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## NATIONAL MYTHS AND SYMBOLS IN MODERN UKRAINIAN CINEMA

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### Abstract

**The purpose of the article** is to summarise the main contexts and connotations of the use of myths, symbols and images in contemporary audiovisual products; to systematise the references to elements of the Ukrainian cultural code in the current national cultural and artistic environment; to analyse the correspondence between the interpretations of the symbols used in the video sequences of music videos and films and their original meanings. **The research methodology** is based on the use of the following methods: theoretical (acquaintance with the scientific and journalistic base of research on the use of images of Ukrainian folklore in contemporary art), empirical (collection of materials to determine the main categories of borrowing images in contemporary art) and analytical (determination of the feasibility and veracity of the interpretation of the primary meaning of the folklore image in the modern context). **Scientific novelty.** For the first time, the author describes the likely consequences of the indifferent attitude of the creators of the national audiovisual product to the primary meaning of the symbols of the traditional cultural stratum; and outlines the consequences of previous political attempts to destroy the specifically Ukrainian cultural code; identifies potential threats in the event of inaction and lack of progress in the field of audiovisual production (films, clips) for the development of future generations of conscious Ukrainians as citizens of an independent country with a clear understanding of belonging to a certain historical background. **Conclusions.** Quantitative and qualitative indicators allow us to confidently speak about the harmfulness of the paradigm of levelling the primary meanings of established images. The article summarises the main contexts and connotations of myths (from the positive in contemporary audiovisual art to the simplistic and negative in films of the 2010s). Having summarised the spheres of use and borrowing of vivid images in contemporary cinema,

the author analyses the correspondence of modern interpretations of the symbols of Ukrainian mythology to their original meaning.

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### Problem statement

In the modern world, the cultural characteristics of people and their identities recede into the background, giving way to new values. Current political, macro- and micro-economic, and even cultural and social processes, are largely subject to the rules imposed by globalization. Considering the special information and psychological operation that Russia has been conducting for several decades (if not centuries), the readiness of Ukrainians to blindly follow popular trends, including ones in the cinematographic process, poses a real threat to the unique development of culture.

We propose to consider the theorem, according to which a current cultural and artistic product must rely on world trends not to lose from a purely market point of view, and on the authenticity of the Ukrainian cultural code, while constantly searching for a balance between the first and the second, as an axiom.

For Ukraine, the actualization of cultural heritage can be considered a completely pragmatic issue of survival. Being oppressed for many centuries, Ukraine suffered from regular prospects of losing its identity. However, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2014, the youth's interest in all national issues gradually increased. This is proved by a survey of the sociological group *Rating* (Tyshchenko, 2021) conducted from July 20 to August 9, 2021, among 20,000 respondents. Observing the emergence of de-

mand, the film market began to actively supply movies in various genres. The speed of production hurt the quality, especially in areas requiring in-depth research (Ukrainian rituals and customs). For the most part, the incomplete, harmful, and false presentation of rituals, symbols, and creatures from myths and legends, as well as the reduction of actions sacred to Ukrainians to the "extreme minimum", seemingly necessary for the average consumer of an information product, is capable of causing irreparable damage to the cultural code of Ukrainians in general.

### Recent research and publications analysis

T. Kokhan (2018) determined that the transformation of "mythical plots" into the space of cinema is related to the history of this art form, and also emphasizes the originality of the means of expression possessed by film art in the process of reproducing the images of mythical heroes on the screen.

M. Katsuba (2013) demonstrated how the psychological mechanisms of fiction affect the formation of ideological attitudes, political views, and beliefs of people, and also outlines the differences between the perception of fiction movies and the perception of documentary cinema and television.

N. Lysovets (2022) emphasized that a person as a social being requires understanding their roots, which appears

especially acutely in conditions of active destruction of the historical connection with the past.

L. Yepyk and D. Yepyk (2020) proved that a real high-quality Ukrainian film product is competitive in an ideological sense.

In modern Ukrainian audiovisual art, national mythical and sacred images and symbols were presented in photo art projects and scientific articles by I. Zaspá and O. Bezruchko (2021; 2022), I. Havran, S. Kotliar and I. Zaspá (2021), O. Bezruchko and V. Bardyn (2021; 2022).

A. Plys (2022) defined the phenomenon of *sharovarshchyna* in general and gave specific examples in the part of the entertainment audiovisual product.

