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Résumé de l'article

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Keywords: informational warfare, war cinema, contemporary Ukrainian cinema, cinematic representations of the Donbas war, Akhtem Seitablaev's *Cyborgs: Heroes Never Die* (2017), Sergei Loznitsa's *Donbass* (2018).

INTRODUCTION

Along with tragic losses, the war in the Donbas has forced Ukrainians to revise entirely their pre-war views on national identity and Ukraine's political future.[1] This revision has inspired an outpouring of artistic productions and research on politics, ideology, culture, social relations, and

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[1] Within the first months of the war, it became common in Ukraine to claim that Russia's aggression in Crimea and the Donbas facilitated the birth of "a new political nation" (see, for example, Polishchuk). For opinion polls supporting such claims, see Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis* 149–50. For a more recent survey, see the 2017 report, "Osnovni zasady," from the Razumkov Center (Tsentr Razumkova). For a scholarly analysis of the rapid post-Euromaidan ethnonational re-identification, see Hale et al.; and Kulyk.

subjectivity in times of armed conflict. Cinema comprises one of the most important arenas for such reflections. In recent years, Ukrainian filmmakers have produced a series of films that not only attempt to make sense of the disastrous events in the Donbas and their influence on Ukraine's emerging civil society but also show how cinema can affect the ways in which the war is perceived and conducted. This article focuses on the two recent, most acclaimed but paradigmatically different, Ukrainian films co-sponsored by the State Film Agency DerzhKino—Akhtem Seitablaiev's blockbuster *Kiborhy: Heroi ne vmyraiut'* (*Cyborgs: Heroes Never Die,* 2017) and Sergei Loznitsa's experimental auteur film *Donbass* (2018).[2] It argues that the two films merit critical attention as an astute record of conspicuous social transformations in today's Ukraine and present an original perspective of the hybrid nature of modern warfare and its mediatization, a relatively new theme in war films broadly defined. In my analysis, I rely on post-colonial and cyborg theories of hybridity, on the Baudrillard concept of simulacra, and on the Marxist notion of "false consciousness" to illustrate how post-Soviet, post-colonial, and post-truth aspects of war-torn Ukraine conflate in Seitablaiev's and Loznitsa's works to bring to the fore the recent shift in the nature of warfare, now defined not so much by high-tech armed operations and direct annihilation of the opponent as by contactless warfare and its consequences for those directly influenced by it.[3] A brief account of Russia's anti-Ukrainian disinformation campaign and its ramifications, along with an overview of the core myths and earlier cycles of Ukrainian war films, will set the stage for specific observations.

THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS: RUSSIA'S INFO-SPIN AND ITS REVERBERATIONS

A deliberate, well-organized, and generously funded information campaign accompanied every move of the Russian-backed forces in the Crimea and the Donbas in 2014.[4] Pursuing the dual purpose of aggression and deception,

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[2] More than a dozen fictional films about the war in the Donbas have appeared in Ukraine in recent years. Zaza Buadze's *Pozyvnyi "Banderas"* (*The Code Name "Banderas,"* 2018) and Ivan Tymchenko's *Illovaisk 2014* (2019) along with Seitablaiev's *Cyborgs* stand out the most among patriotically oriented mainstream productions. Art films with a humanistic approach are less numerous. Valentyn Vasianovych's *Atlantyda* (*Atlantis,* 2019) and Natalia Vorozhbyt's *Pohani dorohy* (*Bad Roads,* 2020) are the other two representative examples.

[3] For a comprehensive discussion of the recent shifts in the nature of warfare, especially in the case of Russia, see *Russian New Generation Warfare Handbook*.

[4] For an overview of the 2014–15 period, see Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis* 118–43; and Yekelchyk 140–52.

Russia directed its informational intervention at broad audiences—Russian, Ukrainian, international—and employed the dissemination of tendentious data ranging from half-truths to outright lies to deep fakes.[5] Experts delineate a set of ubiquitous myths that help Russia pursue its goals in Ukraine. To begin with, Russia repeatedly questions the legitimacy of Ukraine's statehood and depicts Ukraine's southeastern regions as historically Russian territories. Second, Russia claims that ever since the Euromaidan Revolution toppled the Ianukovych regime, Russian-speaking Ukrainians in southeastern Ukraine have been calling on Russia to protect them from the new, presumably Russophobe, government in Kyiv. When combined, these two narratives frame Russia's actions in Ukraine as a response to local Russians asking Russia for protection. Russia's third myth, which continues to obscure the facts on the ground, is the story of a homegrown separatist movement in the Donbas. Although it was quickly proven that militant units in the region largely consisted of Russian citizens in 2014, Western media continues to call the Donbas militants "separatists," re-projecting Russia's positioning of the events that characterize the Donbas war as a conflict between Kyiv and local insurgents.[6] The fourth, and particularly cynical, myth brands the new government in Kyiv a "fascist junta" and portrays the Ukrainian state as a purveyor of racism and Russophobia. Such representation enables Russia to cast its government and its proxies in the Crimea and the Donbas as "antifascist" forces and to use "antifascism" as a mobilizing tool.[7] Although none of the listed myths hold

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[5] For a brief assessment of the Kremlin's information war in Ukraine, see Klymenko. For a sample of an early expert assessment of Russia's use of media and social networks in its disinformation campaign, see the 2014 report, "Regarding the Information-Psychological Component of Aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine" (National Institute for Strategic Studies of Ukraine).

[6] Studies indicate that, since Ukraine's independence, inhabitants of the Donbas have increasingly identified not only with their region but also with the Ukrainian state. Andrew Wilson observes, for example, that 55.7 percent of Donetsk inhabitants in 1994 and 69.5 percent in 2004 identified with the region. Similarly, the proportion describing themselves as Ukrainians rose from 39.4 percent in 1994 to 42.7 percent in 2004, while the number of people in the region who identified themselves as Russians dropped from 30.1 percent in 1994 to 21.1 percent in 2004. See Wilson, "The Donbas in 2014." When the fighting broke out in 2014, scholars could not register any traces of ethnically motivated separatism. For a sample of opinion polling from 2014–15, see Chaisty and Whitefield; Hale et al.; and Sasse.

[7] Russian political technologists first revived the Soviet antifascist narrative during Ukraine's 2004 presidential elections, when Russian-controlled media portrayed the pro-Western candidate Viktor Iushchenko as a demonic figure who sought to rekindle the anti-Soviet Ukrainian nationalism of the 1940s. Because of the active participation of the radical ultra-nationalist parties, such as Svoboda and the Right

ground upon close examination, particularly in light of the repression of the Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian minorities in the Crimea, they remain effective in confusing and delaying Russia's opponents in Ukraine and in the West.[8]

At first, Ukrainians struggled to find an appropriate response to Russia's dominance in information space, but by the mid-summer of 2014 they managed to set up several valid platforms capable of presenting a perspective different from the Russian narrative. Grassroots efforts and international support proved instrumental in revamping Ukraine's position in information space. Public journalism and online broadcasting from the places where events occurred played a key role in refuting Russia's most insidious claims. *StopFake* was one of the first and most prolific non-government media-rebuttal units.[9] Despite the significant achievements of the media, much needed to be done by the Ukrainian government to promote its vision of the events in Ukraine and abroad. Press services of all government bodies were recommended to implement information countermeasures. A special governmental agency was created to support the production of pointed films about the ongoing events and facilitate their broadcasting on national TV and the Internet to reach the broadest possible audience at home and abroad. Experts emphasized that because of their visual power and entertainment appeal, feature films and related forms in the visual arts might be the most effective at interrogating Russian propaganda and providing domestic and international audiences with alternate ways to understand and negotiate the ongoing war and its

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Sector in the Euromaidan Revolution, the narrative of a fascist threat advancing from Kyiv eastward was even more ubiquitous in 2014. For further discussion, see Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis* 125–26.

[8] For a comprehensive overview of Russia's prosecution of the Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian minorities in the Crimea, see Charron and Coynash 28–53.

[9] *StopFake* was founded in March 2014 as an online community of students, alumni, and instructors affiliated with the Mohyla School of Journalism in Kyiv, but quickly grew into more than a simple fact-checking project. Since 2014, *StopFake* has assembled a team of professionals who engage in not only the monitoring and refutations of Russia's claims, but also the research and the development of new approaches in media education. The work of the *StopFake* team has been highly praised internationally and has received many prestigious awards, including the Democracy Prize from the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. As of August 2019, *StopFake* has identified and refuted over 2,640 pieces of false reporting. Importantly, *StopFake* presents information in English to provide world-wide access. For more on *StopFake,* see https://www.stopfake.org/en/about-us/ (Accessed 20 May 2020).

ramifications.[10] As the post-2014 influx of state funding was distributed through the State Film Agency DerzhKino, the 2017 law "On State Support for Film Production in Ukraine" and the latest cycle of war-related films testify that both the Ukrainian government and Ukrainian filmmakers took the experts' recommendations seriously.[11] The filmmakers' recent collaborations with the state agencies do not indicate, however, that Ukrainian cinema and the Ukrainian state operate seamlessly or that Ukrainian filmmakers—Seitablaiev and Loznitsa in particular—simply promote Kyiv's official views. Their symbiotic relationship would be better qualified as coincidental, since both parties are often motivated by mutual concerns regarding their society's need to process the experience of war.

