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## Will they Believe? Cinematic Testimonies from Mariupol

Modern warfare is increasingly characterised as a conflict over truth, where the side that effectively constructs and disseminates its version of reality holds a strategic advantage. This paper argues that the perceived objectivity of documentary footage does not inherently equate to truth; rather, it is the subjective perspective of the filmmaker that often provides deeper insights. We propose that the more personal and subjective a documentary film is, the closer it may come to capturing a nuanced truth. To explore this idea, we employ Michel de Certeau's concepts of tactics and strategies to examine the interplay between subjective experience and the notion of truth in war documentaries. Our analysis focuses on three films documenting the siege of Mariupol during Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022: Mantas Kvedaravičius and Hanna Bilobrova's *Mariupolis 2* (2022), Mstyslav Chernov's *20 Days in Mariupol* (2023), and Robin Barnwell's *Mariupol: The People's Story* (2023). Despite their differing methodologies—ethnographic observation in Kvedaravičius' film, real-time reporting in Chernov's work, and the use of archival and found footage in Barnwell's documentary—all three films offer distinct and compelling testimonies that contribute to the broader landscape of war-related media imagery.

Keywords: Mantas Kvedaravičius, Mstyslav Chernov, documentary film, Mariupol

Since the technological innovations of the nineteenth century enabled the capture of reality on film—and, with it, the passing of time—one fundamental insight about cinema as a medium has emerged, perhaps even a truism: the moving image, particularly in the case of what is generally regarded as documentary films, to a lesser or greater extent always harbours death. Death, of course, can remain invisible within the frame and only anticipated—who could have foreseen, for example, that Nicholas II, whose

coronation was captured on film by Lumière cinematographers, would one day be brutally executed alongside his family? Death can also take on the form of a performance, as seen in Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012). It can become sheer spectacle, as in countless films—from Edison's infamous electrocution of an elephant to the recorded executions of war criminals after the Second World War. Yet none of these examples, nor the images they rely upon, exemplify this connection as powerfully as war documentaries, where death penetrates every frame.

As W. J. T. Mitchell observes, "By the time anyone reads these words, it is safe to predict that a war—a violent conflict involving mass murder of human beings—will be going on somewhere in the world. This war will produce spectacular images of destruction and suffering."<sup>1</sup> While it is true that war raged back when Mitchell wrote his observation and does now, when this paper is crafted,<sup>2</sup> none of these "spectacular images of destruction and suffering" allow us to take for granted that the death depicted on screen is a fact. Thus, the portrayal of death in a contemporary world dominated by images as the primary means of understanding reality raises an inseparable question of truth: is the death depicted on screen real, imagined, or fake? This, in turn, leads to another critical question: will the audience believe that the death shown is not staged, that it bears authentic witness to a tragedy captured on camera, in a real place, involving real people?

This is particularly true of recent documentaries that capture the warscapes<sup>3</sup> of territories turned into war zones. Films of this type not only produce, but sometimes also exploit images of war, which in turn shape public understanding of the conflicts they depict—particularly in cases where no other recorded evidence exists. As Michael J. Shapiro notes, "Cinema is an exemplary aesthetic whose implications derive from the way

<sup>1</sup> Mitchell (2018), ix.

<sup>2</sup> According to the latest Conflict Intensity Index (CII), since 2021, conflict-affected areas worldwide have expanded by 65%, now covering 4.6% of the Earth's total land area (Brennan and Durmaz (2024)).

<sup>3</sup> The term, which denotes how war transforms the physical environment alongside the social and cultural fabric of societies and communities, economic systems, identities, and everyday practices, is used in this paper as conceptualised by Caroline Nordstrom in her work *A Different Kind of War Story* (1997).

it produces and mobilizes images.”<sup>4</sup> Since modern warfare can often be described as a battle for truth—where the side that presents its version of events most convincingly often prevails—the reliability of documentary images from war zones is called into question. Given the difficulty of determining their origins or assessing the extent of post-production manipulation, it becomes essential to critically analyse how and where these images are created, the forms in which they are distributed, the intentions behind their production, and, most importantly, what they represent or seek to communicate.

