

## Communicating European Values through Ukrainian Popular Culture: Case Study of the Jean Monnet *European Values in Literary Arts* Module

### Abstract

*The social impact of popular culture has been widely recognised and reflected upon in the culture studies discourse. Traditionally regarded as immanently conservative, artistically superficial, and inferior to the “high”, “elitist” or official types of culture, popular culture provides valuable insights into the cultural climate of the age, not only signalling the important cultural shifts and transformations taking place in society, but also shaping the audience’s preferences, behaviour and values sets. For Ukraine, as a country painfully rebuilding its national identity through long-lasting resistance to Russian colonisation, and at the same time paving its way towards the European political, economic, and cultural area, the matter of conceptualisation and development of pro-European cultural policies has become subject of ongoing public and expert discussions outlining the Ukrainian culture industry’s mission as a European values communicator. However, the industry’s actual response to this challenge remains largely unexplored. This study, aimed at investigating the existing axiological climate as revealed through the popular culture products generated for and consumed by the Ukrainian audience, sums up the results of 10 student research projects developed under the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet European Values in Literary Arts module implemented at Zaporizhzhya National University throughout 2018–2021. Encompassing a variety of movies and TV series produced in Ukraine within the last five years, the study attempts to reconstruct the axiological messages the products under consideration deliver to their recipients through visual and verbal codes, character concepts, inner hierarchies, core binary oppositions, conflict setting, building and resolution, etc.*

**Keywords:** *pop culture, mass culture, European values, axiology, deconstruction, critical media literacy*

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## *Introduction*

Traditionally perceived as opposed to other forms and types of culture (i.e., high culture), and widely criticised for its consumerist nature both from a Marxist (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002) and Postmodern (Jameson, 1991) point of view, within the last decades, popular culture has been subject to multiple studies that reveal its considerable potential not only to cater to a mass audience's tastes, but also to shape individual opinions, attitudes and values (Kellner & Share, 2005; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007; Dazed Media, 2020). With values functionally perceived as “adaptive traits, which people adjust to maximise their effectiveness as the larger social system around them changes” (Morris, 2015, p.52), and given the scale of impact popular culture casts upon the audience's *Lebenswelt*, Herman and Chomsky (1988) go as far as to proclaim it an innovative, highly efficient, and ever-pervasive propaganda system – a claim paving the way towards a modern vision of pop-culture as a kind of tool for hybrid warfare (Razumkov Centre, 2016).

This vision largely determines both the critical discourse (Denisiuk, 2017) and public discussion (Babenko, 2019) around Ukraine's pop-culture development in times of ongoing political and military confrontation with Russia, resulting on the one hand in the banning of pro-Russian cultural products from the internal market, and, on the other hand, in numerous grassroots attempts at regulating the content of domestic cultural products to deliver strong pro-Ukrainian and pro-European messages (Melnyk, 2019).

However, the industry's ability to respond to this demand has yet to be determined. While obviously raising its stakes as a means of influencing public opinion (an exemplary case being President Zelensky's election campaign featuring District 95 Studio's *The People's Servant* TV series imagery), and getting consciously involved in the national identity-building process, Ukraine's popular culture industry, Melnyk (2019) argues, is still struggling to move away from Russian cultural impact as well as to develop clear strategies and policies regulating the values-shaping messages of the cultural product in balance with the terms of commercial success. What hinders this process, alongside the government's contradictory and often confusing initiatives in the sphere of cultural policies backed by confronting groups of influencers, is the lack of understanding of the essence of European values pointed at by numerous social surveys. Due to Ukrainian society's predominantly survivalist values paradigm, Gorshenin Institute's survey (2018) claims that citizens tend to fragmentise European values (as defined by the Treaty of Lisbon, Art.2, and covering human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights), rather than accept them as an integral axiological construct: “a considerable number of citizens is focused

predominantly on personal well-being and prosperity values, and thus tends to prioritise the values they find personally profitable at the moment” (p. 28), with the values of tolerance, equality or human rights protection put to one side as less significant.

Another important trait considerably influencing the values-related aspects of Ukraine’s cultural politics in lieu of a prolonged Russia-backed crisis is growing disappointment in European democracy. A strong disbelief in Ukraine’s ability to install democratic institutes capable of fighting corruption, injustice, and nepotism, that led to positioning Europe and its values as “an unattainable object of desire” way before the Revolution of Dignity (Yavorska & Bogomolov, 2010), seems to have boosted isolationist moods: the percentage of respondents supporting neither European (EU) nor Eurasian (the Customs Union) integration grew from 7.2% in 2014 to 24.4% in 2017 (Gorshenin Institute, 2018). New Europe Center’s *Generation Z Values and Priorities* (2017) survey, focused on Ukrainian youth, points out that the percentage of those trusting the EU institutions and those doubting their functionality is roughly equal among people aged 14 to 30 (29% and 28% respectively).

