

# Ukraine in search of a post-colonial identity: de-constructing narratives through film

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# 1. Introduction

When one comes across the term “coloniality”, the first thing that springs to mind is the history of Europe, Africa, the Americas, perhaps India. Yet, this is a very Western-centric reading of the term. Although Europe has been in the spotlight for its colonial past for quite some time, the practice of political and cultural domination has also shaped the geopolitical situations in other parts of the world. The post-Soviet territory is particularly affected till this day. Though a number of countries in the region are nominally independent, they still struggle to find their own identity and shake off the far-reaching effects of expansionism. It becomes even more difficult when the cultural center and heiress of the Soviet Union continues to lay claim on territories it had formally conquered, whether by force or by cultural subjugation, or both. This was the story of Chechnya, Abkhazia, and now of Crimea and Donbas in Ukraine. This paper will focus solely on the colonial relationship between Russia and Ukraine, in light of the current events as well as the complicated history between the two cultures. Furthermore, it will provide an overview of the cultural climate both in the past and in the years of independence to assess the far-reaching cultural effects of coloniality. The tension between Ukrainian and Russian cultures was cited by Russia as the reason for the situation in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, which motivates the interest in to investigate the relationship between the two (“Transcript”).

Although the territory of Ukraine has a very extensive and rich history, dating over a thousand years, as a sovereign nation it is very young. In fact, Ukraine gained its independence only in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union in late 1991. Until then the territory has been divided and conquered for centuries, the ruling power switching hands between Russia, Poland, Lithuania, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, and the Mongolian

Khanate. While each of the ruling cultures certainly left a mark on the people and traditions within the region, Russia has had perhaps the most drastic impact. It isn't strange given the shared religion and script, and most importantly the indoctrination of a conquerors ideology over the course of several centuries. This paper will illustrate how a dominant ideology can shape the culture of a vanquished ethnicity with the case of Ukraine.

## Theory: hegemony and postcolonial discourse

This practice of instilling the ideology of the ruling class through various institutions had been explored in the works of many philosophers and authors, starting from Karl Marx and continuing in the works of Gramsci and Foucault. Antonio Gramsci was particularly interested in the ways society is influenced by the ruling class, ideologically speaking. He coined the term "cultural hegemony" which meant the practice of leadership carried out by a power-holding group in society via intangible means. This is in contrast to forceful indoctrination through power structures of the state such as the judiciary or military system. According to Gramsci, society has "two major superstructural 'levels': the one that can be called 'civil society', that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called 'private', and that of 'political society' or 'the State'" (145). It is through these 2 levels that the ruling class dominates albeit via different means. While the actions on State level are more straightforward and measurable, the "civil society" level is complicated as members of society consume the cultural codes they are given and then reproduce them themselves, thereby making it difficult to pinpoint the "exerters" of the dominant culture and the "exertees". In other words "the intellectuals succeed in creating hegemony to the extent that they extend the world view of the rulers to the ruled, and thereby secure the "free" consent of the masses to the law and order of the land" (Bates 353). Interestingly, Bates traces

Gramsci's inspiration to Russian revolutionaries of the early 20th century, specifically to Lenin, although according to Norberto Bobbio "hegemony" in Gramsci's sense was more akin to Stalin's policies regarding party leadership (352). Hence, "cultural hegemony" has been realized in practice within the territory of Russia and Ukraine in the 20th century, which gives direct insight in regards to dominating and dominated classes and not only with respect to economic and political values.

While Gramsci speaks of systems of implementing a new ideology, such as socialism, his concept of hegemony could be applied in other instances, such as cultural domination over a conquered land. Hence in application to postcolonial theory as the concept of "cultural hegemony" can provide invaluable insight into power relations that shaped the culture of contemporary nations. Jasper Goss determines 3 main postulates of traditional postcolonial theory: questioning the Eurocentric Western discourse; transgressing the roles determined by the West, i.e. going beyond orientalist representation; deconstructing cultural identities and narratives (240). In order to achieve these goals, it is necessary to understand how the dominant culture influenced the "minority" culture and it applies to any colonizing culture, not only Western. Hence, first and foremost the paper will explore the cultural power dynamics that shaped the colonial experience of Ukraine and continue to influence its postcolonial present. The crucial difference between colonial Ukraine and, for example, colonial Africa, is the linguo-cultural component rather than racial or ethnic (Riabchuk, *Postcolonial* sec. 1). Therefore applying Western postcolonial theory does not make much sense without taking this stipulation into account. After all Ukrainians, as people, de jure did not face discrimination insofar as they comply with the proposed cultural role determined by Imperial Russia and later the Soviet Union. Unlike people of other races that had been colonized by the West, and even by Russia, such as members of Central Asian ethnic groups,

Ukrainians cannot be visually distinguished from Russians. In this way Ukrainians a priori were “white-passing”. Unless they defied cultural, political and linguistic Russian hegemony, they generally had no reason to fear persecution. “[The] postcommunist world was not colonial sensu stricto because it did not have the idea of racial superiority in its ideological core and never made racial exclusion into political practice”, stresses Riabchuk and thus provides a distinction with traditional postcolonial studies (*Colonialism* 50). However, the framework offered by postcolonial theory remains very relevant to analyzing power dynamics and cultural production.

