

Cyborg Image in Modern Ukrainian Media Discourse: Strategies of Representation, Hybridisation and Mediatisation

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Abstract

This essay explores the hybrid portrayal of the cyborg figure in contemporary Ukrainian media. By 2014–15, defenders of Donetsk airport in eastern Ukraine were dubbed “cyborgs” due to their resilience, bravery, and near-invincibility. To honour their bravery, early photo exhibitions were organised, books chronicling their deeds were published, and later documentaries were produced. The mediatization of the cyborg image continues to develop. This concept has shifted from technological origins to a literary and cinematic symbol. In Ukrainian media discourse today, it represents the unwavering spirit of Ukrainian soldiers and the nation. The research aims to uncover the hybrid structure and the strategies involved in the representation and mediatization of the cyborg image across various Ukrainian media spheres. The article analyses the emergence and development of the hero–defender motif within the context of the Russian–Ukrainian war. Multiple media forms depict heroes: films, news reports, government websites, comics, social advertising, and more. The warrior image is merged with references to a Cossack (a Ukrainian national hero), a modern brave soldier, the national poet Taras Shevchenko, a cyborg, among others. It is demonstrated that through strategies of militarisation, hybridisation, and emotional framing, the cyborg figure has become a core element of the sociocultural landscape. The selected photographs and media portrayals illustrate the comprehensive concept of the Ukrainian warrior–cyborg and its depiction in contemporary Ukrainian media.

Keywords: *representation, mediatization, cyborg image, hybrid image, Ukrainian media discourse.*

Introduction

In the context of the armed conflict, the image of the cyborg has been a familiar figure in Ukrainian cultural and media spaces since 2014. The background of representing different forms of human–machine synthesis (cyborgs, robots, androids, etc.) in modern socio–cultural contexts is highly diverse and multifaceted. In today’s era of technologisation, digitalisation, and mediatization of social and cultural practices, it is important to assess “the

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potential benefits and risks of the ongoing convergence between human nature and advanced technology” (Baeva 2018: 138). Most scholars attribute the popularity of the cyborg image to the factors mentioned above. Our research, based on Ukrainian media materials, indicates that the current socio-political situation significantly influences the transformation of cinematic images and intensifies their mediatization.

To develop a comprehensive scientific framework for analysing the role of the cyborg concept in Ukrainian cultural and media discourse, it is essential to integrate concepts from text theory, cultural and media studies, and comparative and discourse analysis. Through this theoretical lens, the article examines selected media highlighting the evolution of the cyborg image from cinematic, artistic, and mythologised origins to a modern media concept and active agent of Ukrainian resistance.

Recent scholarship on the cyborg phenomenon reveals a broad spectrum of interpretations across social sciences and humanities, as well as advances in bioengineering, information technology, and philosophical and cultural perspectives. It prompts questions about human identity, consciousness, ethics, and the future of humanity.

Our study examines, firstly, the concept of the cyborg as the fusion of mechanical devices with biological organisms, driven by progress in bioengineering and information technology (Baeva n.d.; Dan n.d.; Rohrschneider 2022). Secondly, we explore its interpretations through various philosophical perspectives, such as organology, phenomenology, and anthropology, which debate whether cybernetic organisms are harmonious wholes or unstable couplings (Hoquet 2018; Singh et al. 2023; Whitehead & Wesch 2012).

The research is based on a cultural view of the cyborg image in mass culture, including cinema and video games, as this perspective emphasises its impact on public perception and its role in legitimising it within consumer consciousness (Carmichael-Murphy 2024; Earle 2024; Rheeder n.d.; Schofield 2018; Thomas 2015). A new direction in the study of the cyborg phenomenon is its examination from a new media perspective (Erbenraut 2024; Ng, Robertson and Carley 2024; Søråa 2017) – specifically, how the cyborg image is interpreted and utilised by bloggers and professional communicators. Recently, the study of cyborgisation has evolved into a new branch of cross-disciplinary research, merging biotechnology, nanotechnology, cybernetics, medicine, anthropology, sociology, philosophy and even theology.

Our contribution considers the work of previous researchers, delves into the semantic expansion of the cyborg concept, and articulates how it is represented in Ukrainian culture and media within the current historical stage. Thus, this paper aims to reveal recent strategies of representation,

hybridisation, and mediatization of the cyborg image in the Ukrainian press over the last decade, in the context of cultural, social, and political changes.

