

UKRAINIAN CINEMA AND CULTURAL MOBILIZATION DURING THE RUSSIAN INVASION (2022)

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INTRODUCTION

The response of the Ukrainians to the full-scale Russian invasion, which began on February 24, 2022, was not only an effective military mobilization but also a spontaneous and massive mobilization of individuals, organizations, and institutions supporting the war effort and seeking global support for Ukraine. Since the beginning of the Russian aggression, a significant role in organizing local and international resistance has been played by the so-called “cultural front,” which is self-organizing and initiated by individual artists and activists, various non-governmental organizations, and state institutions. The war prompted the active involvement of several creative individuals, including writers, poets, musicians, visual artists, and filmmakers, who deliberately chose to employ their artistic expressions as a means of resistance against the aggressor. Therefore, visual art exhibitions, music concerts, theatrical performances, and film screenings have been conducted at home and abroad. These events serve to disseminate information about ongoing hostilities, foster national unity, and solicit support and financial resources for the ongoing conflict.ⁱ

Also, national cultural institutions continue to operate, endeavoring to initiate and coordinate spontaneous initiatives and conduct effective cultural diplomacy. On the fifth day of the invasion, the Executive Director of the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, Vladyslav Berkovskyyi appealed to “all cultural institutions in Ukraine, to all cultural managers, to all who create the cultural landscape of our country” to join the war effort.ⁱⁱ The Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, a state-owned institution created in 2017, has become the coordinator of initiatives related to documenting Russian cultural crimes, fundraising campaigns helping Ukrainian culture, and obtaining international support under the banner of “Stand with Ukraine.” Other state institutions also remained active such as the Ukrainian Institute, developing an impressive wartime cultural diplomacy, and the Ukrainian State Film Agency (USFA), which since 2014 has been developing an effective film policy linked to the needs of a country fighting against external aggression.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the paper, I will focus on cinema and how cultural practices related to the production, distribution, and popularization of Ukrainian films are used to fight against the aggressor. In

contrast to 2014, when Russia was able to aggressively manipulate the narrative surrounding events in Ukraine and influence the emotional responses of both its own population and the global community, Ukrainians today are much more aware of the importance of winning the information war.^{iv} From the first days of the full-scale invasion, people associated with the film industry actively joined the resistance against the aggressor and started mobilizing international support. Many of them actively participated in the conflict by enlisting in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, joining the Territorial Defense Unit, or engaging in voluntary activities.^v Others have decided to utilize their professional expertise and skills to produce cinematic content aimed at aiding the ongoing battle and coordinating events with significant mobilization capabilities.

The article starts by providing a concise overview of the mobilizing aspect of Ukrainian culture during the initial stage of Russian aggression in 2014-2019. Next, I focus on the state of the Ukrainian film industry during the war and the role of cinema in galvanizing Ukrainian society and the international community to resist the aggressor. Finally, I examine recent cinematic projects related to the ongoing Russian invasion, examining the reasons and obstacles their creators face. The article is primarily based on analysis of pre-existing data sourced from the official websites of Ukrainian cultural institutions and renowned Ukrainian online media.

2014-2019: THE MOBILIZING ROLE OF CULTURE IN THE FACE OF RUSSIAN AGGRESSION

According to recent studies and analysis, there has been a significant upsurge in Ukrainian culture since 2014,^{vi} related to the empowerment of Ukrainian-speaking artists, the growing demand for their products in the country and abroad, as well as the unprecedented state support. In accordance with the post-Maidan cultural policy, deliberate efforts were made to cultivate and advance the Ukrainian language in the cultural sphere. Ukrainization strategies encompass the utilization of various mechanisms, including prioritizing cultural products in Ukrainian when allocating state funds and implementing quotas for radio and television content, mandating a certain proportion of Ukrainian-language programming and music. Additionally, establishing “national screen time” on Ukrainian TV stations promotes the popularity of Ukrainian films.^{vii}

Significant emphasis was placed on the development of the film industry, with cinema given careful consideration as a potent instrument for fostering a unified national identity and projecting Ukraine’s image on the international stage.^{viii} In 2014, the Ukrainian State Film Agency (USFA) was headed by Pylyp Illienko, the film director and producer, who actively participated in Euromaidan and had political affiliations with the nationalist party “Svoboda.” Illienko openly acknowledged his belief in film’s capacity as a potent ideological instrument, crucial in fostering the development of a collective national awareness: “Cinema must become our powerful artistic weapon because it is a weapon more effective than the Kalashnikov.”^{ix}

Filmmakers were also encouraged to address particular subjects in their films. These were primarily topics related to national history and traditions, “forgotten” heritage, and promoting the biography of famous Ukrainians. Considerable emphasis was also placed on the production of films, series, and television programs that depict the contemporary political history of Ukraine and its emerging heroes.^x Notable is the fact that creators enthusiastically embraced these state incentives, resulting in a significant increase in “patriotic” films, series, television shows, and novels. The Euromaidan movement, the subsequent power transition in Ukraine, and the subsequent armed conflict compelled millions of Ukrainians to take personal responsibility for the nation’s future. This circumstance made it possible to bridge the distance between the official state cultural institutions and the independent cultural sphere.^{xi} Artists, who previously tended to avoid engaging with political topics, began to demonstrate a greater propensity for active participation as conscientious citizens and patriots.

In addition, new initiatives supported by state cultural institutions have focused on using cinema to create a “coherent cultural space”^{xii} and enhance the Ukrainian populace’s sense of allegiance to the Ukrainian nation, particularly in regions where the local society lacks a strong connection to Ukrainian culture and the Ukrainian state. One of the notable initiatives was the “Days of Ukrainian Cinema in Donbas” project, inaugurated in 2017.^{xiii} Another project was an initiative titled “Ukrainian Cinema – to the front,” launched in 2019.^{xiv} This involved Ukrainian soldiers stationed in the front-line region and the local populace being exposed to freshly produced Ukrainian films to boost their morale and foster their commitment to ongoing efforts. Notable is the fact that the successful completion of both initiatives is attributable to a collaborative effort involving activists, non-governmental organizations, and state institutions.

