



Redressing a Lacuna in the Historical Record: Mazepa

Andrea Liu

About the Author

Andrea Liu is a NYC/Berlin-based visual art & performance critic and artist. She was Curator of Counterhegemony: Art in Social Context (fellowship program for visual artists) and received her undergrad education from Yale. She has written art criticism for Afterimage, ArtMargins, e-flux, Social Text, New Museum Social Practice Glossary, Movement Research Journal and catalogue/exhibition essays for visual artists Georgia Sagri (Deste Foundation), Kandis Williams (Soft Colony), Aditya Mandayam (Kunstverein Munich Companion Series) & Bob Gramsma (Edition Fink).

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Since Russia's war in Ukraine in February 2022, institutions of visual art have attempted to take on a reparative role in the cultural sphere by elevating Ukrainian artists and multiplying opportunities and visibility for them—and by dedicating entire exhibitions solely to Ukraine and/or Ukrainian artists. In 2022, Berlin's Goethe-Institut held an exhibition of only Ukrainian artists, *In Exile*. In 2023, three other European museums held similar exhibitions: the Grand Palais Immersif in Paris, with *Ukraine: A Year of Resilience, a Culture of*

Resistance; the Bode-Museum in Berlin, with *Timeless Contemporary Ukrainian Art in Times of War*; and the Atrium Gallery in London, with *The Heart of War: Ukrainian resilience and resistance through art*.

Amidst this landscape, the second iteration of the Kyiv Perennial came to Berlin in February 2025—a sprawling exhibition of Ukrainian artists at nGbK (neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst), Between Bridges, and Prater Galerie. Perhaps the most intriguing work in the exhibition was the moving image project shown on a giant life-size screen in a pitch-black room at Between Bridges, *The Battle Over Mazepa*, by Berlin-based Ukrainian artist Mykola Ridnyi. This film was propelled by the unexpected, robust juxtaposition of two disparate, unlikely entities: rap performance as a personal expression of polemics and historical contestation, wedded to conflicting legends of Ivan Mazepa (1639–1709), a seventeenth-century political leader of Ukraine whose anti-hero yarn eventually came to symbolize the undercurrent of mutual distrust in the Russian-Ukrainian historic encounter. Once a close ally of Russia's Tsar Peter I, Mazepa later defected to join Russia's enemy, Sweden's King Charles XII, at the battle of Poltava in 1709. Russia vanquished Sweden at Poltava, inaugurating an era in which Russia was a global power. The rappers in Ridnyi's film take shards of two conflicting portrayals of Mazepa—Pushkin's poem "Poltava" (1829), which castigated Mazepa as a vicious traitor and a decrepit old man, and Lord Byron's poem "Mazeppa" (1819), which breathlessly romanticized Mazepa being tied to a wild galloping horse in his virile youth—and set them against one another. The performance is structured by six rounds of "rap battles," with two pairs of opposing rappers (one male, one female) rapping on clusters of topics. (Prior to the performance, topics from the two poems were whittled down in Ridnyi's workshop with all four rappers, led by Professor Susan Straetling.)

The film opens portentously with the disembodied sound of stomping feet and a pitch-black screen, the one-note dissonant blare of a trombone, and eventually, a whisper of a clock ticking. Two rappers—Ellie (a feisty spoken-word artist from London with a literary flair to her rapping) versus Moh (a rapper from Sudan)—begin riffing on how the Russian Orthodox Church issued an anathema against Mazepa for his betrayal of Tsar Peter I in 1709. Throughout Ellie and Moh's three rounds, the aim of each rapper seems to be to paint the persona represented by the other rapper as repulsively as possible. Ellie channels Mazepa's disgust for the territorial expansionism of Peter I when she raps, "But when I awake I often hear/ The stomps of Peter Tsar, He is near/ To grab the borderless lands/ With his greedy perverted hands." There is a surreal aspect to watching twenty-first-century hip-hop artists—with their underground street personas, bandanas, and cut-off T-shirts—weave intricate rap verses about a seventeenth-century Ukrainian leader who rebelled against Russia's Peter the Great. The piece ambitiously amalgamates cultural translation, genre translation, temporal translation, and verbal translation. It is intriguing to witness how rap music's quintessential social mores of self-mythologization and adversarial bravado are utilized so fittingly to convey the Pushkin-Byron rivalry.

