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SCHOLAR RESEARCH BRIEF:
THE POLITICS OF FILM PRODUCTION AND FILM DISTRIBUTION IN UKRAINE:
QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY, LANGUAGE, AND CROSS-CULTURAL INFLUENCE

My research focused on the forces at play within Ukraine's film industry, spotlighting the legacies of Soviet-era policies, the impact of forces of globalization during the postcommunist era, including the politics of dubbing and subtitling foreign-made films, co-production projects with the film industries of other nations, and the representation of Ukrainian cinema on the world scene. I interviewed filmmakers, film scholars, state officials in charge of supporting the film industry, film studio managers, and businesspeople working in film distribution. I also conducted archival research on the history of Ukrainian film industry, attended several conferences, book presentations, and film screenings, drawing a comprehensive snapshot of the current state of filmmaking and film scholarship in the country.

RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

The recurring tensions between Russia and Ukraine (such as the natural gas standoff of January 2009) to a significant extent are a product of the widening cultural rift between these two successor states to the USSR. The film industry provides one of the clearest examples of Russia's continuing attempts at influencing and controlling Ukraine's cultural sphere. Both the production and the distribution of films (in theaters as well as on television) have featured prominently in the struggles concerning the use of the Ukrainian versus the Russian language, as well as in the struggle for independent articulation of the nation's cultural policy and for direct contacts with Western partners in pursuit of this goal. The Soviet-era legacy of international contacts being mediated via Moscow remains particularly strong in the film industry. The work of American filmmakers often becomes an unwitting hostage to these tensions, as exemplified by the heated competition between the Ukrainian and Russian-language versions of the Disney film *Cars* or other films notable both from the commercial or the artistic point of view. To this day, most of the so-called "art-house" films continue to be distributed in Ukraine via Russia, and in the Russian-language version only. The distribution agreements are often subject to the whims of Russian mediators and the roadblocks they set up, as evidenced by the five-month delay of the Ukrainian premiere of *Milk*, originally scheduled for January 2009.

This project sought to elucidate the role played by the products of global entertainment industry in the continuing cultural tug-of-war between Russia and Ukraine and the struggle by Ukrainian filmmakers to be seen and accepted by the world cultural community as distinct from their Russian neighbors, in the face of confusion persisting from the days of Oleksandr Dovzhenko's silent-era masterworks through the triumphs and tragedies of Ukrainian poetic cinema of the 1960s and up to the present.

Due to the economic and logistical difficulties that plague the Ukrainian film industry, gaining international attention has been a struggle for Ukrainian filmmakers. Moreover, there has been a fundamental disruption of ties between domestic



This Stalin-era theater, now the premier venue for "art-house" films in Kyiv, in June 2009 was showing a selection of films from major festivals, along with the Disney cartoon *Up* and the Oscar-winning *Milk*.

film producers on the one hand and film distributors and movie theater operators on the other. Even in comparison to book publishing or to the theater, domestic filmmaking in Ukraine has been in a catastrophic shape.

While Ukraine shared in the disruption and decline of domestic filmmaking observable across the ex-USSR and Eastern Europe, the nation failed to experience a filmmaking renaissance observable in countries as varied as Russia or Romania. Legislation on the support of domestic film industry similar to that adopted in France and Poland has stalled in the parliament. However, over the past decade there has been a notable rebirth of movie theaters (after the precipitous decline in the 1990s); many cities now boast state-of-the-art facilities, with reconstructed Soviet-era theaters side-by-side with Western-style multiplexes. Last year's decision of the Supreme Court requiring all major theatrical releases to be available in a Ukrainian-language version (dubbed or subtitled), despite initial resistance from many movie theater operators, has been implemented fairly smoothly and successfully, generating a major boost for domestic businesses engaged in dubbing and subtitling. However, a similar policy still has not been adopted for the DVD market, which continues to be dominated by Russian-language releases.

