

Train Kyiv-War

Kornii Hrytsiuk, 2020

Screenwriter(s): Kornii Hrytsiuk

Place: Ukraine

Studios: EasyLiving Films, Ukrainian Cultural Foundation

Length: 72 minutes

Language: Ukrainian, Russian

Andrii Smytsniuk, University of Cambridge

The Prelude

In Kornii Hrytsiuk's documentary, *Train: Kyiv - War* (2020), war is a place one can ride to, not far away from the world of peace and order. The film was set prior to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The film examines Europe's only active military conflict through the journey of Ukrainian citizens who make their way on a train from Ukraine's capital Kyiv— where life proceeded more or less normally at the time — to Kostiantynivka, a small industrial city in the eastern part of the country. The film documents the transformation of the train into a provisional home that houses individuals intimately touched by the conflict — soldiers, medical volunteers, and the inhabitants of the Donbas region who must find a way to coexist on the 12-hour trip that dislocates them from relative serenity to the pandemonium of conflict. Hrytsiuk, a native of the embattled territory, interviews his fellow passengers, recording their reflections on Ukraine, Russia, the war, and asks them to consider if and how the conflict might be resolved.

Since the 2014 invasion of Crimea, the war in the east of Ukraine has largely redefined Eurasian politics. Rather than scrutinise these changes from a political perspective, Hrytsiuk provides a rare opportunity to view the conflict through the eyes of those most closely affected. The passengers often have radically divergent, and sometimes self-contradictory opinions, the expression of which may be illegal depending on which side of the border they find themselves. Others share their views with a great deal of caution. According to the film's director, the fear among the passengers is often palpable.¹ Those who live in the occupied

¹ *Conversation with Kornii Hrytsiuk, Director of "Train: Kyiv-War" (2020)*, online video recording, YouTube, 4 January 2021, <<https://youtu.be/El2qvJhhH4>> [accessed 9 June 2021].

territory are often afraid to express their pro-Ukrainian opinions, while the same is true of those holding pro-Russian views in territory controlled by Ukraine. A significant portion of the documentary is devoted to the perils of disinformation and its exacerbation of the conflict. Hrytsiuk conveys the destructive and sometimes deadly consequences of disinformation tactics through the recounting of personal stories. One such account is told by a pro-Ukrainian journalist lamenting the radicalisation of her former boyfriend, who had joined with and died fighting for pro-Russian forces.

Throughout the film, topics of ethnicity, nationality, and identity surface. Hrytsiuk asks his interviewees to identify themselves and engages with them about their upbringings and lives. A few individuals raised in the Soviet Union find it challenging to adopt a defined Ukrainian or Russian identity. Rather, they associate themselves with a collective Soviet identity and have a difficult time understanding why war has erupted among republics that, in the past, seemed to be without borders. All too often, the war in eastern Ukraine is oversimplified and described in ethnic terms — Ukrainians versus Russians. *Train: Kyiv – War*, however, reveals the limited relevance of ethnic identification in the current war, which has seen ethnic Russians fight for Ukraine, and ethnic Ukrainians for Russia.

Hrytsiuk punctuates the melancholy of his interviews with a soundtrack of modern Ukrainian poetry by Serhii Zhadan. Many of the lines express the simultaneous love and resignation one feels when living in a hopeless place:

She thinks, standing in the morning at her spot,
Even this territory, it turns out, may be desirable, dear.
It turns out, you don't want to leave it for a long time,
In fact, you want to hold on to it for dear life,
It turns out, this old train station and an empty
Summer panorama are enough for love.²

Ultimately, all Hrytsiuk's interviewees share a commonality: they are tired of war and see peace as the highest priority. Concomitantly, they have no single vision of how to achieve peace. That said, Hrytsiuk's documentary, with its portrayal of intimate testimonials, dialogues and varied opinions reveals what needs to happen on a broader scale to achieve the integral first step towards de-escalation — understanding if communication among adversaries is possible.

² Translated from the Ukrainian by John Hennessy and Ostap Kin.