Book Reviews

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Mitja VELIKONJA, *Ukrainian Vignettes Essays on a Culture at War. Translated by Sonja Benčina*, Los Angeles: DoppelHouse Press, 2025

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Introduction

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has generated vast scholarly, journalistic and artistic responses worldwide. However, relatively few works have examined the war in the cultural context – the daily realities of conflict. In this context, *Ukrainian Vignettes: Essays on a Culture at War* by Mitja Velikonja emerges as a timely and essential contribution. It explores how war permeates cultural forms, identities and practices. M. Velikonja describes his approach as "barefoot culturology", a reflexive auto-ethnographic approach grounded in lived experience, observation and dialogue with Ukrainian academics, artists and citizens.

The emergence of Mitja Velikonja's *Ukrainian Vignettes* marks a significant methodological intervention in cultural studies, particularly in contemporary conflict analysis. As a Professor of Cultural Studies and head of the University of Ljubljana's Center for Cultural and Religious Studies, Velikonja applies a specialised conceptual framework to the Russian-Ukrainian War. The work is positioned as an "anti-war book". Through ten interconnected "vignettes", Velikonja explores the "schizophrenic atmosphere" of a society striving to maintain a normal routine amid abnormal conditions, offering an analysis of

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how conflict reshapes the symbolic and material realities of everyday life.

Authorial Perspective and Historical Consciousness

Velikonja's lifelong engagement with nationalism, collective memory, and cultural transformation – particularly in the post-Yugoslav region – shapes the insights and sensitivities evident in *Ukrainian Vignettes*. His awareness of war's cultural consequences is grounded in personal experience: the disintegration of Yugoslavia. This background leads him to recognise immediate parallels between the 1990s Balkans and Ukraine today, including economic collapse, propaganda, militarisation, and the politics of history.

These connections do not simplify Ukraine's reality but rather illuminate recurring post-socialist vulnerabilities. To understand how these insights shape the book's structure, it is helpful to examine the genre choices and methodological approach underpinning his analysis.

Hybrid Genre and Structural Design of the Book

The book does not conform to conventional academic genres. Instead, it combines ethnographic fieldwork, travelogue storytelling, photographic documentation, and cultural theory. Structurally, the book comprises ten thematic essays – from "Cities of War" and "Politics of War" to "Voices of War" and "Consequences of War" – described as "ten circles of hell" in contemporary Ukraine, a metaphor underscoring the severity and complexity of war's cultural impact.

One of the book's defining features is its fragmentary structure. Each vignette functions as an independent analytical unit while contributing to a cumulative understanding of Ukrainian reality. This form reflects the fragmented nature of wartime experience and social disruption, reinforcing the book's thematic coherence through form.

Another significant feature is the emphasis on symbolism and everyday semiotics: monuments, language choices, public rituals, humour, and informal interactions are treated as meaningful cultural texts. Velikonja shows how ordinary practices become sites for negotiating resistance, memory, and identity. His reflexive authorial voice – explicitly acknowledging his role as an external observer – adds transparency and ethical awareness to the analysis (Mishalova, 2024, p. 78).

Notably, the book avoids simplistic representations of Ukraine. Instead, it challenges stereotypical narratives by portraying Ukraine as a complex cultural space shaped by historical layers, regional diversity, and active civic agency.

This hybrid form allows the author to move smoothly between lived scenes – chatting with Ukrainian students amid air-raid alarms – and critical reflections on nationalism or visual culture. This approach lays the foundation for his central argument: that war constitutes not merely a political crisis but a total cultural condition (Mishalova, 2021, p. 201).

Methodological Framework: Heretical Empiricism and Barefoot Culturology

The academic foundation of *Ukrainian Vignettes* rests on Velikonja's adherence to "heretical empiricism", a concept popularised by Pier Paolo Pasolini. This approach allows for the coexistence of the researcher as a participant-observer who experiences the reality of the investigation and the researcher as a critic who contemplates these experiences through an introspective critical lens (Pasolini, 2005). The author identifies his work as "barefoot culturology", a term that denotes a departure from detached academic inquiry in favour of first-hand, immediate and unfiltered experience as a primary source of motivation and analysis. This methodology is particularly relevant in war zones, where official narratives often obscure the "people's perspective".

A critical feature of this methodology is the rejection of "exoticization" and "essentialization" (Velikonja, 2025, p. 11). Velikonja employs his own "post-Yugoslav perspective", drawing

on the historical memory of Yugoslavia's disintegration to identify structural analogies in the current Ukrainian conflict. This comparative approach allows an analysis in which ethno-politics is viewed not as an inherent cause of conflict but as a consequence of practical interests and strategic geopolitical objectives (Velikonja, 2020).

