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Tsar Peter, Mazepa and Ukraine: A Love Triangle. Iurii Illienko's *A Prayer for hetman Mazepa*

Sander Brouwer

In the last 15 years, in Poland, Russia and Ukraine, the countries under research in the Memory at War project (see the Introduction to this volume), films have been released about rather remote historical events and figures, that seem to project animosity over the interpretation of the recent past onto the distant. As an example of such films I may mention *With Fire and Sword* by Polish director Jerzy Hoffman, which was released in 1999. It was based on the first part of Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Trylogia* (1883-1888). Hoffman's *Colonel Wolodyjowski*, the screen version of its third part, had already been released back in 1968; *The Deluge*, the second part, in 1974. Unlike these two episodes, adapted for the screen in the days when Poland was still a member of the Communist bloc, Sienkiewicz's third part takes a notably more reserved stance toward 17th century Ukrainian Cossackdom. Although Hoffman repeatedly stressed that he did not intend to hurt contemporary Ukrainians' feelings (Shevchuk 1999), the film was enthusiastically received as a patriotic statement by many Poles (Haltof 2007), and by many Ukrainians as an oblique comment on Polish-Ukrainian 20th century frictions (Tarnawsky 2000).

In Russia, first comes to mind, of course, Vladimir Khotinenko's *1612* of 2007, that I have discussed in the previous chapter; a film that is very obviously connected with the new National Unity day on the 4th of November, commemorating the end of the Time of Troubles in 1612, the expulsion of Polish invaders, and already on the horizon the happy ascension to the throne of a new, ideal ruler. We may also mention the two competing screen versions of *Taras Bul'ba*, that I also mentioned in the previous chapter (see note 4). In this chapter, I will discuss a Ukrainian film that very obviously connects the strained Ukrainian-Russian relations after 1991 with those of the distant past: Iurii Illienko's *Prayer for hetman Mazepa* (Molytva za get'mana Mazepu; Oleksandr Dovzhenko National Studio, Creative Union Rodovid, Ministry of Culture

and Arts of Ukraine, 2002). The film, that centers on two historical actors in the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th century: Peter the Great and Ivan Mazepa, was produced in 2001, shown mainly abroad in 2002, and then as it were vanished for some 7 years, after which Illienko released a second, shorter definitive version in 2009.

The distant past can sometimes arouse discussions just as fierce as those over the more recent past, as is witnessed by Russian blogs on which Bul'ba is presented as a Russian hero, and Mazepa as a traitor to the just cause; or Ukrainian ones on which Bul'ba is a Ukrainian freedom fighter, and Mazepa a patriotic hero. Partly this may be due to the fact that these and similar heroes are already so well known to the public from school history books, the literary canon (Gogol's *Taras Bul'ba*, Pushkin's *Poltava*, Sienkiewicz's *Trilogy*), from opera's (Chaikovskii's *Mazepa*, Musorgskii's *Boris Godunov*), from famous monuments and films (Minin and Pozharskii from Pudovkin and Döller's film; from their statue at Red Square—see my previous chapter). Similar to the case of the Smuta discussed before, they are in a way, through these mediations, part of 'communicative memory' as much as of 'cultural memory,' in Jan Assmann's (1995) terms.

The fact that such historical films explicitly position their memory of the historical events as a rallying point for contemporary national feelings can be illustrated by their release date: thus, Jerzy Hoffman's *The Battle of Warsaw 1920* was released on October 7, 2011, the date on which in October 1918 the Regency Council announced Poland's independence (although officially 11 November is celebrated as the date of Polish independence—the day Piłsudski was appointed Commander in Chief of the Polish forces and was entrusted with creating a national government). Khotinenko's *1612* was released on November 1, 2007, to coincide with the November 4 National Unity Holiday. Bortko's *Taras Bul'ba* was also originally scheduled to premiere on November 4 (2008) in Moscow (Uspekh 2009), but was then postponed to April 2, 2009, to coincide with Gogol's birthday. Still it *was* shown on Russian TV on November 4 in 2009 (Telereitingi 2009).

A Prayer for hetman Mazepa received an enormous (for Ukrainian standards of that time) government grant of 12,5 million hryvnia, then

roughly the equivalent of 2.5 million dollars,¹ by decision of Minister of Culture (1999–2001) Bohdan Stupka, who himself played Mazepa in the film, and Prime Minister Viktor Iushchenko. Obviously, a Ukrainian version of *Braveheart* was expected, and an answer to Hoffman's *With Fire and Sword*: a touchstone for the allegedly reemerging Ukrainian national cinema, and a patriotic statement in the Ukrainian-Russian memory war.

