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The National Ecology of the Carpathians in Soviet Ukrainian Cinema: Between Hutsul Ethnography and the Magic of the Mountains[1]

by Joshua First

This article frames the Carpathian Mountains in Ukrainian cinema within a broader discourse of "mountains and meaning," both within Soviet Ukraine, and within global nationalisms during the first half of the 20th century. Within this discourse, mountains are simultaneously transcendent spaces imbibed with religious and national meaning, but also spaces of commerce and tourism. This article examines the intersections of those spaces in three different eras of Ukrainian cinema, during the Second World War; the post-war era; and the 1960s. I ground these films in global processes of mountain fetishism, within which the mountains move between containment and porousness.

Keywords: cinema, Ukraine, Osyka, Ivchenko, Levchuk, Riefenstahl, Carpathians, Hutsuls

As Alexander Kratochvil, Vladislava Moskalets, Ksenya Kiebuzinski, Martin Rohde and Herbert Justnik have noted in this issue, the Carpathians have long become a site of meaning production for a myriad of different groups, some understood as insiders and some as outsiders. Through the lens of photography and literature, we have seen how the Carpathians function alternately as a space of ethnographic fascination, as a transcendent space for communion with nature and the gods, and as a space of leisure and tourism.[2] Finally, many of the scholars in this issue, particularly Roman Lozynskyi, remind us, the Carpathians are also home, regardless of any deeper meaning others may place on this space. In this article, I wanted to explore the idea of "mountains and meaning" within the subaltern space of post-war Soviet Ukrainian cinema. Since the 1940s, when the Northeastern Carpathians (including Bukovyna, Pokuttia and Zakarpattia) were incorporated into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, filmmakers in the republic attempted to channel 19th and early 20th-century Carpathophilia into the Marxist-Leninist framework of Soviet ideology.

At the same time, we can understand these and other attempts to impose meaning on the mountains as part of a global and trans-historical fascination with *terra incognita*, in order to construct a national or nationalist ecology, here defined as a form of environmental ownership, a sense that environmental protection derives from the logic of national traditions and the historical development of

the native people. And like all nationalist ecologies, they involve a politics of the gaze - a politics that involves certain people looking and a certain other (humans, animals, or ecosystems in their totality) being looked at. But what is the promise of looking? The promise is to find some sort of connection with the other in a process of identification and then recognition. Cinema is not unique in this task, nor is it even the most emblematic, but it simultaneously accentuates and devalues the authenticity of the object of its gaze, in line with Walter Benjamin's conception in "The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction" and Theodor Adorno's "The Jargon of Authenticity." Whereas earlier forms of cultural production (religious texts, the novel, as well as the travelogue) advanced an opaque and objective claim to the authenticity of its representation of the mountain, the cinema is built on self-conscious and subjective artifice even as it continues to mobilize and imitate earlier discourses of "mountains and meaning."

Ancient and early modern texts continually represented the mountain as a space of divine communion, from the Roman god Vulcan's forge on Mount Etna, to Moses's conversation with the burning bush on Mount Sinai and Muhammad's cavernous meeting with Allah in Mount Hira. Petrarch famously initiated the Italian Renaissance with his scaling of Mont Ventoux, as a man who undertook the feat only for the inspiration of the view itself (a view for the view's sake). More recently, the visual arts have been instrumental in providing humans with meaning about mountains, with German Romanticists at the forefront of this movement to represent mountains as mystical yet dangerous, a space of solitude and self-reflection for the civilized individual, yet inhabited by the so-called noble savage. Casper David Friedrich's "Wanderer above the Sea of Fog" (1818) is one of the most notable Romantic representations of mountains, with its blurred, quasi-heavenly landscape and intrepid but long-suffering adventurer who scaled the land above the sky. The genre matured with the work of mid-century German-American Albert Bierstadt who painted the landscapes of the American West now sacralized as *National* Parks. Also influenced by German Romanticism, the mid-19th-century Polish writer Józef Korzeniowski brought the mountain theme to the Slavic world with his play, "The Carpathian Highlanders," which, for one of the first times in modern Europe, merged landscape and people into a single frame and created what we might call an "ethnoscape." Ethnoscapes functioned in many literary and visual texts from the early 20th century, as other scholars here have pointed out. Key to understanding this work's relationship to the cinema is how they are essentially teaching us to be spectators, teaching us not only how to see, but also what is worth seeing. As the English historian Keith Thomas has argued, mountains were once ugly for Europeans to look at, and understood as simply uncivilized. After all, in Friedrich's "Wanderer," the subject is not the mountains, it's the gentleman spectator, which tells us that we too *should* look at these dangerous and ugly stone formations.