UNDERSTANDING UKRAINIAN WAR FILMS: CORE MYTHS AND EARLIER CYCLES

In addressing the subject of this article, it is essential to clarify what I mean by a "war film." First, it must be noted that the term resists easy definition because it could be outlined with equal success either in relation to particular wars and narrative situations or in terms of different genres. The task becomes even more problematic if one considers the glaring logical impasse all critics face when they talk about specific genres and their conventions—as Andrew Tudor points out, it is virtually impossible to discuss a given film's display of the "principal" characteristics of its genre unless what constitutes those characteristics has been determined. As a working solution, Tudor suggests that we "lean on a common cultural consensus" as to what constitutes a given genre and then proceed to analyze it in detail (5). In the case of war films, it is fair to suggest that the understanding of the genre arises from the existence of war and the viewers' knowledge of it. That said, war as a subject has been used in a wide range of films, which raises the issue of genre hybridization, which, in turn, complicates the genre definition even further. At the same time, despite the complexity of the latter, critics and scholars alike find the notion of "genre" useful in film analysis and seem to agree on a set of basic defining characteristics of a "war film," which I also adopt for my inquiry. Therefore, in my study, I consider a work to be a war film if it focuses, with varying emphasis, directly on war itself (combat and its aftermath); on the activities

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[10] See, for example, the 2014 report "Regarding the Information-Psychological Component of Aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine" (National Institute for Strategic Studies of Ukraine).

[11] The full text of the law is available in Ukrainian on the official website of the Ukrainian parliament at https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1977-19?lang=en (Accessed 20 May 2020).

of war's participants off the battlefield (recruitment, training, leisure, recovery from wounds); and on the effects of war on the civilian population (civilians caught in war zones, civilians on the home front), and human relations (effects on families and lovers). Whereas some war films meet all three criteria—Seitablaiev's *Cyborgs* is a telling example—others qualify on the basis of one criterion in particular, as it is the case with Loznitsa's *Donbass*.[12]

Ukrainian war films and their pre-independence cycles are inextricably embedded in the Soviet film tradition, where war films occupy an important, if not the most important, place.[13] The many wars of the twentieth century— primarily World War I, the Civil War of 1917–22, and World War II, but also the Cold War and the Afghan war of 1979–89—provided Soviet filmmakers with rich materials. The early Soviet war films are often hard to define as such because they treat war as secondary to the Bolshevik cause and often remain ambiguous in their depiction of the enemy, emphasizing Bolshevik solidarity over national allegiance. Yet, in the 1940s, war comes to the foreground and is portrayed in terms of national victory with a clear-cut distinction between the belligerent sides. In this regard, the 1940s Soviet war films conform closely to the classical narrative of the Hollywood entertainment films (Youngblood 5–6).[14] During the Khrushchev Thaw in the late 1950s and 1960s, when state censorship was lifted, Soviet filmmakers shifted their focus on individual stories and produced a series of critical films that focused on the suffering of people caught in the war and the war's brutality. Yet, despite their humanistic approach, Soviet revisionist and retrospective films never took issue with the credibility of war and continued to justify the human sacrifice in defence of Soviet values in the late Soviet period.[15] Only in post-Soviet times did Russian filmmakers manage to shatter the idealized image of a heroic and glorious war by representing its absurdity and murderous nature. Except for some state-sponsored propaganda pieces endorsing Russia's wars in the Caucasus and Ukraine, most contemporary Russian films show war as a horrendous consequence

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[12] On the war films and other genres, see Altman 219; Basinger 239; and Neale 126. For a discussion of genre hybridization, see Collins; Staiger; and Grant.

[13] For the most sustained examinations of Soviet war films, see Youngblood. Also see Gillespie 124–45.

[14] Youngblood argues, for example, that the recipe for the classic Hollywood narrative is virtually the same as Katerina Clark's typology of the socialist realist narrative. See Clark 27–45.

[15] In Hollywood, a similar development took place in the 1970s, when the experience of losing a war in Vietnam engendered a brief cycle of critical films that challenged many of the war genre's core myths. For further discussion, see Boggs and Pollard 102–25.

of imperial ambition and a reflection of an uncertain, crisis-stricken national psyche disillusioned with the Kremlin's domestic and foreign policy fiascos.[16]

Post-Soviet Ukrainian war films were virtually non-existent in the pre-2014 period but emerged as the leading genre after Russia's aggression in the Crimea and the Donbas. Forced almost overnight to revise their role in shaping the ongoing social and political processes in their country, Ukrainian filmmakers who addressed the topic of the ongoing war have initiated a paradigmatic turn toward a national cinema. The new films not only offset Russia's pernicious disinformation, but they also construct new, Ukraine-centred narratives that simultaneously interrogate Ukraine's complicated past—be it Russian imperial or Soviet, grapple with issues of decommunization, and probe alternate ways to reimagine the Ukrainian national self that transcend its binary Russo-Ukrainian understanding (Moussienko; Shevchuk). Such a dynamic discussion of Ukraine's current post-Soviet situation could be well qualified as post-colonial and akin to the double project of resistance and reparative critique that Ukrainian writers have been undertaking since the early 1990s.[17] Therefore, while exploring Seitablaev's and Loznitsa's representations of the new normal in contemporary warfare, the following analysis also elaborates on the robust

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[16] For a detailed discussion of each cycle, see Gillespie and Youngblood. For an overview of the post-Soviet cycle, see also Beumers, "The Serialization."

[17] While the post-communist world is not colonial, strictly speaking, because Soviet imperialism never had any racist components, and never put the racial exclusion typical of classical post-colonialism into political practice, many scholars have argued convincingly that post-colonial hermeneutics could and should be applied to the analysis of power dynamics and cultural productions in contemporary Ukraine, because many of them are best understood only in the context of Russo-Soviet internal colonialism. See, for example, Pavlyshyn; Riabchuk, "Colonialism in Another Way"; and Shkandrij. Drawing on the works of classical post-colonial theorists, Pavlyshyn, who was the first to introduce the notion of post-coloniality to Ukraine, points out that post-Soviet Ukrainian cultural productions of the early 1990s are mostly dominated by colonial and anti-colonial discourses. As "colonial," he describes those cultural phenomena that maintain the structures and myths of colonial power relations, and as "anti-colonial"—those that challenge those relations. Respectively, he also offers a working definition of "post-colonial," using it to identify emerging entities in Ukrainian culture that demonstrate an awareness of the relativity of both terms—"colonialism" and its negation—and use this relativity to produce a restorative critique of the two (Pavlyshyn 45). A decade later, Vitaly Chernetsky revisits Pavlyshyn's definition of "post-colonial," critically engaging with classical post-colonial theory to complicate Pavlyshyn's formulation by foregrounding a great measure of "anti-colonial" in "post-colonial" and qualifying it as, accordingly, a "double project of resistance and reparative critique" (40–43). For further discussion of the term "post-colonial" in classical post-colonial theory, see Loomba 1–19.

and far-reaching contributions the two filmmakers make to the discussion, if not the reshaping, of contemporary Ukrainian identity politics.

HYBRIDITY AND CYBERSPACE IN SEITABLAIEV'S *CYBORGS: HEROES NEVER DIE*

Seitablaiev's *Cyborgs* is the most notable and ambitious of the recent patriotic film productions that aim simultaneously to commemorate and boost Ukraine's war efforts in the Donbas.[18] Notwithstanding its title's sci-fi connotations, the film is based on real events and follows the wartime lives of five Ukrainian fighters who defended Donetsk International Airport in one of the fiercest battles of the conflict. The conflict ended in a military victory for the Russian-backed Donetsk Peoples Republic (DPR) forces.[19] In the early days of the battle, several fighters of the DPR wrote on social media about their difficulties to dislodge the airport's defenders, marvelling at their tenacity and calling them "cyborgs"—indestructible over-humans.[20] Although the "cyborg" tag originated as a pejorative, it went viral on Ukrainian social media and gave rise to a new national myth about the valiant Ukrainian fighters who have come to embody Ukraine's new military might and patriotic fervour. In a span of several months, the "cyborg" tag became so widespread that it was named "the word of the year" by the interactive online dictionary of contemporary Ukrainian language, *MySlovo* (*WeWord*) ("Slovo roku"). The airport defenders responded modestly to their new superhero status but welcomed Seitablaiev's film and partook eagerly in its production. They recognized its potential to mitigate the effects of Russia's disinformation and to raise public awareness of the media's decisive role in shaping the ongoing conflict and mediating its implications, be they political, economic, environmental, humanitarian, or cultural

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[18] *Cyborgs* was heavily promoted and attracted large audiences, winning the box office in the first weekend by making a $302,000 profit. It was well received, and many opening screenings ended with standing ovations and spontaneous group singing of the national anthem. The film was rated 9.4 out of 10 points on the Ukrainian film database *kino-teatr.ua* and received 8 out of 10 points on the IMDb website. For more information, see the film's profile at https://kino-teatr.ua/film/kborgi-48808.phtml (Accessed 20 May 2020).

