

Oleksiy Radynski
**Maidan and
Beyond, Part II:
The Cacophony
of Donbas**

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1.

On February 22, 2014, the activists of the Maidan movement seized the suburban residence of ousted Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovych, who had fled Kyiv the previous day. Yanukovych’s residence, Mezhyhirya, was notorious long before the fall of the regime for the extent of its megalomaniac luxury. Nevertheless, the occupiers were utterly shocked by the discoveries they made inside. Stocked with a tremendous amount of artwork – icons, portraits, and pieces of decorative art – Mezhyhirya resembled a bizarre museum of looted treasures. These works turned out to be mere leftovers from Yanukovych’s art collection; it soon became clear that the president had begun evacuating his possessions at least a couple of days before he himself fled.¹ In any case, the activists and cultural workers who discovered the collection found it significant enough to be taken to the National Art Museum of Ukraine.

When the Maidan militiamen along with the cultural activists brought the Mezhyhirya treasures to the National Museum in Kyiv, amidst the smoking ruins of the barricades that had surrounded the museum’s premises for more than a month of street battles, the museum’s staff was initially puzzled. The content of the donation seemed dubious at best – despite the fact that a painting ascribed to Jan Bruegel the Younger was also there. What the protesters perceived as sublime works of art turned out to be a random collection of luxurious items, most of which were actually gifts presented to the former president by his cronies. Now these gifts were filling the empty rooms of the National Museum – all artworks had been evacuated when the fierce street fighting with the riot police began. Meanwhile, the Mezhyhirya residence itself was opened to visitors, who flooded its enormous territory in the thousands, exemplifying a bourgeois interest in the wellbeing of the upper classes rather than a spirit of revolutionary destruction. The attitude of Ukrainian revolutionaries towards the palace of an ousted autocrat differed drastically from their French and Soviet counterparts. In Paris and Saint Petersburg, revolutions gave birth to public museums. In Kyiv, the revolution’s outcome was an art show.

Soon after the fall of the regime, the Yanukovych collection being stored in the National Museum’s empty halls was turned into an exhibition. The show was organized with the assistance of a notorious nationalist militia of Maidan called the Right Sector (we will hear more of them later).² A note accompanying the



View of the "Codex of Mezhyhiria," The National Art Museum, Ukraine.



View of the "Codex of Mezhyhiria," The National Art Museum, Ukraine.

show said that the objects presented there had no artistic merit, and that they were exhibited as mere evidence of an evil dictator's taste. The curatorial statement was full of snobbish, elitist contempt for the "tasteless" political class – supposedly personified by the former president – and seemingly directed towards Yanukovich's lower-class background.³ But in fact, unconsciously, the exhibition represented the troubled imagination of a whole society rather than that of a particular kleptocrat. None of the works shown at the exhibition were acquired by Yanukovich himself. Rather, it was the others – his business partners, party comrades, occasional guests, and relatives – who chose these objects based on their own assumptions about his preferences and tastes. The complex interplay of projections of desire behind the Yanukovich collection was now being displayed publicly.

At the heart of this interplay was an incredible story of social mobility exemplified in Yanukovich himself – a story that could be dubbed the Ukrainian Dream. His was a story of an orphan raised in an economically depressed, crime-ridden area, who was jailed twice as a youngster for hooliganism and robbery, emerged during the turbulent post-Soviet transition as a mafia boss, ran for president, stole the vote, and was removed from power by the "color revolution" against this electoral fraud. He then won the next presidential election, putting his country on the brink of economic collapse and civil war during the four years of his autocratic rule. His lifestyle of excessive luxury was not just the perverse obverse of the poverty and denigration that most of his compatriots live through. It also represented the roots of the bizarre political regime of post-Soviet oligarchy: unprecedented, and largely arbitrary, social advancement based on the ultimate looting of assets left behind by the Soviet state. Most of those who donated to the Yanukovich collection were of course the successful beneficiaries of this kind of advance – while most of the audience that flooded the National Museum, the passive spectators of this luxurious world, were its victims.