In the 20th century, mountains became democratized in their ability to convey meaning, opening this space to the urban masses for adventure, travel, tourism, but Western modernity also promoted the idea of untainted nature and new-age understandings of healing.[3] Capitalism, nationalism and deep ecology simultaneously produced a mountain that is an exceptional eco-space, a space that is at once emblematic of, but also distinct from, the nation more generally. But similar to both earlier and more modern notions of "mountains and meaning" is the idea of a space separate from "civilization," as mysterious and unknown. The mountain as a kind of "anti-civilization" can be read in two ways, often simultaneously: as both pure and authentic, on the one hand, but also UNcivilized and dangerous, on the other.

1 Leni Riefenstahl's Mountains and the Fascist Aesthetic

The German *Bergfilm* (Mountain Film), standing on the creative precipice of late-Weimar and early National Socialism, took its cue from the Romantic tradition too. Mountains become meaningful because they highlight the collision of an authentic *Gemeinschaft* with the mapping and defining powers of the rational individual employing the tools of modern technology. In essence, the *Bergfilm* was a genre of looking and being looked at. Leni Riefenstahl, who made *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938) for the Nazi regime, got her start in the *Bergfilm* as an actress in Arnold Fanck's many examples of the genre, *The Holy Mountain* (1926), *Storm over Mount Blanc* (1930), and *The White Ecstasy* (1931). She then went on to direct her own *Bergfilm*, the emblematic *Blue Light* (1932), the best example of the late-Weimar nationalist ecology in that it "transforms exterior landscapes into emotional spaces," as Eric Rentschler argues,[4] something we have already seen in Friedrich's "Wanderer." Riefenstahl's directorial debut concerns a young woman, Junta (played by Riefenstahl herself), who has been cast out of her native village for being a witch. She resides in a mountain cave that emits a blue light during the full moon, which supposedly lures young men from the village to seek out its source, only to die in the climb to get there. One day, a landscape painter from the city comes to the village, where he hears of Junta. After meeting her, he falls in love with her natural beauty, even though they speak different languages (she Italian, he German). One full moon night, he follows her, in secret, to the source of the blue light, where he finds her among the crystals that produce the aura. The painter rushes to tell the villagers of the treasures that exist in their midst, and they proceed to steal them when Junta is away. After realizing what has happened, she falls to her death in grief. The painter, in this film, is a common tourist, bringing modernity to the isolated mountain village through his discovery of the crystals. Moreover, the film is mediated through the painter's views of the exotic space - he teaches us, the spectator, how to look and why we should look at the mountains. The imagery of the mountains is straight from 19th-century painting with its cliff

faces and mountain valleys shrouded in mist.

Figure 1. Leni Riefenstahl's The Blue Light (1932). Film still.

In her famous essay "Fascinating Fascism," American cultural critic Susan Sontag argued that Riefenstahl's mountain aesthetics were part and parcel with her more explicitly Nazi films like *Triumph of the Will*. Sontag's notion of the "fascist aesthetic" reads ideal political power as a "natural" phenomenon, unhindered by "civilization." As she defined it, "fascist aesthetics" involves "turning people into things; … the grouping of people and things around an all-powerful, hypnotic force…"[5] While Sontag understood the problem of "mountains and meaning" all too well, she nonetheless diagnosed common symptoms as a disease that was much too specific. In highlighting the *Bergfilm*, I do not mean to suggest a "guilt by association" for Soviet Ukrainian cinema, but to reveal how fluid ideas of national ecology are across time and space.

2 Oleksandr Dovzhenko's Mountains

Dovzhenko's teleological humanism, based equally on conviction and compromise, contrasted sharply with the nationalist ecology of German filmmakers working on mountain thematics in the late-1920s and early-1930s. The first iconic mountain in Ukrainian cinema is arguably Oleksandr Dovzhenko's *Zvenyhora* (1927), which presents a mountain that contains mysterious riches, the location of which a group of 18th-century rebels (*haidamaky*) attempt to discover from an old man. Zvenyhora stands in for Ukraine itself and the old man functions as the repository of knowledge about the land, while also being an isolated and gullible eccentric. The film is famously difficult to comprehend, not only in terms of the plot but also the contradictory message contained in the central symbol of the mountain - scheming *haidamaky* and amoral nationalists pursue the overdetermined treasure, while Tymish, the social hero, could care less about Zvenyhora. In this way, Dovzhenko's nationalist ecology confronts his teleological humanism, and Soviet authorities were unimpressed with the result.

Figure 2. Oleksandr Dovzhenko's Bukovyna, a Ukrainian Land (1939). Film still.

