Bohdan Tokarsky

The Un/Executed Renaissance
Ukrainian Soviet Modernism and Its Legacies
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Bohdan Tokarsky

The Un/Executed Renaissance

Ukrainian Soviet Modernism and Its Legacies
Abstract

The Ukrainian culture of the 1920s proved to be not only the most effervescent and seminal creative period in Ukraine’s twentieth-century history, but also a distinct phenomenon in the landscapes of both modernism and Soviet culture. Ukrainian Soviet modernism enjoyed the intertwining of various aesthetic sensibilities, combining the exploration of selfhood and engagement with mass audiences, the making of urban literature and drawing upon rural culture, and the radical break with artistic conventions and continuity with (national) cultural traditions. At the same time, the Ukrainian culture of this period fermented at the intersection of several aspirations, primarily between the assertion of national culture long suppressed in the Russian Empire, participation in the shaping of the nascent Soviet project, and a more intensive dialogue with Western European cultures. This crisscross brought about a sui generis multifaceted culture. In the climate of increasing political pressure in the Soviet Union, this rich hybridity went hand in hand with a multi-layered yet fragmented self, which was caught between different projects of identity-in-the-making: communist/socialist, Soviet, Ukrainian, and European. This essay provides an innovative reading of the Ukrainian Soviet culture of the 1920s and its legacies in contemporary Ukrainian culture and politics.
Bohdan Tokarsky works at the Institute for Slavic Studies at the University of Potsdam as part of the research project “Europäische Zeiten/European Times – A Transregional Approach to the Societies of Central and Eastern Europe” (EUTIM). He has been a 2020/2021 Prisma Ukraïna Fellow at the Berlin Forum Transregionale Studien. Dr. Tokarsky completed his doctoral work as a Gates Cambridge Scholar at the University of Cambridge, where he also taught as Affiliated Lecturer in Ukrainian Studies. In his doctoral thesis, he explored the works of the Soviet Ukrainian dissident poet Vasyl Stus. He was also awarded the fellowship of the Ukrainian Research in Switzerland initiative at the University of Basel, where he taught and pursued further research on Vasyl Stus and Soviet (Ukrainian) modernism. In addition to his academic work, Bohdan Tokarsky has also been part of various translation, theatre and poetry projects. He co-authored the verbatim play “The Summer Before Everything” on revolution and war in Ukraine that was staged in Cambridge and Oxford in 2016. He has been engaged in literary translation, in particular working on the translation of the poetry of Vasyl Stus. He has also (co)organised a number of impactful cultural events, with the most recent being the Kharkiv International Theatre Festival 1919-2019: Kulish. Kurbas. Shakespeare, which showcased some of the prominent works of Ukrainian modernist drama.
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The Un/Executed Renaissance: Ukrainian Soviet Modernism and Its Legacies

Introduction

After the executions of Iosif Stalin’s Great Purge, total amnesia with respect to Ukrainian Soviet modernism (this term to be explained shortly) reigned in public consciousness. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, this modernism acquired a potent afterlife. In contemporary Ukraine, it has exerted a considerable cultural impact, while the complex relationship of post-Soviet Ukraine with its Soviet-era legacy has also complicated the reception of the Ukrainian Soviet culture of the 1920s.

Yet beyond Ukrainian Studies, the Ukrainian culture of this period, for all the fascinating questions it raises, more often than not remains largely unchartered territory in the study of both modernism and Soviet culture.1 Commonly, Ukrainian

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1 The more-than-1000-pages 2007 Modernism volume edited by Astradur Eysteinsson and Vivian Liska, for example, contains only a handful of references to Ukrainian modernism. The 2010 Oxford Handbook of Modernisms includes sections on Central Europe and Russia, but hardly touches upon Ukrainian modernism. The 2011 Cambridge Companion to European Modernism discusses Eastern Europe as one of the “peripheral modernisms” (as opposed to “core” modernisms, including Russian modernism). Yet even this section refers to Ukrainian modernism only twice, both times in passing. More recently, the innovative anthology Global Modernists on Modernism, while providing a wide-ranging selection of modernist statements from around the world, nonetheless does not include any Ukrainian writers or artists. Therefore, even volumes devoted to (European) modernism that seek to be representative largely overlook the Ukrainian 1920s or Ukrainian modernism more generally. See: Astradur Eysteinsson and Vivian Liska (eds.), Modernism, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007; Peter Brooker and Andrzej Gasiorek (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; Pericles Lewis (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to European
Soviet modernism either becomes subsumed under the broad categories of ‘Russian’ or ‘Soviet’ culture (especially as the two are commonly and incorrectly equated) or does not receive the critical attention it deserves altogether. This position as a mental blind spot to a great extent results from the marginalisation and even negation of local cultures beyond the Moscow-centre in the Soviet Union, and the ultimate near-total execution of the Ukrainian cultural figures of the 1920s by the Soviet regime coupled with the Soviet policies of the erasure of memory.

Recent studies have reassessed the peripheral situation of Ukrainian culture in the early history of the Soviet Union.
Mayhill Fowler emphasises the importance of “restor[ing] the position of the periphery as central to early Soviet cultural production and reception. An exclusive focus on Moscow”, Fowler argues, “has obscured the stories in the provinces, and these stories are essential for a more nuanced understanding of how Soviet culture developed across the Soviet Union”.\textsuperscript{4} Vera Faber similarly posits that “[f]rom a Ukrainian perspective, Ukraine’s own cultural life represented just as important a centre as any Western European and, especially, any Russian metropolis. . . . Ukraine had established itself as an autonomous centre, meaning that, in a certain sense, the centre and the periphery began to swap places”.\textsuperscript{5} Importantly, the “Ukrainian perspective” itself was not unitary, as two major approaches co-existed in Soviet Ukraine to the construction of a culture that would be both Ukrainian and Soviet, what Olena Palko suggests to call “Soviet Ukrainian culture” and “Soviet culture created in the Ukrainian language”:

\textit{\textit{thetically eclectic and constantly vying for cultural hegemony, the Georgian modernists clearly sought a place within the Soviet order, just as they had previously embraced the independent Georgian state, reassessing their ideological orientation without abandoning the principle of aesthetic experimentation and free innovation}.} Harsha Ram, “From Menshevik to Bolshevik: The Legacies of Georgian Modernism”, \textit{The Slavonic and East European Review}, 98/1, 2020, 139–151, here 149.


\textsuperscript{5} “\textit{Aus ukrainischer Perspektive stellte das eigene kulturelle Leben nämlich ein ebenso wichtiges Zentrum dar wie so manche westeuropäische und, viel prägnanter noch, jede Russische Metropole. . . . Die Ukraine hatte sich als eigenständiges Zentrum etabliert, sodass Zentrum und Peripherie gewissermaßen die Plätze zu tauschen begannen}”. Vera Faber, \textit{Die ukrainische Avantgarde zwischen Ost und West: Intertextualität, Intermedialität und Polemik im ukrainischen Futurismus und Konstruktivismus der späten 1920er-Jahre}, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019, 85. All translations from German, Ukrainian, Russian and French in this essay are mine, except where stated otherwise. Helpfully drawing upon Yuri Lotman’s concept of semiosphere, Faber notes that “there is increased dynamism on the periphery, while the center freezes, not least because of its own organisation”. Ibid., 28–29.
Whereas the promoters of the Soviet Ukrainian cultural project aimed at a decentralized artistic map with numerous cultural centres spread across the various Soviet republics, the contributors to the all-Soviet culture [created in Ukrainian to ease the spread of socialist content] saw Moscow as the only true centre and the peripheries as provincial.  

While the Soviet regime pursued the policy of marginalisation and provincialisation of national cultures (counter to the declared national development under *korenizatsiia*, ‘indigenisation’/’nativisation’), Ukraine asserted its own dynamic culture through the essays and psychological prose of Mykola Khvylov, the innovative theatre of Les Kurbas and the plays of Mykola Kulish, the achievements of the Ukrainian film industry, Mykhail Semenko’s futurist avant-garde, and the intellectual prose of Viktor Petrov (Domontovych) and Valerian Pidmohylny, among many others. Conceptually, this sense of cultural sovereignty culminated in the 1925–1928 Literary Discussion in Ukraine and Khvylov’s assertion that “[w]e are indeed an independent state whose republican organism is a part of the Soviet Union”.  

Opposition to Russian/central cultural hegemony represents but one aspect of communication in the Soviet semiosphere, which encompassed a complex network of relationships, “pluralistic overlapping”, and interlocking between the centre and

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After all, opposition itself implies a certain degree of dependence on what is opposed. Yet the sense and practice of distinct national, and in particular Ukrainian, modernist projects vis-à-vis the official Soviet centre similarly deserve to be taken seriously.

Khvylovy refers to David Strauss’s ostensible phrase “Even if Sirius is larger than the sun, it does not help our grapes to ripen” in order to state: “Thus, if Russian art is great and powerful this does not prove anything. Quite the opposite, if its light does not reach us, like the Canis Major constellation [which contains Sirius] until after many years, then we have to stop orientating ourselves towards it as soon as possible”. Khvylovy frames the relationship between Ukrainian culture and Russian culture/the official centre in spatial terms, emphasising the distance and rupture between them. Semenko’s ‘poem-painting’ “Systema” (“The System”, 1922) provides another vivid example of a restructuring of this relationship, using space – through the arrangement of various places and names

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8 Faber, *Die ukrainische Avantgarde*, 28.
on the map of his poem, as well as through typography (play with fonts, sizes, highlighting) - to foreground the periphery and marginalise (the) centre(s), thereby reconfiguring and disrupting the “system”. Characteristically, whereas such places as New York and London occupy a notable visual place in Semenko’s
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piece, Moscow appears significantly smaller and less prominent visually (while, at the same time, closer to the middle of the poem’s space, where the poet places himself and his version of *Kobzar*).

**Shifting Terminologies**

In this essay, I discuss what I tentatively propose to call here ‘Ukrainian Soviet modernism’. This notion requires a note of explanation. First, it has spatial and temporal limits. I focus on the Ukrainian modernist culture created in the Soviet Union during the (long) ‘1920s’ (the shorthand for the period between the years 1917 and 1933). It does not exhaust the notion of Ukrainian modernism writ large. In her classic study, Solomiia Pavlychko considers Ukrainian modernism as an array of modernist phenomena spanning the period between the feminist works of Lesia Ukrainka and Olha Kobylianska at the turn of the nineteenth century to the New York Group of Ukrainian poets writing in the 1950s–1960s. Ukrainian Soviet modernism constitutes a significant part and stage (often perceived as Ukrainian high modernism) of this cultural continuum, a part and stage that coincided with the making of the Soviet project. Like in the case of any cultural taxonomy, focusing on a specific period, as

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9 Solomiia Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrainskii literaturi*, Kyiv: Lybid, 1999. Because of its spatial limitation, Ukrainian Soviet modernism would not include, for example, the likes of Bohdan-Ihor Antonych (1909–1937), a poet of distinctive modernist sensibility who spent his most creative years in Lviv, which was part of Poland until 1939. Thus, while Antonych pursued his creative work in the 1920s and 1930s, geographically and aesthetically he would not fall within the category of ‘Ukrainian Soviet’. See: Lidia Stefanowska, “Between Creation and the Apocalypse: The Poetry of Bohdan Ihor Antonych”, in: Bohdan Ihor Antonych, *The Essential Poetry of Bohdan Ihor Antonych: Ecstasies and Elegies*, trans. Michael M. Naydan, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2010, 21–37.
The very notion of ‘modernism’ is notoriously difficult to define, both in the Ukrainian context and beyond. Pavlychko focuses on “attempts rather than results materialised in classic masterpieces” and posits that in Ukraine modernism “did not make a transition from a discourse into artistic practice”. However, I believe that the use of ‘modernism’ is appropriate here, as the works of the mentioned artists – Khvylovy, Kulish, Kurbas, Petrov, Pidmohylny, Semenko and many others – contain a great deal of, inter alia, radical formal experimentation, anti-mimetic poetics, exploration of the self, fragmentation, and intertextuality, all of which unmistakably point to a distinct modernist sensibility in its broad sense. By the same token, Ukrainian Soviet modernism provided a number of “classic masterpieces”, including, among many others, Kulish’s plays Narodnyi Malakhii (People’s Malakhii, 1927) and Patetychna Sonata (Sonata Pathétique, 1929); Khvylovy’s stories “Ia (Romantyka)” (“I (Romantica)”, 1924) and “Povist pro sanatoriyinu zonu” (“A Story About the Sanatorium Zone”, 1924); the poetry of Mykola Bazhan, Semenko, Volodymyr Svidzinsky, and

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11 “namirakh, a ne na rezultataxh, utilenxkh u klasxchnxkh shedevrakh”, “modernizm iz dyskursu ne pereishov u khudozhniu praktiku, ne stav chyms bilshym za sproby”. Pavlychko, Dyskurs, 22.
12 With respect to Khvylovy, Vitaly Chernetsky argues, for example, that “the innovative, or, as Pavlychko called it, experimental (laboratorna) prose of Khvyl’ovyi fits well this larger international context of aesthetic innovation and experimentation of his time, now commonly known as modernism, even if a precise definition of this term remains elusive”. Vitaly Chernetsky, “Mykola Khvyl’ovyi’s ‘A Sentimental Story’: In Search of a Ukrainian Modernity”, Harvard Ukrainian Studies, 32–33/1, 2011–2014, 165–177, here 170.
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Pavlo Tychyna; not to mention the novels of Pidmohylny, especially *Misto (The City, 1928)*, and Petrov, in particular *Divchynka z vedmedykom (The Girl With a Teddy Bear, 1928)* and *Doktor Serafikus (Doctor Seraphicus, 1929)*, many of which are yet to be translated properly into English and other (European) languages; as well as Oleksandr Dovzhenko’s notable films, most prominently *Zemlia (Earth, 1930)*.

Here, I employ ‘modernism’ as an umbrella term that encompasses multiple strands, including, rather than being opposed to, the avant-garde. The relationship between the two is complex, and, just like modernism itself, not clearly defined (this largely depends on the intellectual tradition that one approaches this pair from). Pavlychko assigns such traits to the Ukrainian avant-garde as “pseudomodernity [psevdosuchasnist], anti-intellectualism, anti-philosophism, anti-individualism, anti-elitism, anti-psychologism, as well as apologia for violence”, and characterises this avant-garde as an “antimodernist phenomenon”.13 On the other hand, George Grabowicz notes:

Since independence, writers who fall into the now expanded category of modernism, and were in their time seen as avant-garde or experimental – Mykola Khvyl´ ovyi, Valeriian Pidmohyl´ nyi, Maik Iohansen, V. Domontovych (Viktor Petrov), Iurii Kosach, Ihor Kostets´kyi, and others . . . may also be considered as forming the ‘high modernist’ version of twentieth-century Ukrainian literature.14

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Indeed, one should be aware of the diachronic difference in terminology. While *avanhard/avangard* was a common notion in the 1920s Soviet discourse, “modernism” was “demonized by its populist, civic-minded, and utilitarian contemporaries and by its later, equally populist but much more reductive and vulgar Soviet critics”, degenerating into “just a label of modernism as a decadent, sick art”. Ukrainian Soviet writers and artists such as Khvylovy and Kulish did not refer to themselves as modernists and, instead, often approached this notion negatively, especially given the (mis)conceptions around it in the Soviet context. Nonetheless, the poetics of the works that I refer to in this essay may be considered modernist in the general sense I described earlier, which thus implies a certain “critical detachment of the objects of modernist studies from the terms of their own self-description”.

The entangled interconnection between modernism and the avant-garde has also been a contentious issue beyond the Ukrainian case, of course. Edward Możejko suggests that “modernism can be understood as a term denoting constant tension between these two variants [‘modest’ and ‘extreme’] of the same artistic invariant”. Astradur Eysteinsson similarly concludes

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18 Możejko points out the common approach in “Western literary criticism” to distinguish between modernism proper as “experimental literature of rather moderate bent which did not ignore the tradition of past artistic experience” and the avant-garde as “extreme artistic experiments, which called for breaking off (most often by noisy and iconoclastic manifestos) with the legacy of past cultural achievements”. Możejko, “Tracing the Modernist Paradigm”, 19–20.
that “[t]here is no clear dividing line between the two. The difference is fluid, yet dynamic”.\textsuperscript{19} While the distinction between modernism and the avant-garde might be meaningful in general, for the purposes of this essay I do not treat them as opposites, but rather look at modernism as a broad-ranging phenomenon imbued with modern consciousness, disruption of realism, aesthetic experimentation and innovation. In this approach, modernism includes the avant-garde as its – most radical and provocative – part.