THE UKRAINIAN FILM INDUSTRY DURING TIMES OF WAR

The struggle to maintain film production and distribution

On February 24, 2022, when Russia brutally assaulted Ukraine, the film industry, along with many other aspects of Ukrainian life, abruptly ground to a halt. The extensive hostility exhibited by Russia impeded the growth and hindered the acquisition of adequate public support for the cinema development.^{xv} According to the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine’s Resolution on March 10, 2022, the funds for the development of cinema were reallocated for military objectives.^{xvi} As a result, the initially projected budget of UAH 1.6 billion for the USFA in 2022 has been drastically reduced to UAH 115 million, making it impossible to provide financial support for ongoing productions and facilitate subsequent competition selections. In order to sustain its operations, the USFA initiated a fundraising campaign via a dedicated online platform, appealing for contributions of any amount, including the equivalent of a single cinema ticket.^{xvii} The funds were designated to

support the Ukrainian film industry and filmmakers during the war and to facilitate the production and completion of films considered to be of the utmost importance.

In April 2022, the Council for State Support of Cinematography released a comprehensive list of priority projects, encompassing 18 feature films, four documentaries, and two animations that are currently in advanced phases of development.^{xviii} In order to execute these initiatives, efforts were made to secure additional financial resources from various sources, including international collaborations with foreign film institutes such as the Polish Film Institute, Film Fund Luxembourg, and Slovak Audiovisual Fund. Additionally, efforts were made to increase attendance of Ukraine at international film festivals.

Within three months of the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion, the 75th Cannes Film Festival played a crucial role in garnering support for Ukraine and procuring tangible financial resources to sustain the beleaguered Ukrainian film industry. During the festival, the audience viewed two Ukrainian films – “Butterfly Vision” (*Bachennia Metelyka*, dir. Maksym Nakonechnyi) and “Pamfir” (dir. Dmytro Sukholytkyy-Sobchuk) – which were well received. In addition, as an integral part of the official program of the Marche du Film, a screening was organized to showcase nine Ukrainian film projects in advanced production. This screening’s primary objective was to identify potential co-financing partners for these initiatives.^{xix}

Furthermore, the initiation of the European Solidarity Fund for Ukrainian Films (ESFUF) was announced at the Cannes General Assembly in May 2022. This collaborative effort brings together 19 partners from 16 different countries. The fund’s primary objective is to provide financial assistance for the cinematographic works by Ukrainian directors at the development or finalization stage.^{xx} The inaugural fundraising drive was also conducted by Filmmakers for Ukraine, an independent European group of filmmakers that convened after the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022.^{xxi} In addition, to uphold backing and aid for the Ukrainian film industry, the USFA became an associate member of the European Film Agency Directors association (EFAD) in September 2022.^{xxii}

Due to the comprehensive support provided, a diverse range of films were successfully completed and presented to the festival audience by mid-2023. These films include “Luxembourg, Luxembourg” (dir. Antonio Lukich) in 2022, as well as “La Palisiada” (dir. Philip Sotnychenko), “Stepne” (dir. Maryna Vroda), “Forever-forever” (*Nazavzhdy-Nazavzhdy*, dir. Anna Buryachkova), and “Do you love me?” (*Ty mene liubysh?*, dir. Tonya Noyabrova) in 2023. Some of these films were also screened at Ukrainian film festivals, which continue to operate despite the ongoing conflict. Despite facing challenges including frequent air-raid alerts and power outages in 2022, the organizers of prominent events including the Kharkiv MeetDocs Eastern Ukrainian Film Festival, Kyiv Critics’ Week, DocudaysUA, and Molodist Kyiv Film Festival demonstrated resilience and determination. In addition, the Odesa International Film Festival, the most prestigious film festival in Ukraine, implemented the “Beyond Borders” format in 2022. This

format required the festival to be conducted in conjunction with other prestigious international film festivals, including the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in July, the Prishtina International Film Festival (PriFest) in August, and the Warsaw International Film Festival in October. In 2023, the festival was held in the southwestern Ukrainian city of Chernivtsi and, to a lesser extent, in Odesa.

Also, the pursuit of commercial cinema remains ongoing, exemplified by the recent accomplishment of the feature-length computer animation “Mavka. The Forest Song” (*Mavka: Lisova Pisnia*, dir. Oleh Malamuzh and Oleksandra Ruban), which debuted in Ukraine in March 2023. The final phases of the film’s production were already taking place during the full-scale Russian invasion. The filmmakers discussed the associated challenges, such as animators’ work in temporarily occupied territories or working from shelters.^{xxiii} The film achieved significant success by being distributed in 80 countries worldwide, including France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Romania.^{xxiv} Nevertheless, the picture achieved its greatest success in Ukraine, where it rapidly ascended to the position of the highest-grossing film. Throughout fifteen weeks, the picture garnered a remarkable viewership of 1.2 million individuals in Ukrainian cinema theaters, resulting in a substantial box office revenue of over 150 million hryvnias.^{xxv}

The cinematic success of “Mavka” demonstrates that the film industry in war-torn Ukraine is viable and necessary. The domestic distribution of films has been maintained despite the persistent and continuous threat of aerial attacks, which impedes cinemas’ operational capacity. In 2022, a selection of newly-produced films that were concluded shortly before the invasion were released nationwide. Among these films were the highly successful comedy titled “I Work at the Cemetery” (*Ia pratsiuiu na tsvyntari*, dir. Alexey Taranenko), a fantasy film based on a well-known comic book about Cossacks, titled “Maksym Osa” (*Maksym Osa ta Zoloto Pesyholovtsia*, dir. Myroslav Latyk) and the war drama titled “Sniper. The White Raven” (*Snaiper. Bilyi Voron*, dir. Marian Bushan). Notably, the premieres of the last two films were aligned with commemorating significant national holidays: Independence Day on August 24 and Day of the Defender of Ukraine on October 14.