RESEARCH PROCESS AND RESULTS

My research consisted primarily of interviews and lengthy discussions with Ukrainian filmmakers, scholars, state officials, journalists, and businesspeople active in film production and distribution. I was also able to obtain rare and hard-to-find academic and reference publications, and conducted archival research in state archives and film studio museums. I was also fortunate to attend several screenings of newly released Ukrainian films.

The Ukrainian film industry is split between two primary centers: the capital, Kyiv, and the historic cradle of filmmaking in Ukraine, Odessa. A major center of film production even before the 1917 revolution, Odessa retained its importance throughout the 1920s. As the new state-of-the-art studio was open in Kyiv in 1928, the role of the Odessa studio began to diminish. Both studios were evacuated to Central Asia during World War II; the Kyiv studio resumed production upon the end of the war, while the Odessa studio reopened only in the mid-1950s. From the 1950s to the 1980s, the Odessa studio was primarily known for entertainment films targeting a mass Soviet audience, while the Kyiv studio's best products are associated with the poetic cinema movement of the 1960s—early 1970s. The heavy-handed campaign of destruction of the poetic cinema school initiated by party and state authorities in 1973 resulted in a long-term decline of the Kyiv studio. In the post-Soviet era, however, the Kyiv studio has fared better than the one in Odessa. Both have seen attempts at revival, but with varying results. The extensive tour of both facilities I undertook during this research trip evidenced the relatively better fortunes of the Kyiv studio in recent years.

Side by side with the two large studios, new private production companies arose in recent years, with varying degrees of success. Sadly, one of the most prominent of them, headed by the acclaimed director Roman Balayan, fell victim of the economic crisis earlier this year. Other producers, however,

remain active; for instance, SOTA Cinema Group, launched in 1998, has produced *A Tune for the Barrel Organ*, the latest film by Kira Muratova, the leading Odessa-based Ukrainian filmmaker, that triumphed at the Moscow International Film Festival this June. Other private production companies, such as the Kyiv-based Technomedia and L'viv-based Halfilm, are similarly active. Additionally, the film school that is part of the Karpenko-Kary National University of Theatre, Cinema, and Television, continues graduating generations of young talent, and Ukrainian short films (many of them graduation projects at the film school) win recognition at international film festivals—the most successful being Ihor Strembitsky's *The Wayfarers*, winner of the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2005.

Besides the technological process of film production, the key players in the film industry are the movie theaters, the distribution companies, the state agency supporting filmmaking (now part of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism), the Filmmakers' Union, and the journalists and film scholars that generate the discourse about film in mass media and specialized publications. In my meetings during this research trip I sought to interview representatives of all these groups.



The current state of the film processing pavilion at the Odessa Film Studios, deteriorating and overgrown with weeds.

At my meeting with Hanna Chmil', Head of the State Cinematography Service, and her first deputy, Yaroslav Holins'ky, they emphasized the need for a comprehensive reform of the legislation regulating intellectual property rights and the standardizing of practices of business agreement, payment of honoraria, residuals, and royalties. In general, in their opinion, the Ukrainian film market is becoming more civilized. They noted that all the major Hollywood studios were notified of the Supreme Court decision regarding the language of dubbing and subtitling of theatrical releases, and all of them complied promptly. Despite initial worries, the gross receipts from theater ticket sales actually increased by 25% from 2007 to 2008. They also highlighted the decline of DVD piracy, although additional efforts are still necessary in their opinion.

The opinions expressed by Oleksa Novosad, Executive Director of Arthouse Traffic, Ukraine's leading distribution company for independent and non-commercial cinema and a participant in domestic film production, were significantly less optimistic. Mr. Novosad noted the general decline of DVD sales in stores and the increasing competition by the still largely unregulated post-Soviet Internet sites. He also discussed the history of efforts to switch from the Soviet-era practice of dubbing to subtitling films. Began in earnest only some six years ago, subtitling faced significant initial resistance in Ukraine, but in his opinion the language question and the use of subtitles became less of an economic factor in the past two years (which is a hopeful sign). Like most of the film professionals and officials I interviewed, Novosad noted the absence of visible efforts by American nonprofit or government agencies to support film series and other events in a manner similar to most European countries. As a result, only the biggest commercial hits of Hollywood reach Ukrainian audiences, while independent American film remains largely unknown.