[19] For a detailed account, see Fox.

[20] Here is one of the early posts published on the informational bulletin *Ukraine Today*: "I don't know who is guarding the airport in Donetsk, but we haven't been able to dislodge them for the past three months. We tried storming the complex, but every time we are . . . [pushed back] and forced to withdraw. I've no idea who is defending the airport, but they are not people. They are cyborgs." For further discussion and more posts, see "Cyborgs Vs. Kremlin."

(Zaitsev). The latter is the film's precise focus: despite its dramatic setting and potential for commando adventures and spectacular battle scenes, *Cyborgs* prioritizes not so much the traditional warfare as operations that take place in cyberspace and in the hearts and minds of those directly involved in the conflict. Accordingly, the sci-fi implications of the main characters' *noms-de-guerre* might not be as far-fetched as they first appear, and it might be productive to approach Seitablaev's cyborgs through the framework of cyborg theory and examine them, respectively, as metaphors for contemporary Ukrainian society and its post-Soviet, post-colonial, and post-truth conditions.

Ever since Donna Haraway first introduced the term "cyborg" to academic discourse in her trail-blazing essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto," cyborgs and their paradoxical nature have attracted an astonishing degree of critical attention and have provoked intense theoretical debates, particularly with regard to questions of identity, social relations, and subjectivity. In her work, Haraway presents the cyborg as a new means to re-imagine feminist identity and affinity and goes as far as to contend that because all women as constructed in patriarchy are far from natural, they "are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism . . . [all] are cyborgs" (150). Haraway's celebration of the cyborg's hybrid nature, which cannot be easily confined to any one nation, race, class, gender, or sexuality and thus challenges the meta-narratives that have governed Western epistemology for centuries, has had a particular resonance with postmodern theorists who believe that such discourses are no longer viable.

Postmodernists who share Haraway's optimism about technology's ability to aid human consciousness and embrace the fragmented nature of subjectivity, view the cyborg as a progressive symbol of change, which provides a vital means of transcending outmoded ways of thinking. N. Katherine Hayles, for example, hails the correlation of human mind and computer, which has the potential to free humans from physical boundaries and render the body peripheral to human subjectivity, re-interpreting human identity in the postmodern world as posthuman and investing a great measure of hope in technology's ability to change life for the better (3). Mark Dery has termed such a belief in technology's ability to offer applicable solutions to the ongoing crises of Western civilization as "techno-transcendentalism" (9). Critics who remain skeptical, if not despairing, about the demise of coherent subjectivity and the spread of technologically mediated reality—Jean Baudrillard is an apt example—still find the cyborg to be a keen metaphor for their ontological explorations of contemporary identity. While Baudrillard favours the term "simulacra" over "cyborgs," the implication is virtually the same—a means of describing a subjectivity in a technologically mediated environment. Pondering on the nature of postmodern reality, Baudrillard claims that we are now in an age of

"hyperreality" in which only simulations exist, in which the signs of the real substitute for the real, announcing the end of civilization as we know it (2). And with the end of civilization as we know it, according to Baudrillard, also comes the end of the human. As he puts it, "we are [now all] simulators, we are simulacra (not in the classical sense of 'appearance'), we are concave mirrors radiated by the social, a radiation without a light source, power without origin, without distance" (Baudrillard 152). The image of the cyborg has sparked an interest among post-colonial theorists as it has proved to be useful in questioning ideas surrounding race, nationality, cultural identity, and alterity. Because of its "impure" nature and its lack of "origin story," which Haraway views as the cyborg's greatest value in that it allows it to evade the dualism of Western epistemology which has traditionally been used to legitimate patriarchy and imperialism, the cyborg provides a means for post-colonial critics to evaluate hybridity (150). "Hybridity" is a term used in post-colonial theory to describe various cross-cultural influences and to emphasize the dispersed nature of subjectivity, particularly among diasporic communities seeking to retain their own cultural heritage within a dominant host culture.[21] As a state of mind and a cultural position, hybridity has been promoted as a form of resistance by post-colonial critics such as Homi K. Bhabha, who has argued that non-Western migrants are better equipped to question the values of their host culture because they have another point of reference.[22] While Bhabha's celebration of hybridity has been strongly contested in cultural criticism,[23] his hermeneutics prove applicable for the discussion of Seitablaiev's cinematic commentary on the ongoing transformation of Ukrainian post-Soviet and post-colonial subjectivity. Haraway's notion of cyborg, with all its implied open-endedness, semantic fluidity, continuous innovation, and interrogation, endows it with a potential to both mediate and reshape prevailing social, political, and philosophical beliefs.

In a narrative sense, broad definitions that frame anyone who has been technologically modified in any significant way as a cyborg, including anyone who lives in a technologically mediated culture, are particularly fitting for analyzing Seitablaiev's commentary on the hybrid nature of modern war, which Haraway has famously described as "a cyborg orgy" (149).[24] Not only

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[21] For a detailed discussion of how the image of the cyborg has been used in post-colonial theory, see Short 106–10.

[22] For further discussion of this idea, see Bhabha's article "Cultures in Between" and his book *The Location of Culture*.

[23] For relevant criticism of hybridity, see, for example, a collection of essays on *Hybridity and Its Discontents*, edited by Avtar Brah and Annie E. Coombes.

[24] In terms of broad definitions of cyborgs, Chris Hables Gray's elaboration on the contemporary fusion of humans and machines is especially illuminating: "From the

do Seitablaev's characters rely on high-tech weaponry for survival, but their experience of war is mediated through technology and their lives depend as much on the events on the ground as on events unfolding in virtual space. Seitablaiev's cyborgs use social networks to co-ordinate their actions, to analyze their surroundings, to detect and evaluate potential threats, and, most importantly, to counter pro-Russian disinformation that aims to spread chaos, panic, and mass disorder among Ukrainian troops and Ukraine's broader population. Subota, a charismatic paratrooper whose nickname means Saturday, is the most prolific in refuting pro-Russian fakes in Seitablaiev's film. The effectiveness of his onsite armature journalism is established by the impressive amount of "likes" that his broadcasts receive within minutes of their publication. The most dramatic example, perhaps, is Subota's selfie, which he posts while being treated by a medic in the midst of a battle, and which instantly goes viral, receiving twenty-three thousand "likes" in less than half an hour. The expediency of Subota's posts is further underscored by their juxtaposition with traditional media outlets, presented in the film as unreliable because they either cannot keep up with the rapidly unfolding events or are simply designed to spread propaganda. The best example here is a farcical incident with the pro-Russian news crew, which reports live that the DPR troops have taken control of the airport, while the Ukrainian flag billows over its iconic control tower in the background.

Subota's broadcasting of his medical treatment also draws attention to the critical role that technology plays in his processing of trauma, suggesting that his experience of real events is predicated upon their validation in cyberspace. The same is true for all Seitablaiev's cyborgs, who use their cell phones to connect with their loved ones, thereby receiving and extending psychological support that helps them to cope with tedium and the horrors of war. Curiously, Seitablaiev highlights the intimate fusion of his characters with their phones by using distinctive phone rings to define their personalities. For example, Subota's phone has a generic ring tone, which speaks of his directness, his modesty, and his great measure of restraint. In contrast, Mazhor, a young volunteer and an accomplished musician whose nickname means either Silver Spoon or Major Key, uses the upbeat theme from Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" as his ring tone. The melody, which has become a protest hymn in the twentieth century and is now the official anthem of the European Union, hints at Mazhor's rebellious nature and his

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morning your clock radio wakes you in the morning, your life is intimately shaped by machines. Some of them we merge with almost unconsciously, such as the car we drive, the computer we work with, or the television we zone out in front of. Others involve more conscious interfacing. Overall, the effect is an extraordinary symbiosis of humans and machines. This is a fundamentally new development in the history of the machines" (2–3).

pro-European values. Similarly, the ring tone of one of the fallen Russian fighters, whose body Mazhor finds on an improvised scouting trip, projects its owner in a less than favourable light. The ring's melody, a low-brow pop song by Tat'iana Abramova, "Anatolii," evokes bad taste, poor judgement, marred values, and dubious motivations, which are also implied in Subota's anecdote about secret burials of Russian soldiers killed in Donbas.