**The purpose of the article** is to generalize the main contexts and connotations of the use of myths, symbols, images, and direct and indirect references to folklore; to systematize cases of the use of the national costume, as well as other elements of the traditional Ukrainian cultural code in the current national cultural and artistic environment through the prism of modern Ukrainian film production; to analyze the correspondence of the interpretations of the mentioned symbols and elements of oral folk art to their primary meanings – axiomatic and/or determined by scientists in relevant studies.

### Main research material

First of all, it is worth defining the term “modern”. The majority of researchers (D. Yepyk and L. Yepyk, 2020), (Katsuba, 2013) name the beginning of the 21st century as the starting point of modernity.

Many audiovisual products appeared within these timeframes. In this article,

for the sake of clarity, a limited number of titles will be considered: the films *Crazy Wedding* (2018, directed by V. Kilimchuk), *Synevir* (2013, directed by O. Alioshechkin, V. Alioshechkin), and *Shtolnia* (2006 r., directed by L. Kobylchuk); comedy TV-show *Faina Ukraine* (2008-2010, New Channel), video clips for the songs of Sofia Rotaru *Odna Kalyna* (2003, music by R. Kvinta, lyrics by V. Kurovsky) and Mykhailo Poplavskyi's *Saló* (2021, music by Yu. Ponomarenko, lyrics by N. Bahmut, direction by O. Vinyarska).

Each of the mentioned audiovisual products appeals to Ukrainian culture. An analysis of the correspondence of the meanings presented on the screen to the primary meanings was carried out, and the approximate value of audience coverage was determined.

Under the influence of constant oppression and erasure of national identity at various historical stages, the phenomenon of “sharovarshchyna” appeared in the USSR, especially vividly illustrated by the film *In the Steppes of Ukraine* (1954, directed by G. Yura). The main characters, Ukrainians, act as caricature images, *Little Russians* (Panimash, 2020). This largely infantilized, and sometimes frankly inferior, secondary portrayal of Ukrainian lives can be traced not only in the “filmmaking” of the Russian Federation (for example, the film *Crimea* dir. O. Pimanov, 2017), dilogy *We are From the Future*, directed by Andriy Malyukov, 2008; directed by O. Samokhvalov and B. Rostov, 2010), but also in films created by Ukrainians. Despite the well-known anti-Ukrainian rhetoric of Russian cinema, it is still challenging for Ukrainian artists to abandon the Russian prism, justifying the support of the culture of the aggressor with “cultural pluralism and freedom of expression” (Vlasova, 2023).

However, it is worth noting that the wave of growing demand for a Ukrainian product also led to efforts by cultural figures to restore lost (or hidden) film funds (Yermolenko, 2019). The rapid development of interest in authentic national creativity leads to conflicts between representatives of different industries. For example, films on historical subjects invariably cause passionate discussions on social networks. A. Kokotiukha (2018) provided a clear stance and put an end to the discussion on this matter, distinguishing between historical films and feature films on historical themes. However, questions arise not only about the attentiveness of the screenwriters and their knowledge of history but also about their goals.

For example, the famous trilogy *The Crazy Wedding* (2018-2019, directed by V. Kilimchuk). In the first part of the film saga, we see an average Ukrainian (for example, the father of the bride) as a hard-headed racist (Druziuk, 2018). Another racist portrayal is a merchant, a native from the Caucasus region, who is depicted in a stereotypically negative way. In addition, the movie reduces such an important cultural ceremony, as a Ukrainian wedding, to drinking, where even despite the presence of the cultural heritage allegedly codified in the elements of clothing – vyshyvankas – in the frame, sufficient attention is not paid to the ritual part of this element of clothing in the context of marriage (Demchuk, 2022). The researcher Oleksandr Kov-alchuk (1994, p.176) notes in the work "Ukrainian Folklore" that the wedding as a ritual "has preserved the customs of our distant ancestors almost unchanged to this day", and, the researcher emphasizes, that it is more or less the same for the entire territory of Ukraine. Simplifica-

tion of an important part of the cultural code to adjust the cultural and artistic product to the requirements of the audience is a destructive factor for the future of the cultural code as such. Despite such an ambiguous portrayal of their nation, Ukrainians received the film quite well.