Finally, a note is due regarding the – apparently ungrammatical – notion of ‘Ukrainian Soviet’. The most common paradigm for the 1920s Ukrainian culture created in the Soviet Union has been the ‘executed renaissance’ (rozstriliane vidrodzhennia), which was put forward by the Ukrainian émigré critic Iurii Lavrinenko in the post-war period. Recently, scholars have called this concept into question, problematising both the ‘executed’ and the ‘renaissance’ parts of the concept, in particular its emphasis on victimhood, its unbalanced canon, which, for example, does not contain a single woman (an issue that I address in a separate section later in this essay – discussing women’s literature and art during this period), and its assertion of the problematic dichotomy between ‘Ukrainian’ and ‘Soviet’ in the 1920s. Halyna Hryn exposes the “implicit martyrological cast [of the paradigm of an executed renaissance], the idea that national and moral criteria can be brought to bear in the evaluation of authors and their works” and points out “the broader question of the complicity of intellectuals in setting up a system that in the end destroyed them”.\textsuperscript{20}


\textsuperscript{20} Halyna Hryn, “The Executed Renaissance Paradigm Revisited”, \textit{Harvard
that “[t]he ‘executed’ figure and the rhetoric of martyrdom extremely simplify the complex system that entailed the literary life of the 20s”\textsuperscript{21} Lavrinenko’s approach does not fully take on board the entangled processes of Ukrainisation and Sovietisation in Soviet Ukraine and the nuanced relationship between the centre and peripheries, as well as the joint, if turbulent and intricate, construction of the Soviet.\textsuperscript{22}


\textsuperscript{22} Similarly, the notion of a ‘renaissance’ requires significant reservations. Indeed, the Ukrainian Soviet culture of the 1920s could, in a sense, be described as “a new renaissance, with all the connotations usually attributed to that word, including the idea of a new creation, synthesizing often opposing and even contradictory traditions”. Irena R. Makaryk, “Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Experimentation”, in: Irena R. Makaryk and Virulna Tkacz (eds.), \textit{Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Experimentation}, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010, 16–24, here 18. In particular, the Ukrainian Soviet culture of this period extensively drew upon the Baroque tradition, as I show later in this essay. Yet, on the other hand, the use of ‘renaissance’ is also problematic, given both its essentialist connotations and the specific context of the 1920s Ukrainian Soviet scene. “[T]he complex twists and turns of Ukrainian cultural life [during this period]”, posits Krupa, “cannot be, in its entirety, clearly defined as a ‘renaissance’”. Krupa, “Arguments against ‘The Executed Renaissance’”, 284–287. Various ‘renaissances’ were part of the contemporary discourse, ranging, inter alia, from the “proletarian renaissance” (“proletarskyi renesans”) and the “Red Renaissance” (“Chervonyi Renesans”) to the “Asiatic renaissance” (“aziatskyi renesans”), the latter term being a central concept in Khvylov’s pamphlets. For thorough discussion of Khvylov’s theory of (Ukraine’s) cultural revival, influenced especially by the (Italian) Renaissance, German Romanticism, in particular, Sturm und Drang’s Genie-zeit, and Oswald Spengler’s Decline of the West see: Hryn, “The Executed Renaissance Paradigm Revisited”, 77–89. Pavlychko further exposes the problematic mis(use) of the notion of renaissance, which overemphasises external factors and downplays the internal development of literature: “An approach exists, whereby Ukrainian literature is perceived as a constant renaissance [vidrodzhennia]. Conceptually, this means that the constant renaissance was this literature’s response to the unfavourable external conditions of pressure and destruction. The idea about the waves of renaissance
The concept of ‘Ukrainian Soviet’ points to the complex relationship between these two notions, as ‘Ukrainian’ and ‘Soviet’ were dynamic (bound up with the parallel processes of Ukrainisation and Sovietisation) and porous, mutually affecting each other during this time. The reception of Ukrainian Soviet modernism presents a paradox: while Ukrainian modernism is habitually missing in the study of early Soviet culture, in the study of Ukrainian modernism the Soviet element is commonly seen as exclusively external, imposed, and hostile; the complex relationship between ‘Ukrainian’ and ‘Soviet’ has only started to receive thorough attention in the past few years.23 Parenthetically, the qualifier ‘Soviet’ here does not (necessarily) mean being supportive of Soviet state policies or conforming to the Soviet (Socialist Realist) artistic canon, not least because the canon itself was in the making. This qualifier rather shows the subtle interconnection between the simultaneous shaping of Ukrainian culture and Soviet culture. ‘Soviet’ eventually came to be inadequately perceived as synonymous with (Soviet) Russian, but this early period especially shows how ‘Soviet’ rather represented a mobile category to which various (Soviet) cultures – Belarusian, Georgian, Jewish, Ukrainian, and others – made their significant contributions.

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23 Fowler, for example, brings to the fore “cultural construction” and in her book “does not assume Ukrainian culture as an objective category, but rather traces the construction of ‘Soviet Ukrainian’ culture as a result of a struggle between competing groups in Soviet Ukraine, and between Soviet Ukraine and Moscow”. Fowler, Beau Monde, 19. Palko, who seeks to shed light on “the process of cultural Sovietization in Ukraine”, similarly contends that “[d]uring the 1920s, writers and artists in Soviet Ukraine were engaged in constructing a new cultural and political identity that was both Soviet and Ukrainian”. Palko, Making Ukraine Soviet, 2, 10.
By using the reversed descriptor ‘Ukrainian Soviet’ – in contrast to the grammatically customary ‘Soviet Ukrainian’ – I seek to foreground grammar’s function not only as a pragmatic tool but also as an instrument of political conceptualisation. In changing the order, I attempt, at least in the space of this essay, to redefine – through the language – the relationship between the centre and peripheries, taking the perspective of and returning agency to the Ukrainian centre/periphery within the Soviet project. Furthermore, ‘Ukrainian Soviet’, rather than ‘Soviet Ukrainian’, corresponds to the order used in the Ukrainian-language discourse (українсько-радянсько).

This essay consists of two parts. In the first part, I seek to outline the distinctive place of Ukrainian Soviet modernism in both Soviet culture and modernism. In the second part of the essay, I show some of the legacies and potent, if complex, afterlife of this culture in contemporary Ukraine. I suggest that one cannot understand the Ukrainian Soviet culture of the 1920s adequately if one approaches it exclusively either from the national(ist) or from the Soviet imperial perspective. Given the scope of the task that I undertake, this essay can only be tentative and panoramic: a preliminary bird’s-eye overview of the territory rather than long stops at the stations. This piece, therefore, pursues the modest goal of being an invitation for further inquiry into Ukrainian (Soviet) modernism. I hope that this prolegomenon might stimulate a discussion of the Ukrainian culture of the 1920s and map promising avenues for further exploration.
Multifaceted Ukrainian Soviet Modernism

Within just over a decade, Ukrainian Soviet intellectuals created numerous literary and artistic journals, literary organisations, and artistic movements, as well as a host of cutting-edge films, pioneering theatre, experimental prose, and ground-breaking poetry. Along with Moscow and Tiflis (Tbilisi), Kyiv\(^24\) and Kharkiv\(^25\) became vigorous centres of literary, artistic, theatrical, and architectural innovation. In tune with modernist zeitgeist, Ukrainian Soviet modernism was not confined to any single movement or artistic project, but rather consisted of an array of approaches, movements, and isms, on a continuum from the ‘modest’ modernism in the paintings of Antonina Ivanova and Oksana Pavlenko or the poetry of Volodymyr Svidzinsky to the avant-garde prose of Maik Iohansen and radical poetic experiments of the Ukrainian futurists. Similarly to other Eastern European/Soviet places, like Georgia or Poland, Ukrainian Soviet modernism was “belated, contracted and accelerated”, reflecting the dynamics of “uneven modernity”.\(^26\)

\(^{24}\) See especially this indispensable volume: Makaryk and Tkacz (eds.), Modernism in Kyiv. “In few other cities of the Russian empire (one thinks of Kyiv as a rare point of comparison)”, notes Harsha Ram with respect to Tiflis/Tbilisi, “did modernist cultural production evolve under such distinct political regimes – tsarist, Menshevik and Bolshevik – conflicting cultural ideologies – cosmopolitan as well as nativist – and literary sensibilities – symbolist, futurist, acmeist, dada and constructivist”. Ram, “From Menshevik to Bolshevik”, 140.

\(^{25}\) “After only a few years, Kharkiv, the former provincial city and new capital of Soviet Ukraine,” summarises Palko, “experienced its own cultural renaissance, attracting many young artists from all over Ukraine who were creating innovative, modern and original cultural products”. Palko, Making Ukraine Soviet, 6.

\(^{26}\) Applying the notion of “uneven modernity” to the Georgian case, Ram posits: “The unevenness of modernity sometimes generates heightened contradictions (such as those between rival nationalisms, imperialisms and socialisms), and sometimes modalities of cultural coexistence, convergence or hy-
It was richly hybrid, finding itself between the city and the rural space, selfhood and the collective, innovation and tradition, the national and the global. It would be impossible to give a summary of Ukrainian Soviet modernism in an essay. Instead, it is worth drawing some examples of notable 1920s Ukrainian Soviet works and the pregnant interplay between some of the above pairs therein.

The city became a prominent place, environment, theme, and image in the Ukrainian Soviet literature of the 1920s. The Ukrainian futurists, of course, sang the city with its sounds and cityscapes, its dynamism, modernisation and technological development. The 1920s also witnessed the emergence of Ukrainian urban prose, especially the novels of Petrov and Pidmohylny. “Their city was Kyiv”, writes Pavlychko, “that was growing, changing, undergoing Ukrainisation, bureaucratisation, Sovietisation and modernisation”. Pidmohylny entitled his magnum opus precisely that: *Misto (The City)*, which proved to be one of the central (if not the central) novels of 1920s Ukraine. Influenced by the prose of Guy de Maupassant and Honoré de Balzac (whose works Pidmohylny translated extensively into Ukrainian), *The City*, a *Bildungsroman* of a kind, follows the story of Stepan Radchenko, who comes from the village and seeks to integrate into and make sense of the city and eventually conquer it. Historically, *The City* captures the moment of post-war and post-revolutionary transformation in the Ukrainian 1920s, where, as Maxim Tarnawsky notes, “a generation of young men [and women, we should add] who had left their vil-

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lages and seen a much bigger, but not very attractive, world during the war years were now streaming into the cities to make their fortune”.\textsuperscript{28} However, rather than serving as a mere background to the story, the city becomes its important character and “a complete universe unto itself, in which reason and irrationality, order and chaos, civilization and the magic of the night, and good and evil forces of various kinds coexist in eternal conflict”.\textsuperscript{29} Indeed, \textit{The City} outlines its historical contours, shedding light, in particular, on the process of Ukrainisation,\textsuperscript{30} yet what is fundamentally at stake in the novel are “the leitmotifs of the irrationality of human behaviour, the internal split of personality, the impossibility [\textit{nezdiisnennist}] of freedom, the absurdity of being”, as well as a study of the body, which, as Pavlychko argues, Pidmohylny made into the main character of \textit{The City}.\textsuperscript{31} Thus, while, formally, Pidmohylny “turned to traditi-


\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 140.

\textsuperscript{30} Cf. Pavlychko: “Neither Pidmohylny nor Petrov responded to the ‘social demand’ of their time. Instead, they hid from it, as if not noticing the dictate of ideology, high-handedness [\textit{svavillia}] of censorship, and persecution of their colleagues. At the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, when Pidmohylny’s and Petrov’s magna opera came out, the political pressure of society on the person and particularly on the writer was already colossal. Pidmohylny’s novels to a greater extent and Petrov’s novels to a lesser extent show that they both were cognizant of this pressure and that they reflected it in their own ways” (“Ni Pidmohylnoyi, ni Petrov ne vidhukuvalysia na ‘sotsialne zamovlennia’ chasu, navpaky, khovalyia vid noho, nache ne pomichauchy dyktatu ideolohii, svavillia tsenzury, peresliduvannia koleh. Na rubezhi 20-kh i 30-kh, koly vyishly holovni tvory Pidmohylnoho i Petrova, politychnyi tysk suspilstva na liudynu i pysmennyka zokrema buv uzhe kolosalnym. Romany Pidmohylnoho bilshoiu miroiu, Petrova – menshoyo pokazuiut, shcho ikhni avtory svidomi tsoho tysku i u svii sposib vidobrazhaiut ioho.”) Pavlychko, \textit{Dyskurs}, 221.

\textsuperscript{31} “leitmotyvy irratsonalnosti liudskoi povedinky, vnutrishnoi rozdvoienosti osoby, nezdiisnennosti svobody, absurdnosti buttia”. Pavlychko, \textit{Dyskurs}, 216.
onaesthetic models”\textsuperscript{32} and “did not pursue the approach of Joyce and Proust in reforming the form of the novel”,\textsuperscript{33} the unmistakable existential(ist) underpinning of *The City* (prefiguring the post-war existentialist novels of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre) and its insightful inquiry into the nature of sexuality leave no doubt as to the modernist sensibility of the novel.

While works such as the futurist poems and *The City* exemplify the increasing attention to the urban realm, Ukrainian Soviet modernism, nonetheless, did not abandon the rural theme. This theme came to the fore especially in the context of the trauma of collectivisation, which started in the late 1920s and climaxed in the tragedy of the Great Famine of 1932–1933. Dovzhenko’s *Earth*, “a key film of Ukrainian cinematography”,\textsuperscript{34} shows poignantly a clash of civilisations, as it were – namely, the tension between the impending industrial civilisation (especially in view of Soviet breakneck industrialisation) and the traditional agricultural civilisation that Stalin’s regime sought to tame, exploit, and eventually destroy. Rather than shying away from the village, Dovzhenko’s innovative film fully embraced the painful moment of the forceful transition from the (agri) cultural tradition to the Soviet version of make-it-new, from private peasant property to collectivism, from nature to industry, and, not least, from religion to ideology. The scenes related to the death of the young communist Vasyl, and his father Opanas’s desperate exclamation to the priest that “Boha nema” (“There is no God”), as well as Opanas’s request – in spite of himself – “pokhoronit ego po novomu” (“to bury [his son Vasyl] in the new [Soviet] way”) are among the most powerful cinematic moments in (Ukrainian) Soviet film.

\textsuperscript{32} Tarnawsky, *Between Reason and Irrationality*, 5.
\textsuperscript{33} Pavlychko, *Dyskurs*, 230.
Although *Earth* was expected to be an accolade to collectivisation, it turned into “a true hymn of nature, love, and death”,\(^\text{35}\) of the fertility of earth, and of “a rural life that was still in touch with the rhythms of nature”, celebrating “a village life on the eve of its destruction”.\(^\text{36}\) The contemporary Soviet critics accused Dovzhenko of nostalgia for the past, “pantheism”, “bourgeois biology with the tinge [prysmak] of bourgeois nationalism”, and “the reduction of the complex social processes of class struggle in the village to biological processes”.\(^\text{37}\) Indeed, *Earth* went beyond the social and political agenda and tapped into the grand questions of the cycles of life and death, as well as the transformation of life, and not only human life. *Earth*, writes Oksana Zabuzhko in her illuminating essay “Planeta Polyn” (“Planet Wormwood”), “is in fact a religious film, a neo-

\(^{35}\) Ibid.

