

Earth is Blue as an Orange

Irina Tsilyk

2020

Whilst never referenced in the film itself, the title of Irina Tsilyk's cinéma vérité documentary alludes to the famous words of French poet Paul Eluard, who coined the term which would become one of the Surrealist movement's mantras: "The Earth is blue like an orange." It is fascinating to think of this choice.

Set in the Donbas, the film follows Hanna and her four children, the eldest of whom, Myroslava, longs to become a cinematographer, and their life in a front-line war zone. Their world is beset by bombings and chaos, which have become so normalised that they are the object of casual humour. At one point, as the family enter their cellar to film a scene for Myroslava's film, fiction collides with reality as they hear the news of real bombings. Tsilyk and the family making the film within a film, have different subjects. Myroslava's collaborative family short favours drama, trauma, and violence. In interviews, her siblings are asked to describe the horror of war and bombings. One brother describes war as having to shoot people who tried to shoot people first. Another describes the loss of his hamster and running out of the house as flames begin to cover the street. Myroslava's sister heartbreakingly says that the war has made her evil, and had it not happened she would have continued to be the good child she was before. Tsilyk shoots Hanna watching her children give these interviews, a look of profound sadness in her eyes.

There is a fascinating dialogue between the two filmmakers, Tsilyk and Myroslava, one that becomes a reflexive commentary on the nature of authorship and cinema. Myroslava imposes her authorial vision on the world around her; at her graduation, we watch as Tsilyk shows her carefully choosing her pictures and angles. We also watch her and her family craft their lines, stage pre-prepared interviews, and add a dramatic flair to events. Even when she meets soldiers in the street, she asks to film them. Tsilyk, conversely, is far more concerned with the family's intimacy with war; an inescapable fact of their lives, the way they live within it and how they strive to overcome its challenges is what interests her. This prompts a revelation: that war (both past and present) often imposes long periods of confinement upon families, breeding intimacy and collaboration through restriction. In light of the horrors on the streets of the Donbas, Ganna and her

children spend huge swathes of time inside, planning their film, having loving, petty family squabbles, and simply being with each other in the fallout of conflict. In the aftermath of one bombing, the youngest brother pushes a toy tank back and forth as Hanna makes tea. Quotidian sounds fill the air, and for once, the lively family are silent. As heightened as their intimacy is, there are some things which they live through alone.

Perhaps this is the purpose of Myroslava's film: to bring them together again. The nature of her interviews, their artificiality and planning, produces a safe format, in which the family get to reveal how they truly feel to one another. It is healing, it is honest, and it is a reworking of their individual traumas as a unit. In *Variety*, Guy Lodge points to the interviews as being the moment that Myroslava's film and Tsilyk's film truly separate, having previously coexisted in an amorphous creative haze somewhere between deliberate and accidental collaboration: "Once completed, those interviews are remarkable, containing some of the most piercing, personal observations here – a key instance where the achievements of Tsilyk's film and the family's short become inseparable."

The most profound interview is Ganna's. She discusses her guilt at keeping her children in the Donbas and robbing them of ordinary lives. In an earlier, more comedic scene, Ganna and Myroslava argue over the daughter's directorial choices in the film; Ganna wants a panorama, to show the destruction of the city and Myroslava insists on a static shot. Later, in her own interview, Ganna asks: "If everyone leaves the city, who is there to rebuild it?" Ganna's intense civic duty and ethics become clear. As Lodge states, "by the end, it's clear that the short film they've made is their contribution to the rebuilding process" – a rebuilding not just for themselves, but for the city and the wider world too.