According to Artem Denysov, the producer of the film “Sniper” broadcasting the film on Independence Day is a suitable decision: “We believe that our film will once again remind us that war knocked on peaceful Ukrainian homes eight years ago, and all this time, Ukrainian soldiers bravely defend our land – just like our Sniper.”^{xxvi} During its first weekend in theaters, the film was seen by over 11,000 individuals, demonstrating that Ukrainians want to participate in cultural life despite the war, and that the war with Russia is of particular interest. In 2023, Independence Day was celebrated with the premiere of the long-awaited film “Dovbush” (directed by Oles Sanin), which depicts a legendary Hutsul hero.

The political and mobilization aspects of cinema during the Russian invasion

In times of war, the film industry and associated cinematic practices extend beyond their conventional roles in entertainment, business, artistic endeavors, and cultural diplomacy during times of peace.^{xxvii} Similarly, in contemporary Ukraine, institutions, organizations, and individuals associated with the film industry are not only involved in maintaining film production and distribution but also in resistance activities against Russia. First of all, following the commencement of Russia's full-scale invasion, the USFA and the Ukrainian Film Academy^{xxviii} promptly initiated the process of drafting petitions and dispatching open letters to the global film community, urging them to support a boycott of Russian films. The organizers of prominent film festivals such as Berlinale, Venice, Cannes, Karlovy Vary, Locarno, Sundance, Rotterdam, San Sebastian, and Toronto were requested to abstain from including Russian films in both competitive and non-competitive sections.

Requests were also submitted to the leading film studios and VOD platforms, urging them to promptly cease the rental of their films within the Russian Federation and Belarus' jurisdiction and prohibit the utilization of content that Russian creators produce. Furthermore, various international film organizations, ministries, national cinema centers and studios, foreign producers, and distributors were asked to discontinue collaboration with Russian film producers and cease distributing Russian films. As a consequence of these activities, Russia has been excluded from participation in Eurimages, and official Russian delegations have been denied acceptance at prominent international film festivals. Simultaneously, Ukraine experienced unparalleled assistance from the international film industry.

This support was evident at film festivals, which not only served as a platform for securing financial assistance, as previously stated, but also for organizing political demonstrations. The 2022 Cannes and Venice film festivals commenced with inaugural addresses by President Zelenski, in which he implored the film community to stop remaining silent and speak out loud and with one voice about Russian crimes.^{xxix} In addition, the Ukrainian national pavilions hosted events aimed at educating the public about Russian aggression and atrocities, as well as casting light on the difficult circumstances the Ukrainian film industry faces against the backdrop of armed conflict.^{xxx} According to Maryna Kuderchuk, the director of the USFA, film festivals "have become a battlefield" and emerged as a platform where Ukrainian cinema can effectively convey the voice of Ukraine to the global audience, thereby enabling it to be authentically recognized.^{xxxi}

Film festivals also provided a venue for conducting public political actions. During the premiere of "Butterfly Vision," there was a protest action in which Ukrainian filmmakers participated. The artists associated with the film staged an event accompanied by simulated air raid sirens and the slogan "Russians kill Ukrainians. Do you find it offensive and disturbing to talk about this Genocide?" As the film's producer, Daria Bassel, explained, the creators were appealing to the international community's conscience regarding the previously underestimated risks

associated with Russia's aggressive foreign policy and the crimes committed by Russians that have gone unpunished.^{xxxii}

In addition to Ukraine's presence at international film festivals, initiatives that promote Ukrainian cinema to a larger audience are crucial. Coordinated by organizations at various levels, these special film screenings are frequently used to disseminate information about the current situation in Ukraine, demonstrate support for the soldiers engaged in frontline combat, express solidarity with Ukrainian society in its self-defense efforts, and raise funds for the country's pressing needs. Many of these screenings are organized as part of the huge initiative the World Film Marathon "CinemaAid Ukraine", launched in March 2022 by the USFA, the Ukrainian Film Academy, and the "Watch Ukrainian!" Association, with the support of many other partners.

Maryna Kuderchuk, in her appeal on the project website, clearly indicates the mobilizing potential of these events: "Unfortunately, with bombs dropping everywhere, we cannot watch high-quality Ukrainian cinema with our friends and share our emotions as well as our impressions. But foreign viewers do have the chance to do this and thereby join us in our common struggle against the enemy. Victory will be ours and we will achieve this together!"^{xxxiii} Typically, prominent Ukrainian filmmakers, diplomats, and activists attend these screenings and speak about Ukraine and their experiences. Furthermore, notable individuals from the hosting country articulate their words of support and encourage the audience to offer help to Ukrainians.^{xxxiv}

Simultaneously, an important aspect of Ukraine's cultural diplomacy even during times of war is to present and discuss Ukraine not solely within the context of conflict, but rather to highlight Ukrainian culture as a subject worthy of wider recognition and interest. The filmmakers themselves recognize the significance of cinema, as it occupies a central position in this context. Therefore, the presence and success of Ukrainian cinema at international film festivals, as well as the increasing presence of Ukrainian films in foreign distribution and on international online platforms, are crucial.

Furthermore, akin to previous years, the implementation of cinema screening practices exerts a significant influence on the mobilization of Ukrainian society. The mobilizing capacity of cinema was articulated by the USFA website as follows: "Cinema is our weapon against the enemy on the cultural front (...) Ukrainian fairy tales comfort children in shelters, full-length films and series raise the morale of soldiers at the front and serve as psychological support for Ukrainian refugees."^{xxxv} An impressive initiative of the USFA, in cooperation with the Chancellery of the President of Ukraine and the Association "Watch Ukrainian!" is the national film tour "Cinema for Victory!" (Kino zarady Peremohy!), which started in August 2022.