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there has been a significant increase in the production of war documentaries by filmmakers of various nationalities.<sup>5</sup> As Oksana Karpovych, the director of *Intercepted* (2024), observes:

It is often said that this war is the most documented war in human history. Never before has there been such a volume of video footage, especially from the front line, live battles. That is good, because they are, after all, primary documentary sources.<sup>6</sup>

However, rather than examining films that cover the broader theatre of war across Ukraine, this paper analyses three documentaries that capture the warscape of Mariupol, a Ukrainian city on the northern coast of the Sea of Azov, during the devastating Russian onslaught at the war’s outset. The selected films are Mantas Kvedaravičius and Hanna Bilobrova’s *Mariupolis 2* (2022), Mstyslav Chernov’s *20 Days in Mariupol* (2023), and Robin Barnwell’s *Mariupol: The People’s Story* (2023).<sup>7</sup> All three films

<sup>4</sup> Shapiro (2009), 11.

<sup>5</sup> To name a few: the Lithuanian film community’s *Letter to Ukraine* (2023), Vitaliy Manskiy’s *Eastern Front* (2023), Maciek Hamela’s *In the Rearview* (2023), Sergej Orlov’s *The Saints Are Watching* (2024), Oleh Sentsov’s *Real* (2024), Olha Zhurba’s *Songs of Slow Burning Earth* (2024), and many others.

<sup>6</sup> Kajėnas (2024).

<sup>7</sup> There are more films about Mariupol that focus on the beginning of the war. For example, Yelizaveta Tatarinova’s *Mariupol: The Chronicles of Hell* (2022), which was made shortly after the city was completely occupied by the Russians, or Maksim Litvinov’s *Mariupol. Unlost Hope* (2022). However, these documentary films are not primarily focused on personal testimonies but, as Kamilla Simor notes, serve as a gesture of restoring collective memory, where it is not about who

employ distinct strategies to represent the experience and reality of war. Kvedaravičius and Bilobrova's film adopts an ethnographic approach, Chernov's employs real-time reporting which is accompanied by his voice-over, and Barnwell's film relies on found footage, often sourced from Mariupol's residents themselves who become the protagonists of the film. By analysing these diverse cinematic perspectives, this paper explores how the ruined landscape of the city and the tragedy of its inhabitants are rendered on screen.

Furthermore, employing Michel de Certeau's concepts of tactics and strategies, it investigates the tension between subjective experience and the notion of truth in war documentaries. The paper argues that subjective, personal filmmaking often conveys a deeper truth than objective representation. The analysis of these three documentaries sheds light on how war documentaries not only document events, but also critically interrogate the shifting narratives surrounding war, instead of trying to explain the historical and political situation or make arguments why the conflict ensued.

### *Mariupolis 2: Transforming Everyday Spaces into Warscapes*

On March 2, 2022, Mariupol was encircled by Russian forces. Despite the imminent danger, anthropologist-turned-filmmaker Mantas Kvedaravičius and his partner, Hanna Bilobrova, made the decision to smuggle themselves into the city, which was on the verge of falling to the invading army. Upon their arrival, they quickly discovered that moving freely within Mariupol was nearly impossible. As a result, they sought refuge in an Evangelical Christian Baptist church they found shortly after entering the city. This church, along with its immediate surroundings, became the central setting for their film, *Mariupolis 2*, which premiered later that year at the 75th Cannes Film Festival and went on to win the European Film Academy Award for Best Documentary in 2022. Tragically, before they could attempt to flee

said what, whose memories they are, or who recorded them, but rather that these videos exist as evidence, making it possible to remember the events. (Simor (2024), 11.)



