exposing the fallacies of Soviet and Russian propaganda and reflecting on the aftermath of the destruction and metamorphosis of the Donbas.