The origin of the cyborg image in media: the cinematic dimension

The concept of the cyborg, as a being with both organic and biomechatronic body parts, was introduced in 1960 by Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline. They presented the term in their article "Cyborgs and Space", published in *Astronautics* magazine. However, the idea of a human-machine hybrid had appeared in science fiction long before 1960. It featured in novels by Edgar Allan Poe, Edmond Hamilton, C.L. Moore, and others since the 19th century.

Transformed from an engineering concept into a literary symbol, "the figure of the cyborg has enthralled film and television audiences, critics and academic theorists alike for over half a century" (Thomas 2015: 57). Consequently, it has played an active role in shaping new ideas and storylines in cinema. The image of the 'cyberhero' became widespread throughout the 20th century and remains relevant today in addressing the challenges of modern society. The cyborg filmography of the past century includes numerous films across various genres. Thus, a complex and evolving image of the cyborg has emerged, expanding from cinema to other media in the 21st century.

Film analysis shows that cyborgs were depicted in a wider variety of roles beyond soldiers or villains, saviours or attackers. This included law enforcement (e.g., *RoboCop* sequels), couriers with data implants (e.g., *Johnny Mnemonic*), and even more ambiguous figures (e.g., *Alita and the Terminator*). Motivations became more complex, exploring personal struggles, the desire for enhancement, or being tools of larger organisations or future conflicts. In summary, the cyborg in the 1990s and 2000s evolved into a more nuanced and multifaceted character, often used to explore complex themes about humanity, technology, and the future.

In Ukrainian culture and media, the shaping of this image began with the film 'Cyborgs. Heroes Don't Die,' directed by Akhtem Seitablaev. The story is set over a two-week duty at the airport of a battalion in 2014. A volunteer group first arrives at a hot spot that the Ukrainian military has been defending for four months and encounters the harsh realities of war. Subsequently, not only professional military personnel but also volunteer corps are tasked with protecting the airport. As this film was characterised by public opinion and the State Agency of Ukraine for Cinema, "this clash, an unconditional challenge to the whole world, becomes the beginning of the formation of a new self-identification of Ukrainian citizens" (State Agency of Ukraine for Cinema 2018). Researchers describe the movie:

It is one of the Ukrainian war films that merits critical attention as an astute record of conspicuous social transformations in today's Ukraine. As a medium that presents an original perspective on the hybrid nature of modern war and its mediatization, the latter being a relatively new theme in war films broadly defined (Ladygina 2022: 105).

Image A shows the stills of cyborgs from the film about the defence of the Donetsk airport during the war in eastern Ukraine. The combination of artistic and realistic elements allows us to present the indomitability of the heroes, underlined by their firm gaze, 'iron' posture, and steadfastness.



Image A. Ukrainian cyborg-soldiers from the film "Cyborgs"

| © espresso.tv.

To outline the specifics of the cyborg image in the film, let us quote the words of researcher Ladygina (2022: 117), who emphasises

The hybrid nature of his cyborgs is revealed through the glaring differences in their ages, cultural backgrounds, social status, ideological views, and preferred languages of communication. Yet, for all their apparent diversity and multiculturalism, and their occasional outbreaks of intolerance, the devotion of Seitablaiev's cyborgs to duty and shared political ideals supersedes any social and cultural differences. In one of his interviews, Seitablaiev points out that the cyborgs' esprit de corps and far-reaching desire to persevere in the war for the sake of reconstructing Ukraine as a free and democratically oriented country constitute the film's central premise. That is why the filmmaker notes that Cyborgs' main actions take place not on the battlefield but in the characters' hearts and minds (Ladygina 2022: 117).

To honour Ukrainian cyborgs' exploits, the first photographic exhibitions were organised, books were published about their achievements, and later documentaries and feature films were produced. The mediatization of the cyborg image continues and includes both culture (films, books, art) and media discourse (news, official government websites, comics, social advertising, etc.).

Ukrainian cyborg as a hybrid image: historical allusions in modern media

The cyborg concept has been actively permeating Ukrainian mass media discourse since 2014. In Ukraine's current socio-political climate, especially amid full-scale aggression, this image takes on new characteristics. It is conceptually redefined and dynamically transformed into a complex mediatized idea. Nevertheless, under the challenging and threatening conditions of war, national memory activates the mythological, folk, and historical background of the Ukrainian superhero.

