

# (After) Five Years of War in the Donbas: Cultural Responses and Reverberations

Mark Andryczyk

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# (After) Five Years of War in the Donbas: Cultural Responses and Reverberations

**Mark Andryczyk**

*Columbia University*

This special issue is dedicated to the study of an important phenomenon that has been taking place in Ukraine for what is now approaching a decade. The 2013–14 Revolution of Dignity was quickly followed by Moscow's annexation of Crimea and then by a war between Russia and Ukraine in the Donbas region. The war greatly impacted various aspects of life in Ukraine in the past eight years including its profound effect on Ukrainian culture. Ukrainian artists, who had been leading a vigorous, varied, and long-awaited free explosion of creative achievements in Ukraine since the country's independence in 1991, were roused and galvanized by the sudden appearance of war in their land. The war became the subject of artistic projects by many of Ukraine's leading filmmakers, writers, visual artists, and musicians, and also brought to light the work of new creative voices. These artists developed new approaches while providing fresh perspectives on many issues that had also, in fact, been the focus of many of the notable cultural achievements over the past thirty years, including questions of identity, memory, gender, and displacement. Borders and borderlands, concepts intrinsic to Ukraine's name, once again acted as sites where these topics were explored.

The impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on Ukrainian culture has now, correspondingly, become a subject of scholarly study. The poems, novels, plays, films, installations, performances, paintings, and songs that have emanated from Ukraine are increasingly analyzed at conferences and in articles in various global academic forums. One such assembly was the conference *Five Years of War in the Donbas: Cultural Reflections and Reverberations*, which was held at Columbia University on 1–2 November 2019. Organized by the Ukrainian Studies Program at Columbia's Harriman Institute, the conference gathered scholars from the US, Ukraine, Sweden, Hungary, and China to discuss Ukraine's cultural treatment of the war in a series of panel presentations and discussions.<sup>1</sup> *Five Years of War in the*

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<sup>1</sup> The participants in the conference were Mark Andryczyk, Uilleam Blacker, Vitaly Chernetsky, Yuliya Ilchuk, Roman Ivashkiv, Nazar Kozak, Yuliya V. Ladygina, Oksana

*Donbas: Cultural Reflections and Reverberations* was cosponsored by the Ukrainian Museum; the US premiere of an exhibit of installed graphic art by Lviv-based artist Vlodko Kaufman entitled *Besida (A Conversation)* took place there, with the artist present, at the conclusion of the conference.<sup>2</sup>

This special issue of *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* gathers articles written by several participants of this conference. A cursory glance at the articles indicates that two feature the term “vatniks” in their titles (Ladygina, Shuvalova), three demonstrate how Ukrainian culture utilizes a body as a metaphor (Kozak, Blacker, Martynyuk), and all articles point to ways that Ukrainian culture battles Russian disinformation. Furthermore, two articles examine the film *Kiborhy: Heroi ne vmyraiut' (Cyborgs: Heroes Never Die)* (Ladygina, Blacker), while two others focus on the work of artist Maria (Mariia) Kulikovs'ka (Kozak, Martynyuk), two on writer Serhii (Serhiy) Zhadan (Ivashkiv, Blacker), and two on writer Liuba Iakymchuk (Yakimchuk) (Martynyuk, Ivashkiv). A thorough reading of these six articles reveals that the above-mentioned topics, and other crucial ones, are approached by these scholars fastidiously and that they propose meaningful arguments about various aspects of this culture.

Uilleam Blacker’s “Writing around War: Parapolemics, Trauma, and Ethics in Ukrainian Representations of the War in the Donbas” adopts Kate McLoughlin’s term “parapolemics” when interpreting several recent Ukrainian cultural works about the war. Examined in the article are three prose works—Zhadan’s *Internat (The Orphanage)*, 2017), Volodymyr Rafeienko (Rafeyenko)’s *Dolgota dnei: gorodskaia ballada (Length of Days: An Urban Ballad)*, 2017) and Olena Stiazhkina’s *Movoiu boha* (Russ. *Na iazyke boga*) (*In God’s Language*, 2016)—as well as Nataliia Vorozhbyt’s play *Bad Roads* (2017), and Akhtem Seitablaiev’s film *Cyborgs: Heroes Never Die* (2017). Blacker notices that these works of art about the war often focus not on death and destruction but on pauses between violence and on background events. He sees such an emphasis as an opportunity for these artists to offer subtle reflections on the war, to provide marginalized perspectives, and to allow for an expression of empathy. By featuring various

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Maksymchuk, Olena Martynyuk, Ronald Meyer, Natalia Moussienko, Oksana Remaniaka, Maria G. Rewakowicz, Yuri Shevchuk, Iryna Shuvalova, and Alina Zubkovich.

