

AN OBSERVATIONAL STUDY OF  
UKRAINIAN MAIL ORDER BRIDES

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UKRAINIAN MAIL ORDER BRIDES

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This thesis is a study of the representations of Ukrainian “mail order brides” over the Internet via personal profiles from a broker agency that specializes in the marriages of Ukrainian women and foreign men.

In exploring the women as both objects of consumption in an international economic market and as individuals who are exhibiting their own power and control in a historically patriarchal society, I am analyzing the profiles and photographic representations of Ukrainian women through a catalog of found portraits and profile text.

By creating a book of photography and text, I am recreating the very personal experience of seeing and searching through pages of women who are both exotic products to choose from and persons with whom to connect. And with the idea that these women are performing for a desired and targeted audience, the book is visual effort to embody the written portion of this thesis that explores the Ukrainian woman’s control.

The examination of the profile text is directly influenced by post-Structuralist theorists who considered the context and authority of language as dependent on the context of its setting and circumstance. This is especially important because of the historical repression of Ukraine, a country that has only seen national independence and identity for twenty years after centuries of war, border conflicts and Soviet control. Queer and feminist theory is also an essential part of this thesis when examining the exhibition of gender performance, emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity.



## **On Ukraine**

Ukraine, like most Eastern European countries, has many influences due to a long history of war and territorial conflicts. Roughly the size of Texas, Ukraine shares its 233,090 square miles of borderland with six different countries. Bordering the Northwest is Hungary, Slovakia and Poland and with Romania and Moldova bordering the South and West territory. The Northeast and Eastern portion of the country is bordered by Russia. The South is largely coastline at 1,729 miles.

The origin of the name Ukraine is disputed. First seen in the fifteenth-century text of the Hypatian Codex – a three-story chronology of the eleventh and twelfth-century of Kievan Rus' people – *Ukraina* is mentioned throughout the early era. “Someone else’s borderland” or simply “land” and “principality” all come up as possible meanings in regard to the etymology of Ukraine in context of the Hypatian Codex.

The widely accepted theory is that the name of the country is derived from the term *Ukraina*, Russian for “borderland, frontier region, marches” (Vasmer, 1950.) Contemporary Russian parallels this with the word *okraina* meaning ‘outskirts.’ However depending on some nationalist theorists, Ukraine is derived from the same word *Ukraina* to mean ‘region, principality, country’ from another meaning of the word \*kraj-, namely ‘to cut’—as that is, ‘the land someone carved out for themselves.’

Ukraine officially became an independent country in 1991 after being controlled for majority of the century by the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union. Independence, while long awaited, was perhaps ill prepared for. After centuries of domestic and relational ties with Russia, Ukraine was still dependent on Russia in many ways including relying on Russia as its energy and gas source.

Although there has been a push in the last twenty years to form a more culturally connected republic and restore the moral traditions of Ukraine, Russia has held an underlying and subtle dominance of the social consciousness. According to their first official census in 2001, the Russian language is native for over 14,273,000 Ukrainian citizens (29.3% of the total population) despite Ukrainian being the official language of Ukraine since 1989. In 2004, the Kiev International Sociology Institute conducted a public opinion poll on the number of people using the Russian language in their home. The polled number actually showed far more of the population using Russian on a daily basis than was earlier considered by the official census. According to the survey, 43-46% of the country declared Russian as their native language.

The conflicts of language politics are deeply rooted in Ukraine's history of largely being seen as the farming and peasant country. Where Russian was considered the *lingua franca* and the language of culture, education and commerce, Ukrainian was the low language of the people in rural villages. Also because there is no established and formal version of the Ukrainian language, there are disputes over correct pronunciations and intermixing of Russian phonetics throughout Ukraine. (Bilaniuk, 2003) There has been and continues to be a struggle over social authority. Language politics serve as a metaphor of Ukraine's struggle with identity and national direction.

### **On Ukrainian Women**

Since its independence, Ukraine has enforced the Ukrainization policy. In an effort to diminish the previous Russification, Polonization and Rumanization policies of various parts of Ukraine throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Ukrainization enforces Ukrainian culture in all aspects of public life, including education, media and publishing,

government and religion. In its return to its own culture, Ukraine is desiring to re-root itself in its traditional Eastern European traditions but also desires to grasp a more globalist, Western position in the established international market.