One of the objects presented at this exhibition was a late-nineteenth-century map of Donbas, an impoverished coal-mining region from which the ousted president hailed. It was also home to a vast majority of the president's clan, which had built its fortunes and political capital through the rampant privatization and exploitation of the region's numerous industrial assets. By the time the Yanukovich exhibition opened in the museum in late April, large swaths of territory represented on that map of Donbas were engulfed in armed civil conflict – one of the

outcomes of the Maidan revolt in Kyiv. This war was of course inspired by the clash of financial interests, but justified solely by the ghosts of the past.

2.

In 1930, Dziga Vertov completed *Enthusiasm (Symphony of Donbas)*, a documentary film praising the labor of Donbas coal miners during the first Five Year Plan in the USSR. One of the film's episodes shows a fierce anticlerical campaign in Donbas, with Soviet stars replacing Orthodox crosses on the tops of churches, and with churches themselves being turned into museums and workers' clubs. In one of the shots, a procession of atheists removes the treasures found at a church, just like the Maidan activists would carry away the possessions of Yanukovich from his residence.

In spring 2014, a comparable outburst of iconoclasm took place in Donbas, this time directed at the institutions of state rather than the church. Some groups in Donbas did not accept the overthrow of the regime of their fellow Donbasian, despite the fact that their region suffered from his corrupt rule no less than any other. As a result of total impoverishment under Ukrainian authority and a massive Russian propaganda campaign, an active and radicalized minority decided that joining the Russian Federation would be a good solution for Donbas, and a violent protest campaign was launched. The furious crowds of Donbas dwellers (with the substantial support of mercenaries from neighboring Russia) stormed city halls, security services, police stations, and other state institutions, tearing down Ukrainian flags, tridents, and other governmental symbols, and replacing them with Russian tricolors – or with the flag of a self-proclaimed People's Republic of Donetsk.

In between these two waves of iconoclasm lies the fascinating history of a region that until recently was probably one of the most ignored and depressing places on earth, despite the fact (or maybe precisely because of the fact) that it had served as a backbone for the Soviet project from the 1930s until its inglorious end – both in industrial and cultural terms. At the heart of this project were the ideals of labor and proletarian identity – and the Donbas region was one of their most highly promoted representatives.

Symphony of Donbas marks one of the first cinematic representations of shock labor – an ideology and practice of superproductive physical work. Shock labor was supposed to transcend the capacities of the human body and contribute to the accelerated industrialization of the Soviet Union – and thus to the creation of a Communist society. The Donbas region became a

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breeding ground for shock workers – a new kind of laborer, ready for endless, voluntary, sacrificial self-exploitation that had to replace the outdated, capitalist modes of exploitation based on market relations. In the mid-1930s, Donbas gave birth to the Stakhanovite movement, a Soviet application of Taylorism named after Aleksey Stakhanov, who had reportedly mined 227 tons of coal in a single shift. But in the postwar Soviet Union, the ecstatic ideology of acceleration from the Stalinist era was replaced by an all-encompassing stagnation. Time in Donbas went by slower and slower until the clock of progress finally froze for good in the early 1990s, when the state largely shut down the region’s factories and mines and sold them off to new private owners for nearly nothing. The sites of the shock workers’ records of the 1930s were transformed into places of sacrificial self-exploitation of an entirely different kind: illegal, mostly manual work in the abandoned mines controlled by the mafia, which provided yesterday’s labor heroes with the most miserable means of existence.⁴ Meanwhile, the idea of shock labor was outsourced and implemented elsewhere, in the ever-accelerating cognitive factories of digital turbocapitalism.