Velikonja's analysis of the Ukrainian urban landscape reveals a "Brechtian" interruption of illusion, where two radically exclusive realities – peace and war – clash at every step. In cities such as Kyiv, the researcher observes a deceptive pulse of springtime life: students in bars, children on playgrounds, and street musicians providing entertainment. However, this "giant lie" is punctured by the mandatory curfew, sirens that "regularly pierce the dark silence", and the presence of "patrols of men... armed to their teeth". This duality creates a state of permanent psychological tension, where the "blossoming May days amalgamated with emergency calls Mayday-Mayday-Mayday" (Velikonja, 2025, p. 22).

The urban semiotics documented in the book highlight the physical manifestation of the "war drive". Monuments are transformed into sandbagged "stalagmites", and windows are reinforced with Sellotape to mitigate the impact of explosions. M. Velikonja notes the precision (or lack thereof) of modern warfare, where a hit on a skyscraper such as the Samsung building in Kyiv remains a "unique monument" to the city's vulnerability. The cities under review – Kyiv, Odesa, Lviv, and Uzhhorod – each represent a specific manifestation of this wartime "normality" (Velikonja, 2025).

To facilitate a more systematic examination of the urban transformations documented in *Ukrainian Vignettes*, it is necessary to summarise the key symbolic and psychological markers observed across the essays. This comparative framework illustrates local manifestations of the "war mode" and the specific cultural artefacts repurposed to enhance civilian resilience.

Table 1: Urban Profiles and Symbolic Observations

City	Symbolic Observations and Infrastructure	Psychological/Atmospheric Note
Kyiv	"Ghost of Kyiv" mural, sandbagged statues, undercover security presence.	Schizophrenic coexistences of spring and sirens.
Odesa	Closed Potemkin Stairs, anti-tank "dragon's teeth", "Odesa air in cans".	Tense suspicion of "saboteurs".
Lviv	Coffee capital and famous chocolate bars.	Ageing elegance; most "Central European" of Ukrainian towns.
Uzhhorod	Safely behind the Carpathians, "Goriziana Caffè", military police roundups.	A harbour for thousands of people running from battle zones.
Mykolaiv	Damaged university buildings, "dark souvenirs" of rocket wings.	Ominously empty wide streets; frontline exposure.

It clearly highlights the wartime reality of life in Ukrainian cities. The contrast between Odesa's stressful atmosphere and Lviv's historical stability shows that war is felt differently in different places. This spectrum of experience is dictated by proximity to the fighting, which governs the intersection of peace and violence. By showing these urban differences, the author opens a deeper investigation into the materialist pressures that define the conflict's duality.

Culture as Resistance and Survival

Velikonja shows that war is not confined to battlefields; it infiltrates everyday spaces, emotions and cultural expression. Public life in Kyiv illustrates this contradiction vividly: cafés are lively in the sunshine, while nights are filled with explosions and sirens. Life and

death coexist in what he describes as a "schizophrenic atmosphere" where joy and terror constantly collide (Velikonja, 2025, p. 23).

Because violence is omnipresent, culture becomes not merely a reflection of war but one of its battlegrounds. This leads the author directly to his next major focus: the role of culture as a form of resistance.

Despite devastation, Ukrainians persist in creating, teaching, performing, and living. The author emphasises that cultural production is not escapism. Instead, it is a direct response to war – a restoration of human dignity. He highlights examples such as hybrid university classes, children's dance performances, activist murals, and literature that confronts trauma. The accounts cited by the author maintain that:

"Art is our weapon."

"Writing contradicts death."

"Culture is the shield of our identity" (Velikonja, 2025, p. 40).

Thus, cultural resistance is not only symbolic; it is existential. However, asserting culture also sparks profound debates about identity and nationalism.

Velikonja integrates:

- Ethnographic field notes based on travel across Kyiv, Odesa, Lviv, Uzhhorod, Mykolaiv, Drohobych, etc.
- Photographic documentation, which he insists must be read alongside the text as "visual sketches" of war-altered reality
- Dialogues with Ukrainian academics, artists, cultural workers, and ordinary citizens
- Theoretical commentary drawing on Pasolini, Howard Zinn, semiotics, and memory studies.

His commitment to ambivalence – being both inside and outside – aligns with Pier Paolo Pasolini's concept of "heretical empiricism", in which lived experience and analytical distance coexist in productive tension (Pasolini, 2005).

The Political Economy of Conflict: Neoliberalism and the "Nearby War"

A profound insight in *Ukrainian Vignettes* is the critique of the "Ukrainian transition", which Velikonja frames as an internal war between the rich and the poor, coinciding with external Russian aggression. The author argues that the current state of emergency has enabled a radical redistribution of power, in which "crony capitalism at its worst" continues to flourish under the cover of patriotic fervour. This "legal robbery", often euphemistically called privatisation, has resulted in a society in which the population has declined from 51 million at the end of socialism to approximately 37 million in 2024, with a significant percentage living below the poverty line.