In the return to traditionalism, “women are seen as responsible for maintaining linguistic and cultural traditions” as well as having to “first liberate the nation before liberating themselves.” (Bilaniuk, 2003; Rubchak, 1996). Because speaking Ukrainian and teaching Ukrainian culture first begins in the home, Ukrainian women have the added domestic sensibility to bear children and carry on “the moral spirit of the Ukrainian people in order to save and preserve the nation.” (Rubchak, 1996.)

Ukraine, in spite of its history of communist ideologies of gender equality, is still a patriarchal society. While Soviet notions of women working to the best of their ability outside of the home linger, Ukrainian women are still expected to maintain care for their husbands, bear children and manage their domestic duties. Employers are reluctant to hire women due to a long-standing generous maternity leave policy and now women are seen as holding down an even weaker position of the labor market due to the post-Soviet economic crisis. (Bilaniuk, 2003; Rubchak, 1996; Pavlychko, 1996.) There is a dominant culture of objectification and exploitation of women, “with pornographic materials abundantly visible, job ads explicitly specifying physical traits and requiring lack of sexual inhibitions and no recourse against sexual harassment at work.” (Bilaniuk, 2003.)

This national effort to put pressure on women to return to a traditional ideology of a “woman’s place” make the ideals of femininity especially important and these ideals are in evidence as the women first introduce themselves to their western audience in the Kiev Connection’s profiles.

## On Fantasy and Gender Sensibility

“Now, take everything you know about dating and throw it away. After a few days, you guys are going to become like American women! A woman you would have killed to have lunch with back in the U.S., she'll be wanting to go out with you, but you'll start noticing little faults—her ankles are too big, you don't like the shape of her earlobes. And you will throw her back, because you have so many choices.”

Shyly, slyly, hopefully, the men around the table smiled; these damaged guys, so desperate to believe.

*Kristoffer Garin*

In December 2005, a newlywed, American journalist went undercover as a bachelor on a search for a Ukrainian bride. The “hunt” as he called it, is commonly referred to as a tour by foreign agencies that facilitate and broker marriages between Western males and women from war torn, third-world countries. The American journalist Kristoffer Garin published his account of the two-week tour in *Harpers* magazine in June 2006. Observing the American men in his article, *A Foreign Affair: On The Great Ukrainian Bride Hunt*, Garin noted that the participating males were promised by their tour guide, “Dan the Man”, that Ukrainian women are first and foremost “not American women...they do not care about your age, looks, or money.” (Garin, 2006.) In return for the four thousand dollar price tag, the men were to expect an agenda and the endless possibilities of “dating like an American woman.”

The first day of the two-week tour, the undercover journalist took note of the participants who were all there, he assured the reader, for one reason: because they had in some way failed or rather, were failures. The first order of business was introductions – names and occupation given. They ranged from lawyer to farmer to real estate investor. His own identity concealed, he explained that as a young man in advertising he was “just here to see what happens.”



A Foreign Affair, the American agency that promoted the tour, handled all the plans that included several “socials” or banquet parties during the two-week period. Overall, with about ten to fifteen men in attendance, the agency invited all the Ukrainian women from their databanks that numbered in the hundreds to the comparative handful of visiting Western men. A Foreign Affair was looking to introduce as many eligible women as possible.

The first social is telling, though; Garin describes what these women are wearing, how they’re acting and what little English they’re pretending to understand. The women feigned interest in the most banal aspects of the westerner – his local grocery store or x-rays of dental work for instance. Next to the men in business suits, blazers or American flag t-shirts, the women were separated by Garin into categories: the demure and outrageous. The demure, he noted, were the older ones in evening attire, business suits or simply slacks and sweaters. Younger women were dressed “in the Ukrainian manner...miniskirts, fishnet stockings...high-heeled boots, ruffles, sequins.” Garin saw how several members of the group who had expressed interest in a companion went straight to the women less than half their age who, while eye-catching, were not interested in leaving Ukraine.

Was the fantasy of being desired enough to throw these men off track of their original intent, their four thousand dollar reason for being in Ukraine in the first place? Garin described the men’s conversations as the tour comes to its end and the idea of marriage becomes too much of a reality for the men who wanted it in the first place. Ultimately a remark from orientation confirms the suspicions that the Western men were trained to see the Ukrainian women as an idea more so than reality.

“A few of the tour veterans—or “repeat offenders,” as one jokingly called himself—began to dispense advice. Some had been on as many as five of these trips before; at least two had brought home fiancées in the past, though they hadn't actually married. They promised that we, too, would surely become repeat offenders once we saw what was in store. “Remember,” said one silver-haired gent in a well-cut suit and polo shirt, “they've only been liberated for ten years. They're going through a social and sexual revolution like we went through in the 1970s.”

