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The depiction of an ongoing war in film: the case of *Bucha* and *20 Days in Mariupol*

A narrative analysis of the films and a comparative analysis of their reception

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[1] All the words semantically associated with "russia" are allowed to be written in lowercase according to the Ukraine's National Commission of Language Standards. (RFE/RL 2023)

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Abstract

This comparative study, which includes narrative, rhetoric, and reception analyses of two films depicting the current war in Ukraine—*Bucha* and *20 Days in Mariupol*—explores the differences in how these films are received by various parties involved in the conflict, specifically Ukraine and russia, as well as by other countries affected by the war. The paper also features a chapter on the russian propaganda tactics as part of the response to the films. The analysis is conducted through the prism of the theory works on film narration by David Bordwell, documentary film by Bill Nichols, and the reception study by Janet Staiger. These theories help analyze and research the narrative structure of the two chosen films, as well as the narrative elements and rhetorical devices employed in them. Moreover, this study aims to research the questions of polarity in the reception of *20 Days in Mariupol* and *Bucha*, and their role in the modern cultural landscape in Ukraine, russia and abroad. Altogether, the analysis demonstrates how the reception of a moving picture in general may depend on the prevailing historical context.

Keywords: Bucha, mariupol, war film, documentary, fiction, reception, propaganda

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

At the end of February 2022 russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. Although the country had already experienced armed invasion by russia since 2014, the earlier conflict was limited to specific regions. In contrast, the 2022 invasion targeted the entire nation. As with the annexation of Crimea in early 2014 and subsequent russian military operations in Donbas, the full-scale invasion has profoundly affected all aspects of life in Ukraine, including the film industry. In this paper, I examine the depiction of the ongoing war in Ukraine in both documentary and fiction films. My analysis focuses on two Ukrainian films: the fiction film *Bucha* (Tiunov, 2024), which is based on real events and recounts the occupation of the town of Bucha near Kyiv in February and March 2022, and the documentary *20 Days in Mariupol* (Chernov, 2023), which documents the russian siege of Mariupol during a similar period. *Bucha* received largely negative reviews from critics, journalists, and the general public in Ukraine. In contrast, *20 Days in Mariupol* was well received both domestically, where Mstyslav Chernov has become a prominent figure among documentary filmmakers and journalists, and internationally. *20 Days in Mariupol* received the World Cinema: Audience and World Cinema: Documentary awards at the Sundance Film Festival in 2023, the Best Documentary award at BAFTA 2024, and the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature Film in 2024.

Bucha has been presented and promoted by its creators as a docudrama that is intended for larger audiences primarily outside of Ukraine, i.e. in the West. Its main purpose was, as declared, to "open the eyes" of the Western audiences on the events in Ukraine and evoke compassion through telling a personal and heroic story of a real person wrapped in skillful and artistic cinematography. That, according to the filmmakers, should have helped the Ukrainian filmmakers get more recognition internationally and additionally secure more financial and political support for Ukraine in difficult times like these (Vakulina&Farrant 2025). The film's producer and screenwriter, Oleksandr Shchur, reflects on the film's backstory in the numerous interviews: "When I first heard this story on the news, I knew it would resonate with everyone around the world. It's interesting because, while it's expected that Ukrainians save Ukrainians, here we have a Kazakhstani citizen - a Lithuanian Jew - who chose to stay in Ukraine, risk his life, and save others. It's a powerful message that no one can stand aside when faced with such evil" (Vakulina&Farrant 2025).

That explains why the film gets governmental support in Ukraine, particularly by the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Intelligence, in the form of extensive consultations and additional

means. According to the film producers, *Bucha* was totally financed by private investors, but nevertheless was promoted via the governmental channels as well (HUR 2024). However, the film seemed to become the opposite of what was declared. *Bucha* was predominantly unpopular among Ukrainian cultural professionals, and it did not achieve much success among the larger audiences, neither in Ukraine nor abroad. The film was extensively criticized as being an unethical and clearly propagandistic picture, and that the only effect it managed to achieve was the retraumatization of the country's population on both the personal and the national level. *20 Days in Mariupol*, on the other hand, has also been accused in propaganda. But this time the criticism comes from russia. The film was called a propagandistic fake made under Western supervision, and so on. Moreover, the russian propagandistic media have used one of the victims of the bombings of Mariupol featured in the film, one of the pregnant women in the bombed maternity hospital, Marianna Vyshemyrska. She had been transferred first to Donetsk, then to Moscow, where she became a mouth piece of the russian media outlets and a tool of the media war, which goes along with the physical one (RusBel.RF 2024, Meduza 2025).

1.2. Purpose and research questions

What drives film creators to make films in the situation of an ongoing war, and what public reaction and the reception of such films might lead to? Documentaries, for example, are seen as the natural part of war journalism and, as in the case of *20 Days in Mariupol*, are created under life-threatening circumstances. The media reports from Mariupol constitute the largest part of this documentary. Those reports, the backstory of their creation, the life-threatening events the reporters and their documentary characters have been through, the lack of information from Mariupol and the fact-check of the information they provided in their reportages[2] create trust with the audience and therefore make a positive impression and lead to acceptance by the viewers.

But what motivates filmmakers to create a fiction film based on the extremely tragic and highly traumatic events, exactly after those events have taken place? What might be the expected reaction to and the outcome of such a film? The example of *Bucha* clearly illustrates such a problematic case of a fictional war film that raised numerous ethical questions and unflattering observations by its audience and critics. There is a screenplay where the real story has been rewritten to create a more appealing narrative. There is a music score created to highlight the

[2] For example, the ruins in Mariupol caused by russian bombings were quickly caught on picture by the American satellite system MAXAR Technologies. (Rachwani 2022)

most effective parts of the narrative and to cause a certain emotional response to the events or the characters pictured. There are stars hired to represent all the parts of the story, being the evil or good, dead or alive. There are even extras being publicly hired to play the real dead bodies lying on the streets. Those bodies that have only recently been discovered, identified and buried. Those bodies that represent the fresh, deep and non-healing collective trauma. All this effort, in the end, turns out to be a highly questionable result, causing the negative reception and the multiple discussions on ethical aspects and the purposes of this and similar film products.

Therefore, this paper aims to focus on the following research questions: What is the narrative structure of these two films, and what narrative elements and rhetorical devices are used in them? Why is there such a huge, namely polar, difference in the reception of *20 Days in Mariupol* and *Bucha*, and what role do they play in the modern cultural landscape in Ukraine, russia and abroad? Moreover, why might such films sometimes be considered unethical and propagandistic, and what is the reason behind the war films created under the current military conflict, and what response might such films lead to?

I consider this research topic to be exceedingly relevant for modern society, as I research the questions that concern the events happening here and now and affecting the lives of millions, not only in Ukraine itself but also in its neighboring countries. Keeping in mind the frequency of the military conflicts that appear in the different parts of the world, I aim for this research to be of interest to the larger parts of both the research society and the general public.

1.3. Theory and method

My research will analyze both films by examining their form and style, symbolism, creators' stated purposes, and reception in Ukraine, russia, and internationally across media and social platforms. To accomplish these objectives, I will utilize tools such as narrative form and style analysis, reception theory, documentary studies, propaganda studies, as well as rhetoric and semiotics. First of all, I am going to turn to the following theory books: *Introduction to Documentary* by Bill Nichols and Jaimie Baron (2024), *Film Art: An Introduction* by David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Jeff Smith (2023) as well as to *Understanding Film Theory* by Christine Etherington-Wright & Ruth Doughty (2011) and *Interpreting films* by Janet Staiger (1992).

In his book, David Bordwell describes, among other things, the types of film narration, i.e., a film structure that helps the director to convey a particular story through his/her film (Bordwell

2023, 93). He especially focuses in detail on the so-called classical Hollywood model, which ”tends to present individual characters making things happen “ (Bordwell 2023, 98) and where, “the plot will typically resolve its causal issues by bringing the development to a high point, or *climax*” (Bordwell 2023, 86). I analyze *Bucha* according to Bordwell’s definitions of narration as a process and research how the various creative choices made by *Bucha’s* director affect the film’s narrative and subsequently its reception. The film narration in *20 Days in Mariupol* is analyzed through the prism of the discourse model presented by Bill Nichols. According to him, there are three major forms of discourse: narrative, rhetoric and poetic (Nichols 2024, 15). Another concept coined by Nichols in his book is the modes of production: “Documentary film possesses its own set of modes of production: expository, poetic, observational, participatory, reflexive, performative, and interactive” (Nichols 2024, 35) where the definition of every single mode is largely dependent on the specific technique or the set of several techniques used in a particular film (Nichols 2024, 128). In the film analyses, I turn to the Nichol’s modes as well as to some other concepts of documentary filmmaking discussed by him, such as indexicality and social actors. Indexicality is a vital concept that, according to Nichols, “used to refer to images that bear a […] precise correspondence to what they represent” (Nichols 2024, 13). The real people featured in documentaries, instead of being portrayed by actors, fall under the definition of social actors: “In documentaries, real people, people who act in our shared historical world, play or present themselves so that we come to know them or their parts of the world in some depth (Nichols 2024, 16-17).

Janet Staiger criticizes the standard approach of reception theorists, who traditionally research and measure film reception by sampling audiences into different categories (critics-general public, male-female, countries, ethnic groups, age groups, etc.), which leads to generalized ideas of a particular work’s reception (Staiger 1992, 13). Although my analysis relies partly on this traditional categorization, my research also adopts Staiger’s idea that the historical and political context of both a particular film and a particular viewer/reviewer shapes the critical approach to and reception of that film (Staiger 1992, XI). Moreover, she emphasizes that the use of language in films reflects particular historical processes, and reviewers interpret this language from their current historical standpoint (Staiger 1992, 6-7). This idea is vital for both *Bucha* and *20 Days in Mariupol*, and is analyzed further in the reception and discussion sections. In order to analyze the rhetorical devices used in the films, I draw on Aristotle’s model of ethos, logos and pathos, as discussed by Bill Nichols, as well as on some concepts by the structuralists Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes, reviewed in *Understanding Film Theory (*Etherington-Wright&Doughty 2011).

1.4. Previous research

There are unfortunately no research papers available on either *Bucha* or *20 Days in Mariupol*, at least, there is nothing that could have been found through the major research channels. On the other hand, there is a plethora of excellent film analyses of *Bucha* performed by Ukrainian film critics, such as the YouTube channel zagin_kinomaniv[3] and Valerij Myrnyj, and of *20 Days in Mariupol* performed by both Ukrainian, russian and foreign critics (RogerEbert.com, Peter Bradshaw, Madeline Sawyer and the NYT critic Jason Farago as well as Ekaterina Barabash and Diana R. Sherman). Moreover, I turn to the numerous social media resources (such as Facebook, YouTube, VKontakte[4] and Telegram[5]) to collect the audience response as well as the critical posts of some of the prominent Ukrainian cultural figures. Additionally, I am going to examine several interviews with the filmmakers and their crew, such as the interview of Stanislav Tiunov with the newspaper Life.Pravda (Vseliubska 2024) and Mstyslav Chernov's interview with BBC Culture (Jones 2024).

