



[Home](#) > [Film](#) > [Reviews](#)

May 25, 2025 2:37am PT

‘Militantropos’ Review: Austere Anti-War Doc Employs Formal Control in an Impassioned Defense of Ukraine

Debuting in Cannes, a Ukrainian documentary from Yelizaveta Smith, Alina Gorlova and Simon Mozgovyi brings an anthropologist’s eye to how war is lived through, waged and filmed.

By Catherine Bray ▾





Courtesy of Tabor

Billowing gray smoke intermingles with moody cloud cover, while scores of grim-faced Ukrainian citizens watch the skies, arms folded. The visual opening salvo of “[Militantropos](#),” directed by Yelizaveta Smith, Alina Gorlova and Simon Mozgovyi, could be the opening scene of a Hollywood disaster movie, albeit one of the more dour and serious-minded sorts. Moments later, we’re at a train station and the visual reference switches: Huddled masses are being evacuated from Kviv to Vienna with their suitcases and children. We’re setting up a heartfelt period drama, perhaps. And then, in close-up, a bulldozer turns over rubble, and a family photograph is glimpsed in the debris, a tattered symbol of what has been lost.

Related Stories





VIP+

Celebrity Chatbots: How Talent Can Navigate the Risks & Rewards



Austin Butler and Jeremy Allen White to Star in A24 Crime Saga 'Enemies'

The makers of “Militantropos” seem well aware of how the visual touchstones of war have been borrowed or appropriated by cinema, and their film loops us back around again, confronting us with the source images. The neologism that gives the film its title, coined for and by this film, is defined on-screen as “a persona adopted by humans when entering a state of war.” Such textual musings return periodically and are part of a toolbox of techniques aligning this doc with formally experimental work, despite ripped-from-the-headlines subject matter which might lead you to expect a more standard-issue approach.

Written with Maksym Nakonechnyi, the director of the bleak drama “Butterfly Vision,” “Militantropos” repeatedly considers the effect of war on children. The bubble any parent tries to build for their child is always temporary, as the illusion that the world is for the most part a benign or even magical place must inevitably be dismantled — but whether that dismantling is a gradually managed part of growing up or the quick and brutal consequence of events beyond the parent’s control is brought home here with vivid urgency.

A school where children have been forced to stay, with artwork on the walls — some of which are normal kids’ drawings and others of which depict bombings — gives a grounded sense of place to the horrific childhoods endured by young Ukrainians. This film’s anthropological interest in how people are shaped by an ongoing immersion in a state of war is simultaneously deeply personally felt and viewed with a sense of analytical remove. Perhaps that’s partly the