

# BO ZAR



## A Short History of Ukrainian Cinema

It is a little known fact that Ukraine has a connection with cinema that goes back to the very beginning of this industry. Indeed, in 1893, Josyp Tytshenko, an inventor from Odesa, built one of the prototypes for the kinetoscope. Unfortunately, the few films he made did not attract any attention and his invention was soon forgotten. On December 1, 1896, Kharkiv Opera House saw the first screening of Ukrainian films shot by Alfred Fedetskiy.

In 1911, in what is today known as Dnipro, the Sakhnenko & Co company was founded, which would go on to produce films based on Ukrainian history. It was only in the 1920s, however, that the cinematographic industry started to get off the ground in the then Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. The All-Ukrainian Photo Cinema Administration (VUFKU), established in 1922, was at the time largely independent of Moscow and its centralised decision-making. Studios set up in Odesa, Kyiv, Kharkiv and Yalta produced comedies as well as adventure and historical films designed for mass audiences.

At the same time, Alexander Dovzhenko was pioneering a new form of artistic cinema. His 'Zvenyhora' (1928), 'Arsenal' (1929) and especially 'The Earth' (1930) earned him international fame. Nevertheless, critics from the communist party accused him of all manner of ideological sins, finally breaking him as an artist. The relative freedom of the VUFKU attracted other directors, like the Kaufman brothers, to Ukraine. In 1929, Dziga Vertov (David Kaufman) shot the influential 'Man with a Movie Camera'.

But it all came to an abrupt halt with Stalin's terror regime of the 1930s. Following the artificial famine of 1932/33 known as Holodomor, which cost the lives of millions of Ukrainian peasants, Stalin took on the Ukrainian intelligentsia, arresting and executing hundreds of Ukrainian artists, writers and musicians. Cinema became nothing more than a tool in the hands of communist party ideologues.

After the terror of the 1930s and the horrors of the Second World War, Ukrainian film-making emerged from the ashes only in the 1960s. What came to be known as Ukrainian Poetic Cinema united creative artists with different stylistic approaches and gave traditional Ukrainian culture modern means of artistic expression. At the forefront of this new generation was Serhiy Paradzhanov, a director of Armenian origin who had come to Ukraine to study the cinematic works of Ukrainian masters. His 'Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors' (1964), a tour de force in defiance of the prevailing socialist realism of the time, brought him international renown, while making him a target of the soviet system's brutal attacks. Other representatives of this highly emblematic genre included Iuriy Illienko ('A Well for the Thirsty', 1965), Leonid Osyka ('Stone Cross', 1968) and actors Ivan Mykolaichuk, Konstantin Stepankov and Larisa Kadochnikova.

In the 1970s, this wave of Ukrainian film-making was once again crushed by the communist regime, to be replaced by increasingly escapist cinema based on classic literature and Russian authors.

In 1982, however, Roman Balayan's non-conformist social drama 'Flights in Dreams and Reality' attained cult status, with signs of growing protest. Kira Muratova, in constant opposition to the official ideological and stylistic canons since the mid-1960s, developed her own hermetic cinematographic language. Her 'Asthenic Syndrome' (1989) metaphorically predicted the end of the Soviet Union and was awarded the Jury Prize at the 40th Berlin International Film Festival.

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After gaining independence in 1991, the lack of a coherent state cinema policy in Ukraine resulted in an annual output of very few full feature-length films and potential loss of significant talent. Nevertheless, some remarkable films were produced, such as Andriy Donchyk's debut drama 'Oxygen Starvation' (1992) and Viatcheslav Krichtofovitch's 'Friend of the Dead' (1997) portraying the uncertainties of the 1990s, coproduced with France. This first successful international coproduction was emulated only recently with various European collaborations (Sharunas Bartas's 'Frost', Peter Bebjak's 'The Line', Andrea Magnani's 'Easy', all from 2017). In the meantime, other mostly short Ukrainian films were gaining recognition at numerous prestigious festivals. Igor Strembitsky's 'Wayfarers' (2005) and Maryna Vroda's 'Cross' (2011) were both awarded the Short Film Palme d'Or prize in Cannes, while Sergei Loznitsa had a number of his feature films shown at the festival, including 'My Joy' (2010), 'In the Fog' (2012) and 'A Gentle Creature' (2017). His 'Maidan' about Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity was also presented at the Cannes Special Screening session in 2014.

2011 can be considered the start of a new era of Ukrainian cinema thanks to a systematic state policy and financial support for the movie industry. Particularly worthy of mention are Ukrainian documentalists Serhiy Bukowsky ('Tell me your Name', 2006; 'The Living', 2008; 'The Main Role', 2016) and Roman Bondarchuk ('Ukrainian Sheriffs', 2015). Recent years have also witnessed the development of independent film-making, with youth centres dedicated to cinema especially involved.

While the last 20 years have only seen a trickle of Ukrainian films, no more than one or two a year, 2017 has already seen 33. Along with financially successful mainstream movies, films like Myroslav Slaboshpytskyj's 'The Tribe', prize winner at over 40 festivals, notably the Cannes Critics' Week in 2014, herald a new direction in Ukrainian cinema. Shot during the 2013/2014 revolution, its subject matter, aesthetics and atmosphere epitomise and embody the full raft of dramatic historical changes in Ukraine.