We can see how different media strategies blend to portray heroes: the image of a warrior is combined with those of a Cossack (Ukrainian national hero), a modern brave soldier, the national poet Taras Shevchenko, a superhero, and others. We suggest examining these examples of hybridisation of the cyborg image step by step.

From a historical, diachronic perspective, the signs of the cyborg image and its origin can be traced to the image of a Cossack – a Ukrainian warrior-defender from the 15th to 18th centuries. Traditionally, the artistic image of a Cossack includes the following features: a Cossack is a free, courageous, and brave individual, independent of official authorities, a defender of Ukraine and the Orthodox faith, and a warrior and worker. In Ukrainian artistic practices from the 18th to the 20th centuries, the use of the Cossack image strengthened the national idea. The concept of the Cossack played a significant role in shaping the era's moral standards.

'Ancient Ukrainian cyborgs' – Cossacks, according to folk legends, possessed certain super abilities: "the unique ability of warriors to control their emotions and demonstrate extraordinary fortitude in emergencies, to achieve a special state of invulnerability to weapons, to perceive the thoughts and moods of the enemy, to copy the behaviour of animals, to reincarnate" (Pyrogoва 2009: 6).

In current Ukrainian media discourse—in news reports and on the websites of state authorities—we can observe photos of modern heroes in real time, which echo images of Cossacks. The function of event images on news sites is to popularise military exploits, promote patriotic propaganda, and foster fighting spirit. Some news reports are visualised with the help of photos with deep historical connotations – image B. In the first photo, there is an allusion to Ilya Repin's famous painting "The Cossacks write a letter to the Turkish Sultan." Ukrainian soldiers' poses, facial expressions, and gestures accurately reflect the artist's original and thanks to this, the photo conveys the current political context.



Image B. Ukrainian military transformed the famous painting “The Cossacks write a letter to the Turkish Sultan” by Ilya Ripyn (1891) | © Facebook

So, the allusion to the image of a Cossack is based on the same common features as the cyborg: courage, determination, indomitability, and a willingness to defend the homeland and the people.

One more background image of a Ukrainian cyborg is the poet-patriot Taras Shevchenko, the most famous Ukrainian writer. In Ukrainian media over the last decade, one can encounter images that merge the image of a cyborg with that of Taras Shevchenko. This hybrid image of a warrior-poet is shown in picture C. Such an allusion helps to synthesise patriotism, fighting spirit, and traditional symbols. In the photo, several symbols demonstrate the synthesis of the present and the past: traditional oak leaves, poppies, swords, the modern Ukrainian flag, weapons, and an aeroplane.



Image C. “Shevchenko as a Prophet” | © zp.gov.ua
| © ukrinform.ua/tag-inomovlenna

The hybrid heroic image of Shevchenko, combining folk symbols (T. Shevchenko with a musket, poppies, and a sabre) and military attributes (clothes, bullets, and weapons), carries a patriotic appeal. The visual representation of the poet creates a new cultural concept of the poet-cyborg and evokes analogies with the heroism of modern warriors.

Representation of Ukrainian cyborgs in comics

Current Ukrainian media also show hybrid signs of portraying the image of the cyberhero in comics. Comic books are becoming more popular in Ukraine, as many publishers and organisers of the Comic festival have observed. That's why more and more interesting Ukrainian comic books about superheroes are appearing on bookstore shelves every year. The authors understand that citizenship begins in childhood, so most comics have a patriotic theme.

In 2015, the first national comic book, "Ukrainian Superheroes," was published. The idea came from Bukovyna writer Lesia Voroniuk, and the illustrations were created by artist Sofia Rozumenko. The creators produced a series of stories that resonate with current events in Ukraine. Real Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers served as the prototypes for the comic characters. For example, in the first issue, the heroes must save a lark, a symbol of Ukraine that brings the sun every day. If they fail, eternal darkness will ensue.

The comic story features four main characters. Kobzar embodies a modern man, representing a strong-minded leader who, despite his flaws, can read people's thoughts. Dill is a cheerful, witty character who heals using herbs. Cyborg symbolises an indomitable warrior, inspired by one of the men who died at the Donetsk airport. Vera is a volunteer girl. The authors have succeeded in creating superheroes that are both contemporary and rooted in Ukrainian origins. The comic became very popular immediately after its release.

The visualisation of heroic deeds through the comics genre is attractive and easy to understand. The Image D shows prototypes of warriors from the east of Ukraine (Cyborg, Dill, female warrior Vira and indomitable Kobzar) using Cossack symbols and stylistics.



