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# AUTHORIAL DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING IN UKRAINE IN THE LATE 1980 TO EARLY 1990 s : BETWEEN POLITICAL AWAKENING AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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The article explores the transformation of Ukrainian documentary cinema during the late 1980 s to early 1990 s – an essential period marked by the collapse of Soviet ideological control and the rise of national consciousness. It focuses on the emergence of author documentary filmmaking as a response to newly accessible, previously suppressed subjects, including political repression, the Holodomor, Chernobyl, Ukrainian dissidence, and distorted historical narratives. A central feature of this transformation was the application of *kino-pravda* (film-truth) – a technique pioneered by Dziga Vertov – where subjective observation, minimal mediation, and immersion in real events replaced traditional propagandistic cliché. Films such as *Steps of Democracy*, *July Thunderstorms*, and *Chernobyl: Chronicle of Difficult Weeks* illustrate how Ukrainian filmmakers adopted these methods to reconstruct public memory and challenge official narratives. The article underscores the importance of documentary cinema not only as a medium of filming historical events but also as a powerful cultural instrument in constructing national identity. Through its capacity to interpret collective trauma, articulate suppressed voices, and reflect the evolving societal values of an emerging independent Ukraine, documentary film became a powerful tool for national self-definition. Future research should further examine the role of documentary cinema in constructing Ukrainian post-Soviet national narratives and its long-term influence on cultural memory and identity formation.

**Key words:** audiovisual culture, national identity, film and television art, Ukrainian cinema, documentary film, genre transformations.

**Relevance of the Study and Problem Statement.** Contemporary Ukrainian cinema is known in the world, as a «representative» of young talented directors who work in extraordinary dramatic situations and create competitive films that represent the struggle of Ukrainians for the right of self-identification. What role do documentary filmmakers play in this struggle?

The earliest triumphs of documentary cinema in Ukraine are associated with the films of Dziga Vertov, who is traditionally considered to be one of the first documentary filmmakers and theorists of «cinema truth» [3]. His films, including *The Movie Eye* (1924, cinematographer M. Kaufman), *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929, cinematographer M. Kaufman), *Symphony of Donbas* (Enthusiasm) (1930, cinematographer B. Zeitlin) are still regarded as the significant works in realm of world documentary cinema. In 2014, the British Film Institute published a film rating in which «*Man with a Camera*» was recognized as the greatest documentary of all time.

In 1924, Dziga Vertov shot an experimental silent film titled *The Movie Eye*, which he described as the first film created without the involvement of actors or traditional artists [1]. Despite receiving an award at the World Exhibition in Paris, the film was met with sharp criticism in the Soviet Union, where it was condemned for allegedly wasting film stock. The editing was deemed excessively abrupt and the camera angles unusually unconventional. Vertov's attempt to create a film without titles, aspiring toward a universal cinematic language composed solely of images, was denounced as formalist [13; 98]. During the Second World War, Vertov directed films about the Soviet people's struggle against Nazism. However, in the postwar period, he became a target of political persecution against the so-called «rootless cosmopolitans».

However, within the totalitarian Soviet regime, Dziga Vertov's concept of «cinema truth» was not only lacked prospects for further development but also fundamentally contradicted to the system of propagandistic myth-making. The filmmaker's subjective view was incompatible with the discourse of Soviet collectivism, where the only permissible «eye» was that of the Communist Party. Ukrainian documentary filmmakers were

limited to working within the frames of the popular science genre. The Kyivnauchfilm studio achieved the significant results in this field. One of its most prominent directors was Fedor Sobolev (1931–1984), a Kharkiv-born documentary filmmaker who became a «father» of the so-called «Kyiv School of Scientific Cinema».

Since the latter half of the 1980 s, Ukrainian documentary cinema has entered a new phase of development, when every decade was marked with distinct characteristics. Ukrainian documentaries were expected to pursue «cinematic truth» to the audience, uncovering and illuminating the historical «blank spots» that emerged as a result of decades of total censorship.