A decade later, Dovzhenko was one of the first Ukrainian filmmakers to travel to the newly-annexed Carpathian territories to make his documentary *Bukovyna, zemlia ukrainska* (*Bukovyna, a Ukrainian Land*, 1939). The film opens with a traditional establishing shot of mountain valleys before cutting to peasants sowing grain. A narrator discusses the joyful yet sorrowful nature of the Bukovynian peasants, the camera pausing on a young man: "Here is an illiterate and ignorant boy (*temnyi parubok*)." Yet, this is also a land that the "poets call paradise." More images of mountain vistas, sheep, and finally the sound of the *trembita*, the alpine horn of the Hutsuls, with the narrator returning us to the primitive ethnoscape of the mountain, a society whose foundation is related to honor and blood. In Dovzhenko's history lesson, the Carpathians become a site of brutal massacres of the Hutsuls at the hands of their conquerors - Mongols, Austrians, Poles, and most recently, the oppressive Romanians. This mountainous "paradise" had become the "hell [lit. underworld or *preispodnyaya*] of Europe." Throughout these early scenes, the diagonal landscape is associated with oppression. When the Red Army arrives, however, liberation occurs on a horizontal landscape. The peasants shed their highlander dress for generically Soviet peasant clothing. Without the landowners and capitalism, loggers now work efficiently to fell trees, which are then made into boards and plywood at a factory in Chernivtsi. Dovzhenko soon forgets about the mountain itself in favor of a cultural ethnography of the Bukovynian people, now freed from their oppression and able to perform their folk arts and crafts while being educated and lifted out of poverty. Dovzhenko had abandoned his nationalist ecology, largely to stay alive, a compromise that allowed him to make another film about Ukraine, albeit from his exile in Moscow. But it is worth dwelling on the transition that happens in this film. At the beginning of the film, the peasants of Bukovyna are oppressed by not only the Romanians but also by the landscape itself. Dovzhenko suggests that the landscape is to be looked at, not to be inhabited. By the end, however, they have overcome their ecological subjugation too, and he no longer commands us to look at them. Hutsuls now inhabit schools and factories

rather than the laborious valleys and dangerous mountain sides.

3 The Historic Carpathians: Viktor Ivanov's "Oleksa Dovbush"

The mountain theme receded from Soviet and Soviet Ukrainian cinema during the 1940s and 1950s,[6] and only returned with Viktor Ivanov's 1959 feature about 18th-century Hutsul rebel Oleksa Dovbush, a generically, stylistically, and narratively conventional picture, but here the mountains define the man and have clear agency. As a popular historical epic, the film located a primordial struggle between Ukrainians and Poles among the Carpathian Hutsuls. Dovbush, the legendary 18thcentury bandit-turned-rebel leader of the highlanders, defends the Hutsuls against the arbitrary will of the Polish *szlachta* (nobility). After taking a blood oath to an older rebel to avenge his comrades' deaths at the hand of Pan Jablonski, Dovbush leaves his life of petty crime to gather a group of Hutsul revolutionaries. Upon first meeting the lord, Dovbush easily subdues him in a sword fight, but spares his life after a promise to return the peasants' livestock. Jablonski initially follows through with his promise, but later kills Dovbush's parents in revenge. He eventually tracks down the pan, killing him, but in Dovbush's flight from the castle, his fiancé, Marichka, is captured. Dovbush's men, in turn, capture Jablonski's widow, and offer the Poles an exchange. After another series of double-crossings, Dovbush breaks into the tower to free his love, only to be stabbed in the back by his friend Shtefan. The latter had made a pact with a Polish priest, who promised to marry the latter to Marichka, his long-time crush. After leaving victorious, Marichka and Dovbush's men lead their dying leader to the mountains, where he disappears with Marichka over the horizon.

The original draft of the screenplay for *Oleksa Dovbush* made its nationalist ecology much clearer than the film released in Soviet theaters. In the screenplay, for example, the narrator associated highland and highlander together, as the credits roll in front of a montage of a forested mountain vista:

> *The Carpathian Mountains, like deep wrinkles in the ancient face of the land. From time immemorial, children of the one mother Ukraine lived here until the Polish, Austrian, Hungarian, and Wallachian lords seized this land, tore it to pieces, and divided it among themselves. How much suffering did our brother-heroes experience in captivity, but they did not give in, and were not annihilated. Anger was excavated from the hearts of the people, like those springs from mountain cliffs, and came down like a merciless sword on the heads of the oppressors. Two hundred years ago, this anger had a human name. They called him Oleksa Dovbush…*[7]

In 1959, only a Russian-language version screened in theaters, but the Oleksandr Dovzhenko National Film Center restored the original Ukrainian version in 2015 (with public screenings in Lviv and Kyiv) with this text at the beginning.[8] The Russian-language version, however, toned down the language of "one mother

Ukraine" in favor of a Russian imperial version of history, which emphasized the legacy of Kyivan Rus and the shared fates of Ukraine and Russia.