In *Symphony of Donbas*, Vertov envisages

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the conflation of shock work and cognitive labor, and reveals that the point where the two meet is propaganda. In fact, the film itself was often dismissed as mere propaganda, while it actually explores and transcends the limits of propaganda by laying its device bare. The film opens with an image of a young woman listening to the titular *Symphony of Donbas* – a radio program about the fight for communism in the region. Shots of the woman wearing headphones are intercut with documentary shots of workers in Donbas, which by way of parallel montage are rendered her “internal cinema,” in other words, emerging from her imagination. The documentary nature of those labor scenes is thus subverted, and the border between reality and fiction becomes blurred. Vertov’s montage allows us to perceive political reality as an internalized experience, and turns our subjectivities into small propaganda machines of their own.

Just as Dziga Vertov’s experiments were easily appropriated by the Soviet media machine (devoid of their self-reflexive dimension, of course), this machine itself was then swallowed by the ideologues of post-Soviet Russia. To be sure, various means of conflating reality and fiction are part of the everyday job of mass media virtually everywhere, also in the demoliberal



This image is a detail of a Map of Donbas region, on view at the “Codex of Mezhyhiria,” The National Art Museum, Ukraine.

societies of the West. What differs in the current Kremlin-backed propaganda machine is that for more than a decade it has not been limited by any democratic procedures of influence and control.⁵ Postmodern ideas of reality as a mere collection of narratives were never realized as successfully as in Russia. The media picture can be assembled out of disparate fragments of reality completely voluntarily, given the fact that there is no credible possibility for publicly verifying the media's claims.

Since the Maidan movement began, the Kremlin-backed media has launched a total information war against political dissent in Ukraine. This campaign has proven especially successful in Donbas, a region with strong economic and historical ties to Russia, and where the Russian media is still dominant. If Dziga Vertov's art was supposed to engage the viewer in intensive physical work via mobilization at an immediate motoric level, the Russian media was able to push the population of Donbas into a kind of ideological shock labor. But the major tool of mobilization is no longer an idea of a bright distant future. On the contrary, the historical memory of the Soviet past became a force behind the second phase of the Maidan revolt – its counterrevolution, dubbed the Anti-

Maidan, which took the form of an armed uprising in Donbas.

3.

On May 9, 2014, celebrated as a Victory Day, a group of unidentified gunmen attacked the Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Donetsk, stealing the WWII-era arms that were on display in the museum's exhibition.⁶ The gunmen called themselves the Home Guard of a self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and told the museum staff that the seized weapons would be used in their fight against the alleged fascists that are attacking their land, just as they did over seventy years ago. It may sound like the most bizarre case in the history of museum heists, but this episode is probably the best summary of the ideological confrontation induced by Kremlin-backed television in its Donbas audience. Devoid of any vision of the future, this confrontation was focused on the battles of the past that were to be restarted today, as if for over seven decades they were simply on pause and could now be launched again by pressing the "play" button on the YouTube channel of Russia Today. Now, the glorious war of the Soviets against the fascists had to be fought again. This time, fellow Ukrainians who happened to be the followers of

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Dziga Vertov, *Symphony of Donbas*, 1930. Film still of a passage portraying anti-clerical campaign underway in Donbas.

the Western-backed government in Kyiv impersonated the fascists. How could this twist ever take place?

The specter of fascism has been haunting Eastern Europe at least since the collapse of USSR. There were plenty of historical parallels that justified the fears of a post-Soviet fascist threat. In the early 1990s, the West had subjected the new post-Soviet states to economic and cultural humiliation comparable to that of the Weimar Republic after WWI. Western politicians and entrepreneurs did not only want to profit from what they perceived as their victory over USSR in the Cold War. It seems that the ultimate (albeit unconscious) goal of the “transition” from the Soviet system to post-Soviet neocapitalism was to punish the societies of the former USSR for their sin of adhering to Communist ideology. This sin had to be burnt out of their minds by means of savage shock therapy and other neoliberal measures, implemented in the post-Soviet countries more radically than anywhere in Europe. The West did avoid the mistake of Versailles when dealing with Germany after WWII, but then it repeated the same mistake when dealing with the leftovers of USSR after the Cold War. As a result of economic impoverishment and political denigration by the

victorious first world, a perfect ground for extreme revanchist nationalism was created in a formerly second-world region that quickly joined the ranks of the third.