*An analysis of the theoretical approaches* to various aspects of documentary filmmaking reveals a divergence in perspectives between Ukrainian and international (primarily English-language) researchers. These differences are particularly evident in how documentary film is conceptualized as a distinct cinematic form. For Ukrainian scholars, the classification of types and genres serves as a foundational framework for the study of documentary cinema. In contrast, genre distinctions hold less significance in contemporary Western film studies, where the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction films are increasingly fluid in both theory and practice. Western scholars tend to focus on issues such as effectiveness in addressing harsh social problems within commercial and economic frameworks, while Ukrainian scholars focus on the documentary's dialogue with society [see: 2]. A similar divergence is evident in approaches to the theme of identity in documentary film. While Western theorists often approach this subject through the lenses of philosophy and cultural sociology, Ukrainian researchers prioritize identity as a central analytic category. In their view, the value of a documentary film is closely tied to the extent to which it can represent questions of identity. Notable Ukrainian scholars who explore documentary cinema from this perspective include O. Kuzmenko [8], L. Novikova [11], S. Marchenko [9], M. Mischenko [10], Y. Pavlichenko [12].

An important dimension of Ukrainian film analysis is the exploration of space in cinema. Researchers investigate this issue from various perspectives. Notably, D. Konovalov – both a scholar and a documentary filmmaker – analyzes different types of space within the framework of the contemporary auteur documentary [7]. Scholars from Kharkiv, M. Demydenko and N. Markhaichuk, focus on the visual representation of historical space in Ukrainian cinema, primarily using feature films as case studies, while drawing significant parallels with documentary films [4].

Ukrainian documentary cinema of the late 1980s and early 1990s can be regarded as a significant subject of scholar research, as it reflects the key socio-political transformations of the transitional period in Ukraine, such as the re-evaluation of crimes committed by the Stalinist regime against the Ukrainian people, the ecological and humanitarian catastrophe of the Chornobyl disaster, the era of *perestroika*, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the revival of national identity, and the formation of an independent Ukrainian state. Equally important and compelling for researchers is the gradual shift from Soviet propaganda to the documentary film as a form of auteur expression.

*Research Aim and Objectives* of the article is to analyze the transformations in Ukrainian documentary cinema during the late 1980 s and early 1990 s through the lens of identity-related issues.

*Presentation of research material.* To comprehend the profound changes that took place in Ukrainian documentary filmmaking beginning in the mid – 1980 s, it is essential to briefly reconsider the state of Soviet documentary cinema during the last two decades of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. The development of television and the expansion of film production – both of which were actively employed by Soviet ideologues – contributed to a documentary filmmaking boom. At the center of this process were the Kyiv Studio of Chronicle and Documentary Films and the Kyiv Studio of Popular Science Films. In addition to these central institutions, various regional and even departmental studios (affiliated with ministries or major industrial enterprises) also produced documentary films [14; 128–129].

Accordingly, the stream of such documentaries was enormous. However, the vast majority of these films – centered on themes of the «leading role of the Communist Party» and «outstanding industrial achievements» – cannot meet serious critique from the point of cinematic art. The quality of these films was notably poor, based on an obligatory set of ideological cliché, required by Soviet propaganda. At the same time, there existed a small group of documentary filmmakers who produced films of professional quality. This is evidenced by the consistent success of Ukrainian documentary filmmakers at international film festivals specializing in the genre [14; 129].

Documentary films that addressed topics subject to minimal censorship – such as popular science, sports, nature, or the arts – often found success beyond the borders of the Ukrainian SSR. The Soviet approach to Ukrainian culture was deliberately reductionist, promoting a so-called «sharovary-style» representation that emphasized folkloric and traditional elements while suppressing its deeper historical and cultural ambiguity.

Documentary filmmaking in the 1980 s was the prolific sector of the Soviet Ukrainian film industry, which primarily functioned within an agitational and propagandistic framework. In this context, documentary film served as an ideological tool for constructing a submissive image of Ukrainian culture and Ukrainian national identity.