Prayer was conceived as a Ukrainian answer to (...) Polish blockbuster *With Fire and Sword* (1999) by Jerzy Hoffman. The project enjoyed a massive financial support of the then Ukraine's prime minister Viktor Yushchenko and had the budget of \$2.5 mln., the biggest for a film since independence. The historical drama, featuring some of the best actors Ukraine boasts, was widely expected to herald a much overdue revival of the Ukrainian national cinema (Ukrainian Film Club 2009).

Ivan Mazepa is of course a very ominous figure to choose for a patriotic film. He is by far the most pronouncedly anti-Russian Ukrainian historical character. Indeed, from the 1990s on, Mazepa was officially promoted in newly independent Ukraine as a patriotic hero, he is portrayed on the 10 hryvnia banknote since 1995, streets were named after him, monuments erected, a Mazepa medal was created, the anniversary of his death commemorated, etcetera (for more background and details see Grob 2008). However, Illienko's film proved a huge box-office failure, it has until this day not been released on DVD, and many critics showed disappointment in its artistic qualities. This undoubtedly has to do first of all with the difficulties an average viewer has with the poetics of the film, which we will try to untangle a bit below. And secondly, the film reverses, plays with, and questions this image of Mazepa that politicians, financiers, critics and the public at large would have expected or even demanded—the lofty image of a patriotic hero. To get a grasp of how this is done, we will first have to briefly recapitulate which events the film refers to, and to which cultural context it relates. All these elements, as we will see, have been used by Illienko to compose his hybrid image of Mazepa in the film. The director also has a keen eye for the pictorial intertextual history of the theme—which is very justified in view of the important pictorial reception of the subject matter in 19th century painting. It translates into

¹ Wikipedia 2015. According to other sources, 20 million hryvnia, then roughly the equivalent of 3.75 million dollars (Kinopoisk 2008).

an enormous visual metaphorical and intertextual density of this film, parts of which we will try to unravel in the following.

Ivan Mazepa served as a warrior and a diplomat under Petro Doroshenko, hetman of Rightbank Ukraine, from 1669-1673, and under hetman of Leftbank Ukraine Ivan Samoilovych from 1674-1682, before becoming Leftbank hetman himself in 1687, having denounced Samoilovych and secured the support of Vasili Golitsyn and young Russian Tsar Peter. He gained Peter's trust more and more by assisting in the overthrow of his sister Sofia as a regent in 1689; and by taking part in Peter's storm of Azov in 1696. In 1702-1703 he managed to conquer parts of Rightbank Ukraine. In 1704 Mazepa, then 63 years old, started a passionate love affair with Motria Kochubei, the 20-year old daughter of Chief Judge of the hetmanate Vasyl' Kochubei, a relationship that many considered incestuous, as Mazepa was Motria's godfather. Kochubei repeatedly denounced Mazepa before Tsar Peter and warned him that he was planning to take side with Swedish king Charles XII, who had invaded Russia. Peter did not believe him and handed Kochubei over to Mazepa, who in 1708 had him beheaded. The next year, Mazepa indeed did unexpectedly take side with Charles: in the battle of Poltava (1709) both were defeated by Peter and had to flee to Bendery, where Mazepa died.

Mazepa has thus in Russian eyes become the arch traitor and false friend that since then always formed the shadow part of the image of the Ukrainian in Russian culture (Grob 2008: 85-86). As such, he was the subject of Faddei Bulgarin's novel of 1834, and more famously of Pushkin's epic poem *Poltava* (1829), which in its turn formed the basis of Chaikovsky's opera *Mazepa*.

