
**Reviewed by** Stanislav Menzelevskyi (Indiana University)

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**Commissioned by** Nataliya Shpylova-Saeed (Harvard University)

Joshua First’s *Ukrainian Cinema: Belonging and Identity in the Soviet Thaw* poses some challenges to reviewers. It may seem like a simple task because we are dealing with perhaps the only academic study of such scope, conceptual depth, and historical sensitivity published on Ukrainian cinema in Anglophone space. On the other hand, the task is complicated by the book’s singularity in a field that lacks a polemical tradition or referential framework.

It is sad but true: so far, unfairly little has been written on Ukrainian cinema in the Anglophone academic environment. Following the Russocentric film studies consensus, Ukrainian cinema has long remained an academic, aesthetic, and industrial confusion. Of course, over more than a hundred years of Ukrainian cinema’s existence, some texts on the topic have been written. Mostly these are specialized articles within the framework of Ukrainian, Slavic, or Soviet studies. Occasionally, these publications represent the perspective of auteur film history, which prioritizes the self-expression of an individual genius and his or her authorial style. Concomitantly, these texts often ignore the ideological contexts of film production and depoliticize the power relations of non-Russian cultures in the USSR.

Thus, even the vitae of Ukrainian “authors,” as well as those of other non-Russian artists, were written according to the classical formula that for many years ignored the plurality of Soviet cultures. Within the framework of the internationalist Soviet project, which most of the Western scholars reproduced uncritically, most non-Russian cultural actors “willingly” sacrifice their national identity in favor of the “global” Soviet identity, which, post factum, always turns out to be a truly national-Russian one. That is why the conflation of “Soviet” with “Russian” and the Russified transliteration of non-Russian surnames and film titles dominated Soviet film studies until recently. For this reason, Ukrainian directors and films made at Ukrainian studios uncritically fit into the Russocentric academic canon. Any average book on the “history of Russian cinema” includes the names of Oleksandr Dovzhenko, Dzyga Vertov Larysa Shepitko, or Kira Muratova.

In 2005, I. B. Tauris published Jane Taubman’s *Kira Muratova*, as part of the Film Files series. The latter, in particular, covers the activities of one of the most important and interesting Russian cinematographists, as well as film directors from former Soviet countries. While making some rather ambiguous references to the “southern Russian accent” of the nonprofessional actors in Muratova’s early films, Taubman devotes the last chapter of the study to Muratova as a Ukrainian filmmaker, covering the films made after
Ukraine’s independence in 1991.[1] This unexpected logic deprives Ukrainian culture of both continuity and the Soviet past as if Ukrainian identity is a product of the political and cultural activities of the last thirty years. This is an erroneous approach to the study of the history of Ukrainian cinema that significantly distorts the historical complexity of its development.

The history of Ukrainian cinema is a crucial source of Russian-Ukrainian relations, a vivid testament to the fact that politics and aesthetics are always and inextricably connected. Joshua First’s *Ukrainian Cinema* introduces a long process of a comprehensive revision of Russocentric academic narratives.

It should be mentioned that the book was published shortly after the Maidan protests, which draw much attention to Ukrainian culture that in previous years had remained quite invisible on a broad international level. As a result, the book may have been held hostage to this haste. This affected not so much the content but the way of delivery: typos, misspellings, inaccuracies of names, plot details, and historical events make the reading experience somewhat challenging.

Nevertheless, the book is conceptually important for both “Western” scholars and “independent” Ukrainian film studies. The latter, for too long, has been trapped in the romanticized ghetto of the auteur theory, reducing the complexity and dynamism of the cinematic process to the manifestation of the free will of an unbending, creative individual genius, a messiah who speaks on behalf of the Ukrainian people, reflecting their essence and exposing their soul. First offers his readers less trivial (and more research-based) answers to the most fundamental questions of what Ukrainian cinema and national character are and how the two established themselves against the backdrop of complexity and diversity inherent to their development.

In 1927, Oleksandr Dovzhenko filmed *Zvenyhora*, which “started,” as many of his compatriots declared, Ukrainian cinema. Among the latter was the young Mykola Bazhan, who proclaimed *Zvenyhora* to be a film of the nation that is building socialism, a film that is deeply national and international, a cinematic masterpiece of Soviet Ukraine.[2] Since then, this seemingly paradoxical formula has perplexed many generations of Ukrainians—contemporaries of the early Dovzhenko and sympathizers of the late Stalin, the Sixtiers artists, and witnesses of independence—who have tried, each in their own way, to answer the questions, What is national content and form? What is the recipe for a Ukrainian Soviet film? Who is a Ukrainian filmmaker, and what is the identity of the Ukrainian audience?