The genre of horror and fantasy was presented in 2013 by the film *Synevyr* directed by Oleksandr and Viacheslav Alioshechkin. The producer of the film, V. Horunzhy, talks about the similarity of Pesyholovets with snow people (The first Ukrainian horror film was made about *Synevyr*, 2017), and the directors understood the image of this folklore character as a werewolf. In the picture *Synevyr*, the typical Ukrainian mythical Pesyholovets gives way to a more "global" and, accordingly, more familiar to the masses, werewolf, without adopting the centuries-old vision.

In the popular horror film *Shtolnia* the image of the idol Perun is mentioned, and Old Slavic symbols and appeals to otherworldly spirits are used. The interpretations of the elements of the cultural code offered by the tape act only as artistic "crutches" that provide motivation to the characters and develop the plot. Miphemes do not have the necessary depth and are more a background than independent elements of the plot; some information about the idols of Perun is incorrect. The critics' reviews are mostly favourable, while the audience mostly rated the film quite low.

Sometimes borrowed traditions look more attractive and understandable to a consumer than their own. This is explained by the already mentioned fashion trends, tastes, and passions of the audience. The most frequent reason for this state of affairs is the reluctance of creators of audiovisual productions to delve into the nature of the ritual object/ob-

ject that they choose as the cornerstone or auxiliary motif of their works. This situation is not new for Ukrainian cinematography (Prymachenko, 2017), and the decline of screenwriting skills and, accordingly, the film product, was overcome.

The popular TV series *Faina Ukraine*, loved by many viewers (coverage on YouTube approximately 2.5 million) also has "sharovarshchyna" elements among its characters. Among them, there are permanent molfar (witcher), who destroy Ukrainians' respect for the wisdom of herbalists and elders, nationalist warriors, who reduce all their desires to sexual manifestations, neglecting the heroic role of nationalists in the formation of the Ukrainian nation.

The well-known song *Odna Kalyna* (*One Viburnum*), which regained popularity in 2022 thanks to its use by Russian propagandists, has ambiguous symbolism in the clip. In general, the visual series represents a certain mixture of Roma and Ukrainian cultures. The appeal to the cultural code is decorative and entertaining, purely nominal. The stage director neglected the deeper meanings of the viburnum, fire, traditional necklace, sacredness of embroidery and clothing, and dance symbols.

The humorous song *Salo* (*Lard*) appeals to the popular stereotype of a Ukrainian who loves lard. This high-calorie and nutritious product has long been valued by Ukrainians for its ability to be stored for a long time, as well as for the fact that it was not taken away by Muslim invaders. In the music video, lard acts as a decoration, on the same level as dances and clothes.

The situation is similar in modern fiction (except for some authors of Ukrainian fantasy, Gothic prose, and generally tradition-oriented literature – individual works of V. Aryenev, N. Matolinets, S. Ok-

senyk, O. Zavara). However, the overall percentages of careless, superficial coverage of elements of the Ukrainian cultural code in audiovisual art are still higher, at least in well-known works.

It is worth noting that simultaneously with these audiovisual products, quality Ukrainian content is also being developed; films *Iron Hundred* (2004, directed by O. Yanchuk), *Prayer for Hetman Mazepa* (2001, directed by Yu. Ilenko) and *Living Fire* (2015, directed by O. Kostyuk); video clips for songs – a joint work of performers Alyona Sarvanenko, Yana Shemayeva and Monika Luminaire (Alyona Alyona, Jerry Heil, and Monika Liu respectively) *Dai Boh* (2022), as well as a video clip for the song *No thanks to the heroes* by Volodymyr Parfenyuk (VovaZiLvova) and Ivan Buyan (2014). Since the restoration of independence, one can also observe the interest of the foreign audience in authentic Ukrainian art. However, one cannot ignore the fact that Ukrainian films that receive recognition abroad are practically unknown in Ukraine (Kuzmenko, Bahrii and Hrubliak, 2012).

Among the factors that influence the slow development of specific Ukrainian-ness in culture, it is worth noting globalization, the desire to feel unity with a large group of people (following global trends), and a decrease in the intellectual level of the audience's expectations. The actress Irma Vitovska aptly spoke about the last factor in an interview with the *Reporter*, "Only culture and education can shape tastes... I heard recently that only 1% of the Ukrainian population is what one can consider cultured. For the country to develop, the numbers should be 4-6%. This is a question of debilitating television, imposing tastes from all screens, primitive humour" (Lytyvn, 2017).