A wholly different literary tradition developed around the figure of Mazepa in the West. Here, he acquired fame as the hero of an amorous anecdote popularised by Voltaire in his *History of Charles XII, King of Sweden* (1731). According to the legend, the young Mazepa had an affair with the wife of a Polish nobleman, was discovered, and punished by being tied naked to a wild horse and chased into the steppes, where he barely escaped death. This well-known legend served as the basis for Byron's *Mazeppa* (1819), and then of Victor Hugo's 'Mazeppa' (1828) from *Les Orientales*, in which Mazepa's flight into the unknown, his symbolic death on the horse and resurrection becomes a symbol for poetic and

artistic creation. These texts soon became popular in Romantic painting as well, in the famous series of works of Delacroix and Géricault and their followers, Boulanger, Herring, Vernet, Chasseriau.²

Leaving aside other famous Mazepa-related art works, such as Juliusz Słowacki's drama *Mazeppa* (1839) or Franz Liszt's piano étude *Mazeppa* (1826/1840) and his *Poème symphonique No. 6* (1851), it is worth mentioning here another, lesser known offshoot of the Mazepa tree, especially since it has very probably been of some influence on Illienko's film. I am referring to the horse shows with Mazepa as the main hero, that became very popular in the 1820s and 1830s in France and England, but later especially in the United States, with their peak in the 1870-1880s. Particularly famous was Henry M. Milner's very free adaptation of Byron: *Mazeppa, or the Wild Horse of Tartary. A Romantic Drama in Three Acts* (1831), in which Mazepa is a 'Tartar' called Cassimer, and his beloved a certain Olinska. The apogee of the show was the scene where Cassimer is on-stage bound to a horse and galloped off. There were hybrid forms of these 'hippodramas' with proper drama, tragedy, pantomimes, and comic opera's.

The simple plot of these shows generally coincides with and indeed is taken from Byron's poem, but isolates from it only the amorous conflict in its moment of culmination, when Mazeppa is tied to the back of the horse and is chased away. The intriguing thing is that by the second half of the 19th century his role came to be played preferably by women. With this idea we can credit the impresario John Smith, and the actress who became famous with the role was Adah Isaacs Menken (1835-1868).

In the culminating scene of the show the villains undress Mazeppa/Cassimer, to the skin and tie him to the horse. The juicy detail here, of course, is that he is a woman. The actress Adah Menken acquired great fame by her role; instead of being really naked she was actually dressed in a skin coloured petticoat and shirt, but due to the inferior lighting in the theatres and even saloons this detail must have escaped the public. Nudity was in the eye of the beholder. Menken-Mazepa in the meantime has acquired the fame of having been the first proto-porno-

² See for the Mazepa theme in Western literature Babinski 1974, Sadowska-Guillon 1982, Grob 2005; for the French pictorial tradition Marciuk 1991.

actress.³ A few of the poses on photographs that she became famous with have survived. Especially two of them very much resemble the pose of Mazepa's statue on the tomb in Illienko's film (see below).

For the Illienko film, it is of course interesting to mention here the screen versions of the American Mazepa drama. In 1910, Francis Boggs produced a short film *Mazeppa or the Wild horse of Tartary*. In 1960, George Cukor made *Heller In Pink Tights*, a Technicolor western film starring Sophia Loren and Anthony Quinn; Loren plays an actress performing the Mazeppa play and is actually seen a few times galloping off the stage on horseback, much like Menken. It is interesting that for this Mazepa-inspired film Cukor had the music written and performed by Daniele Amfitheatrof (1901-1983), a Russian-born composer and conductor; and hired also Russian-born George Hoyningen-Huene (1900-1968), a famous photographer and illustrator, for its overall design. As an indication of how famous Adah Menken still was in the late 1950s, I may mention an episode of the TV series *Bonanza*, "The magnificent Adah" (1959), that was probably influenced by Cukor's film.⁴ It shows Adah Menken visiting her old friend Pa Cartwright in Virginia City. During that visit, the three sons visit the play *Mazeppa*, in which Menken plays her role. Indeed, Hoss is shown to remain troubled mainly by the question: "was she or wasn't she ... naked?"⁵

Thomas Grob (2005) has, with great erudition and analytical acumen, brought together the various historical as well as artistic imaginations concerning Mazepa, and has established as a common denominator in all this seemingly heterogeneous material the element of transgression (*Grenzüberschreitung*) and liminality. I will not excerpt Grob here, but will briefly recapitulate why these themes are so inextricably bound up with the figure of Mazepa.

³ For further information on her career see Mankowitz 1982. See also the excellent information and further links on https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adah_Isaacs_Menken

⁴ *Bonanza*, season 1, episode 10. See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0529771/>

⁵ Finally, *Mazeppa* is also the title of a 1993 French drama film directed by Bartabas; it is based loosely on Géricault's life and gives an interesting interpretation of why he preferably painted horses. Oddly, the Cossack exoticism is in this film replaced with Georgian elements.