However, there are several research papers and essays that study the events in both towns of Mariupol and Bucha, as well as the propaganda in the media resources. The former topic has been researched, for example, in "Denying Bucha" (Fredheim et.al. 2023) and "She Played All the Pregnant Women!": Russian Disinformation, Symbolic Annihilation, and the Mariupol Hospital Attack" (Shapovalova 2024), while the latter is researched, for instance, in the essay by Anna Litvinenko "Propaganda on demand: Russia's media environment during the war in Ukraine" (2022).

1.5. An introduction to *20 Days in Mariupol*

20 Days in Mariupol is a Ukrainian documentary by a war reporter, Mstyslav Chernov that depicts the first three weeks of the russian invasion of the city and the upcoming siege from February 24, 2022, until March 15, 2022. Mstyslav Chernov, together with the photographer Evgeniy Maloletka and the field producer Vasilisa Stepanenko, all three being freelance journalists for the Associated Press agency (AP), traveled to Mariupol before the invasion and soon enough became the only press team left in the city. They filmed the invasion by the russian troops, the bombings and the shootings, the mass panic, the people fleeing the town, the people hiding in the basements of their apartment buildings, the casualties, the mass graves in the yards

[3] further ZK
[4] a popular russian social media and social networking service created by the infamous russian businessman Pavel Durov
[5] a social media platform, extremely popular in both russia and Ukraine, that was also created by Pavel Durov: https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pavel_Durov

of the residential quarters and at the outskirts of the town, the work of the local hospitals and their (quite often unsuccessful) attempts to rescue the lives of the wounded and, moreover, the airstrike of the city maternity hospital on March 9, 2022 (Shapovalova 2024, Farago 2023) that was classified as a russian war crime by OSCE[6] and justified by the russian Ministry of Defence (Interfax 2022, Shapovalova 2024). Though being under the difficult circumstances, when the social media were long shut down and the mobile network barely worked (the journalists literally had to search for a spot to get the signal (Jones 2024) they managed to send some of the photographs and news dispatches to their agency (10% of the available footage), which were published internationally and became the only documented proof on the events happening there (Farago 2023). The AP reports prompted the russians to initiate a hunt for journalists, who were forced to hide in one of the city hospitals and subsequently got help from the Ukrainian forces to get evacuated to the unoccupied territory of Ukraine via a so-called humanitarian (green) corridor for civilians (Baranovska 2024, Pavlenko 2024). The footage from Mariupol was turned into a 95-minute documentary by Mstyslav Chernov with the help of Frontline, which is part of the PBS network. The film was first shown at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2023, where it won the Audience Award, and then was released in the summer of 2023, first in the USA (Associated Press 2023), then in Ukraine and worldwide (Shchokan 2023, SVT 2023). *20 Days in Mariupol* became the most high-grossing documentary film of all time in Ukraine (Kononets 2023), was awarded with both a BAFTA Award (BBC 2024) and an Oscar for the best Documentary Feature Film in March 2024 (Oscars 2024) and was released on Netflix in April 2024 (Ukrainska pravda 2024). Moreover, the film participated in numerous festivals and events around the world, for example, CPH: DOX in Copenhagen 2023 (Producent Foreningen), and it was screened under the 78th session of the UN General Assembly (Mouriquand 2023). It got 100% fresh rating on Rotten Tomatoes (Rotten Tomatoes 2023), got several other awards, and was widely praised by critics and audiences, both in its home country and internationally (Bradshaw 2023).

1.6. An introduction to *Bucha*

Bucha is a fiction film made by Stanislav Tiunov and the LEVEL company with the support of the Ukrainian authorities, such as the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine (Bucha 2023), that is based on the real-life events which took place in the town of Bucha and the other towns and villages in the outskirts of the Ukrainian capital Kyiv during February-March 2022, when that area was largely occupied by the russian army (Bucha 2024). There is no official information available that *Bucha* was financed through the government

[6] Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

funds, but, on the contrary, by the private patrons, such as Semyon Dukach (an American businessman, investor and philanthropist). The film is mainly based on the story of a Kazakhstani volunteer of Lithuanian-Jewish origin, Konstantin Gudauskas, who, due to his foreign, i.e., non-Ukrainian, passport, managed to evacuate hundreds of people from the occupied places near Kyiv (Bucha 2024, Peterson 2022). The film depicts some of the most graphic and violent events of the so-called Bucha Massacre (Fredheim et.al. 2023) during which the russian armed forces were practicing mass murder (inclusive via tortures and executions), rape and looting and as a result killed either 458 people according to the Ukrainian government (Andreikovets 2022) or 73-178 people according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR 2022). The film was advertised as a docudrama. In order to create dialogues for the film, the film creators used the intercepted conversations of the russian soldiers as well as the Bucha Massacre eyewitnesses and survivors' interviews. The filming took place outside Kyiv in spring 2023, and the authentic russian trophy military vehicles, as well as the uniforms, are seen in the film. *Bucha* was first shown at the so-called special events at several major film festivals, such as Berlinale, Venice and Toronto, and at the various private screenings around Ukraine and the world, with its official world premiere being held at the Warsaw Film Festival in October 2024 (Vakulina&Farrant 2025). In Ukraine, the film was officially released in theaters in November 2024 and then picked up by the Ukrainian branch of the Netflix streaming platform. The film got a largely negative response in its home country, specifically from the critics and the media and was not a big hit with the audience either. The film was already criticized before its release for being a feature film and not a documentary, for re-traumatizing the nation and for a number of additional reasons. Some of the prototypes of the characters in *Bucha* expressed, however, their support for the film, which they considered to be “a Ukrainian *Schindler’s List*” (Romanenko 2024).

2. Analysis

2.1. The use of social media in Ukraine and russia

To understand the response to the films I have studied the numerous sources from three different sides, namely the domestic Ukrainian response (both of critics, media and the larger audience via both the articles in the media and the post and comments in the social media), the russian response (the official statements through the media, the oppositional media sources and the potential audience reactions via the social media platforms) and the third side, i.e., the available response from the critics, the media and the audience from the countries/nations that are not directly involved in this military conflict, mainly in English. A large part of the response comes from social media as they nowadays play a crucial role both in Ukraine and russia.

According to the SCEEUS[7] report #9 (Dutsyk&Umland 2025), since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the media landscape in Ukraine has dramatically changed. The oligarch-owned media outlets have been merged into the state-controlled Telemarathon, United News. The remaining independent media outlets have been forced to seek new formats, communication channels, financial support and audiences: "The media landscape has become less open due to the presence of military censorship, government centralization and political self-censorship" (Dutsyk&Umland 2025). That is exactly when social media, especially Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube, started to play a tremendous role not only for the everyday communication of the millions of Ukrainians, but also social media also offered a platform for social discussion, cultural development and dialogue with both the government officials and the country's opinion leaders. According to another research, 73.4% of the Ukrainian population quoted social media as their primary source of information in 2024 (OPORA 2024). Additionally, "the rating of the most popular social networks in Ukraine has remained virtually unchanged over the past three years. As before, this year, Telegram is on top of the rating (78.1%), followed by YouTube (59.5%) and Facebook (44.6%)" (OPORA 2024). The SCEEUS report concludes that the Telegram use by Ukrainians increased, and as further stated by the report from Euroactive, this russian social media channel, the most popular messenger and the source of information in both russia and Ukraine, is also effectively used by russia to spread its propaganda via its channels (Churanova 2025).

In russia social media also play an important role, which has also increased since 2022. YouTube, once being the most popular platform in the country, since its slowdown and partial blockade in 2024 along with other western social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, has been substituted by the rise of the domestic social media VKontakte and the mentioned-above Telegram: "Telegram, the Russian messaging tool, which offers channels for users to communicate with a large audience, is increasingly becoming a key news source for Russians. The platform is popular among users from all ends of the political spectrum, from independent media to pro-war bloggers" (Mirumyan&Bazenkova 2025).

2.2. Analysis of *Bucha*

2.21. Production, form and style

Bucha is formed as a simple and restrictive narration where the audience is limited to the protagonist's range of knowledge (Bordwell 2023, 93). Through its narration, *Bucha* presents a

[7] Stockholm Centre for Eastern European studies

story of the main character, Konstantin, formed according to a classical Hollywood model (Bordwell 2023, 98), by which the audience gets to follow the protagonist's psychological development[8] as his story progresses. In accordance with the classical Hollywood narration, there is an obstacle that the protagonist has to deal with to achieve his goals – an antagonist and his accomplices (Bordwell 2023, 98). The antagonist occupies the parallel plot line, which goes along the main sequence. Such a director's choice helps to structure the development of the plot by dividing it into two separate special elements and creating a contrast and intensifying "the pattern of causes and effects" (Bordwell 2023, 72, 86). This parallel plot conveys the events happening in the occupied territories, and sometimes these two main lines intersect, as in one of the climax scenes (Bordwell 2023, 86), which *Bucha* seemingly has a few, when the protagonist and the antagonist meet. Interestingly enough, none of the antagonists from the parallel plot ever travels to the premise of the main plot line, but the opposite, which gives an additional contrast to the plot lines and the protagonist-antagonist juxtaposition. On the other hand, the extremely restricted narration (we got to know as little as possible about both the character and the premises of the story) creates a negative effect and does a disservice to both the story and its reception. According to Bordwell, restricted narration hides important details and causes of the story, thus creating an effect of mystery (Bordwell 2023, 88)). *Bucha*, however, aims to transfer the facts and the impacts of the real-life story to the largest audiences possible, but due to the wrong narrative choices, it completely fails its goals (Zagin Kinomaniv 2024).

The film is presented in a calendar-like sequence with a countdown from February 24, 2022 (the day of the invasion) until April 1, 2022 (the day of the de-occupation of these particular territories) through the use of a non-diegetic element[9] – superimposed titles indicating the dates. At the very end of the film, there are the pictures and the credits of some of the film's real-life prototypes with the short remarks on their fate, which helps the viewers to better grasp the plot and get some additional insights into the story (Bordwell 2023, 94). One cannot assert that the film lacks authenticity, considering its background:

- The plot is based on the true story of a Kazakhstani volunteer living in Ukraine who cooperated on this film.
- The film creators consulted with the Ukrainian Intelligence Service, and some of the characters in the film portraying the intelligence officers have their real-life prototypes.

[8] "Large-scale effects such as […] wars may affect the action, but the story centers on personal psychological causes: decisions, choices, and traits of characters." (Bordwell 2023, 98)
[9] "A shot or series of shots cut into a sequence, showing objects that are represented as being outside the world of the narrative" (Bordwell 2023, G-3)

- To write film dialogues, the authors were listening to the intercepted genuine phone calls of russian soldiers.
- The military vehicles used in the film are the actual trophies as well as the russian uniforms.
- The majority of the film scenes were inspired by the real events. For example, the scene where a russian officer shoots a Ukrainian man in front of a crowd of civilian women, elderly and children, saying: "It is filth. We are purging you from the filth."[10] reflects a true story that happened during the occupation (Shramovych 2024, Dudarenko 2022).

The film was shot on location around Kyiv, though not in Bucha itself or the other places that had survived the occupation, so as not to re-traumatize the local population (Shramovych 2024).

