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Taras Shevchenko as Sakrum of Maidan: on values during the revolution

The revolutions and social upheavals generate specific forms of national spiritual culture. Maidan (Euromaidan) or the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, the armed confrontation to Russian aggression in the eastern Ukraine caused a kind of collective creativity flash of the Ukrainians. Poetic texts, posters, videos, which were broadcast primarily in the social networks, graffiti on the streets have become striking phenomena of mass culture.

Without a doubt, the phenomenon of Maidan can be examined from the point of view of various humanities disciplines: history, philology, political science, psychology, art, etc. For me, the Maidan is of interest primarily as a cultural phenomenon, as a kind of manifestation of the collective mass consciousness. Maidan here will be treated from the point of view of the methods that the researcher is provided with by anthropology and folklore studies.

Ukrainian folklorists have already drawn attention to the specifics of folk art in the age of revolution. Examples are the articles by Aleksandra Britsyna, Inna Golovakh, Elena Chebanyuk which are devoted to the First Maidan, or the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004¹. The specificity of the First Maidan is its carnival character, lack of tough confrontation

¹O. Britsyna, I. Golovakha, *Karnaval revolucii*, „Krytyka” 2005, no. 3(89); O. Chebanyuk, «Oranzhevaia revoliucija» v folklorie kievskih ploshchadej i ulic, [in:] *Rosija i Ukraina: etnopoliticheskie aspekty vzaimodejstvija*, Moskva 2007.

between protesters and security forces, determined the direction of the creative activity of the masses (the symbolism of the orange colour, the feeling of a person acquiring self-esteem and feeling a sense of unity with like-minded people). It is impossible not to take into account the fact that the form of broadcasting of socially important information has fundamentally changed within 10 years between the two Ukrainian revolutions. If the Ukrainians received information about the Orange Revolution primarily through the television broadcast of opposition channels, the leading news items during the second Maidan are taken from the Internet and such digital social networks as Facebook, becoming the main form of transference of political, cultural and socially important information. The proximity of the nature of messages' broadcast in the digital environment and traditional folk communication was highlighted by the Polish folklorist Violeta Krawczyk-Vasilevska:

Before our eyes, the digital culture is developing, which causes adequate and a different changes in various spheres of life of modern high- and medium-developed societies, as well as those societies that are approaching them. As the triumphal procession of "the technopolis" (a term by Neil Postman) continues, digital culture becomes a living laboratory of social sciences².

According to the researcher, e-culture, or already electronic folklore, can exist in two forms – verbal texts and visual information (pictures, cartoons, posters, etc.). Dynamism and rapid development of the digital culture at the moment add to the list video clips, the transmission of which also takes place according to the laws of folk communication, and which because of syncretic nature of broadcast material is able to make significant influence on the public consciousness. It is important to pay attention to one thing: the number of "reposts" and "likes", which become a separate message, is usually fixed in social networks, and it gives the opportunity to follow what information resonates with users.

The subject of this article will be the process of forming of national symbols during the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, which is directly related to the transformation of social and national values. At least two points require comments here. The first is my understanding of the concept of "value". Here I use the approach proposed by the Ukrainian historian Jaroslav Hrytsak. In order to understand what values are, it's needed to look at what they are opposed to. Values are not interests. Interests in society are always a subject of bargaining and compromise, while values are not

²V. Kravchuk-Wasilewska, *E-folklor jako zjawisko kultury digitalnej*, „Literatura Ludowa” 2008, no. 4–5, p. 26.

subject to compromise. Jaroslav Hrytsak believes that basic human values are self-identity and security³. Strictly speaking, Euromaidan itself arose as a consequence of violations of a Ukrainian's fundamental values: first, in the form of student opposition, there was a threat of self-identification with the European world, in opposition to the imposed identification with the Russian and Asian world. After students' beating in November 30, 2013 there was a threat to the feeling of security: the government showed signs of approaching dictatorship.