- a) as a Cossack hetman he embodies the traditional in-betweenness of the region continually disputed by Russia, Poland-Lithuania and Ottoman Crimea;
- b) more specifically, he embodies the cultural confrontation between the “noble adventurer” Charles XII, who represents Enlightenment culture, and Peter, who “had not yet cast off the rudeness of his upbringing and his country”, as Voltaire wrote (quoted in Grob 2005: 41);
- c) in the legend introduced by Voltaire and elaborated upon by Byron and others he embodies a region that is wild, a European periphery (“les frontières de l’Europe”) but as yet unknown, not belonging to Europe’s ‘North’ nor to the Orient;
- d) being, for Voltaire, not a Ukrainian but a Polish nobleman he performs on his wild horse the journey from ‘civilised’ into ‘uncivilised’ space,
- e) while himself performing the double transition from “gentilhomme” to outcast,⁶ and from “demi-mort” nobody to “prince de l’Ukraine” (cf. Hugo’s final lines: “Il court, il vole, il tombe, / Et se relève roi!”);
- f) the ‘Mazepa’ myth in itself constantly evidences plurimediality, crossing the borders, or existing liminally, between history and imaginative literature; between narration and poetry, drama, music; and between narration and pictorial image;
- g) especially in the 19th century, Mazepa not only transgresses the boundaries between media, but also that between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art forms, when he becomes the hero of circus acts and horse shows/equestrian drama, pantomimes and comic opera’s in France, England and North America; of dime novels⁷ and burlesques;⁸
- h) in Mazepa’s image as a whole, he is at the same time the reckless enamoured youth, the victim of love (the scene with the wild horse), and the lecherous, immoral old seducer (of Motria Kochubei);

⁶ He was tied to the horse in a typical outcast, liminal position, what Grob (2005: 43) describes as the classical pose of punishment, backside up and face toward the horse-tail.

⁷ In Albert Aiken’s *The Indian Mazeppa or The Madman of the Plains* (1877), the Mazeppa myth is transposed to the Wild West.

⁸ In Charles White’s *Mazeppa. An Equestrian Burlesque in Two Acts* (1856) the action takes place in America and Olinska’s father is not a Polish nobleman but a black man called Castiron.

i) finally, in the American Mazeppa shows the Mazepa figure transgresses gender boundaries, being represented by a woman.⁹ As Grob remarks, while in the Western legend the attribution of male seducer traits seems a stable element, the pictorial tradition shows Mazepa's body essentially 'being exposed' (Ausgestelltsein; Grob 2005: 56), which reveals an undercurrent of potential femininity (in the traditional conception, of course).

As I said, Illienko uses many of these elements to create a very hybrid image of Mazepa in his film. The incorporation of all these contexts—even the American reception of the Mazepa story—shows that it has been the aim of the director not to carve a cinematic statue for a hero, but to reflect on the mythical status of a controversial historical figure, show him as the subject of various and contradictory discourses. Doing so, Illienko very clearly distances himself from what already has become a standard ingredient of Ukrainian nationalist myths of statehood:

In the wake of Ukrainian independence, the literary-historical and mythologized Mazepa spearheaded, among others, the symbolism now deployed by the state and the media to legitimize the new statehood in historical terms. Much as in the early twentieth century, the current interest taken in Mazepa resides in anti-Russian sentiments and the quest for precursors of Ukrainian statehood (Grob 2008: 93).

Illienko works in the Ukrainian 'poetic cinema' tradition, and indeed his film shows many traits characteristic for this style, as characterised by Vitaly Chernetsky in this volume: it "privileges the compositional aspect over the semantics of narrative progress" (p. 4) and shows "emphasis on an impressionistic presentation of experienced reality, and frequent reliance on unusual camera angles and fluidity" (p. 10). Indeed, *Prayer* is deliberately chaotic, its chronology is unclear, the visual perception is hampered by strange lighting, shots through greasy lenses or through some kind of veil, lots of smoke, deliberately amateuristic-artificial props, unnatural acting, and shaky work of the hand-held camera. Moreover, the film is visually very strongly marked by its scenic designer, Serhii

⁹ Not only Adah Menken, but also Kate Vance, Leo Hudson, Fannie Louise Buckingham, and others (cf. Coleman: 67-71).

