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**Review of the doctoral thesis
of Olga Anna Gontarska**

“Visions of the Past in Ukrainian feature films after 1991”

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Olga Anna Gontarska's dissertation research is devoted to a topic highly relevant in academic terms, the very formulation of which indicates the novelty of the work. Indeed, as the author rightly points out in the Introduction, due to the lack of interest in feature films so far and their omission from research into the history debate, using them as primary sources literally means “finding them” for science. The scholars who concerned themselves on Ukrainian historical politics (Heorhii Kasianov, Oleksandr Hrytsenko, Oksana Shevel) focused mainly on the activities of the central government and political forces. Meanwhile, as the author has shown, the problem of film representations of history is not limited to the activities of the Ukrainian authorities and central institutions. The aim of the dissertation is to shift the focus, observed in the

research conducted so far, from the policy of the Ukrainian authorities and their declarations regarding shaping the image of history to the analysis of the debate about the past, in which different social actors, including filmmakers, participated and still participate. The author's innovative approach is mainly related to the focus on film representations of history, which until now were mainly the subject of analysis by anthropologists or film experts and not by historians.

The thesis covers the area of research related to historical politics (or memory politics – the author uses these terms interchangeably), historical culture, and transition studies. The last of those mentioned until recently was not considered the subject of historians' interest, hence, here too the author paves new ways.

The topic of Olga Gontarska's study is especially important for Ukraine. Hayden White in his essay "What is a Historical System" argued that times of revolution and social transformation always produce a process that he called "retrospective ancestral constitution". This process consists in society's rejection of the old "ancestry" and choosing of new "ideal ancestors", whose activity is considered a model for the present and for the building of an ideal future. A similar process has been taking place in Ukraine, starting with the time of *perestroika* and the collapse of the USSR. The Euromaidan of 2013–2014 ("Revolution of Dignity") has given it a new impetus. Ukrainian society is getting rid of the old, Soviet-imperial "ancestry", and establishing (or reviving) an alternative one. Obviously, cinema can play a very important role in this process, although, as Olga Gontarska shows, just in the Ukrainian case its potential has remained largely unrealized.

The structure of the reviewed dissertation is quite clear, logical, and consistent. It includes seven chapters, the first of which is devoted to methodology, and the last illustrates the realities of film production in Ukraine. Chapters two through

six focus on feature films in five main themes: (1) the Soviet past, including communist terror and the Chernobyl disaster; (2) attempts to implement an inclusive concept of the Ukrainian history by including non-Ukrainian ethnic groups, especially Jews and Crimean Tatars, in film stories about the past; (3) the history of Ukrainians during World War II and the "war after the war" (post-war activities of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army); (4) the Cossack era (17th and 18th centuries); and finally (5) transformation period after 1991. The thematic structure chosen by the author is optimally subordinated to the tasks formulated in the dissertation.

The first chapter, methodological and theoretical, has been divided into two parts. The first one presents the methodological discussion on the use of fictional films in historical research to date. Olga Gontarska discusses various ideas about the role of movies and how they are used by Marc Ferro, Pierre Sorlin, Siegfried Kracauer as well as Robert Rosenstone and Hayden White. According to the author, some research trends turned out to be less useful, e.g. historical memory, or debatable (Hayden White's historiophoty). The challenges related to establishing the criteria for selecting film sources for the dissertation and the issue of identifying films as "Ukrainian" have been presented in the second part of the chapter, in particular, on the example of the film "ТойХтоПройшовКрізьВогонь" (2012).

The second chapter discusses feature films whose main theme is traumatic experiences during the Soviet period. Such issues as the images of the Great Famine (Holodomor) and Executed Renaissance, the moral destruction of an individual in the service of the system, as well as resettlement as part of the Soviet repressions after World War II are discussed in detail. A second subchapter is devoted to a film reflection on the Chernobyl accident as a social trauma of the declining period of the Soviet Union.

Chapter 3 discusses the attempts to implement an inclusive concept of the Ukrainian history by including other nationalities, ethnic groups, and even entire state organisms in film stories about the past. This topic is illustrated mainly on the example of films dealing with the history of the Crimean Tatars, the Jewish minority, but also with the peculiarities of the history of regions that for a long time were a cultural border. The fragment devoted to the film about Metropolitan Sheptytsky introduces the theme of religion into the narrative.

