



Introduction

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The idea for this special issue goes back to early 2008, when the prominent Ukrainian cultural critic Mykola Ryabchuk, who was spending that academic year in Edmonton as Stuart Ramsay Tompkins Visiting Professor at the University of Alberta, agreed to give a talk in Victoria, British Columbia. To take full advantage of this opportunity, the Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies at the University of Victoria invited three Ukrainian specialists from nearby universities in British Columbia and Washington state to come as well. Ryabchuk's visit in March 2008 thus turned into a small but very productive one-day workshop on "Ukrainian Culture after Communism." By the end of the day, the idea for this collection was born.¹

Additional papers were then solicited from colleagues working on various aspects of contemporary Ukrainian culture. The resulting special issue is an accurate reflection of the changing landscape of academic work on Ukrainian culture. What was once the domain of diaspora literary scholars teaching in Slavic departments of Western universities is now a global and interdisciplinary field. In addition to Ryabchuk, four other contributors were educated in Ukraine, Poland or Russia, subsequently adding North American Ph.D.s to their East European degrees. They continue publishing and giving talks in Ukraine, which, in a sense, they have never left. The same is true of our Western-born colleagues, who after the collapse of state socialism became a notable presence in Ukrainian Studies in Ukraine. These days, a conference held anywhere in the world is likely to feature a mix of academics from Ukraine and from the West. There are few conceptual and methodological

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differences today between the works produced by Ukrainian scholars and their colleagues abroad. In other words, the field has gone global.

It has also gone interdisciplinary, in terms of the participants' academic affiliations and training as well as their approach to the study of Ukrainian culture. The disciplines represented in this special issue include Slavic Studies, Comparative Literature, History, Sociology, Anthropology, Folklore, and Religious Studies. The traditional narrow understanding of Ukrainian culture – the Ukrainian language, literary works in Ukrainian, and other high culture clearly marked as “Ukrainian” by either language or its connection to the folk tradition – has given way to a much wider concept, including mass culture, new media, political tropes, and societal attitudes. What is Ukrainian about Ukraine's mass culture in the post-communist era can be a difficult question, but pondering it is the only way to understand contemporary Ukraine.

The eleven articles in this special issue reflect the full range of cultural phenomena in post-Soviet Ukraine, from political rhetoric to folk stories to literary works to pop music. The issue opens with a contribution from Mykola Ryabchuk, who examines Russo-Ukrainian relations as a struggle between the discourses of imperial dominance and national liberation. The author proposes postcolonial theory as a tool that could help Russians and Ukrainians to overcome, respectively, imperialistic stereotypes and anti-colonial obsessions. Ryabchuk's methodology is explicitly modern, but his subject matter is traditional for Ukrainian intellectuals – the struggle against Russian political and cultural dominance. This comes out clearly in Marko Pavlyshyn's article, which is devoted to the views of Ivan Dziuba, the famous Ukrainian dissident of the 1960s, who briefly served as the minister of culture after independence. Dziuba's vision of a fully developed Ukrainian culture as an essential attribute of a modern Ukrainian nation and something a Ukrainian state has an obligation to support, can be traced back to Enlightenment ideas and Ukrainization policies of the 1920s. Since his concept of Ukrainian culture is language-based, however, for Dziuba present-day Ukrainian culture remains frustratingly “incomplete” – because Russian still predominates in mass culture – and eroded even further by global, English-speaking mass culture.

Catherine Wanner implicitly problematizes such an understanding of a Ukrainian nation and its culture by devoting her article to the people who left Ukraine precisely for the English-speaking world during the late Soviet and early post-Soviet periods. Evangelicals and Jews from Ukraine, who were accepted in the United States as refugees, maintain little contact with Ukrainian diaspora organizations, dominated as they are by nationalistic and anti-Soviet postwar émigrés. But these new arrivals also lack a clear identity of their

own: Ukrainian Jews in America by and large avoid any institutional structures that could have united them, while the so-called “Slavic” evangelical communities – whose members include Ukrainians, Russians, Belarusians, and Poles – are not based along ethnic lines.