Due to popular culture’s immanent direction of mass appeal (Crothers, 2021), the hypothesis of the current survey is that Ukraine’s popular culture product would bear a strong imprint of society’s contradictory European values reception. This is where the matter of responsible consumption of cultural products comes into play, raising issues of the stakeholders’ shared responsibilities and critical media literacy skills mastered through specific academic courses. As Kellner and Share (2005) argue, a deconstructive interpretation is applied to popular culture products to subvert their aesthetic encodings and generic conventions. Revealing the way they conceptualise reality could lead to important insights in terms of debunking social myths and addressing issues of tolerance, equality, human dignity, etc. Within the last decades, popular culture has been gradually paving its way to the classroom, not only as a means for the teacher to connect to students (Tisdell & Thompson, 2007), but also as a powerful tool to raise issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Joanou and Griffin, 2010; McGaha, 2015). Dazed Media’s *The Era of Monomass* (2020) analytical report demonstrates a growing concern among young pop-culture consumers over the issues of equality, race, environmental issues and women rights, as a cumulative result of balanced media policies and Gen Z’s growing media literacy skills.

The double research optics of this study are therefore determined by focusing not only on the values that modern Ukrainian pop-culture entertainment products (movies, TV shows, TV series, music videos made

after 2014) communicate to the public, but also on the way they are perceived by the “naïve” and “critical” recipients, thus revealing their own value profiles. With this aim in view, the following research questions have been formulated:

What values-stating messages have been delivered through Ukrainian popular culture products after 2014?

In what way are the values communicated by Ukrainian pop-culture recognised and interpreted by the target audience (TA)?

To what extent could formal training influence the TA's comprehension skills?

## Theoretical framework

### *Method*

The theoretical framework of this study is determined by Hans-Georg Gadamer's (2004) philosophical hermeneutics, with particular emphasis put on the concept of hermeneutics as “a philosophical effort to account for understanding as an ontological—the ontological—process of Man” (p. 78) rather than a process aimed at revealing a particular meaning. Gadamer's concepts of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*, *Horizontverschmelzung*, *Vorverständnis* and *Vorurteil* have been taken into consideration when assessing the reception of axiological messages delivered by the media products under analysis.

Edmund Husserl's (1962) concept of *Lebenswelt* is of particular importance when addressing pop-culture products as derived from and oriented to the pre-scientific, pre-philosophical comprehension level.

Umberto Eco's (1989) receptive aesthetics, specifically the idea of a cultural product as *opera aperta*, a field of meanings interlinking the mind, society, and life, and hence subject to multiple, diverse, and dynamic interpretations arising from the product/recipient macro communication and largely dependent on the recipient's subjective encodings, is applied to distinguish the naïve and critical recipient profiles.

The methodological apparatus of the study is determined by critical global education (CGE), as well as by the critical media literacy (CML) framework, the first one providing tools and approaches for dealing with multicultural experience, and the latter applied for media product analysis. Deconstruction as a method of subverting core binary oppositions and hierarchies, underpinning the media products' ideological framework to demonstrate its contextual determinacy and the relativistic nature of any possible meaning acquired from it, was applied to reinforce the ethical

dimension of the analysis, as suggested by Simon Critchley (2014).

## **Participants and Procedure**

The project assignments were issued to mixed groups of Bachelor students (1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> year of study, average group size 4 to 6, average age 21, male/female ratio 30/70, 64 students in total) majoring in Humanities, Social, Natural and Exact Sciences and enrolled in the Jean Monnet European Values in Literary Arts Module as a part of their qualification training.

Due to the academic process specificity (an interdisciplinary course taught to a mixed, otherwise fragmented group of students for four academic hours per week, 13 weeks per course iteration), the students were given three weeks to form a project team and to come up with the pop-culture product choice they would work upon for another 10 weeks, alongside progressing through the EUVOLIA course. Each course iteration would end up with a public presentation of the project results, subject to open discussion and peer assessment. The students would also take a wrap-up self-assessment survey to reflect upon their discoveries and the skills they had acquired.

### *MPA algorithm*

To secure project quality and to grant theory-to-practice balance via experiential learning, a media product analysis (MPA) algorithm was developed. The MPA procedure is applicable to visual and textual entertainment products with coherent narrative (i.e., movies, fiction, plot-based music videos or advertisements) and provides a thorough, step-by-step guide through each stage of the research process.

The initial MPA stage comprises defining the product's messages as recognised by students (first impression self-assessed via questionnaire), wide audience (review aggregators feedback analysis) and project creators (interviews, behind-the-scenes, and other add-ons).