\(^{36}\) Nikita Lary, “Film”, in: Nicholas Rzhevsky (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 299–329, here 311. Just as the 2017 British Royal Academy *Revolution* exhibition described Dovzhenko as merely a “Ukrainian-born” Russian director, the above volume includes him into the canon of modern Russian culture. At the beginning of his essay, Lary acknowledges: “In any history of Russian film questions about boundaries arise, directly or by implication. The subject cannot include all of the production of the Russian Empire, the old Soviet Union, and the Commonwealth of Independent States. Nonetheless, Aleksandr Dovzhenko, among the Fathers of Soviet film, is a fact of the Russian and Ukrainian cinemas”. Ibid., 299. It would be more appropriate, however, to speak of Dovzhenko as a Ukrainian Soviet director who was indeed at the origins of Soviet film. As Blacker notes, with respect to the 2017 exhibition, “[w]hy Dovzhenko, who was not only born in Ukraine, but thought of himself as Ukrainian, made films about Ukraine, and worked extensively in Ukraine, should not be described simply a ‘Ukrainian’ is unclear”, and this applies, of course, more generally, to the erroneous, yet, unfortunately, common practice of presenting Dovzhenko as a Russian film director.

pagan film. It is Dovzhenko’s answer to the main existential question, which seems to have concerned him at the time: is there life after death . . .? – and the answer is decisively negative: no, there isn’t, there is none and there will be none, apart from the Earth itself, apart from the eternal cycles of nature and the change of forms”.38 Earth proved to be a macabre prefiguration of the Famine. “This bucolic [Ukrainian] landscape, which is an integral part of [Dovzhenko’s] film”, notes Lubomir Hosejko, “appears as a cruel irony, as even in the slightest shifts in [this landscape] an inevitable catastrophe can be felt”.39 The film also exposed the Soviet mistreatment of nature and the attempt to remake and subjugate it, which gives Earth a profound environmental significance. In a 1985 interview, Andrei Tarkovsky, who was greatly influenced by Dovzhenko, expressed his deep affinity with the Ukrainian Soviet director and emphasised that Dovzhenko,


39 “Zhorstokoiu ironiieiu  ie tsei bukolichnyi kraievyd, skladova chastyna ioho tvoru, de navit u naimenshomu porukhu vidchuvaietsia nemynuche nastan-nia katastrofy”. Hosejko, Istoriiia ukrainskoho kinematohrafa, 64. Zabuzhko writes: “Ukrainians find it so hard to watch ‘Earth’ precisely because the collective memory has ‘stubbornly’ resisted erasure. It is impossible to disregard the chronology: if the boy in the frame looks into the camera in 1930, you cannot but think, seeing him smile, that three years later he won’t hold the apple in his hand anymore, and, most likely, the boy himself will be no more” (“‘Zemliu’ ukraintsiam dyvytysia tiazhko same tomu, shcho kolek-tivyna pamiat ’vperpt’ lysyllas nestertoiu. Nemozhlyvo abstruhuvatysia vid khronolohii: iakshcho khlopchyk u kadri dyvytysia v kameru 1930 roku, ty ne mozhesh ne dumaty, bachachy, iak vin smiyetsia, pro te, shcho cherez try roky iabluka v ioho rutsi vzhe ne bude – i, z duzhe wysokoiu imovirnistiu, ne bude i ioho samoho.”) Zabuzhko, “Planeta Polyn”, 228.
felt nature like no one else. . . . His concept of the spiritualisation and deification of nature, his pantheism are very close to me. Dovzhenko was, perhaps, the only director who did not tear the cinematic image away from the atmosphere of (the) earth itself, from its life. For all the other directors it was just background. For him it was environment. He felt internally connected to nature.40

Such connection with nature and pantheism were rooted in Ukrainian cultural traditions. This theme and worldview, within the rural context and beyond, organically gained a key place in Ukrainian Soviet modernism, above all in the ‘cosmic’ early poetry of Tychyna, primarily in his collection *Soniashni clarnety* (*Sunny Clarinets*, 1918) and poetic cycle “V kosmich-nomu orkestri” (“In the Cosmic Orchestra”, 1921), as well as in the quietly innovative poetry of Svidzinsky. The opening stanza of Tychyna’s *Sunny Clarinets* is among the most recognizable lines of Ukrainian (modernist) poetry:

Not Zeus, nor Pan, nor the Dove-Spirit,
Just the Sunny Clarinets.
I am in a dance, a rhythmic movement,
In an immortal dance with all the planets.41

Svidzinsky’s poetry was much less known until recently. Tychyna eventually became the official Ukrainian Socialist Realist writer and a Soviet official (he held the office of the Minister of Education in Soviet Ukraine in the 1940s and was a member of the Soviet parliament during in the 1940s and 1950s). Tychyna’s writing, as well as the perception of his writing, has, therefore, been influenced by this biographical trajectory. Svidzinsky, on the other hand, was a fundamentally apolitical poet who distanced himself from his historical circumstances. During his lifetime, he published few books of poetry, and his works were criticised for their “idealistic worldview” and “hopelessly futile bourgeois Weltanschauung”.42 Eleonora Solovey explains that the poet’s “recovery proved a challenging endeavor, and were it not for the efforts of émigré Ukrainian literary scholars”, Lavrinenko among them, “his poetry might have been irrevocably lost”.43 In Ukraine, Svidzinsky was rediscovered only in the 1960s, primarily by the Ukrainian dissident writers:

43 Ibid., 13.
During their raids, the KGB would at times find Svidzinsky’s poetry retyped on a typewriter or even written out by hand, which only served to fuel the ardent, implacable hostility of the ‘system’ and its accomplices toward the nonconformist poet.44

The full (two-volume) collection of the poet’s works, edited by Solovey, was not published until 2004. In his poetry, Svidzinsky did not sing the collective, or grand historic events, as Soviet critics expected literature to do, but rather explored “the inner human world”, as well as “the uniqueness and evanescence of the world in its incessant movement of natural cycles” and the “vortex of blooming, ripening, and withering”.45 From the grand scale

44 Ibid., 29.
of history Svidzinsky turned to the private scale of human life inextricably interwoven with the organic world around him. “All the roads / across the earth, tired from love, / lead to us, its smallest”, wrote Svidzinsky, articulating a modest, even humble, perception of being human. Nature, with its rich variety of birds, animals, lakes, flowers, trees and herbs – all of which make recurrent appearance in this poetry, shining with their unusual and often little-known names – became a central, if not the central, poetic presence in Svidzinsky’s verse. The poet provides striking instances of ecopoetry, prioritising the natural world over the world of humans:

I live under the blue water. 
Above me the golden-eyed fisherman casts a fiery net.

I know: not once, not twice
I will slip through this alluring meshwork and walk over the marshy orchard, but one day I’ll be caught.

Then a yellowish misty star will sadly turn to ashes; silently night will approach, but will not find me on this earth.47

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47 Ibid., 83.
The position from beyond the human self is especially poignant in this couplet of Svidzinsky’s, which is as powerful as it is concentrated (Solovey rightly calls the poet “a consummate master of lyrical miniature”): 48

It’s terrifying, I say, reflecting, that once I walked in the shape of an animal. It’s terrifying – my descendant will say – that once I was a [hu]man. 49

While Svidzinsky sought to transcend the human self, the focus on selfhood was, nonetheless, central for, if often disguised within, Ukrainian Soviet modernism, reflecting the general modernist spirit but also serving as a response to the Soviet disdain towards “I”. The interest in the self was increasingly at odds with the evolving Soviet ideology and artistic canon, as exemplified by the exclamation in the 1924 long poem “Vladimir Ilich Lenin” by Vladimir Mayakovsky (himself accused of writing “ultra-individualistic verses”): “One! / Who needs that?! / The voice of one / is thinner than a squeak”. 50

Consider this scene from Kulish’s play Maklena Grasa, written in 1933, where Ihnatii Padur, a former musician, emerges from a dog’s kennel where he had been secretly residing. Answering Maklena, he presents himself in the following way:

Voice: It is I! (Climbs out of the kennel) I – like the unity of self-awareness in philosophy, the universal substance, the eternal “I”! Transcendental according to Kant, and absolute [iedynosushche] according to Hegel. “I”! From which the entire world originates, according to Fichte.

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49 Svidzinsky, Evasive Shadow of Life, 109.
and even according to materialism – the pinnacle of the development of matter – “I”! 

This scene serves as a painful emblem of the attempts to explore selfhood in the Soviet context: “I” can exist only clandestinely, hidden in a doghouse and disguised in text as an odd occurrence. Pavlychko stresses that in reading the Ukrainian Soviet literature of this period one should be aware of the masks and cyphers inherent in it. She draws a similar example from Viktor Petrov’s *Romany Kulisha* (1930), a fictional biography of the influential Ukrainian writer Panteleimon Kulish (1819–

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1897, not to be confused with the playwright Mykola Kulish), where Petrov’s words can hardly be taken at face value:

We have got used to believing in the figment of ‘I’, in the figment of the individual and individuality, to maintaining in ourselves and others the illusion of the person and personality. Meanwhile, ‘I’ is but a function of society and class, political circumstances, economic conditions, only part and particle of the general social and manufacturing process.52

Petrov, therefore, arguably writes his own time into Panteleimon Kulish’s fictional biography, creating a “modernist game”, as Pavlychko put it, and a palimpsest where the official discourse coexists with subtle and subversive meanings.

The increasing political pressure in the Soviet Union deepened the psychological investigation of the self. This tendency is especially evident in the prose of Khvylovy, which offered some of the most powerful articulations of self-fragmentation in the (Ukrainian) Soviet prose of the 1920s. Stylistically, Khvylovy’s works are replete with ellipsis, disrupted syntax, rapid associative shifts from one image or scene to another, oneiric and hallucinatory scenes, and the blurry line between these dreams or hallucinations and reality. “I am a Checklist,53 yet I am also a human being” (“ia – chekist, ale i liudyna”) from Khvylovy’s novella “I (Romantica)” are perhaps his most famous words, which concisely expose the psychological fissure bet-

52 “My zvykly viryty v fiktsiiu ‘ia’, v fiktsiiu indyvidualnoho i indyvidualnosty, pidtrymuvaty v sobi i v inshykh iliuziu osoby i osobystoho. Tymchasom ‘ia’ – tilky funktsiia suspilstva i kliasy, politychnykh obstavyn, tilky chastyna i chastynka zahalnoho sotsiialno-vyrobychnoho protsesu”. Pavlychko, Dyskurs, 222.

53 A Chekist is a member of the Cheka (‘ChK’), the first Soviet state security organisation.
ween the commitment to communism and the ideals of the revolution (or, more broadly, to any utopia) and disorientation in the bleak reality of the implementation of these ideals. Khvylovy’s novella has a dedication, yet not to a person, but to a text: Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky’s novella “Tsvit iabluni” (“Apple Blossom”, 1902). Kotsiubynsky’s story shows the narrator’s psychological struggle as his young daughter is dying. As an artist, he is split between his fatherly pain and his jarring artistic interest in this tragic scene. Khvylovy’s narrator is similarly split, yet in his case between his role as a Chekist on the one hand and his (human) self and his sonly love for his mother on the other. This bifurcation becomes the central theme of the novella: “And now I have only one right: – not to tell anything, ever, to anyone about how my own ‘I’ has split”.

Instead of writing a whole and unflinching “new Soviet man”, Khvylovy expresses the very cracks emerging in the self, growing insanity, and the “phantoms of the subconscious”. “I (Romantica)” presents a gruesome cast of the “commune’s black tribunal”, which, besides “I”, the narrator, also includes Doctor Tahabat, the narrator’s “bestial instinct” who has a “cool mind and stone in place of the heart”, Dehenerat (the “Degenerate”), the obsessive watchman who makes sure that no one survives the execution, as well as the young fragile communist Andriusha, who is desperate to escape the obligation to put his signature under the “Execute!” verdicts. Unsurprisingly, Khvylovy’s prose, too, was heavily criticised by Soviet critics. With respect to “I (Romantica)” one commentator asked: “was the revolution really made by the kind

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of degenerates depicted by Khvylovy? . . . Will a peasant or a worker believe Khvylovy that the ‘I’ of revolutionaries, the true revolutionaries, was split every minute?”

In the finale of “I (Romantica)”, the narrator kills his own mother, who appears before the “black tribunal” amidst a group of nuns, also counterrevolutionaries, to be tried and executed (“now they caught the other end of my soul!”). The novella’s haunting finale merits a lengthy citation:

Yes, it was a hallucination: I stood at the deserted edge of the forest for a long time, facing my mother and looking at her.

She was silent. . . .

. . . Then, in a daze, enveloped by the flames of an intolerable joy, I put my arm around my mother’s neck and held her head against my breast. Then I raised my pistol and pressed the barrel against her temple.

She fell on me like a scythed spike of wheat.

I put her on the ground and looked wildly around. – The space around me was deserted. Only to one side lay the warm dead bodies of the nuns. – The canon was roaring nearby. . . .

But had I hardly taken three steps when something stopped me.

I shuddered and ran to the body of my mother.

I went down on my knees before her and stared at her.

56 “nevzhe vyvedeni Khvylovym deheneraty revoliutsiiu robyly? . . . Nevzhe selianyn abo robityk poviryt Khvylovomu, shcho u revoliutsoneriv (diisykh) shchokhvylvyry kololos ‘ia’?” Ibid.

face. It was lifeless. Down her cheek, I remember, the blood was trickling in a dark stream.

Then I raised her helpless head and passionately glued my lips to her white forehead. – Darkness.

Suddenly I heard:
“Well, communard, get up!”
“Time to join the battalion!”
I glanced around:
- the degenerate stood before me again. . . .

. . . The storm was approaching. Faint blots of dawn were to be seen here and there. The moon was silently fading away in the pierced zenith. The clouds were scudding over from the west. A sharp exchange of fire was going on.

. . . I stopped in the midst of the lifeless steppe:
- there, in the distant unknown, most strangely gloved the peaceful lakes of the Commune beyond the hills.58

This fragmentation of the self reappears in numerous other works by Khvylovy,59 in particular in “A Story About the Sanatorium

58 Ibid., 54–55.
59 The fractured self constitutes a recurrent theme in the works of Ukrainian Soviet writers in general. In one of the finale versions of Sonata Pathétique, Kulish’s protagonist “I”, i.e., the poet Ilko luha (functioning as the first-person narrator, as well as a character in the play, a notable instance of modernist drama), doubles and sees himself from the side: “She: . . . (She seems to be sitting me down. She looks into my eyes, the imaginary Me . . .) I can see by your eyes how tired you are. You are looking at him (pointing to Me), at your double. What is he guarding? Let him guard. That is why he has weapons, isn’t it?” Mykola Kulish, Sonata Pathétique, Littleton: Ukrainian Academic Press, 1975, 110. “I”, the poet Ilko, eventually gives up his poetic dreams and his love towards Maryna (“she” in the passage above), denouncing her as a nationalist traitor and ostensibly confirming his commitment to the Bolsheviks.
Zone”, whose characters “appear as alter ego[s] of the different ‘I’s of the writer, as mirrors, or rather as a system of mirrors, which reflect what might seem to be different faces, but, in fact, are the same face of the writer”.60 Just like “I (Romantica)”, “A Story About the Sanatorium Zone” foregrounds not only the abyss between the initial revolutionary ideas and the way they were (mis) carried out in the Soviet Union, but also the more universal subject of a clash between the individual and political systems, as well as the bitter disillusionment in the realisation of utopian ideas and the effect that this disillusionment has on the human psyche, especially in the context of pervasive violence.

While Ukrainian Soviet works focused on the limitations for the free existence of “I”, they simultaneously sought to create a proletarian culture. Consider this passage from Iohansen’s avant-garde and “Ukraine’s first formalist novel” Podorozh uchenoho doktora Leonardo i ioho maibutnoi kokhanky prekrasnoi Alchesty u Slobozhansku Shvaitsariiu (Journey of the Learned Doctor Leonardo and his Future Beloved, the Beauteous Alcestis, to the Switzerland of Slobozhanshchyna, 1930).61

60 “postaiut alter ego riznykh ‘ia’ mytsia, dzerkalamy, chy, pravylnishe, system-oiu dzerkal, v iakii vidbyvaiutsia pozirno niby vidminni oblychchia, a naspravdi – odne i te same oblychchia avtora”. Iurii Bezkhutryi, “‘... Ia prosto fiksu-vav nastroi trydtsiatykh rokiv””, in: Khvylovy, Povne zibrannia tvoriv u piaty tomakh. T 3. Osin, 7–26, here 11–12.

61 Halyna Hryn, “Iohansen’s Journeys: Ukraine’s First Formalist Novel”, Harvard Ukrainian Studies, 32-33/1, 2011–2014, 377–393. Hryn notes: “Iohan-sen’s experimentation with language and structure (razvertyvanie slovesnogo materiala), his virtuosic estrangement (ostranenie) of lexemes on both the semantic and euphonic plane, his blending of poetry and prose in a way to bring out the features of each in sharp relief, and his acrobatics with plot construction make Podorozh uchenoho doktora Leonardo among the very best ex-amples of modern, formalist prose.” Ibid., 381. See also Marko Pavlyshyn, “Literary travel: Ukrainian journeys toward the national and the modern”, Australian Slavonic and East European Studies, 23/1-2, 2009, 1–18.
From the decorative cupboard he [the author] cut out human figures, glued to them wooden limb pieces, painted them roughly with some kinds of paint [umovnymy farbamy], he pulled wire through their cupboard navels and started to move these figures cheerfully under the burning sun of the real, live steppe and under the raw branches of real sycamores of the Switzerland of Slobozhanshchyna. And lest the reader should think that those figures are alive, the author tore apart their cupboard chests in the most sentimental places [naipatetychnykh mistsiakh] and stuck his shaggy head through them.62

62 “Iz dekoratyvnoho kartonu vin vyrizav liudski fihury, pidkleiv pid nykh derevliani tsurpalky, hrubo rozmalivav ikh umovnymy farbamy, kriz karttoni pupy protiahnuv im drit i veselo zasovav tsymy fihuramy pid paliuchym sontsem zhyvoho, spravzhnoho stepu i pid vohkym ryzziam spravzhnikh
This passage clearly shows Iohansen’s attention to the audience and communication with the reader. His novel furthermore contains a lengthy passage explicitly dedicated to the proletariat: “just like Don Jose [the novel’s protagonist], I love and respect the proletariat very much, but I do so even more deeply and fully”.63 Given the unreliability of Iohansen’s narrator, it is difficult to ascertain the exact meaning of this confession. It likely reflects the very ambivalence of this attitude. On the one hand, the narrator notes, likely not without irony, “I have never dared to be as arrogant as to teach it [the proletariat], and to shamelessly lay claim, as a weak and capricious intellectual, to its role as the leader”.64 On the other hand, the narrator’s words seem to be trustworthy when he asserts that

most of all I love the proletariat because it is a Master, because it makes the Thing, and only through this can it make the world. I confess that I have been in love with Things hopelessly and for a long time, that I even bought tools which I didn’t know how to or couldn’t use only to be able to get them out of the table during the day and contemplate them for many hours.65
The content of proletarian culture was in the making. In his pamphlet “Kamo hriadeshy” (“Quo Vadis?”, 1925), Khvylovy refers to proletarian art as the “sum of various artistic groups, often with a confused ideology” that is a far cry from a “single artistic monolith” and that has to go through numerous stages.66 Khvylovy “defended a proletarian ‘high culture’”.67 Kurbas was concerned with the question of the audience, trying to educate it, for culture to go beyond narrow circles. At its largest, the Berezil, which was not only a theatre but a movement of a kind, with its own theatre labs and studios, a journal, and even a theatre museum, had up to 400 members.68 Kurbas was also attentive to the response of the audience. He did questionnaires to better understand the spectators’ responses and sat among the

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66 “Do we, then, view proletarian art as a single artistic monolith? No, we reply!” Mykola Khvylovy, “Quo Vadis?”, in: Khvylovy, The Cultural Renaissance in Ukraine, 40–93, here 68.

