

A family sits together in a small Ukrainian dining room conducting a heated argument. The topic of debate: how will they show the audience of their film that they have been living in a war zone for five years? The question is approached with earnestness and passion throughout *The Earth Is Blue as an Orange*, as young Myroslava Trofymchuk, her single mother Anna, her sister Anastasiia, her two little bothers and her extended family attempt to represent their life in a small city in the ‘red zone’ of Donbas. Since meeting director Iryna Tsilyk at a regional youth filmmaking camp, eldest daughter Mira has dreamed of becoming a cinematographer. While Mira works on her first film, about the daily trauma of shelling and bombings while living under siege, Tsilyk carefully documents the way that the project becomes another example of the family’s fierce support for one another.

Through collective efforts that reveal their resourcefulness and resilience, the family takes on multiple roles: scriptwriters, editors, actors, interviewers, advisors. They haul cameras into cellars, pin up backdrops, debate their lines and each other’s performances. One of the children remarks, presciently, at the start of the documentary: ‘It should be kind of tragic.’ What the meta-level approach of a film within a film reveals, however, is not the artifice of representing reality. Instead, Tsilyk’s quiet glimpses into the interior life of the Trofymchuk family portray their home as an oasis of warmth and creativity in ‘the emptiness of war’. The impressions of Anna between scenes, the mixture of empathy, pride, encouragement and joy as she watches her children, emphasises that maintaining this space of relative security and freedom is hard work and a labour of love.

*‘Some people would do anything for a good shot’*

There is another subtle relationship set up by the film, as the business of war progresses alongside the work of art. Apart from a few shouts and stoic profiles of soldiers, the absence of men is striking. The camera steps into these absences – and, with it, so does the audience. It is left to those who remain to rebuild the future, to shift the frame towards life. This sense of quiet resistance is amplified by the movie’s soundtrack, mostly made up of lively conversations and instruments played by family members with the sound of shells muffled in the background. As Anna’s mother recounts a particularly violent episode, her grandchildren listen with the intensity of those who know the importance of being heard. With the magic of cinema, history is remembered and retold from the inside through interviews with neighbours and loved ones, painful memories and emotional triumphs.

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