Riabchuk quotes Marko Pavlyshyn in terms of cultural discourses that are present in Ukraine (*Postcolonial* sec. 2). On the one hand, there is the obvious colonial discourse, that includes a distorted self-image of Ukraine and an elevated and glorified image of the “mighty Russia”. Then there is the anti-colonial discourse, which is essentially as much a product of imperialism as is colonial discourse. Anti-colonialism is subject to the same fallacies of myth-making, demonization, and victimization, except in terms of polar opposite subjects. Mark von Hagen writes that in this myth-making process applicable to both colonial and anti-colonial discourses as in both cases “insignificant moments or personages in the past were elevated to world-historical status, while less convenient episodes or individuals were suppressed, reconfigured or relegated to non-events and non-persons” (663). Clearly, both approaches offer a very limited, binary cultural understanding of both history and the national “self”, which suggests a need for a third discourse - the post-colonial discourse, one that would address the shortcomings of both anti-colonial and colonial discourses, and offer a viable alternative to a culture desperate find its voice.

## Methodology: analyzing film through a postcolonial lens

Ukraine has mainly suffered cultural oppression, which included, but was not limited to, banning the language, literature, music and other cultural artifacts. Therefore in order to evaluate the effects colonialism has had on Ukraine, it is necessary to analyze cultural objects that had been produced after Ukraine gained independence and no longer had state-imposed limitations. Nowadays film is the one most powerful medium to influence culture, as it is more accessible to people of various backgrounds socially and culturally, contrary to the literature, visual arts, and music. Given the cultural effect films can produce, it is the best medium to analyze in terms of post-colonial cultural dynamics.

The next chapter will explore the existing literature on the subject of post-coloniality in Ukraine and outline the limitations of traditional post-colonial theory when applied to the case of Ukraine. It will provide an overview of the theoretical framework that exists in postcolonial studies, specifically dealing with cultural oppression. Chapter 3 will apply the theory in an analysis of a Ukrainian film, that will encompass postcolonial theory and Barthesian semiotics, in order to illustrate the process of decolonization in Ukraine and place the films within a discourse framework. The chosen film must fulfill the following criteria: it must have been produced in Ukraine before 2014 to eliminate any influence produced by the recent conflict with Russia, it must address the matter of Ukrainian identity, and it must have received acknowledgment from both critics and the general public, meaning it had a notable cultural impact. Further, this paper will draw conclusions from the reception of the film and its role in national identity politics, and outline the relevance or irrelevance of such movies for Ukraine. By combining the theory discussed in chapter 2 and film analysis tools in chapter 3 we can provide an answer to the following research question: how do films

produced in Ukraine today reflect its colonial past and contribute to constructing a national identity? However, because this paper deals with only one case study, the conclusion will propose possibilities for further research on the topic to provide more in-depth answers.

## 2. Between postcolonialism and postcommunism

### Part 1: what is a colony

One of the larger debates surrounding existing postcolonial studies on Ukraine is whether or not Ukraine could even be considered a colony. The traditional understanding of colonialism, especially amongst western scholars, is somewhat different than the situation with Ukraine. This chapter will attempt to contribute to this debate and provide arguments as to why Ukraine is a postcolonial nation. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy colonialism is “a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another”. This undeniably applies to Ukraine’s history within the Russian empire and the Soviet Union. Yet, academics argue that “within the Russian empire and the Soviet Union, Ukraine was more core than colony” (Hrytsak 733) and thus cannot be compared to colonies such as India or South Africa. Furthermore, Ukrainians being present in the ruling elite in both the Empire and the Soviet Union is often held as proof that Ukraine wasn’t colonized, but was, in fact, part of Russia culturally and politically. However, circling back to the parallel with Britain’s colonization of India, it is crucial for the colonizer to establish an alliance with the existing ruling class of the colonized nation and incorporate them into the new regime (Viswanathan qtd. in Shkandrij 285). Ukraine was central to the empire/union due to its advantageous geopolitical position between Europe and Asia, with access to the

Black Sea and its extremely rich soil. Therefore it was important to establish Russian hegemony over Ukrainians. It was necessary to prevent any strive for autonomy in Ukraine and prevent any attempt to establish an autonomous cultural identity, one that would be able to compete with the dominating Russian culture. Therefore putting ethnic Ukrainians in charge ensured a smoother transition and promoted self-colonization. In Gramsci's terms this was a crucial step for cultural hegemony, for Ukrainians promoted in the social ladder further extended the ruling class ideology.

For centuries the dominating historiographic ideas were placing Ukraine as part of Greater Russia and nothing more. One of the more prominent historians that contributed to this was Vasilii Kliuchevskii, who, according to Elizabeth White, played a "leading role in the formation of the worldview of the Russian intelligentsia" (557). "Kliuchevskii downplayed the imperial nature of the Russian state and suggested that the creation of a unitary state within the "natural" boundaries of the Russian Empire was Russia's 'manifest destiny'", - writes White and reinforces Vera Tolz's claim that Kliuchevskii had an incredible impact upon the Russian and Soviet identities (557). Because of all the discourse revolving around Ukraine being integral to the Russian empire and the Soviet Union, it is easy to overlook the underlying colonial and imperialist attitudes. After all, it is very unlike the typical examples of colonialism. In the case of India as a British colony, culturally the former has been clearly impacted by Britain. However, India itself was not fundamental to British culture. The British rule influenced the perception of sexuality as well as solidified the caste system (Ferriter), and yet the biggest influence India has had upon British culture is perhaps diversifying its cuisine. Ukraine has certainly impacted Russia to a larger extent, to the point that the former holds a firm central position in Russia's national mythology (Fisher). However, if you take into account cultural representation everything falls into place.