2.22. Sound

Three main types of sound are used in cinema. They are music, speech and noise, which are often referred to as "sound effects" (Bordwell 2023, 270). As the majority of modern films *Bucha* relies heavily on them, especially on dialogue. Though according to Bordwell, most of the speech is still recorded via ADR (automated dialogue replacement) because of better quality provided, thus not on location but in postproduction, the way the characters speak sounds extremely unnatural and made-up (Bordwell 2023, 27). The speech delivered by the majority of characters feels forced and artificial due to several reasons. First of all, there are no differences either in pitch or timbre of the voices, which both constitute quite important elements of film sound[11] - as Bordwell points out: "these qualities enable us to recognize different characters' voices" (Bordwell 2023, 269). Therefore, it creates an effect as though all the secondary characters are voiced-over by basically one and the same either male or female voice. Secondly, all the characters that speak Ukrainian speak as though they are presenters of the national radio broadcaster, i.e., in perfectly enunciated and modulated and moreover deprived of any dialecticisms and any melody of the everyday speech, standard Ukrainian language.[12] This effect was noted by some critics. For example, Diana R. Sherman wrote in her article: "the positive characters […] speak pure literary Ukrainian, as though they've just stepped off the pages of books. Many Ukrainians (including those in the Kyiv region) speak surzhik.[13] The pure standard Ukrainian was rarely used in everyday life up until 2022. It was usually used mainly in the

[10] All the necessary translations from Ukrainian and russian are made by me

[11] "The harmonic components of sound give it a certain color, or tone quality – what musicians call *timbre*. […] The frequency of sound vibrations affects *pitch*, or the perceived highness or lowness of the sound." (Bordwell 2023, 268-269)

[12] "Standard Ukrainian, which is accepted as such by the speakers of all the dialects and represents Ukrainian to outsiders, is a superstructure built on this dialectal foundation." (Shevelov 1993)

[13] "In Ukraine, mixed and non-standard [linguistic] forms often referred to as "surzhyk." (Bilaniuk 1997)

public realm. The living everyday language sounds somewhat different" (Sherman 2025). Moreover, all the russian characters, but one [the antagonist], speak russian with a distinctive Ukrainian accent. In the present circumstances it might have felt unethical for the film crew to seek the actors who can speak russian without the local prosody, but on the other hand if the filmmaker declares that their intention with the film is to stay as close to the original as possible, such a serious deflection affects the authenticity of the characters, creates the artificial effect and kills the audience initial expectations (Bordwell 2023, 4).

In addition to the generally low sound quality in this film, the clumsy voicing of the protagonist stands out. The protagonist is played by a Polish actor, Cezary Lukaszewicz,[14] who speaks poor Ukrainian himself (Zagin Kinomaniv 2024). Therefore, the filmmaker made his creative choice to dub him with a Ukrainian voice. This choice has been widely criticized by critics as the protagonist speaking the Ukrainian radio voice does not seem genuine at all. Moreover, the critics suggested that allowing the actor to speak his broken Ukrainian would create a much stronger effect, due to his prototype, the real Konstantin Gudauskas, speaking broken Ukrainian himself (Zagin Kinomaniv 2024). It is worth mentioning that the Ukrainian reviewers who criticized the language choice in *Bucha* got their own portion of critique for criticizing the choice of the Ukrainian language.[15] There is only one character in the film that speaks perfectly and sounds authentically – the antagonist, the russian FSB officer Strelnikov. This creates an opposite, to the expected, effect. As Bordwell states in his book, "The protagonist tends to be the character who's onscreen more often than others, whom we most sympathize with, who changes the most, and who resolves the action. […] The antagonist is a character who opposes the protagonist" (Bordwell 2023, 77). In the case of *Bucha*, the poor voicing of the protagonist and the number of other unresolved issues with him make the persona of the antagonist the focus of the viewer's attention for being the better shaped, more genuine, and therefore more captivating character, thus compromising the main idea of the film (Zagin Kinomaniv 2024, Cento 2024).

There is another problematic issue with the sound in *Bucha*, namely music. As explained by Bordwell, musical motifs are often brought into film to evoke associations, and a close connection between musical and visual elements of the film can create a strong emotional climax by increasing the viewer's level of tension (Bordwell 2023, 86, 281-283). If this might apply to the Tchaikovsky piece, which bears a certain symbolism and is played in one of the climax

[14] Cezary Lukaszewicz: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm2021835/
[15] Further discussed in 3. Discussion 3.1. Historical interpretative strategies 3.12. Response from different sides

scenes of *Bucha*,[16] the choice of the upbeat music playing for instance when Konstantin engages in conversation with the Ukrainian soldiers at the check point along with the almost comical delivery of the dialogue feels awkward and quite questionable, especially when such scenes contrast the gruesome scenes with the girl being continuously raped by drunk russian soldiers. There might have been an attempt by the filmmaker to stress the contrast between the good, Ukrainian, and the evil, russian, sides of the story. However, his attempts undoubtedly failed: "Beautiful shots and a greyish colour palette subtly evoke the atmosphere of Ukraine at the onset of war. Tense music interspersed with wailing sirens immerses the audience in the gravity of such catastrophic events. Yet, this promise is squandered as Tiunov fails to commit to a consistent storytelling tone. The mood swings with the soundtrack transitioning to uplifting tunes each time Konstantin gears up for a new quest" (Arsova 2024).

2.23. Rhetoric and symbolism

Rhetorical strategies significantly influence the persuasiveness of arguments when multiple viewpoints compete for consideration (Nichols 2024, 89). There are various rhetorical devices, but they all fall under Aristotle's classification of ethos, logos and pathos, where ethos is responsible for the credibility of the author, logos is liable for reasoning, and finally pathos is responsible for creating an environment that is conducive to a specific viewpoint or placing the audience in the correct state of mind (Nichols 2024, 76). *Bucha* is overfilled with such emotion-driven symbolism expressed through the range of signs whose signifiers reflect the distinct and easily readable concepts behind them (Etherington-Wright&Doughty 2018, 64-65).[17] The camera often focuses on the following symbols:

- the national flags: Ukrainian means good, and russian signals the evil,
- the war symbols: the yellow stripes marking the Ukrainian forces, i.e., the good ones, while the red stripes – the russians, i.e., the bad ones, and the white ones are marking the civilians, i.e., the victims; the Z and V letters marking russian vehicles and generally their presence,[18]
- the word CHILDREN on one of the cars in the film is a direct reference to the famous Mariupol picture,[19]
- the historical symbols that emphasize the centuries-old fight of Ukrainian against russian imperialism: the monument marking the Soviet deportation of the Crimean Tatars,[20]

[16] Further discussed in 2.23. Rhetoric and symbolism
[17] Based on "Semiotics – Course in General Linguistics" (de Saussure 1915)
[18] the Z and V uppercase letters have become the symbols of war with Ukraine in russia (Sauer 2022)
[19] The original spelling in russian is "DETI" – the word that Mariupol citizens, hiding from bombings in the city drama theatre, scribbled in front of the entrance so that russian bomber planes would notice it and skip bombing the theatre. Unfortunately, that did not help. (Lister et.al. 2022)

- as well as on the mixture of everything possible such as a quote from Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* as the allegory on the hell where the protagonist will have to descend (Vseliubska 2024), the black military jackets of the russian officers as the reference to the SS officers uniform that must connect russians to the internationally recognized ultimate evil; the white sneakers stained with blood that the villain brings to his daughter which hint of the russia war crimes and looting and again are supposed to emphasize the evil-nature of russians and give the additional feeling of sympathy to the victims;
- dozens of other symbols that do not always seem relevant.

Therefore, it is crucial that filmmakers carefully consider the decisions they make within their film, also regarding the symbolic meaning of the film's elements, because of the influence semiotic coding has on viewer reaction (Etherington-Wright&Doughty 2018, 65).

As Bordwell notes, there might be underlying implications in several of the movie's scenes, and he illustrates his thought with a portrayal of a road in film (Bordwell 2023, 59). After a careful examination of its narrative, music, color palette used to portray the road, etc., it might reveal multiple meanings and convey various emotional subtexts (Bordwell 2023, 59). Here in *Bucha*, there is also a road which might have many interpretations: from the Road of Life,[21] where the russians have switched their place, to the passage between the earth and the underworld, with the russian security checkpoints being the allegory for the infamous Gates of Hell.[22] The director also plays with color and the light and often uses the black&white color scheme and turns to the chiaroscuro technique to create more contrast between good&evil and safety&danger in this story. Additionally, the film is filled with various russian cultural symbols, such as quotes from the russian literature and the Tchaikovsky music, which have been supposedly used in order to influence the traditionally positive European view on the russian culture by connecting it to the horrendous actions of the villainous soldiers. The recognizable Ukrainian (the Kozaks)[23] and the mutual Soviet symbols (as the posters of the famous Soviet musicians in the home of a well-known Ukrainian composer, Ihor (Igor) Poklad)[24] have been brought here probably to demonstrate how russians in their hatred and rage neglect anything positively common between the two nations. Connotative meaning can be added to any symbol, i.e., signs may be appropriated by society and given a lot of meaning through particular usage (Etherington-

[20] "Shortly following the recapture of the Crimean peninsula from German occupation in 1944, the Stalin regime decided to forcibly remove the Crimean Tatar population to Uzbekistan. (Pohl 2024)
[21] https://www.dw.com/en/leningrads-road-of-life-70-years-later/g-17385236
[22] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gates_of_hell
[23] A series of popular cartoons (Medynska 2016)
[24] https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0688677/ , https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ihor_Poklad

Wright&Doughty 2018, 72-73).[25] The very name of Bucha, since the massacre, has become a nickname for a tragedy in Ukraine (similarly to Mariupol - another subject of this essay).

The language use in itself can be reviewed from the rhetorical point of view as well. The use of language here in *Bucha* marks the sides in the same manner as colors and light: the Ukrainian speakers symbolize the good ones, the russian speakers are either the evil or the victims trying to survive through the use of the enemy language. This language marker might be seen as quite a precarious one, as the film protagonists, as well as the many victims of the Massacre, for example, speak russian in their everyday life. On the other hand, such use of language in the film might quite well reflect the real-life situation in the very first months of the invasion when the nation of Ukraine through the much more extensive than before use of the national language developed the sense of the national brother- and sisterhood, the national pride and the mutual support when all the language arguments and disagreements were put aside for a while (Lönngren et.al. 2023).