The second stage is focused on the product's historical, cultural, political context analysis and aims to find the role the context plays in understanding the product's message by imaginatively transposing it to another cultural or historical context. At the third stage, the agents (characters) are examined in their role as values communicators in terms of their appearance, behaviour, language, race, gender, nationality, and perception by other characters, as well as by the audience. The fourth stage is devoted to conflict analysis. The core conflicts and their resolutions are mapped through a set of binary oppositions (i.e., rich vs poor, male vs female, "normal" vs "deviant", us vs Others, rational

vs emotional, collective vs individual, war vs peace, nature vs civilization, modern vs traditional), to identify the position the product holds in each specific case. The fifth stage accumulates the previous ones to build up the product's ideology, focusing on the values it promotes for its "naïve" and "critical" recipients.

## Results and Discussion

### *Values communicated by Ukraine's popular cultural product: MPA results.*

One of the primary research outcomes derived from projecting the empirical results upon Inglehart-Welzel's values classification matrix (Inglehart & Welzel, 2010) is that, despite the ostensibly postmodern aesthetic codes applied, content-wise, Ukraine's cultural products made for the general audience appeal to survivalist and traditionalist values rather than self-expressive and secular-rational ones. Praising heritage and traditional family values falls in line with depicting fictional worlds based on absolute categories, urging the audience to identify with what is positioned as a "norm". In Vlad Dyky's *The Crazy Wedding* (2018), a comedy loosely based on Philippe de Chauveron's *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?*

(2014) and retelling the story of interracial marriage reluctantly approved by a conservative Ukrainian family patriarch, it is the French African fiancé's adjustment to traditional values rather than his Ukrainian in-laws' eagerness to embrace the Other that grants success to the whole issue.

As for deference to authority as one of the key traditionalist value traits, it is often re-established through substituting "fake" legal authority (disempowered or corrupted by the current system's declared "lawlessness") with a "real" moral one. In District 95 Studio's *Sugar Daddy* TV series (2019), a retired actor boasting his "Soviet" upbringing based on the "eternal values" of justice, equality, empathy, and spirituality, reluctantly teams up with a young female gold digger (meant to portray the "lost" young generation falling victim to a corrupted and "lawless" society) to reinstall social justice in a lawless world by robbing the local oligarchs of their "ill-gotten" wealth. This way, he acquires a role as the young woman's mentor, gradually indoctrinating her in his system of values by stimulating her cultural and intellectual growth and granting integrity to her so far insecure and split personality. This paternalistic vision, together with the fact that the younger character possesses skills rather than values, dismantles all the claims for transgenerational values diffusion the authors make by introducing learning-from-each-other tropes (i.e., the

elder character mastering the Internet as a response to the younger one reading a book).

The paternalistic trend is clearly distinguished in District 95 Studio's other extremely popular product, *The People's Servant* TV series (2015-2017, over 98 mln viewers, making it Ukraine's most highly-rated TV series ever), which vividly depicts the Ukrainians' vision of an ideal leader of the state. Vasyl Holoborodko, an everyman-turned-president, is the archetype of a caring father-of-the-nation figure (wifeless and childless, as he fathers the whole nation and is symbolically married to the country), whose exceptional moral qualities grant him the exclusive right to violate the law (presumed to be installed by the evil oligarchic clans Holoborodko fights single-handedly) for great justice. Holoborodko's social role as the father substitute is further emphasised by depicting "the people" he is supposed to "serve" as infantile, incapable of rational decision-making, and easily manipulated by corrupted oligarchic clans. Within the TV series' fictional world, they possess neither personality nor authority, acting as a silent and often passive majority under authoritarian rule.

Thus, not only does the male cultural hero constructed by Ukrainian pop-culture products incorporate the normative masculinity idea marked by a paternalistic outlook and survivalist values, it also delivers a firm belief in providential, spontaneous, bottom-to-top justice as the only way to fight abuse from those in power.

Directly derived from the patriarchal world picture established at the generic conventions level is the products' overt misogyny and gender inequality, commonly traded for a humorous depiction of gender stereotypes. Neither of the above listed products passes the Bechdel test, nor do they establish a positive female role model other than "mother of the family". Wherever the "strong woman" alternative is introduced, it is depicted with overt sarcasm rather than with the mild humor typically reserved for the mother figure. As an example of what is declared as normative, self-sacrificing femininity (the so-called *Berehynya*, or Home and Hearth Guardian type, referring to a lower female goddess from Slavonic mythology), the mother figure does not commonly require any inner evolution and is accepted as is, while the "strong woman" (usually marked as a businesswoman through her appearance, behaviour traits and professional background) is often subject to a considerable character transformation (taming) on her way to "family harmony". What hampers her way to happiness is a set of values contextually marked as "non-female", such as individualism, leadership, professional ambition, and, first and foremost, her reluctance to sacrifice all that for the sake of "family values". Whenever the strong female characters dominate in

a relationship, this kind of family is depicted as deviant and directly opposed to the patriarchal family considered a social norm.