As a scholar of the Ukrainian nationalist movement, I was particularly interested in Chapter 4, which deals with the reflection of the history of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and Ukrainian Insurgent Army in feature films. It contains a story that can be interpreted in Hayden White's terms: how the Ukrainian diaspora, with the help of Ukrainian filmmakers, especially Oles' Yanchuk, have tried to impose their own list of "ideal ancestors" on Ukrainians, with Stepan Bandera, Roman Shukhevych, the OUN, and the UPA most prominent among them. Olga Gontarska rightly states that in the case of the UPA, the productions financed by the diaspora stood out from other films relating to the same period due to the strong and uncritical heroization of representatives of the Ukrainian underground and the assumption of creating new myths. Paradoxically, one of the most anti-Soviet filmmakers Oles' Yanchuk used techniques and patterns typical of depicting heroes in film pictures of the Soviet times.

Chapter 5 discusses the images of the events of the 17th and 18th centuries that took place in the territory of today's Ukraine. It includes both historical dramas and costumed films. The next chapter is devoted to films relating to the transformation period after 1991. This chapter also addresses the issue of the "extra-cinema" functioning of films in the social space and the related challenges in the field of research on their reception.

In general, Olga Gontarska's dissertation paints a rather sad picture of the history of Ukrainian historical cinema of the last three decades. The author convincingly shows the reasons for this situation in the last chapter of her work.

The conclusions of the dissertation are well substantiated, logically follow from the content of the main sections of the dissertation, mostly do not cause objections and fully confirm the thesis stated in the Introduction about the innovative nature of the work. Three theses deserve special attention.

1. One cannot speak of a coherent and comprehensive politics of memory in all areas of culture in Ukraine in the analyzed period. The actions and declarations taken were rather a facade hiding the lack of a long-term plan and prospective thinking of the authorities.
2. There was a specific Ukrainian phenomenon of "cinema without viewers" – the exclusion of Ukrainian historical films from the public debate about the past as an example of a new type of censorship. Fictional films about history were deprived of a role in the public debate due to the lack of financial support, effective distribution, and modern promotional tools. "Cinema without viewers" has become a paradox of Ukrainian mass culture, which has remained a niche space due to the specific post-Soviet economic and cultural conditions.
3. There were successful attempts at an inclusive narrative about the Crimean Tatars or the Jewish minority in the history films. However, in the case of other nationalities – Russians, Poles or Romanians – the emphasis was on the imposition of power and not on coexistence or cultural contribution. The key to distinguishing or excluding from an inclusive historical perspective was the existence of state organisms which at certain times posed threats to Ukrainian identity. This did not apply to the Jewish minority or the Crimean Tatars in the 20th century.

While positively evaluating Olga Gontarska's doctoral thesis, I would like to note some insufficient shortcomings and debatable points.

1. The author has used several works by Ukrainian historians, but I have not found an important work among them – Heorhii Kasianov's book *Past Continuous*, published in 2018. Along with the book by Oleksandr Hrytsenko *Presidents and Memory*, today it is the most thorough study of historical politics in Ukraine in the late 20th and the early 21st century.
2. Although a detailed analysis of the historical accuracy of feature films was not the author's task, nevertheless, when episodes of films are based on unreliable or falsified sources, it is worth mentioning. In the case of the “executed kobzars’ congress” depicted in the film “Поводир” (“The Guide”), the author indicates that this event was “legendary” (pp. 59 and 60), while the “order of Lavrentiy Beria and Georgy Zhukov” to deport all Ukrainians, quoted in the film “Страчені світанки” (“Executed Dawns”), is mentioned without any comments as an authentic document (p. 73). Meanwhile, researchers have long established that this “order” was a Nazi propaganda forgery. Even on the site “Archive of Alexander N. Yakovlev”, to which the author refers, this order is placed in the section “Dubia. Falsified and dubious deportation documents.”
3. The author mentioned the lack of a coherent and comprehensive memory politics of the state authorities as a negative aspect of the Ukrainian situation. This is indeed a disadvantage, but it also has its positive side. As Heorhii Kasianov notes, “historical politics is a way of manipulating consciousness to achieve a certain political goal, it is the translation and realization of the interests of certain social groups.” Obviously, the interests of these groups do not always overlap with the interests of society as a whole. The experience of both Ukraine and Poland shows that some decisions of state authorities in the field of historical politics

can have negative consequences both for international relations and within the country. If such decisions become elements of a coherent and comprehensive policy, the damage from them becomes even greater. Conversely, the lack of the comprehensive historical politics on the part of the state authorities leaves more room for freedom to other actors in the politics of memory, including filmmakers.

However, these minor weakness and debatable points cannot reduce the scholarly value of the dissertation, which makes a very positive impression of a solid theoretical basis, the amount of source base used, including the number of analyzed Ukrainian films, the quality of analysis, the author's impartiality, and the novelty of the results. I do not doubt that the dissertation "Visions of the Past in Ukrainian feature films after 1991" meets the requirements of Article 13, paragraph 1 of the Law on Academic Degrees and Titles. Concluding, I strongly recommend to award the doctor's degree to Olga Anna Gontarska.



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