The second point, which requires comment, refers to my understanding of the revolutionary process as a factor that will completely change the consciousness of its participants. The behavior of the direct participants of the revolutionary process, as well as the people supporting the revolution, provides distinguished from the ordinary, ritualized behavior of its participants, and their actions contain signs of the so-called "altered state of consciousness"⁴. The peculiar features of altered states of consciousness characteristic of "the revolution" are the revision of the system of social, national, civic values, emotional lift, clear marking of significant events of the surrounding world according to the system of binary oppositions, the most important of which are the opposition friend / foe, positive / negative, future / past, increase of the participants' in the revolutionary events creative potential.

What are the semantic transformations of the social values system that occurred during Euromaidan? First of all, it is the negation of the existing power structure. The President, the guarantor of the Constitution and sovereignty of Ukraine, loses legitimacy in the eyes of a significant part of its citizens. And since the legal procedures of impeachment are not possible, the forms of humiliation and ridicule at the head of the state by way of cultural means appear.

One of the most popular at the beginning of the revolutionary events in Ukraine was the music video "Vitya, ciao!"⁵. The musical basis for this video was the song of Italian partisans of World War II era "Bella, ciao!" ("Farewell, my beauty!"). The symbolic humiliation of President Yanukovich is achieved by using both text and the selected video sequence. The first frame of the clip is wet, drenched by rain President. The head of the vertical power is not only shown in ridiculous and absurd form (jumping on the stumps, dancing funnily), his "antistatus" in the eyes of the par-

³ J. Hrytsak, *Zhytt' a, smert' ta inshi nepryjemnosti (statti ta esei)*, Kyiv 2010.

⁴ W.I. Kharitonowa, *Zagovorno-zaklinatelnoe iskusstvo vostochnykh slavian: problemy tradicyonnykh interpretatsij i vozmozhnosti sovremennykh issledovanij*, Moskva 1999.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s38DhbDJWj> [access: 20.02.2015].

ticipants in the revolutionary process is emphasized in the footage showing the movement of Yanukovych in the reversed direction, “hammering” him in the earth by fir wreath falling over the President during the laying ceremony, slamming doors of the Varhovnoy Rada building in the face on the day of his inauguration. Confrontation participants are presented in the video with clear hierarchical and ethical characteristics. On the one hand, the representatives of the state are endowed with the authority and unlimited powers, depicted as the forces of darkness (police beating protesters, prosecutors overstepping the demonstrators lying on the steps (the event “you stop short at the law, then you stop short at us”), subordinates kissing the ring of the ruler (behavioral marker of the Italian mafia). On the other hand, the result of this power: the female students beaten, a bloodied journalist, imprisoned protesters. In opposition to the acts of “old” authority and social “downtrodden” Yanukovych “sprouts” of something new appear in the music video: a girl, wrapped in the flag of Ukraine, young people gathering under the flags of the European Union and the Polish resistance movement “Solidarity”, artifacts of Euromaidan: national flags of Ukraine, construction helmets, the piano painted in yellow and blue colors.

Another folklore way of the existing government’s social status humiliation demonstrates the performance of participants in civil confrontation on the stage of Maidan⁶. Girls performing on stage (one of them is the famous Ukrainian writer and public figure, Irena Karpa) use the traditional Carpathian folk genre kolomyjka. Kolomyjka is an improvisational genre capable of updating content using traditional melodies.

На Майдані я була з Європрапорцями –
 За Європу голосую руками й ногами.
 [...]

 На Майдані я була – маю в нього віру,
 Бо в Європі хоч жити, а не у Сибіру⁷.

Most of the performed from the stage of Maidan kolomyjkas are devoted to ridicule and humiliate the serving President Yanukovych. The main artistic device used here is aposiopesis when the text involves the use of obscene word, guessed by the audience and is replaced in the performance by a neutral word. The same word-play is used by the authors of satirical posters of Yanukovych.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vee3dzsz1Mg> [access: 20.02.2015].

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vee3dzsz1Mg> [access: 20.02.2015].