The effective coordination of this event can be credited to the tremendous support provided by sponsors, volunteers, and numerous bodies including the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the police, and regional military administrations. During the first edition of the National Tour, which lasted until October 31, 2022, a total of 1036 screenings were conducted across 177 towns

in 18 regions of Ukraine.^{xxxvi} Film screenings were conducted in metropolitan areas as well as in locations that typically lack access to film viewings, such as military units and rural communities. The screenings were accompanied by interactive sessions featuring prominent figures from the film industry, including Bohdan Beniuk, Akhtem Seitablayev, and Ada Rohovtseva, who serve as official ambassadors for the project. Furthermore, the individuals involved in the production of the aforementioned films, including the actors and directors, actively took part in these sessions.^{xxxvii}

According to the organizers, the primary objective of the project is to cultivate a heightened sense of resilience and resolve within the Ukrainian community. Additionally, the initiative seeks to promote social solidarity in the quest of victory, as well as to further the preservation and appreciation of Ukrainian cultural heritage. Shows organized for internally displaced people and military personnel are particularly noteworthy. These sessions frequently extend over a substantial duration and evoke intense emotional responses. According to Andriy Rizol, an organizer, it is crucial for soldiers to receive genuine and benevolent expressions of gratitude during séances involving renowned Ukrainian cultural figures: “They need to hear sincere and kind words of gratitude, to feel understanding that their effort is extremely appreciated, that all of Ukraine is incredibly proud of its soldiers.”^{xxxviii} The success of the first edition of the tour led to the commencement of the subsequent edition in June 2023.

WAR-RELATED FILM PRODUCTION

Documentaries as a tool of mobilization

Since February 2022, the Ukrainian film community has assumed a significant role in disseminating information to the Ukrainian populace and the global community regarding the ongoing events in Ukraine and in conveying the personal and collective experiences of Ukrainians during the Russian invasion. Consequently, many documentaries are produced, focusing on the continuous conflict. For example, the informal collective of filmmakers known as “Babylon’13,” established in 2013 during the Revolution of Dignity, persists in capturing the emergence of the “new civil society” through their ongoing documentation efforts. Immediately after the start of the full-scale Russian invasion, filmmakers started documenting the besieged cities and the Ukrainian populace’s resistance against the invading forces. The result is short films^{xxxix}, including the series “Mariupol Fortress” (*Fortetsia Mariupol!*, dir. Yuliia Hontaruk) founded on video calls made to soldiers surrounded on Azovstal. Also, the full-length documentary film titled “One Day in Ukraine” (*Den ukrainskoho dobrovoltsia*), directed by Volodymyr Tykhyi, was shot during a single day, on March 14, 2022.

Furthermore, numerous film projects incorporate elements of both documentary filmmaking and mobilization efforts. One illustrative instance is the “Ukrainian Witness”

initiative, which was established “to capture and memorize the terrible events in Ukraine.”^{xli} Within the scope of this project, short documentaries are produced with the intention to chronicle the Ukrainian resistance to Russian aggression, “a chronicle that our children, and our children’s children, will study in their history lessons.” In the initial month of the conflict, a total of 70 concise documentaries were distributed across several social media channels, resulting in substantial levels of public participation. As of the middle of 2023, a cumulative count of over 500 items has been produced, resulting in an audience over 35 million on YouTube.^{xli}

In addition to the documentary aspect, the project’s authors place significant emphasis on its aim to inform and mobilize society to fight. The project initiator is Vitalii Deineha, a public activist and founder of the International Fund Come Back Alive. According to him, the project is needed in order not to lose the information war again. According to his statement, posted on the project website: “I barely remembered the beginning of the war back in 2014. (...) Nobody fixed those events... At the same time, Russian propaganda was already writing about us, changing how history is recorded and remembered. We were losing the informational battle. When Russia attacked us again in 2022, the whole story repeated itself. We were unprepared to document our history. I needed to fix that.” The international community is an essential target of this information war, emphasizing the importance of producing content that is tailored for a global audience. As stated by the project’s authors, this has the potential to facilitate the acquisition of financial and armament support, particularly from countries in Europe and North America.

Documentaries focused on the perspectives and behaviors of prominent individuals within the Russian invasion also possess a mobilizing aspect. An example of such an initiative is a series of 25 short documentaries titled “Art in a Wartime Country” (*Mystetstvo v kraini viiny*), which pays homage to artists who remained within the country’s borders and actively resisted the Russian invasion. Documentaries were broadcast on YouTube^{xlii} as well as all regional channels of Public Television as part of the project “Suspilne. Sprotyv” (Public. Resistance). The films were additionally showcased in the National Museum of Art of Ukraine in Kyiv, where screenings were organized with the participation of the project’s creators and artists.

The primary aim of the film project was to examine the changing dynamics between artists and their artwork within a community that has been impacted by armed conflict. The films illustrate the active participation of Ukrainian artists in various aspects of wartime engagement. These include voluntary initiatives, and the creation of visual art, poetry, and musical compositions that revolve around war themes. Additionally, the films emphasize the artists’ promotion of their Ukrainian heritage while seeking international recognition for their artistic pursuits. According to Kostiantyn Klyatskin, the director and co-founder of DocNoteFilms studio, which is accountable for the execution of the project, “Our project aims not only to tell the story of 25 Ukrainian artists – we also want to show the strength and versatility of Ukrainian art, and its ability not only to reflect but also to motivate and inspire in the most challenging times for Ukraine.”^{xliii}

In turn, the project “Culture vs. War” (Kultura vs. Viina), implemented by the Association “Watch Ukrainian!”, aims to chronicle the experiences of Ukrainian filmmakers and artists who have actively participated in the Armed Forces and have been engaged in the defense of Ukraine since February 2022. The films present introspective examinations of the characters’ transformation in the context of war, the reassessment of societal principles, and their patriotic attitudes. Additionally, the film incorporates authentic depictions of the protagonists’ experiences in the military. The principal protagonists in the first two films are Serhii Mykhalchuk, a cinematographer, and Akhtem Seitablayev, an actor and director. The initiative was initiated at the onset of the Bouquet Kyiv Stage, an esteemed international high arts festival, in August 2022 in Kyiv. According to Kadim Tarasov and Andrii Rizol, the project’s creators, “Cinema is a weapon. Culture will win the war!”^{xliv} Undoubtedly, this type of film has a significant impact on social mobilization, as it depicts admirable patterns of behavior and heroic dispositions.

Additionally, the project’s creators recognize the need to engage both the Ukrainian population and the international community. As they admitted, the films in the “Culture vs. War” series are intended for two distinct target audiences: Ukrainians and foreigners. “We want to show the Ukrainian audience that even famous artists are absolutely sure of our victory and will take up arms. In our opinion, this is a motivating factor for people. We also want to tell the foreign audience that, since the first days of the war, we have not only been fighting for ourselves, but we have been a shield for Europe. All our foreign activities are to show that our Ukrainian values are identical to European ones. We hope that the foreign audience will feel this message,”^{xlv} they claimed.