Image D.

"Ukrainian Superheroes" and "Guardians of the Country"
| © life.pravda.com.ua

In the summer of 2017, the 4th issue of the graphic novel series "Guardians of the Country" was published, centred on the history of Crimea's occupation. The comic features 7 characters, and the story revolves around the struggle for

the main artefact – a peaceful sky. In this narrative, Ukraine is portrayed as one of the key centres of global geopolitics, crucial for maintaining balance and peace. In an interview, the author of the texts, Ihor Rohovyi, pointed out that the main difference between the Guardians superheroes is that they primarily rely on their intelligence, followed by weapons and superpowers. They are comic book superheroes: Kiy is the operational leader, the heart and mind of the team; Khoriv is the group commander from the Ministry of Defence; Shchek is a young prodigy and computer genius; and Lybid is a super-fighter girl. The story also includes characters from the Crimean Tatar community.

Another series of comic books was launched on the Cyborgs Facebook page at the initiative of the NGO “Faithful to Traditions”. Founded in 2016 to counter Russian aggression, the organisation has released a series of comics telling the story of the heroic defenders of Donetsk airport, the Cyborgs. The comics were created by young Ukrainian artists who work closely with experienced warriors and consult with them to portray the characters as accurately as possible.

Cyborg photo comics can be exciting and entertaining, offering stories of adventure, combat, and science fiction. They capture readers’ imaginations and immerse them in a world where humans and machines coexist. Different genres and styles of cyborg photo comics can suit the tastes of various readers. These media primarily serve educational, patriotic, and aesthetic purposes.

Comics as a means of socially and patriotically oriented visual imagery can be observed in the media of authorities. For example, the Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration, on Valentine’s Day in 2022, published several visual messages on their Telegram channel, creating the image of a warrior-superhero under the slogan “Love is...” The primary stylistic tool used in these comics is analogy. It allows a comparison between the image of a warrior and that of love, portraying the cyborg as a loving man. In this context, the concept of the superhero is constructed through comics in celebration of the day dedicated to love. In the media, there are also photographic illustrations that interpret feelings through a military lens. Photo comics help forge an emotional bond with the target audience by sharing heartfelt stories about cyborgs that can inspire and motivate individuals. This strategy promotes the image of a warrior and challenges myths and prejudices.

Advertising media as promoters of the cyberhero and warrior image

The use of cyborg imagery in advertising has been studied since the 2000s by N. Campbell (2010), I. Roderick (2013), U. Suhud et al. (2024), and others. Specifically, the visual depictions of technologised bodies in advertisements, mainly commercials, were examined. N. Campbell stated that the cyber body in advertising “emerges not as a mere tool that humans use, but a repository

for human fears, fantasies, and desires; a distinct and powerful aesthetic that has evolved over time” (Campbell 2010: 1).

Since the start of the full-scale invasion, debates have persisted in Ukrainian media about the appropriateness of using war and patriotism themes in commercial advertising. Some refer to it as “war hype”. In 2023, the Ukrainian Parliament considered a draft law on the inadmissibility of exploiting war themes in commercial advertising. Therefore, during wartime in Ukraine, images of cyborgs and warriors are mainly utilised in social advertising. As we can observe,

Today, the social and communicative situation in Ukraine is highly complex, and social advertising has undergone significant changes: it is primarily devoted to advertising on patriotic and military topics, in particular, aimed at drawing attention to the Ukrainian army, its needs, role and importance for the society and fighting for the victory of Ukraine. Social and patriotic advertising contribute to the development of a high level of national patriotism, as well as awareness of the role of national unity in overcoming the enemy. The main means of conveying information in the texts of socio-patriotic advertising is the verbal part, that is, the text, in an inextricable combination with the visual part of the announcement’ (Zelins’ka 2022: 16).

Advertising is part of the military forces’ overall image strategy. The informational and educational role of advertising media enhances the authority of soldiers, emphasising the importance of the Armed Forces as a key component in maintaining national security and protecting the rights of servicemen. Effective advertising media are centred around a clearly articulated patriotic narrative. This task guides the selection of imagery, its implementation process, and the methods of realisation. Modern advertising acts as a powerful tool for promoting social projects, with communication models becoming a vital factor in achieving these aims.