Nevertheless, documentary cinema of this period revealed several crucial issues of Ukrainian national

self-identification. Documentary filmmakers tried to explore and analyze national roots and the historical distinctiveness of Ukrainian culture, in spite of the fact that all documentary films were state-sponsored. There was no possibility for auteur vision that could overcome the ideological filters of Soviet propaganda. As a result, filmmakers frequently had to use «Aesopian language» even in the genre of agitational films. Their efforts actualize the understanding of the basic principles of auteur documentary filmmaking. Namely the importance of the director's subjective interpretation of reality or historical events.

Thus, during the ideological crisis of the late 1980s, in Ukraine existed a well-developed documentary industry, including skilled professionals and qualified technical personnel. Consequently, when the Soviet leadership proclaimed the policy of *glasnost*, a period of flourishing auteur documentary cinema in Ukraine was started. For the first time, documentary filmmakers were able to work with «cinema truth». The turbulent political, social, and cultural events of the late 1980s allowed Ukrainian documentarians to focus on filming history in real time. In this respect, the documentary cinema of the transitional period may be viewed as a precursor to the «streaming-era» documentaries that appeared two decades later – enabled by both new technologies and evolving perspectives in the 2000s.

A bright example of the shift toward auteur documentary filmmaking is the film *July Thunderstorms* (*Липневі ХРОЗЫ*, 1989–1991), directed by A. Karas and V. Shkurin, which was awarded the Shevchenko National Prize in 1993. This documentary explored politically crucial events – the miners' strikes in Donbas, which significantly influenced the broader political discourse. The directors chose the format of a diptych (or documentary dilogy), often considered one of the most versatile forms of late 20th-century documentary cinema. The two parts of the film, *Strike* and *Outburst*, present different perspectives on the relatively brief period of the miners' protest movement. The first part focuses on a specific episode: the July 1989 miners' demonstrations on the square in front of the Donetsk Regional Administration. The manifesto of *cinéma vérité* regained its relevance, because the filmmakers were physically present among the protesters, observing events from inside. In doing so, they fulfilled one of the basic principles of auteur documentary: the elimination of distance between the documentary filmmakers and their characters. The second part focuses on the protest movement in 1990, offering the audience an opportunity to connect both events into a continuous narrative and to witness another dimension of the miners' resistance – one that unfolds not in the streets but within the so-called «corridors of power» (a euphemism typical of the late 1980 – early 1990s). This reinterpretation of power structures becomes a key element in the formation of Ukrainian auteur documentary cinema.

Overall, the comparison of the diptych's two parts reveals the filmmakers' intention to portray multiple temporal dimensions and the contrasting perceptions of unfolding events. K. Yakovlenko, in her study of the cinematic image of the miner, describes *July Thunderstorms* as the first work in contemporary Ukrainian documentary history «devoid of ideological pathos, not conceived as a symphony or an ode to any phenomenon or event». She also notes the film's «cinophilic» character, particularly evident in its postmodern citation of the 1934 propaganda film *The End of Peking* (*Кінець Пекіна*, dir. M. Levkova; *Ukrkinochronika*), which appears in the second part. This structure reveals that the miners' suffering remains almost the same since the 1930s – this idea embodies the directors' statement of the film. In a certain sense, this approach may be considered historically appropriate within the methodological framework of event interpretation [15; 114].

The documentary *Steps of Democracy* (*Шляхи демократії*, 1992; dir. H. Shklyarevskyi) can also be regarded as an attempt to interpret real events without claiming to demonstrate the «ultimate truth». In our view, it is important to highlight that in documentary filmmaking focused on reflecting socio-political events – and particularly those that aimed at constructing national identity – this task is inherently complex both artistically and conceptually.

The film focuses on the demands, hopes, and emotions of political «spring» in the period from the late 1980s to early 1990s. The protagonists and antagonists gradually exchange their roles and disillusionment becomes the dominant atmosphere of the film. It is worth emphasizing that during the transitional period, there was a clear intention of the part of the filmmakers to distance themselves from the conventions of *Soviet documentary film*. Thus, the authorial perspective becomes the foundation for interpreting events.