The last three rounds of the "rap battle" feature a new pair: Caxxianne (a hip-hop artist from the Cayman Islands) and Exo (a rapper from Romania). This pair is a more successful

collaboration, as Caxxianne is the most convincing of the four as a rapper, imbuing her rapping with a succulent reggae lilt at times. Her raps and Exo's wrap around each other, as they alternate sentence by sentence, whereas the first pair did blocks of monologues that did not dovetail so intricately. In both pairs, the female rapper subtly dominates and is a stronger performer/ writer than the male rapper. Is it a coincidence then that in both pairs, the female rapper represents or advocates for Mazepa's point of view, against the Tsar of Russia?



Figure 1

The Battle Over Mazepa. Video by Mykola Ridnyi, 2023 (20 minutes). Film still courtesy of the artist.

The duality of Mazepa's historical persona (villain versus hero) is what allows for this transposition of his story into a "rap battle" paradigm of two adversarial rappers. There is not only a duality, but also a plasticity, to the historical persona of Mazepa. First introduced to the West by Voltaire's book *Histoire de Charles XII* (1726), Mazepa sprouted into an intergenerational muse for over 300 works of art, literature, and music, such as Victor Hugo's poetry collection *Les Orientales* (1828) and Franz Liszt's opera *Mazeppa* (1854). Like a chimera, Mazepa morphed from a persecuted lover, to an orientalized hero tied to a wild horse in the exoticized land of Ukraine, to a disgraced villain who betrayed Russia during this period—depending on the author. As Koznarsky observes, "Mazepa is imprinted upon the identity of Ukrainians both from within as a stigma, and from the outside—as a curse. Note that the terrible name 'Mazepa' was not used as a curse by Ukrainians, but was applied to Ukrainians by Russians as an ethnic label implying perfidy, stubbornness, and an inclination to treason."¹ To a degree, Ukrainians were expected to ritualistically perform public renunciation of Mazepa under the imperial gaze.²

But in the aftermath of Ukraine's independence as a nation in 1991, Ukrainian nationalist movements reclaimed Mazepa as a symbol of national integrity and historical agency. (This is perhaps analogous to how the word "queer" was once used to denigrate gays, but was later reclaimed by the gay liberation movement as a moniker of pride.) In Mykola Ridnyi's artist talk on *The Battle Over Mazepa* at Pushkin House in 2024, he expressed his ethical and political ambitions for the film, lamenting that "Mazepa has been shaped by two gazes which are not Ukrainian" and that "Mazepa [has been made into] a symbol of Ukraine without the


¹ Taras Koznarsky, "Obsessions with Mazepa," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 31, No. 1/4 (2009–2010): 588, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41756516>.

² Koznarsky, "Obsessions," 601.

participation of Ukraine.³ To redress this elision in the historical record, Ridnyi puts great faith in the art form of rap/ hip hop, where highly stylized rituals of competition are the vehicle through which community is fostered. In *The Battle Over Mazepa*, this community consisted of roughly a dozen rap fans in their twenties, standing in attentive silence around the two battling rappers. In Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, "organic intellectuals" come largely from the working class and articulate the politics of their class, as opposed to the fossilized, detached figures comprising "traditional intellectuals."⁴ The four rhyming rappers of Ridnyi's film can be likened to "organic intellectuals"; they use hip hop as an auto-didactic discursive framework through which to dissect, refute, affirm, or skewer multifarious aspects of the two Mazepa poems, thereby creating an intertextual, polyphonic re-evaluation of the legend of Mazepa.

³ Mykola Ridnyi, *Artist Talk: Mykola Ridnyi in Conversation with Professor Susanne Strätling*, moderated by Dr. Maria Chehonadskih, posted October 13, 2024 by Pushkin House, London, UK, Youtube video, 37:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmMsmL-UuGU>.

⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. & trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, International Publishers, 1971.

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