67 Palko, Making Ukraine Soviet, 9.

audience to observe people’s raw impressions. While creating modernist experiments, Kurbas was also cognizant of the social function of art, and the relationship with the audience was important for him. Kurbas sought the “elevation of the active role of the spectator”69 and “strived to “cultivate the new audience”."70

Ukrainian Soviet modernism also enjoyed the coexistence of traditions and daring innovation that questioned traditions. An important illustration here is the centrality of the

70 Makaryk, Shakespeare, 77.
Baroque for Ukrainian modernists. Examples abound. Kulish and Kurbas drew upon the *vertep* (the traditional Baroque puppet theatre and its Nativity scene) and used its elements in their theatrical work. In his *Sonata Pathétique*, Kulish used the two-level architecture of the *vertep* in his structuring of the space in keeping with the puppet theatre, while exploring the revolutionary events of 1917–1919.

In *Vertep*, one of his early productions with the Molodyi Teatr in Kyiv (1919), Kurbas transformed the puppet theatre into a full-size theatrical production having his actors embody the puppets:

Kurbas took up [Gordon] Craig’s challenge; he used the conventions of the puppet theatre, but then staged his production of *Vertep* with actors rather than puppets. The costumes for the actors were built with materials used for dressing the puppets: dyed cheesecloth, coloured paper, and tin foil. The set designer, Anatol Petrytsky, built a large two-storey wooden structure that resembled an eighteenth-century puppet house. It was framed on both sides by church choir stalls in which sat the student choir that usually accompanied the puppet show.

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71 Cf. Petrov’s note on the character Ver in his novel *Doktor Serafikus (Doctor Seraphicus)*, 1929, published in 1947: “The fascination with the Baroque was an indispensable part of the worldview of Ver and her fellows. A spring stroll on a warm March day would turn into a pilgrimage to Kyiv’s Baroque sights [памяток] of 17–18th centuries”. (“Zakhoplennia baroko khodylo iak obov’azkovyi skladovyi element u svitohliadi Ver ta ii priiateliv. Vesniana prohulianka v teplyi bereznevyi den obertalas v palomnytsku mandrivku do barokovykh pamiatok Kyieva XVII-XVIII vikiv”). Petrov himself had a deep interest in the Baroque: “The second half of the 1910s was marked for me by fascination with the Baroque” (“Druha polovyna desyatykh rokiv proishla pid znakom zakhoplennia baroko”). Viktor Domontovych, “Bolotiana Lukroza. Spomyny”, in: Viktor Domontovych, *Divchynka z vedmedykom*, Kyiv: Krytyka, 1999, 261–300.

72 Virlana Tkacz, “Towards A New Vision of Theatre: Les Kurbas’s Work at the
This production had a dual significance for Kurbas. On the one hand, the *Vertep* production manifested a national theatrical tradition: “Those who care about the past of our people [narod] will watch this performance eagerly. There one can discern the seed, the germs of what was later to blossom in the works of [Ivan] Kotliarevsky and other founders of our theatre”. On the other hand, it provided a solid ground for modernist experimentation: “transform yourself into a puppet. Distance yourself from yourself as much as possible. Stop being, living, acting like a human – move according to the laws of a puppet. It is a tremendous exercise in the control of one’s body”.

The Baroque aesthetics manifested themselves even in the most unlikely of places. Commenting on Semenko’s visual poetry, Myroslava Mudrak suggests that the poet revived “the methods of Baroque poem construction and wordsmithing cultivated earlier by the Jesuit-influenced Kyiv-Mohyla Academy”, and places Young Theatre in Kyiv”, in: *Modernism in Kyiv*, 278–309, here 294. Kurbas drew upon the (Ukrainian) Baroque and included its elements into several of his productions, including *Ruhr* (1923) and *Macbeth* (1924). “Incorporating newspaper articles, political speeches, and slogans into its narrative”, writes Irena Makaryk, “Ruhr played upon the world outrage at France’s invasion of Germany’s industrial heartland. Tying the contemporary with the medieval, the spectacle drew upon Ukrainian baroque traditions (such as the mingling of allegorical characters like Capital and Death with realistic ones) of drama suppressed since the eighteenth century”. By the same token, in *Macbeth*, “Kurbas was consciously reaching back to the rich, Western medieval and Renaissance traditions of the audience-actor relationships, as well as to the Ukrainian baroque drama with its mingling of allegorical and real, and to the popular circus”. Makaryk, *Shakespeare*, 71, 101.


Semenko’s futurist works in the context of iconography.\textsuperscript{75} While this connection might seem speculative at first glance, Semenko was an avid student of the Baroque. He belonged to – as per Petrov’s designation – “the Narbut Baroque group”, which gathered cultural figures such as Petrov himself, the notable Ukrainian graphic artist Hryhorii Narbut, Semenko, Kurbas, Tychyna, Mykola Zerov and others, who “had the ambitious plans to break new paths for the development of culture, and whose creative experiments very often aligned themselves with the Baroque language”.\textsuperscript{76}

Another notable example of the interplay between the Baroque and Ukrainian modernism is Bazhan’s cycle “Budivli” (“Edifices”, 1929), which – through intricate architectural ekphrasis – portrays three Ukrainian edifices that were made in different styles and belonged to different eras: a towering Gothic cathedral, the Ukrainian Soviet Dniprelstan power station built from the late 1920s to the early 1930s, and the eighteenth-century Zaborovksy Gate in Kyiv:

And they fell,
and clawed their way forward under the vault,
Those bodies without arms, and arms without bodies,
With mouths half torn apart
As they wove their lamentation into the stony rapids.

(from “Sobor” (“Cathedral”), Part I of the cycle)\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{75} Myroslava M. Mudrak, “The Graphic Arts: From Page Design to Theatre”, in: \textit{Modernism in Kyiv}, 408–441, here 419.


\textsuperscript{77} Mykola Bazhan, \textit{Quiet Spiders of the Hidden Soul: Mykola (Nik) Bazhan’s Early Experimental Poetry}, eds. Oksana Rosenblum, Lev Fridman, and Anzhelika
Uncomely pillars. Piles of scaffolding.
Bent cranes. Broken winches.
The boiling hot rebellious crater
Of mighty construction! . . .

Like a march of never-before-heard centuries
The great music of construction
Thunders above the earth,
Above the old earth.
And the steppe groans,
   and the country rumbles,
Like the frothy steel turbine
Of everlasting electrical stations.

(from “Budynok” (“Building”), Part III)\textsuperscript{78}

Bazhan places the Baroque Zaborovsky Gate in the middle of the cycle, between the Gothic and the Soviet:

In those distant centuries,
   when hearts
Filled with the passions of a covetous baroque
Issuing from age-old labyrinths,
That from afar seemed to combine
The abundant leaves of a Ukrainian arch
With the moistness of Corinth’s acanthus.

(from “Brama” (“Gate”, or “Archway”), Part II)\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{78} Ib\textit{id.}, 69–73.
\textsuperscript{79} Ib\textit{id.}, 67.
The Baroque tradition, then, informed—thematically, stylistically, and conceptually—innovative Ukrainian Soviet modernist works. Dmytro Chyzhevsky, who regards the Baroque as a seminal and formative period in Ukrainian culture, distinguishes such features of the Baroque as

the need for movement, transformation, tragic tension and catastrophe, passion for bold combinations, for escapades [*avantura*]; the Baroque finds in nature not as much statics and harmony as tension, struggle, movement; above all, the Baroque does not shy away from the utmost ‘naturalism’, a description of nature in its harsh [*suvor-ykh*], sharp, often non-aesthetic manifestations [*rysakh*].

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80 “potreba rukhu, zminy, mandrivky, trahichnoho napruzhennia ta katastrofy,
All these features, *mutatis mutandis*, can be found in many Ukrainian Soviet modernist works. Ukrainian Soviet artists felt affinities with the hybridity, criss-cross of genres, and play of
the Baroque, its “combination”, its “covetous” – that is, unruly and dynamic – character, as well as its winding “labyrinths”. In consciously and extensively drawing on this tradition, the Ukrainian cultural figures of the 1920s simultaneously sought to create a new art and pursued “an attempt to restore continuity and cultural identity”.

The in-between nature of Ukrainian Soviet modernism, therefore, stands out in the landscape of modernism and problematises its narrow definition as exclusively urban, elitist, and anti-traditional. At the same time, this hybridity posed a threat to Stalin’s vision of Soviet culture. In the Soviet Union, culture increasingly meant politics. In 1926, the Ukrainian secret police (GPU, the State Political Administration) issued the classified circular “On Ukrainian Separatism”. The central notions of the circular are kulturnaia borba (“cultural struggle”) and kulturnyi front (“cultural front”). “Nationalists”, the circular states, pursue the “tactic, in which the Soviet power has the role of an object, against which the weapons of the ‘cultural work’ are directed”. The notion of “cultural work”, the document continues, “has substituted the failed motto of the armed struggle for independence”. The circular, therefore, weaponises culture, attaching the notions of struggle, front and arms to it.

Earlier in 1926, a few months before the circular was issued, Stalin wrote a letter to Lazar Kaganovich and the leadership of the Ukrainian Communist Party. In the letter, Stalin criticises Khvylovy for “his laughable and non-Marxist attempt

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to tear culture away from politics”. Indeed, numerous literary groups fought in Soviet Ukraine, and elsewhere in the Soviet Union, not so much for a certain kind of aesthetic as for the monopoly over the content of ‘Soviet culture’. Gradually, literary debates turned into political accusations and ruthless labelling of opponents. Literary organisations grew into the tissue of the Soviet body politic. Kulish’s 1927 essay “Criticism or Prosecutor’s Interrogation”, even in its title, captures the eventual mixture of these two genres in the Soviet context. The ambiguity of Kulish’s plays – characterised by “paranoia”, as one contemporary critic put it – just like Khvylovy’s deep exploration of the psyche, his use of disrupted syntax and his experimentation with narration all were at odds with the increasingly confining artistic principles in the Soviet Union, which culminated in the 1934 advance of socialist realism. “[M]arginal cultural pheno-


mena”, Faber notes rightly, “often no longer have any reference to the ideal that is sketched out by the center. They therefore often take far more freedom than is possible in the center, especially in a repressive system like the Soviet Union”. 85 Even form alone could be dangerous. Kurbas’s 1930 scandalous production of Ivan Mykytenko’s play Dyktatura (Dictatorship, 1929) exemplifies the explosive political potential of form. Without modifying the original text of the play (“an ode to collectivization and class warfare”), in this production Kurbas “changed the spoken text to song and assaulted the audience with images, music, even film, in addition to the actual script”.86 The way Kurbas played with the formal make-up of the original piece turned its intended propaganda message on its head.

The notable hybridity of Ukrainian Soviet modernist works did not correspond to the nascent Soviet canon. They were symbolist here and expressionist there, Baroque in one place and modernist in another; one moment they conformed to the Soviet rulebook, and the next they broke the rules. In the

85 Faber, Die ukrainische Avantgarde, 29.
86 Fowler, Beau Monde, 133, 139.
rigid Soviet context, this fluidity posed not only a cultural but also a political threat. Ukrainian Soviet modernism provides a striking example of the potential of modernist aesthetics to have a subversive political impact. Works such as those by Khvylovy, Kulish and Kurbas represent a “minor literature” of a kind, to use Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s apt notion, a peripheral literature that affected and subverted the centre.87

Marginalisation, Execution, Erasure

That Ukrainian Soviet modernism is missing in broader cultural cartographies stems to a great extent from the marginalisation of national cultures, and the eventual repressions and memory manipulations by the Soviet regime. Let us consider a few examples exposing the (cultural) inequality and imbalance between the official centre and peripheries in the Soviet Union, which contributed to the marginalisation of the peripheries. When it came to constructing the Soviet image externally, especially through such an important channel as international exhibitions, the Soviet Union presented a predominantly Russocentric picture, pushing other national Soviet cultures to the margins. The seminal 1925 *Exposition internationale des Arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris provides a clear case in point. While the work of non-Russian Soviet republics was presented, it was almost entirely confined to decorative art as part of showcasing “the culture of the peoples of the USSR”, thus pigeonholing it into an ethnic and folkloristic realm, and even this art was “represented poorly and shown with little care”, as Kurbas

noted the same year. In her comprehensive study of the 1925 Exposition, Irena Makaryk shows that at the Exposition:

old, paternalistic, if not outright imperialist, attitudes and hierarchies prevailed. . . . The vast bulk of literature produced for the fair by the Soviet organizers focused on Russia proper, its art, and artists. Theatres outside of Moscow were not even mentioned, nor were members of their companies issued visas. The contributions of other republics were generally confined to sections devoted to the kustari, small artisans or peasant craftsmen, a decision that seemingly confirmed the stereotype of a folkloric or amateur artistic culture outside of Russia (Moscow) proper.