Shkandrij writes that culturally the relationship between Russia and Ukraine is textbook colonial, where the subjugated culture is represented as uncivilized and simple, no match for the “higher” imperial culture and language. He gives examples of Russian imperial literature constructing a trope of what a Ukrainian really is, equating Ukrainian culture with rural primitivism, while elevating the metropolitan and modern Russian culture (Riabchuk, *Postcolonial* sec.6). “The Ukrainian” in Russian imperialist, and later Soviet, discourse is merely a primitive “khokhol”, which is not and most importantly *cannot* be a threat to the mighty Russian culture.

When the Russian Empire collapsed in 1917 the question of Ukraine’s autonomous identity had surfaced among the intellectuals. But only to be buried in socialist discourse which emphasized the need to unite against the capitalist West. “The imperial vantage point was rehabilitated under the guise of the slogan ‘friendship of peoples’ according to which the Russians were the older brothers for the rest of the peoples”, writes Mark von Hagen and highlights how within that rhetoric any ethnic tensions between Russians and non-Russians had been downplayed in attempts to prevent any nationalist urges that would threaten the integrity of the Soviet Union (663). The USSR inherited Russia’s “manifest destiny”: to unify slavs, save the world, bring order in its territories, only now instill communism instead of Christianity (Riabchuk, *Postcolonial* sec.2). Soviet rule represented an obvious contradiction. On the one hand, it’s central ideology was that of breaking the system, going against imperialism and capitalism, and so by extension - against colonialism. Yet, as Yaseen Noorani rightfully notes: “Capitalism is ... a key element of the colonial matrix, but not a defining one”. Timothy Snyder writes that the communists indeed aimed to be anti-colonial, at least according to their own definition. However, he points out that “the logic of the new regime was also colonial, precisely because its most pressing task was to emulate capitalist

development. If imperialism was a stage of capitalism, it could hardly be skipped” (*Integration* 697). Thus in order to compete with the West, the Soviet Union had to catch up with the rapid industrialization that had already been set in motion with the help of the capital amassed on the backs of Western colonies. The only way that would be possible was for the USSR to exploit marginalized regions under the false pretenses of the worker’s revolution. And so while the leaders and the rhetoric were swapped to those more appealing to common citizens, the underlying system of exploitation remained unchanged.

## Part 2: what is missing

The problem of applying the existing theoretical groundwork on decolonization to Ukraine lies in the following discrepancies. Postcolonial theory, as offered by Western scholars, is very much rooted in the critique of imperialism and capitalism. Postcommunism, on the other hand, highlights the fallacies and hypocrisies of socialist regimes and instead looks to capitalism for guidance. Both only offer binary systems of analysis, whereas that is too simplistic for post-Soviet countries, and especially Ukraine, that had gone through colonial oppression in both capitalist and socialist renditions. Madina Tlostanova notes that this is where the academic uncertainty within the post-Soviet space has an effect upon real-life self-identification and geopolitical climate:

Habitually thinking within the binary either/or logic, postcommunism sees itself as forced to either accept liberalism and capitalism as the only remaining options or go back to idealizing socialist myths, including the infamous double-standard proletarian internationalism and the USSR patronage over developing countries (Russia and the CIS).

In essence, to decolonize the history of Ukraine, one must combine the theories of post-imperialism and post-communism and recognize that they overlap and shape each other. Just because the Soviet Union was principally anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, does not mean that the effects of imperialism upon Ukraine's social order and culture simply vanished in the 1920s. As mentioned above, the Soviet Union naturally inherited Russian imperialist culture and continued to extend it towards all of the nations constituting the USSR. By the time of the Soviet Union dissolution, Ukrainian culture had remained under the influence of Russian imperialism and its Soviet iteration. Therefore in order to fully understand Ukraine's colonial experience, one must look at imperialism and communism as ideologies both separately and together.

The second problem with decolonizing Ukraine is not of theoretical nature, but of practical. Because Ukraine had essentially been a pawn over the course of many centuries, its official history had been written by the dominant cultures that had ruled over her at one time or another. As Mark von Hagen writes, most of the smaller European countries' histories until 1914 were influenced by the Romanov, the Hohenzollern and the Habsburg dynastic empires, and later by the German Reich and the Soviet Union (659). And because Ukraine has been divided numerous times between them, its historiography lacks integrity and continuity. Because of this discontinuity, there is no uniform national identity. Shulman writes that "the various regions of Ukraine have traveled quite different historical paths, and this regionalization can be expected to weaken a sense of unity based on sharing a common territory" (*The Contours* 37). This is the main difference between Eastern European and Western European senses of identities. In the West, there had been more stable territorial borders, which influenced the development of civic national identity, whereas in the East the

unstable political climate forced nations to rely more on culture to define their national identity. The Ukrainian tragedy is that Russian culture has been both forcefully and implicitly indoctrinated throughout the last centuries, therefore there is no easy solution to the problem of creating a uniform national Ukrainian identity. At the same time, the whole region had been orientalized by the West, with no distinction between Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians, etc. So in the eyes of the entire world, Ukraine as a culture and as a country is seen as merely a piece broken off an empire (Riabchuk, *Postcolonial* sec.1, 7). There is not only a gap between the way Ukraine is perceived by the rest of the world and its own identity, but Ukraine itself has a fragmented vision of its national identity. For centuries Ukrainians could only choose between 3 options: be a meek and content peasant, otherwise known as “khokhol” that was the laughing stock in literature and popular culture; be a dangerous crazy nationalist, called “mazepist” and later “petlurovets” and “banderovets”, for adamantly holding onto Ukrainian language and culture and resisting Russian imposition; or accept fate and become “Little Russians”, assimilate with the “Greater” Russian culture and become part of the internal colonisation process (Shkandrij 284).