<sup>2</sup> A video recording of the conference can be found at <https://harriman.columbia.edu/event/conference-five-years-war-donbas-cultural-responses-and-reverberations>. For an article about Vlodko Kaufman’s installation at the conference see Mark Andryczyk, “Vlodko Kaufman’s *A Conversation* at the Ukrainian Museum,” *Harriman*, Fall 2020, [http://www.columbia.edu/cu/creative/epub/harriman/2020\\_fall/vlodko\\_kaufman\\_s\\_a\\_conversation.pdf](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/creative/epub/harriman/2020_fall/vlodko_kaufman_s_a_conversation.pdf). Accessed 24 Nov. 2021.

parapolemic spaces in their works, these authors open the door for frank examinations of assorted traumas caused by the war. Blacker contends that an exploration of the hidden spaces of war can demonstrate how the war disrupts the everyday lives of people in the warzone and can proffer the prospect for a much-needed dialogue between them in a manner that “strong” war stories cannot.

Ukrainian literature today has been greatly affected by the war, with many of its prominent writers approaching the topic in their works. In his article “Translating Ukrainian War Poetry into English: Why It Is Relevant,” Roman Ivashkiv closely scrutinizes two anthologies of Ukrainian poetry that were among the first literary responses to the war to be published in English translation: *Lysty z Ukrainy / Letters from Ukraine* (2016) and *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine* (2017). The authors whose poetry is analyzed in the article are Natalia Belchenko, Mirek Bodnar, Vasyl' Holoborod'ko, Bohdan-Oleh Horobchuk, Borys Humeniuk (Humenyuk), Oleksandr Irvanets', Iurii (Yuri) Izdryk, Aleksandr Kabanov, Kateryna Kalytko, Marianna Kiianovs'ka (Kiyanovs'ka), Viktor Neborak, Yakimchuk, and Zhadan. Ivashkiv combs through the English-language versions of these poems, revealing instances where translation is particularly knotty due to the difficulty in working with the Ukrainian rhyming tradition and with issues related to war and trauma; he also points out instances where these endeavours are largely unsuccessful due to word choice issues and misinterpretations. Ivashkiv does this as part of an overarching effort to provide a new perspective with which to judge the relevance of translated texts, expanding upon Jacques Derrida's concept of “relative,” to include poems that have socio-political significance.

In “Art Resistance against Russia's ‘Non-Invasion’ of Ukraine,” Nazar Kozak examines how Ukrainian artists challenged Russian strategies of simulation of “non-invasion,” that were engaged by Moscow to help conceal its actual active participation in the war with Ukraine. He scrutinizes art's agency against war by focusing on three projects: Kulikovs'ka's “245” die-in at the tenth edition of the well-known Manifesta biennial at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg on 1 June 2014, Serhii Zakharov's July 2014 “Murzilki” installations of caricatures-portraits of Russia's proxy rebels on the streets and buildings of occupied Donetsk, and Izolyatsia's #onvocation occupation at the 56th Venice Biennale in May 2015. In his article, Kozak points out that these art projects were successful because they permeated the actual physical sites of these simulations; he shows that by both instigating a reaction from Russia and infiltrating the simulation's online component, this art was able to effectively expose and disseminate Russia's true role in the war.

Resulting in no small part from the much-delayed state structural and financial support for the Ukrainian film industry, the remarkable growth in

production of Ukrainian films since 2014 has been paralleled by an increase in the number of films treating the Ukrainian-Russian war. These films have been both domestically produced and in co-production with other countries and have ranged from art house films to blockbusters. In her article “Cyborgs vs. *Vatniks*: Hybridity, Weaponized Information, and Mediatized Reality in Recent Ukrainian War Films,” Yuliya Ladygina argues that today’s cinema is particularly apt in depicting hybrid wars, such as the one taking place in the Donbas. She focuses her analysis on two films that recently had great resonance in the world of Ukrainian cinema—Seitablaiev’s *Cyborgs* and Sergei Loznitsa’s *Donbass* (2018). Ladygina traces the different manners by which each of these films have contributed to identity politics in wartime Ukraine, proposing the cyborg as a metaphor fitting for the post-colonial fluidity, characteristic of this identity. The article demonstrates how these films battle Russian disinformation and myths about the war by taking them head on and by exposing their mechanisms. Ladygina determines that these films lay bare the capacity of film and media to shape perceptions of reality and identify it as a powerful weapon in the Russian-Ukrainian war.