The film also makes it clear that it is social media, not traditional combat, that gets the characters in dire situations. When DPR militants fail to drive the Ukrainian soldiers from the airport by force, they turn to cyber technologies to achieve their objective. By manipulating a trusted social network of one of the cyborgs, they make their opponents believe that the pro-Russian troops are about to use an extremely destructive thermobaric multiple rocket launcher system (TOS–1) against them. Curiously, Buratino, the colloquial name of the deadly weapon used in the film, is also an allusion to a popular children's fictional character, a Russian version of Pinocchio.[25] The intertextual reference to Pinocchio and the popular factchecker scale named after him is ironic and hints at the fake nature of the Buratino report, but the cyborgs do not detect any mischief and treat it as reliable. Deeply shocked by the news and acknowledging that they cannot survive the attack, the Ukrainian cyborgs choose to defend their position and, if it comes to that, sacrifice their lives for a higher cause, be it comradery or Ukraine's independence. Evidently, no heroic slaughter takes place, but the cyborgs' decision is framed as an ultimate victory and puts forward an uplifting patriotic message about Ukraine's fortitude and determination to preserve its statehood. While celebrating the cyborg's commitment to do what is right, the scene also draws the viewers' attention to the real dangers of psychological cyber-attacks, foregrounding the hybrid nature of contemporary warfare.

Sci-fi and commando undertones aside, the image of the cyborg is also helpful in exploring the film's depiction of the dynamic shifts in the post-Euromaidan ethnonational identifications in Ukraine and its post-colonial

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[25] Buratino is the main character of the book *Zolotoi kliuchik, ili Prikliucheniia Buratino* (*The Golden Key, or the Adventures of Buratino,* 1936), by Aleksei Tolstoi, which is based on the 1883 Italian novel *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, by Carlo Collodi. The story of Buratino quickly became popular among children in the USSR and remains so in post-Soviet times. In the 1980s, "Buratino" became the nickname of the TOS–1 multiple launch rocket system because of the big "nose" of the launcher. The system was first used in combat during the Soviet war in Afghanistan and then again in Chechnya in 1999–2000. In September 2015, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) reported sighting the TOS–1 in the pro-Russian militants' camp in the Donbas. The report is available at https://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/186276 (Accessed 20 May 2020).

condition. As Edward Said observes, a key problem with any discussion of national identity is that of promoting a dualistic evaluation of people because "the difficulty with theories of essentialism and exclusiveness, or with barriers and sides, is that they give rise to polarization that absolves and forgives ignorance and demagogy more than they enable knowledge" (35). By capitalizing on the mixed origins of the cyborg which, according to Haraway, confounds fixed notions of subjectivity, particularly those based on rootedness and ethnic purity, and frames the identity as hybrid and perpetually in motion, Seitablaiev avoids such simplistic distinctions. He emphasizes the hybrid nature of his cyborgs through the glaring differences in their ages, cultural backgrounds, social status, ideological views, and preferred languages of communication. Yet, for all their apparent diversity and multiculturalism, and their occasional outbreaks of intolerance, the devotion of Seitablaiev's cyborgs to duty and shared political ideals supersedes any social and cultural differences. In one of his interviews, Seitablaiev points out that the cyborgs' *esprit de corps* and far-reaching desire to persevere in the war for the sake of reconstructing Ukraine as a free and democratically oriented country constitute the film's central premise. That is why, the filmmaker notes, *Cyborgs'* main actions take place not on the battlefield but in the characters' hearts and minds, and reveals not so much a quest for historical truth as a need to understand the relationship of each individual to the ongoing events and to explore ways in which solidarity and peace might be reached (Zaitsev). Here, a great measure of credit should be also given to Natalia Vorozhbyt, the film's script writer and one of the most premier contemporary Ukrainian playwrights, acclaimed for her complex and highly nuanced representations of the ongoing war and her "delicate balance of affect and ethics" in her latest works (Wallo). In her interviews, Vorozhbyt points out that she prioritizes self-reflection in all of her works and wants her viewers to engage with them, not only emotionally but also intellectually. Her war-related works aim to motivate viewers to "think hard about what exactly is going on" in the Donbas and how the war affects not only those directly participating in it but also all of Ukraine (Pidhora-Hviazdovs'kyi).

The fine balance between diversity and commonality suggested by the metaphoric cyborg identity of the main characters underlines every measure of the *Cyborgs* film. The tension between the two comes to the foreground when a randomly assembled detachment finds itself trapped in the airport's ruins and under attack by pro-Russian forces. At first, the characters—neophytes and seasoned fighters—are introduced in flashes and identified only by their *noms-de-guerre*, but as the narrative unfolds, they come more clearly into focus, and five of them emerge as structural points of reference, representing not only the different military forces involved in securing the airport, but also the diverse ideological camps participating today in shaping

Ukraine's political future. The most prominent of them is Serpen', whose nickname means August, a teacher of history from western Ukraine with strong nationalistic views, who has volunteered to the front and who quickly rose in rank in the early days of the conflict. His combat experience, clear judgement, and leadership skills are acknowledged when he is assigned to command a new detachment. Although his personal motives for fighting are ideological, Serpen' the leader values camaraderie the most and works hard to foster group solidarity.

While most of the newcomers embrace Serpen' as their commander, Mazhor challenges his authority. Mazhor joined the fight in revolt against his well-off parents, who set up a way for him to evade the draft. Passionate and idealistic, Mazhor repeatedly overreacts to the not-so-perfect realities of life at the front, disobeys orders, and picks fights with his commander. Thereby, he not only brings tension into the detachment's inner dynamics but also endangers everyone's life. During one of his confrontations with Serpen', Mazhor accuses the commander and his whole generation of ruining Ukraine's chances for statehood. He rejects what he perceives to be Serpen''s national ideal—Ukraine as a "national preserve," a closed society for Ukrainians only—and promotes instead an image of a highly cultured and open Ukraine, indicting the commander of intolerance and a lack of appreciation for progressive European values. The film makes it obvious that none of Mazhor's tags adequately describe Serpen', whose character refutes the most insidious myths promulgated by Russian propaganda that depicts all western Ukrainians as unwavering ultranationalists who are biased against all things non-Ukrainian. At the same time, Serpen''s attack on pseudo-liberal idealists such as Mazhor, who know little about Ukraine's history and have little understanding of the real power dynamics in their country, and who, consequently, might be responsible for Ukraine's initial defeat in the Crimea and the Donbas, is difficult to rebut. Notwithstanding their arguments, Serpen' and Mazhor have more in common than first meets the eye. In fact, Mazhor could be read as Serpen''s double, who eventually steps up to further his commander's cause. When Mazhor returns to the front after recovering from shell shock at the end of the film, he is no longer bitter over the past he cannot change and is prepared to defend Ukraine's present and take responsibility for its future, as Serpen' professes in one of his passionate speeches. Accordingly, Mazhor emerges as an embodiment of Ukraine's hope for a better future—a possibility that Serpen' unequivocally implies when he sends the young hero, an internationally renowned musician, away from the front earlier in the film.

Subota and Staryi form a second set of covert doubles. Staryi, whose nickname means Old Man, is an awkward retiree from a provincial town. Staryi unexpectedly turns out to be combat savvy, but like Subota, Staryi is steeped in ideological implications. In the first crossfire, Staryi loses his

weapon and quickly becomes the butt of everyone's jokes. Subota is the most adamant in his mockery and often treats the old man with condescension. The two soldiers, however, quickly get along because of many shared qualities: both remain unfazed by the dangers in battle, carry out commands with precision and rectitude, are comfortable bending rules, especially when it comes to a good drink after a fight, and have little regard for ideological debates or public displays of patriotism. Both also do not speak Ukrainian. Subota speaks Russian, whereas Staryi speaks *Surzhyk*, a mixture of Russian and Ukrainian defined by norm-breaking, which is often associated with provincialism, a lack of education, low socio-economic status, and ethnic inauthenticity.[26] Serpen' singles them out for their linguistic preferences and challenges them to articulate their motivations to fight for Ukraine. Although initially put off by such a request, both eventually demonstrate a deep sense of civic duty and claim their Ukrainianness, which they see in no way compromised by their linguistic choices.

Notably, the peculiar combination of Subota's and Staryi's national self-identification and their languages of communication showcases an important development in post-Euromaidan Ukrainian identity politics, which complicates some of the most pernicious myths used by Russia to justify its military operations in Ukraine. The first myth that the soldiers' story debunks is the so-called tale of two Ukraines, which depicts the country as split into two hostile and unreconcilable parts. It assigns belligerently pro-Ukrainian traits to western and central Ukraine, presenting both regions as homogeneously Russophobic, and positions Ukraine's southeast as wholly Russian-speaking and pro-Russian. Accordingly, Russia projects the Crimea and the Donbas as indivisible parts of the *Russkii mir* (the Russian World) and in need of its protection.[27] Subota's and Staryi's story complicates, however, such a generalization by spotlighting the fact that people who have come recently to identify as Ukrainians no longer consider national identification as an inherited or ethnic, but rather as a civic, category (Kulyk 125–32). The characters' ability of switching among Russian, Ukrainian, and *Surzhyk* also shows that Ukrainians no longer consider language usage to be a reflection of national allegiance or of a specific national world view, but as a means of communication, embracing a situational use of either language. Subota, for example, uses Ukrainian to accentuate his apprehension of social injustice in

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[26] For more information on *Surzhyk*, its history, and social connotations, see Masenko. For a discussion on *Surzhyk* in Ukrainian nationalist ideology, see Bernsand 38–47.