Riabchuk writes that for the survival of a colonized nation the only long-term viable solution is assimilation (*Postcolonial* sec.14). This is why decolonization is so problematic. Internal colonization is hard to identify and expel, when throughout the centuries the even cultural figures that were ethnically Ukrainian promoted colonial ideology. For instance, Nikolai Gogol, a prominent 19th-century writer, consistently perpetuated the pan-Russian identity, where Ukrainians are clearly loyal to the Russian crown and fight for the Orthodox church and “Rus” (Shkandrij 290). This is one of many examples of imperial colonial discourse within cultural artifacts consumed by Russians and more importantly Ukrainians. Russophone Ukrainian authors, musicians, film producers rely on the existing bodies of work

in Russian, which are full of Russian cultural codes, codes that reinforce colonial imagery (Riabchuk, *Postcolonial* sec.6). Therefore what is said about Ukraine in Moscow is regurgitated in Russian-language media in Kyiv. But it isn't only Russophone Ukrainians, that consume cultural products in the Russian language. Up until 2014 less than 30% of media, such as television, magazines, websites, were in Ukrainian (Shamayda). This means that for the majority of Ukrainians Russian-language cultural products, informed by cultural codes from Russia, were the only source of cultural identity. This resulted in a vast portion of the country that was confused and simply did not understand why there is a need for decolonization. For this fragment of society modern Ukraine was simply a continuation of Soviet Ukraine and of "Malorossia". It was a part of the nation that looks up to the neighboring country for cultural guidance. On the other hand, there was a part that failed to initiate further cultural emancipation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Russia instigating a military conflict could not have come at a better time in terms of acting as a catalyst for change. The issue of finding a homogenous Ukrainian identity was a festering wound waiting to burst. For many, war with Russia lay the groundwork for separating Russian language and Russian culture, separating Russian from Soviet. Riabchuk writes that the coexistence of different cultural identities is only possible if they are not mutually exclusive (*Postcolonial* sec.16). And the situation in 2014 showed that for many Russophone Ukraine was consonant with Russian culture that has never accepted Ukraine as an independent state and culture. Hence the importance of decolonizing Ukraine became clearer than ever. From December 2013 onwards the country went through a wave of decommunization via removing Soviet relics such as monuments and re-naming streets and towns that were named after Soviet heroes. Yet while policymaking is an obvious influence

upon forming a nation, culture can be an even more powerful instrument in decolonizing Ukraine and shaping a homogenous common national identity.

### 3. Dealing with colonial past through film: “Povodyr” as a case study

#### Part 1: what’s on the surface

Oles Sanin’s historical drama “Povodyr” (eng. “The Guide”) is a prominent example of contemporary Ukrainian cinema. It was released in November 2014, a turbulent time for Ukraine. This was only months after the revolution in Kyiv, Crimea was annexed by Russia and a proxy war began in the coal region of Ukraine - Donbas. While Sanin completed the film’s production in late 2013, right before all of these events, he decided to postpone the premiere to a more suitable time. He said that the subject of the film was very emotional for him, but he never could have imagined it becoming this relevant. Who could have known that a legacy of the opposition of Ukrainian and Russian culture would culminate in a modern military conflict? The plot revolves around an orphaned American boy and a blind minstrel, called a kobzar, in Ukraine in the early 1930s. While the story of these two is very emotional and captivating, the focus is actually on the history of Ukrainian culture within the Soviet Union.

The movie opens with a quote: “In times of tyranny and injustice, there will always be singers - those who tell people about the times when they were strong, proud and free”. The following text explains that in the 1930s the Soviet regime arrested and detained hundreds of kobzars (Ukrainian minstrels), who then vanished without a trace. The first scene shows a

group of men being led into a train car in the night, while a little boy climbs into a box underneath the train. The caption says that this is Kharkiv, 1934, the former capital of Ukraine. The narrator introduces himself as Peter Shamrock and tells the audience that this is his story as a 13-year old American boy in Ukraine. He explains that back then seeing people loaded into trains headed to prison camps as “enemies of the state” was nothing unusual. The unusual thing about this case was that blind minstrels would not be useful in any labor camp, so where would they be taken?

The film backtracks 2 years in order to explain the events of the first scenes in chronological order. We see a man telling a communist official about gathering kobzars at a convention. He tells an official that this would be a great way to reinvent the art in a socialist way. The frame jumps to the celebration of Michael Shamrock’s departure. He was an American communist who had helped build the first tractor in socialist Ukraine. Michael’s son Peter reads a famous Ukrainian poem by Taras Shevchenko. Meanwhile, a voiceover reveals the content of an official decree on collectivization. It mandated everyone in the republic to give up all caused by Stalin’s regime that occurred in Ukraine in the early 1930s that killed over 3 million Ukrainians and is consistently denied by Russia in terms of it being artificially exacerbated by the government (Mendel). Back at the party, a woman named Olga is approached by the communist official we saw before, Volodymyr. He confesses his feelings towards her but Olga tells him she isn’t interested and loves Michael. While Olga sings on stage, Michael Sytnyk asks Michael to deliver a book to a friend of his, journalist Gareth Jones, who lives in Moscow. Volodymyr observes at a distance.