*Mariupolis 2*, 2022, 01:06:23

the city, Kvedaravičius, aged 45, was killed by Russian forces.<sup>8</sup> *Mariupolis 2* stands not only as one of the earliest cinematic accounts of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but also as a crucial audiovisual testimony of life in Mariupol under siege.

For individuals whose professions are intertwined with war, being at the epicentre of conflict is often a natural, if perilous, aspect of their work. The role of journalists in war zones falls under the category of expert practices, akin to that of military personnel, medical professionals, or other specialists for whom the war zone becomes a professional field of operation. A journalist's camera often teeters on the edge of survival, and tragically, the deaths of journalists in such environments are all too common. However, Kvedaravičius was not a journalist, and his approach to filmmaking

<sup>8</sup> European Federation of Journalists (2022).

diverged from the conventions of journalistic practice. Neither he nor Bilobrova risked their lives in pursuit of sensationalism, nor to capture the most shocking images for public consumption; their motivation was fundamentally different.

In 2016, following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the onset of war between Russian-backed separatist forces and Ukraine, Kvedaravičius completed his second feature-length documentary, *Mariupolis*. This film offers an ethnographic exploration of the everyday lives of Mariupol's residents, who continued their routines despite the constant threat of military violence. *Mariupolis 2* similarly maintains an ethnographic approach. Kvedaravičius employed observational cinema as a methodological tool to document the warscape of Mariupol. As Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz argue, observational cinema emerged as a departure from traditional ethnographic film, which primarily used the camera as a tool for collecting data for research and analysis.<sup>9</sup> Hence, during the week he and Bilobrova spent in a church where local residents sought refuge, Kvedaravičius focused not on interviews or attempts to explain the origins of the war, but instead turned his camera on various everyday activities: prayer, sleeping, preparing food, salvaging equipment, and other routine actions.

Michel de Certeau distinguishes two fundamental modes of engaging with everyday life: strategies and tactics. Strategies are employed by entities with power and authority—such as institutions, enterprises, or cities—that define and control their own space by isolating it from external influences. In contrast, tactics operate within spaces that do not belong to the individual but are shaped by external forces. Everyday life is inherently tactical: a series of improvised responses to the constraints and opportunities of an environment they neither design nor control.<sup>10</sup>

For instance, an ordinary city dweller is surrounded by an environment created almost entirely by others. The objects encountered each morning—the bed, toothpaste, toothbrush, clothes, coffee cup, car,

<sup>9</sup> Grimshaw and Ravetz (2009), ix–x.

<sup>10</sup> De Certeau (1988), 35–37.

or subway—are strategically designed, often mass-produced, and largely devoid of personalisation. Moreover, their uses are predetermined: clothes are for wearing, coffee for drinking. Yet, from a tactical perspective, even these mass-produced items are engaged with in unique, personal ways. The way an individual crosses a street will never be exactly repeated: trajectories differ by centimetres, the tension in leg muscles varies, the length of steps changes, and so on.

At first glance, these minor variations may seem insufficient to break the monotony of everyday life. However, on a microscopic level, every detail contributes to an individual's potential for creativity. The possibility of doing something even marginally different the next day opens up avenues for subtle innovation. When such minimalist creativity begins to influence or reshape the strategic space, everyday tactical activities become acts of resistance and rebellion against the strategically determined conditions of life.

The tactical nature of everyday practices positions individuals as both subjects and agents of resistance. The familiar world encountered daily—rooms, shops, workplaces—becomes a stage for small acts of adaptation and creativity. While individuals cannot reshape the broader power structures or physical environments defining their context, they exercise agency through the ways they navigate and inhabit these spaces. Seemingly mundane acts, such as getting out of bed or making coffee, become micro-strategies, reflecting resistance or acceptance through their manner of execution. These improvisations do not aim to create entirely new meanings or structures; rather, they represent subtle, iterative negotiations with existing conditions. This interplay between constraint and choice transforms everyday life into a site of resilience, resistance, and creativity, even within environments shaped by larger, uncontrollable forces.