[27] For elaboration on and deconstruction of the myth of two Ukraines and its instrumentalization in the ongoing war, see Riabchuk, "Two Ukraines Reconsidered"; and Zhurzhenko, "A Divided Nation?"

Ukraine, and Staryi seamlessly switches to standard Ukrainian in an official setting to address a group of new recruits at the end of the film. Similarly, Serpen', the most conspicuous Ukrainophile in the film, switches to Russian while interrogating a captive Russian citizen and while helping his daughter to memorize a poem by Aleksandr Pushkin. The latter episode is significant because it foregrounds the high value Ukrainians place on knowledge of the Russian language and culture by including both in the school curriculum.[28] Therefore, although some commentators have criticized the film for its use of Russian and *Surzhyk*, its linguistic code-switching and norm-switching lends a great deal of authenticity to the film and helps to refute some of Russia's most detrimental propaganda claims predicated on a purported language use in Ukraine; it also extends a valuable commentary on Ukraine's current post-Soviet and post-colonial condition (Anderson).

Seitablaiev further problematizes overly generalized and often propagandistic claims rooted in ethnic origin and primary language by his multifarious representations of the Donbas inhabitants. Hid, a Russian-speaking Ukrainian fighter with a great sense of humour, whose nickname means Guide and who helps Serpen''s detachment to navigate the dangerous ruins of the airport, merits the most attention. Prior to the depicted events, Hid spends some time in captivity where he is repeatedly tortured by pro-Russian militants, who are his fellow Donbas residents. Enraged by an encounter with one of them during a prisoner exchange, he nearly sabotages his mission and eventually takes out his fury on a badly wounded prisoner, also a Donetsk native. The story of Hid's captivity and its aftermath deserves attention because it demonstrates that although Hid, his captors, and his victim might share the same regional identity and speak the same language—Russian—their political views are fundamentality different. Hid successfully aligns his local identity with a broader civic loyalty to Ukraine, whereas others are either unable or unwilling to do so. It is not surprising then that Seitablaiev depicts Hid in a rather conventional way that

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[28] According to the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, there are over six hundred Russian-language schools in Ukraine, which provide instructions to more than nine percent of all school students. Additionally, more than a quarter of all students currently enrolled in Ukrainian schools receive instruction in the Russian language and culture. For more information, see the latest official reports available at https://mon.gov.ua/ua/tag/zagalna-serednya-osvita (Accessed 20 May 2020). In contrast, there is not a single Ukrainian-language school in Russia, although Ukrainians are its second largest ethnic minority group. For more information, see the official statement on violations of the rights of national minorities in Russia delivered by the Ukrainian delegation at the 1217th meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council, available at https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/9/412610.pdf (Accessed 20 May 2020).

simultaneously humanizes and heroizes the character. Despite some initial psychological hardship, Hid eventually finds a way to overcome his trauma and manages to transform his anger into a motivational resource. Such a redemptive narrative of therapeutic healing undermines *Cyborgs*' critical potential to address issues related to post-traumatic stress disorder because it makes clear that the film does not focus on trauma per se but uses it as a narrative device for ideological leverage. By assuring that trauma can be worked through, masculine virility can be re-established, and the valorous work of soldiering can be reclaimed and re-mythologized. *Cyborgs* relieves Ukrainian viewers' anxieties about the ongoing political turmoil in their country and reassures them in their ability to rise above "disorder."

Curiously, some critics believe that such a narrative is exactly what the Ukrainian viewers need today (Ladyka). When it comes to Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) militants, the film openly demonizes Hid's torturers as sheer brutes, driven not by ideology but by sadism and vile, while representing Hid's captive in a more nuanced way. At first, the captive is full of spite toward Ukrainians and simply reiterates the Kremlin's hype about the neo-Nazi government in Kyiv. Yet, as he bonds with Serpen' on the level of class-based identity and shared war experiences, he acquires new depth. Ultimately, the film positions him not so much as a villain but as a telling product of false consciousness and a casualty of political circumstances that are beyond his control, once again foregrounding the hybrid natures of the conflict and its characters. The paradoxes and cruelty of the hybrid war with some civil-war-like elements in which Ukrainians are killing Ukrainians become even more obvious when the captive is executed by his DPR comrades after Serpen' lets him go in a show of mercy. Thereby, the film undermines Russia's claims about the solidly pro-Russian Donbas, frames Russia and its proxies as the main perpetrators of violence in the region, and demonstrates that what is often framed as clear-cut ethnic strife in the Donbas is actually a conflict between the new Western-style civil society and the strong paternalistic state represented by the Soviet past and the Russian present, an ideal to which many corrupt Ukrainian pre-Euromaidan politicians have aspired.

Hence, while it is fair to say that *Cyborgs* has responded well to the state's need to counter Russian propaganda and boost public morale, the film is not utterly propagandistic and merits recognition for its valuable observations about the hybrid nature of the ongoing war in the Donbas. The filmmakers' creative use of the cyborg image proves especially effective in demonstrating the profound homogenization of political opinions and the crystallization of national unity that the war has triggered in Ukraine. The cyborg offers a powerful metaphor that helps to transcend the rigid black-and-white binaries of Russia's interpretations of Ukrainian subjectivity and the national responses that mimic and replicate them. Instead, it represents

the new hybrid Ukrainian identity as capable of overcoming the divisions created by distinctions such as age, ethnic origin, regional identity, social background, and language of communication and of creating "non-organic" coalitions rooted in a shared sense of civic duty and political orientation.

The symbolic connotations of the cyborgs' ability to adapt and survive also play an important role in forging the film's patriotic message, which could be well read as a product of post-colonial reflection that offers a viable vision of an alternate future while partaking in the process of its invention. Equally essential in this regard are the war film genre conventions used in *Cyborgs*—a solid script, a well-defined character psychology, clear-cut values, logical motivations, and a cinematography that supports the narrative and stirs the emotions. The film is well done and visually appealing. The acting is controlled, measured, and underplayed. The five cyborgs are impressive in their roles of forsaken soldiers who take the course of events into their own hands. Intricate camera work and creative editing add a great deal of visual power to the story. Replicating the shifting mood of scenes that alternate between hectic battles and moments of respite, the film switches between wild camera movements, hand-held recording, and jumpy editing that places the viewers in the middle of the action. The smooth 180-degree continuity editing paired with a superb cinematic portraiture allows viewers to identify with the characters during downtime. The carefully orchestrated setting and the savvy use of framing also merit recognition. When combined with low-key lighting, long shots of the airport's ruins offer spectacular, film-noir-style panoramic views that aestheticize heaps of twisted rebar and concrete, transforming them into a symbol of Ukraine's resilience. Deliberately placed displays of the Ukrainian national flag, the state coat of arms, military insignias, and patriotic children's drawings add symbolic undertones of national might, as does an elaborate soundtrack featuring Sviatoslav Vakarchuk's 2015 hit "Myt'" ("A Moment")—a lyrical song about the last living moments of a fatally wounded soldier that prophesizes the immanent rebirth of his homeland. Both remind the viewers that the featured cyborgs are not individuals as much as types representing a cross section of Ukraine's variegated population, diverse in its social and cultural backgrounds but united in its commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and democratic course of development. Such a framing of Ukrainian national identity is rather optimistic and is clearly designed to drum up national morale and solicit support for Ukraine's war effort.

Yet the triumphant notes in the film's reflections on "Why we fight?" and what it means to be Ukrainian are well balanced with a series of nuanced motifs that showcase some of the key critical points of those theorists who question post-colonial and postmodern celebration of hybridity. They demonstrate how easily its fluidity and open-endedness could be utilized to

animate ideologies of hatred and lead to murderous conflicts. It is also precisely by means of this careful balance of elation and forewarning embedded in the cyborg image that the film draws viewers' attention to the mediatization and rampant weaponization of information that take place in modern war and emphasizes the paramount importance of the struggle for hearts and minds in the Donbas.

DEEP FAKES AND SIMULATED HORROR IN LOZNITSA'S *DONBASS*

Loznitsa's film about the ongoing war in the Donbas came out shortly after the release of Seitabaiev's *Cyborgs* but tells a fundamentally different story.[29] While Seitabaiev's film leaves viewers with the comforting notion that even in terrible times the Ukrainian national spirit can survive and win, *Donbass* is a grueling experience that places the viewers directly in the war zone, with no hope for a speedy resolution of the conflict. Loznitsa's film is an experimental work that has attracted significant international attention.[30] It features a non-linear structure consisting of thirteen loosely connected vignettes inspired by amateur videos posted on the Internet by witnesses to and participants in real-life events that took place in the Donbas in 2014–15. The episodes show little military action but present stories of the daily life of civilians and combatants in a war-torn region, qualifying this film as a war film. The film mixes rhetorical forms of narration with occasional small-scale narratives that briefly follow minor characters in their struggles for survival. The film is organized as a travelogue about *Novorossiia* and its people and offers a vivid sampling of local sights, customs, and power dynamics.[31]

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[29] Throughout this paper, the Donbas is spelled with a single "s" according to the rules of transliteration from Ukrainian. Loznitsa, however, chooses the English spelling derived from the Russian name of the region, "Donbass," which foregrounds his film's ideological implications.