2.24. The purpose of the film

The film team has stated that the film has an important social mission and it has been particularly aimed at reaching foreign audiences with the help of it (Shramovych 2024). Stanislav Tiunov, the director of *Bucha*, explains in an interview: "When we were creating this project, we thought it would work for the foreign audiences, fight propaganda. We even called it - "art against propaganda" (Vseliubska 2024). Vyacheslav Dovzhenko,[26] who played the villain of the story, seconds the director's opinion: "There is nothing we, Ukrainians, could not understand in this film, but the European viewer doesn't know our context. There are still many Europeans who think that "everything is not so clear-cut"[27] – russian propaganda is still quite strong there. Their [russian] propaganda's goal is to destroy the European community. And we want to create a film that could persuade everyone not fall for such sick ideologies" *(*Detektor Media 2022). They both [Shchur and Dovzhenko] meet the critique on that it might be too early to create such a film with a similar counterargument: "There are several powerful examples of films made during wartime. For example, Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* was released in 1940 while London was being bombed by the Nazis. *Casablanca* came out in 1942 as the war continued. More recently, Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*, an Oscar-winning film about the Iraq War, was made while the conflict was still ongoing" (Vakulina&Farrant 2025) and, "We are the ones who

[25] Based on "Mythologies" (Barthes 1957)
[26] https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1194362/
[27] "ne vse tak odnoznachno": a meme in russian reflecting a certain political position on the war in Ukraine (Litvinenko 2022)

can tell this story in the best possible way because we have lived through it. We have to do it to open the eyes of the European audience that still lives in the liberal illusions about russia and might follow their propaganda and question both these events in particular and the whole war in general" (Detektor Media 2022). Shchur adds: "If we don't tell our true stories, some people might believe the narratives that Russia promotes. […] For example, we showed the trailer to a big Hollywood producer from a major company. He told us they wouldn't take the film onto their streaming platform because they didn't know the true reality - maybe it was Ukrainian propaganda, as Russia claims" (Vakulina&Farrant 2025). He also adds that in Ukraine no one could ever believe that there would be a war in their homes, especially coming from the russian side, and the film highlights the idea that no one should feel secure in the world where the imperialistic ambition still exists (Vakulina&Farrant 2025).

2.3. The reception of *Bucha*

2.31. Introduction

"Without an audience, some would argue, no text or maker of that text exists (Staiger 1992, 3). In her book *Interpreting Films* Janet Staiger writes: "In the ideal-spectator interpretative strategy, the historian assumes homogeneity among spectators […] by which people are segmented into smaller categorical groups" (Staiger 1992, 13). She further argues that, "such an act still universalizes audiences and experiences" (Staiger 1992, 13). Here I do not claim to be able to research all the possible groups' as well as the single "complex and contradictory "individuals' response to the films studied. However, according to the tradition mentioned above by Staiger, I break the reception into several distinct categories. This approach, however, allows examining responses from different focal points, even though it is still quite generalized and idealized (Staiger 1992, 13).

2.32. The reception in Ukraine

Bucha already got criticized in the early stages of its production for being planned and announced too early after the notorious events. As one of the critics has noted, there is a general expectation that first come numerous documentaries and then, after careful consideration and research, there is time for feature films to be made. But as ZK notes, "the producers of *Bucha* didn't care about it at all and quickly made a teaser and announced the future full feature already in August 2022, only 4 months after the Bucha massacre, obviously without having a solid screenplay behind their backs because it was simply impossible to get one over such a short period of time" (Zagin Kinomaniv 2024). As it has been stated in the introduction to the Analysis, social media have a particular social power of influence in Ukraine. Some of the

Ukrainian opinion leaders, particularly those who are usually called the cultural elite of the country, i.e., writers, journalists, filmmakers, have also expressed their negative reactions to the announcement about *Bucha*. One of the earliest responses came in the form of a critical social media post by Alla Samoylenko, an influential Ukrainian casting director,[28] in which she strongly criticized the casting call for the film published in the professional acting communities. The casting call read as follows: "Looking for extras to play the dead bodies of the Bucha streets" (Samoylenko 2023). In another Facebook post, the Ukrainian theater and film critic Lena Chichenina wrote:" Not all the bodies [of those died in Bucha and around] had been identified yet, but we are already making a film out of it. And it's not the worst part. It has been filmed by the director [Stanislav Tiunov] and the producer [Oleksandr Shchur], who had previously presented us with the [notoriously bad] comedies *Date in Vegas* [Serge Vane 2020] and *Producer* [Serge Vane 2019]. [...] And now these gentlemen have decided to work on such a delicate and extremely complex topic. Despite the majority of the directors having put an embargo on this theme. Now we've been filming only documentaries, while the fiction films we have to wait for. […] The teaser of *Bucha* has already demonstrated to us the quality of the future film. The same as in their previous works" (Chichenina 2022). The well-known Ukrainian film director Iryna Tsilyk,[29] in her comment under this post, stated: "I know that the number of directors has declined this offer as well. But not everyone. The process is on; it's all about getting hyped" (Chichenina 2022).

After this explicit critique in social media the part of the national film community called for a boycott of the film which was supported not only by the Ukrainian Film Academy that wrote an open letter in September 2022, in which they claimed the future film to be an unethical and untimely attempt to highlight the sufferings of one part of the Ukrainian society at the cost of the sufferings of the Ukrainians from other regions of the country (Ukrainian Film Academy 2022); but also by some of the Ukraine's biggest film stars as Irma Vitovska[30] who stated: "There are a numbers of opportunities to make films today without trying to speculate on such complex themes.[…]I beg my colleagues not to get involved in it. Mariupol, Bucha, Izium … There will be more suffering, don't risk your reputation. Leave such subjects for documentaries" (BBC News Ukraine 2023). The latter statement does not seem surprising and appears to be a direct critique of the very idea of the genre choice for covering parts of the Bucha Massacre and similar fiction films. While documentaries rely strongly on the representation of the reality through its various conventions (Nichols 2024, 27), in fiction films, according to Bill Nichols: "the roles are

[28] https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1404467/
[29] https://www.imdb.com/name/nm6380232/
[30] https://www.imdb.com/name/nm2257436/

so strongly shaped by the filmmaker or producers" (Nichols 2024, 17), and if there is a certain lack of trust to a certain film crew, the very idea of creating a fiction film might seem wrong.

A popular Ukrainian film reviewer, ZK, seconds Chichenina's opinions on the very low expectations about the possible result of the director's Tiunov work, as Tiunov is notoriously known for his low-quality productions (Zagin Kinomaniv 2024). ZK also adds that the first and the biggest problem of the film is that it's hard to understand it without knowing its context, i.e., the facts of the Bucha Massacre, and that the filmmakers have neglected the character work and development and instead put all their stakes on the emotional aspects filling the film with pathos and neglecting the logic (Zagin Kinomaniv 2024). Therefore, according to ZK, *Bucha* is nothing more than a pure manipulation of the viewer's emotions (Zagin Kinomaniv 2024). As an illustration of his thoughts, ZK uses the story of Iryna Filkina.[31] Everyone who knows the real story would definitely strongly react when reminded about it. The film manipulates the Ukrainian public into such a strong emotional response through fully recreating Iryna's story without explicitly showing the very end of it, i.e. we see as the tank head moves into Iryna's direction, and then the scene is abruptly cut into another. As a result, the Ukrainian audience, who know everything about this story, reacts powerfully to this scene. But the rest of the audience who doesn't have the context is left aside, as there is no character development of this particular character; we just see a single, though emotionally dense, episode with the ending, which leaves part of the audience in tears and part of the audience being puzzled. ZK states that there are a great number of similar moments in *Bucha* (Zagin Kinomaniv 2024).

However, there are many people among the wider audience who praised the film both in Ukrainian and russian. They speak approvingly of its special effects, plot and acting and insist that *Bucha* is an important film that should be shown abroad because the world, and specifically the countries of the Global South, is supposed to know what Ukrainians have to come through. Such comments can be observed in, for example, YouTube channels under the trailer of *Bucha* (B&H Film Distribution Company 2024) and under the critical reviews of the film (Zagin Kinomaniv 2024). However, the audience often raises the question of the ethics and doubts the real motives of the film creators: "Was their aim to truly create a good film or just get some quick fame?" asks @TheSunnnyM, @Ївга-э1т and others (Zagin Kinomaniv 2024).

[31] Known as "the woman with the red manicure" – one of the Bucha locals murdered and left on the streets of the town. (John 2022)

In spite of all the criticism, the film has been generally praised by some of the Bucha locals for telling their story and for closely involving the real archetypes in the filming process. The main point of this film, according to their own words, is to show that simple average people are the heroes, everyone can become one, and together we can save Ukraine even if the country's politicians are not able to do it (Romanenko 2024).

2.33. The poster and the name controversies

The poster (Shramovych 2024)

Another massive wave of criticism was aroused by one of the film posters created for the English-speaking audience, which depicts the destroyed buildings of Borodyanka, another town in the Kyiv region, instead of Bucha (Shramovych 2024). The filmmakers addressed the critical comments with the explanation that in the poster for *Dunkirk* we don't see the real evacuation site of the British troops, and it means that a fiction film does not have to be as precise with details as a documentary (Shramovych 2024). Another argument was that the part of the events depicted in the film does take place in Borodyanka as well and that Borodyanka is a part of the "Greater Bucha". All these arguments, though, were not positively received by the Ukrainian public, in particular by the Bucha and Borodyanka locals. One of the commentators stated: "Our Borodyanka has got its own tragedy, and by depicting a ruined Borodyanka building and nicknaming it Bucha, you humiliate the memory of the people who have died here. Don't try to find explanations. Just remove it" (Shramovych 2024).

Even the name of the film feels quite problematic because the word “Bucha” instantly triggers particularly strong and painful feelings in the nation. That brings up a story of a soft drink kombucha that manufacturers labeled and marketed as the “Heroic Bucha Kombucha”, due to the wordplay, and that caused a similar massive backlash among Ukrainians (Zhdanovych 2023). So, strictly semantically, the town name Bucha in the course of a month became such a strong national symbol of tragedy, suffering and war that insensitive use of it might not be accepted well on the national level. As the ZK states in his review, if the film, instead of *Bucha*, were called *The Volunteer* or *The Transporter*, similar to a Ukrainian TV-series about the war,[32] there would be fewer questions and negative remarks about it (Zagin Kinomaniv 2024).

2.34. The reception in Kazakhstan

The reception from the East is also quite uneven. There is a great number of supportive and praising comments from Kazakhstani nationals that in russian express their pride for the film and its prototype, Konstantin Gudauskas, and the support for and understanding of Ukrainians (B&H Film Distribution Company 2024). That response gets quite political at some point – when one of the commentators, @maxminimum777, states: “Ukraine is fighting for Kazakhstan” he gets a number of angry replies in russian such as: “Russia has saved you from a revolution, saved your country and your economy” (B&H Film Distribution Company 2024), referring to the national protests in January 2022 (BBC 2022). On the other hand, there are some supposedly Kazakh (as the comments are written in russian which is widely spoken in Kazakhstan, therefore it is hard to determine whether they are authentic or made by russian bots) that beg to “leave Kazakhstan alone”, such as left by @АкылВидео (B&H Film Distribution Company 2024).