Indeed, while the Soviet catalogue for the Exposition emphasises that the theatre “submit le plus influence des grands mouvements sociaux” (“represents the most influential of major social movements”), its theatre section uses exclusively the notions of “théâtre russe” (“Russian theatre”) and “le théâtre moderne en Russie” (“the modern theatre in Russia”); it foregrounds the theatre of Vsevolod Meyerhold, and mostly speaks of theatres based in Moscow. Avant-garde theatres like Berezil or Sandro Akhmeteli’s Rustaveli Theatre in Georgia fall under the vague category of “autres théâtres russes” (“other Russian theatres”). Meanwhile, Vadym Meller’s constructivist maquette

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for the production of *Sekretar profspilky* (*The Secretary of the Labour Union*, incorrectly translated as *le Secrétaire du Professeur - The Professor’s Secretary*), had great success, receiving one of the Exposition’s gold medals. Answering journalists’ questions about Berezil’s success at the Exposition, Kurbas commented that “the organs of political education [politosvita] in Ukraine have not done anything to present Ukrainian art abroad. . . . Not a single representative of our theatre was present at the [Paris] exhibition. . . . Nothing has been done yet for the American exhibition”.91 “More than simply displaying their cultural achievements,” Makaryk concludes, “the Soviet exhibits were thus carefully crafted tools of propaganda and public diplomacy”.92 In the end, a significant number of reproductions and photos of Berezil’s work were presented at the 1926 International Theatre Exposition in New York, even though there, too, Berezil was identified as a Russian theatre.93

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93 For more on Berezil’s participation in the 1926 New York Exposition see: Vik-
While Kurbas certainly was aware of the developments in Soviet Russia, he pursued an artistic course of his own, a course that, in its turn, exerted influence on Soviet Russian theatre. In her comparative study of Kurbas’s and Meyerhold’s theatre, Béatrice Picon-Vallin notes: “There is no doubt that Meyerhold’s audacious theatrical revolution – and the strong reactions it generated – spread beyond the borders of Soviet Russia. How much it influenced Kurbas (if at all) is debatable”.94 While there were striking similarities in the work of the two directors (in the emphasis on the intellectual rather than merely emotive aspect of the actor’s performance, rigorous and broad-ranging training of actors, experimentation with different media and theatrical space, avant-garde stage design, and even parallels in repertoire choices), “[i]t was of fundamental importance for Kurbas to define a distinct identity for the Ukrainian theatre, to emphasize its individuality and unique character, to exclude Russian influence, and, even more important, any form of imitation”.95

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95 Ibid., 529. In 1927, Kurbas emphasised: “I did not come to Moscow until the
With the Berezil’s productions of *Jimmy Higgins* and *Macbeth*, Kurbas, in his turn, exerted influence on Soviet Russian theatre. The ambition of *Jimmy Higgins*, particularly the large-scale incorporation of film into theatre (especially innovative given the early days of film industry) greatly impressed Meyerhold who asked Kurbas for permission to stage the production at his Theatre of the Revolution in Moscow (which, however, ultimately did not come to fruition). In the 1924 production of *Macbeth*, “the most remarkable Shakespeare production of the early Soviet period”, Kurbas employed several ground-breaking elements, such as enormous screens (some of them up to four by four metres in size) that became part of the production in their own right and performed various functions (indicating places, supplementing the characters’ emotions,

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spring of 1923, not after the premiere of ‘Gas’. It was only then that I saw Meyerhold’s theatre’s productions for the first time. . . . And how startled I was when here, in Kharkiv, the reviews of the ‘Gas’ production gifted me abundantly not only with a crushing contemptuous tone but also with reproaches in doubtless formal plagiarism. . . . The esteemed critic seems not to understand that the laws of artistic evolution are the same for everyone . . . that [Edward Gordon] Craig, [Max] Reinhardt, the classics, [Otto] Brahm, the Chinese and Japanese theatres, the devices of the medieval theatre are available not only to Meyerhold in Moscow, but also to us – in Lviv, in Kharkiv. . . . And this is only the beginning. I could show you some reviews, like the review of ‘Jimmy Higgins’ in the ‘Communist’ newspaper, where the dates of the Moscow productions are falsified to prove the dependency of ‘Jimmy Higgins’ on Moscow theatres!” Kurbas, “Sohodni ukrainskoho teatru i ‘Berezil’”, in: *Berezil: Iz tvorchoi spadshchyny*, 274. In 1925, Kurbas said that Berezil “became acquainted with the Russian left theatre only after [the production] of ‘Gas’. It would be naïve to think that the first encounter with the Russian theatre, which has rich traditions, given the output of the revolutionary theatrical Moscow would have no effects [naslidkiv] for Berezil. . . . The influence concerned the artistic ideology, some formulations and, in general, it accelerated certain processes. . . . Yet it is important to point out that the influence is confined to some adjustments [korektyvy] based on the encounter with a new theatrical individuality, and it quickly goes away [shvydko znykaie]”. Kurbas, “Shliakhly ‘Berezolia’ i pytannia faktury”, in: *Berezil: Iz tvorchoi spadshchyny*, 247–249, here 248.

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contributing to the ambiance of scenes, etc.). Kurbas was accused of copying the use of screens from Meyerhold (from his production of *D.E.* [Daioš Levropul]). This accusation was groundless, however, as Meyerhold’s production took place a few months later: “I don’t intend to contradict the fact that the flying screens in Meyerhold’s *D.E.* and in my *Macbeth* . . . are the same device”, Kurbas protested in 1927, “but the critic must verify [the information]; it’s his duty to find out that *Macbeth* was put on a whole three months earlier than *D.E.* How could I, a direc-
tor in Kyiv, know what would be put on in Moscow three months hence!"97 Picon-Vallin points out a major difference between Kurbas and Meyerhold: “The Ukrainian director, much like the Georgian Sandro Akhmeteli, had to form as opposed to reform. Also, in many respects, Kurbas was setting precedents; for example, he was the first to produce Shakespeare’s plays in Ukraine”.98 Akhmeteli, Kurbas, and Meyerhold were among the central figures behind the making of Soviet avant-garde theatre, each having their own approaches and artistic philosophies. As Kurbas himself noted, Berezil pursued “its own independent path in the colossal collective work of big and small creators of the new post-October theatre”.99

Similarly to the theatre, the 1920s witnessed the emergence of robust national Soviet cinemas. As Hosejko has shown, between 1921 and 1928 “a true national cinematography flourished in Ukraine”,100 which also extended its influence beyond the country. For instance, in 1926, VUFKU (the All-Ukrainian Photo Cinema Administration), the powerhouse of the film industry in Soviet Ukraine, became the second largest provider of films to Germany (outnumbered only by films from the USA).101 Upon his visit to Germany, Kurbas, who was also extensively involved in filmmaking and whom Dovzhenko considered to be his mentor,102

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97 Quoted in: Makaryk, Shakespeare, 108.
100 Hosejko, Istoriia ukrainskoho kinematohrafa, 25. The Oleksandr Dovzhenko National Centre has restored a great number of these films. For the considerable archive of the Centre, including information on the restored films, see the Centre’s website: https://www.dovzhenkocentre.org/en/about/ [accessed 29.06.2021].
101 Hosejko, Istoriia ukrainskoho kinematohrafa, 25.
noted in passing in 1927 that “[t]he Germans are extremely interested in our [Ukrainian Soviet] film industry”.103 As VUFKU was one of the main competitors to Soviet Russian cinema, it, along with other national (in particular, Georgian) film infrastructures, was eventually folded into the Soviet centralised Sovkino, thereby losing its financial, conceptual, and aesthetic independence.

The Soviet policy of korenizatsiia further brings the imbalance between the official centre and national Soviet republics into relief. Officially, this nationalities policy adopted in 1923 was aimed at meeting “the special needs and requirements of each individual nationality”, while “the first immediate task of our Party” was “vigorously to combat the survivals of Great-Russian chauvinism”.104 Practically, the policy’s rationale was, that, as Palko explains,

by engaging and promoting national cadres into local party organs . . . and facilitating the development of national cultures and languages, the Communist Party would be able to curb any manifestation of ‘bourgeois’ local nationalism and strengthen the trust of the border republics towards the Soviet centre.105

In other words, the new policy’s principal goal, quite expeditiously, was to ensure control over the republics and to secure their loyalty rather than to enhance their self-sufficient cultural and political development.

105 Palko, Making Ukraine Soviet, 6.
The inherent contradiction of *korenizatsiia* became clear already in 1926, when the Ukrainian GPU issued the circular “On Ukrainian Separatism”. “As the implementation of Ukrainization began in earnest”, Hryn concludes, “the secret services were already setting up all the mechanisms for its ultimate dismantling”.106 Palko helpfully proposes to use *korenizatsiia* and *Ukrainizatsiia* as two different terms, representing the central and national perspectives respectively: “While *korenizatsiia* implied cultural and linguistic concessions, the accomplishment of the Ukrainizatsiia’s objectives relied heavily on economic and political decentralization”.107 While the Soviet state initially encouraged national cultures through *korenizatsiia*, the out-of-hand progress of Ukrainisation came to pose a fundamental threat to the normative Soviet identity that Stalin sought to construct.

In 1926, Stalin sent his letter to Kaganovich, in which he discussed the progress of Ukrainisation. In the letter, Stalin highlights the task of “transforming the rising Ukrainian culture and Ukrainian society into the Soviet culture and society”.108 He, therefore, speaks explicitly about identity engineering, seeking to “transform” Ukrainian culture into a, or rather the, Soviet one through a controlled and orchestrated process. What prompted Stalin’s letter was an “article by the famous communist Khvylovy”.109 Stalin refers to one of Khvylovy’s pamphlets that spearheaded the Literary Discussion of 1925-1928. Khvylovy’s polemic pieces went against the tide of the increasingly centralised vision of the Soviet, calling to break away from

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109 Ibid., 151.
Russian culture in pursuit of one’s own artistic path, oriented rather towards (Western) European cultures. \(^{110}\) Stalin perceived Khvylov’s insistence on “the derussification of the Ukrainian proletariat” as a direct attack against Soviet culture. \(^{111}\) Two drastically different visions of the Soviet clashed: a hybrid Soviet national identity that would allow for the development of independent national cultures within the broader Soviet project, \(^{112}\) advocated by Khvylov, and the normative (pan-)

\(^{110}\) In this respect, Khvylov also drew upon the works of Panteleimon Kulish. “It was [Panteleimon Kulish]”, posits Vasyl Stus in his 1971 essay, “who defined those problems of our spiritual life that were almost fully repeated in the literary discussion of 1873–1878 and again became relevant at the beginning of the twentieth century and were copied with the red pencil of M. Zerov and M. Khvylov during the literary discussion of 1925–28. Khvylov emphasised those moments that P. Kulish had explored and that contemporary Ukrainian culture is facing”. (“Same vin vyznachyv toi kompleks problem nashoho dukhovnoho zhyttia, iaky maizhe v usomu svoiemu obsiazi buv povtorenyi u chasy literaturnoi dyskusii 1873–1878 rr., znovu stav aktualnym na pochatku dvadsiatoho stolittia i vidkryzhenyi chervonym olivtsem M. Zerova i M. Khvylovoho u chasy literaturnoi dyskusii 1925-28 rr. Khvylovyi naholoshuvav na tykh momentakh, iaki ziasovuvav dla sebe P. Kulish, i iaki stoiat pered ukrainskoiu sohodennoiu kulturoiu.”) Vasyl Stus, *Fenomen doby (Skhodzhennia na Holhafu slavy)*, Kyiv: Klio, 2015, 6. Khvylov himself emphasises this continuity: “He [Panteleimon Kulish] alone can be considered a true European, a man who came close to being the type of the Western intellectual. And we fail entirely to understand why Comrade Doroshkevych considers him a representative of ‘black Europe’; in our opinion this is precisely ‘red Europe’. Because we see in ‘red’ nothing other but a symbol of struggle”. Mykola Khvylov, “Thoughts Against the Current”, in: Khvylov, *The Cultural Renaissance in Ukraine*, 96–140, here 125.


\(^{112}\) Most emphatically, Khvylov postulated this approach in “Ukraine or Little Russia”, also written in 1926: “We are indeed an independent state whose republican organism is a part of the Soviet Union. And Ukraine is independent not because we, Communists, desire this, but because the iron and irresistible will of the laws of history demands it . . . . To gloss over independence with a hollow pseudo-Marxism is to fail to understand that Ukraine will continue to be an arena for counter-revolution as long as it does not pass through the natural stage that Western Europe went through during the formation of nation-states . . . . The Ukrainian society, having grown in
Soviet identity, into which all national cultures would eventually have to transform, and where Soviet ‘internationalism’ effectively meant Russification.

The above examples show how the notion of the Soviet before the mid-1930s requires significant caveats and a very nuanced approach, both politically and stylistically. As Stalin’s 1926 letter to Kaganovich makes clear, it is appropriate to speak not as much about the Soviet as about becoming-Soviet or, more accurately still, making-Soviet – a verb rather than a noun, a process, an increasingly forced one at that, rather than a set-in-stone phenomenon.

The attack that started in 1926 led a decade later to the near-total annihilation of Ukrainian Soviet modernism. In 1937–1938, during Stalin’s Great Purge, which affected the Soviet Union as a whole, the Soviet regime executed most of Ukraine’s leading cultural figures of the 1920s. Within months, a whole generation of writers and artists, poets and actors, literary critics, and filmmakers perished. On 3 November 1937 alone, the NKVD executed more than a hundred Ukrainian political prisoners. Almost all inhabitants of the notorious Slovo House (which was built at the end of the 1920s and gathered the vast majority of Ukrainian Soviet writers and artists under one roof) were arrested starting from 1933 and eventually killed. Not only did the regime physically exterminate Ukrainian intellectuals, it also sought to efface them from public memory. For the following half century they were laconically lambasted as “Ukrainian bourgeois nationalists” or “formalists” in Soviet encyclopaedias at best, or, far more often, entirely erased from Soviet discourse.
Their works were taken away from the public eye and a significant part of these works was destroyed.

While émigré scholars sought to preserve and publish their works, in Ukraine itself, like in other Soviet republics, only the relative liberalisation of Nikita Khrushchev’s Thaw brought some cultural figures of the 1920s, slowly and cautiously, into view. The Ukrainian ‘sixtiers’ (*shistdesiatnyky*), the 1960s generation of Ukrainian dissident intellectuals, started to discover the story of their notable predecessors and their works. Yet the Thaw was short-lived. Under Leonid Brezhnev’s rule, the regime became more rigid: the majority of the *shistdesiatnyky* were arrested, particularly during the crackdowns on dissidents in 1965 and, especially, in 1972, and the retrieval of the culture of the 1920s was brutally interrupted.

During the post-1920s Soviet period, then, the audience for Ukrainian modernist works was extremely limited, to say the least. These works were not studied in schools or universities, either in Soviet Ukraine or elsewhere in the Soviet Union; neither did these works enjoy an adequate (based on their literary merit) critical response, as would be expected in a normal literary process. The same holds true for Ukrainian Soviet art, theatre, and cinema. With very few exceptions, their paintings were not exhibited, their plays were not staged, and their films were not scree-

113 The figures of Ukrainian modernism and their works became a crucial cultural and political inspiration for the Ukrainian dissidents of the 1960s and 1970s, providing a significant cultural ground and precedent for them. In September 1965, a protest against the arrests of intellectuals took place at the premiere of Sergei Paradzhanov’s legendary film *Tini zabutykh predkiv* (*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*), based on the eponymous story by Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky, one of Ukraine’s fin-de-siècle modernist writers and a pioneer of psychological prose in Ukraine. At the screening, the dissidents Ivan Dziuba, Viacheslav Chornovil and Stus spoke out against the repressions. Yet even before 1965, the Kyiv Creative Youth Club organised several literary evenings dedicated to Ukrainian modernists such as Ukrainka, Kurbas and Kulish, which the Soviet authorities similarly tried to prevent and impede.
ned. In short, as far as the Soviet state was concerned, these works did not exist and had never existed. In Ukraine, the works of this generation were mostly not published until the late 1980s and early 1990s, following the collapse of the USSR and Ukraine’s independence, the period that saw an explosion of interest in Ukrainian modernism. The (more or less) complete editions of the works of some of the most prominent Ukrainian Soviet modernists were not published until the 2000s.

For half a century, between Stalin’s Great Purge and the 1980s, these works were largely preserved through the efforts of the survivors of the regime and Ukrainian émigré scholars, especially in the United States, Canada, and Germany. In 1959, an anthology of some of the extant works of this generation, edited by the émigré critic Iurii Lavrinenko, was published. The volume was entitled *Rozstriliane vidrodzhennia* (*The Executed Renaissance*), and this title has come to be the most widely used designation for this period and generation, as I mentioned previously. In the preface to his anthology, Lavrinenko gives a sense of the difficult process of searching for these works:

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114 The title *Rozstriliane vidrodzhennia* (initially, apparently, coined by Lavrinenko) was suggested by Jerzy Giedroyc (1906–2000), the editor of the influential Polish émigré journal *Kultura*, who proposed the idea of compiling the anthology and provided practical support for Lavrinenko’s project (the anthology was published by Instytut Literacki, the publisher of *Kultura*).

The materials that were used for the anthology, were eradicated and eliminated from life . . . so thoroughly that looking for them was as difficult as it was to excavate artefacts in Pompeii after it had been covered with the lava from Vesuvius. Suffice it to say that part of the included material was taken from handwritten copies, which had been made and preserved in the past by individual people.\(^{116}\)

As becomes clear from Lavrinenko’s note, the regime made every effort to wipe out any memory of the Ukrainian Soviet culture of the 1920s. As a result, the reception of Ukrainian modernist works was immensely delayed and distorted.

**Modernist Legacies: Discovery, Inspiration, Rethinking**

In present-day Ukraine, the modernist explosion of the 1920s is perceived as more than merely one cultural period among others: it furnishes “an unattainable example”\(^{117}\) and a “context to grow from”.\(^{118}\) “Pidmohylny”, emphasises Zabuzhko, for example,

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116 “Materialy, z iakyh robyvsia dobr do antolohii, pislia 1933 roku znyshcheni i usuneni z zhyttia . . . tak gruntovno, shcho rozshukuvaty ikh teper tak samo trudno, iak rozkopuvaty pamiatky v Pompei pislia zasypannia ii liavynoiu Vezuvia. Dosyt skazaty, shcho chastyna vmishchenoho materialu vziata z rukopynykh kopii, shcho ikh zrobily i zberehly sobi kolys okremi liudy”. Iuriy Lavrinenko (ed.), *Rozstriliiane vidrodzhennia*, 9–10.