The expectation and initial fantasy was that suddenly they would be surrounded by endless options of beautiful and interested women. The men, however, were let down after the first social because the anticipated control was false. The men that set up dates were stood up, “demoralized”, shocked by what Garin calls “innocent opportunism” of the woman in it for the free champagne or practice of their English skills. Garin briefly mentions the men’s analysis of “money girls” among the group – the women who didn’t take gypsy cabs and ordered the most expensive entrée at the local Applebees – the Ukrainian women, the American men thought, were not supposed to use them like American women.

### **Reconsidering the Gaze Within The Profiles**

Intersecting media studies and psychoanalysis framework in her pivotal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey puts forward gaze theory, according to which the exchange of observer and observed, women are always object or image for the sexual or visual appetite of the audience. Are the Ukrainian women then the

direct object of sexual desire at first glance? In such a moment, where one is virtually absent or in person rendered incommunicable, is the power always to the male viewer? The *scopophilia*, or pleasure of looking at woman as image, “at the extreme it can become fixated into a perversion...whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified sense.” (Mulvey, 413.)

The full profiles of the website KievConnections.com contain three images, body and self-descriptions, location, language proficiency and the descriptions and age range of their desired partner. In the databank, the searcher can comb through pages and pages of picture thumbnails with name, height, weight and age of the females with profiles. The photograph is of the utmost importance and the presentation of self is, even over the Internet, really the initial introduction. For Mulvey, woman is in a traditional exhibitionist role – to be looked at and displayed – “she holds the look, plays to, and signifies male desire.” (Mulvey, 1975.)

Mulvey, however, directly ignores the autonomy and desire of the women who are observed by dismissing women as altogether passive to the active male observer. A large amount of choice is evident for both the male and female. The searcher can specify preference – things like zodiac sign and hair color – and the Ukrainian woman has the opportunity to say what “kind” of male she is looking for – a harder worker, a “man’s man” or a great father – but the photograph comes first. Similar to the experience the men in Garin’s article faced at the Ukrainian socials, the first sight of the women becomes the spectacle and invariably, one might say, the objectified.

At what point, though, do we consider the self-direction and awareness of either participant? Thinking only in regard to male as active subject and female as passive

object is too simplistic and ultimately harmful. It is the conscious decision of the Ukrainian woman to be on sites like Kiev Connections and she has some choice in the presentation performed. The femininity one encounters throughout the photographs is both structured and familiar. The hair is noticeably coiffed and kempt, and the clothing, even if considered casual in usual contexts, is sexually appealing. From attire to makeup and facial expression, it is clear that the woman is aware of and catering to an audience.

Though the profiles do have a very specific formula (and its plausible to believe that the poses of the women might have been dictated by the agency), it is important to remember that, even within pre-formed constraints, there are choices open to the women. In the full-length portraits the women, in some way, show their hands. The woman is never simply looked upon as an “object” for male desire but returns the gaze. Almost all portraits are active in some form, providing evidence for the assertion these women are not just passive beings or uniform in existence.

The object of pleasure reverses the gaze from the onset and this is essential to complicating the primary point of Mulvey’s theory. The following section provides ten photographs culled from the several thousand in existence. Though only a small sample of those at KievConnections.com and those in the catalog created for this thesis project, the photographs provide eloquent evidence of constructed and performed femininity, and the viewer will be able to draw his or her own conclusions about the common features of the presentations. But, it is crucial for the viewer to keep in mind that the entire purpose of the profile is to be seen. The women participate in the website in order to be wanted by the searcher. Rather than effaced, female desire is an essential feature of the encounter.

























### **The “Other” Subjectivity and Narrative**

For that masculine subject of desire, trouble became a scandal with the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of female “object” who

inexplicably returns the glances, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of masculine position.

*Judith Butler*

Queer theorist Judith Butler in her seminal feminist text *Gender Trouble* discusses the subjectivity of identity and the complications of desire. Drawing from the existentialist work of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, she explores the conception of the “Other”, the mysteriously female, that can threaten the patriarchy or, rather, the culturally accepted power dynamic that privileges the male.

Butler argues that culture, not each individual, constructs gender – despite the widespread belief in personal and personally-crafted identity. With culture then constructing gender, there is a direct conflict with maintaining personal identity. Is the Ukrainian woman’s individuality always entwined in the oppression of Ukrainian history and the institutions? Furthermore, are the American men on the hunt always enacting their performance of gender within a culturally confining and shaping context as well?