To try to predict the likely consequences of the influence of global and local processes in the artistic, social, and everyday life of Ukrainians, it is worth turning to the history of Ukrainian cinema and looking for parallels. In difficult times, easy, understandable, "victorious" art is financed (Briukhovetska, 2011).

Since the past era, which is viewed as a historical parallel with the present, led to the decline of the artistic component of cinematography, we can assume that a similar scenario may take place now.

True, with the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the demand for everything patriotic and pro-Ukrainian is growing exponentially. So even in a simplified and infantilized format, the viewer perceives something remotely national-oriented.

Talented, highly erudite, and thoughtful creators of mass production are needed to turn cinema and television from a means of "debilization" (Lytvyn, 2017) into a true tool for promoting the Ukrainian cultural code in its original form.

### Conclusions

At the current stage of its development, Ukrainian cinematography is at a kind of crossroads: on the one hand, it follows trends and fashion, on the other hand, it remains authentic Ukrainian cinematography. The question is only in the ratio of a low-quality, insufficiently developed audiovisual product to a well-made film, where the problems of the Ukrainian cultural code are given an adequate in-

terpretation. This crossroad follows the Ukrainian audiovisual product along the entire path of its historical development since certain events, phenomena, and processes do not allow it to appear as an independent cultural unit endowed with its unique characteristics.

Given all this, we can state that the current state of development of the Ukrainian audiovisual product is unfavourable in terms of preserving the cultural background of Ukrainianness due to several factors – from globalization processes, the fusion of world cultures, to the reluctance of its creators to develop and culturally enrich themselves. However, research convincingly demonstrates that deep Ukrainian cinema is competitive with mass products. This is also applicable to other elements of audiovisual production. This paradigm is once again confirmed by the international awards and popular recognition won by Ukrainian films, not to mention the reviews of critics, which in the case of "high" cinema are mostly favourable.

When, at the current stage of Ukraine's historical progress, insufficient attention is paid to the stabilization and dissemination of knowledge about the Ukrainian cultural code in all its diversity, we risk returning to the situation during the Soviet occupation of our country. For the time being, the market, being in a de jure state ready for deeper cinema, de facto continues to generate an audiovisual product, which cannot be called anything other than a trash product.

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## НАЦІОНАЛЬНІ МІФІЧНІ ОБРАЗИ І СИМВОЛИ В СУЧАСНОМУ УКРАЇНСЬКОМУ КІНОМИСТЕЦТВІ

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### Анотація

**Мета дослідження** – узагальнити основні контексти й конотації використання міфів, символів та образів у сучасному аудіовізуальному продукті; систематизувати звернення до елементів українського культурного коду в актуальному вітчизняному культурно-мистецькому середовищі; проаналізувати відповідність тлумачень символів, використаних у відеоряді музичних кліпів і фільмах, їх первинним значенням. **Методологія дослідження** спирається на використання таких методів: теоретичного (ознайомлення з науковою та публіцистичною базою досліджень щодо використання образів українського фольклору в сучасній творчості), емпіричного (збір матеріалів для визначення основних категорій запозичення образів у сучасному мистецтві) та аналітичного (визначення доцільності та правдивості тлумачення первинного сенсу фольклорного образу в модерному контексті). **Наукова новизна.** Вперше схарактеризовано імовірні наслідки індивідуального ставлення творців вітчизняного аудіовізуального продукту до первинного значення символів традиційного культурного прошарку; окреслено наслідки попередніх політичних спроб винищення питомо українського культурного коду; визначено потенційні загрози у разі бездіяльності та відсутності прогресу у сфері аудіовізуального виробництва (фільми, кліпи) для розвитку майбутніх поколінь свідомих українців як громадян незалежної країни з чітким розумінням належності до певного історичного тла. **Висновки.** Кількісні та якісні показники дають змогу впевнено говорити про згубність парадигми нівелювання первинних значень усталених образів. У статті узагальнено основні контексти та конотації використання міфем (від позитивного в сучасних творах аудіовізуального мистецтва до спрощено-негативного в кінострічках 2010-х років). Узагальнивши сфери використання та запозичення яскравих образів у сучасному кіномистецтві, проаналізовано відповідність сучасних тлумачень символів української міфології їх первинному значенню.

**Ключові слова:** фольклор; аудіовізуальна продукція; звичаї; художнє кіно; кінематограф; масова свідомість; соціум