**Fig.1** Scene from “Povodyr”: Volodymyr and Olga

Shortly after Sytnyk shoots himself right before the NKVD (The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) officials arrest him. Michael and Peter get ready for their trip to Moscow and say their goodbyes to Olga. At the station, Volodymyr stalls Michael, while Peter witnesses two men trying to open their luggage. When Michael confronts them he is stabbed and tells Peter to run. During the chase, the boy gets picked up by a blind old man, called Ivan Kocherha, into a train car. At the murder scene, Volodymyr finds out that the documents he was after are missing. He receives an order to find Peter Shamrock so as to prevent anyone from seeing the documents Mykola Sytnyk passed on to his father. Ivan tries to console Peter and advises him never to return to Kharkiv. The man proposes helping Peter if he becomes his guide. Ivan brings the boy to the ruins of a monastery in a forest, where kobzars and their guides hide away from the public. The kobzars discuss being approached by government officials proposing to record their songs and inviting them to a convention in Kharkiv at which they would receive permits that would allow them to freely perform in the streets. Ivan expresses concern over the convention being a trap. Meanwhile, Volodymyr finds out that a blind man is helping the missing boy and ransacks the monastery only to find it empty. Back in Kharkiv a commission listens to a kobzar's performance and asks him to

play something more lively. He starts playing a satirical song, ridiculing the Soviet government and immediately gets dragged away.



**Fig.2** Scene from “Povodyr”: Peter and Ivan

Peter and Ivan reach the property of an old friend. Ivan asks him to see what book Peter was carrying and they find the documents concerning Holodomor inside of it. In a series of flashbacks that Ivan experiences the audience finds out he was a soldier of the UNR (Ukrainian People’s Republic). This references the battles between pro-Soviet Bolsheviks and Ukrainians fighting for independence in the turbulent time following the fall of the tsarist regime. Ivan’s squad was captured, but he managed to barely survive the execution. Behind the machine gun, we see Volodymyr’s face.

Ivan finds out from a newspaper read to him that Peter’s father is indeed dead. Another decree is issued, this time concerning curbing begging and playing instruments in the streets, so as to limit the influence of kobzars. Banduras (the main instrument of kobzars) are deemed a sign of nationalism and are to be outlawed. The audience is taken to a nearby village, where food and livestock are already being seized, certain villagers get appointed as

agents of the state and any discontented - liquidated, including a councilman whose daughter's wedding is being celebrated. In the words of Timothy Snyder "The peasant, perhaps especially the Ukrainian peasant, was unlikely to see himself as a tool in this great mechanization of history ... He was bound to resist a policy designed to relieve him of his land and his freedom" (*Bloodlands* 25). And the film shows that even those who weren't against the state but were confused by the seizing of food and punished for even questioning it. At the wedding, Volodymyr and Ivan run into each other and the latter recognizes his executor. Ivan rushes to Peter to take him away as far as possible. Volodymyr looks through documents of kobzars and sees that Ivan was to be executed 1918 by the Bolsheviks, but was only blinded. In another flashback, it becomes clear that Volodymyr fought alongside Ivan, but switched sides to escape punishment.

Peter finds the bit of newspaper in Ivan's things which states his father is dead. When Ivan leads the village's children away to save them from starvation, Peter runs away because he no longer trusts Ivan. A communist squad spots him and chases Peter, but Ivan manages to divert their attention. The viewer is taken forward in time to when Ivan is detained by Volodymyr. He and other kobzars are tortured to get them to confess that they are traitors and enemies of the state. Peter finds his way back to Kharkhiv and tries to steal food from Olga's apartment. Volodymyr orders all of the kobzars to be liquidated as their songs pose a threat to the Soviet rule. Olga tells Peter when they will be sent away. He slips into the train with the detainees and witnesses the kobzars being lined up for execution. Ivan is held separately as Volodymyr wants him to hear his friends die. Peter manages to get to Ivan, but Volodymyr sees and tries to stop him. When Volodymyr demands the documents Ivan manages to choke him with a bandura string and fires the flare. Peter gets away moments before the explosion.

## Part 2: what is the truth

There are a few important elements to be analyzed and they address some of the criticism the film faced in reviews. Firstly, the historical accuracy of “Povodyr” has been under extreme scrutiny. The film was never claimed to be factual, although director Oles Sanin does refer to a number of real historical events. Even the story of the American boy lost in Kharkiv he took out of a newspaper clipping from the 1930s. Most importantly Sanin references Holodomor, which was “undoubtedly, one of the greatest and the most tragic moments in Ukrainian history that, very much like the Holocaust, is still the subject of academic and political controversies” (Hrytsak 733). However, the plot itself was fictional and was only informative in regards to the historical events it depicted. Ukrainian culture and nationalism were indeed frowned upon and punishable during the Soviet era, which is a renowned fact. However, the culmination of “Povodyr”, the execution of kobzars, is not officially backed by documents.