Iakutovych, who worked miracles indeed to give the film its visual impact.¹⁰ The spaces, within doors and without, in which the scenes from Mazepa's life are shown, are invariably furnished with paintings, statues, lavish decorations and frescoes on walls (the film's approximately last half hour shows how death approaches Mazepa, symbolised in an elaborate series of frescoes being drawn of his friends and foes).

Moreover, "the film was shot on 'Shostka' stock, so that the viewer cannot resist the visual sensation that he is watching a Soviet movie" (Kinopoisk 2008). What is meant here is the old Soviet 'Svema' film stock, produced in the Ukrainian town Shostka, which was used for most of the Soviet films. Illienko thus fits in with a trend among young Ukrainian film makers who from the beginning of the 2000s started to work with old Svema stock, the expiration date of which had passed, in order to deliberately 'defamiliarise' the viewing: *Prayer* shows the characteristic traits of the 'Svema aesthetics': "rain of dots and scratches, distorted brightness and contrast, bleak faded image texture and other spontaneous effects that otherwise could be taken for waste" (Radynski 2009).

The result, of course, is quite the opposite to the venerable epic distance you would want from a 'heroic' film. Its hero is likewise far from idealised: Mazepa is driven by lust for power, belief only in himself and last but not least insatiable sexual greed. No reason for Ukrainian national pride whatsoever.

Still, the film does not take the Russian side either—Peter is depicted as just as debauched, which is probably why in Russia Minister of Culture Mikhail Shvydkoi 'advised' not to sell or lend it. In fact, I think this film carefully avoids taking any side, expressing anyone's or even any viewpoint, not only literally by 'making its form (its viewing) difficult,' but also by immersing its details in a wealth of intertextual reminiscences; thereby stressing the fact that the 'Mazepa text' is a text with many authors, each with his own intentions, and that its subject cannot be represented neglecting that multiple intentionality.

Most of the principles of visual and intertextual metaphorisation are recognisable in the very beginning of the film, its first 8 or 10 minutes

¹⁰ When Bohdan Stupka praises the film for its stunning design, costumes, and background paintings, and calls Illienko a "Salvador Dali" for it (Stupka 2002), I think this compliment should have been directed to Iakutovych in the first place.

or so. Therefore an analysis of that segment may suffice to show the main devices characteristic for it. Let us start with the introductory titles.

We see a drawing of Europe as an old crone; between her legs lies a beautiful young woman who has a double body—one stretches to the West, the other to the East (figure 2.1). Then we read:

This old beauty, as a map of Europe, was created by me, Mazepa, for king Charles XII in May, 1709, before the Poltava battle. He had to understand where he found himself as a result of the Northern war with the Moscow Tsar... Kings and caesars, along with their armies, had crawled over this beauty for ages; one can hardly imagine anybody she did not give herself to until she grew old... Ukraine, as you can see, is in the epicenter of these encroachments... a sweet pubis of the old beauty... I, Mazepa, the hetman of Ukraine, have declared this sweet flower an independent state... and I was forever damned by the one who raped her...

These last words of course refer to Mazepa posthumously being anathemised by the Church on the orders of Peter; and the one who raped the young beauty/Ukraine is obviously Peter. Thus opens the film's main metaphor, that of state power as erotic in nature, and of Ukraine as a beautiful woman lusted for by state actors. The metaphor of the land as an attractive young woman is a very old one indeed, it was known in Classical Greek culture and even before that—when for instance the capture of a city could be metaphorised as a rape, a country without a

figure 2.1 Europe as an old crone with beautiful Ukraine between her legs

figure 2.2 Ukraine as a beautiful girl with Kyiv between her legs (Peter I in the background)

monarch could be called a “widow”, etc. Illienko may have thought of his main metaphor because the metaphorical representation of the Russian nation as a bride was so widely used especially in Russian literature. In the 19th and early 20th century, we witness a fierce competition for the role of Russia’s symbolical bridegroom between the representative of the *intelligentsia*, on the one hand, and authoritative older males representing the tsar, or state authority, on the other. It is here not the place to elaborate on this (see Brouwer 2003, Rutten 2010); it should, however, be mentioned that in Russian literature, images of other nations as a maiden coveted by a male Russia are present, as well. Examples include Evdokiia Rostopchina’s *Forced Marriage* (Nasil’nyi brak, 1845), on Russia’s oppression of Poland, Aleksandr Odoevskii’s *Georgia’s Marriage with the Russian Empire* (Brak Gruzii s russkim tsarstvom, 1838). This metaphorisation is well known in Ukrainian culture, too. Taras Shevchenko’s *Kateryna* from his eponymous poem (1838; cf. the famous painting he himself made after it in 1842) is easily read as symbolising Ukraine in love with but betrayed by Russia, her lover. Still in the same vein, Taras Polataiko’s project *Sleeping Beauty* (National Art Museum, Kyiv, 2012) was received as a symbol for Ukraine (Barton 2012).¹¹