2.35. The russian reception

The Bucha massacre and subsequently the film depicting some aspects of it were called by russian officials a show, a falsification and a spoof staged by Westerners and performed by Ukrainians. The official russian statement sounded as follows: “The photos and video footage from Bucha are another hoax, a staged production and provocation by the Kiev regime for the Western media” (Higgins 2022). A number of propagandist tools were deployed by russia in order to cover up the russian war crime in Bucha and other parts of the Kyiv region (Fredheim et.al. 2023), which reflects the official russia’s narrative of the West being responsible for the war in Ukraine (Litvinenko 2022, 7,10). After the first posters of *Bucha* had officially been released, the russian propagandists started spreading them through various Telegram channels, which brought a new wave of accusations of the falsification of the Bucha Massacre. Among

[32] *In Her Car* (Eugen Tunik, 2024)

other things, *Bucha* was compared with the russian film *Witness* (*Svidetel*, David Dadunashvili, 2023) that presents the alternative, russian view on the events (Shramovych 2024, Zametin 2023). The russian narratives (Bond 2023, Litvinenko 2022, Fredheim et.al. 2023), disseminated by either their notorious army of bots[33] or/and as a reflection of the opinion of the general audience, are quite striking in social media, such as in their own VKontakte under the smuggled in full-length *Bucha* (Faraonov 2025), or under the trailer of *Bucha* on the YouTube (Sistema.Info 2022). There russian commentators, such as @ShyThor, @annanagel7949, @ВаняПетров-х4п etc., in different forms insist that *Bucha* is either a pure propaganda: "Goebbels would choke of jealousy", or simply a fake: "Here is another fairytale the same as about Mariupol"(Sistema.Info 2022). Many of the commentators, @ОлексійБойко-з5г, @ГрафТуберкулёз, @alexeipetrov2908 etc., prefer just make fun of the film, of the war and of the Ukrainians by stating that this film is: "a great comedy" and: "Zelensky was good in comedy before, now he's more into zombie movies", celebrate the "scary and dangerous Russians" or call for action: "It's time to start doing that what they are lying about" (Faraonov 2025).

The russian oppositional media based in Lithuania also has reviewed the film and reached conclusions similar to their Ukrainian colleagues. Sherman criticizes the lack of a backstory and the character arc in both the protagonist and the antagonist. She writes that the protagonist is presented here as a blank page, and that creates one of the biggest problems with the film, especially considering the fact that the real Konstantin Gudauskas was a political activist in Kazakhstan, where he was prosecuted for his activism and had to flee the country and seek asylum in Ukraine. His story could have explained a lot about the motivation of the character based on him. But unfortunately, the filmmakers decided to deprive the screen Konstantin of all his past experiences by making poor creative choices. As well as some critics, this reviewer criticizes the use of the unauthentic dialect, the simplification of the real story, the lack of logic in the characters' actions, the editing choices, the manipulation of the audience's emotions and the cartoon-like villain (Sherman 2025).

2.36. The reception in the West

As the *Bucha* creators have stated, their film targets first of all the foreign Western audience. But what about it? Is there any reaction to the film from the West? After the extensive research in English it can be stated that *Bucha* has been only mentioned at some minor festivals pages, in

[33] Lakhtinskiye or Lakhta, Olginskiye a.k.a Trolls from Olgino or Kremlinbots. The origin: the name of the districts in Saint-Petersburg: Olgino and Lakhta, where the Internet Research Agency was allegedly located. (Cyclowiki, Wikireality, Wikipedia)

short media pieces as for example the one for CBS News which primarily focuses on the Konstantin Gudauskas real-life story (Inocencio 2023) and the various articles and invitations to the private screenings affiliated with Ukrainian institutions, charity events and volunteer organizations (Molitor 2025, Carey 2024, Soldak 2024). I was lucky to find, though, a couple of reviews whose general consensus can be summarized as follows – a mediocre movie with "a great villain" (Cento 2024) where, "The promise of a gripping story, grounded in the stark realities of war, is overshadowed by inconsistencies and shallow character arcs." (Arsova 2024) and further on, "The film has no narrative thrust, no escalating stakes or tension, and very little connecting tissue between scenes"(Letterboxd 2023). Additionally, it is worth mentioning that *Bucha* does not even have a Wikipedia page in English, which generally reflects the low interest in the film among the international audience.

The reception of *Bucha* can be summarized, and, according to Janet Staiger's observation, generalized (Staiger 1992, 13) as predominantly negative in Ukraine, except among individuals personally affected by the events depicted. In russia and other post-Soviet countries, the film received mixed reviews: it was condemned by official russian propaganda and its supporters, criticized by the russian opposition in a manner similar to the Ukrainian response, and praised by some Kazakhstani nationals for its positive portrayal of a Kazakhstani individual. In Western countries, the response was largely absent, as the film went unnoticed by most audiences and critics, or negative among those few film critics who viewed it.

2.4. Analysis of *20 Days in Mariupol*

2.41. Production, form and style

Bill Nichols writes in his book *Introduction to documentary* that documentary films represent reality with the help of a specific film language and that documentaries, though their definition stays quite vague, are "neither factual documents nor fictional allegories" (Nichols 2024, 35). Documentaries help viewers to perceive the world around them, most importantly through the use of indexical images and sounds (Nichols 2024, 35). Indexicality serves as a useful concept that describes images which maintain a direct and exact relationship to what they depict (Nichols 2024, 13). *20 Days in Mariupol* belongs to the documentary film genre by all the basic genre conventions: it uses a narrative framework and a voice-over blended with the location sound, depends heavily on the social actors, i.e., real people contrary to actors in fiction films, and the interviews with them, though always the impromptu ones, additionally it also includes parts of the so-called B-roll footage, that is, transitions from the main scene into another that provides examples or more evidence (Nichols 2024, 27).

Similarly to *Bucha*, *20 Days in Mariupol* is also formed as a diary-like sequence of the first 20 days of the invasion with the countdown from the first day on February, 24 to the day the journalists left the city: “This film is very hard to watch, and so it should be, though its episodic structure makes it somewhat easier to endure: Day 1 through Day 20, one at a time, from the first bombs to the team’s flight to safety” (Farago 2023). As Nichols suggests, one of the major forms of discourse (Nichols 2024, 15) is the so-called narrative discourse which has “the beginning, middle and end [where] each part has a specific role to play” (Nichols 2024, 69). In other words, it is built as a story with the problem formulated in the beginning and developed in the middle of the film, while the ending presents a sort of solution to the problem: ”our desire to know more at the beginning is largely satisfied by the ending” (Nichols 2024, 71). *20 Days in Mariupol* largely falls into this definition, by clearly setting the frames of the “problem” (the military intervention), giving more context to it and highlighting its escalation in the middle and presenting a sort of a lesser ending. *20 Days in Mariupol*, however, provides no solution to the given “problem” as a whole, i.e., the journalists successfully leave the city, but the invasion does not stop. This film combines both the narrative discourse by mixing the stories of the journalists and their social actors with the larger and more complex story of the invasion as a chronicle, “which are characterized by their potential to continue indefinitely” (Nichols 2024, 70), with an open ending, which can be perceived more as a cry for help and a call for action rather than a “sense of closure that satisfies the viewer (Nichols 2024, 70).

The film has a linear narrative often built on long takes[34] where the journalists capture the life in Mariupol day after day, i.e., in chronological order, while moving between various locations in the city, interviewing people they meet and struggling to send their material to their agency. Such by Nichols “raw power of the indexical image” (Nichols 2024, 14) made an enormous contribution to the film’s reception because these long takes have an indexical connection to time (Nichols 2024, 60). Chernov explains: "We wanted the audience to be there in the city, which was dying day by day, how it was to be trapped there and not to have a way to leave" (Jones 2024). The film’s plotline is sometimes interchanged with the non-diegetic media pieces created from the reportages the journalists sent to AP. It has a strong effect on the audience, as first the audience is presented with the footage of an event happening and being filmed in real time and then being reproduced via the large media channels. Moreover, there are also parts of another type of media reports that help to illustrate the historical circumstances in which the main film events take place (Nichols 2024, 30-31). There is, for instance, a piece inserted from the russian

[34] “A shot that continues for an unusually lengthy time before the transition to the next shot” (Bordwell 2023, G-3)

news in which putin announces the beginning of the invasion to his nation. This piece provides the audience with a basic background on the story that unfolds before their eyes.[35] Nichols calls this type of editing “evidentiary editing” or “B-roll editing.” (Nichols 2024, 31) and explains that, “evidentiary editing organizes cuts within a scene to present the impression of a single, convincing perspective on the historical world that is in keeping with the film’s overall framework” (Nichols 2024, 31). Farago speaks on these in-cut media pieces as follows: "blending of high- and low-resolution video registers is a critical tool of Chernov and his editor, Michelle Mizner of "Frontline" (Farago 2023). They actually combine three different types of footage – the extreme long shots[36] over the city captured by drone, the high-definition, though shaky because of constant movement, videos of the events happening in the city and in the end of many diary days come B-roll footage clips of the news pieces, broadcasted by various media from British ITV News, Deutsche Welle and France 24 to American CBS (Farago 2023). "These rebroadcasts underscore two things: the rarity of Chernov's footage and the immense challenge of getting it out of Mariupol" (Farago 2023).

An exploding multi-storey apartment building (Maloletka 2022)

Additionally, a range of particular scenes have another smashing effect, for example, the footage of an exploding multi-storey apartment building [that is being fired at by a russian tank]. The still image of this building went viral all over the world, but only via the film did the audience get to see the story behind this picture – a shooting tank, marked with the Z letter, that caused the explosions and fire in the building.[37]

[35] Such an insert exists in *Bucha* as well

[36] “A framing in which the scale of the object shown is very small; a building, landscape, or crowd of people will fill the screen” (Bordwell 2023, G-2)

[37] “Nepomnyashaya was at her daughter’s building when Russian tanks rolled up to her own at dusk on March 11. As AP journalists watched and recorded from the upper floor of nearby Hospital No. 2, one tank raised its gun at 110 Mytropolytska and fired.” (Hinnant et.al.2022)

A fire truck and the maternity hospital (Maloletka 2022)

Dozens of scenes evoke strong feelings in viewers through such animated effect: the woman wrapped in a blue plaid standing by a fire truck, the surgeon crying over the dead body of the child he was not able to resuscitate, the father who just lost his teenage son, who bled to death, the scenes from the maternity hospital and many more. Valerij Myrnyj defines such scenes as the counterpoints that give extra credibility, proximity and scope: “It also demonstrates to us how the war correspondents work in the world’s hotspots. It could not be manifested more clearly than that” (Myrnyj 2024).

Similar to *Bucha*, the film ends with an informational title. Here it provides the date when the city finally fell to russia, which is on the 86th day of the siege.

Bill Nichols defines several distinct modes of production within documentary film-making (Nichols 2024, 35). According to their description (Nichols 2024, 132), *20 Days in Mariupol* falls into several categories at once, namely the participatory mode combined with the performative and the observational (also known as direct cinema) ones, because according to Nichols, a documentary may integrate different modes and employ several of their unique techniques at the same time (Nichols 2024, 130). All these three modes, as Nichols writes, are strongly dependent on the relationship between the director and his characters (Nichols 2024, 134). The filmmaker actively engages in the life of his/her subjects via interviews, conversations and even provocations, by which the author often constructs situations themselves that help to further open and deepen his subjects (Nichols 2024, 134). In fact, Chernov does actively participate in the events happening around him and in the lives of his subjects. Sometimes it happens non-intentionally, as in the numerous impromptu interviews, for example, in the aftermath of the maternity hospital bombing. Sometimes he does provoke his subjects into giving a particular and often emotional response. For example, there are several intense and emotion-filled scenes where he, tries to interview some of the locals leaving their buildings, and they tell

him to “f*ck off”. In another scene, he keeps asking the residents of one building about who is bombing them in order to finally film their reply: they do not know, they do not care whether it is russians or Ukrainians. One of the strongest scenes of this kind, that was also critically acclaimed, is the one inside the hospital where a surgeon cries out to Chernov: “Show that Putin bastard the eyes of this child! Show what these motherf**kers are doing to civilians!” (Myrnyj 2024). As the Nichols points out, such active director’s participation in the events happening around helps to shape events, “What we see would not have occurred had the camera, and the filmmaker, not been there to record it” (Nichols 2024, 61), and provides more context to the story. Indeed, if Chernov and his crew did not travel to Mariupol, did not stay in the city and did not film the reality around them, the world would have never found out in detail what did happen in Mariupol in the first days of the russian invasion, similarly to that as the world still does not know what happened with those people seeking their shelter inside the Mariupol Drama Theater, how many of them were inside the theater and how many perished due to the russian bombing (Cassidy 2023, 285, HRW et.al. 2024).