By contrast, my conversation with Bohdan Batruch, the head of B&H Distribution, one of Ukraine's most successful film distribution companies that serves as the official representative of Disney and

Universal Studios, highlighted the successes in bringing high-quality Ukrainian-language dubbing and subtitling of commercial releases and development of state-of-the-art movie theaters. Batruch noted the success of his efforts to drop the pernicious practice of mediation of contacts with Western film studios via Moscow and the robust state of the film theaters in large cities (although the picture is very gloomy in rural areas). However, Mr. Batruch expressed his indignation at the state of the DVD market: according to him (and my visits to video stores confirmed his observations), circa 90% of DVDs legally sold in Ukraine do not carry an option of viewing them with Ukrainian subtitles or soundtrack, only Russian. While no one is arguing for a complete ban and withdrawal of Russian-language menu options, the lack of an option to view the DVDs in Ukrainian remains a serious problem—and is paradoxical since the Western producers and their distributors invest in making Ukrainian-language versions for theatrical releases.

During the Odessa portion of my trip, I conducted an extensive interview with Yan Yusim, the unofficial leader of the independent film club movement in Ukraine and the manager of the country's most successful theater specializing in international art-house cinema, the Odessa-based *Maski*. An avid film fan, Mr. Yusim oversaw the perseverance of at least a small selection of venues for critically acclaimed films with limited commercial appeal during the



Poster for European cinema festival in Kyiv, June 2009. Ukrainian film professionals noted lack of comparable events for independent American cinema.

years of post-Soviet economic turmoil. Mr. Yusim personifies flexibility and persistence in overcoming obstacles in making award-winning international cinema available to audiences in Ukraine. In difference from the Kyiv-based interviewees, however, Yusim was more skeptical about prospects for language shift at film screenings, especially for urban audiences in large cities in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, although the passive knowledge of Ukrainian is on the rise even among the older generations of Russian speakers. Mr. Yusim also invited me to the premiere of Kira Muratova's *A Tune for the Barrel Organ*, held at the city's first Western-style multiplex. Its technological quality and comfort level testified to the remarkable strides of Ukrainian film screening venues in recent years, and despite the new economic crisis that was highly palpable during my research trip, this theater was doing very brisk business.

My tours of film studios and interviews with management and curators of studio museums generated mixed impressions. While Andriy Hrushka, Deputy Director of the Kyiv Studio, was robustness and energy personified and proudly reported about the studio's successful climbing out of economic woes over the past several years, the Odessa studio was at a near standstill, with most employees on furloughs and reporting to work just one day a week, and only coming alive for brief shooting periods, primarily for film and television projects from Russia. At both studios, the museums and archives are surviving thanks to the labor of love of their respective directors, Raisa Prokopenko in Kyiv and Vadym Kostromenko in Odessa. Both museums face serious challenges, especially since due to restrictions of access to studio campuses they cannot be open to regular visitors, and are only available by special appointment. These museums are located in buildings in dire need of structural repairs and lacking adequate conservation technologies and computer support. The state archive of the Odessa oblast where I examined the file of the Odessa film studios dating back to the 1920s is likewise staffed by dedicated professionals who work in terrible conditions, in a building that is structurally unsound and is simply dangerous to be in. All through my trip, I met with museum and

archive workers, academics, and other dedicated professionals that work in terrible physical and economic conditions and ensure the salvation and preservation of the artifacts and documents in their care. In a similar fashion, enthusiasm of several individuals, such as Oleg Pavliuchenkov, head of Technomedia, a private film production company, enabled the preservation and restoration of dozens of classic Ukrainian films.