Nonetheless, the visual cues of the mountain's agency remained a dominant trend in the film. For example, when Oleksa is recruiting rebels to fight the Polish nobility, he challenges his recruits to walk across a mountain gulch on a felled tree between two peaks, as if to allow the mountains themselves to decide who is worthy to join. Moreover, the mountain also functions as a sacred space, and Dovbush's men carry his dying body into the mountains. Instead of a burial, the social hero disappears into the landscape, suggesting that the mountains' divine presence whisked him away in a whirlwind, much like the prophet Elijah's departure in the biblical account depicted 2 Kings chapter 2. Ivanov's *Dovbush* was a mainstream success in 1959, with over 23 million viewers, and it more properly functioned as Soviet spectators' introduction to the significance of the Ukrainian Carpathians.

Figure 3. Viktor Ivanov's Oleksa Dovbush (1959). Film still.

Also generically significant is *Oleksa Dovbush*'s dialogue with the conventions and iconography of the Western in its representation of a frontier society with tenuous connections to a political center. Like the Western, the physical and cultural space of the film is located in the borderlands of two states, in this case Poland and Russia. Yet both spaces have shifted in context. Instead of Enlightenment-era St. Petersburg and Warsaw, Left-Bank Ukraine stands in for Russia and Pan Jablonski's remote outpost of aristocratic decadence and violence stands in for Poland. This Western-like iconography of vigilante on horseback, high cliff faces, immoral gentlemen, and the damsel in distress would have been familiar to Soviet audiences in the 1950s. Thus, we might see Ivanov's film as an attempt to emulate the epic Hollywood Western of the 1950s, while sufficiently adapting it to the ethno-historical context of the Russian Imperial and Polish "frontier." In this Imperial Western, however, Ukraine as a nation largely disappears, even though this was not the intention of screenwriter Liubomyr Dmyterko. Dmyterko wrote the script already in 1940 and director Amvrosii Buchma intended *Oleksa Dovbush* to fit with

the celebration of Ukrainian Reunification that also brought us Dovzhenko's film about Bukovyna.

Ivanov's changes made the film more marketable to a Soviet mass audience, but critics contemned the film for the absence of a Carpathian ethnoscape. Russian critic Nina Ignat'eva wanted to see more "Hutsul color" in the film.[9] Here, despite the fairly democratic historical teleology (Eastern and Western Ukrainians uniting, without the help of the Russian state, to eliminate Polish aristocratic injustice) of a chapter leading toward Ukrainian unification, critics largely picked up on the film's ability (or lack thereof) to represent these human objects accurately and authentically. As Ignat'yeva suggests, it is the filmmaker's gaze that catalogs and defines such authenticities.

Sergei Parajanov also wrote about his Dovzhenko Studio colleague's earlier film a few years after his success with *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1964). In the article "Perpetual Motion," Parajanov's main published work of film theory, the director caustically wrote that Ivanov and his crew "came to the Carpathians cinematically educated. More importantly, they drew it with exotic and decorative motifs, but we did not recognize any Hutsuls in the film. We did not see their gait, did not hear their charming speech, and the movement of thought."[10] Parajanov counterposed his conception of ethnographic authenticity with filmmakers' specialized knowledge of cinematic technique and generic conventions. Parajanov wrote in his article that aesthetic "power is [located] in the authentic object," and here it seems he could alternately be speaking about the keptar or the Hutsul himself. Parajanov took particular offense to the "inauthentic" language of Oleksa Dovbush. Hutsuls should not speak either perfect Russian or Ukrainian, despite the problem of comprehension that dialect presented. Whereas *Oleksa Dovbush* employs the sounds of the *trembita* (alphorn), *floiar* (Carpathian flute), and *drymba* (Jew's harp)– the traditional instruments of the Hutsuls – it does so exclusively with the accompaniment of a symphonic score more characteristic of classical narrative cinema. While Ivanov's film occasionally uses dialectal terms and phrases, especially to characterize priests and older Hutsuls, the bulk of the dialogue in the originally screened version is spoken in flawless literary Russian.

With Parajanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, the idea of the Carpathians enters a different stylistic and narrative field, and Ukrainian cinema about the mountains leaves the mainstream and enters an artistic niche that we know of as Ukrainian Poetic Cinema. Leaving aside this most famous example of Carpathophilia (because the dialectic of "mountains and meaning" is self-evident in much of *Shadows*), I now want to situate this search for "mountains and meaning" within mainstream Soviet Ukrainian cinema at the end of the 1960s, but also contextualize it within a broader popular cultural fascination with mountain tourism in the USSR.