In the context of warscapes, the concepts of strategy and tactics gain critical relevance. Strategies perceive the warscape as a totality of power relations, encompassing military objectives and the field of battle. Tactics, however, focus on localised spaces and the specific situations within them. While tactics can describe the actions of combatants navigating war landscapes, they more aptly capture how civilians adapt to and survive

within war zones. War undoubtedly disrupts the routines of everyday life, yet citizens in war zones often manage to reconstruct these routines even in extreme conditions. As Caroline Nordstrom observes, in wartime, everyday individuals continuously reconstruct “social order out of chaos.”<sup>11</sup>

This dynamic is vividly illustrated in *Mariupolis* and *Mariupolis 2*. In *Mariupolis*, the frontline is only a dozen kilometres away, shaping but not entirely disrupting the residents’ daily lives. By contrast, *Mariupolis 2* depicts a radically altered landscape of war, where the immediacy of violence transforms everyday practices. The film shifts focus from the proximity of conflict to how individuals adapt their routines amidst life-threatening circumstances. As Kvedaravičius responds to a man sheltering in the church who asks if he is making a video: “Yes. I’ve recorded places like this, but it’s so uncomfortable. So pity...”<sup>12</sup> This statement underscores a distinct tactical approach to navigating and documenting the overwhelming reality of war.

As a tactical subject, Kvedaravičius, in his role as a filmmaker, has no means of influencing the global strategic battlefield. Situated in a constant bombardment zone and operating as a civilian rather than a combatant, he cannot alter the fact of the bombing. However, while strategic control of space lies beyond the power of the everyday individual, the way that space is practised remains within their agency. Filming in a war zone for non-journalistic purposes becomes a resistive act, as it transcends the natural survival instincts of a civilian and the journalistic mandate to objectively document events.

De Certeau highlights that everyday tactical activity often manifests as a form of manoeuvre, where individuals navigate obstacles or circumvent constraints.<sup>13</sup> For civilians in a war zone, this manoeuvring becomes especially pronounced: unlike the military, who can serve as both targets and targeters, civilians are exclusively targets. In the case of the filmmaker, the tactics of manoeuvring reach their peak intensity. The filmmaker is simultaneously an everyday subject navigating the warscape and an ob-

<sup>11</sup> Nordstrom and Robben (1996), 137.

<sup>12</sup> See *Mariupolis 2*, directed by Mantas Kvedaravičius and Hanna Bilobrova (2022), timestamp 00:58:47.

<sup>13</sup> De Certeau (1988), 37.



server capturing the everyday lives of others within the war zone. Hence, the act of filming the everyday life of war requires an intrinsic commitment to lingering and remaining within the space being recorded. Yet, in the volatile and ever-shifting environment of war, even a momentary hesitation in any given location carries the potential for fatal consequences.

### *20 Days in Mariupol: Film It All*

A markedly different approach to the cinematic representation of Mariupol is taken by Ukrainian war photographer Mstyslav Chernov in his film *20 Days in Mariupol*. Premiering at the Sundance Film Festival in 2023, the documentary later won the Oscar for Best Documentary in 2024, making it the most acclaimed work on Mariupol in terms of accolades, political impact, and global reach. As the title suggests, the film is compiled from footage Chernov captured during the twenty days he spent in Mariupol following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Structured as a diary, it documents the war's initial phase through the lens of Chernov and his colleagues from the Associated Press, who, despite the significant risks and the knowledge that their efforts could cost them their lives, continued to work in the besieged city.

Chernov noted that, at the time, only a few foreign journalists remained in Mariupol to document the events.<sup>14</sup> He emphasized the importance of recording the city's destruction as it unfolded, aware that a lack of documentation could allow the massacre to be obscured or distorted—especially as Russian propaganda advanced alternative narratives, such as the claim that NATO had provoked the aggression.<sup>15</sup> Through their efforts, Chernov and the Associated Press team created a visual record of the war's impact on Mariupol and its citizens: tanks marked with the letter Z targeting residential areas, destroyed maternity wards, looted shops, mass graves of civilians, the relentless efforts of medical personnel, dead animals in the streets, civilians sheltering in makeshift bunkers, local people providing testimonies to the camera, and moments of profound loss, such

<sup>14</sup> Chernov (2022).