¹¹ Interestingly, Semen Nadson wrote of Russia as a Sleeping Beauty still in 1881, in his *Fairy Tale of Spring* (Vesenniaia skazka).

In *Prayer*, the lovers that lust for this Ukraine-maiden are obviously Peter the Great and Mazepa himself—we recall the traditional image of Mazepa as a womaniser and seducer—and this theme will be present in the film continually.¹²

In the next picture—we are still in the titles—the old crone is already replaced by a young beauty, and between her legs, as her center of interest, we see a city, of course Kyiv, behind which looms the portrait of Peter (figure 2.2).

And then, in the first scenes of the film itself, we first see Mazepa—that is we see his effigy, on his tomb (figure 2.3). But he lies there in a very strange pose, almost the same pose the young girl had a moment ago in the titles: a classic pose of feminine erotic seduction, that at the same time retains something of the traditional resting pose of late Baroque tomb effigies. In the background of the scene we see a cardboard Peter on a horse, naked. Maybe Mazepa's pose on the tomb also reminds of the elegantly reclining pose in which he is usually depicted tied to his horse (especially the paintings by Chasseriau and by Vernet)—in which case there is an implicit visual rhyme with Peter on his horse (but sitting straight up) in the background. We may observe how Mazepa here acquires ambivalent sexual features—his pose is apparently meant to arouse the sexual appetite of men as well, in this case, obviously, of Peter. Indeed, in the first variant of the film Peter was shown penetrating a young Russian soldier (a scene that Illienko later deleted). Remnants of a possible homo-erotic attraction between Mazepa and Peter are recognisable much later in the film: for only a few seconds we are shown a life size drawing of Peter and Mazepa, both naked, behind a door that is opened (00.48.20; the portrait is ascribed to an "Italian artist named Sergio Jakutelli", obviously a play on Serhii Yakutovych, the set designer).

¹² See for another angle of approach to the film's overtly sexualised presentation of the will to power Romanets 2010.

figure 2.3 Mazepa's effigy on his tomb

However one wants to interpret this possible homo-erotic element, it would again underline the erotic impulse behind political power, and we see Mazepa and Peter united by it. As Michael Flier, the Oleksandr Potebnia professor of Ukrainian Philology at Harvard University, commented:

Using the conceit of the Mazepa-Peter dynamic Illienko sees them as reflections of each other, both narcissistic, intent on control and independence, driven to sweeping theatrical gestures, and acts of dominance and humiliation. The homoerotic leitmotif provides a vehicle to comment on the attraction between powerful men and the need for physical domination and humiliation to prove their vitality and their roles as leaders (quoted in: Shevchuk: 8).

At the same time, Mazepa's pose reminds of another image—understandably, only for those who are well acquainted with the image of Mazepa not only in Russian and Ukrainian as well as in Western European culture, but also with his 19th century American image. This is the image of Adah Menken on her famous photographs in her role as Mazepa (figure 2.4), which greatly enhances not only Mazepa's gender hybridity in the film, but also shows him from the very beginning not so

figure 2.4 Adah Menken as Mazepa

much as an historical figure, but as a ‘textual’ entity (in the broad sense, including pictures): not the man, but the myth is the real hero of this film.

Events then begin unfolding with a young Peter defiling Mazepa’s tomb in a church by demolishing his effigy and shouting: “Get up from the coffin! Stand up! I’ll show you independence!”¹³ Then Mazepa’s hand appears from under the tomb’s lid, grabs Peter by the throat, and Mazepa rises from the dead.