Bohdan Tokarsky

is my personal accusation against the Soviet regime, because he was a prose writer of ‘my blood type’, for my own full-fledged prose development it was vitally important to read all that he could have written at the age of forty, fifty. . . . He was only gaining momentum, only just showed his potential. And that potential was of such a scale that we are still reading and relishing what he wrote until the age of 34. . . . I have been robbed personally. Because if Pidmohylny would have written all that he wanted to back then, I would have been a different writer today.\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{119} “Pidmohylnoho ia sovetskii vladi ne proshchaiu osobysto, tomu shcho tse buv prozaik ‘moiei hrupy krovi’ – meni dla moho vlasnoho povnotsinnoho prozovoho rozvytku zhyttievo neobkhidno bulo prochytaty te, shcho vin mav napysaty v 40, u 50. . . . Bo iakby Pidmohylnyi napysav svoho chasu vse,
Despite the repressions and executions, the twenties established a firm cultural foundation for generations to come. Earlier, I mentioned the significant role that works of this period played for the Ukrainian dissidents in the 1960s and 1970s. Due to the Soviet repressions, by the late 1980s this lineage looked more like a dotted line at best. Yet not only did this line proved to be durable, but it also became perhaps the most important single source of identity and continuity for contemporary Ukrainian culture. Today, the reception of Ukrainian modernism is characterised by discovery, inspiration, and rethinking.

In 2017 and 2018 the Mystetskyi Arsenal Museum in Kyiv held the exhibition *Boichukism: Project of “Grandiose Style”* [*Boichukism. Proekt “velykoho styliu”*] dedicated to Boichukism, the artistic movement named after Mykhailo Boichuk (1882–1937),¹²⁰ whose art “is riddled with paradox and contradiction – iconography and avant-garde art; archaic tradition and innovation; movement beyond imitative art and adherence to socialist realism”.¹²¹ Boichuk came from Western Ukraine and studied in Lviv, Vienna, Krakow, Munich and Paris before coming to Kyiv to pursue his creative work and teach. Boichuk and several of his students were executed in 1937. In the exhibition catalogue, the curators provide insight into the desperate struggle to save this art:

¹²⁰The exhibition was curated by Olha Melnyk, Viktoriia Velychko and Ihor Oksametny. For more information on this exhibition see: “Boychukism. Great Style Project”, https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavka/boychukism-great-style-project-2/ [accessed 12.05.2021].

Boichukist monumental art works were destroyed together with the artists. Their magnificent legacy survived only as scant sketches or works of a smaller scale. Each of those preserved works survived thanks to the human courage of the people involved: museum staff who refused to follow orders and destroy art that did not suit the official ideology; Boichuk’s students who turned to Socialist Realism but hid and preserved their early works; and art collectors who recognized the value of Boichukist artworks.\footnote{“Foreword by the Exhibition Curators”, in: Klymenko, Boichukism, 8. The art critic Halyna Skliarenko refers to the complex relationship between Boichukism and Soviet art, which, in her opinion, was missed in the exhibition: “one of the questions that the visitors of the exhibition had was the link between ‘Boichuk’s project’ and the ‘Soviet project’, his [Boichuk’s] participation or non-participation in the making of the new Soviet art that in the 1930s received the name of socialist realism. Yet this discussion too in the context of the exhibition could have also been clearer and more visually justified, with the incorporation of the historical context: archival photos and accounts of contemporaries, both followers and opponents of Boichuk. This would help to reconstruct the intense struggle between different artistic groups, which defined the main tension of the art and cultural life of the 1920s and early 1930s. Boichukists took a very proactive part in this struggle, they opposed their critics, consistently asserting their vision of the new Ukrainian art”.
}
The first exhibition of Boichukism did not take place until 1990, more than half a century since Boichukist works were created. The 2017–2018 exhibition was only the second grand display of the art of Boichuk’s school over the course of 80 years. The story of Boichukist works epitomises the gradual discovery and exploration of Ukrainian modernism. Even in the country itself this art returns as a familiar other or the unfamiliar self.

In 2018, the Mystetskyi Arsenal hosted another grand exhibition: *Kurbas: New Worlds* [*Kurbas: Novi svity*]. While Kurbas is one of the better-known figures of Ukrainian Soviet modernism, the Kurbas exhibition stemmed from a significant paradox:

On the one hand, he is a given for people specializing in the field, his life and work have been thoroughly studied. . . . On the other hand, the general public knows very little about Kurbas, aside from the fact that he had something to do with theatre and was repressed by Stalin.

Elsewhere, Virlana Tkacz, a theatre director inspired by Kurbas’s work and the lead curator of the exhibition, explains her ambition further:

But all the time I was thinking to myself: we know, for example, that Malevych painted ‘The Square’, that Picasso

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123 The exhibition was curated by Virlana Tkacz, Tetiana Rudenko and Waldemart Klyuzko. For more information on this exhibition see: “Kurbas: New Worlds”, https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavka/kurbas-new-worlds/ [accessed 12.05.2021].

124 See the description of the *New Worlds* exhibition on the website of Yara Arts Group (founded by Virlana Tkacz): https://www.yaraartsgroup.net/kurbas-new-worlds [accessed: 01.05.2020].
created ‘Portrait of a Woman with Two Noses’. But what did Kurbas do? So, my goal, as a director, was to show that in the exhibition.\textsuperscript{125}

Kurbas: *New Worlds* indeed brought to the fore the achievements of Kurbas, his theatre and his collaborators: the role of movement and gesture in Kurbas’s theatre, his progressive use of music and different media (in particular, film and radio), as well as the avant-garde costumes and scenography designed by such prominent constructivist artists as Petrytsky and Meller. In outlining the purpose of the exhibition, Tkacz emphasises the gap between scholarly work and the reception of Ukrainian modernism by the population at large. While this gap is not peculiar to Ukraine, in the Ukrainian context it greatly reflects the Soviet memory manipulations that I discussed earlier.

Furthermore, the divorce of the art and the audience goes strikingly against Kurbas’s inclusive approach to making theatre, given his dedication to theatrical education and deep interest in the audience. Exhibitions, such as those on Kurbas and Boichukism, re-establish this lost connection, opening avant-garde art and theatre to thousands of people beyond a coterie of scholars.

Another figure that has exerted tangible influence on the contemporary literary scene is the leader of Ukrainian futurists Semenko. The prominent contemporary writer Serhiy Zhadan, who wrote his doctoral thesis on Semenko and played the poet in a feature film, was inspired by the Ukrainian culture of the 1920s:

> When back in the late 80s I came to Kharkiv, I visited the Literary Museum. At that time, there was a large exhibition dedicated to the Executed Renaissance. I think that my love for the literature of the [19]20s–30s comes from that time [if another proof of the importance of exhibitions was needed – B.T.]. Everyone from our “Chervona
fira” [“Red Cart”] group started to work there as junior researchers, and we were lucky enough to work with the manuscripts of the writers of the 20s, with their books, with their personal photos.\textsuperscript{126}

It is no coincidence that the exhibition on the Executed Renaissance took place on the eve of Ukraine’s independence and that young writers like Zhadan were galvanised by this period and generation. Despite the unhealable damage that Ukrainian Soviet modernism suffered, its accomplishments set a pivotal cultural precedent. The literary group Red Cart, among others, “considered themselves successors of the cause of the father of Ukrainian futurism, which they repeatedly emphasised”.\textsuperscript{127} Zhadan’s words reveal the paradox of a futurist in a museum, as it were: the rebellious Red Cart group sought to be as innovative as the futurists, but instead of breaking away with the tradition like the futurists claimed to do, they treated this very anti-conservative futurism as their own tradition.\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{126} “Shche koly naprykintsi 80-kh ia priykhav do Kharkova, to potrapyv do literaturnoho muzeiu. V toi chas tam bula velyka vystavka, prysviachena Rozstrilianomu vidrodzhenniu. Meni zdaietsia, shcho zdaietsia, shcho liubov do literatury 20-30-kh rokov same z toho chasu. My vsi z nomu ‘Chervonoiu firoiu’ vlashtuvalys tudy na robotu iak modelsi naukovi spivrobotnyky, i nam trapylos shchastia pratsiuvaly z rukopysamy pysmennykiv 20-kh rokov, ikh nimy knyhamy, osobystymy fotografiiamy”. Zhadan, “Chym dykhaie Radio Kharkiv: Serhiy Zhadan pro avanhard ta misto Kha”.


\textsuperscript{128} The paradox of a futurist in a museum is not entirely surprising, however, given that Semenko himself claimed to be “[b]oth a futurist / and an antiquary” (“I futurist, / i antykvar”), in his poem “Pro sebe” (“About Myself”, 1916). Mykhail Semenko, \textit{Poezii}, Kyiv: Radianskyi pysmennyk, 1985, 73. For a discussion of this coalescence see the most comprehensive to date study of Ukrainian futurism: Oleh Ilnytzkyj, \textit{Ukrainian Futurism, 1914-1930: A Historical and Critical Study}, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University
The contemporary poet Liubov Iakymchuk, who has dedicated great efforts to learning about Semenko and promoting his work, similarly speaks of this influence: “In fact, futurism is that part of literature that I am learning a lot from. I am learning from Mykhail Semenko. . . . Experimentation in poetry is important for me. Visual poetry, experimentation with rhythm. I am fascinated by Semenko’s audacity”. Elsewhere she notes: “The popularisation of Semenko’s creative work is my personal task, because he is very important for me. It is necessary to have a solid foundation for the continuation of his avant-garde tradition”. Instead of rejecting the past, therefore, Iakymchuk, Zhadan, and Zabuzhko, among many other contemporary writers and artists, emphasise the importance of cultural continuity and in their work consciously draw upon the tradition of Ukrainian (Soviet) modernism.

Press, 1997. Faber similarly speaks about “the paradox that the future-fixated current of futurism fell back on already outdated or historicised phenomena from the past” (“das Paradoxon, dass die auf die Zukunft fixierte Strömung des Futurismus auf bereits überholte resp. historisierte Phänomene aus der Vergangenheit zurückgriff”). Faber, Die ukrainische Avantgarde, 88.


Decommunising Ukrainian Soviet Modernism?

In January 2019, the Ukraine Orthodox Church became independent from the Russian Church, and in a magazine column written in anticipation of this historic event, the then President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko incorporated Khvylovy into the discussion of some of the country’s most pressing religious, cultural and (geo)political issues.\(^{131}\) It appears paradoxical that Poroshenko, during whose presidency the decommunisation laws were adopted, refers to “the famous communist Khvylovy” (as Stalin characterised the writer in the 1926 letter to Kaganovich) in articulating Ukraine’s domestic and foreign policies. On the one hand, this reference reflects the selective reception of Khvylovy’s works, and more generally, the legacy of Soviet modernism in Ukraine today: Khvylovy is widely viewed as a Ukrainian and European writer, but not as a communist/socialist writer. On the other hand, while the Soviet – centra-lised, Russia-oriented, and totalitarian – version of communism eventually monopolised this ideology in the USSR, it was far from being the only version of communism. The national communism in Ukraine offered a major alternative. Defending Khvylovy at a public dispute in 1926, Oleksandr Shumsky, the People’s Commissar for Education and one of the principal

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champions of Ukrainisation, for example, emphasised that Khvylovy “will fight for socialism as a Ukrainian communist”. This alternative, however, did not come to fruition because of the Bolsheviks’ eventual exclusive control.

Responding to a journalist who admitted to no longer liking Khvylovy after having learnt that he was a communist, Iaryna Tsymbal wrote:

I am startled by the whole logic of their thinking. If [someone is] a communist, it means that that person is a bad writer; if the Bolsheviks rule the country, it means that the books are published by the Soviets. What shall we do with our twenties then? Decommunise these people who had to live under the Soviet rule, and erase it all from the history of Ukrainian culture . . . ?


133 “Among the demands of . . . the ‘national Communist current’”, writes Myroslav Shkandrij, were “the control of certain government bodies (economic, political, educational, etc.), the Ukrainization of the party, government, press and civil life in general, the promotion of Ukrainians to positions of leadership and the creation of a modern Ukrainian culture”. Myroslav Shkandrij, “Introduction: Mykola Khvylovy and the Literary Discussion”, in Khvylovy, The Cultural Renaissance in Ukraine, 1-10, here 3. For further discussion of national communism see: James Mace, Communism and the Dilemmas of National Liberation: National Communism in Soviet Ukraine, 1918–1933, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.

Marci Shore draws a similar example from another post-Communist, namely Polish, context, which concerns Bruno Jasieński (1901–1938), a leading Polish futurist in the interwar period, who was also a communist in Poland, France, and the Soviet Union, and who was eventually executed in Stalin’s Great Purge. In a 2009 letter, the Polish Institute for National Remembrance insisted that the street named after Jasieński in his hometown must be renamed, as it represents “a glorification . . . of the criminal ideology of communism”. Edward Balcerzan strongly disagreed with such an approach. The Polish critic emphasised that Jasieński was “a romantic of proletarian revolution, a victim of Soviet pathology, a deeply tragic figure”, and asserted that “[a]nyone unable to distinguish human dreams from brutal totalitarian politics does not understand the twentieth century”. The same can be said about Khvylovy, whose “I”, as we have seen, was deeply fractured, which Khvylovy’s death note foregrounded poignantly. Khvylovy’s note opens with genuine confusion: “The arrest of [Mykhailo] IALOVYI means the execution of the Whole Generation. For what? Because we were the most committed communists? I do not understand this at all”. Khvylovy further writes in the same note: “It is a beautiful sunny day today. How I love life, you have no idea”.

136 Ibid.
137 The arrest of Yalovy (1895–1937), a Ukrainian Soviet writer and one of the leading VAPLITE figures, was the first in the series of repressions that eventually led to the execution of Ukrainian Soviet intellectuals.
139 “Sohodni prekrasnyi soniashnyi den. Iak ia liubli zhyttia – vy i ne uivliai- ete”. Ibid.
The jarring juxtaposition of these two parts of the self, prominent in Khvylovoy’s works, is distilled in this final text of his.

Mykola Kulish and his modern-day reception is also emblematic of the formation and co-existence/competition of identities. While Kulish is widely considered to be Ukraine’s greatest twentieth-century playwright, his works have been staged rather selectively. The most popular has arguably been *Myna Mazailo* (1928), a comedy in the spirit of, and with allusions to, Molière’s *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, which ironically explores the vicissitudes and intricacies of the process of Ukrainisation.\(^{140}\) Over recent years, another play by Kulish that has come to the fore has been the playwright’s last staged piece, *Maklena Grasa*.\(^ {141}\) This play is set in 1930s Poland amidst the Great Depression (alluding to 1930s Ukraine beset by the Holodomor). At the centre of *Maklena Grasa* is the coming-of-age story of the 13-year-old Maklena who lives in dire poverty with her ill father and dying sister and dreams of a better life in “the land of the Soviets”.\(^ {142}\) Kulish sets Maklena’s hardships and dreams against her neighbour and rent collector Zbrozhek who pursues his own, capitalist, dreams. When Zbrozhek’s plans fall through, he is ready to sponsor his death for his family to earn the insurance money (a plotline similarly employed more than fifteen years later by Arthur Miller in his *Death of a Salesman*, a play that bears some striking parallels to Kulish’s *Maklena Grasa*, despite Miller’s likely unfamiliarity with Kulish’s works). Driven to despair and dazzled by the socialist dream, Maklena kills Zbrozhek and escapes for the Soviet Union.

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\(^{141}\) The most recent production (as of the time of this essay) of Kulish’s *Maklena Grasa*, by Malyi teatr in Kyiv, premiered in January 2020.

\(^{142}\) Montague’s unpublished translation.
Drastically different interpretations of this play highlight its multi-layered nature. In 2019, the international theatre festival Kulish. Kurbas. Shakespeare took place in Kharkiv featuring two productions of Maklena Grasa.\footnote{“Kharkiv International Theatre Festival: ‘1919-2019: Kulish. Kurbas. Shakespeare’”, Night Train Theatre Company, \url{https://www.nighttraintheatrecompany.com/kharkiv-festival-2019} [accessed 12.05.2021].} One was the first ever English-language production of the play by the Night Train Theatre Company (UK, directed by Maria Montague).\footnote{For more information about this production see: “Maklena”, Night Train Theatre Company, \url{https://www.nighttraintheatrecompany.com/shows-maklena} [accessed 12.05.2021].} The British production brought to the fore the clash between illusion and reality, as well as the ideological conflict between capitalism and socialism in the play, while attending to the vulnerable position of an individual amidst these collisions. The other production was that of The Luhansk Theatre of Music and Drama (directed by Volodymyr Moskovchenko), displaced in the wake of the war in eastern Ukraine, which had a markedly different approach. The Luhansk theatre removed references to the Soviet Union. Instead, it included comic interludes with batiary (“young street fighters and pranksters from the prewar Lwów”, now Lviv in Western Ukraine),\footnote{Eleonora Narvselius, \textit{Ukrainian Intelligentsia in Post-Soviet L’viv: Narratives, Identity, and Power}, Plymouth: Lexington Books, 175.} which both returned Maklena Grasa to the Ukrainian context and added elements of farce, seeking to convey “the feeling of the Apocalypse border[ing] with irony”.\footnote{“Maklena Grasa: Anotatsiia”, Luhanskyi oblasnyi akademichnyi ukrainskyi muzychno-dramatychnyi teatr, \url{http://ukrlugteatr.com/repertoire/maklena-grasa/} [accessed 12.05.2021].} In this production, which “immerse[d] [the audience] into the reality of our times, where the persistent feeling of collapse, misfortune, and depression haunts many”,\footnote{Ibid.} the socialist revolution that Maklena seeks to join in the play subtly
referred to the Euromaidan revolution. The Luhansk production, therefore, effectively ‘decommunised’ the play, revealing, inter alia, the lingering effect of the Soviet trauma.  

