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‘Militantropos’ Review: Another Staggering Ukrainian Documentary About What War Actually Looks Like

Cannes: Alina Gorlova, Yelizaveta Smith, and Simon Mozgovyi’s mesmerizing vérité documentary is another entry in the unfortunately burgeoning Ukrainian nonfiction new wave.

BY LAUREN WISSOT 

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'Militantropos' *Square Eyes*

It's heartbreakingly ironic that, as Vladimir Putin continues his messianic battle to wipe Ukraine from the map, **the country's documentarians** are fighting back the one way they know how — by creating films

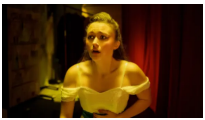




that seem to just get better and better with every bomb dropped.

Simply put, what began for many **as a way to keep track of war crimes** has now transformed into nothing less **than a new way of seeing**. In fact, because of the heightened stakes on the ground — the ever-present tightrope-walking between existence and nonexistence — life, and thus the *recording* of life, is now lived in 3D. There's a heightened sensitivity to every sound and image encountered during wartime, a hyper-awareness that translates with precision onto the screen. In other words, this uber-focus is a result of their own metamorphoses as filmmakers and as human beings. Great art has become a byproduct of war.

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And the latest example of this Ukrainian nonfiction new wave is Alina Gorlova, Yelizaveta Smith, and Simon Mozgovyi's mesmerizing "**Militantropos**," its title referring to "a persona adopted by humans when entering a state of war." (It's also a neologism created by the trio's Tabor Production colleague and co-scriptwriter Maksym Nakonechnyi, "milit" being a nod to soldier in Latin, "antropos" to human in Greek.)

Centered squarely on their fellow citizens, the doc is likewise a collective endeavor in every sense. In fact, many members of the crew have been involved in repairing the homes of their protagonists; and an all-filmmakers volunteer team has even opened a charitable foundation that raises outside money and brings in materials to rebuild liberated villages. It's a level of dedication and care made apparent right from the **film**'s stunning opening

— a low angle shot of all-encompassing smoke from a devastating blast, rising up like a demon from below. From there, we immediately cut to an anonymous man, and then a woman, their faces both registering an inability to comprehend the enormity of exactly what they are witnessing.

Thus begins an exquisitely crafted vérité journey comprised of painstakingly framed (medium and long) snapshots of an unfortunately contemporary Ukraine. A railway station with its ghostly arrivals platform, its departing area frenetic and jam-packed. Dusty family album photos peeking out from the massive rubble of a building that's still being searched for survivors. Photojournalists in vests emblazoned with "press" on the back rushing to position themselves for the perfect shot — of an exhausted elderly woman just trying to make her way down the street. The Kyiv mayor (and former world heavyweight champ) Vitali Klitschko giving a press conference, pausing to take a question from a clearly anguished man who asks where he's to live now. When the politician begins to speak of evacuation plans the guy immediately shouts him down. Like his president he's not looking for a ride, but to stay and defend his home.

Scenes that, through the magic of sight and sound, imperceptibly morph into a visceral study of how conflict changes both people and society in mysterious and unpredictable ways. A massive theater is now a place to stage a strange participatory performance, as the audience of everyday noncombatants learn how to handle distributed guns. We're taken to a basement where random folks were once held hostage — children's drawings still adorning the walls, along with a long list of names of the dead. The unbearable silence, save for the ticking of a clock, is palpable. As troops gather in a tent, conducting airstrikes from smartphones and a computer screen, a soldier recites words from the book of poetry he's working on. A farmer tills his field while a spent missile rests as an uneasy reminder in the foreground.

“Militantropos chooses to accept war as the one and only option to exist...” notes a title card one-third of the way through the 111-minute tour de force.

A sentiment made heartbreakingly apparent by the group of youngsters playing in a dugout in a park, belting out a tune with the phrase, “The Cossack bloodline will never perish.” (Though, later, we’re also treated to closeups of two adorable little girls joyously snacking on strawberries in a flower-filled field on a warm summer day.) When battered and captured Russian tanks are lined up for display along a Kyiv street, Ukrainians gawk and prod (and punch) as if at a surreal car show.

And then there’s the otherworldly sequence at night in a claustrophobic bunker, fighters bathed in a red light as they chain-smoke in the dark. A night-vision POV suddenly renders the forest outside a B&W landscape from another time. “Militantropos face death as a reality of their own non-existence...” another title card tells us. “Militantropos reclaim their sense of self, reshaping the very order of existence.”

With a multilayered sound design that acts as an invisible force, rendering nature unfamiliar as well, we’re invited to bear witness to the unimaginable pain seared onto the faces of evacuees and funeral attendees alike. Even while beekeepers suited up like astronauts focus on their own dangerous care-taking, and harvesters continue to rotate crops — the nurturing of life will go on despite (to spite) Putin’s bombs.

“You used to have the blue sky in your eyes! But now there’s only the sadness of the sea,” go the lines of a rock anthem a trio of soldiers sing along to on their way to target practice. As “Militantropos” finally comes to a close, a violent thunderstorm rolls in — and soldiers and their families hold tight on the departing platform of a train station once again.

Grade: A

“Militantropos” premiered at the 2025 [Cannes](#) Film Festival. It is currently seeking U.S. distribution.

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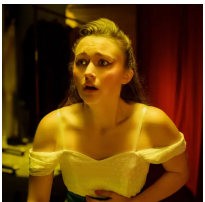
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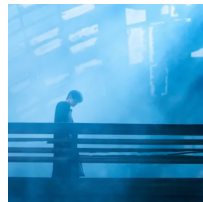
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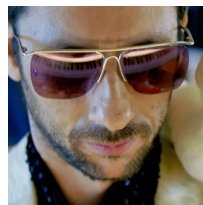
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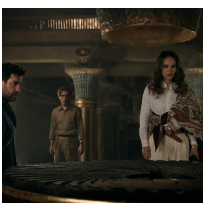
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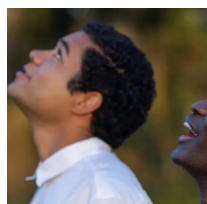
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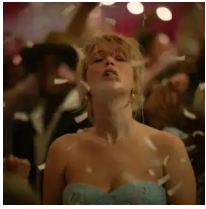
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