In Russia, this nationalism is peculiar because it justifies itself on the basis of the Soviet project, which is still perceived as leftist and antifascist, despite its nearly total absorption into the symbolic world of the far right. Russia’s apparent greatness was thus based upon its victory over the Nazis, claimed to be a victory of the Russian army rather than Soviet one, which was actually composed of Byelorussians, Georgians, Kazakhs, Tatars, Ukrainians, and many others who fought alongside Russians. Meanwhile, some Ukrainians fought against the Red Army – and this was a great pretext to launch a reenactment of a half-century-old feud.

During the last decade, there was a tremendous process of excavating the ghosts of the past on both sides of the Russian-Ukrainian border. While the myth of the Great Patriotic War was being resurrected in Russia, in Ukraine a right-wing government put in power by the Orange Revolution began glorifying the nationalists who fought both the Red Army and the Nazis, despite being one-time Nazi

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Dziga Vertov, *Symphony of Donbas*, 1930. Film still.

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Exhibition view at the Museum of Great Patriotic War, Donetsk, 2012.

collaborators. The historical stupidity of the Ukrainian government provided the Kremlin propaganda machine with an opportunity to warn its audiences of the Nazi threat coming from Ukraine, while the Russian authorities were destroying the remnants of freedom of speech in their country, outlawing public dissent, supporting far-right youth organizations, persecuting ethnic minorities and labor migrants, and banning “homosexual propaganda.”

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Dziga Vertov, *Symphony of Donbas*, 1930. Film still.

If there is such thing as “politics of memory,” it is exactly what Donbas saw in spring 2014, when the pretext to pit citizens against each other did not stem from ethnic, religious, or social issues, but from conflicting (and equally mistaken) views of the past. Kremlin-backed media took advantage of the presence of some far-right groups at Maidan and painted all of the antigovernment protests in Ukraine as a Western-backed neo-Nazi coup. When enough people in eastern Ukraine believed this story, they were told that Ukrainian Nazis were coming to eliminate Russian-speakers with the weapons they got from NATO, so the locals should arm themselves. In some places, police stations were seized with the help of Russian mercenaries, and the armed rebellion against the Ukrainian state began. When the army sent troops to disarm the separatists, the initial fairy tale of “Nazis coming back to eliminate us” started to fulfill itself in the minds of those involved.

There’s a certain irony in the fact that the resistance in Donbas still claims to be somehow antifascist, since from the very beginning many of its participants openly identified themselves as sympathizers of the Russian far right. The rule of the Donetsk People’s Republic in Sloviansk, the first town taken over by the separatists, started with an attack on the local Roma

population. In the so-called constitution of the Donetsk People’s Republic, abortions are banned, and the “leading and dominating faith” is the orthodox Christianity of the Moscow Patriarchate. The Donetsk People’s Republic actually seems like an attempt to reverse time and undo the anti-obscurantist iconoclasm captured in Donbas by Vertov. It’s no surprise that the Donbas war immediately became a magnet for history lovers and military geeks of all stripes. The so-called leader of the Home Guard of the Donetsk People’s Republic, proven to be an officer from the Russian secret services, is actually famous as a participant in the historical reenactment movement in Russia, known for his love of monarchy. He had been an active participant in numerous historical reconstructions of the Russian Civil War before he actually became a military commander in real life. It seems that history no longer repeats itself as farce. It repeats itself as historical reenactment.

P.S.