<sup>15</sup> North Atlantic Treaty organization (2024).

as the death of four-year-old Angelina after an unsuccessful attempt to save her life in a hospital.

The motivation behind Chernov's filming is encapsulated in the words of a doctor who fought to save the child: "Please, show it to the bastard Putin. The eyes of this child and the crying doctors."<sup>16</sup> While it is doubtful that the man behind the war saw the cry of the doctor, this and other pieces of footage reached international audiences despite Russian attempts to sever communication with the outside world. Hence, while residents of Mariupol also documented the events through videos, photographs, and audio recordings, Chernov's footage constitutes one of the most widely disseminated visual records of the city's siege as it was used by mass media channels.

More than a year after successfully escaping the siege and continuing to document the war in other parts of Ukraine, Chernov decided to transform his footage into a feature-length film, believing that the medium of cinema could provide a more comprehensive and nuanced representation of Mariupol's siege than journalistic reportage. In his own words:

When we finally carried this material through Russian checkpoints and broke out from the siege, I felt it was important to assemble the rest into a film that would more fully and accurately convey the tragedy of the siege of Mariupol.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, Chernov's goal in creating the film was not merely to shape the footage into a cohesive narrative but, above all, to preserve and communicate the truth of what he witnessed in Mariupol. He has argued that misinformation in modern warfare functions like a weapon, strategically deployed by nations and groups to control the narrative about the conflict.<sup>18</sup> Chernov views film as a powerful medium capable of countering such distortions and ensuring that the realities of war, often at risk of erasure, are documented and remembered. Therefore, while parts of *20 Days in Mariupol* retain the characteristics of news reporting, the film extends its exploration of events over their temporal duration, crafting a

<sup>16</sup> See *20 Days in Mariupol*, directed by Mstyslav Chernov (2023), timestamp 00:17:25.

<sup>17</sup> *Filmmaker Magazine* (2023).

<sup>18</sup> Hobbs (2024).



*20 Days in Mariupol*, 2023, 01:27:25

more emotionally resonant and reflective narrative that focuses on the truthful representation of what is actually happening.

However, as mentioned earlier, Chernov was not naïve about the possibility that his footage, even when disseminated through reputable and reliable news outlets, would face scrutiny and be dismissed as a Ukrainian attempt to stage reality for propagandistic purposes. A striking example of this is the case of Marianna Vyshemirsky, a beauty influencer featured in the film on the 14th day as she fled a bombed maternity hospital. At the time heavily pregnant, Marianna became the subject of an iconic photograph taken by Associated Press journalists, which quickly gained global attention. However, the image also became a target of Russian disinformation, with pro-Kremlin propaganda claiming that Marianna was an actress playing not one but two different women, thereby asserting that the bombing of the hospital was entirely staged.<sup>19</sup> This incident underscores the challenges of documenting war in an era where visual evidence, even when widely disseminated, can be manipulated to undermine its credibility.

<sup>19</sup> Press-Reynolds Kieran (2022).

To counter this, Chernov chose to include his own voice-over in the film—a common documentary technique used to explain and contextualise visual material while illustrating the realities of the filmmaking process.<sup>20</sup> While commentary or voice-over is a staple of many journalistic productions,<sup>21</sup> in *20 Days in Mariupol*, it serves an additional purpose: establishing the filmmaker's personal involvement and firsthand witness to the events. The narrative builds the validity of the images on Chernov's direct experience, underscoring his presence with an implicit assertion: *I was there*. Much like Kvedaravičius's *Mariupolis 2*, the observed reality of Mariupol is presented as a deeply personal testimony. For Chernov, the film represents both a professional obligation—to ensure the world comprehends the events—and a profoundly personal act, carried out with the haunting knowledge that he might not survive to see his family again.