Whatever attempts at raising the issues of tolerance, equality and democracy were made in the products under discussion, the impact of these values upon the narratives' plotlines and ideology remained largely superficial – more visual than structural. The racial Other in *The Crazy Wedding* is orientalist and exoticised in the colonial tradition, while the democratic transformations in *The People's Servant* are limited to the President's riding a bicycle rather than establishing the rule of law. Female characters meant to fill in the strong woman niche are marginalised, depicted grotesquely, and act mostly as supporting characters.

Among the products under analysis, *Crazy Wedding* and *The People's Servant* attract specific attention, as they refer to the image of a European modelled by the Ukrainians' collective consciousness. In *Crazy Wedding*, the Europeaness (understood primarily as politeness, rationality, prosperity and restrained behaviour, as opposed to Ukrainians' levity, sincerity, primitive tastes, low incomes and emotionality) is attributed to a French African character to debunk the racial prejudices shared by his Ukrainian in-laws-to-be (who associate Europeaness with whiteness) and thus to subvert on multiple levels the civilisation vs savagery opposition. *The People's Servant*, on the contrary, greenlights the negative stereotype: Season 2 features greedy, false, and shrewd EU officials who urge President Holoborodko to initiate unpopular – and seemingly unproductive – reforms in exchange for financial support. In his answering speech, seemingly resonating with the audience's mood, Holoborodko condemns the Head of the IMF for his intent to “take advantage” of Ukraine's current financial hardships, as well as for treating Ukrainians as “beggars” and “Gasterbeiters”. He then rejects the EU support by claiming his “beautiful and strong” nation would prosper using its own resources. This isolationist and ethno-centric narrative, displaying a low level of trust, firmly positions the product within the traditionalist/survivalist values set.

### *Reception: Vorverständnis vs critical analysis.*

In line with Gadamer's idea of *Vorverständnis* as a pre-understanding determined by the context and tradition the recipient lives in and belongs to, the students assessed their first impressions of the cultural products under analysis as mostly positive (58 out of 64). Apart from cases of explicit misogyny marked as disturbing, they found it possible to solidarise with those products' agents positioned as positive role models, to understand and partially



share their values declared verbally or through actions, or to emotionally react accordingly to the products' genre framework. While some products' topics or imagery were declared provocative, the students did not report these cases as disturbing, but rather stressed the social importance of addressing such issues visually or plot-wise.

However, upon applying the CML toolkit to the products they picked for analysis, 46 out of 64 students reconsidered their initial experience and found the national pop-culture products' quality, in terms of delivering axiological messages, as well as the messages per se, less than satisfactory. To raise awareness of European values through the national media product, 14 respondents suggested implementing more precise ethical codes and guidelines based on European media standards: 28 students voted for introducing critical media literacy courses into the secondary school curriculum; 10 stated professional media critics should pay more attention to pop-culture products; 12 said they believed media would change their policies and values set only in response to social changes.

Among the messages revealed via the MPA procedure, those of misogyny and gender inequality were marked as most harmful. The recipients proved to be particularly sensitive to human dignity issues raised through the narratives of bullying, domestic violence and rebellious physicality, while the issues of tolerance and democracy seemed the hardest to grasp.

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## ***Conclusions***

Ukraine's pop-culture products of the last five years (since the beginning of the Russian aggression) arise from a complicated political context, and aim to bridge two contradictory demands to deliver strong pro-European and at the same time ethno-centric messages to an audience gradually coming to terms with European integration as a real perspective rather than an unattainable object of desire. As a result, the Ukrainian pop-culture product perspective on European values directly follows the contradictory and fragmented interpretations they acquire in the national mass consciousness. Despite some attempts at visual or verbal manifestation of the European values set through some easily recognisable markers, structurally and content-wise, domestic media products targeted at a general audience firmly position themselves in a traditional/survivalist values paradigm. This strategy, however,

changes when it comes to products specifically targeted at a teenage and young adult audience, thus signalling the younger generations' gradual shift towards a secular-rational / transcendence values set, mostly addressed through tolerance, gender equality and human dignity narratives. A visible performance gap in communicating the ideas of democracy, human rights and racial equality can be traced, mostly due to the audience's lack of personal connection to these issues. Although the recipients' critical media literacy skills are yet underdeveloped, a short-term formal training in media product analysis could significantly raise their awareness of informational manipulations and thus stimulate responsible consumption of entertainment products.

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