In March 2014, weeks before heavy fighting started in the Donbas region between the Ukrainian army and local separatists joined by mercenaries from Russia, I went to a small Donbas town known for its huge salt mine, which now serves as an army weapons warehouse. The entrance to the mine was surrounded by an Anti-Maidan protest camp opposing the possible transport of weapons from the mine, weapons that allegedly could be used by the army against the protesters in Donbas. Most of the weapons stored in the mine were said to date back to WWII, although they still seem to be fit for fighting. Everyone I talked to in the camp (like nearly all the dissenters in Donbas) was sure that the government wanted to hand over these weapons to an obscure post-Maidan militia called the Right Sector. Why them? From the very beginning of the Maidan movement, this newly founded, loose coalition of marginal far-right sects became the darling of each and every Kremlin-backed media outlet, which reported on every one of the group’s provocative moves. The group thus became a nightmare for many Eastern Ukrainians opposed to Maidan and loyal to Russian TV. Its actual role in Ukrainian politics is very hard to determine, because it hardly exists anywhere outside these media reports. The group boasts from two to three hundred members, and its candidate in the presidential election of 2014 won around 1 percent of the vote.⁷ Social media analysts said that its swift rise in popularity during the Maidan uprising bore clear signs of very professional web promotion. When standing at a checkpoint together with some pro-Russian activists who were staring into the misty Donbas steppe, waiting for the armed units of the Right

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Sector to arrive, I asked myself what those much-feared warmongers were doing at that time. Maybe they were actually preparing for an exhibition at the National Art Museum of Ukraine?

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[Oleksiy Radynski](#) is a filmmaker and writer based in Kyiv. He is a member of Visual Culture Research Center, an initiative for art, knowledge, and politics founded in Kyiv, 2008. Since 2011, he has been an editor of Ukrainian edition of *Political Critique* magazine. His texts had recently been published in *Soviet Modernism 1955-1991: Unknown Stories* (ed. by Katharina Ritter, Ekaterina Schapiro-Obermair, and Alexandra Wachter, 2012), *Post-Post-Soviet?: Art, Politics, and Society in Russia at the Turn of Decade* (ed. by Marta Dziewianska, Ilya Budraitskis, and Ekaterina Degot, 2013); *Sweet Sixties: Spirits and Specters of a Parallel Avant-Garde* (ed. by Ruben Arevshatyan and Georg Schöllhammer, 2014). His latest films include *Incident in the Museum* (2013), *Ukraine Goes To War* (with Tomas Rafa, 2014), and *Integration* (2014).

1
CCTV footage from Mezhyhirya proves that Yanukovich was already packing his bags during the negotiations on the resolution of the Ukraine crisis that he held with the French, German, and Polish foreign ministers on February 20–21, 2014. Some suggested that Yanukovich had to flee Kyiv because the agreement arranged by the international negotiators (which included limitations on presidential power and early elections) was broken by the opposition. But Mezhyhirya's evidence proves that Yanukovich was about to flee anyway, with the intention of creating a pretext to undermine the agreement because of alleged security concerns.

2
See the National Museum's website <http://namu.kiev.ua/en/exhibitions/active/view.html&eid=234>

3
See <http://artukraine.com.ua/eng/a/inventory-of-a-dictator/#.U5sSmxagHKG>

4
See the first episode of *Workingman's Death* (2005) by Michael Glawogger.

5
Despite all the shortcomings of representative democracy, it is ironic to see its mechanisms being despised in the West by those who still possess them, while being ridiculed by authoritarians in Russia who have effectively privatized the right to be elected. It's obviously a trap to regard the Russian crackdown on representative democracy as an argument in its favor; according to this view, Western representative democracy is the only "still democratic" option available. But it's far more dangerous to consider the Putinist system as a "counter-imperialist" alternative that could provide opportunities for reclaiming democracy.

6
"The Great Patriotic War" is the name given to WWII in the Soviet Union. According to Soviet history, the Great Patriotic War started in 1941, with the German attack on the USSR, rather than in 1939, with the division of Poland. (In this way, Soviet historiography tries to conceal the fact that the USSR made a deal with the German Nazis before the start of WWII to divide Poland.)

7
In an outstanding media prank on the day of the presidential election in Ukraine, Russian state TV announced that the Right Sector's candidate was actually winning the election, with 37 per cent of the vote. See (in Russian) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkTvACx5LaM>