It can be argued that women as an oppressed body is a western notion that is rooted in existentialist “other” claims. Western assumptions also underlie the sympathetic narrative of the naïve foreigner, or more acutely, the passive female. In other words, before we even know the specifics of the actions or intents of Ukrainian women, western narrative applies a coat of concern. Is it that these women don’t know any better or have no way other way out; after all, who would not want to be an “American woman” (that is to say the idea of the American woman being the embodiment of a Western woman with inherent choice).

One common assumption is that American men seeking foreign wives are predators and moreover, that foreign wives are victims. Considering the 2006 Violence

Against Women Act, subtitle D, known as the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act (IMBA), states that any American man seeking matchmaking services through a for-profit agency must first turn over a multitude of personal information. Previous records of court orders ranging from restraining orders or child neglect, marriages, arrests or convictions related to controlled substances, alcohol or prostitution and any information on children under 18 are some of the required information American males need to submit in order to be a client seeking a foreign wife. It is estimated that between 8 to 12 thousand American men find foreign wives every year through agencies like Kiev Connections but there is no firm statistic on the abuse of mail order brides and no reason to believe the number is any higher than the domestic abuse of women in general. The IMBA has received criticism, mostly from the broker agencies that feel that the regulation violates their clients' freedom of speech and raises identity theft concerns. But the existence of the act and the language within it further implies the narrative of foreign wives as first thought of as victims and the American men seeking them are predators.

We should be wary of the idea that Ukrainian women as a gendered body are “ready” to be passive to the Western male they are attempting to attract, just as Western society no longer expects that a Western woman is “ready” to be passive to any male they are attempting to attract. According to Garin’s observations, American males went to Ukraine – a country that in many ways is still unadjusted to its own identity – with preconceived notions. With their original anticipation of being “alpha males on the hunt” they align with what Butler calls the “place and authority of masculine position.” (Butler, 1.) They did not anticipate the agency or personal identity of the women they would be interacting with. Garin notes that the “innocent opportunism” of the women who joined



the men in mere conversation to practice their English or for a free dinner left the men distraught and disenchanted with the whole process of seeking a wife. In paying the four thousand dollars to go with such high hopes of obtaining a wife, the men became disappointed at how much harder it would actually be. The Ukrainian women, despite their cultural history and presumed socio economic conditions, were still not interested in the American males as much as the males expected and, through their actions and exhibition of agency, rupture the “woman as objects” script.

Although for Beauvoir, gender is an act of "becoming", but, for Butler, rather than being an expression of free subjectivity, is profoundly shaped and interpreted by cultural meaning. While it is true that the notion of “self” is divided by social constructs and labels – nationality, ethnicity, religion, sex, etc – the subjectivity that is performed is personal and fluid in shifting contexts for every person. The women for this analysis proved that there was no certain embodiment of the Ukrainian woman that the men in Garin’s article hoped for. That is to say that the Ukrainian woman, while all equally Ukrainian and performing with the traditional ideals of femininity, were not the tangible idea of the mere object or the antithesis of the American female that the Western men hoped for.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis is an informed but constructed narrative, a narrative that is intended to challenge reductive feminist perspectives in which the Ukrainian women are seen only as victims or as items for the consumption of the Western male. The “victim narrative” is a natural “descendant” of Mulvey’s gaze theory and has been taken up by many feminist theorists. But locking women into the victim narrative paradoxically risks the very

objectification and dehumanization it is intended to reveal. So, I have looked for—and found—ways in which the Ukrainian women can be seen as exhibiting agency. My exploration, like that offered by Garin, is inevitably partial. A full analysis of Ukrainian mail-order brides would certainly include the voices of the women themselves. Through grappling with the notions of place – namely Ukraine and the United States – and what it might mean to be individual from either country that has its own culture and idea of gender performance, I have attempted to recover the agency of the Ukrainian women who are portrayed in KievConnections.com

I would argue that all parties involved —both the American males and the Ukrainian women – have specific, subjective intentions – be they emotional or financial stability or a physical partnership – as to why they are seeking a relationship with someone they do not meet through traditional ideals of courtship. Once one emphasizes that the role of choice for both the Ukrainian women and the Western males, tantalizing questions arise: is the international marriage market just an extension of Match.com? It is just this sort of complicated and loaded question that will allow us to move past the narrative of victimization and create the space to understand the reality—whatever that may be—of the experiences of the Ukrainian women.

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