2.42. Sound

Sound plays a particularly important role in documentary making, and the approach to the use of sound in documentaries is quite distinct from that used in the production of fiction films. As Bill Nichols simply puts it: “The coherence, or sometimes the incoherence, of many documentaries depends a great deal on the verbal soundtrack. A reliance on speech tends to distinguish the documentary from the avant-garde, and the rootedness of this speech in the lives of social actors or in voice-over commentary tends to distinguish it from fiction” (Nichols 2024, 32-33). The Nichols’ participatory mode, the one largely applied in *20 Days in Mariupol*, does rely heavily on the use of sound, mostly on the synchronized diegetic sound[38] while the performative mode is characterized by the extensive use of the filmmaker’s own narration (Nichols 2024, 132). In *20 Days in Mariupol*, both can be observed: the film is, first of all, fully narrated by Chernov himself and, secondly, is heavily dependent on the diegetic sound, i.e., the direct speech[39] and indirect communication of the social actors along with the interviews conducted by Chernov. This non-diegetic[40] narration performed by the director, combined with the synchronized diegetic sounds, creates a perfect balance with the visuals. Madeline Sawyer writes in her review: “By conducting interviews with Ukrainian citizens, Chernov creates a powerful,

[38] “Any voice, musical passage, or sound effect presented as originating from a source within the film's world” (Bordwell 2023, G-2)
[39] “Direct address occurs when individuals speak directly to the camera or audience; it is rare in fiction, where the camera functions as an invisible onlooker most of the time.” (Nichols 2024, 16)
[40] “Sound, such as mood music or narrator's commentary, represented as coming from a source outside the space of the narrative” (Bordwell 2023, G-3)

touching narrative of the war through the eyes of those experiencing it. Alongside images of bombed homes and aerial shots of the city, civilians voice their anger, confusion and disbelief over the destruction. […] Each individual image is compelling on its own. But the scenes become especially poignant through Chernov's narration, which creates a cohesion that is critical to the film as a whole" (Sawyer 2024). Indeed, all the critics, without exception, note that the film particularly benefits from the voice-over made by Chernov, "his calm, monotonous human voice methodically registers the chaos happening around" (Vorozhbyt 2023). Ekaterina Barabash writes: "The film continues for 90 minutes. For 90 minutes, there is a non-diegetic narration in English by Chernov performed with a monotonous voice.[…]Chernov understands that his film is not in fact a film or piece of art; it is a document. Therefore, he follows the main rule of reporting journalism – do not intrude with one's own analytics or own emotions. The combination of the extremely powerful material and his at first glance neutrality creates a smashing effect" (Barabash 2023). Chernov explains in an interview: "We needed to make this story cohesive, to make sure that the audience stays engaged in a story or does not get pushed away by the abundance of violence or tragedy. And at the same time, we needed to stay very thoughtful on the horrors of war, on the reality of war. To find that right balance takes a lot of careful planning and searching for vision and the right tone, and it goes for all parts of filmmaking, camera work and just the way you tell the story with voiceover" (Jones 2024). With the same calm and neutral voice Chernov tries to interview his characters and register everything happening around, "and it seems that once we hear irritation in his voice", Myrnyj says (Myrnyj 2024). Here, the critic mentions the scene where the filmmaker meets a group of aggressively pro-russian locals hiding in one of the basements. This reaction by Chernov is totally understandable to Myrnyj: "Having no access to the truthful information, people start repeating russian propagandistic narratives, which in such circumstances when russian bombs are falling onto their very heads cannot be more disappointing"(Myrnyj 2024). It is a totally justifiable reaction as well because, as Nichols points out, "In many cases the voice of the filmmaker addresses issues and experiences that are very personal for them" (Nichols 2024, 64).

The only sound technique that has been criticized by some critics is the non-diegetic background music, which feels excessive here. Farago writes: "The only wholly unnecessary touch is a subdued minor-key synth score that plays during extended sequences of dread and terror. The movie doesn't need it. The images and sounds speak for themselves" (Farago 2023). Indeed, the already mentioned-above scene with the surgeon, and another one, where one of the heavy-wounded pregnant women, Iryna Kalinina (Murray 2022), finds out that her baby is dead inside her she pleads to the medic: "Just kill me now!", create such a tremendous effect, that no any

additional means are ever needed. Here, the viewer can fully perceive the power of documentary, which “lies in this ability to couple evidence to emotion” (Nichols 2024, 87).

2.43. Rhetoric and symbolism

Mariupol is a Greek name, originally Marianopol (Greek: Μαριανόπολη), meaning the city of Maria (Mary) and being derived from an icon of the Virgin Mary (Dzhuvaga 2011). It was founded by Greek settlers back in the 18th century, and up to the invasion, this city was traditionally known as the centre of the ethnic Greek community in Ukraine (Drapak 2022, Vovk 2024). As Barthes wrote, any signs can gain arbitrary meanings based on the particular society’s demand and experiences (Etherington-Wright&Doughty 2018, 72-73). Similarly to Bucha, the name of Mariupol, through the collective trauma, has gained particular traits and become something much bigger than just a town name today. Its name has become a special code that means an open wound, both hell itself and the escape from it (Hoshij 2022), the symbol of heroism as a reference to the defenders of Azovstal (Sullivan&Kakissis 2022), and it is together with Aleppo often called the tragic symbols of putlerism (Tsybulnyk 2022). The tragedy has turned this previously quite neutral name into one of the scariest symbols of this war, quite in line with Barthes’ ideas about “neutral things” being able to “acquire multi-layered meanings” (Etherington-Wright&Doughty 2018, 72-73). There are poems, plays and songs dedicated to Mariupol, where it is often referred to as Misto Marii (the city of Mary).[41] *20 Days in Mariupol* is a natural and important part of the city’s symbolism as this documentary fixates one of the most devastating parts of its history: "Mariupol has become a symbol of every other city that is getting destroyed right now, over the two years since I made it, it's gained more meaning than I ever thought it would," says Mstyslav Chernov, "With everything that's happening in Gaza right now, there's another whole layer of symbolism to what the civilian population goes through in war, and how war is destructive and unacceptable in this way" (Jones 2024).

As well as *Bucha*, *20 Days in Mariupol* is filled with the national and the military symbols: the blue and yellow colors of Ukraine’s national flag signaling the national resistance and pride as the opposite of the aggressive russian tricolor invading the city; the Z and V letters on the russian military vehicles and the soldiers wearing stripes of specific color that mark the sides of the conflict. However, contrary to *Bucha*, here these signs are characteristics of another rhetorical device – ethos. All these symbols reflect indexicality, i.e., they represent exactly what they are in real life thus being the authentic signs of reality, and, by that, establish the premises of the film.

[41] Such as a song of the popular Ukrainian band Okean Elzy “Misto Marii” (City of Mary) dedicated to the defenders of Mariupol. (Okeanelzyofficial 2022)

They are not brought in here by the filmmaker's creative choice in order to trigger particular emotions from the viewer; they are necessary natural elements of the narrative, which help the viewer to register the reality and develop trust in the director.

Here is also a road, the one that the journalists first take in order to enter the city and then to flee it. The road that runs through the whole city, but unlike the one in *Bucha*, this road not only exhibits the terrible reality of terror and the quick decay, but it also gives no hope, as there is no organized evacuation from the city, and the residents feel trapped. There is only a bare chance left to take that road, as the old man in the film does, and just see what happens next – either salvation or demise.

2.44. The purpose of the film

In an interview, Mstyslav Chernov said that he had not initially planned to film a documentary about Mariupol. He came to the city as a war correspondent with his primary goal to send short news dispatches to his agency, but when he realized the scale of the tragedy and got to know that they were the only international media team left in the city he decided to film everything around him as any picture might potentially serve as an important document: "Actually, I sent only 40 minutes out of the filmed 30 hours [from the seized Mariupol]. But those 30 hours constitute just around 1% of what happened in Mariupol. Those events in Mariupol account for around 1% of the total events happening in the whole country. Therefore, to effectively convey the scale of the tragedy, a larger format is necessary, such as film" (Pavlenko 2024). Moreover, he says, many people feel tired of the news flood, people losing their interest in following the events in Ukraine, but these people still watch films and documentaries. He sees an opportunity to reach such people through his film: "This gives us a wider audience because there's still so many people who don't see what is happening in Ukraine, who didn't pay attention, or who forgot about it, because it just disappeared from the news, and everybody moved on" (Jones 2024). But the most important point of this film, as Chernov says, is to preserve the memory about those people who were forced to go through this hell: "I still feel that I owe this to people of Mariupol who helped us to survive, to those who lost everything, including their lives. I just owe them to do everything I can to make sure that their story will not be forgotten.[…]And that's why the film exists" (Jones 2024). Documentaries often are seen as a tool for reaching a wider audience on behalf of people who do not have a public voice (Nichols 2024, 43-44), and Chernov truly succeeds in helping his subjects to be seen and heard.

2.5. The reception of *20 Days in Mariupol*

2.51. Introduction

Similarly to Robert Darton, whose review of the Andrzej Wajda's *Danton* mentioned by Janet Staiger in her book, I will analyze the reception of *20 Days in Mariupol* by using the same approach as to the analysis of *Bucha*. I will compare the contrasting response groups taking into consideration their cultural, social, political and ideological differences (Staiger 1992, 7).

