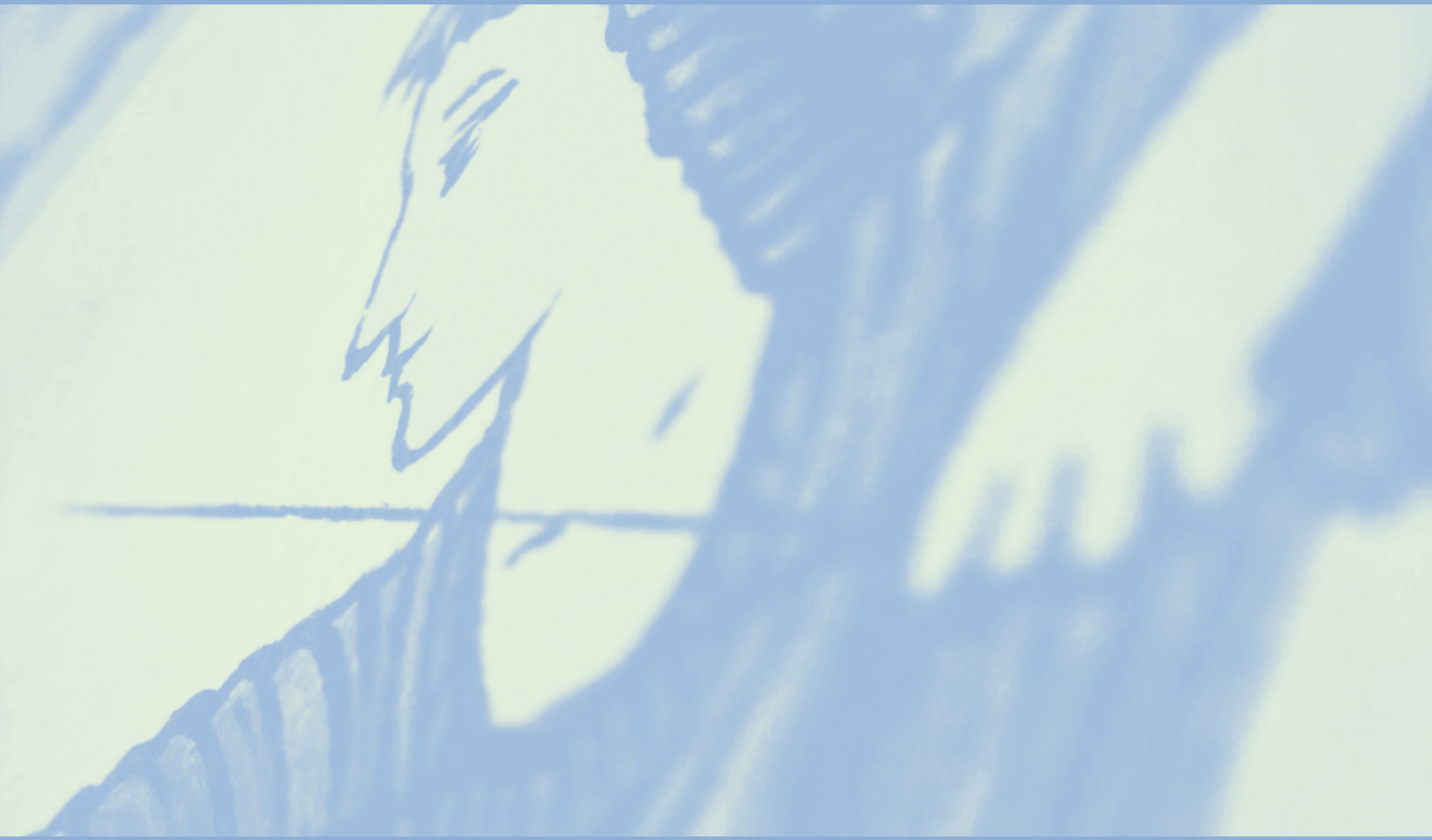
MARIUPOLIS

a film by Mantas Kvedaravicius

66 Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin
Panorama

In short:

A man repairs his fishing net and goes out to the bridge. Two trams run into each other – nobody is hurt and cables are fixed the same day. A small concert is given for factory workers and the sincere performance of a violinist makes them cry. Bombs fall into the sea, no one notices.