It is also noteworthy to consider feature-length documentaries specifically tailored to international viewership. One illustrative instance is the film titled “The Rising Fury” (dir. Lesia Kalynska and Ruslan Batytskyi), which came into fruition in 2023 through the means of funding predominantly sourced from American institutions and people.^{xlvi} The film effectively establishes the historical backdrop of the Russian invasion, beginning with the events that transpired on Kyiv’s Maidan in 2013. It continually conveys that Russian aggression towards Ukraine did not commence solely on February 24, but has persisted since 2014. The film was showcased at many international film festivals, including the Chicago International Film Festival, the Melbourne Documentary Film Festival, and the New York Tribeca Film Festival. Additionally, it is presented at exclusive screenings held at universities and local cultural centers to raise awareness about the war in Ukraine.^{xlvii}

Challenges in making feature films

Moreover, there have been the first attempts to produce dramatized documentaries or even full-length films centered around contemporary occurrences. The first one is “Region of Heroes”

(Oblast Heroiv, dir. Artur Lerman), which was produced by Oleksii Komarovskiy. Instead of employing professional actors, the film relies on volunteers who personally encountered the events depicted in the film. The plot is comprised of four true stories, each of which depicts the courageous actions taken by residents of the Kyiv region during the Russian occupation in March 2022. The film presents an authentic and candid account of the events that transpired during the challenging period of hostile occupation in various locations such as Bucha, Vorzel, Hostomel, and Irpin. As the film's creators explained, every courageous confession presented in this context transcends the individual, embodying instead the collective experiences of numerous Ukrainian volunteers who represent the unwavering spirit of the Ukrainian nation.^{xlviii}

Shooting for the film commenced in July 2022, and by November of the same year, the film was released in Ukrainian cinemas, indicating a highly accelerated production schedule. The promotional campaign for the film showing used the slogan "Ukrainian cinema warms not only the soul," as proceeds from ticket sales were used to purchase heaters for orphans in Ukraine. According to Oleksiy Kuleba, the head of the Kyiv Regional State Administration, the video holds historical significance for Ukraine as it highlights the pivotal role performed by ordinary Ukrainians in securing victory in Kyiv. Hence, "This film project is part of the emotional and moral reconstruction of the Kyiv region and Ukraine."^{xlix} Similarly, Kuderchuk, the head of USFA, an institution that supported this film project, admitted that "cinema is a powerful tool for restoring and rebuilding Ukrainian space." This acknowledgment highlights the significance of filmic imagery in facilitating trauma recovery and restoring psychological balance after dramatic experiences.

The film was additionally disseminated internationally through streaming platforms, either accompanied by English subtitles or with a voiceover in the respective local language. As the film's producer explained the decision on foreign distribution, "The purpose of this film is to show the whole world how heroic Ukrainians are."¹ The film, like the previously mentioned documentaries, seeks to engage in information warfare by portraying Ukraine as the victim of Russian aggression. In addition, the film skillfully depicts the brutal realities of the Russian occupation in the vicinity of Kyiv, thereby fostering sympathy and solidarity for Ukrainian refugees among communities where they found new homes.

The second project, a feature-length film titled "Bucha" (2023, dir. Stanislav Tiunov), examines the Russian occupation of the Kyiv region with a greater degree of controversy. The film is based on a true story about a Kazakh refugee who valiantly rescued several Ukrainians in Bucha and other occupied territories in the suburbs of Kyiv. The production of the film was made feasible by the funds raised through a dedicated crowdfunding platform. The film was shot in March and April of 2023 in the same geographic locations where the actual events took place. The film's premiere, originally scheduled for the autumn of 2023, has been postponed to 2024. Over 120

actors and over 700 crowd-sourced actors participated in the project, including the renowned actor Viacheslav Dovzhenko, known for his portrayal in “Cyborgs. Heroes Never Die.”

However, after the release of the trailer, which depicted the execution of noncombatants in a ruthless manner, the Ukrainian Film Academy issued a highly critical statement regarding this film project. It is accused of an insensitive approach, an opportunistic use of the tragedy, and the risk of retraumatizing individuals who experienced violence at the hands of the occupiers. “The use of heavy military equipment, pyrotechnics, Russian army uniforms, and the recreation of violent events now reminds people who have experienced the violence of these events,” the authors of the appeal state explicitly.^{li} Consequently, those who have experienced such occurrences may be more prone to reliving traumatic events, both through their participation as background actors during shooting and subsequent viewing of the final footage.

In response to these accusations, the creators of “Bucha” emphasized the importance of contemporary cinema as a crucial element of public diplomacy and information warfare. According to their viewpoint, it is crucial for Ukrainians to produce films that address contemporary issues, as failure to do so could lead to the proliferation of films that promote narratives concentrated on Russia.^{lii} Hence, according to the film’s official website, the primary purpose of the film is to counter Russian propaganda and “tell the entire world what really happened.”^{liiii} Moreover, as asserted by the creators of “Bucha,” cinema is a suitable medium for commemorating war casualties and engaging in the collective effort to address trauma, which encompasses both personal and societal dimensions. At the same time, they acknowledge the need for a sensitive approach to potentially traumatizing issues and the participation of individuals who have experienced violence. As they explain, this is why the scriptwriters endeavored to contact all the individuals and families depicted in the film. In addition, a psychologist was consulted during the film production.

Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize that Ukrainian filmmakers exhibit a variety of perspectives regarding the permissible limits of wartime cinema. As demonstrated by the outcomes of a collaborative initiative between the Ukrainian Film Academy and Netflix, “Grant Program: script development and exclusive sessions with industry experts,” filmmakers and producers are interested in the topic of conflict. As a result of the script competition, 48 successful projects, which will receive funding for further development, were selected; the majority of these projects deal with events related to the Russian full-scale invasion and the diverse responses observed in Ukrainian society.^{liv} At the same time, certain directors, such as Oleh Sentsov, who won the script competition for a film about Azovstal, have stated their intention to begin production only after the achievement of Ukrainian victory.^{lv}

CONCLUSIONS

The article examines the mobilizing function of Ukrainian cinema in response to the Russian invasion. Despite the ongoing war, the Ukrainian film industry continues to operate. This is possible due to the extraordinary mobilization of the film community, the efforts of state cultural institutions, and, most significantly, the substantial support from international film institutes, film agencies, and various organizations.^{lvi} Due to the collaborative efforts, Ukrainian filmmakers are able to continue their ongoing film projects and initiate new ones, including those centered on the ongoing conflict. This phenomenon is both pragmatic – assuring jobs in the film industry and sustaining filmmakers and their families – as well as highly symbolic.

The production of new audiovisual content and the promotion of Ukrainian films serve to strengthen the resiliency and unity of Ukrainians, while also contributing to the formation of a coherent narrative encircling ongoing events and their affective evaluations. Additionally, Ukraine's participation in international film festivals and the promotion of Ukrainian cinema through special screenings contribute to the cultivation of a favorable perception of Ukrainians and Ukraine, resulting in the acquisition of tangible and moral support, including financial and military aid.

Film productions that aim to depict the horrors of war and the associated experiences of millions of Ukrainians hold significant value. They play a vital role in the information war, influencing the interpretation of events in a manner that favors Ukraine. In addition, they have significant psychological value, facilitating the process of grappling with the difficult aftermath of Russian aggression. In addition, the cinematic depiction of the harrowing ordeal endured by innumerable Ukrainians, which resulted in the loss of their homes and loved ones, has the potential to enhance the global audience's comprehension of the current events in Ukraine. This can facilitate the development of a hospitable and empathetic attitude toward the large number of Ukrainian refugees who are presently displaced from their homes and their integration into local communities.

Simultaneously, the initial endeavors to produce feature films centered around the ongoing war sparked intense debates within the Ukrainian cinema community.^{lvii} Unquestionably, a crucial aspect of these debates is emphasizing the importance of ethics in the filmmaking industry, particularly with regard to war films and the management of extremely sensitive subject matter. A significant concern that has been raised is the need to ensure the psychological safety of individuals engaged in filming activities, particularly those who have witnessed gruesome events during times of conflict. In addition, it is essential to provide specialized care for children and adolescents involved in such filmmaking endeavors.

ⁱ The Ukrainian Cultural Foundation regularly reports these events through the Ukrainian-language version of the online digest “Chronicles of the cultural front,” available at: <https://uaculture.org/digests/>.

ⁱⁱ “Vladyslav Berkovskii: “We shall collect facts on the russian-belarusian aggression,” Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, February 28, 2022, <https://ucf.in.ua/en/news/28-02-2022>.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more about the war-related activities of these institutions, see: Elżbieta Olzacka, “The development of Ukrainian cultural policy in the context of Russian hybrid aggression against Ukraine,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, OnlineFirst, (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2023.2187053>.

^{iv} After the successful Revolution of Dignity and the change of power in the country, in February/March 2014, the Russians annexed Crimea and supported the pro-Russian separatists. On the territory of Donbas, the Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics, supported and armed by Russia, were established, against which the Ukrainian state began military operations. The events were portrayed by the Russian media as an internal struggle within Ukraine, and the narrative of a “Ukrainian crisis” was also actively propagated in Western media. See, for example, Taras Kuzio, “Russian Military Aggression or ‘Civil War’ in Ukraine?” *E-International Relations* (2020), <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/11/27/russian-military-aggression-or-civil-war-in-ukraine/>.

^v The profiles of the filmmakers who were directly involved in the combat are presented as part of the project “Culture Fight Back,” launched by the Ukrainian Institute. Available at: <https://ui.org.ua/en/culture-fights-back-2/>.

^{vi} See, for example, Olzacka, “The development of Ukrainian cultural policy;” Maria Pesenti, “Cultural Revival and Social Transformation in Ukraine. The Role of Culture and the Arts in Supporting Post-Euromaidan Resilience,” *Chatham House Research Paper*, November 20, 2020, www.chathamhouse.org/2020/11/cultural-revival-and-social-transformation-ukraine; Nataliia Zlenko, “Socio-Cultural Development and Cultural Policy of Ukraine: Experience of Formation and Implementation,” *Three Seas Economic Journal* 48, no. 1 (2020): 48–53, doi:10.30525/2661-5150/2020-4-8.

^{vii} See more Olzacka, “The development of Ukrainian cultural policy.”

^{viii} Olzacka, “The development of Ukrainian cultural policy,” 8–9.

^{ix} Iryna Shtohrin, «Kino ie zbroieiu efektyvnishoiu, nizh Avtomat Kalashnikova» – Illienko [“Cinema is a More Effective Weapon Than a Kalashnikov” - Illenko].” *RadioSvoboda*, December 28, 2016, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/28202432.html>.

^x For more about patriotic filmmaking in the context of Russian aggression see: Elżbieta Olzacka, “The Development of National Cinema in Post-Maidan Ukraine,” *East European Politics and Societies*, 37, no. 2 (2023), 435–454, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254221101907>.

^{xi} Olzacka, “The development of Ukrainian cultural policy,” 11.

^{xii} Olzacka, “The development of Ukrainian cultural policy,” 7.

^{xiii} More about the project see Aleksei Pershko, “Dni ukrainskoho kino na Donbasi,” *Kino-Teatr*, May 10, 2017, <https://kino-teatr.ua/uk/articles/dni-ukrainskogo-kino-v-donbasse-4461.phtml>.

^{xiv} “Proekt «Dyvys ukrainske» stav chastynoiu nadvazhlyvoho proektu «Ukrainske kino – frontu»” [Project “Look Ukrainian!” became part of the important project “Ukrainian cinema - the front”.], *Look Ukrainian!*, 2019, <http://www.kinoua.org/ua/news/proekt-divis-ukrainske-stav-castinou-nadvazlivogo-proektu-ukrainske-kino-frontu>.

^{xv} Despite the problems associated with the coronavirus pandemic and lockdowns, the film industry has grown steadily. See: Pesenti, “Cultural Revival,” 20.