Seen through the prism of de Certeau's division between strategy and tactics in everyday life, Chernov's *20 Days in Mariupol* exhibits a paradoxical duality. The film embodies both the strategic and tactical dimensions of war. While war journalism often incorporates elements of subjective experience, its primary focus is on documenting the reality of war rather than foregrounding the journalist's personal presence. In this sense, *20 Days in Mariupol* serves as a strategic war image—one that records and reports on war as an external reality.

However, Chernov's emphasis on his constant peril and precarious navigation of war-torn spaces introduces a distinctly tactical dimension. This approach challenges de Certeau's dichotomy, suggesting that strategy and tactics are not always oppositional. Instead, the same activity can encompass both aspects, depending on the perspective one adopts. By blending the journalistic depiction of war with his own lived experience, Chernov enriches the strategic image of war with a tactical lens, underscoring the filmmaker's precarious existence—hovering on the brink of danger and death—as a vital element of the narrative.

<sup>20</sup> Nichols (2010), 44.

<sup>21</sup> Orlebar (2009), 111.

*Mariupol: The People's Story: Truthful Images of a City in War*

In one of the final scenes of *20 Days in Mariupol*, while fleeing the city by car, Chernov turns the camera on himself, capturing his face as his silent gaze briefly meets that of the anonymous viewer. Much like Kvedaravičius in *Mariupolis 2*, whose voice and embodied camera movements emphasise his presence, Chernov uses this moment to assert his own. The camera becomes an extension of his body, making the image it records a firsthand witness testimony.

However, Chernov, like Kvedaravičius, was not the only one documenting the outbreak of war in Mariupol. Hundreds of the city's residents filmed, photographed, recorded voicemails, and shared what was happening in the Russian-ravaged city through social networks and other channels, creating their own personal testimonies. Some of these raw recordings were lost forever if they were not shared online; others now linger as digital debris in the vast virtual archives of social media. Some, however, have been preserved as primary sources, stored in specialised databases like Dattalion,<sup>22</sup> which document war crimes committed by the Russian military. Additionally, some of these recordings were later edited into films, such as Robin Barnwell's *Mariupol: The People's Story*.

In contrast to the films by Kvedaravičius and Chernov, Barnwell was not physically present in Mariupol during the events depicted in his work, which spans from the start of the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022 to the surrender of the last fighters at the Mariupol Azovstal steelworks on 21 May. However, Barnwell does not present the film as his own testimony. Instead, he prioritises allowing Mariupol's residents who managed to survive and eventually escape the city to tell their own story. Notably, both Chernov and Kvedaravičius were outsiders who entered Mariupol with a specific goal: to document the events through film. By contrast, *Mariupol: The People's Story* centres on the inhabitants of Mariupol, whose accounts

<sup>22</sup> <http://dattalion.com>.



*Mariupol: The People's Story*, 2022, 00:12:27

are deeply personal, rooted in their intimate connection with the city, and who had no intention of making a film out of the recorded material.

The film's protagonists, apart from Sergey, an actor from the Mariupol Theatre, are primarily women from various walks of life. Hanna, a teacher by profession, cares for her infant while her husband, Kyrlo, serves as a member of the "Azov" Brigade; she also endured two months in the underground shelters of the Azovstal steelworks. Alevtina, a news reporter for the local television station Mariupol TV, documents the unfolding events. Oksana, an anaesthetist at the Mariupol Regional Hospital, struggles to treat the wounded in the early days of the war. Viktoria, whose father lives in Russia and refuses to believe that Russian forces are targeting civilians, faces the war's realities firsthand. Olena gives birth to her first child amidst the siege, while Olga witnesses her husband's death during a

bombardment. Yulia and Diana are among several others whose videos and testimonies are used in the film.