2.52. The reception in Ukraine

The reception of the film in Ukraine was overwhelmingly positive. The film critic Valerij Myrnyj, calls *20 Days in Mariupol* "a very well edited reportage puzzle that is hard, but necessary to watch, though it leaves viewers in tears" (Myrnyj 2024). He points out that this film is not only an important document on the horrible trauma which is hard not empathize with, but the masterful editing turns this film into a textbook on the importance of the documentalism both as a process and as a genre (Myrnyj 2024). As an example, Myrnyj reflects on the scenes when the film characters first react very negatively to the media presence and their prying, but as the story unfolds, the Mariupol locals become more and more open and keep asking the journalists to document everything. It echoes Yana Dudko's observations:" The attitude towards journalists gradually changes. At first, they are called 'prostitutes' or are not taken into consideration at all. But then, when the despair is growing, the journalists with their cameras become not only witnesses but also weapons in the fight for the truth" (Dudko 2023). In her review, Dudko calls the film a manifesto of the freedom of information and sums up her review with the following quote: "It is a time-lapse of The City of Maria's death.[…]It is hard and scary to watch, but we have to watch it, because this chronicle has to be preserved for the sake of memory and respect" (Dudko 2023). Ukrainian author and feature film director Natalka Vorozhbyt expressed her emotions on Facebook after viewing the film, likening the experience of critiquing it—considering aspects like its dramaturgy, characters, editing, narrative, and music—to undergoing surgery or an autopsy (Vorozhbyt 2023). She elaborated that the significance of this film transcends being merely a skilled professional and creative endeavour, "It stands as one of our most crucial documents evidencing Russia's war crimes. I felt as though I was experiencing that dreadful period of life with both my heart and my gut" (Vorozhbyt 2023). She, as well as the rest of the Ukrainian reviews, encouraged all Ukrainians to watch this film in order to shake off the deceiving comfort of their everyday lives in other, somewhat calmer, parts of Ukraine and in order to remember that: "Mariupol is a tragedy. The author of this tragedy is Russia. The authors of this film are heroes. The film is a masterwork" (Vorozhbyt 2023). Her fellow writer and another documentary film director, Iryna Tsilyk, called *20 Days in Mariupol* a very harsh

documentary film where, “You can see almost everything, you would never like to see” (Tsilyk 2023). All Ukrainian critics concur that *20 Days in Mariupol* is an impactful means of conveying the truth about the events in Ukraine to international audiences. Furthermore, as Tsilyk states, the inclusion of non-diegetic media elements, such as b-roll footage, i.e., “cutaways from a given scene to provide images that illustrate or complicate assertions” (Nichols 2024, 27), alongside the main scenes in the film helps bridge the connection between foreign viewers and Ukrainians, allowing them to witness the reality behind the media clips they are familiar with (Tsilyk 2023).

The Mariupol locals, who managed to flee the occupation, expressed their gratitude for the film. Some of them, according to Chernov's interview, come to the film screening either in Ukraine or abroad and cry, “It was very hard for them to watch. But on the other hand, the film worked as a sort of therapy session for them, something that one should live through again in order to fully apprehend what has happened. Moreover, this film provides for Ukrainians[…] a hope that no one ever forgets Mariupol“ (Pavlenko 2024). His observations are partially supported by some of the commentators on Facebook: “I have seen it all with my own eyes, I can’t imagine Mariupol locals being able to watch it, but I really want the whole world to see it!” (Samoylenko 2023). *20 Days in Mariupol* is often contrasted with *Bucha* and another allegedly manipulative fiction film about Mariupol, *Yurik* (Oleksandr Timenko, 2023).[42] As it has also been mentioned in the reception of *Bucha* in Ukraine, documentaries in general, and this one specifically, are often referred to as an example of a film work that does the job of covering the current war (Vorozhbyt 2023, BBC News Ukraine 2023).

2.53. The reception abroad

According to Letterboxd, *20 Days in Mariupol* holds the title of the highest-rated documentary of 2023 (Letterboxd 2023). The film got appraisal of the Western critics too, being reviewed by the biggest names in the industry, such as Matt Zoller Seitz for RogerEbert.com, who wrote: “20 Days in Mariupol” spares no one’s sensibilities. It goes on a short list of great documentaries that the viewer will never want to watch again and likely won’t need to because some of the images are so gruesome and the context so upsetting that they’ll be burned into your memory.[…]This is a dispatch from hell on earth. The fragmented, chaotic, imprecise nature of it is a revelation.” (Zoller Seitz 2023), and Peter Bradshaw writing for the Guardian that “this movie is the uncut, unexpurgated version: the real nightmare, the real explicit obscenity which no TV executive

[42] A feature film telling the story of an 11-year-old boy who is forced to travel alone from the war-torn Mariupol to his relatives in Estonia. The film was so extremely negatively received in Ukraine that it sparked a massive scandal, where it was called by the critics and the public “a spit into our souls”. It caused the film to be temporarily removed from all streaming platforms in the country. (BBC News Ukraine 2023)

would put on the nightly news. This searing film bears a terrible witness to this great crime" (Bradshaw 2023). Madeline Sawyer of The Dartmouth, as well as Peter Bradshaw, awards the film five stars of five and, through the detailed narrative analysis of the film, gives her conclusion: "The documentary highlights the human cost of conflict and appeals to viewers' humanity, making it an especially relevant watch as the war continues" (Sawyer 2024).

There was a controversy, though, connected to the Oscar acceptance speech by Mstyslav Chernov being cut from the international broadcast by Disney. In his speech, Chernov called himself "probably the first director on this stage to say that I wish I had never made this film" and emphasized that he would gladly exchange this Oscar for the peace in Ukraine.[43] Chernov was largely praised for his speech, while Disney faced criticism for its actions and was accused of cowardice and of not acting neutrally, as the award ceremony of the previous year's Best Documentary winner, *Navalny* (Daniel Roher, 2022), had been included in the international broadcast (Smith 2024).

The russian oppositional critic Ekaterina Barabash wrote in her review: "*20 Days in Mariupol* is a film-pain, a film-desperation, a film-hopelessness" that is strongly recommended to everyone in russia despite it is only available via pirate resources (Barabash 2023). This review, even though published in the oppositional media, sparked a traditional discussion between the russians who feel ashamed for being part of this war and those who support it (Barabash 2023). Many russian oppositional voices have stressed the importance of this film and especially the Oscar award the film received as recognition of the proof of the kremlin terrorism and war crimes (Zaripov 2024). Some of the russian voices expressed their feeling of guilt and shame that will never be washed away (Zaripov 2024). But all the commentators agreed on the thought that *20 Days in Mariupol* will always be there for russia as a sore in the mouth, the film that documented its crimes forever (Zaripov 2024).

2.54. The reception in russia and by its allies

On the other hand, russian propagandists used the Oscar moment as another occasion to push forward its narratives (Bond 2023) comparing *20 Days in Mariupol* to the Goebbels promoted Nazi films and insisting that "this film spreads the fascist propaganda – while the Drama Theatre in Mariupol was blown up by the Security Service of Ukraine and neo-nazi Azov battalion to blame russia in committing war crimes. […] Before the Hollywood supported communists, now

[43] "I wish to be able to exchange this for Russia never attacking Ukraine, never invading our cities. I wish to be able to exchange this for Russian not killing 10,000 of my fellow Ukrainians." (Oscars 2024)

they all vote for new fascists" (Zaripov 2024). The numerous commentators on YouTube and the russian resource Pikabu[44] agree that *20 Days in Mariupol* pictures some horrible moments from the city, but in unison with the official russian response either accuse Ukraine in staging the shelling and bombings or provoking russian troops into shooting, or even blame the West in spreading false propaganda that aims to discredit "our brave and courteous Russian warriors" (coktis 2024, WALK&TALK 2024). Exactly as in the case with *Bucha*, russian commentators claim that it was Ukrainian forces that entered Mariupol, committed all crimes and then accused russia of doing it – according to Litvinenko, a favored russia's tool of "mirroring Western narratives by accusing adversaries of the same wrongdoings of which Western countries accuse Russia" (Litvinenko 2022, 7). As proof of their words, the anonymous commentators appeal to the scenes from *20 Days in Mariupol*, where the residents tell the journalists to "f *ck off" or say that they do not know who exactly is bombing them, similarly to the story of Marianna Vyshemirska (coktis 2024, Meduza 2025, Bond 2023). The main argument used by the russian commentators to justify the invasion into Mariupol, and generally into Ukraine, is that the local language spoken in Mariupol, and many other parts of the country, is largely russian – the official narrative of the russian federation voiced by putin in 2014 and intensified before the full-scale invasion (Lönngren et.al. 2023). Some russian provocateurs with their "fake news, all this was staged" message (Bond 2023) have even made their way into the commentary section of RodgerEbert.com under the film's review (Zoller Seitz 2023), which also reflects one of the russian tactics of their propaganda dissemination (Fredheim et.al. 2023, Litvinenko 2022). While the whole world applauded *20 Days in Mariupol*, receiving numerous accolades, russia launched its own film project about the city: "a series designed to propagate the Kremlin's official propaganda story, which denies the atrocities committed in Mariupol, despite all the evidence gathered by independent journalists" (RSF 2024).

Moreover, the russian narrative was supported in Serbia, where the Serbian Radical Party called *20 Days in Mariupol* the anti-russian propaganda and demanded to ban the scheduled screening of the film in October 2023 stating that, "The promotion of such a position contradicts the official policy of the Republic of Serbia, which has taken a neutral position since the beginning of the Russian "special operation in Ukraine"(Telishevska 2023). Additionally, the documentary was called by the party as: "an attempt by the West to change the attitude of the Serbian people towards brotherly Russia"(BSC Happy 2023), which supports a usual russian narrative of the West being responsible for the war in Ukraine (Litvinenko 2022, 10, 7, Fredheim et.al. 2023). This particular screening of the documentary was canceled due to this controversy, but the film

[44] Pikabu: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pikabu

was eventually screened in Belgrade on the second anniversary of the russian invasion in February 2024 (Tanjug 2024).

The overall response to *20 Days in Mariupol* was highly favorable both domestically and internationally. The film received acclaim for its strong narrative structure, the use of indexical material, and the first-person narration performed by the director. The critics, as well as the general public, agree that it is a very difficult, though necessary, film to watch, as it is also an important historical document. In russia, though, the film was received in the same manner as *Bucha*, discussed above. The film was condemned and called fake by russian propagandists whose narrative is reflected even among the general public in russian segment of social media. The reception by russia affected the reception in Serbia, especially among traditionally pro-russian radical right activists, who attempted to get the film banned in the country.

3. Discussion

3.1. Historical interpretative strategies

3.11. Introduction and theory

Staiger claims that though the common approach in reception studies today is to focus on the particular viewer/reviewer of a film, the historical premises and their effect on the critical approach should be considered as well.[45] In this particular study that involves *Bucha* and *20 Days in Mariupol*, Staiger's approach does indeed work. The critical response from all the sides reviewed above (general Ukrainian, general russian, general Western, and particular from some other directions) to both films is deeply rooted in the current reality and affected by the change of the political situation, historical events, as well as spatiality. First of all, it is worth mentioning that the historical premises, i.e., the temporal and spatial circumstances, of both events, depicted in the films, and those of the reviewers, coincide. Therefore, first of all, the response to these films is largely based on that factor. However, the technical and creative qualities of the films, as perceived and analyzed by the viewers, also play a big role in the film's reception.