The humiliation of the President, the denial and destruction of the power structure require the construction of personal system of values, where a worthy object, causing respect and reverence would occupy the place of the sacred peak of the power hierarchy. It is significant that the participants of the protest movement used the national anthem and the national flag of Ukraine very actively. Commenting on the phenomenon of widespread use of the national anthem and the flag by the protesters, one of the Facebook bloggers wrote that if the government uses force to those carrying the national flag and singing the national anthem, then this power occupational.

In addition to the use of state symbols as revolutionary symbols the society feels the need for the man who would become the leader and symbol of the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity. Unfortunately, neither the Ukrainian opposition nor the protest movement has generated a single leader, the need for which the Ukrainian society felt so acutely. However, the need to give the symbol of the revolution human traits was so strong that it caused the search for a leader, if not in the present, then in the past. Taras Shevchenko became one of the symbols of the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity. I will try to demonstrate the basic forms and aspects of the use of Taras Shevchenko's image and poetic text, as well as to determine the pragmatics of the phenomenon under investigation. Two forms of embodiment of the Shevchenko phenomenon appear to us the most expressively in the studied material. These are a portrait of Taras Shevchenko and poetic words of the great Kobzar. According to the recollections of the residents of Kyiv, Taras Shevchenko's portrait first appeared on the walls of the Kiev city hall at the beginning of the protest movement, in December 2013. This portrait replaced the image of Stepan Bandera, who did not become a consolidating national symbol.

The artifact of the Revolution becomes not just the portrait of Shevchenko, but Maidan creates its Shevchenko, placing Kobzar's portrait in the most unusual modern contexts: Shevchenko on the Grushevsky street in the city center on fire, Shevchenko with a Molotov cocktail in his hand, Shevchenko with a bat, with a car tire on the shoulder (the protesters in the city center were burning tires).

One of the messages which the creators are trying to convey to the recipient, is the modernity of Shevchenko, his "refinement" in the context of the modern society. So Shevchenko appears in the image of Elvis Presley or Shevchenko-Buddha. Shevchenko is shown like Che Guevara on one of the portraits, and respectively his name is interpreted as She Vchenko. The first



Shevchenko as Che Guevara



Shevchenko with a tire on the Grushevsky street in Kyiv

syllable She becomes the like Che, causing the association with the legendary Latin American revolutionary.

“Shevchenko the Doer” becomes one of the variants of the image: the poet carries a tire on the Grushevsky street, resets Lenin monument from the pedestal, that is personally trying to change the country. Even a hundred-hryvnya note which depicts Shevchenko gets the revolutionary interpretation. The face of Sergei Nigoyan, one of the heroes of Maidan, emerges instead of the Kobzar’s portrait.

The photo of Independence Square at night, where you can see the features of Shevchenko’s portrait requires special interpretation. The story of the appearance of the face of the Holy Virgin is the famous legendary story of Ukrainian folklore. Epiphany denoted a certain, special, holy place, around which a kind of sacred center is formed, pilgrimage to the holy places are made. Epiphany or Theophany as a phenomenon of spiritual culture is considered in details by Mircea Eliade⁸. Folk legend treats Epiphany as absolutely positive symbol that gives hope, liberation and salvation. It is obvious that by following this logic, Maidan, the sacral center of the Ukrainian state, must become a place of occurrence of the main national symbols and sacred object, the Great Kobzar, and his appearance must give hope for a miraculous salvation, liberation, the embodiment of Taras’ covenants. It is appropriate to recall that of the same value is for Ukrainians the belief about the appearance on Maidan of the Archangel Michael, who, according to folk beliefs, defended people on Maidan in the hardest night of 18 to 19 February during the confrontation with the security forces.

The use of Great Kobzar’s poetic lines was a specific phenomenon of spiritual culture of Maidan. The lyrical lines, written just about two centuries ago, not only became relevant to our times, but also turned out to be a kind of a revolutionary program, a guide to action.

The portrait of Shevchenko in balaclava with the inscription that recreates almost exactly the line from the poem “Hamalia” was one of the most popular: “Вогонь запеклих не пече”. This poster appeared in the network after “Вогняного Водохреща” (“Fiery Baptism”), at the beginning of the confrontation between protesters and security forces on the Grushevsky street.