Story, as told a month before 9th of May, 2015:

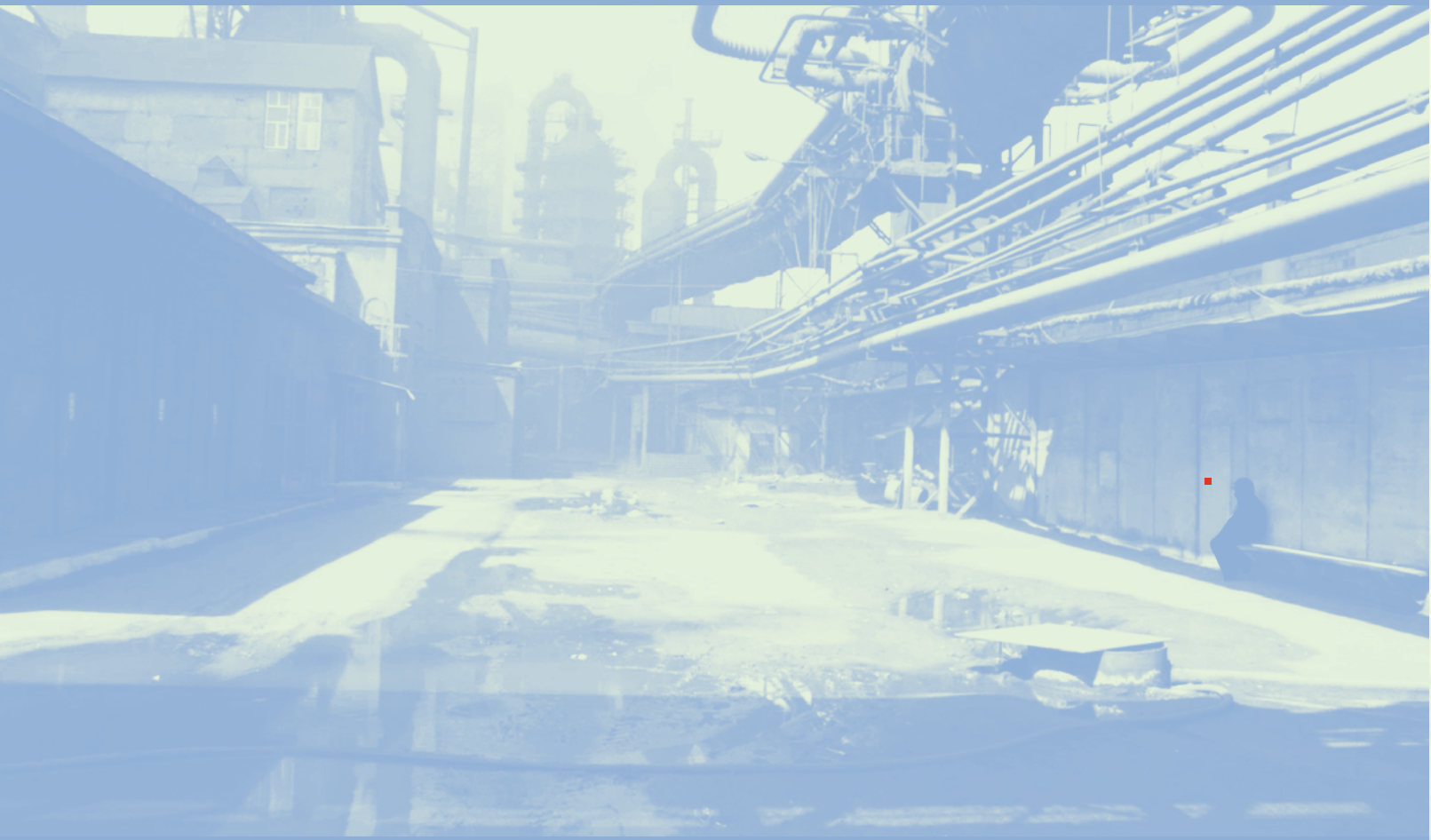
The city of Mariupole is by the Azov sea. It is also on the river Kalmius. Most of the city's residents, half a million according to the last census, are working for the steel factory and do fishing, for leisure or food, in between shifts. The Orthodox church towers above the city, and its newly build bronze domes are sitting next to it, waiting to be donned. A tent near by is sheltering a crying icon, which receives a steady flow of visitors. The train station opens at five each morning, yet no trains are coming for the last few months.