The film initially presents the appearance of new protest figures (primarily from the People's Movement of Ukraine, or simply «Rukh»), but its second part portrays a very notion of the public protest. Yet, the feeling of disillusionment remains. A noteworthy aspect of the film is its extensive use of archival footage shot by cinematographers from the Ukrainian Studio of Chronicle and Documentary Films. This makes *Steps of Democracy* one of the earliest Ukrainian examples of the *observational documentary* genre. According to I. Kalinina, the film «reflects the paradoxes of the transformation of Ukrainian Soviet society into a 'post-Soviet' independent society» [6; 131].

It is important to emphasize that such delicate issue as national identity cannot be conveyed through a straightforward narrative or linear storyline. It demands a complex approach that relies on subjective

evaluations, offers interpretations, and constructs hypotheses.

As scholars of Ukrainian documentary cinema from the late 1980 s to the early 1990s rightly note, Ukrainian documentarians suddenly found themselves facing an overwhelming range of topics that had previously been strictly prohibited in the USSR. These included: the brutality of the political repressions of the 1930 s in the Soviet Union and in Ukraine in particular (including the theme of the «Executed Renaissance»); the Holodomor as an act of genocide against the Ukrainian peasantry; the truthful history of the Second World War and the Soviet Union's role in its outbreak, as well as the existence of secret protocols between Nazi Germany and Stalin's USSR – protocols that also concerned Ukrainian lands; the Ukrainian dissident movement and the generation of the «Sixtiers»; human rights violations in the late Soviet period; and the distortion of the so-called «national question».

As we can see, even when topics appeared strictly historical, they were, in fact, projected into the present and became relevant vehicles for truth-telling and for critiquing the Soviet regime and its system of governance.

The newly gained access to previously forbidden topics – combined with contemporary challenges – led to a situation of thematic abundance, in which quantity did not always equate to quality. Nevertheless, even overtly weak films did not hinder the broader processes of democratization in society. On the contrary, they contributed to the emergence of previously impossible forms of independent journalism in Ukraine and, along with it, a new wave of authorial documentary cinema.

Tragically, the catastrophic man-made disaster at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant in 1986 – both a consequence of the systemic failures of the Soviet command economy and a warning to the world about the risks of entering the era of advanced technologies – became a major thematic focus of Ukrainian documentary cinema.

According to film scholar I. Zubavina, the first cinematic response to the Chornobyl disaster was the documentary film *Chornobyl: Chronicle of Difficult Weeks* (1986; dir. V. Shevchenko). Moreover, it was Volodymyr Shevchenko and his film crew who were among the very first to film footage directly at the place of the catastrophe. The researcher also cites a number of other documentary films that explored this topic – one that continues to be revisited as a form of warning: *Chornobyl: Two Colors of Time* (1988; dir. I. Kobryn), *The Threshold* (1988; dir. R. Serhiyenko), *The Shadow of the Sarcophagus* (1989; dir. H. Shklyarevskiy), among others [5; 21].

*Chornobyl: Chronicle of Difficult Weeks* serves as an example of the transformation occurring within Ukrainian documentary filmmaking. Direct observation of the disaster was merged with authorial choices in editing and composition, including the use of voice-over narration that presented facts as both real events and subjective assessments. The film became widely known for its footage captured in close proximity to the place of disaster.

Volodymyr Shevchenko combined interviews with academician Legasov, who was a government official and member of the commission investigating the causes of the disaster with the observational footage. As a result, the film marked a significant milestone both for the socio-political development of Ukrainian society and for the evolution of documentary cinema.

As the film's editor A. Karas recalled, «The filming process occurred in two stages: first, securing permission to shoot in the exclusion zone; second, obtaining permission to show the film to the audience» [13; 323]. Thus, the attempt to grasp the scale of the Chornobyl disaster through documentary filmmaking simultaneously served as a critique of the decaying system of «late socialism», in harsh contrast with the heroic narratives of the «liquidators».