4 Western Recognition of the Historic Carpathians: Tymofii Levchuk's "Balzac's Mistake"

I chose two unexpected films to focus on here because I think they represent precisely that - the mainstreaming of fascination with the Carpathians in Soviet Ukraine during the 1960s. These films take us away from the national-aesthetic project of Ukrainian poetic cinema and toward the conventions of historic melodrama: First, we have Tymofii Levchuk's *Honoré de Balzac's Mistake* (1968) about the 19th-century French writer's visit to Western Ukraine to kindle his love affair with Polish noblewoman Ewelina Hanska. Second is Borys Ivchenko's *Annychka* (1969), a film set in the Carpathian region of Pokuttia during the German occupation of World War II, which imagines a love affair between an injured East Ukrainian partisan and the daughter of a collaborator. Both films were made by highly connected and powerful people in the Kyiv cultural establishment. Levchuk was the Secretary of the Ukrainian Cinematographers Union, and he made more films than any other director during this period, most of which commanded incredibly large budgets, but few actual movie-goers. And Ivchenko was the son of Viktor Ivchenko, one of the most popular mainstream Ukrainian directors in the 1950s and early 1960s, the founder of the Cinema Department at the Karpenko-Karyi Theatrical Institute in Kyiv (KITM), and the original organizer of the Molodist Film Festival. The elder Ivchenko is probably most remembered as the one who discovered Ivan Mykolaichuk. Ivchenko senior had originally developed *Annychka* as his own project, and co-authored the screenplay, but decided to offer the project to his son who had just graduated from the KITM film department.

Levchuk's initial foray into Carpathian imagery occurred very briefly in his best-remembered film, a biopic about Ivan Franko from 1956. While made at a time when most Ukrainian films were shot inside Kyiv Studio walls on Prospekt Peremohy, a short scene at the beginning of the film involves a brief interlude to float down the Cheremosh on a log raft, after which Franko dances with the Hutsuls and finally enjoys a brief moment of solitude in the mountains for poetic inspiration. More generally, however, Levchuk's *Ivan Franko* (1956) bears the aesthetics of late Stalinism in its slow pacing, lots of talking, and a generally artificial studio sound that contrasts with the ethnographic character of this single scene on location.

After spending most of the 1960s opposed to, or simply confused by, the representational politics of the Thaw, Levchuk fought hard for his "Balzac in Ukraine" project, a long-term dream to adapt Jewish-Ukrainian novelist Natan Rybak's 1940 story about the French writer's journey to the Russian Empire in the late-1840s. Originally, Levchuk intended the film to follow on the heels of *Ivan Franko*, done in the same traditional style for Soviet literary bio-pics, with the occasional local "color" thrown in. The project was abandoned in the late 1950s for reasons that remain unclear, but perhaps there was a dispute with the powerful Russian screenwriter, Mikhail Bleiman, who felt that Rybak had stolen his own

story about Balzac in St. Petersburg. In the intervening years, Levchuk continued to develop the screenplay with Rybak and Hryhorii Zeldovych, who drew out the novel's admittedly brief scene in Western Ukraine. Early drafts of the screenplay provoked complaints that such scenes were merely "decorative" and lacked narrative motivation or creative exploration. In other words, they did not seem to have a point. Levchuk attempted to assuage these criticisms by introducing a revised screenplay with the claim that the "film permits a spontaneous and … deep revelation of the image of life of our people …. In comparison to the novel, the screenplay has significantly expanded Balzac's acquaintance with the Ukrainian people, not only in Kyiv, but also in [the village of] Verkhivnia." Verkhivnia is not to be confused with Verkhovyna, the setting for several Carpathian-themed films in the 1960s, most notably *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*. Verkhivnia, instead, is the site of Hanska Castle on the border between Zhytomyr and Vinnytsia oblasti (provinces). As Levchuk implied in his explanation, however, the narrative motivation for the famous writer is but a weak device to establish the fictional connection between Balzac and Ukraine, at once a celebrity association written upon the entire nation and a view of that nation read through the eyes of a famous tourist.

The plot of *Balzac's Mistake* resembles a lot of second-rate Soviet cinematic adaptations about the 19th and early 20th centuries. I want to focus, however, on the border crossing between the Austrian and Russian Empires, which happens approximately ten minutes into the film. Balzac is in his carriage, passing through the Eastern Carpathians as he remembers his last encounter with Countess Hanska. The iconic scenes of sheep and distant mountains are shown through Balzac's carriage window, offering viewers a subjective and mediated view of the scene that is in stark contrast to the stuffy and traditional cinematography in most of this film. This combination of a point-of-view shot cross-cut with Balzac looking through the window - the window consistently serving as a visual metaphor for a movie screen - places spectators in the position of an outsider moving across a foreign border. Here, Levchuk represents the politically constructed border as a physical barrier between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Interestingly, this entire scene on the road is absent from the screenplay. As the Carpathians recede into the foothills and into the steppe, the writer passes through customs into the Russian Empire. Three men with Hutsul *keptari* (vests) greet the writer, one of them being the writer's French translator Leon, or Levko, played by iconic Ukrainian actor, Ivan Mykolaichuk.