Some other plays by Kulish have also been decommunised – by omission. Consider Kulish’s *Sonata Pathétique*, a most significant theatrical work about the 1917–1918 revolutionary

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148 The contemporary Ukrainian playwright Nataliya Vorozhbyt wrote the play *Kvitka Budiak*, an adaptation of *Maklena Grasa*, which premiered in September 2013. It is perhaps not an utter coincidence that *Kvitka Budiak* was first staged just a few weeks before the Euromaidan Revolution, as in her adaptation Vorozhbyt translated the 1930s play into the reality of contemporary Ukraine with its social and economic challenges. This act of translation also testified to how central social issues are to Kulish’s original play, behind the ideological element. Himself growing up in utter poverty, not unlike Maklena, and having seen the suffering and predicament of so many children, as he worked as an education officer, Kulish experienced those hardships first-hand. That Kulish set the play in Poland suggests that the national question might not have been of primary importance for him. Svitlana Oleshko, “‘Polska’ piesa Kulisha”, *Culture.pl*, 2019, https://culture.pl/ru/article/polska-pesa-mikoli-kulisha [accessed 22.09.2020]. The suffering of people mattered for Kulish no less, if not more. This sensibility is a major reason why *Maklena Grasa* still feels relevant. The struggle of a teenage girl in the tarnished adult world fraught with economic decline, political violence and a conflict of ideologies translates compellingly into a relatable story of fighting for one’s way out of destitution.
events in Ukraine. Combining elements of modernist drama and epic theatre (Kulish initially conceived this piece as a novel), *Sonata Pathétique* explores the complex tapestry of the struggle of the Bolsheviks, the Whites, and nationalists. Against this epic background, the story of the play’s protagonist – “I”/the poet Ilko Iuha, as we have seen – appears all the more prominently.

Kulish also weaves into the play a cast of seemingly secondary characters – a prostitute, a washerwoman and her husband, a war veteran and legless bootblack – who might not appear important at first but who, in fact, represent Kulish’s deep interest in and sympathy with social outcasts who strive for the normality of life beyond revolutions. *Sonata Pathétique* is one of Kulish’s most complex works. Yet, apart from Oleksandr Tairov’s 1931 production in Kamerny Theatre in Moscow, there have been very few productions of this play, even in independent Ukraine. To some extent, this status quo illustrates the inertia stemming from the erasure of Kulish and his works from the Soviet canon (*Sonata Pathétique*, in particular, was removed from the repertoire of the Kamerny theatre and the Soviet theatre as a whole after forty shows). On the other hand, that *Sonata Pathétique* has not received more theatrical attention in Ukraine is bound up with the fine coexistence of multiple facets in Kulish’s play. Fowler suggests that Kulish was not anti-Soviet, but rather practised ‘engaged social criticism,’ in Marko Stech’s words, to improve his surrounding society. . . . This aporia may explain why *Sonata Pathétique*, a very good play, has not been promo-

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149 Cf., for example, the productions of the play in 1966 (director Dmytro Aleksidze, The Ivan Franko Drama Theatre, Kyiv), 1993 (director Serhii Danchenko, The Ivan Franko Drama Theatre, Kyiv), and in 2006 (director Oleh Mosiichuk, The Ternopil Taras Shevchenko Drama Theatre).
Fowler’s proposition might arguably apply to a number of other plays by Kulish. Among the playwright’s works that have not been part of scholarly discussion or theatre repertoires, are works such as *Farewell, Village* (*Proshchai selo*, 1933), one of Kulish’s last plays, which explores the process of collectivisation and provides a striking theatrical counterpart to Dovzhenko’s *Earth*. Written in 1932, two years before Kulish was arrested and at the time when the horrors of the Holodomor were already unfolding, *Farewell, Village* conforms, on the surface, to the socialist realist aesthetic and seemingly celebrates the policy of collectivisation. Yet, in fact, through subtle modernist elements the play sabotages both this aesthetic and the Soviet policy. The ‘red’ cover of the play should not divert the attention of scholars and theatre makers from the staggering clashes, contradictions and subversions that take place beneath the surface of this work.

Kulish’s *Farewell, Village* raises the important question of “the possibility of continuities and shared characteristics between modernism and socialist realism”. Grabowicz approaches this issue in his recent article that advances a revision of the poetic legacy of Tychyna. Commonly, scholars split Tychyna’s works into the “early Tychyna”, one of the most influential Ukrainian modernist poets, and the “late Tychyna”, an epitome of a socialist realist writer-cum-Soviet official. Much at odds

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with the well-established canon, Grabowicz approaches Tychyna’s middle poetry (the insightful category that the scholar introduces) from an avant-garde perspective, showing examples of collage, montage, dramatisation, parody and self-parody, as well as instances of “modernism folded into socialist realism” in Tychyna’s poetic works of this period.\textsuperscript{152}

\textbf{Women’s Voices and Visions: Within and Without Modernism}

A cardinal void in the Executed Renaissance anthology, perpetuated by the lasting canon established by Lavrinenko’s volume, is the complete absence of women writers and artists. Krupa notes:

The [Executed Renaissance] anthology does not contain a single poem, prose, or essay written by a woman. One gets the impression, fundamentally wrong, that the entire literature of the 20s had been created by men. Meanwhile, according to Iashek’s and Leites’s \textit{Desiat rokiv ukrains’koji literatury}, 67 women writers co-created the Ukrainian field of literary production in the years 1917–1927.\textsuperscript{153}

On the one hand, this void exposes the sharp contrast between the declared gender equality and women’s emancipation in the Soviet Union and women’s actual limited possibilities for participation in (Ukrainian) Soviet cultural life. On the other hand, the absence of a female perspective in the executed renaissance

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\footnote{153}{Krupa, “Arguments against ‘The Executed Renaissance’”, 275.}
\end{footnotes}
canon reflects the general and universal problem that modernist studies are still missing “an intensive, large-scale exploration of gender and modernism”, and in particular inquiry into such salient aspects of this relationship as: “the sex/gendered constitutions of modernism; women’s roles in shaping modernity; the suppression and recovery of lost modernist women writers; or the ways in which taking gender/the body/women as a point of entry might expand and/or completely alter current definitions of modernism” (emphasis in the original).154 While these questions have been better studied with respect to the Ukrainian fin-de-siècle modernism, 1920s (Soviet) Ukrainian women’s writing and art still remain almost completely overlooked.

This absence appears especially jarring given the central role that women writers played in inaugurating modernism in Ukrainian literature. Pavlychko compellingly argues that modernism in Ukraine took root largely thanks to feminism:

Ukrainian modernism was not deprived of gender, as the majority of scholars have surmised – never having delved into the topic. On the contrary, it had direct, genetic links to gender. In the context of Ukrainian fin de siècle literature, things feminine and things feminist became both a cause and a symbol of modernity.\(^{155}\)

Ukrainka (1871–1913) and Kobylianska (1863–1942) were not just important in advancing the modernist paradigm in Ukraine, they largely shaped it.\(^{156}\) Ukrainka rewrote some of the central myths from the female/feminist perspective in her modernist poetic dramas, in particular Kassandra (1907), where Ukrainka revisited the mythology of the Trojan War, and Kaminnyi hospodar (Stone Host, 1912), where she rethought the story of Don Juan.\(^{157}\) In her novella Valse Mélancolique (1898), Kobylianska “explores the relationship between three independent women

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who reject patriarchal mores and share a home together, living only for art”.

As Rory Finnin reminds us, “*Valse Mélancolique* predates Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* by over thirty years”. Ukrainka’s and Kobylianska’s works epitomise the fact that “[s]hifts in gender relations at the turn of the century were a key factor in the emergence of Modernism” and that “Modernism had mothers as well as fathers”. Ukrainka’s poetic dramas and Kobylianska’s prose, in particular *Valse Mélancolique*, belong to some of the first female/feminist modernist works next to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1891), Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), Gertrude Stein’s *Three Lives* (1903–1906), and Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* (1915).

With respect to the later period, Pavlychko notes:

Ukrainian feminism, which had such vocal resonance at the end of the nineteenth century, had no champions during the modernist experiments of the 1910s and 1920s. There were no writers who proposed to analyze the relationship between the sexes in terms of the conflict between them. The question either was not posed at all, or else it was dominated by a masculine approach – usually under a neopopulist, neopatriarchal scheme. Sexuality, and especially sexuality from a woman’s point of view, returned for a long time to the realm of the taboo.

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159 Ibid.
While stressing “the conflict between [the sexes]” might place a wrong emphasis (as, arguably, it is possible to regard questions of gender in a non-antagonising, non-binary way) the fact that hardly any female writers from the 1910s and 1920s are known or, let alone, have been sufficiently explored, reveals a tremendous gap, which, at the same time, necessitates and leaves vast space for further research.\footnote{The very fact that this void exists in the first place requires a study of its own, one that would necessarily take into account women’s economic circumstances, access to education, and social conditioning. An important volume to approach this problem is: Oksana Kis (ed.), \textit{Ukrainski zhinky v hornyli modernizatsii}, Kharkiv: KSD, 2017. See also the recent anthology: Vira Aheieva (ed.), \textit{Buntarky: Novi zhinky i moderna natsiia}, Kyiv: Smoloskyp, 2020.} It is important to explore the works of female prose writers and poets of this time, both within the Soviet Union, such as Veronika Cherniakhivska, Mariia Halych, Dokiia Humenna, Ladia Mohylianska, Halyna Orlivna, Liutsiana.
and women artists who contributed to Ukrainian Soviet artistic modernism, such as Oleksandra Ekster, Nina Henke-Meller, Ivanova, Sophia (Sonia) Lewitska, Pavlenko, Ievheniia Pribylskaya, and Hanna Sobachko-Shostak.\textsuperscript{164}

\textsuperscript{163} Beyond the Soviet Union, one should mention women writers such as Natalia Livytska-Kholodna and Iryna Vilde, among many others. See, for example, Alexander Averbuch, “The Theurgy of Impurity: Fin-de-Race and Feminine Sin in Russian and Ukrainian Modernisms”, \emph{The Russian Review}, 78/3, 2019, 459–485.

\textsuperscript{164} Insightful notes on the life of some of these and other women might be found in this recent anthology of autobiographies: Raisa Movchan (ed.), \emph{Sami pro sebe. Avtobiohrafii ukrainskykh myttsiv 1920-kh rokiv}, Kyiv: Klio, 2015. Studying this time encourages a look at less mainstream genres, in particular letters, diaries, and memoirs. See also Francisca de Haan, Kras-simira Daskalova, and Anna Loutfi (eds.), \emph{A Biographical Dictionary of Women’s Movements and Feminisms Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe}, Central European University Press, 2006, which, in addition to the entries
Recent book and art projects have been aimed at balancing out the narrative of the Ukrainian literature and art of the 1920s from the gender perspective. In 2017, the anthology *Moia kariera. Zholina proza 20-kh rokov* (My Career: Women’s Prose of the [19]20s) came out, the first of its kind, which contains texts “by women on women” written by Halych, Orlivna, Oleksandra Svekla, and Varvara Cherednychenko. “There were a few dozen women writers in the 1920s [in Ukrainian Soviet literature],” explains Tsymbal, even though today it seems that these writers did not leave their mark in the history of literature, that is how invisible [nepomitni] they were (the title of one of Marharyta Senhalevych’s books was precisely that, *Nepomitna [The Invisible]*) because, above all, they were unheard and overlooked.¹⁶⁵

Halych, Senhalevych and Ahata Turchynska sought to organise “Zholina almanakh” (“Women’s Almanach”), which would gather female writers from Kyiv and Kharkiv, and which, however, did not materialise. Nonetheless, Halych, Senhalevych and Turchynska dedicated the almanac to Kobylianska,¹⁶⁶ which reflects their intention to draw upon the preceding feminist tradition and to maintain this tradition in the Ukrainian literature of the 1920s.

While stylistically the Ukrainian Soviet women’s writing

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of the 1920s was mostly not radically innovative, it nonetheless contained clear modernist elements. Again, this writing might invite a reassessment of modernism rather than an outright exclusion of these writers from modernist canons. “African American women writers (and feminism) are consistently underrepresented in major modernist venues”, notes Cassandra Laity, the founding editor of the Feminist Modernist Studies journal, and this statement equally applies to Ukrainian Soviet women writers, of course. Laity continues: “questions of form still exclude many women writers of all races and ethnicities from critical inquiry. Measured against Ezra Pound’s exhortation ‘make it new,’ much women’s writing appears not ‘modern’ enough, or paradoxically, too (quirkily) hybrid”. Yet, suggests the critic, “[m]odern women’s often politically driven prose may adapt traditional forms such as the regional, gothic, sentimental; or create hybrid forms, oscillating between ‘high’ and ‘low,’ the experimental and the traditional”. It is from this angle that 1920s Ukrainian Soviet women’s literature could, and in fact should, be regarded too.

Consider, for example, the prose of Halych, in particular her story “Drukarka” (“The Typist”, 1927), which follows the story of Nadiia who works as a typist at an “ustanova” (“institution”) and faces the risk of being made redundant. While on the surface this text might appear as depicting, at times even gaily, an ordinary scene from a woman’s life, a closer look at the story reveals that at its centre are Nadiia’s psychological experiences, her “unpleasant feeling”, “dark hopes and immovable thoughts about danger”, “non-transparent false calm”, her “eyes like the eyes of an artificial puppet”, and other manifestations of anxiety and alienation: “since childhood, when Nadiia was scared of the desert created everywhere by darkness. Somewhere deep that dread [zhakh] still lives in her”.168 Nadiia tries to persuade herself that having a profession and a job is good enough for her. The sudden prospect of being fired only reinforces this mantra (along with Nadiia’s painful memories of her poverty-stricken past and thoughts about the current economic difficulties in the country).

Yet throughout the story she asks herself the crucial question: “Shcho zh potim?” (“What’s next?”), which she repeats in different ways and words, desperately looking for ways to grow and go beyond the monotony of her everyday existence: “the familiar dull days, months and years went rhythmically one after another before her eyes. Slowly, without a reply”, “the clerk life . . . as an unbearable pointless burden”, “only rhythmical spirals were moving around, and she herself circled with them, as if on a merry-go-round”.169 Back in her apartment, she picks up

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169 “[p]ered ochyma lyshe v takt, odyn po odnomu prokhodyly znaiomyi marudni dni, misiatsi, roky. Plavko, bez vidpovidi”, “kantseliarske zhyttia . . . iak
Zhurnal dlia zhinok (Women’s Magazine) only to put it down, feeling disappointment that the models in it “are all the same”; on the same shelf she also puts away H. G. Wells’s novel Men Like Gods (1923), ironically questioning the title of the novel: “like Gods!” Nadiia finds herself staring at the wall in her apartment, which brings to mind Gilman’s fin-de-siècle feminist story “The Yellow Wallpaper”.\textsuperscript{170} Nadiia’s equivalent of the yellow wallpaper, if this parallel may be drawn, is the omnipresent typing with its tedious beat:

it seemed to her that her very profession [\textit{fakh}] was her greatest enemy. That its monotonous rhythm would not leave her anywhere: at work, on the street or in her sleep. Even at this moment she could hear clearly how through her fingers passed the black words, tapping the same beat! And suddenly she was horrified that it could be like that forever without end.\textsuperscript{171}

\textsuperscript{170} The female narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” gradually becomes insane as she continuously explores the patterns on the yellow wallpaper in the room where she is confined whilst being (mis)treated for her “temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency”, as diagnosed by her physician husband. Eventually, the narrator sees female shapes in the wallpaper and peels the wallpaper off to get the figures out: “there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast. I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?” Shawn St. Jean (ed.), “The Yellow Wall-Paper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Dual-Text Critical Edition, Athens: Ohio University Press, 22-23, 51.