^{xvi} Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine “Pro spriamuvannia koshtiv do rezervnoho fondu derzhavnoho biudzhetu” [On the allocation of funds to the reserve fund of the state budget], available at: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/245-2022-%D0%BF#Text>.

^{xvii} See the appeal of Maryna Kuderchuk, head of the USFA, available at: <https://usfa.gov.ua/press-center/pidtrymay-ukrainske-kino-derzhavne-agentstvo-ukrainy-z-pytan-kino-ogoloshuye-akciyu-na-pidtrymku-i12252>.

^{xviii} Full list available at: <https://usfa.gov.ua/press-center/do-uvagy-vyrobnikiv-filmiv-shho-perebuyayut-na-zavershalnykh-stadiyakh-vyrobnictva-i12020>.

^{xix} About the “Ukrainian Films Now” initiative see more: Ben Dalton, “12 European film funds partner on Ukraine fundraising event in Cannes (exclusive),” *ScreenDaily*, May 11, 2022, <https://www.screendaily.com/news/12-european-film-funds-partner-on-ukraine-fundraising-event-in-cannes-exclusive/5170348.article>.

^{xx} See more at: <https://esfuf.eu/>.

^{xxi} “Who is behind Filmmakers for Ukraine,” available at: <https://filmmakers-for-ukraine.com/about/>.

^{xxii} “The Ukrainian State Film Agency becomes the 36th EFAD member,” EFAD, September 21, 2022, <https://europeanfilmagencies.eu/news-publications/our-press-releases/2515-the-ukrainian-state-film-agency-becomes-the-36th-efad-member>.

^{xxiii} Polina Hrytsyk, “Mavka. Lisova pisnia. Khronolohiia/Problemy/Perspektyvy” [Mavka. Forest Song. Chronology/Problems/Perspectives], *UA Geek*, 2023, <https://uageek.space/mavka-forest-song/#gs.5cm1c0>.

^{xxiv} For more, see: ““Mavka. Lisova pisnia” u svitovomu prokati — prodiuserka pro uspikh multfilmu, sykvel i krytyku” [“Mavka. Forest Song” at the global box office — the producer about the success of the cartoon, the sequel and criticism], *SuspilneKultura*, April 10, 2023, <https://suspilne.media/438489-mavka-lisova-pisna-u-svitovomu-prokati-produserka-pro-uspikh-multfilmu-sikvel-i-kritiku/>.

^{xxv} “Za rezultatamy piatnadtsiatoho tyzhnia u natsionalnomu prokati, kasovi zbory multfilmu «Mavka» skladaui 150 952 041 hrn” [According to the results of the fifteenth week at the national box office, the box office of the cartoon “Mavka” is UAH 150,952,041], USFA, June 13, 2023, <https://usfa.gov.ua/press-center/za-rezultatamy-p-yatnadcyatogo-tyzhnya-u-nacionalnomu-prokati-kasovi-zbory-multfilmu-mavka-i13018>.

^{xxvi} “Ja khochu vyhnaty tu navoloch zi svoiei zemli: do Dnia Ukrainskoi Derzhavnosti predstavliaiemo trailer filmu “Snaiper. Bilyi Voron”” [I want to drive that bastard out of my land: for the Day of Ukrainian Statehood, we present the trailer of the film “Sniper. White Raven”], USFA, July 28, 2022, <https://usfa.gov.ua/press-center/ya-khochu-vygnaty-tu-navoloch-zi-svoyei-zemli-do-dnya-ukrainskoi-derzhavnosti-predstavlyayemo-i12208>.

^{xxvii} See, for example, Michael Hammond, *The Big Show: British cinema culture in the Great War (1914-1918)* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006); Guy Westwell, *War Cinema. Hollywood on the Front Line* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2006); Klaus Dodds, “Hollywood and the Popular Geopolitics of the War on Terror,” *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 8 (2008): 1621-1637, DOI: [10.1080/01436590802528762](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590802528762).

^{xxviii} The Ukrainian Film Academy (Ukrainska kinoakademiia) was established in 2017 as an association of experts and professionals in the field of cinema and film production.

^{xxix} “Prezydent Ukrainy Volodymyr Zelenskyy vystupyv na tseremonii vidkryttia Kannskoho kinofestyvaliu” [President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy spoke at the opening ceremony of the Cannes Film Festival], USFA, May 17, 2022, <https://usfa.gov.ua/press-center/prezydent-ukrainy-volodymyr-zelenskyy-vystupyv-na-ceremonii-vidkryttia-kannskogo-kinofestyvaliu-i12069>.

^{xxx} For example, during the 2022 Cannes Film Festival, two discussions were held, “Canceling Russian Culture: Cinema as an Instrument of Russian Propaganda and War” and “Women In Industry.” These discussions focused on the topics of Russian propaganda and the role of women filmmakers in the context of war.

^{xxxi} “Ukraina na 75-mu Kannskomu kinofestyvali: kulturna dyplomatiia za chasiv viiny” [Ukraine at the 75th Cannes Film Festival: cultural diplomacy during the war], USFA, May 12, 2022, <https://usfa.gov.ua/press-center/ukraina-na-75-mu-kannskomu-kinofestyvali-kulturna-dyplomatiya-za-chasiv-viiny-i12054>.

^{xxxii} “U den svitovoi premiery komanda filmu “Bachennia metelyka” provela aktsiiu na pidtrymku Ukrainy na chervonii dorizhtsi Kannskoho kinofestyvaliu” [On the day of the world premiere, the team of the film “Butterfly Vision” held an action in support of Ukraine on the red carpet of the Cannes Film Festival], USFA, May 25, 2022, <https://usfa.gov.ua/press-center/u-den-svitovoi-premyery-bachennya-metelyka-komanda-filmu-provela-akciyu-na-pidtrymku-ukrainy-na-i12101>.

^{xxxiii} See at the official project’s website: <https://www.cinemaid.org/>.

^{xxxiv} Detailed report on activities undertaken available at: <https://www.facebook.com/CinemAidUkraine>.