Levchuk made some interesting decisions that diverted from the director's script. First of all, the screenplay identifies Radyvyliv as the border crossing, which is not the landscape that we see in this scene. And second, the scene of singing is completely absent in the script, as only Leon himself stands ready to serve his master. Finally, giving this role to Mykolaichuk sharply heightened the importance of this supporting character within the film as a whole, and implicitly referenced

the Carpathians despite their narrative and geographic absence on the Russian side of the border. In the screenplay, Rybak and Zeldovych imagined a "typical Ukrainian landscape," and there was a scene that they wrote where Balzac passes by a well as a crane lands next to a dangling wooden bucket. This is the visual cue that the screenwriters envisioned to signal "Ukraine" to audiences, which was supposed to be shot at Askania-Nova National Park near Kherson. But owing to the representational politics of the 1960s, this image of the Ukrainian landscape suddenly became a more diversified topography that was ethnographically coded as Hutsulshchyna (Land of the Hutsuls). Shortly after this scene, we cut to a wide-angle view of an empty valley with only the figure of Balzac in the frame, looking similar to Friedrich's "Wanderer" or Riefenstahl's star-crossed landscape painter. In voiceover, Balzac calls Ukraine "a mysterious and unknown land." Balzac gathers Ukrainian dirt into his hands, pressing it against his face with pleasure. In this way, the film constantly forces its hero to recognize the beauty of Ukraine's landscape, people and history, which remains unmotivated in the narrative, and furthermore absent in the screenplay, from which Levchuk adapted the film.

5 The Carpathians in the Great Patriotic War: Borys Ivchenko's "Annychka"

1968 also saw the release of another mainstream film set in the Carpathians, Borys Ivchenko's *Annychka*. Its location within the Ukrainian cinematic canon is more established today, first because Ivchenko went on to make the definitive classic, *The Lost Letter*, in 1972, and because *Annychka* is actually located in Pokuttia, with filming taking place in Verkhovyna and the use of many of the same sets as *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*. Finally, Mykolaichuk occupies a more central place in this film, playing a psychologically complex character who attempts to reconcile his love of Ukraine with collaboration with the German occupiers during the Second World War. Most significantly, this film presents one of the best efforts at Soviet reconciliation with Ukrainian nationalism, largely because it deflects these *political* problems into a melodramatic frame. At the same time, *Annychka* conformed to the accepted devices of socialist realism and the Great Patriotic War film. First and foremost, as a mainstream film, *Annychka* begins with the camera panning across a mountain vista with the sound of an intense storm. The image is dark, impenetrable, and romantically mysterious as befits the mountain theme. But, unlike the previous films, *Annychka*'s texture is clear, imparting the image with a quality of lived-in space, rather than a mythic space.

Set in the village of Zhabie (now Verkhovyna, in Ivano-Frankivska Oblast) in 1943, the film details a chance encounter between a Hutsul girl, the daughter of a German collaborator, and a wounded Red partisan named Andrii that she finds in the forest. After Annychka's lover is captured by Hutsuls working for the Nazis, having been double-crossed by Annychka's father, the heroine agrees to marry her long-time suitor, Roman, in hopes that the elaborate Hutsul wedding ceremony

would cause a diversion to allow her and her friends to free Andrii and escape to safety. While the plan is successful, as Annychka and Andrii ride off together on a carriage, her father shoots his gun after them in a fit of rage and kills his daughter. The final image is of the father, shocked at what he has done. While ostensibly about a young woman's rising consciousness of the bankrupt moral principles of Ukrainian nationalism during the Great Patriotic War, the film nonetheless functions at the level of melodrama for its foregrounding of the domestic realm as the site where "politics" is worked through.

Figure 4. Viktor Ivchenko's Annychka (1968). Film still.

But even beyond the realm of the family, the Carpathians remains a highly insular political and cultural space, with Andrii appearing just as foreign as the Nazi occupiers. The film ends with Annychka's attempted escape from the Carpathians, rather than sowing the seeds of dissent among her fellow Hutsuls. Further suggesting this insularity, the imagery presents the mountains as held captive, contained behind barbed wire and patrolled by roving bands of collaborators posing as patriots. As with *The Blue Light*, the presence of the outside love interest ultimately brings about the death of the female protagonist, as if to suggest that opening up this space to the outside (whether for good via the Soviets or evil via the Germans) inevitably dooms it.

Thus, the central *political* conflict of the film is not partisans vs. Nazis (with their Banderist toadies), but the uneasy alliance between two "enemy" ideologies: Ukrainian nationalism and the German occupation, an alliance fraught with cultural difference and misunderstanding that's grounded in this mysterious space of the mountains. Moreover, the figure of Roman, Annychka's fiancée, is by far the most compelling, both in terms of the acting and in terms of his allegorical value. Derzhkino, the Ukrainian film administration, reported to the authorities in Moscow, perhaps anticipating problems with the film's sympathetic treatment of this counterrevolutionary figure, that Roman is the truly tragic figure in the film for his honest belief that he was fighting for Ukraine's freedom. Roman supports the

nationalist cause during the Nazi occupation out of love for Ukraine, but refuses to look upon the atrocities that his co-ideologists propagate. Thus, Roman's nationalism is redeemed in the film, through disconnecting it from violence, and in foregrounding Mykolaichuk's convincing performance as a peasant who believes that siding with nationalism will help Ukraine.