In order to find relevant answers to these questions, it is impossible to study Ukrainian cinema outside of its historical and geographical, ideological, and production contexts; nor is it possible to write about it in the language of Soviet film criticism, ignoring the conceptual apparatus of contemporary humanities. That is why—and despite the fact that the title of First’s book proposes an analysis of Ukrainian cinema and identity during Khrushchev’s Thaw—the ambitions and focus of this study are much broader: to rethink, against the background of the classical historiography of the Soviet Union (some might argue that it is too conservative: the revolutionary twenties, Stalinism, the Thaw, stagnation, perestroika), the practices of constructing and representing the Ukrainian “national character” within the regulated and centralized ecosystem of Soviet (film) culture.

In the late 1920s, under the slogans of the “fraternal” republics, the Soviet culture began to assimilate the national republics in favor of Russian hegemony. Since then, the Ukrainian film industry has been losing its autonomy, and non-Russian Soviet cultures have been getting used to new cultural coordinates: periphery and center. Since then, Ukrainian film studios, which were proclaimed by their contemporaries as the “Donbas of
culture” (Kyiv) and “Hollywood on the Black Sea” (Odesa), and which were associated with progressive technological, industrial, and aesthetic initiatives, have gradually turned into a sanctuary of provincial folklore spectacle. Since then, the centralization of professional education and the closure of regional film schools have long encouraged Ukrainian filmmakers to study in Russia and stay to work at the “respectable” central film studios. Since then, the budgets of film studios and the salaries of filmmakers have been determined in the center, in favor of their Russian “brothers.” Since then, the Russification of film criticism has compromised previous attempts to write a modern history and theory of Ukrainian cinema. Before Stalin’s death, Ukrainian cinema was rarely written about, and almost never in the Ukrainian language.

It is to these often contradictory scenarios of interaction between the center and the periphery, the centralized system of representation, and the cinemas of the non-Russian republics that First devotes the introductory part of the book. After all, without an analysis of the practices of aggressive Russification, marginalization of non-Russian cultures, imperial logic and quasi-colonial relations, and the unfair distribution of financial and human resources, further attempts to write about Soviet cinema make little sense, turning into a romantic fascination with the greatness of “Soviet” cinematography and filmmakers. After all, without the Stalinist “folklore turn” that has metastasized into contemporary Ukrainian culture as well, it is difficult to recognize the thematic and formal intentions of the auteur-centric representatives of the “poetic cinema of the 60s” as well as to grasp the general dynamics of mass Ukrainian (film) culture in the following years.

The compositional center of the book is, of course, a meticulous analysis of the “Carpathian journey” of the eccentric filmmaker Serhii Parajanov, the filming of Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors (1965), and the genesis of the debate over Ukrainian authenticity and the traditions of poetic cinema. However, the value of the book lies not so much in the “auteur center” as in the “industrial periphery,” in the inclusiveness of texts and contexts, in the institutional history and the attempt to overcome an established tradition of Ukrainian film criticism that abuses a dichotomy of intellectual auteur (Ukrainian) cinema and communist (non-Ukrainian) genre propaganda. Moreover, in contrast to the common practice of Western scholars to (over)interpret Soviet cinema without a proper understanding of the cultural context, production history, and distribution ecosystem First uses a significant body of sources from Russian and Ukrainian archives to outline a representative and inclusive history of the Ukrainian Soviet film industry.

First shifts the focus from the genius intentions of anti-system authors to bureaucracy, numbers, statistics, and audience politics, and presents a less clear-cut and hardly linear history of Ukrainian cinema. After all, the “poetic cinema” did not exist in a countercultural vacuum, and the Ukrainian bureaucrats that Ukrainian filmmakers fought against were not above resisting their Moscow counterparts. The contradictory cultural policy often depended on the ambitions and phobia of a particular head of the state film agency, minister, or minor official.

Thaw cinema is a good example of such ambivalence. On the one hand, filmmakers from non-Russian republics, for the first time in many years, were able to speak openly about the alleged equality of Soviet nationalities, the centralization of the industry, and the marginalization of non-Russian studios. On the other hand, bureaucratic inertia and the discriminatory logic of inter-republican relations have not disappeared. In the end, like other republican studios, Dovzhenko Film Studio failed to escape from Moscow’s catch-22: “films produced at republican studios were generally of inferior technical quality due to funding limitations, thus justifying the continued practice of un-
derfunding productions” (pp. 48-49). The situation may indeed seem even more pessimistic if we remember that the rating of a film studio depended on the annual number of feature films, and the salaries of its employees depended on it, too.

In such a situation, Ukrainian film studios have always had to defend their right to authenticity and respectability, national themes, and a mass audience. The resuscitation of the Ukrainian studio system, the search for specific Ukrainian content different from the Russian-centered model of representation of Ukrainians, consonant with the modernist experiments of European cinema and popular among the global audience, determined the search for more than one generation of Ukrainian filmmakers. Ultimately, everyone who claims to be a Ukrainian filmmaker faces identical challenges today.

Notes

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