Folklore as a sensitive barometer of social attitudes accurately reflects the true attitude to a particular literary classics and his works. Classics are assumed to make parody on, treating them a little ironically because

⁸ M. Eliade, *Sviashchenn'e i myrs'ke; Mify, snovydyn' a, misterii; Mefistofel' i androgin; Okulyzm, vorozhbystvo ta kulturni upodobann'a*, transl. G. Korian, W. Sachna, Kyiv 2001.



Taras Shevchenko Face on Maidan



of a consequence of excessively zealous advocacy of classical works. The folklore of Ukrainian students, for example, gives examples of parody of Shevchenko's "Заповіт" ("Will"):

Як умру, то поховайте мене край дороги,
Алгебру й геометрію положіть у ноги.
(Folklore record of Oksana Labashchuk)

"Заповіт" starts with the following lines:

Як умру, то поховайте
Мене на могилі
Серед степу широкого
На Вкраїні милій...

Such treatment of the classical canonical text, its transference from high to low style are typical of the folk tradition. The revolutionary interpretation of the Word saves a sense of high register in the reading of Shevchenko's poetry. The classic's lines suddenly become urgent and in tune with the revolutionary reality. Moreover, they are a direct guide to action, showing the Ukraine's path of renewal. In this case, the "Kobzar's" lines can be defined as a precedent text confirming the importance of what has been said to all the bearers of certain cultural traditions.

Shevchenko articulates the concern for Ukraine's future, says about his own involvement in the fate of his native land in the lines used by the creators of the revolutionary poster. Actually millions of Ukrainians felt themselves personally involved in what was happening in the country at that moment:

Та неоднаково мені,
Як Україну злії люде
Присплять, лукаві, і в огні
Її, окраденую, збудять...
Ох, не однаково мені.
У казематі

Some Taras Shevchenko's lines, used in the revolutionary poster, sound like revolutionary slogans and direct guide to action:

Борітеся – поборете!
Вам Бог помагає!
За вас правда, за вас слава
І воля святая!

Кавказ
 Свою Україну любить,
 Любить її... Во время люте,
 В остатню тяжкую минуту
 За неї Господа молить.
У казематі

One feels that the lines from “Kobzar” became for Ukrainians a kind of “Holy Scripture”, the text in which people search for the answers to the most burning issues of our time, look for the same emotions that they feel themselves, look for spiritual support and reassurance:

Окрадені, замучені,
 В путах умираєм,
 Не молилось чужим богам,
 А Тебе благаєм:
 Поможи нам, ізбави нас
 Вражої наруги,
 Поборов Ти першу силу,
 Побори ж і другу,
 Ще лютішу!..
Давидові псалми

The appearance of the Great Kobzar’s poetry and his portrait in the form of graffiti on the walls, writings on cars is the evidence to the sense of involvement of his poetic lines with the events that Ukrainians had to endure during the Revolution.



At one time Gregory Grabovich very accurately determined that it is Shevchenko who was the creator of Ukrainian national myth. During the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity Shevchenko himself becomes a mythological character. His personality, his word, image take sacred significance. Simultaneously there is a way of modernizing the classic. It seems that the poet can be found on Maidan or Grushevsky street. Remarkable poetic lines of “Kobzar” are in tune with modernity, become the verbal form of the feelings and emotions that arise in man caught in a whirlwind of revolution.

Oksana Labashchuk

Taras Shevchenko as Sakrum of Maidan: on values during the revolution

During the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity the reassessment of social and cultural values is taking place. The current president, the government, the law enforcement agencies are subjected to pillory and humiliation by means of mass culture. At the same time, a new sakrum, i.e. symbols and values that embody the revolutionary ideals, is formed. One of the main symbols of the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity is the Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko. Protesters use the portrait of Shevchenko and the poetic lines from his book “Kobzar”. The image of Shevchenko is sacralized, his poetry takes the functions of the Holy Script, the poet is seen as our contemporary. The forms of transference of the revolutionary creativity are posters, videos, which are broadcast in electronic form, as well as graffiti on the cities' streets.