6 Returning to a Deep History of the Carpathians: Leonid Osyka's "Zakhar Berkut"

In the final example of the mainstreaming of "mountains and meaning" for a Ukrainian national ecology, I offer Leonid Osyka's *Zakhar Berkut*, released (albeit limitedly) in 1972. Osyka's film represented a further attempt at melding the visual techniques and Ukrainian classic literary material of "poetic cinema" with an objectively determined set of criteria that would appeal to Soviet (and international) audiences. Based on Ivan Franko's novella published in 1883, Osyka's film was a big-budget national-historical epic about the Mongol-Tatar invasion of the Carpathians in 1241. *Zakhar Berkut* was to be a mainstream historical epic – an "Americanization of Franko," as contemporary Ukrainian film scholar Serhii Trymbach put it[11] – along the lines of *Oleksa Dovbush* in its genre-driven iconography, but which would employ the "new methods" of "Ukrainian poetic cinema" to explore the Carpathian ethnoscape. In fact, the historical epic, to which Osyka's film most strived to emulate was the work of Romanian director Sergiu Nicolaescu, whose elaborate film *Michael the Brave* (1970-71) offered comparable national origin myths emerging from the union of pre-national Carpathian tribes against invaders from the East (Tatars in Osyka's case and Ottoman Turks in Nicolaescu's film). Osyka, in fact, lifted several scenes from *Michael* because he liked the way that Nicolaescu shot his battle scenes in the Carpathians. As Vadym Skurativskyi wrote, however, the historical epic was common throughout socialist Eastern Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, with Poland and Bulgaria being notable examples of film industries highlighting the theme of national origin myths.[12]

Figure 5. Leonid Osyka's Zakhar Berkut (1972). Film still.

While Osyka planned to shoot the film in the Carpathians as he did with his 1967 Vasyl Stefanyk adaptation, *The Stone Cross*, bureaucratic hold-ups on access to horses forced him and his crew to travel to the Tian Shan mountain range in

Kyrgyzstan to shoot his "Carpathian" scenes, a problem that undermined the film's authenticity. In line with the mise en scène of *Shadows* and *Stone Cross*, *Zakhar Berkut* opens with a series of medium shot tableaus of long-haired medieval warriors standing against the rocky backdrop of mountainous nooks and crannies. Meant to demonstrate the ecological rootedness of the warriors in later contrast to the Tatar nomads, the effect is undermined by an early scene. In an initiation ritual, for example, the film cuts to a mountain vista, with the clear image of Lake Issyk-Kul in the foreground, a far cry from the wooded terrain of the Carpathians. Nonetheless, the forested Carpathians figure more centrally in the narrative scenes. The tribal *viche* (council) functions within a rocky outcropping, as boyars discuss the Tatars and sing about unchanging life in the mountains. The film cuts among a variety of different wintery medium shots of tribesmen on the mountains. The hero Maksym, played by Ivan Havryliuk, takes the boyar's daughter Myroslava to a pagan temple inside a mountain cave. By contrast, the Christian boyar, Tuhar Vovk, is seen as an authoritarian leader who promotes executions and order at all costs. There is a fairly risqué discussion of the relationship between the executioner and intelligence. He claims to be in the service of Grand Prince Danylo. There is a great shot of the judgment of the boyar as a traitor, where the camera circles the mountain-top village. The pre-Christian Carpathian *smerdy* (peasants) inhabit the mountains themselves, a village almost devoid of built structures, except for a few thatch-and-grass-roofed *khaty* (house), whereas the Boyar inhabits a wooden fortress. With only the implicit presence of the Tatars, the main contrast is between the mountain-dwelling Tukholian *smerdy*, ruled by its *Hromady* (community), and the forest-dwelling boyar. The boyar has connections beyond the Carpathians and is considered a traitor precisely for his authoritarian cosmopolitanism. The Tatars are then portrayed on an empty horizontal landscape, with fires and smoke everywhere. Tuhar discusses with the Tatar leader that Danylo is searching for help from the Hungarians, and that he himself knows the unguarded road through the Carpathians. Again, his evil cosmopolitanism is expressed in his promise to undermine the mountains themselves in order to access "civilization" on the other side, whereas the peasants defeat the Tatars and Tuhar using the mountain itself to encircle their more numerous enemy. The film ends with another mountain vista, at sunrise, after the Tukholians manage to drown the Tatars by flooding the river. *Zakhar Berkut* inverts the politics of the gaze. The outsider no longer possesses the power of looking. The mountains remain inherently dangerous to the Tatars, and, in an extreme high-angle shot, the Tukholian peasants look down upon their drowning bodies from high above a mountain cliff. Furthermore, the figure of Boyar Tuhar, as a man who sought power by reconciling the lowlands and highlands, becomes subject to the petty whims of the Tatars and begs for his life from the highlanders.