Advertisements featuring images of Ukrainian soldiers attract attention, as vivid visuals, metaphors, emotional appeals, puns, and unexpected plot twists engage viewers and draw their attention to the advertising message. Artistic techniques create an emotional bond and evoke specific feelings in the audience: joy, sadness, compassion, and admiration. These methods make advertising messages more interesting and informative. For example, similes, metaphors, analogies, and rhetorical questions, as well as appeals to authority, can be employed to strengthen arguments. Patriotic advertising motivates action by invoking the image of an invincible, relentless soldier in the mind. The perception of a comprehensive image is syncretic; it does not follow formal logic but instead relies on the imperative of thought. The strategy of mythmaking is often used to endow a symbol with a

meaningful image, surrounding it with a halo of mystery, mysticism, or magical power that can transform it and bestow new qualities.

Many social actions related to the military are paired with advertising campaigns. For instance, on 29 October 2023, Nova Poshta (New Post) organised the World's Longest Marathon, a large charity race to show support and appreciation for Ukrainian heroes fighting for victory. For this expansive campaign, they employed online advertising with the slogan 'Pack the sky – pump the air defence'. The 'common platform' technology brought people together around a shared idea. The launch of a charity sportswear line called 'Don't Stop' served as a strong call to action. Such advertising efforts help create a positive image of a warrior, including fostering an objective and favourable perception in the minds of the public.

Informing society about the needs of soldiers: this area focuses on highlighting topical issues related to soldiers' lives and functioning. This helps society better understand the military's role and tasks, and increases trust in them. Since 2014, thousands of defenders of Ukraine and their families have received access to special discounts on food, non-food products and services of various kinds, including medical, household and sports and entertainment services, thanks to the 'I Am Veteran' social card (image E).



Image E. Social card “I am a veteran” and Advertising “I believe in the AFU (Armed Forces of Ukraine)” | © zp.gov.ua

Image E is an example of social advertising. It was shown at the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The photo of a warrior appeared in the media and depicted a hero who symbolically looks towards the future and encourages trust in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Because of the repeated use of this photo, local media were able to foster a positive attitude towards the soldiers and the resilience of the Ukrainian people.

Advertising tools that shape the image of Ukrainian heroes aim to create an appealing portrayal of soldiers and contract service among potential volunteers. This is achieved by highlighting the military's priorities and responsibilities. The dissemination of patriotic and military-related advertising materials focusing on the Ukrainian army, its tasks, and its role in the nation's life signifies a rise in patriotism within Ukraine. This phenomenon also reflects the revival of core values, including the concept of national unity. Advertising aims to foster a sense of patriotism and responsibility for the country's future, encouraging participation in fundraising efforts and donations.

Thus, advertising tools influence the target audience by associating the image of a cyborg with historical background, positive emotions, values, or events, making it more appealing and emotionally resonant. The advertising media emphasises the popularity of the warrior image and encourages people to join the majority and feel part of the country.

Conclusions

In this essay, we examined the hybrid structure, representation strategies, and the mediatization of the cyborg image across various spheres of Ukrainian media discourse. In summary, contemporary depictions of cyborgs in media are more complex and nuanced than those of the 20th century. The cyborg concept of the 2010s–2020s encompasses a wide range of topics, from technological possibilities and profound philosophical questions about human nature and the future of our species in conjunction with technology, to national-patriotic interpretations within the context of the modern war in Ukraine. The influence of popular franchises on the perception of the cyborg image remains, but modern works often offer original and unexpected interpretations. The Ukrainian film "Cyborgs. Heroes Don't Die" (2014) sparked the push for new cyborg representations.

Modern Ukrainian media discourse analysis allowed us to identify the main strategies of representation and mediatization of the cyborg image:

- militarisation – Ukrainian cyborg appears as a hero-warrior, who fearlessly defends his homeland.
- hybridisation with the images of a Cossack and the most famous Ukrainian poet, Taras Shevchenko, as a result of the search for historical allusions and parallels.
- accentuation in advertising on the visual images and emotional interpretation of patriotic feelings to create positive emotions and values.

In comics, the cyborg concept serves to create socially and patriotically themed visual images. Comics are often utilised by authorities' media as a means of supporting social actions related to military forces. Additionally,

cyborg photo comics are highly popular among young audiences due to their stories of adventure, combat, and science fiction, offering an exciting and entertaining style.

Thus, in modern Ukrainian cultural space, the cyborg image is depicted in media as a hybrid mediatized symbol of indestructibility, invincibility, and the fighting spirit of Ukrainian soldiers and the nation as a whole.

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