**Fig.3** On set of “Povodyr”: Jamala and Oles Sanin

Jamala, a renowned Ukrainian singer who played the role of Olga, explains in an interview that kobzars were the press, music and television, all in one at that time. “That is why they [kobzars] were so important and that is why the government disliked them”, - she says (Hromadske.TV). Which is why despite the lack of evidence, the execution of kobzars does not seem so far-fetched. The Soviet Union was renowned for the tradition of manipulating the truth and hiding facts, therefore no one can ever know for certain whether something happened. Teresa Phelps explains the difficulty in examining narratives that do not have solid evidence to back it up apart from personal testimonies. She says that when it comes to human rights violations that occurred at the hands of the state “the agents of the state have ‘had the microphone’ and have shaped a false narrative” (183). The individuals that have witnessed atrocities are often silenced by force or by the threat of violence towards them or their loved ones, something very common in totalitarian regimes such as the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany. A number of parallels can be drawn between the two, especially concerning uncovering the truth about crimes against humanity. Phelps writes that the stories of the Holocaust victims were scarce for nearly a decade after the World War 2 ended and it took a while before they gained recognition as reliable witnesses to the horrors of war (176). When discussing Holocaust literature, Edith Hall writes that “collective history is the sum of countless individual histories” (30). Yet with Soviet repressions, it was not possible to even mention unfavorable individual stories in public for fear of repercussions, so by the time the Union fell apart, there were barely any witnesses left to speak of the Soviet regime crimes of the 1930s. Moreover, after decades of silencing any criticism towards the state, the public consciousness shifted to survival mode. As mentioned in the previous chapter assimilating and conforming is the only long-term strategy for a nation to survive. So the only memories of oppression were passed down by relatives of those who suffered from the regime and those

differ from memories of those who did not. This is where the public memory or the collective history split in two - not only in Ukraine, but in the entirety of the former Soviet Union. The majority that chose to abide by the rules set by the state so as to keep safe passed down exactly that experience to the next generation, while the successors of the victims of the state have a different perspective. Because those in charge of Ukraine since its independence were predominantly successors of those who managed to thrive in the Soviet Union, they saw no point in restoring historical justice and rethinking the dominant narrative. Furthermore, despite setting the borders, Ukraine and Russia had not parted ways culturally and politically until very recently. Therefore it is no surprise that any narrative, fictional or not, that does not coincide with the established norm undergoes scrutiny from those living within the dominant ideology. Films such as “Povodyr” are held accountable for any misinformation because of that. But should the historical ambiguity of the liquidation of kobzars lead to the film being discarded as cultural heritage?

Zizek writes that “the point is *not* to remember the past trauma as exactly as possible” (272). He explains that trauma by nature cannot be objective. Therefore the only point is to remember it in a “symbolic gesture”. This is why films like “Povodyr” that are dealing with national trauma, should not be viewed as an objective depiction of history, but as a means to memorialize and secure trauma in national conscience by means of symbolism.

### Part 3: “The Guide” to connotation

As we turn to symbolism in order to analyze “Povodyr”, we must refer to semiotics as the methodological framework. Roland Barthes, one of the most prominent semioticians, explained that any given thing, tangible or intangible, is comprised of 3 elements: the signifier, signified, and the sign - which is the combination of the two and the thing itself.

The signifier is what is on the surface, what we see, so in the case of “Povodyr”, it is the plot, the people on the screen, the sounds, colors, dialogues. This is also called the denotation, or the literal meaning of something. The signified is what is meant by the thing, what cultural codes it represents. This is the connotation of the thing. Barthes writes that anything we encounter consists of the literal and hidden meaning, the signifier and the signified, denotation and connotation. On a denotative level, this film is filled with historical inaccuracies. The director himself does not hide this and explained that he collected various stories from the 1930s into a single coherent plotline. However, on a connotative level, it is debatable how much the “Povodyr” is untrue to its purpose. Sanin says that it was important to make a film that showed that there used to be people that were against what was going on in the state and who believed in a better future. He had directed historical dramas before and wished to find a way to talk about the famine in the 1930s (Galata). Phelps writes that a personal narrative can cut through the indifference and manage to convey the horrors of human rights abuses in ways simple facts cannot (169). Thus for Sanin to choose a first-person approach to talk about Holodomor is more than understandable. Yet, interestingly the famine is used more as a plot device or even the backdrop for the narrative. What was the purpose of structuring the story in such a way and what cultural effect did it yield?

A common criticism the film received was that while it was full of emotional triggers, the characters were flat and the story was cliché (Kinsella). The very first image with the quote about singers already sets the stage for a dramatic story, full of pathos and heroism. Ivan is the stoic hero, the survivor and victim of fate - practically a metaphor for Ukraine as it is depicted in traditional literature (Pavlyshyn 212). Galata writes that the blindness is an allegory for the uncertainty Ukrainian people faced at the time. The allegory can be extended to the uncertainty the entirety of the Ukrainian population faces to this day. During the Soviet