3.12. Response from different sides

The general response from the Ukrainian critics and general viewers alike demonstrates close connection to the real events that both films depict, moreover the professional critics and

[45] "A commonplace assumption in criticism today is the notion that the reader of a text, the viewer of an art piece, or the spectator of a film ought to be a focal point of study. […] my argument is that describing *historical* interpretative strategies and explaining the causes for those specific strategies can make valuable contributions to the history, criticism, and philosophy of these cultural products." (Staiger 1992, XI)

journalists focus more on how successfully/poorly the filmmakers manage to deliver their message to the audience about the events depicted in the films, what emotions the films are able to convey and what creative choices dominate the films and which particular effect these choices have on the viewer, by that raising a number of questions, for instance the one of ethics. The general public, though, tends not to dissect the films into details, but focuses more on the general impression the films make on them, as well as the historical accuracy of the elements of the events depicted in the film. Interestingly enough, there are not many Ukrainian critics who dare to express their criticism of the linguistic elements of the films (particularly in the case of *Bucha*), which in some way may contradict the currently dominating beliefs in the country (Lönngren et.al. 2023). As the example of the ZK's review of *Bucha* shows, any attempt to lift any criticism connected to the language use in a cultural product may result in a critique of the reviewer from the general public (Zagin Kinomaniv 2024). While Western critics, as expected, have little to no agency regarding the language use in Ukraine, the critics, who represent the same language group[46] and are not bound by the current processes and agenda within Ukraine, are able to avoid self-censoring, at least regarding this particular element of the film (Sherman 2025). This example well illustrates Staiger's critique of the extremes in reception studies, which call for the detachment of the reader from the production, for "they believe meaning is produced by the reader" (Staiger 1992, 3). The reality of the production and that of the reader have a direct influence on the perception of the finished product (Staiger 1992, 4). Moreover, the example given above additionally supports the thought that language is considered to be a vital part of the historical process in any region and therefore the use of language in the film reflects the ongoing historical process and the perception of that process through the current historical reality of the viewer (Staiger 1992, 6-7).

20 Days in Mariupol got a similar, namely extremely positive, response in both Ukraine and in the West, as well as in some other countries that are not russia or its allies. The consensus on the response might describe *20 Days in Mariupol* as an important historical document and a well-made documentary full of excellent creative choices. Its director, Mstyslav Chernov, was additionally praised for both neutrality and historical accuracy. Moreover, it was highlighted by numerous critics that the coincidence of multiple temporal and spatial factors, i.e., Chernov and his crew being in Mariupol when the invasion started, their ability to transfer some material to their agency and their luck in being able to escape russians and bring all their footage to the outer world, played a decisive role for the world being able to watch events in Mariupol as practically unfolding before our eyes in real time. *Bucha*, on the other hand, was completely unnoticed in

[46] Slavic

the Western realm of film criticism despite Ukraine's governmental effort to promote the film. The film was largely negatively received in its home country, where the critics did not question the authenticity of the events depicted in the film, but rather the poor creative choices made by its director, Tiunov, and what they led to. *Bucha* was broken down into pieces by Ukrainian critics in the attempt to understand why film made such a negative impression and never reached its announced goals and by that the expectations from the audience.[47] Bordwell writes in his book that it is creative decisions made by the director, such as" sound in film as well as some other aspects and details such as mise-en-scene, acting, semiotics, editing etc." are considered to be critical for the film's reception: "as they impact the authenticity, quality and the potential manipulative technics used in the film as well as either help or not the film to meet the audience's expectations" (Bordwell 2023, 4). The film's producer, Shchur, states the following: "If you have even a slightest bit of humanity in your heart, this story will touch you"(Vakulina&Farrant 2025), implying that if someone, for some reason, is not particularly impressed by the film, regarding the film's historical premises, that person is simply inhumane. In order to illustrate his point, the producer talks about the scene where the captured and raped girl is escaping her prison by stepping on the dead body of the boy who sacrificed his life for her. This particular scene could have been a compelling moment. Unfortunately, the way it was edited, alternating with the scene of the villain playing on the piano, the Tchaikovsky's Swan Theme and a picture of a black bird flying free, makes it feel extremely manipulative, what was also noted by the Ukrainian critics and the general public (Zagin Kinomaniv 2024).

As to the response from russia interestingly enough, the response to *Bucha* and to *20 Days in Mariupol* was exactly the same. Viewers from russia followed the official state narrative filled with anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda, while separate, oppositional to the russian government, critics dared to express themselves and reflected on the films more openly and freely (Barabash 2023, Sherman 2025, Zaripov 2024). The reaction to Mariupol from the unspoken allies to russia, such as Serbia and Kazakhstan,[48] was not that cheerily approving as from the West, there were supporting voices, the voices of doubt along with the angry protest – all of them reflecting their countries' current relationship with the two main actors (Ukraine and russia) and the rest of the world. Such an approach, according to Staiger: "foregrounds the political implications of the differing positions" (Staiger 1992, 5).

[47] "Creating expectations is central to advertising any product. A film's title, its poster, its online promotion, and its trailers aim to set up particular expectations." (Bordwell 2023, 53)
[48] Discussed in 2.3. The reception of *Bucha* 2.34. The reception in Kazakhstan and in 2.5. The reception of *20 Days in Mariupol* 2.54. The reception in russia and by its allies

3.2. Propaganda

3.21. The role of russian propaganda

Considering the role of the historical premises in the film's reception discussed above, it is worth taking a closer look at the russian propaganda tactics and their effect on all the elements of the discussed matter. In Anna Litvinenko's research paper on the modern russian propaganda, the term propaganda is defined as: "intentional manipulation of public opinion," which uses a plethora of various tools, for instance, disinformation campaigns (Litvinenko 2022, 5). Further, Litvinenko suggests a concept termed as *propaganda on demand*,[49] which can be specifically applied in the cases of *Bucha* and *20 Days in Mariupol*. The *Bucha* creators describe their film as a powerful tool which should help to resist russia's propaganda machine,[50] and they definitely have a valid point here. Both films, as it is noted above, have received a similar response from the russian side, – both films were labeled as a combined Ukrainian and Western propaganda product and as fake news. This is a specific tactic of the russian propaganda machine to call any war crimes or anything that russia potentially can be accused of, foreign propaganda or simply justify those acts (Litvinenko 2022, 2,7, RSF 2024, Bond 2023). Moreover, while accusing both films, and generally the Ukrainian and the Western reaction to the events that had taken place in both Bucha and Mariupol, as being staged propagandistic acts (Fredheim et.al. 2023, Shapovalova 2024, 3730), russia created its own reply using its propagandistic machine.[51] According to Litvinenko, it is quite a frequent russian tactic to fill the state propaganda channels with "content according to political momentum" (Litvinenko 2022, 7) by distorting reality. Thus, not only news broadcasts and timelines are being filled with alternative russian versions of reality, but such disinformation is also transmitted via various cultural channels such as films, TV-shows, public events, etc. (Zametin 2023). Subsequently, "people who encounter this filter become dismissive of any alternative information, which they tend to condemn as 'fake news' (Litvinenko 2022, 5). The concept of fake news has not been taken seriously abroad before. Peter Bradshaw states in his review of *20 Days in Mariupol*: "As for the Russian authorities, they brazenly claim it is all fake news. And here is where I had an uneasy memory of Sergei Loznitsa's 2018 film *Donbass*, which depicts the Russians confecting fake news; it was taken by many, including me, to be a satirical fantasy. But now Russian authorities believe, or pretend to believe, that the Ukrainians are doing it" (Bradshaw 2023).

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[49] "I suggest the *propaganda on demand* concept, which describes the manipulation of public opinion by targeting different social milieus with specifically tailored narratives." (Litvinenko 2022, 1)

[50] Discussed in 2.2. Analysis of Bucha. 2.24. The purpose of the film

[51] "a favored propaganda tool is mirroring Western narratives by accusing adversaries of the same wrongdoings of which Western countries accuse Russia" (Litvinenko 2022, 7)

3.22. Reaction

This approach by russia characterized by adjusting to the current circumstances and tailoring the response of the particular receiver, in this case the film audiences, is conceptualized by Litvinenko as propaganda on demand, which is difficult to oppose and fight (Litvinenko 2022, 8). Nevertheless, the world seems to understand the weight of the russian propaganda and seems to recognize the attempts to resist and counter it as reflected in the numerous reviews of *20 Days in Mariupol*: "When propaganda is used to try and sway the outcome of a conflict, documentaries like *20 Days in Mariupol* […] can be a powerful way to fight back" (Jones 2024) and "*20 Days in Mariupol* is the light fighting the darkness in this informational battle" (Myrnyj 2024). As Litvinenko concludes, the russian propaganda is skillful and powerful and completely dominates the country's media and digital landscape (Litvinenko 2022, 2,10), therefore it is very important to be aware of it, recognize its tools and consider this present factor while reviewing and analyzing any cultural and media products of our time (Litvinenko 2022, 11).

4. Conclusion

It turns out that both filmmakers, Chernov and Tiunov, have declared the similar goals behind their films' creation – that is first of all reaching the broader audience abroad through creation of a sincere story and by that keeping the world's focus on the ongoing war in Ukraine and telling the truth about russian actions, as well as documenting the events for the Ukrainian audience. However, while Chernov has succeeded with his goals and his work has been widely recognized, Tiunov has not. The key difference, as it comes out from the numerous reviews and the audience response, is how the filmmaker treats the reality presented through his film. As Nichols writes in his book, both documentaries and fiction films might: "correspond to verifiable facts and actual events" (Nichols 2024, 19), and the story the filmmaker tells, which involves these events, is always to be told from the perspective of each filmmaker through the range of their choices of its form and style. Chernov shapes his story by chronologically narrating the real events happening around him and gives voice to the social actors of this story without giving it his personal characteristics, and by that, he helps the audience to experience his story together with him and his subjects and subsequently to draw their own conclusions. Therefore, *20 Days in Mariupol* has been recognized both as highly professional creative work, an important historical document and as: "a testament to the strength and resilience of Ukrainians and an appeal to the outside world not to close its eyes to the atrocities that Chernov documents" (Sawyer 2024).

Meanwhile, Tiunov, through his creative treatment of reality and poorly shaped characters,[52] tries to manipulate the historical events and fit them into the expected response from the audience and by that he manipulates the audience as well, which is perceived as a highly unethical act (Zagin Kinomaniv 2024). Sherman adds: "Bucha does not leave any aftertaste of grief, pain and regret, the way the good war film does. Even the Wikipedia article provides more consideration and emotional reaction than this film. It seems that Bucha was made simply for being made. And this is a very regrettable conclusion" (Sherman 2025). *Bucha's* poor result can be summarized as a combination of the weak creative choices and the insensitive approach to the work material, without any regard to its historical temporality and specialty. *Bucha* is an interesting, inspiring and without any doubt heroic story told in such an ineffectual way: "what could have been a masterful portrayal of human resilience instead serves as a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of superficial storytelling in times of profound crisis" (Arsova 2024).

Additionally, this research has shown that the russian response to these two films demonstrates a great example of the current state of things inside the russian cultural realm that is deeply corrupted by state propaganda, whose main task is to create an alternate reality and spread it into the outer world.

All in all, the response to these two films, deeply rooted in the current political and historical agenda, shows how the reception of a moving picture in general might depend on the current historical premises. It would be quite interesting to continue and deepen this research in the future in order to investigate how the reception might alter in our rapidly and radically changing modern world. In light of recent events, it sounds completely unbelievable, but we never know what the future response might be. *Bucha* might be lifted as an action-filled and quite exotic thriller, while *20 Days in Mariupol* might be downsized to uncomfortable and outdated nonfiction and just another historical document; not in Ukraine and russia though.

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[52] "In fiction the roles are so strongly shaped by the filmmaker or producers." (Nichols 2024, 15)

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