Velikonja identifies a symbiotic relationship between neoliberalism and ethno-nationalism: the former creates class divisions that the latter ideologically justifies through "tribal inwardness". In urban settings, this manifests as criminal activity disguised as patriotism – for example, the demolition of protected historic buildings to make way for office blocks, justified by patriotic billboards. The author argues that "nationalism hides poverty", noting that the more severe the material deprivation, the larger the national flags become, serving as psychological compensation for the "pauperised masses" (Velikonja, 2025, p. 81).

Ideological Contestation: Between Imperialism and Ethno-Nationalism

The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war has intensified long-standing ideological struggles in Eastern Europe, transforming political narratives and symbolic identities into active instruments of conflict. Cultural space has become a strategic arena where competing visions of history, legitimacy and national belonging are continually produced and contested. In this context, Ukrainian nationhood is not simply defended on the battlefield but reaffirmed through processes of reinterpretation, purification and resistance in

the realms of culture and collective memory (Mishalova, 2021, p. 205).

Mitja Velikonja approaches these developments with careful analytical distance. Rather than reducing the conflict to a binary of "aggressor" and "victim", he examines how ideological responses to invasion reshape internal social dynamics. His work highlights the growing interplay between efforts to undermine imperial cultural dominance and the parallel resurgence of ethnically framed nationalism within Ukraine. This dual movement reveals a complex ideological landscape in which the pursuit of self-determination coexists with the risk of narrowing national narratives.

In examining this ideological argument, Velikonja emphasises that war produces not only material destruction but also profound shifts in the symbolic order. Historical figures are re-evaluated, cultural markers are removed or reimagined, and public discourse becomes charged with urgency and moral clarity. These transformations illuminate how Ukraine, while resisting external domination, is simultaneously renegotiating the boundaries of its identity, community, and political values. The resulting tensions constitute one of the most challenging and intellectually revealing dimensions of Ukraine's wartime cultural change – a transformation that Velikonja urges readers to witness critically rather than accept unconditionally (Jenkins, 2014).

This is evident in one of his essays, "Ideologies of War". Velikonja examines the struggle between Great-Russian imperialism and Ukrainian (counter-)nationalism. He carefully dissects the Russian justification for the "special military operation" – framed as "de-Nazification" and "de-militarisation" – as a self-fulfilling prophecy. By attacking, Russia has ensured a much higher degree of militarisation and the rise of radical nationalist sentiments within Ukraine. However, the author maintains a "critically unrelenting" attitude towards Ukrainian nationalism, refusing to offer blind adherence even as he takes the side of the victims (Velikonja, 2025, p. 92).

The author examines the controversial rehabilitation of historical figures such as Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych,

noting how their images have been transformed into "recognisable symbols of anti-Russian resistance", akin to Che Guevara T-shirts, despite their proven historical collaboration with fascism. He further analyses the phenomenon of "Pushkinopad" – the systematic removal of Russian cultural markers – as a form of cultural decolonisation that risks erasing the nuanced layers of history. Velikonja warns that the "pendulum effect" of nationalist retaliation can lead to new injustices, reminding readers that "he who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster" (Velikonja, 2025, p. 119).

Semiotics of Consumption: Everyday Life as a Battlefield

In *Ukrainian Vignettes*, Mitja Velikonja examines this cultural reconfiguration through a semiotic lens, showing how consumption becomes a medium through which individuals interpret and perform belonging. His exploration of the everyday reveals not merely a civilian response to crisis but an assertive cultural strategy: the production of a shared narrative in which survival and patriotism are visibly intertwined. As public space and market goods adopt visual and rhetorical cues of wartime defiance, the line between resistance and routine dissolves. What once belonged to the domain of private life now participates in the collective struggle.

In Chapter V, "Everyday Lives of War", the author presents the symbolic transformation of consumer culture into a battleground for identity, showing how an ordinary material environment acquired extraordinary national significance in wartime Ukraine. He observes that war has "usurped every area of social and private life", becoming a "Zeitgeist" evident on inner and outer walls, in commercials, and even in food. Particularly revealing is what he describes as the "street theatre" of fashion, in which clothing becomes a wearable declaration of collective defiance. T-shirts featuring "All will be Ukraine" motifs, "Ghost of Kyiv" imagery, and "Be Brave Like Ukraine" slogans have become the standard urban uniform. In this context, clothing evolves from personal style into ideological performance (Velikonja, 2025, p. 130).