In Ukraine, too, the replacement in the early 1990s of the Soviet ideological canon with a no less ossified nationalist mythology did not result in the universal spread of Ukrainian patriotism, but caused some young Ukrainian (and Ukrainian-speaking) intellectuals to rebel against the new certainties, just as they had rebelled against the old ones. The playful, satirical undermining of the new canon, as Myroslav Shkandrij shows in his article, was at the heart of the Bu-Ba-Bu phenomenon in general and the poetry of Oleksandr Irvanets in particular. In any case, as the reader learns from Maria Rewakowicz’s article, throughout the independence period regionalism in culture, never mind regionalism in politics, did not facilitate the construction of a unified Ukrainian national imagination. This, however, may be a good thing for both the nation and its literature because the global and the local, as well as the national and the regional, are not antithetical concepts, but complement each other. The authors of urban fiction portray their cities very differently, sometimes in a fantastic key, and not all of them write in Ukrainian, but they all identify with Ukraine, and the imagined Ukraine of their prose is a cultural mosaic loosely similar to the real Ukraine. Vitaly Chernetsky’s article adds an important component to this cultural puzzle – young Ukrainian writers can live (or spend extended periods of time) abroad and engage topics and literary models without appearing to be assisting the nation building that is so dear to traditional Ukrainian intellectuals. Yet by staking out their presence on the global cultural scene, they are contributing in an unexpected way to the national culture’s “completeness,” the concept at the heart of Dziuba’s writings.

In her article Natalie Kononenko takes the reader from the world of modern literature to that cradle of Ukrainian culture, the village. However, the author travels there not to marvel at the continuation of the Ukrainian folk tradition, but to analyze the recent changes in story-telling by pious female villagers. Kononenko finds that elderly peasant women, who had previously been controlled by male collective farm chairmen, now find themselves marginalized by other males: priests. Recounting sometimes unorthodox religious stories helped these elderly Ukrainian women to come to terms with the new social realities of post-Soviet transition that they experienced as a time of economic uncertainty and confusing change of authority as represented by educated men – not as an exciting period of freedom and cultural efflorescence. In her contribution to the issue, Alexandra Hrycak also deals with the position of

women in present-day Ukrainian society, but these are educated activist women whose achievements she also compares to the position of women in Russia and Belarus. In the Ukrainian case, the author points out a curious inconsistency between the official, patriarchal, nationalistic rhetoric of the Yushchenko administration stressing motherhood (a Ukrainian woman as the *berehynia* of the nation) and actual policies promoting gender equality and the creation of women's NGOs – an important barometer of the development of civil society. The next article, by Maryna Romanets, only deepens this sense of disparity between the progressive policies Hrycak describes and the popular stereotypes used in politics and mass culture. Romanets analyzes, in particular, the use of sexually explicit imagery in Ukrainian historical films and political propaganda during the Orange Revolution, in both cases as an effective answer to the former imperial master, but also the Russian attempt to turn the weapon of “political” pornography against Ukraine's female Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko. Themes of sexuality and postcolonial condition are interwoven in the author's analysis, bringing the reader back to the themes raised in earlier articles by Ryabchuk and others.

The Russian-Ukrainian cultural divide, which is often less than clear, but almost always divisive in present-day Ukraine, is also the topic of an article by Laada Bilaniuk. She examines the language politics of a popular Ukrainian TV show, where the hosts and guests can speak either Russian or Ukrainian, or even switch languages in the process. A widespread practice on Ukrainian TV since the late 1990s, such bilingual shows have allowed producers to get around state requirements for the use of the “state” language and also neutralize the explosive language issue, but it is actually the spur-of-the-moment decisions by participants and their implications for national identity in which Bilaniuk is most interested. Serhy Yekelchuk continues this theme in his study of Verka Serdutchka, a gender-bending and language-mixing Ukrainian pop star, who for a long time was equally popular in Ukraine and Russia, but recently disappointed his/her Russian fans with a rather unorthodox political statement. The author uses Serdutchka's example to discuss the larger context of post-Soviet change in national identities and to question the traditional borders of inclusion and exclusion in regard to Ukrainian culture.

Overall, the articles in this special issue present a view of contemporary Ukrainian culture as vibrant and intellectually exciting, appealing in its various incarnations to global audiences and mass-culture consumers, as well as to more conservative connoisseurs of national high culture. Cultural phenomena originating in twenty-first-century Ukraine do not always fit easily into the traditional concept of what Ukrainian culture is, but revising old concepts

may be a better solution than rejecting unorthodox cultural products. Owing its very existence as a state to nineteenth-century ideas of linguistic nations entitled to self-rule, modern Ukraine is nevertheless not a country where everybody constantly listens to folk choirs and reads the national classics. Ukrainian citizens manage to preserve allegiance to their land while being immersed into the multilingual, digital, global culture, as well as when they are consuming the native, postmodernist cultural product, which deconstructs the traditional notion of Ukrainianness. This collection is but one step towards a better understanding of just how they manage to do so.