**Conclusion.** The period from the late 1980 s to the early 1990s marked a formative stage in the development of author-driven Ukrainian documentary cinema. During this time, the gradual uncovering of the «blank spots» in Ukrainian history began. It was in these years that films emerged addressing key components of collective historical memory, which would later serve as the foundation for shaping Ukrainian national identity. These films dealt with the exposure of Soviet crimes, political repression, the Holodomor, suppression of the Ukrainian language and culture, the activities of dissidents, and the revival of an authentic – non-folklorized – national culture.

It is important to emphasize that one of the factors contributing to the success of these films was not only the relevance of the subject matter, but also the use of techniques inherent to authorial documentary filmmaking, particularly the concept of «film-truth» (*kino-pravda*) pioneered by Dziga Vertov.

Future research should focus on examining Ukrainian documentary cinema as a powerful tool for constructing a space of national identity.

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### АВТОРСЬКИЙ ДОКУМЕНТАЛЬНИЙ ФІЛЬМ В УКРАЇНІ КІНЦЯ 1980 -- ПОЧАТКУ 1990-х: МІЖ ПОЛІТИЧНИМ ПРОБУДЖЕННЯМ ТА НАЦІОНАЛЬНОЮ ІДЕНТИЧНІСТЮ

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Досліджено трансформації українського документального кінематографу на зламі 1980–1990-х років ХХ століття в контексті проблематики національної ідентичності. Проаналізовано основні тематичні напрями, що стали актуальними для авторського висловлювання в період ідеологічної кризи та «перебудови»: Чорнобильська катастрофа, шахтарські протести, суспільно-політичні зрушення, осмислення радянських репресій та розсекречення історичних сюжетів. Виявлено художньо-документальні засоби, через які кінематографісти відходили від пропагандистського формату радянської агітдокументалістики та зверталися до авторського погляду, інтерпретаційності та наративної відкритості. Висвітлено, що в цей період документальне кіно стає майданчиком візуального репрезентування національної ідентичності та колективної історичної пам'яті.

*Ключові слова:* аудіовізуальна культура, національна ідентичність, кінотелемистецтво, український кінематограф, документальний фільм, жанрові трансформації.

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### ПСИХОЛОГІЧНІ ОСОБЛИВОСТІ СПРИЙНЯТТЯ СЦЕНІЧНОГО МИСТЕЦТВА : ВЗАЄМОДІЯ АКТОРА ТА ГЛЯДАЧА

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Аналізуються психологічні особливості сприйняття сценічного мистецтва, зокрема у контексті важливості взаємодії актора та глядача. Констатується, що сучасні сценічні практики дедалі більше фокусуються на глядацькому сприйнятті та взаємодії між виконавцем і аудиторією. Дослідження вказують на важливість психологічних, когнітивних і нейрофізіологічних механізмів, що визначають емоційний відгук глядачів. Ключовими аспектами ефективного сценічного дійства у цьому контексті є: емоційна виразність актора – використання методів переживання та фізичних дій для створення глибокого зв'язку з аудиторією; психофізіологія акторської майстерності – контроль голосу, міміки, жестів та різні техніки для впливу на глядацьке сприйняття; психологія сприйняття – розуміння механізмів уваги, ідентифікації та емпатії для підсилення емоційного залучення; театральна терапія – використання сценічних практик у соціальній адаптації, психологічній підтримці, особистісному розвитку тощо.

Загалом сценічні практики – не лише розважальний різновид мистецтва, а й потужний інструмент впливу на людську свідомість, мотивацію, емоції та соціальну взаємодію.

*Ключові слова:* сценічні практики, психологія, взаємодія, глядач, емоції.

*Актуальність дослідження.* Ключ до успіху будь-якого сценічного виступу полягає не лише в тому, що відбувається на сцені, а й у тому, як актору вдається емоційно взаємодіяти з глядацькою аудиторією. Вміння вплинути на психологію глядача може перетворити будь-яку сценічну практику на незабутнє дійство.