^{xxxv} “Pidtrymai ukrainske kino: Derzhavne ahentstvo Ukrainy z pytan kino oholoshuie aktsiiu na pidtrymku vitchyzniano kinoindustrii” [Support Ukrainian cinema: the State Film Agency of Ukraine announces an action in support of the domestic film industry], USFA, August 22, 2022, <https://usfa.gov.ua/press-center/pidtrymay-ukrainske-kino-derzhavne-agentstvo-ukrainy-z-pytan-kino-ogoloshuye-akciyu-na-pidtrymku-i12252>.

^{xxxvi} For more, see: “Videozvit zi spohadamy ta vrazhenniamy vid I etapu Natsionalnoho turu «Kino zarady Peremohy!»” [Video report with memories and impressions from the 1st stage of the National Tour "Cinema for Victory!"], USFA, 23 November 23, 2022, <https://usfa.gov.ua/press-center/videozvit-zi-spogadamy-ta-vrazhennyamy-vid-i-etapu-natsionalnogo-turu-kino-zarady-peremogy-i12514>.

^{xxxvii} Olesya Kotubey, “Kultura pratsiuie na vyperedzhennia”: Seitablaiev, Beniuk ta Rizol pro Natsionalnyi tur "Kino zarady peremohy!" ["Culture works in advance": Seitablaiev, Benyuk and Risol about the National Tour "Cinema for Victory!"], USFA, September 13, 2022, <https://usfa.gov.ua/press-center/kultura-pracyuye-na-vyperedzhennya-seitablayev-benyuk-ta-rizol-pro-natsionalnyy-tur-kino-zarady-i12311>.

^{xxxviii} “«Kino zarady Peremohy!»: u mezhakh turu filmy pokazaly vzhe v 11 oblastiakh” ["Cinema for Victory!": during the tour, films were already shown in 11 regions], USFA, September 16, 2022, <https://usfa.gov.ua/press-center/kino-zarady-peremogy-u-mezhakh-turu-filmy-pokazaly-vzhe-v-11-oblastyakh-i12323>.

^{xxxix} See at the official project's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCrJIeADD45RsffK2yYgmSw>.

^{xl} The official project's website available at: <https://uw.media/en/>.

^{xli} See at the official film's channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@UkrainianWitness/about>.

^{xlii} Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvU0rL8J7mQ>.

^{xliii} “Mystetstvo v kraini viiny: iak my znyaly dokumentalnyi serial u 2022-mu” [Art in the Wartime Country: How We Filmed a Documentary Series in 2022], *Lb.ua*, January 30, 2023, https://lb.ua/blog/docnotefilms/544164_mistetstvo_kraini_viyi_yak_mi.html.

^{xliv} “U Kyievi startuvav proiekt «Kultura vs viina»” ["Culture vs War" project launched in Kyiv], *Ukrinform*, June 6, 2023, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-culture/3719156-u-kievi-startuvav-proekt-kultura-vs-vijna.html>.

^{xliv} “U Kyievi startuvav proiekt «Kultura vs viina».”

^{xlvi} List of donors available at the official film's website: <https://arisingfury.com/>.

^{xlvii} See at the official film's Facebook profile: <https://www.facebook.com/arisingfury/>.

^{xlviii} “Ukrains'kyi fil'm «Oblast Heroiv» Oleksiia Komarovskoho vykhodyt u svitovyi pokaz” [Oleksiy Komarovskiy's Ukrainian film "The Region of Heroes" is being released worldwide], USFA, March 1, 2023, <https://usfa.gov.ua/press-center/ukrainskyy-film-oblast-geroiv-oleksiya-komarovskogo-vykhodyt-u-svitovyy-pokaz-i12750>.

^{xlix} “Na Kyivshchyni rozpochalys ziomky dokumentalnoho filmu "Oblast Heroiv"” [Filming of the documentary film "Region of Heroes" has begun in Kyiv Region], USFA, July 27, 2022, <https://usfa.gov.ua/press-center/na-kyivshchyni-rozpochalys-zyomky-dokumentalnogo-filmu-oblast-geroiv-i12214>.

^l “Ukrainskyi film «Oblast Heroiv».”

^{li} Polina Horlach, “Ukrainska kinoakademiia zaklykala do diskusii cherez ziomky ihrovoho filmu "Bucha"” [The Ukrainian Film Academy called for a discussion about the filming of the feature film "Bucha"], *SuspilneKultura*, September 16, 2022, <https://suspilne.media/282456-ukrainska-kinoakademiia-zaklykala-do-diskusii-cerez-zjomki-igrovogo-filmu-buca/>.

^{lii} Oleksandr Shchur, “Tsym filmom my khochemo vshanuvaty pamiat zahyblykh – stsenaryst filmu «Bucha»” [With this film, we want to honor the memory of the dead - screenwriter of the film "Bucha"], *#Bukvy*, June 3, 2023, <https://bykvu.com/ua/mysli/tsym-filmom-my-khochemo-vshanuvaty-pam-iat-zahyblykh-rezhymer-i-stsenaryst-filmu-bucha/>.

^{liii} See at the official film's website: <https://buchafilm/>.

^{liv} All winning projects available at: <https://www.development.ua/filmacademy.org/en/projects>.

^{lv} Polina Horlach, “Oleh Sentsov napyshe stsenarii do filmu pro "Azovstal"” [Oleg Sentsov will write the script for the film about "Azovstal"], *SuspilneKultura*, September 16, 2022, <https://suspilne.media/282373-oleg-sencov-napise-scenarij-do-filmu-pro-azovstal/>.

^{lvi} Based on the survey done by the Ukrainian Film Academy, Ukrainian filmmakers expresses discontent with the operations of the USFA, perceiving them as lacking competence and falling short of expectations. In the present circumstances, as highlighted by the filmmakers, the paramount factor is the establishment of a personal network of connections that facilitates the identification of sponsors and the provision of assistance for cinematic endeavors. The results of a survey available at: <https://uafilmacademy.org/news/rezultati-opituvannja-chleniv-kinoakademiji-schodo-stanu-ukrajinskoji-kinoindustriji.html>.

^{lvii} The public discussion on this topic was initiated by the Odesa International Film Festival and was held, among others, during the 2022 film festivals Kharkiv MeetDocs and Kyiv’s Critics Week.