Diana explains at the beginning of the film why she recorded with her smartphone: “I was filming everything around me because I was looking at it from my balcony, and I saw it.”<sup>23</sup> In doing so, she echoes what Kvedaravičius and Chernov express in their films: we were there, and we had one thing to do—to film. However, Diana’s footage gains additional truthfulness and impact by functioning not only as raw recordings but as part of a documentary film, integrated alongside other protagonists’ testimonies. Together, these narratives transcend individual accounts to form the collective story of the city—a scale amplified by the documentary medium. Unlike isolated personal narratives or smaller vignettes, the documentary weaves these accounts into a broader perspective. As Kamilla Simor observes, by editing recordings side by side, the documentary elevates footage captured on smartphones from mere illustrations or visual evidence to elements of a cohesive and powerful narrative.<sup>24</sup>

*Mariupol: The People’s Story* was produced by the BBC, and unsurprisingly, compared to the other analysed films, it adopts a more conventional documentary aesthetic typical of television. The film is edited from a range of materials, including first-hand footage (captured with both rear- and front-facing cameras), personal recollections, drone shots, footage from the Russian army, archival videos and photos, interviews with protagonists, and CGI visualisations of maps with precise GPS coordinates and dates. Nevertheless, while this documentary adheres to traditional genre conventions in its structure and content, it offers something deeper than a mere catalogue of atrocities or a testament to Ukrainian resilience.

The film avoids reducing its interviewees to semi-anonymous witnesses, victims, or heroes. Instead, each protagonist is given ample screen time to recount their experiences and reflect on the enduring emotions of fear, loss, and guilt. One protagonist, Oksana, captures the tragic experience by Mariupol’s residents during the siege: “We got out of hell. And so only

<sup>23</sup> See *Mariupol: The People’s Story*, directed by Robin Barnwell (2022), timestamp 00:14:06.

<sup>24</sup> Simor (2024), 9–10.

people from Mariupol can understand this hell.”<sup>25</sup> Hence, Barnwell’s film centres on the tactics of survival—a theme that remains critically important as the war continues. At the time of writing, this is the 1018th day.

Thus, Barnwell’s film invites the audience to consider not just what happened in Mariupol, but also to reflect on *when* it happened—reminding us to situate these events within the timeline of the war. By weaving strategic depictions of the conflict with the deeply personal, tactical experiences of Mariupol’s residents, the film provides a dual perspective. Interviews with key individuals—conducted after the events they recount—add a temporal depth that encourages both the protagonists and the audience to not only relive the events of the occupation but also to contextualise them within the broader narrative of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.

The film also constructs a spatially expansive strategic picture, using aerial drone footage at the beginning to present Mariupol as a unified whole. These panoramic shots offer a stark contrast to the fragmented, ground-level experiences that follow, illustrating how the city’s overall destruction is composed of countless individual stories. At the microscopic, tactical level of the warscape, the lived experiences of war differ significantly. Each individual navigates and practices the warscape in ways that may lead to entirely different, even opposing, perceptions of the same conflict. However, Barnwell’s film carefully selects and intertwines these varied civilian experiences, presenting them as complementary pieces of a larger mosaic. In doing so, the film asserts that despite the differences in how war is experienced, these stories collectively complete the kaleidoscope of Mariupol’s suffering and resilience.

## Conclusions

One of the first moving images to emerge from Mariupol, just days before the full-scale invasion began on February 24th, shows a cheering crowd gathered in front of the National Theatre. This crowd, defiantly resisting

<sup>25</sup> See *Mariupol: The People’s Story*, timestamp 01:27:44.



the looming threat of war, expressed their resolve to defend the city.<sup>26</sup> Within just a few days, everything changed dramatically. What had been a hypothetical threat the day before the invasion became an overwhelming reality as Mariupol was hit with full force. The city, which had been one of the first strategic objectives of the occupying army in 2014, was once again targeted. The three films analysed in this paper bear witness to the horror that unfolded in Mariupol in the days that followed.