The rail bridge has been blown up recently; these are times of war. More precisely and accordingly to Ukrainian officials and the representatives of the newly established pro-Russian republics in Eastern Ukraine, it should be truce – peremirja, literally in-between-peace. As the bombs fall in the outskirts of Mariupole and gun battles are louder than the church bells, it feels like war is coming to the city, instead.

It is Spring of 2015 and 9th of May, the Day of WWII Victory Celebration, is considered by common opinion to be the date when the city will be attacked again. The Ukrainian and Russian allegiances and divisions of the city with a messed-up history only become more strongly felt: waiting for war is either waiting for the liberation or the catastrophe. In spite of all that, or maybe precisely because of it, life continues in a marvelous way: the heavy presence of half uniformed men and cannonades, proximity of rumors and death seem to make love and joy only thicker.

Sartana, a suburb of Mariupole according to the city's cartographers, is predominantly Greek. Fifty houses have been destroyed here recently, a funeral procession has been bombed on another occasion (from whose side the missiles came is only starting point of discussion here). The front line runs in the nearby fields. Still, more residents stayed than left. The House of Culture in the center of Sartana (its Soviet inheritance, as an institution promoting the cultural life - intact) is not only functioning, but also vehemently preparing for yet another celebration. There is a Greek play to be rehearsed, ancient dances to be performed, and the WWII veteran songs to be sung. The small orchestra playing in a tiny corner room on the second floor takes part in all that. They also have agendas of their own (Marina, the violonist, does not live nearby, she has to take a red tram and a yellow bus through Mariupole to come to rehearsals each Wednesday and Friday).

The zoo in Sartana is just a bit further down the street, next to the park and the church. A couple of lions, a bear, and a few lamas, as well as cows are there; fields were recently mined and there is no space to pasture them. While some milk goes to the soldiers stationed nearby, bombing and shortage of means keep animals anxious. Nonetheless, the zookeepers,



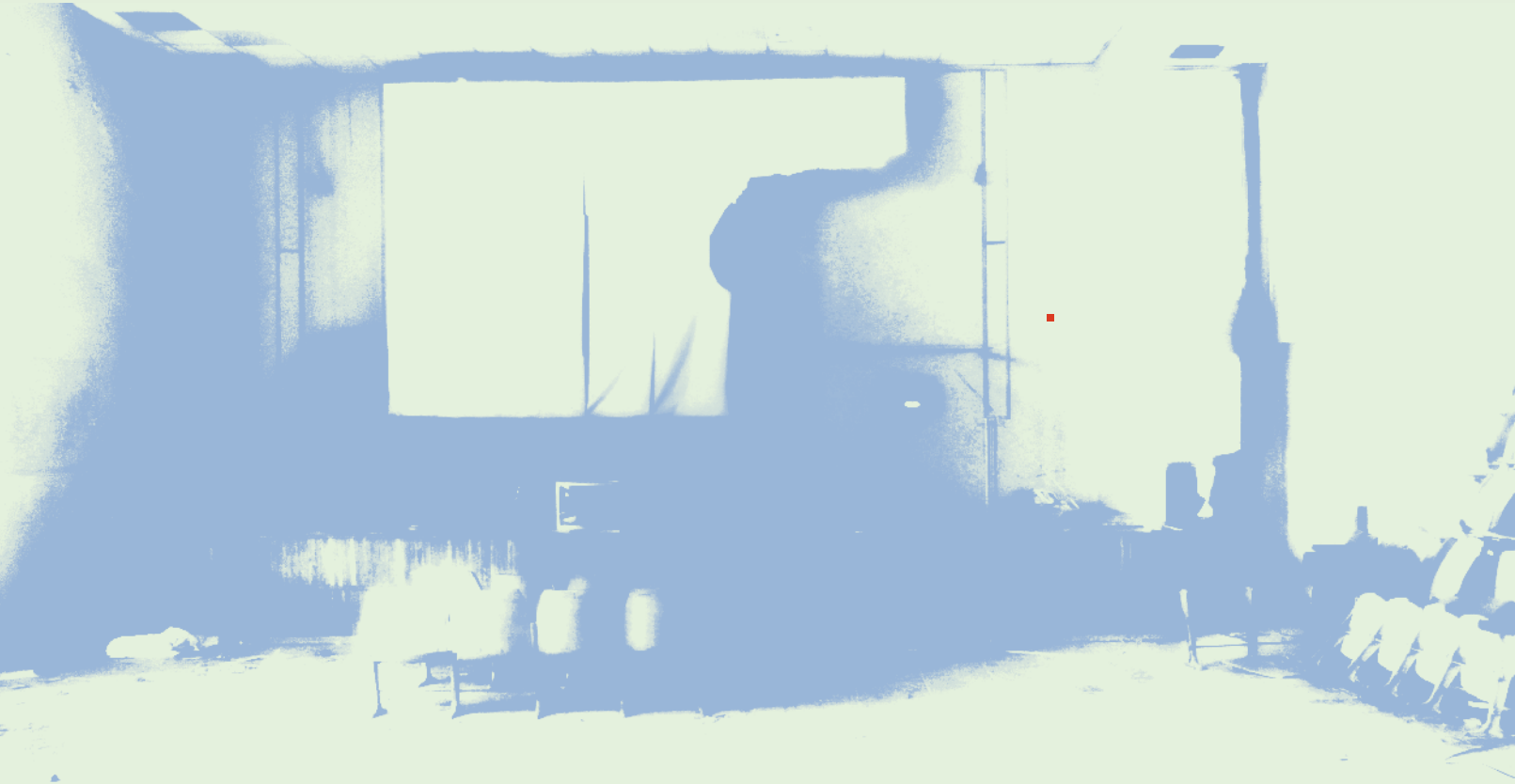
with weathered faces and lives, are looking after them with admirable care. The owner, given the circumstances, plans to relocate the animals to a newly built zoo in the midst of the city and some to the park of the steel factory. The factory - as some musicians from the House of Culture working there fear - is not going through the best times.