The scene of Mazepa coming to life after Peter’s attack on his statue carries a wealth of connotations. Read as a ‘statue coming to life,’ it reminds very much of a well known motif in Pushkin’s works, which was analysed in a famous essay by Roman Jakobson, ‘The Statue in Puškin’s Poetic Mythology’ (1975, original 1937). The essay is mainly (but not only) concerned with two Pushkin texts, *The Bronze Horseman* and *The Stone Guest*, in which statues come to life and stymie the male hero’s efforts to start a relationship with a beloved girl. Both texts are, of course, very relevant for our film. The first one is about Peter’s equestrian statue on Senate Square, Saint-Petersburg (remember that we see cardboard Peter on horseback in the back of the scene), which in an ambivalent way connects ‘Mazepa the victim of love tied on a horse’ with the theme of the

¹³ In that last sentence, spoken in Russian, the Ukrainian word for independence is used, obviously playing on the Russian dissatisfaction with Ukraine’s independence since 1991. The word alone gives the Peter-Mazepa plot a contemporary topicality.

‘equestrian statue of the menacing statesman and destroyer of love’. The images of Peter, as well as of Mazepa, as well as, later, of Charles XII as statesmen on horseback will repeatedly return in the film.

Simultaneously, Peter punishing the statue (for its striving for independence), after which the statue awakens and threatens him, reminds of the Commendatore’s statue from *The Stone Guest* coming to life after Don Juan’s scornful invitation. Reminding very much of the Statue’s words: “I have come answering your call” (Ia na zov iavilsia), Mazepa’s first words are: “You wanted me to get up, I got up.” The theme of rivalry between Don Juan and the Commendatore for Dona Anna turns into amorous rivalry—we recall here Mazepa’s love for his own god-child Motria. When he christens her in the film, he pronounces “it is as if I christen Ukraine here at my chest” (00.43.30), thus turning his erotic love for his country into an incestuous one, as well.

Thus with the help of several leitmotifs based on intertextual play with the core metaphor of state power as erotic dominance, the figures of Mazepa and Peter are denied their heroic status and shown as subject to lust-driven, dionysian irrationality. Moreover, the moving cardboard image of the rider and the horse introduce the theme of masquerade, artificiality, play, and stress the essential ‘quotedness’ of the characters in the film.

For reasons of space and proportion, we will not discuss the rest of the film in such detail as we have done with its first few minutes.

In a seemingly random order scenes are shown from Mazepa’s pre-Poltava period: Mazepa’s ride with Christian prisoners as slaves for the Crimean Khan, the Crimean campaigns of prince Golitsyn, the conflict with princess Sofia, the strelets rebellion, and several other intrigues. Kochubei is decapitated after denouncing Mazepa with Peter, his wife masturbates with his severed head. We see Mazepa being anathemised by Orthodox clergymen, his home town Baturyn sacked and many dead bodies floating by in a river, and then the battleground of Poltava (in this, reverse chronological, order). On this battleground there is only some fighting in the background, but a lot of dialogue between Mazepa and Peter at a large dining table, while Swedish king Charles now and then appears as well. Mazepa manages to outdrink Peter, so that he and Charles can escape after the Russian victory. Towards the end of the film, all Mazepa’s friends and foes gather for his funeral (that, it seems, has already taken place).

In the scenes that follow the opening, the resurrected Mazepa proposes Peter to remember “how it all started.” Peter has a nightmare in which he sees a rider on a horse reproaching him for building a town on ‘his’ swamp—again, of course, reminding *The Bronze Horseman*, in which the image of Saint-Petersburg having been built on a swamp as a defence against Sweden figures prominently. Much later in the film (01.17.30), this rider indeed appears to be Charles XII, who invites Peter to a banquet in honor of his victory over Ukraine at Poltava: the motif of the Commendatore’s statue being invited by Don Juan to a banquet is here reversed.

In the next scene, we return to a much earlier episode in Peter’s life: he is shown to flee from his sister Sofia (initially his attempt to depose her seems to fail) naked, on a horse, with his hands tied between his back. Of course, this depicts him in Mazepa’s position on the horse that we know so well from Voltaire, Byron, Géricault etc. Subsequently, it is Mazepa who helps him ascend the Russian throne (again a switch of roles: let us remember Hugo’s “et se relève roi!”).