[30] In 2018, *Donbass* won the Un Certain Regard Award for Best Director at the Cannes Film Festival, the Special Jury Prize for Best Director, the Silver Pyramid at the Cairo International Film Festival, the Grand Prize for Best Picture at the Seville European Film Festival, the Golden Peacock Award for Best Picture at the International Film Festival of India, and Ukraine's Nomination for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. In 2019, it collected three Golden Dzygas, Ukraine's most prestigious award in cinematography, for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Script. For more details, see Loznitsa's official website at https://loznitsa.com/movie/donbass (Accessed 20 May 2020).

[31] *Novorossiia* (New Russia) was the name of the territory of the Russian Empire formed from the lands annexed from the Crimean Khanate and the Zaporizhian Sich in the late eighteenth century. Originally, it included present-day southeastern Ukraine and parts of southwest Russia. In 2014, the term *Novorossiia* came into usage

Notably, while working with materials based on real events, Loznitsa does not claim any meta truth in his representations of the war. To the contrary, he emphasizes the fictitious nature of his work and frames it as a pure construct, a subjective recreation of events originally captured through someone else's lens, a copy of a copy, an artistic simulacrum (Loznitsa, "Donbas"). As such, the film challenges the prevalent belief that the camera is capable of recording reality accurately, presents documentary discourse as a form of fiction, and develops a mesmerizing argument on the pivotal role of media in the production of power relations between different social groups in the Donbas and elsewhere. Along the way, the film also exposes the newly forged puppet-state of *Novorossiia* as a *tufta*, a "nonsensical world" and a "hyperreality," to use Baudrillard's term, generated by the Kremlin to manipulate the local population and the international community, which, nevertheless, wields the power to render human lives as worthless and absurd (Loznitsa, "Loznitsa"). By blurring the line between reality and representation, *Donbass* offers a vivid insight into the lives of people who have been deeply affected by the war and makes cogent observations about the challenges and the urgency of decommunization in the post-Soviet space, the Donbas in particular.

From the start, Loznitsa makes it clear that his film is not a typical war story but an exploration of the media's power to control the public's perception of reality in times of crisis. Not only does the film prominently feature scenes of filmmaking and film consumption, it also brings media's manipulative potential to the fore, foregrounding the camera's ability to alter human behaviour and augment reality by stripping it of meaning. Two episodes that take place in a makeup trailer on a movie shooting set are the most disturbing. The film opens by following a group of inartful actors as they are made up and herded by armed enforcements to a set where they

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among anti-Maidan protestors and acquired a new meaning associated with Russia's latest imperial ambitions. Once the events in the Donbas began to unfold, Aleksandr Dugin, a prominent Russian political theorist known for his theories on Russia's integrative geopolitics, promoted the idea that a new and "more pure" Russia would be reborn in *Novorossiia.* See, for example, his post, "Za russkii mir," available at http://russia3.ru/ideolog/nashi/novoross_ideya (Accessed 20 May 2020). Russian President Vladimir Putin also referred frequently to *Novorossiia* and *Russkii mir* in the weeks following the annexation of the Crimea. Most explicitly, he evoked both terms when he questioned Ukraine's right to the Donbas during his annual phone-in question-and-answer session in April 2014. The full transcript of his speech is available on the Kremlin's website at http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796 (Accessed 20 May 2020). However, when the events in the Donbas did not go to his liking, Putin swiftly discarded the *Novorossiia* narrative. For further discussion, see Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis* 118–24; and Yekelchyk 117–19.

play eyewitness to a fictitious bus bombing, presumably carried out by pro-Ukrainian forces. The shaky hand-held camera closely follows the actors in a three-minute-long take until they begin to sell their stories to reporters, at which point the camera stabilizes and makes only one smooth and rather slow pan to the site of the bombing, where it lingers uncomfortably for nearly a minute. The final cut of the news is shown later in the film as a background to a live broadcast from a dilapidated bomb shelter.

   This scene could serve as a keen example of Baudrillard's simulacrum, as it has no longer any connection to the actual reality that was originally captured by amateur filmmakers whose videos caught Loznitsa's attention, and functions as a sheer signification that constructs a perceived reality of Loznitsa's characters.[32] Cinematographically, it is a shrewdly constructed product that intersplices close ups of body bags and demolished vehicles with eyewitnesses' testimonials and the reporter's explanatory commentaries. Loznitsa uses nimble camerawork and crafty editing in both episodes to implicate his viewers in their production and consumption. While the hand-held camera places the viewers amid the actors, thereby framing them as collaborators, the smooth editing of the news sequence elucidates, in turn, how easily a staged event could be perceived as a real occurrence when presented in a format that triggers an emotional response.

   The cynicism of the opening tutorial in the production of fake news and simulated reality reaches its climax in the closing episode in a sequence where the same set of actors in almost identical makeup reappears minutes before yet another fraudulent news broadcast. The second time, the actors no longer play the roles of eyewitnesses of staged events but are liquidated en masse. Once their execution begins, Loznitsa cuts to a landscape shot outside the trailer, moves the camera high overhead, and offers his viewers an uninterrupted immersive observational experience in the remaining twelve minutes of the film. The shot takes in foreground, medium ground, and background from a single vantage point, allowing the viewers time and space to monitor the events unfolding before the camera and ponder their significance. As the first responders take over the scene and a new set of actors begins its rehearsed performance, the viewers grow painfully aware of the pervasive disinformation, wide-spread structural violence, and profound social disintegration that have worn out the connecting ties between the people of the Donbas, who are ravaged by fear, acrimony, and sheer exhaustion. The viewers also realize that whatever anti-Ukrainian

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[32] While elaborating on the difference between representation and simulation, Baudrillard delineates four successive phases of simulacra formation: a copy of a profound reality, a mask that hides a profound reality, a mask that hides the absence of a profound reality, and a pure simulacrum that has no relation to any reality whatsoever. For further reference, see Baudrillard 6–7.

sentiments the Donbas inhabitants might have, they are not "homegrown" but are artificially imposed by those who control the media and the information flow in the region. At the same time, the keen awareness of Loznitsa's omnipresent camera that records an alternate story of the war and facilitates a critical inquiry into its nature and into the nature of those directly involved in it adds a great measure of hope, if not optimism, to the overall doom and gloom in the atmosphere of the closing scene.

While the framing sequences lay out the process of manufacturing fake news, a series of episodes in-between elaborate on what it actually means to live in post-truth hyperreality, where simulacra and disinformation are the only *modus operandi*. Along the way, these series expose the self-proclaimed state and its institutions as fakes designed to manipulate the general public's mental representations of the social relations around them by obscuring the actual realities of exploitation and domination that those relations embody. To be sure, like many traditional states, Loznitsa's *Novorossiia* maintains monopoly on the use of violence, but the filmmaker strips it of any credibility by questioning its legitimacy.[33] From the moment when a burly DPR militant welcomes a busload of Donbas locals to the "People's Republic"—after he has requisitioned a slab of bacon from an elderly woman at the first checkpoint—to the expository encounter with the Lenin-looking warlord who oversees the mass expropriation of private property from local businessmen, Loznitsa methodically projects *Novorossiia* as a hodgepodge of farcical anarchy and violent totalitarianism that shows little consideration for the rule of law or for the wellbeing of its people. Despite the flamboyant populist rhetoric of its representatives, Loznitsa's *Novorossiia* has no clear structure and no long-term plan of action.

The filmmaker conveys its chaotic nature with a carefully orchestrated mise-en-scène at the beginning of a vignette on the requisition of a local citizen's car that takes place in front of the DPR headquarters in Donetsk. In the centre of the opening shot, displayed over the main entrance of the building directly under the official black-red-and-blue DPR colours, is the flag of the Donetsk region, the largest banner in the shot. The flag features a rising gold sun in its upper sky-blue part and a reflection of that sun in its lower black part. To the right of the Donetsk flag is the flag of the Russian Federation and a hand-made sign with a caption that reads "Russia / Crimea / Donbass," and to the left of the Donetsk flag is an orange-and-black-striped

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[33] My schematic discussion of *Novorossiia's* claims to statehood in Loznitsa's film is based on Max Weber's definition of the state as a compulsory political organization with centralized government that maintains a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within a certain territory. Weber first introduced his definition in his 1918 essay, "Politics As a Vocation," and it is still widely used in contemporary political science.

banner fashioned after the ribbon of St. George. The ribbon of St. George is a Russian military symbol that was originally promoted in Russia in 2005 as a symbol of Soviet victory in World War II, but has evolved recently into a symbol of support for the Putinist regime and an emblem of Russia's triumphalism in southeastern Ukraine.[34] Hence, while the Donetsk flag with the rising sun, officially adopted in 1999, might suggest the regime's commitment to the region's prosperity, the surrounding Russian insignias imply Donetsk's allegiance, if not its complete subjection, to the Kremlin.