Overall, the Ukrainian film industry has been hampered by absence of adequate funding, by infrastructure disarray and by the inconsistency of legislation and policy approaches. As in many other parts of the cultural sphere, there are remarkable accomplishments but only as a result of the efforts of a small cohort of enthusiasts. Like other Soviet-era creative unions, the Filmmakers' Union of Ukraine, although it now has capable and energetic people at the helm, notably Serhiy Trymbach, the union's president, and Yaroslav Lupiy, head of the Odessa branch—both of whom granted me extensive interviews—has been beset by numerous problems and petty squabbles. There is a profound disconnect between commercially-oriented movie theaters and the ensuring of access to the heritage of domestic and world cinema and preservation of archival materials. The nation's film production so far has failed to rebound in the manner similar to other countries in the region, but is producing a few hopeful signs of revival.



Oleksandr Dovzhenko's desk and objects from the film *Shchors* (1939) at the Kyiv Studios museum.

CONTINUING RESEARCH

To gain a more informed perspective on the reasons for the current near-crisis state of the Ukrainian film industry and the possible strategies of improving its health, a detailed examination of the past practices of management of film production and distribution, both during and after the Soviet era. On the basis of the contacts I made with the younger generation of Ukrainian film scholars, I am currently finishing guest-editing a special issue of an English-language online journal, *KinoKultura*, scheduled for a December 2009 release. A more long-term project I have begun as a result of this trip is an anthology of translated and annotated sources on the history of Ukrainian cinema. Significant further work still remains to be done in the public and private archives and library collections around the world. However, already the documents I was able to discover and the contacts I made with the editors of Ukraine's leading film journals, Larysa Briukhovetska of *Kino-Teatr* and Volodymyr Voitenko of *KinoKolo*, ensure the productive continuation and completion of this project.

A question that still awaits adequate answer is how best to overcome the traumatic legacies of Soviet colonialism and develop a vision of Ukrainian cinema past and present that is both vibrant economically and rewarding intellectually. A comprehensive English-language anthology of annotated translated sources on the history of cinema in Ukraine will serve as a major step in increasing the nation's cultural visibility and aiding in its integration into multifaceted global-scale processes. Also, a comparative study of struggles and attempts at recovery of several national film industries of the region would provide additional insight on the degree of success of the strategies undertaken at local and national level, while also illuminating the impact of larger, region-wide trends.

RELEVANCE TO POLICY COMMUNITY

An enhanced awareness of Ukraine's cultural specificity and promotion of direct contacts between the Ukrainian and the U.S. cultural producers, film scholars, and journalists covering the cultural sphere (including the film industry) will help promote a friendlier, less stereotype-ridden image of American culture and public policies in Ukraine, while simultaneously aiding the appreciation of the creative potential and accomplishments of Ukrainian culture by U.S. audiences. Bringing information about Ukraine's cinematic tradition and the current state of the nation's film industry to the English-speaking audience could have truly far-reaching consequences, serving as a stepping stone for a wide range of future research and educational projects.

An increase in intellectual dialogue and information exchange would also help Ukrainian film industry better integrate in the global cultural sphere. A strong domestic film industry and an informed and active community of filmgoers appreciative of both domestic and international accomplishments of the art of cinema will help secure a Ukrainian cultural identity that underlies an effective and active participant in pan-European and global integration, on the economic, cultural, and political level. A comprehensive plan of investment in salvaging and updating the infrastructure of filmmaking and of archival preservation in Ukraine, the development of a vibrant program of familiarization of the Ukrainian populace with the intellectual and artistic achievements of American cinema on par with the efforts by countries of the European Union, and an investment in training policymakers on the legal and economic system of managing the cultural sphere would be greatly beneficial.

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ENDNOTES

The personal names are given in simplified transliteration in the main text and in the Library of Congress transliteration in the references.



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