“Gardens of Tolerance: Ukrainian Women Artists Reflect the Donbas War” by Olena Martynyuk begins by offering a brief, yet very useful, review of some of the more well-known visual art projects that have been produced by Ukrainian artists as a result of the war, before moving on to its main topic—a focus on art created by women that gives a nuanced perspective on how the war has impacted women lives and their roles in today’s Ukraine. Under investigation in the article are performances by Alevtyna (Alevtina) Kakhidze and Liia (Lia) Dostlieva, sculptures by Kulikovs’ka and Anna Zviahintseva (Zvyagintseva), and paintings by Vlada Ralko and Maryna Skuharieva (Skugareva). Several of these artists feature flowers or employ a garden theme in their works and appeal to a need for gentleness to help others to withstand a war. Martynyuk sees these artists striving to take up the notion that realistic representations of war are impossible while simultaneously challenging inherited patriarchal and Soviet gender stereotypes that suppress female subjectivity.

Popular music that appeared in Ukraine as a result of the war is the subject of analysis of Iryna Shuvalova’s article “‘Moskal’s,’ ‘Separs,’ and ‘*Vatniks*’: The Many Faces of the Enemy in the Ukrainian Satirical Songs of the War in Donbas.” In particular, she looks at the songs produced by Orest Liutyi as well as by the Mirko Sablic collective. Purportedly created in order to counter Russian fake news and propaganda regarding the war in the Donbas, Shuvalova instead sees the songs as vehicles of intolerance and aggression. The article closely studies the lyrics to these songs and provides information about their popularity in Ukraine. She also engages multimodal discourse analysis, which looks at extralingual means of making meaning, in examining how the enemy is depicted in these songs. Shuvalova investigates

how the terms “moskal’,” “separ,” and “vatnik,” which have practically entered into daily use in wartime Ukraine, are used in classifying different types of enemies. She scrutinizes the satirical function of the music and its intended effect on its target audience.

These six articles are among the earliest scholarly investigations of this Ukrainian war culture to be published in the West. Research and publications on the subject will undoubtedly grow in years to come. Increasingly more creative works are being produced in Ukraine about the war and the number of scholars worldwide engaging in the topic grows as well. It is my hope that this collection of articles will provide an early view of analyses of the first books, films, visual art projects, and music to be produced as a result of the war. As these essays enter into dialogue with future academic publications, they will offer a useful perspective on the ways that Ukrainian artists were stimulated by the war and how their various responses adapt as the war, sadly, endures in their land. Today, the articles presented here provide diverse, robust inquiries into the different ways that Ukrainian artists have approached the Russian-Ukrainian war in their work. In these articles, the nuances concerning how this particular war has agitated this particular culture are imaginatively examined alongside established relevant theoretical concepts. Thus, they can be of great value to scholars, both within Ukrainian studies and beyond, who probe the ways that war can influence culture. I am delighted that, thanks to EWJUS’s translation project with the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, these articles will be available in Ukrainian translation, facilitating their inclusion into academic discourse in Ukraine.

**Figure 1. Participants in the conference *Five Years of War in the Donbas: Cultural Reflections and Reverberations*, Columbia University, 1-2 November, 2019. Photograph by Marianna Dushar. Courtesy of the photographer.**



*Standing left to right:* Nazar Kozak, Roman Ivashkiv, Maria G. Rewakowicz, Yuliya Ilchuk, Oksana Remaniaka, Vitaly Chernetsky, Natalia Moussienko, Mark Andryczyk, Oksana Maksymchuk, Iryna Shuvalova, Yuliya V. Ladygina, Olena Martynyuk, Uilleam Blacker. *Seated, left to right:* Alina Zubkovich, Yuri Shevchuk. *Missing from photo:* Ronald Meyer.