



Cannes 2025 review: Militantropos (Yelizaveta Smith, Alina Gorlova, Simon Mozgovyi)

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"A grim but somehow also utterly beautiful reminder of how war changes people."



"The chaos of war not only tears apart the physical world, but also fractures the militantropos' sense of self."

When war starts to permeate all aspects of your everyday life, how does it change the way you perceive yourself? How does a country as a whole start to perceive itself? In the observational documentary *Militantropos*, a neologism of the Latin word for 'soldier' and the Greek for 'human', directors Yelizaveta Smith, Alina Gorlova, and Simon Mozgovyi chronicle the transformation of a nation. Their nation. The war in Ukraine has gone into its fourth year, although technically the two countries have been at war for over a decade now. Its soil, soaked in the blood, sweat, and tears of its people, has proven fertile ground for filmmakers wanting to document not just the atrocities of the Russian aggressor, but the psyche of the Ukrainian people. These documentaries can range from the personal to the detached, and *Militantropos* falls somewhere in the middle; the three directors, together known as the Tabor Collective, lay bare the emotions of their fellow countrymen, but stay at a distance like the proverbial fly on the wall. Written in cooperation with Maksym Nakonechnyi, director of 2022 Cannes entry *Butterfly Vision*, *Militantropos* eloquently shows the need for constant change, both on an individual and a collective level, to ensure survival, and makes evident that war is first and foremost a human experience.

Can a film about war be beautiful? Is it ethical to judge such a film that way? These are questions to ponder, because a great number of *Militantropos'* exquisitely composed shots are eye-wateringly gorgeous. Shot from the very beginning of the Russian invasion on February 22, 2022, when the trains left Kyiv central station to evacuate its people, the film takes delicate and well-framed snapshots of those uncertain early days, with the confusion, the despair, the destruction. These shots are both stunning visually, and heart wrenching in content. There is room for a chuckle also, when a horde of press photographers in bulletproof vests and helmets snap pictures of an old biddy with her groceries, an almost grotesque image. The film slowly transitions into scenes of military training, ordinary men going through drills for the first time in years, perhaps forever. It doesn't take long for the camera to end up at the front, in trenches and bunkers, where men (and the occasional woman) are huddled together listening to distant shelling and patiently waiting to go out and lay their lives on the line. For their country, for their children who we also saw in trenches, playing. They also record poems for their loved ones, or watch a World Cup semifinal. The main point is that they are soldiers together, as a collective. This extends to the home front, where Christmas carolers sing patriotic songs in a packed mall. Sadness is juxtaposed with joy, funerals with weddings, with newlywed husbands going to the front mere days

afterward. Everyone becomes a soldier, and the national psyche changes.



While watching them, one has to wonder how these *militantropos*, the ‘persona adopted by humans when entering a state of war’, as the film puts it in its opening, adapt when inevitably that state of war ends at some point. Because when your sense of self is fractured, as another title card later puts it, can it heal again? History tells us that the ‘soldier’ often lingers in the form of PTSD. The powerful impact that war has on human behavior isn’t simply erased after the war ends. This is a sobering thought while watching *Militantropos*; there may be healing, but the scars will remain. Destinies and futures are changed forever, either directly or indirectly. As the first part of a planned triptych (*The Days I Would Like to Forget*), this film is a grim but somehow also utterly beautiful reminder of how war changes people, and the start of an intriguing sociological project.

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