In that very estranging scene, Mazepa very much resembles Peter, in particular as he is depicted in the well-known statue by Mikhail Shemiakin in the Peter and Paul fortress in Saint-Petersburg (revealed in 1991). Peter in his turn comes out from under a large puppet, which hides another small figure in which perhaps Peter’s brother (and co-tsar before Sofia’s banishment) Ivan may be recognised, with puppets in his hands. Peter takes over Mazepa’s boots, while Mazepa takes Peter’s place in the doll—the power of Russia and the Ukrainian Cossacks seem to be equal. The confusion is enhanced because in this scene, the roles of both Peter and Mazepa are performed by Viacheslav Dovzhenko and Bohdan Stupka, respectively, as well as two other actors. The mixing of actors showing both characters at different ages, old and young, will continue throughout the film.

Continuing the doll play, in the scene of Sofia’s deposition Peter tears off the testicles of her lover Golitsyn’s doll, who simultaneously is Sofia (s/he has a pronounced bosom), and of whom he says that s/he is a “horse with balls.” Later on (but earlier in chronology), in the scene where Mazepa is chosen, or rather pushed forward, as the new hetman, Sofia’s doll is present in a wheelchair as a kind of representative of her as Russia’s regent. That doll will sit with Mazepa at the table, armed with bow and

arrows, when he receives word that the old hetman Samoilovych has been deported to Siberia. It will also be presented as an image of Mazepa's approaching death, but then she will wear a bridal gown (old Sofia strangely converging with young Motria Kochubei).

Such games with dresses, dolls and masks will also be continued throughout the film. From 00.25.00, Mazepa, again played by different actors and donning different masks, says: "They say that I have many faces. They say that in youth I was galloped off on a horse to the steppe. That is not true, but it must have been a prophecy: after death I will always be a beautiful naked youth, galloping on the wild horse of lies and anathema." Furthermore, the events are often emphatically shown in their theatrical quality, for instance, in the scene beginning at 00.34.00, where a giant Baroque puppet theater, the famous Ukrainian 'vertep', has been built in open air. The theatre opens to show Ukraine, which is called a 'vertep of death'; Mazepa says that this is Poltava, the centre of the country "where there will never be a battle." Such examples could easily be multiplied.¹⁴

This film thus can impossibly be said to straightforwardly 'represent' something—events or characters—and give a certain 'perspective' on it. It plays with existing perspectives and points of view, and shows their equal distance from any historical episode and its political actors, the principal impossibility to 'explain' them, put them in their 'right' perspective or to even try to give a fixed interpretation. In the world of this film, only interpretations exist, the reality behind them is illusory, evasive.

The film thus seems to do exactly what Thomas Grob offers as an answer to his own question, when he ponders the possibilities of offering a Mazepa image in contemporary Ukrainian culture that would avoid

¹⁴ For instance, at 00.54.30, Motria saves herself after Poltava on a horse; this is followed by an amorous scene between her (or Liuba Kochubei) and Mazepa (alternately old and young), with the horse beside the bed. Mazepa is then seized by soldiers, sprinkled with tar and feathers and chased away on a horse; for a few seconds his horse is followed by a similar horse with a doll representing old Mazepa on it. Much later, at 01.40.00, we see the same horse and doll galloping through the fields, after Mazepa has fled from Poltava. He is then followed by Liuba Kochubei, one of his mistresses, who is clad like a Ukrainian warrior and coiffured with the typical 17th century Cossack forelock (oseledets), thus combining female and male traits and at the same time symbolising Ukraine as a warrior and as Mazepa's lover. Mazepa then says: "I have seduced my mother country with freedom and have left her unprotected against the tyrant" (01.44.00).

superficial nationalistic heroisation: “can one step around the myth-making factor?” (Grob 2008: 94). Grob suggests that the only way to do so would be that “one would recognise the history of writing history and narratives about Mazepa, acknowledging its essentially narrative character once again; that is, it is not merely a matter of re-historicising Mazepa but also the narratives shaping him” (ibidem). It is curious that Grob did not recognise these very qualities of Illienko’s film. He writes that *Prayer* is a “mystifying (and strongly anti-Russian) film (...), where the historical Mazepa is an inflated national figure serving as a backdrop for a mythified discourse on Ukrainian history” (ibidem). As will be clear, I could not disagree more with that last statement. In my analysis the film is an artistic recognition of just this “essentially narrative character” of Mazepa, every scene and every detail is focused on the ‘already-narrated’, ‘already-perspectivised’ nature of what is being shown. That it only rarely has been recognised as such is perhaps the fault of the film itself, with its relative unaccessibility and uncompromising ‘art house’ poetics. One can only hope that with time its approach will earn more recognition.

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