This consumer patriotism extends to the most ordinary material objects, blurring the boundaries between politics and daily life:

- Food and hygiene products: ice-cream packaging encouraging citizens to "Be Brave"
- Children's culture: plush toys of the Patron mine-detection dog and picture books celebrating the sinking of Russian warships
- Urban infrastructure: fences, benches and flowerpots painted in the national blue-and-yellow palette.

Taken together, these "visual sketches" form what the author interprets as a self-defensive cultural mechanism. The nation sustains itself by transforming everyday consumption into continuous acts of symbolic resistance. Here, national consciousness is not only expressed in speeches or military actions but also felt, worn, eaten and played with. He notes the paradox of "neo-traditionalism" – the reactivation or even reinvention of an idealised past to reinforce present unity. The renewed prominence of the *vyshyvanka* – simultaneously a fashion item and a political emblem – exemplifies this phenomenon. Although rooted in folklore, it now functions as a dynamic tool of identity politics, blending heritage with ideological mobilisation. In this chapter, the author reveals that everyday life is never neutral in wartime. Markets, streets, homes – all become battlegrounds where national meaning is produced, contested and consumed (Velikonja, 2025, p. 129).

Academic and Intellectual Resilience: The University as a Battlefield

While the material and commercial spheres reveal how resistance becomes embedded in everyday consumption, the struggle for Ukraine's future is fought just as intensely within its intellectual institutions. Universities, research centres, and publishing communities have emerged as key arenas where national identity is debated, reconstructed, and defended against both physical destruction and ideological erasure. In wartime, education

is not merely a system of knowledge transmission – it becomes a form of cultural continuity, a refusal to allow violence to suspend the nation's intellectual agency.

The author critiques the "linguistic politics" of the academic world, noting the ongoing minimisation of the Russian language – a process he links to similar shifts in post-socialist Slovenia. He identifies a significant "historical revisionism" within the curricula, where "old demons" of WWII leaders are being reinstated in textbooks (Velikonja, 2025, p. 160). However, he also praises the resilience of the academic publishing industry, noting the high professional standards of Odesa publishers, who managed to produce high-quality books despite the noise of diesel generators and power outages.

Geopolitical Projections: The "Korean Script" and Permanent Conflict

Having examined how Ukraine sustains its cultural and intellectual life amid violence, the author now turns to the horizon of the conflict: its long-term consequences for society once the immediate fighting subsides. If universities, markets, and city streets reveal how war permeates the present, the question that inevitably follows concerns what kind of future such conditions are shaping. Cultural resilience, while powerful, does not erase the psychological, political and social upheavals generated by prolonged war. The transformation of national narratives, identity structures, and everyday practices raises urgent questions about how a post-war Ukraine will cope with the legacies of militarisation and trauma.

In the final chapters, the author moves from observation to projection, considering the "Consequences of War". He posits that the conflict has reached a "stalemate" or a "war of attrition", in which neither side can achieve a decisive breakthrough. He introduces the "Korean script" as a likely future – a permanent ceasefire without a formal peace treaty, characterised by a fragile balance on a knife-edge. This scenario implies long-term militarisation of society and the continuation of "culture wars" long after the weapons are silenced.

Velikonja's outlook on the future of current events is pessimistic. He warns that a "great national disappointment" could follow the war, potentially leading to even more radical leadership if the promises of the "Revolution of Dignity" are not met. The author's conclusion reflects the "spectateur engagé" position: he remains critical of the power structures while maintaining profound empathy for the "regular people who are the only real victims of war" (Velikonja, 2025, p. 37).

Conclusion

Ukrainian Vignettes is a benchmark for applying cultural studies to the "bloody serious stuff" of modern warfare. Its distinctive features – illustrations and photographs accompany each essay, some taken by the author himself, the "barefoot" methodology, and the author's unique post-Yugoslav comparative framework – distinguish it from many geopolitical analyses that currently dominate the market. Velikonja succeeds in "breaking stereotypes" and refusing to create "new illusions", providing a frank, often unpleasant look at the "ten circles of hell" that constitute today's Ukraine. In comparison with other scholarly works on war and culture, the book complements macro-level historical and political analyses by foregrounding micro-level cultural dynamics. Its emphasis on everyday resistance and symbolisation aligns with a growing scholarly interest in cultural resilience in conflict zones, offering a model for analysing other contexts where war reshapes public culture.

Consequently, Mitja Velikonja's *Ukrainian Vignettes* offers a compelling, culturally grounded chronicle of Ukraine's war-shaped public life. Through its hybrid form – combining ethnographic attention, cultural interpretation, photographic documentation and reflexive sensibility – the book deepens academic understanding of how war permeates everyday life. It is recommended for scholars and students of cultural sociology, visual anthropology, memory studies, Eastern European studies, and war and society research. The work also has broader value for

educators and general readers seeking nuanced, human-centred perspectives on contemporary Ukraine beyond conventional geopolitical narratives.

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