Unlike Nikolai Gogol’s Akakii Akakievich, who “[i]n his copying . . . found a varied and agreeable employment” and who “smiled, winked, and worked with his lips” when he needed to copy his favourite letters, Nadiia becomes petrified at the thought of her clerk routine being the limit of her opportunities. “The Typist” not only has clear feminist undertones and sheds light on professional limitations for women in Soviet Ukraine (and elsewhere in the Soviet Union), but also provides insight into the (female) psyche, exploring selfhood, anxiety and alienation, which highlights the modernist sensibility of this story. Women’s writing such as Halych’s “The Typist” should become part not only of the Ukrainian Soviet modernist canon but also modernist studies more generally, problematising, as Laity

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172 While Pavlychko suggests that “during the modernist experiments of the 1910s and 1920s [t]here were no writers who proposed to analyze the relationship between the sexes in terms of the conflict between them”, the women’s writing of this period includes, in fact, a number of works that broach this topic, and that do so from the feminist perspective. Consider, for instance, these distinctly feminist passages, foregrounding the new woman, from Svekla’s story “Nadlomleni sertsem” (“The Heartbroken”, 1930): “I am not willing to follow the fashion [of family life]. God damn that blasted fashion if I have to sacrifice my conscience to it”, says Iryna, the female protagonist of the story, replying to Petro. Answering Petro’s question as to whether she intends instead “to live like a prostitute”, Iryna asserts: “That depends on how you understand prostitution. For me, for example, prostitution is a trade of sorts, and if that’s the case, I’m not a prostitute. I have nothing to do with that kind of trade. You can rather call prostitutes those who shy away from piecemeal trade and instead sell themselves wholesale for their whole life. Your ‘legal’ wives”; “By working and earning my own living I gain the right to satisfy my physiological needs. I do not accept the family life as it used to be as it sometimes is today too”; “I am leaving, and, on this occasion, I wanted to thank you: I am pregnant. . . . Not before you, but before everyone else, and before the child, I am the father, and I am the mother of the child. Don’t get offended, but I needed you for some time as a machine. . . . I wanted a child, and, make no mistake, I do not care who will be the child’s father – Dmytro, Petro, or anyone else, the important thing is that he is healthy”. Oleksandra Svekla, “Nadlomleni sertsem”, in: Moia kariera, 310-460, 314-319.
rightly suggests, the notion that women’s writing in particular should be “‘modern’ enough” as measured against the benchmark of Pound’s “make it new”.

In 2019, following the exhibition *A Space of One’s Own* (*Svii prostir*) in PinchukArtCentre in Kyiv, the volume *Why There Are Great Female Artists in Ukrainian Art* was published, featuring Ivanova, Pribylskaya, Pavlenko, Ekster, next to later Ukrainian Soviet and contemporary Ukrainian female artists. This volume represents “one of the first attempts to tell the history of Ukrainian art through the lens of gender, covering the period from the end of the 19th century to the artistic experiments of the early 21st century.” The book’s contributors include these artists into a broader women-oriented narrative of Ukrainian art, seeking to remedy the inadequate (mis)conception of Ukraine’s artistic tradition as being almost exclusively male. *Why There Are Great Female Artists in Ukrainian Art* outlines a tentative continuity between the female artistic perspectives of the 1920s and later Ukrainian Soviet art, as well as women’s contemporary art of the early twenty-first century.

Just like 1920s Ukrainian literature, the Ukrainian art of this time created by women encourages a broader definition of visual modernism/avant-garde, one that includes folk and proletarian elements (reflecting the general tendency of the Ukrainian Soviet art of the 1920s). The art critic Kateryna Iakovlenko notes in her introduction to the volume that, similarly to Ukrainka and Kobylianska on the literary scene, the

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174 Tsymbal posits: “Unlike the classic triad of Vilinska, Kosach [the real names of the writers Marko Vovchok and Ukrainka, respectively], and Kobylianska, who all were of noble origin and did not have to earn a living . . . the women of letters of the 1920s had to solve a new problem, the combination of family and creative work, that is career. In contrast to the new [i.e., Soviet] government’s lip service to the struggle for gender equality, liberation of women
foremost nineteenth-century female artists, such as Mariia Bashkyrtseva (1858–1884) and Augusta Kochanowska (1866–1927), came from advantaged backgrounds. “Both Bashkyrtseva and Kochanowska”, explains Iakovlenko, “came from wealthy families, had the opportunity to study abroad, and stayed in the midst of Western Europe intellectual life. However”, the critic asks further, “could such a life be accessible to a woman of the ‘proletarian’ origin, or one coming from a peasant family? Was there a place for modernist currents and ideas in the Ukrainian village?”\textsuperscript{175} Indeed, similarly to the literary scene, the Ukrainian female avant-garde of the 1920s was in many cases infused from household slavery, and a new kind of domestic life [pobut], the woman remained in the grip of two Ks, ‘Kinder’ and ‘Küche’, as ‘Kirche’ was not part of the picture in an atheistic state”. Tsymbal, “Vyzvolennia zhinky”, 9.

with and enriched by folk and proletarian elements. Sobachko-Shostak, who came from a peasant background and only received a limited formal education, created a distinct artistic idiom in embroidery and decorative art. She was part of the studio in the village Skoptsi (now Veselynivka near Kyiv), a peasant craft

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workshop, which, along with another similar workshop in Verbivka (near Cherkasy), was organised by Ekster and Pribylskaya.\(^{177}\) “This creative collaboration”, notes Tetiana Zhumurko, “brought to life a kind of language that combined folk and decorative principles with Cubist-Futuristic and Suprematistic compositions”.\(^{178}\) 

Pavlenko, who also came from a peasant background and was discouraged by her family from receiving an education and becoming an artist, and Ivanova, who studied art in Moscow and Kyiv, both belonged to the Boichukist group of artists and produ-

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Fig. 28: Oksana Pavlenko, “Zhinochi zbory” (“Women’s Assembly”, 1932).
The Un/Executed Renaissance: Ukrainian Soviet Modernism and Its Legacies

Fig. 29. Antonina Ivanova, “Kupalnytsia” (“Woman Bathing”), 1925.
ced works that combined elements of monumentalism, modernism and proletarian art. Here, too, the notion of modernism should allow for “adapt[ing] traditional forms” and “creat[ing] hybrid forms, oscillating between ‘high’ and ‘low,’ the experimental and the traditional”.

In general, the understanding of Ukrainian Soviet modernism would greatly benefit from the study of this culture from the perspective of gender studies. Scholars have not yet sufficiently applied the methodological toolkit of gender theories to this period. Such a gender-focused approach would investigate the gender dynamics of the Ukrainian Soviet 1920s in their complexity, examining works by women and men, heterosexual and homosexual, and all that is in between and beyond these categories. The feminist inquiry into Ukrainian Soviet modernism should also include men’s writing and art as its rich material. The idea of such inclusion reflects the trajectory of feminist criticism: “Once the tradition of women’s modernist writing . . . became better established . . . [t]he focus changed from stark denunciation of misogyny to more complex, theoretically nuanced, historically oriented investigations of the contradictory presence of the feminine, in its variegated manifestations, in the writing of male Modernists”. By the same token, it would be important and elucidating to use the literature and art of this period to study its various perceptions of masculinity and homosexuality.

Needless to say, any gender, ethnic, sexual, or other limitations not only distort the reality of this (or any other) period, but also

180 Dekoven, “Modernism and gender”, 182.
deprive us of the chance to learn about its richness and variety.

**Conclusion: Back to the (Modernist) Future**

The ‘executed renaissance’ has become the main metaphor and paradigm for Ukrainian (high) modernism, and it remains as such today. The qualifier ‘executed’ precedes and largely overshadows the achievements of this generation, projecting its ultimate tragic outcome onto the creation of art in the moment and thereby firmly tying the Ukrainian Soviet culture of the 1920s to the political situation. “As far as ‘the Executed Renaissance’ is concerned”, Tsymbal notes,

I hope that this designation will disappear one day as an unfortunate metaphor. What I do not like about it is that it necessarily implies a martyrlogy of victims murdered by the Soviet regime. I prefer to speak about what those people did. . . . After all, people did not live only to die.

An alternative that Tsymbal suggests using is “the Twenties”.182

182 Iaryna Tsymbal, “Psykhohichnyi roman pereduvav masovym zhanram”, *LitAktsent*, 2016, http://litakcent.com/2016/03/03/jaryna-cymbal-u-1920-h-psyholohichnyj-roman-pereduvav-masovym-zhanram/ [accessed 18.09.2020]. Elsewhere, Tsymbal notes: “This metaphor, which at one point was felicitously made up by Jerzhy Giedroyc for the anthology compiled by Iurii Lavrinenko, played a trick on us in the end. We wanted to turn a blind eye to the fact that in the period covered by the anthology – the 1920s–the first half of the 1930s – not all cultural and literary figures were executed, and among the represed people not everyone represented a ‘renaissance’”. ("Tsia metafora, kolys vdalo vyhadana lezhy Gedroitsem dla antolohii, iaku sklav Iurii Lavrinenko, vreshti-resht zle pozhartuvala z namy. My volily zapliushchuvaty ochi na te, shcho v periodi, iakyi okhopliuvala antolohii, — 1920-ti — persha polovyna 1930-kh rokiv, — ne vsi diiachi kultury i literaturny rozstrilihani, a sered represovanykh ne vsi ‘vidrodzhennia’"). Iaryna Tsymbal, “Karaty ne mozhna pomyluvaty”, *Tyzhden.ua*, 2018, https://tyzhden.ua/Columns/50/211919 [accessed: 22.09.2020].
In this spirit, the scholar has edited a number of volumes of works from this time, which are organised according to different genres (detective prose, love novels, science fiction, travelogues and others, next to women's writing, as we have seen, which is part of the series too), calling this series “Nashi dvadtsiati” (“Our Twenties”). “The term ‘the executed renaissance’”, Pavlychko noted as early as the 1990s, “does not reflect the essence of the phenomenon of the Ukrainian literature in the first post-revolution decade, it merely captures the unprecedented explosion of creative activity of Ukrainian literary figures and the Bolshevik massacre of them”. Furthermore, the notion of ‘executed’, while painfully truthful in the Ukrainian context, is not confined to Ukraine, but similarly applies to Belarus, Georgia, Russia, and other Soviet republics, where the majority of modernists were also murdered.

“A more complete rediscovery of Ukrainian literary modernism is still before us”, points out Grabowicz, adding:

if by “rediscovery” we mean a synthesizing notion of the paradigm, the period, and the multiplicity of its phenomena, especially as to the ways in which the various modernist literary moments, such as symbolism, impressionism, futurism, constructivism, and so on, and above all the various ideological moments, the Literary Discussion of 1925–1928, the notion of proletarian art, and even the early phase of socialist realism fit into the mix—because clearly modernism and socialist realism overlapped by several years.184

183 “Termin ‘rozstriliane vidrodzhennia’ ne vidobrazhaie suti fenomena ukrainskoi literatury pershooho porevoliutsiinooho desiatylittia, vin fiksuiu tilky fakt nebuvaloho spalaku tvorchoi aktyvnosti ukrainskykh literatoriv i bilshovytskoi rozpravy nad nymy”. Pavlychko, Dyskurs, 170.
The uncertainty around terminology and the pursuit of a paradigm for Ukrainian culture created in Soviet Ukraine between 1917 and 1933 reflect the complexity of this period, the coexistence and succession of various isms, tendencies and aesthetics, and the rich hybridity of this culture. In this essay, I have proposed the concept of Ukrainian Soviet modernism. On the one hand, this concept reflects the intricate centre-periphery (in particular, Moscow-Soviet Ukraine) relationship, where Ukraine was significantly affected by the official centre, but simultaneously perceived itself as a centre of its own, and affected, in its turn, the official centre and disrupted the hierarchy established by the latter. The notion of Ukrainian Soviet modernism also highlights the entangled relationship between ‘Ukrainian’ and ‘Soviet’, which cross-pollinated each other rather than being two airtight categories. Kurbas, Kulish, Khvylovy and others sought to contribute to the making of Soviet/socialist/proletarian culture, and participated in the shaping of the Soviet project, which was in *statu nascendi* in the 1920s. At the same time, the above entanglement means that the Soviet, and Soviet culture in particular, must not be confined to the official centre. In the minds of Ukrainian or Georgian modernists the Soviet cultural map had several centres, not just one. The vantage point of Ukrainian Soviet modernism, therefore, welcomes a different, more intricate and inclusive, look at early Soviet culture, one that would overcome the amnesia caused by Soviet repressions and memory manipulations.

On the other hand, the study of 1920s Ukrainian Soviet culture also invites an expansion of the (mental) map of modernisms. As I have tried to show in this essay, Ukrainian Soviet modernist works present rich instances of the interplay between literary/artistic traditions and modernist experimentation, in particular the Baroque and the avant-garde, between utopia and violence, the rural/environmental and the urban/industrial, the
religious and the ideological, between a deep study of the self and the making of a proletarian literature. Modernism “is often thought of as the antithesis to representation of the threat/promise of radical political and cultural change”, as a fundamentally apolitical phenomenon. In contrast to this understanding, the literary and artistic ambivalence and subversion in response to the political climate in the Soviet Union often resulted in modernist games and experiments, which also had significant political effects (which does not mean, however, that these modernist oeuvres should only be regarded in the political context). The multifaceted character of Ukrainian Soviet modernism invites its proper inclusion into modernist studies, especially in view of the gradual turn towards global modernism(s). While some scholars regard global modernisms as “unsafe modernisms”, which might bring the risk of “expansion becom[ing] colonialism”, it is, nonetheless, important to question the

185 Dekoven, “Modernism and gender”, 175.
186 Claire Barber-Stetson, “Modern Insecurities, or, Living on the Edge”, Modernism/modernity, 3/4, 2018, https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/modern-insecurities [accessed 15.02.2021]. Barber-Stetson’s essay “confronts the feeling of insecurity that lurks behind expansions of modernism as a field and concept with the rise of the new modernist studies”, suggesting that the new modernist studies “threaten[n] to dilute the term modernism beyond critical purchase, to leave graduate students without sufficient institutional support, and to divert resources from other fields, periods, and movements, including contemporary literary studies”. Barber-Stetson approaches global modernisms from the perspective of “traditional English departments”, thereby foregrounding the latter’s limitations in the study of modernisms. In their response to this essay, the editors of the 2020 volume Global Modernists on Modernism Alys Moody and Stephen J. Ross confirm the urgency of Barber-Stetson’s concern and emphasise that the completion of the volume was only possible through collaborative international effort: “We realized we would need to draw on the expertise of other scholars who already had the regional knowledge and linguistic skills that we lacked. . . . Our wonderful section editors – a cohort of ten scholars with expertise in languages and regions about which we knew little, who assembled, edited, annotated and often translated texts in their areas of specialty – were particularly invaluable”. Alys Moody and Stephen J.
narrow definition and canon that modernism has commonly had. Here, too, a re-examination of the relationship between the (modernist) centre and peripheries would be worthwhile. Feminist theories and gender studies could provide an illuminating tool in this respect, as while “the interdisciplinary and transnational, global ‘turns’ brought an influx of women artists and culture makers worldwide into the new modernisms”, feminist criticism, in its turn, “helped to make possible the transnational, along with other recent ‘turns’” (emphasis in the original). Ukrainian Soviet modernism is still to undergo the (gradual) process of recovery, which also constitutes a major task of feminist studies (the recovery of women’s writing and art in Ukrainian Soviet culture, then, has a special urgency, as the study of these women writers and artists has been in a doubly peripheral situation).

In this essay, I have also sought to show that the culture created by the Ukrainian Soviet modernists has had powerful reverberations in contemporary Ukraine. Studying this period is akin to going ‘back to the future’ in a sense, as, on the one hand, both political life and cultural studies in Ukraine will be coming to grips with the Soviet legacy in the foreseeable future, and, on the other hand, the Ukrainian Soviet culture of the 1920s provides a tradition, inspiration and a subject matter for contemporary Ukrainian writers, artists, activists, and the general public alike. Lavrinenko compared the search for the works of this period with the excavation of the culture of Pompeii brought to an abrupt end by the eruption of Vesuvius. This analogy vividly

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Ross, “On Global Modernism and Academic Precarity”, Modernism/modernity, 4/2, 2019, https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/academic-precarity-reply [accessed 15.02.2021]. This insightful discussion helpfully shows practical (and institutional) obstacles, such as the lack of regional and linguistic expertise, for a truly global/international study of modernism, especially in Anglophone academia.

conveys the assiduous effort of Lavrinenko and other émigré scholars and activists to preserve the memory of this generation and their works. Today, however, this analogy requires a major caveat: while the life of Pompeii was forever suspended in time, Ukrainian modernist culture is constantly recovered, re-enacted and revitalised in contemporary Ukraine and beyond – through theatre productions, films, exhibitions, scholarly studies, and multiple other forms of academic, cultural, and even political, life. Rather than being fixed artefacts behind glass, this culture remains highly relevant and alive, which only confirms how important it is to study it.
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