Union rule, internal policies did not allow for an autonomous Ukrainian identity, so after gaining independence in 1991 the nation had no sense of direction and was in a cultural shock. Riabchuk calls this “post-imperial disorientation” (*Postcolonial* sec. 9). Like Ivan’s character, the nation was blinded by the past and had to feel its way back to the roots if not find a whole new path. Peter’s character, albeit being very important for the storyline, serves one purpose in this allegory - a witness of Soviet history. Being a child allows him a degree of naivety which can downplay some of the historical atrocities. Indeed, the main horror Ukraine has gone through at the hands of the state is merely alluded to, but not really shown, mirroring the experience of Peter - witnessing an event from a distance. Being born and raised in the West allows his character to retain a degree of objectivity. Coincidentally, it was a Western person to first publicize the famine to the rest of the world - Gareth Jones, a Welsh journalist, who is briefly mentioned in the film. Volodymyr’s character seems unrealistically one-sided - the evil NKVD officer, the Ukrainian who turned his back on his own culture. And yet his background, briefly shown through flashbacks and his conversation with Ivan, shows the story of many Ukrainians within the Soviet Union. When facing the choice between death and life, honor and cowardice, Volodymyr chose the latter, as many would and have in those circumstances. Having to execute his former brothers-in-arms broke his connection with the culture he was born into and made him be part of the dominating force. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, opponents of the opinion that Ukraine had been colonized, often emphasize the role ethnic Ukrainians played within the system and the fact that a number of Ukrainians were members of the elite. Yet, as Volodymyr’s character shows, it was a survival method mixed with internalizing a dominating ideology. Lastly, the bleakest main character seems to be Olga. She only appeared at the beginning and the end of the film and seemed to have barely any influence upon the narrative. However continuing the

allegory of Ukrainian people in history, she seems to represent yet another group, one that retained a connection to Ukrainian culture but did not necessarily fight for its survival. She is part of the Ukrainian Boheme, she speaks Ukrainian on a daily basis and tries to find a balance between the proponents of both Russian and Ukrainian cultures. In this quality, Olga's character resembles the role the Ukrainian diaspora has played in Ukrainian cultural identity formation. As Koinova points out, the diaspora, while holding onto Ukrainian traditions, is very interested in having a dialogue with Russian-speaking Ukrainians in order for them to retain their loyalty to Ukraine (162). Therefore it is both a facilitator and a mediator of Ukrainian culture but remains untouched by any oppression its homeland faces.

If "Povodyr" was to be analyzed purely as a film out of context, it is indeed far from innovative and full of drama cliches. There are the infallible good guys who are persecuted by the universal evil and there is no moral ambiguity. However, upon closer inspection, the film has many more facets, especially to a Ukrainian viewer. As a foundation for a culture of independent Ukrainian cinema, it is noteworthy. The box-office success of the film and an Oscar nomination speaks for itself - "Povodyr" was remarkable in the eyes of the Ukrainian audience. It is one of the few historical movies that dealt with the Soviet history of Ukraine outside of the dominant Russian discourse on the matter. "Povodyr" is only on par with perhaps "Khaytarma", a 2013 historical drama on the deportation of Crimean Tatars in 1944, and "Nezlamna", a 2015 war film about the most famous female sniper - Lyudmila Pavlichenko. Thus in 28 years of independence, Ukraine had only managed to produce 3 widely successful movies on Soviet history, all only within the last 6 years. Earlier the only other source of historical films was the Russian film industry. While this in itself does not necessarily mean that Russian films are sub-par on the topic of Soviet history, the chances of them portraying Ukraine in its own right, if at all, are minimal. This is especially the case as

Russian mainstream culture follows the Soviet and imperial traditions as it continues to serve the Russian state (Blakkisrud 252). Moreover, Russophone Ukrainians as of yet had not been included in the common Ukrainian identity, thus they could only turn to Russia for cultural guidelines (Riabchuk, *Postcolonial* sec.16). Due to lack of alternatives, for many all that was left in the last decades was to consume Russian cultural codes that may or may not have been detrimental to Ukraine's self-image. Therefore in terms of culture modern Ukraine has been a continuation of Soviet Ukraine, one that has had no place for de-russification and de-sovietisation (Riabchuk, *Postcolonial* sec.12). This further impeded both the need to see a Ukrainian cultural product and to produce it.

So for a clearly anti-Soviet narrative to become a success on a big screen, "Povodyr" had to tick quite a few boxes. From a moving personal story to stunning cinematography, the film struck a chord for many. Yet, critics expressed concern that it was simply preaching to the choir. "It's a film for someone who already knows the history and is interested in Ukrainian culture. The average audience member will simply not understand. It will be an example of "banderivshina", or fascism, something foreign and strange", - wrote Troyan and his claim was supported by the fact that many cinemas in Eastern Ukraine, a historically pro-Soviet region, refused to show "Povodyr". In part, this was due to the ongoing military conflict and the region being torn between Ukrainian and Russian identities. Yet even prior to the conflict Oles Sanin recalls facing incomprehension.

We were met with resistance at different stages of film production ... There were people who were not too happy to have a film made about Holodomor, about executed musicians, people going against Stalin. Coincidentally this is when Maidan happened. And a film that was not that relevant before, was suddenly as if tailored to

current events ... Now it seems like propaganda, anti-Russian propaganda. However, it was not meant to be. What people take away from the film now is influenced by all of what happened with Ukraine and Russia after it was made [translated] (Sanin).