A motley array of signs, flags, and religious symbols displayed by the participants of what seems to be a rally in support of the new regime is also rife with contradictions. The banner of the Russian Orthodox Church and a series of crosses and icons, for example, do not blend well with either the Soviet flag or the posters headlining obscenities such as "Fuck EU and US." Similarly, the official flag of *Novorossiia*, which somewhat resembles the Confederate flag, undermines the message of the sign that reads "Stop racism!" This explosion of contrasting symbols related to the region's Soviet past or to a foreign authority can hardly represent a nodal point around which people can develop a common political identity and suggests discord, lack of cohesion, and an absence of solidarity. The sycophantic nature of the state symbols paraded in front of the DPR headquarters becomes particularly palpable when the scene is juxtaposed to what takes place inside the building next to it. The remainder of the sequence follows a local businessman, Semen, who arrives at the DPR headquarters to reclaim his stolen car, only to be forced into handing the vehicle and a huge sum of money over "for the cause." By the time the poor man realizes the magnitude of the cruelty, theft, and opportunism of the new government, the viewers are left with little doubt that the motley display of *Novorossiia*'s many colours is no more than a mask to cover up a major predatory operation to redistribute power and resources in the region, and that the state they claim to represent is no more than a Baudrillardian hyperreality in which "only the fiction of a political universe [exists]" (Baudrillard 26).

Loznitsa highlights the same hyperreality and its lack of cohesion in *Novorossiia*'s political agenda through his mocking representations of the DPR officials and their tortuous interactions with the people of the Donbas. Two military commanders, whose characters are fashioned as parodies of the heroes of the Russian Civil War of 1917–22, stand out the most. The first of them is a coarse female officer reminiscent of Klavdiia Vavilova, a fictional character from Aleksandr Askoldov's seminal film *Komissar* (*Commissar,*

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[34] For a detailed discussion, see Koltsø.

1967).[35] Similar to Vavilova, whose first act is to order the swift execution of a deserter, Loznitsa's commissar shows maximum ruthlessness as she harangues a busload of civilian men, mostly teens and elders, for not fighting and threatens to send them to the front. Loznitsa, however, does not give his heroine enough time to develop a human dimension or to prove her devotion to the cause that she propagates. Instead, he pictures her as a blind executioner of the Kremlin's political program, an allegation implied by the St. George ribbon tied around her arm. The burlesque character of Chapai, another political propagandist, also offers a provocative intertextual reference. Chapai is named after a celebrated Red Army commander, Vasilii Chapaev (1887–1919), who was immortalized by the Vasil'ev "brothers" in their 1934 film named after its protagonist. Vasilii Chapaev is widely regarded as the most famous war hero in all of Soviet cinema.[36] Like his legendary prototype, Loznitsa's Chapai is semi-literate and spontaneous in his orations. But he is no rebel who answers to no one and no dashing man of action universally loved and respected by his men. To the contrary, those who wield real power in his unit, treat him as a jester, fit only to reproduce scripted propaganda before naïve audiences. Yet, Loznitsa's Chapai fails even to do that. All he can produce in response to the question of a German war journalist about what is going on in the Donbas is a mixture of absurd deductions, historical misinterpretations, and an outpouring of foul language. The only graspable message that can be distilled from his passionate jumble suggests that the *Russkii mir* is once again uniting under the antifascist slogans to "fuck" first Lviv, the cultural capital of western Ukraine, and then the rest of Europe. Such a cause can hardly qualify as either noble or legitimate and has nothing to do with the real needs of Donbas civilians caught in the war. The two characters, Chapai and the female commander, thus embody the two main qualities, chaos and despotism, that the film ascribes to *Novorossiia*.

Loznitsa's farcical battlefield commanders set the standard for all subsequent representatives of the new regime. For example, both government functionaries—the dead-eyed bureaucrat whose language, demeanour, and golden trinkets call to mind the ousted former Ukrainian president Viktor Ianukovych, and the Lenin-looking malicious warlord who runs the mass operation of expropriation—replicate the female commander's brutality in their interactions with the Donbas locals. A campy blond, a spokeswoman for the religious nationalism that fuels the split between pro-Russian sympathizers and pro-western Ukrainians in the

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[35] For further discussion of Askoldov's film, see Beumers, *A History of Russian Cinema* 150–52; and Gillespie 69–70.

[36] See Gillespie 15–16; and Youngblood 37–43, 243.

Donbas, mirrors, in turn, Chapai. As she brazenly juggles feeble exertions of thought, clumsy turns of speech, snippets of theological arguments, and bits of holy relics of phony saints to secure funds for her crusade, even the Ianukovych-looking bureaucrat grows utterly bewildered by her blatant manipulation of religious discourse and the overall absurdity of the scene. When the blond and her entourage finally leave, he asks rhetorically, "What was that horns-and-hoofs business all about?" He refers to the infamous *Horns and Hoofs* dummy company created by Ostap Bender, the fictional con man and central antihero in Il'f and Petrov's 1931 satirical novel, *Zolotoi telenok* (*The Golden Calf*), which ably pokes fun at a new model society—the USSR of the 1920s—and its hubris. As Loznitsa's reference to Il'f and Petrov's classic and his depictions of *Novorossiia*'s power-hungry and occasionally dim-witted officials imply, the bureaucrat's question captures well the bogus nature of the self-proclaimed state. Loznitsa's intertextual references to the two most important films based on Soviet history also suggest that the filmmaker sees parallels between the distractive tyranny of the Bolsheviks and that of *Novorossiia*.

   Donbass is no less caustic in its representations of the region's civilians, most of whom either ignore, comply with, or partake in the atrocities perpetrated by the new regime. Among the two-thousand characters featured in the film, there are only a few who refuse to believe the lies propagated by *Novorossiia's* misinformation machine and reject the new status quo as a new normal. The overwhelming majority of Donbas locals populating Loznitsa's film are depicted as uncritical consumers of state propaganda, the so-called *vatniks*. The latter is a pejorative derived from the Russian word connoting a type of cotton-padded winter coat commonly worn by low-ranking soldiers in World War II, GULAG inmates, and the impoverished strata of the Soviet population. In the context of Russia's ongoing aggressions against Ukraine, *vatniks* are associated with Ukraine's pro-Russian population and are characterized by their Soviet nostalgia, their excessive aggressiveness toward, and unreflective hatred of, everything non-Russian, and their blind belief in Russia's liberationist mission in the Crimea and the Donbas—a group that can be well described using Marxist terms as having been dupped by "false consciousness."[37] Loznitsa conveys

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[37] False consciousness is a concept derived from the Marxist theory of social class. It refers to the systematic misrepresentation of dominant social relations in the consciousness of subordinate classes. Marx himself did not use the phrase "false consciousness," but he paid extensive attention to the related concepts of ideology and commodity fetishism. He presented his theory of ideology in his essay *The German Ideology*, using the term to refer to a system of ideas through which people understand their world. Marx's central theoretical assertion is that ideology and thought are dependent on the material circumstances in which people live. As to the

the sheer ignorance and inhumanity of this type of individual. In one of the most horrendous scenes of the film, a captured Ukrainian soldier, tied to a street pole in the centre of Donetsk, endures a savage beating at the hands of a crowd of passersby. The sign that labels him an "extermination squad volunteer" is one of the film's many evocations of the fascism used in pro-Russian propaganda to frame the new government in Kyiv as an existential threat to the Russian-speaking southeast of Ukraine. As the film suggests, the fascist narrative particularly resonates with the older people. While the young men who first arrive at the scene ignore all references to fascism and are content with jeering at their victim and taking sadistic selfies, a head-scarfed granny responds violently to the fascist narrative and is the first to strike the humiliated man. Instigated by the granny's fury, the crowd grows wild, and the scene turns into a public execution. As the violence escalates, it becomes obvious that the people in the crowd have no interest in either justice or truth but crave only revenge and an outlet for their own suffering. The captive's frail attempt to narrate his side of the story falls on deaf ears, and the guards are forced to interfere to save his life. This almost unwatchable sequence is superbly filmed. It begins with an extreme long shot of the city landscape, followed, gradually, by medium shots and close ups of people who walk into the scene. As the action picks up, the camera begins to circle around and up close to the characters' faces, focusing on the anguish of the captive and the viciousness of his tormentors. The resulting compilation of portraitures of the doomed men, who, as the film suggests, have been stripped of their subjectivity, dehumanized, and reduced to a mere social function by the Russian propaganda machine, captures the

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concept of commodity fetishism, Marx discussed it in the first part of the first volume of his *Capital* and used it to refer to the pervasive and defining illusion that exists in a commodity society and leads to the alienation of the exploited class. For further reference to Marx's analysis of the two concepts, see his corresponding works in Tucker 146–86 and 302–29. While the term itself was first used by Friedrich Engels in a private letter to Franz Mering, it was György Lukács who introduced the concept of false consciousness into Marxist discourse and urged Marxist critics to treat it as an unavoidable stage in the historical process (50). In the 1930s, Antonio Gramsci further extended Marxist thinking about ideology and consciousness by ascribing to ideology a more active role in politics and history than in classical historical materialism. He argued that the subordinate class has the ability to influence the terms of its consciousness, and that there is an extended struggle between the exploiters and the exploited over the terms of the representation of the existing social reality. According to Gramsci, the ruling class generally exercises "hegemony" over the terms of ideology through its control of the instruments of consciousness—social institutions such as schools, churches, courts, and the media, among others—yet the subordinate class can also exert influence through its own cultural institutions (145).

microscopic details of the crowd's descent into barbarity with keen precision.