7 Conclusion: Transnational "Mountains and Meaning"

The discourse of "mountains and meaning" has always been a deeply personal and individualistic one, albeit written onto the natural world and generally supplied with national-historical and, thus, ideological meaning. As the Scottish poet and memoirist Nan Shepherd concluded her famous book *The Living Mountain*, "It is a journey into Being; for as I penetrate more deeply into the mountain's life, I penetrate also into my own."[13]

What unites these films is the dialectic between the mountains as a window into the self and the divine, and thus a space of accessibility, and the mountains as dangerous and impenetrable, especially to outsiders. Petrarch's archetypal view, the mountain vista also endemic to the German Romantic tradition and every single establishing shot in films about mountains, represents the latter with its emphasis on distance, a depth of field that allows the viewer an illusion of possession and power. Each of the films I examine here complicates this vision in some way by showing the mountain as a habitat for humans who value their own unique traditions and are skeptical of outsiders. And it's precisely this dichotomy between knowledge and power conveyed through the view, on the one hand, and the danger and impenetrability of the inhabited mountain, on the other, that establish what I am calling the "national ecology" of the Carpathians in Ukrainian cinema.

About the author

Joshua First is the Croft Associate Professor of History and International Studies at the University of Mississippi, in Oxford, MS. He specializes in the history of Russia and Ukraine during the 20th and 21st centuries. First received his Ph.D. in History from the University of Michigan. He has published articles on Ukrainian cinema, Soviet film sociology, and the politics of melodrama. His book, Ukrainian Cinema: Belonging and Identity during the Soviet Thaw (I.B. Taurus) appeared in December 2014 and a follow-up volume on the Ukrainian film, Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors (Sergei Paradjanov, 1964) was published in late 2016. First's current project examines literary, cinematic and administrative representations of technology, scientific management, and medicine under late socialism in the USSR.

Endnotes

1 Thanks to Professor Bohdan Shumylovych at the Center for Urban History in Lviv for inviting me to participate in the lecture series "To Mountains from a City: Imagining Carpathians in Arts and Culture" in June 2021, which in turn led to this article. Thanks also to the helpful comments and gentle criticism from my anonymous reviewer.

2 See, in particular, Patrice Dabrowski's *The Carpathians: Discovering the Highlands of Poland and Ukraine* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2021), which combines all of these elements of Carpathophilia.

3 See Andrew Denning, *Skiing into Modernity: A Cultural and Environmental History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

4 Eric Rentschler, "A Legend for Modern Times: *The Blue Light* (1932)," in *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 26-51.

5 Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," *The New York Review*, 6 Feb 1975: https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1975/02/06/fascinating-fascism/ (accessed 13 May 2022).

6 Ivan Kaveleridze attempted to make a film about Oleksa Dovbush in the Carpathians in 1941, which was canceled due to the beginning of World War II.

7 Tsentralnyi Derzhavnyi Arkhiv-Muzei Literatury i Mystetstva Ukrainy (TsDAMLMU), f. 670, op. 2, d. 1536.

8 Ihor Sadzhenytsia, "Ukrainske ozvuchennia filmu 'Oleksa Dovbush' stalo dostupne onlain [A Ukrainian Dub of the Film *Oleksa Dovbush* Has Become Available Online]," *Tvoye misto* [*Your City*], 30 Jan 2016: https://web.archive.org/web/20200616220352/http://tvoemisto.tv/news/ukrainske_ozvuchennya_filmu_oleksa_dovbush_stalo_dostupne_onlayn_75918.html (accessed 16 May 2022)

9 Nina Igant'eva, "V puti [On the Way]," *Iskusstvo kino* [*Cinema Art*], no. 1 (Jan 1961), 90-94.

10 Sergei Paradjanov, "Vechnoe dvizhenie [Eternal Motion]," *Iskusstvo kino* [*Cinema Art*], no. 12 (1966), pp. 60-66.

11 Serhii Trymbach, "Chomu zh ne nashym dniam sudylosia? [Why Didn't Things Go Well for Us?]" *Kino Teatr* [*Cinema and Theater*], no. 1 (1997), p. 30. In 2019, there was an actual Americanization of the Franko story with the release of John Wynn's *The Rising Hawk*.

12 Vadim Skuratovskiy, "Kievskaya literaturnaya sreda 60-kh-70-kh godov XX veka [The Kyiv Literary Scene in the 60s-70s of the 20th Century]," *Polit.ru*, 21 May 2010: https://m.polit.ru/articles/publichnye-lektsii/kievskaya-literaturnaya-sreda-60-kh-70-kh-godov-xx-veka-2010-05-21/ (accessed 11 Feb 2024).

13 Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain* [1977] (Canongate Books, 2019), p. 108.