However, each of the three films employs different strategies and tactics to capture the unfolding events of the assault on Mariupol. *Mariupolis 2* delves into the everyday lives of Mariupol's residents, who continue their daily routines despite their city being transformed into a war zone. The filmmakers spent a week in an Evangelical Christian Baptist church, where local residents had taken refuge, and the camera observes various everyday activities within this altered reality. *20 Days in Mariupol* retains the characteristics of journalistic reporting, but through the use of the director's voice-over, it transforms into a more emotionally resonant and reflective narrative. This voice-over, grounded in the director's personal presence during the events, creates a powerful focus on the truthful representation of the unfolding reality. In contrast, *Mariupol: The People's Story* is distinguished by its extensive use of handheld camera footage, which brings the viewer into the very heart of the war-ravaged city. The film emphasises the personal testimonies of those who survived and managed to escape, positioning these accounts as the primary means of telling Mariupol's story from within, rather than from the perspective of an external observer.

Moreover, these three films serve as a reminder that questions surrounding the truthfulness of war's representation in documentaries have become even more pressing. In an era of "green screens," artificial intelligence, propaganda, and conspiracy theories, truth is no longer simply "a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms,"<sup>27</sup> but rather a carefully constructed lie, believed not only by those for whom

<sup>26</sup> The same protesting crowd appears at the beginning of *Mariupol: The People's Story* (timestamp 00:12:27).

<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche (2010), 29.

it is intended but also by those who produce and disseminate it. The perceived objectivity of documentary footage does not necessarily reflect the truth; rather, it is the subjective perspective of the filmmaker or the film's characters that can offer deeper insights. Hence the paradox: the more personal and subjective a documentary film is, the closer it may come to the truth. In other words, documentary cinema exists because it bears witness to the truth of the person who made it.

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Narius Kairys, Nerijus Milerius

## Ar kas nors patikės? Kinematografiniai liudijimai iš Mariupolio

### *Santrauka*

Šiuolaikinį karą galima apibūdinti kaip konfliktą dėl tiesos: tikėtina, kad nugalės ta pusė, kuri veiksmingiausiai ir įtikinamiausiai pateiks savo tikrovės versiją. Kai propagandinių vaizdų iš karo zonos gausu, vykstant karui sukurtų dokumentinių filmų patikimumas išlieka abejotinas dėl galimo vaizdo turinio manipuliavimo baigiamųjų darbų etape. Šiame straipsnyje teigiame, kad tariamas dokumentinių filmų objektyvumas vis dėlto nebūtinai atspindi tiesą; veikiau priešingai – subjektyvi režisieriaus perspektyva gali suteikti gilesnių įžvalgų ir autentiškesnį liudijimą. Taigi, kuo asmeniškesnis dokumentinis filmas, tuo jis gali būti artimesnis tiesai. Šiam teiginiui pagrįsti, remdamiesi Michelio de Certeau taktikos ir strategijos sąvokomis, analizuojame tris dokumentinius filmus, liudijančius apie įvykius Mariupolyje per Rusijos invaziją į Ukrainą 2022 m.: Manto Kvedaravičiaus ir Hannos Bilobrovos „Mariupolis 2“ (2022), Mstislavo Černovo „20 dienų Mariupolyje“ (2023) ir Robino Barnwello „Mariupolis: žmonių istorija“ (2022). Filmai sukurti remiantis skirtingomis kinematografinėmis taktikomis ir strategijomis (Kvedaravičiaus filmo atveju – etnografinė; Černovo filme – reportažinė; Barnwello – naudota rasta medžiaga), visi jie yra unikalūs kinematografiniai liudijimai su karu susijusių žiniasklaidos produktojamų vaizdų atžvilgiu. Jie ne tik atskleidžia Mariupolio gyventojų patirtį karo katastrofos akivaizdoje, bet ir parodo, kaip taikaus miesto peizažas virsta fatališku karovaizdžiu.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Mantas Kvedaravičius, Mstislav Černov, dokumentinis kinemas, karovaizdis, Ukraina