The semi-functioning zoo and the river, the House of Culture and the omnipresent factory chimneys (with sometimes orange and sometimes black, and on occasions green smoke) are perfectly seen from the belfry of the church where Pavel plays bells each Sunday. The smoke coming from the village of Shirokino in the outskirts of Mariupole is very well seen from there as well.

Shirokino is by the sea in a valley between two hills. There is a House of Culture there as well, on the western hill, and a school on the eastern. The eastern hills are controlled by the fighters of the newly established pro-Russian republic; the western ones - by Ukrainian paramilitary groups. In between the two hills, in this abandoned village, there are stray animals and a monument to Pushkin, who rested there on his way to exile and, they say, woke up inspired. The House of Culture hosts Mongol and nine other men of his combat unit. The cinema hall on the third floor is used as a shooting platform, targeting the eastern hills, whereas the school is used by the other side for similar purposes. The library on the second floor serves as bedroom and kitchen.

The canteen on the ground floor is used as shelter during the heavy missile fire. In the few daily hours when the fighting subsides (truce time is between 11am and 5pm, monitored by European observers), they play, drink, and sing. Mongol has recently used, strategically, fifty new refrigerators (found in the basement) to give his unit extra protection; he is a taking-care-rather-than-power-on kind of commander. It is their second month of fighting and the stakes are high. Shirokino and the House of Culture is the last line of defense for Mariupole, and, some say, the whole coast of the Black sea. The last nights before they go to rest are intense and fearful. Returning back to the city is joyful.

Marina, the violinst who lives on the other side of Mariupole and takes the red tram and then the yellow bus through the checkpoints each Wednesday and Friday to play violin in the tiny room on the second floor of the House of Culture in the Greek village with the zoo (the model of the tram she takes comes from the late 30's as are the faces, outfits and instruments of the workers that fix them) now fixes her shoes with the shoemaker Valera. Valera's shop, where he takes care of the city's residents walking needs (and some of the shoes from the dancing group of Sartana) is at the very center of Mariupole, by the house where Hitler, it is said, had stayed when he visited the town. Valera also keeps birds and makes keys. The wedding of his daughter, Albina, is modest but joyful. The groom's side is unfortunately absent, while the bride strongly supports the Ukrainian side and is