Loznitsa's criticism of *vatniks* reaches its climax in the meta-ironic episode that immediately follows the execution scene and features a politicized wedding. Some critics find this sequence "superfluous," if not pernicious, because it takes grotesque to the extreme and thereby breaks with the overall realism of the film, "allowing the very aesthetic that *Donbass* seems to condemn to take over" ("Donbas @ the Filmhouse;" Glasser). Yet, the sharp juxtaposition of the film's overall grisly tone and the scene's overexaggerated emphasis on theatricality and caricature is precisely what allows Loznitsa to expose the pervasive dehumanization characteristic of any post-truth society akin to *Novorossiia*. The filmmaker underscores the scene's importance by populating it with symbolically overdetermined objects, characters, actions, and intertextual references. For example, Loznitsa names his groom Ivan Pavlovich Iaishnitsa and the bride Anzhela Tikhonovna Kuperdiagina, after two similar characters in Nikolai Gogol' (Mykola Hohol')'s 1842 comedy *Zhenit'ba* (*Marriage*), which is renowned for its unconventional episodic structure and extreme absurdity. The reference is a subtle reminder that Loznitsa's objective, like that of Gogol' in his play, is not so much to depict reality as to inquire into the lives of people hardened by privation. Like Gogol', the filmmaker pursues his study by colliding the comic and the serious to avoid superficiality.[38] The couple's grand entry into the main hall of the palace of civil records to the sounds of Mendelssohn's "Wedding March*"* is an intertextual reference to Hitler's ludicrous wedding in Mikhail Chiaureli's epic film, *Padenie Berlina* (*The Fall of Berlin,* 1949–50).[39] Like Hitler's wedding in Chiaureli's epic, the wedding in Loznitsa's *Donbass* (2018) represents a painful contrast to the devastation of the city outside the official building and symbolizes the regime's total disregard for the suffering of its people. It also underscores the sheer futility of the newly established union and the state it represents. While Chiaureli's episode ends with a mass suicide, Loznitsa wraps up his story with a cover-up execution of some of the Iaishnitsas' friends after they carry out an artillery attack on civilians. The episode clearly suggests that the newlyweds might soon face the same fate. The filmmaker reinforces his implied link between *Novorossiia* and the newly created Iaishnitsa family with a plethora of kitschy white-red-and-blue props, state insignias, and a hilarious parody of the official discourse used in the wedding ceremony. The latter, carried out according

[38] For a comprehensive discussion of Gogol''s *Marriage* and his technique of the comic broadly defined, see Slonimsky.

[39] Chiaureli's film is widely regarded as the first Soviet epic about World War II, which presents Stalin as an epic hero and offers a grotesque caricature of Hitler. For further discussion, see Gillespie 133–35; Youngblood 97–101; and Taylor 99–122.

to a set of agonizingly vulgar rites, is repeatedly interrupted by the raucous cheering of the crowd, and culminates in the singing of the informal anthem of *Novorossiia*. Every detail in this scene draws attention to the obscenity and *poshlost'* (banality) of *Novorossiia*'s new elite, simultaneously tying it to Nazi Germany and Russia. The film suggests that Russia orchestrates the ongoing slaughter in the Donbas in the same manner as the unflappable emcee runs the wedding ceremony—forcefully, deliberately, and according to a plan. The link is especially obvious in the singing of the marriage certificate sequence, which brings to mind the bogus referenda in Donetsk and Luhansk and the signing of *Novorossiia*'s declaration of unification. Loznitsa films the wedding scene in the same manner as he films the execution sequence— with a tracking camera, using one long take that lingers restlessly on the sheer crudeness and ruthlessness of *Novorossiia*'s patriots—linking the two episodes into one continuous exposé of the Donbas *vatniks* and their false consciousness.

Some critics have reprimanded Loznitsa for his degraded representations of *Novorossiia* and its people, comparing these representations to uncritical vilifications of Germans in the cycle of Soviet and western films released immediately after World War II (Morian). Indeed, the film focuses exclusively on the basest qualities of Russia's supporters, be they militants or civilians, thugs or silent bystanders, and paints the Donbas as a bitter world, shredded by terror and animosity. Loznitsa's representations, however, defy any simplistic determinism and resemble a conundrum similar to that of Soviet filmmakers in their depictions of the Russian Civil War, during which the enemy was defined not so much by nationality as by social class.[40] Similar to rank-and-file enemy soldiers in corresponding Soviet films, Loznitsa's *Novorossiians* belong to the same destitute group that they oppose. Except for a few well-equipped and well-organized soldiers with strong Russian accents and no state insignias, all of Loznitsa's characters are Ukrainians. Even the Russian-speaking and pro-Kremlin bride and groom remain deeply rooted in their Ukrainian cultural heritage and follow a traditional wedding custom by stepping on the embroidered towel to be properly pronounced husband and wife.[41] All of Loznitsa's characters are also projected to be victims of Soviet nostalgia, disinformation, and state-sponsored violence; they are positioned as possible targets and potential casualties, whatever their rank or their level

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[40] For further discussion on the representations of enemies in relevant Soviet films, see Youngblood 232–33.

[41] This brief yet fundamentally important episode is a subtle illustration of the deep cultural affinity that the people of the Donbas share with the rest of Ukraine, a phenomenon on which Volodymyr Rafeienko elaborates in his essay "Donbas— Ukraine, a Life Journey."

of commitment to the *Novorossiia* cause. By foregrounding the brutality and unpredictability that indelibly mark any war, and by framing the Donbas as a national tragedy where Ukrainians kill Ukrainians, more out of fear, greed, or ignorance than out of regional hatred, Loznitsa makes it clear that his sympathies are with the people of the Donbas and that the main perpetrator of violence in the region is *Novorossiia*, a fake state, created by the Kremlin's political technologists to secure Russia's interests in the region. Notably, in his cinematic exploration of *Novorossiia*'s hyperreality and the "false consciousness" of *vatnik*s, Loznitsa goes far beyond rigid vilifications and condescending remarks as to whether *vatniks'* beliefs are true or false relative to their interests. Instead, he invites his viewers to investigate the two. Loznitsa's quest brings to mind György Lukács's call to treat "false consciousness" and institutions that foster it "as an aspect of the historical totality and a stage in the historical process" (50). That this stage must be acknowledged and critically assessed before post-Soviet Ukraine can move to a new historical era, is an approach and initiative that Loznitsa often takes in his other works that question post-Soviet identities informed by the Soviet past. By doing so, the filmmaker transcends the dystopian motives of Baudrillard's theorizations and establishes a solid foundation for optimism.

CONCLUSION

While attesting to a new development in war films that draws attention to fundamental shifts in the nature of contemporary warfare, the latest cycle of Ukrainian war films also heralds a radical paradigmatic turn toward a new national cinema. Cognizant of the role of film in shaping public discourse and mediating reality, Ukrainian filmmakers frame the ongoing events in the Donbas as a new kind of war shaped by psychological operations, hacks, fake news, disinformation, and brainwashing rather than conventional military forces. By positioning media as the key tool in molding public perception and thereby manipulating events on the ground, recent Ukrainian war films reconfigure traditional thematic genre priorities, de-emphasizing combat and the militarization of space. While relying for narrative approaches on references to Soviet and western cinema, contemporary Ukrainian filmmakers—Loznitsa and Seitablaiev, in particular—prove to be innovative in the realm of ideology and strategic discourse. They not only project media and cybertechnology as potent tactical weapons, but they also mobilize cinema in a plurality of ways to deconstruct Russia's pernicious lies and to reframe the war in the Donbas as conducive to Ukraine's political goals. While justifying Ukraine's fight for a pro-European future, Loznitsa and Seitablaiev remain critical of the war and are careful not to slip into counterpropaganda. They reject the divisive language of Russia's

informational warfare and develop a more robust approach to reach their target audience by exposing Russia's manipulations of facts and public sentiments. They show where a lack of critical thinking and a shortfall in media literacy leads, and how devastating and debilitating its repercussions could be. By combining their subversions of Russia's neo-imperial discourse with a critical deconstruction of Ukraine's post-Soviet condition, the two filmmakers assert that although the war in the Donbas might have strengthened the concept of the Ukrainian civic nation identifying now with the Ukrainian state rather than an ethnic group, the fight for people's hearts and minds in Ukraine remains urgent and ongoing. According to Loznitsa and Seitablaiev, that fight can be won if Ukraine's civil society and the new authorities engage in open conversations about the prospect and processes of building a peaceful and democratic future. Social diversity and public awareness of Ukraine's complicated post-Soviet and post-colonial condition can be force multipliers in the country's fight for its sovereignty.

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