Why was the reception so polar? For one, the ultimate flatness in “Povodyr” lay in attributing the Ukrainian language to the positive characters and Russian to the negative ones. Therefore the predominantly Russian-speaking East of Ukraine, and especially those who do not have prior understanding of the darker historical impact of Russian language and culture upon Ukraine, feel threatened and confused. This is because “in the relations between Ukrainian and Russian culture there is no dialogue-there is only the enormous influence of Russian culture on Ukrainian and on the course of events in Ukraine as a whole, and practically an absence of the reverse influence” (Pustotin qtd. in Shulman, *Cultures* 290). It became normalized, even internalized, that the Russian language and culture are superior to Ukrainian if even through the seemingly friendly guise of “fraternal” relations, where Ukraine is always given the role of the “little brother”. Said explains that a colonized culture’s inferiority complex is born due to the colonizer’s culture defining the differences of the other culture as weaknesses, and eventually the latter internalizes this view. If the roles were to be reversed, for Ukrainian language and culture to be shown as superior or on par with Russian if even in a work of fiction, it would be deemed an example of anti-Russian propaganda. After all, going against imperial discourse was for long branded as “crazy nationalism” and heavily condemned (Riabchuk, *Postcolonial* sec.3). Is it not to be expected that an exemplary work following anti-colonial discourse would be facing a backlash? Still, “Povodyr” stands out mainly because there are barely any other films with anti-colonial

narratives. Perhaps if there would be more of these films the cultural imbalance would even itself out and there could be a chance to move on to true post-coloniality.

## 4. Conclusion

Postcolonial theory seems to suggest the need for a culture to move towards a postcolonial discourse, one that would acknowledge the pitfalls of colonial and anti-colonial rhetoric as they are deemed to be two sides of one coin. This would, in theory, entail allowing the coexistence of Ukrainian and Russian culture within one country, perhaps even instating Russian as a second state language, something a significant proportion of Ukrainians have been longing for since the fall of the Soviet Union until very recently (“Зросла”). Yet, Riabchuk writes that such a coexistence of cultures is only possible when they are both in equal positions, and the existence of one of them is not threatened by the other (*Postcolonial* sec.16). As an example he gives the case of Belarus, where both Russian and Belarussian are official state languages, but practically Belarussian is nearly entirely excluded from both social and cultural spheres (*Postcolonial* sec.15). This is because of there being a step missing in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union - recognizing the colonial past, reclaiming a national narrative and separating the colonizer’s language from culture.

When a dominant and marginalized culture simply skips the step of restoring historical justice and acknowledging the real past, it is only a matter of time before the marginalized culture gets swallowed up. This is especially the case with cultures that are historically and linguistically as tight-knit as Ukrainian and Russian. Moreover, it is necessary for both cultures to go through the process of decolonization. However, in the words of Riabchuk “culturally neither Ukraine nor Russia are ready to embrace the

postcolonial discourse” [translated] (*Postcolonial* sec.2). Moreover, one cannot move on without the other. Up until 2014, Ukraine has not attempted to go on to the post-colonial phase and the actions of Russia proved that the state discourse is still very much imperial in regards to Ukraine. Nearly a fifth of Russian citizens supports the idea of Russian territory expanding to include Ukraine and Belarus (Alexseev 176). Elizabeth White draws a parallel between the way the Russian historian Kliuchevskyy defined the imperial Russian identity and the way post-Soviet Russia defines itself now, with “President Vladimir Putin acknowledging him [Kliuchevskyy] as a source of his thinking” (566). The loss of Crimea and Donbas shows that culturally Ukraine did not manage to give enough pushback to withstand Russian influence. And in order to do this, Ukraine needs to create its own myths, in the Barthesian sense. “Povodyr” is a prominent example of such an attempt because it is questioning the dominant discourse of the past, portraying Ukrainian culture in a positive, albeit heart-wrenching, light, and it is drawing a parallel between Soviet and Russian discourse. However, the next step of incorporating the Russian language into the common Ukrainian national identity cannot be taken until Ukraine as a whole goes through an “anti-colonial phase”. The current situation is delicate because Ukrainian culture is torn between two paths. As Shkandrij writes Ukraine is “post-colonial out of will, anti-colonial out of need” (qtd in Riabchuk, *Postcolonial* sec.2). And so out of this need Sanin produced a film uncovering one of the darkest times in Ukrainian history. While “Povodyr” can never be seen as an objective historical drama, it is one of the many necessary cultural products needed to counteract the years of colonial hegemony.

As of today the cinema in Ukraine falls in one of two discourses: colonial and anti-colonial. Because the relationship with Russia is still unfolding, it is too early to make predictions as to when will Ukraine culturally enter a true post-colonial phase. This is why

the analysis of “Povodyr” is lacking an objective measurement of its reception - given its premiere in the early stages of the conflict with Russia. Future research could take this into account and compare “Povodyr” to another film, perhaps with a less obvious affiliation with either anti-colonial or colonial discourses, but that also came to public attention during the conflict. In this regard, a potential candidate for analysis could be the 2018 drama “Donbass”, directed by Serhii Loznitsa. It also is a retelling of personal stories in a complicated time of Russo-Ukrainian history, thus it bears some similarities with “Povodyr”. However, there is a great deal of ambiguity in regards to the moral message of the film and its characters, making it an interesting case study for further research on postcolonial film narratives. Does “Povodyr” have more to offer in terms of national identity because it counteracts colonial discourse? Does moral ambiguity in narratives help or hinder the process of decolonization in Ukraine? As more films are analyzed from a postcolonial standpoint, these questions could receive a definitive answer. For now this paper is merely a stepping stone to future postcolonial cultural research in Ukraine.

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