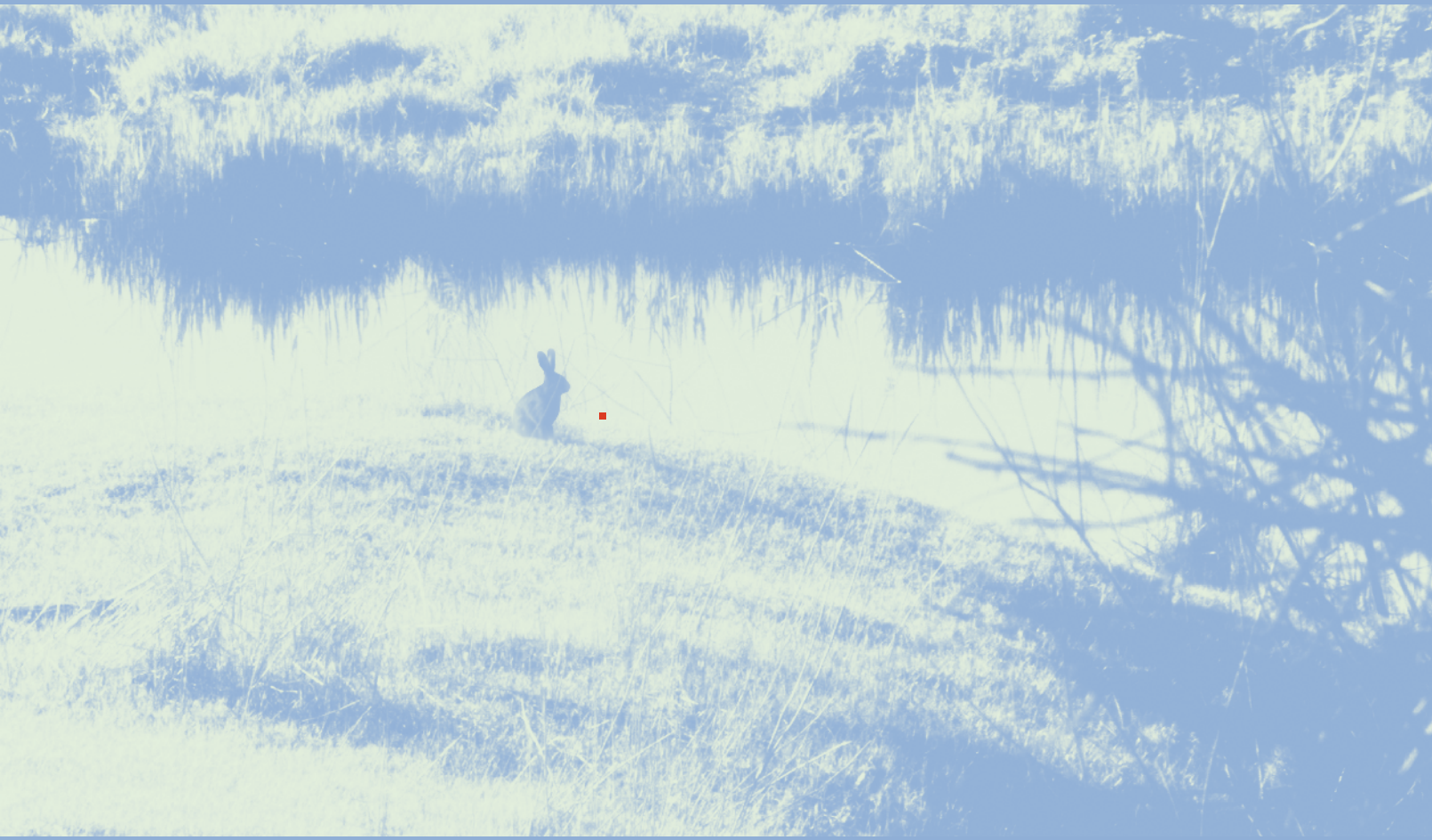
settled to become a war journalist. Her red-haired mother is already fearless and famous at that. Albina recently has been reporting from the paramilitary base where Mongol's battalions is stationed: a delicately built former Soviet pioneer camp by the sea, where newcomers and old soldiers have military training, history lessons and church services before and after frontline battles (Vega, the girl in Mongol's unit, not yet in her twenties, is extremely good with explosives, at least half the battalion is in awe admiration with her). While Albina takes news assignment to go to the front line, for reasons unknown she drops it and starts following the trial of a fisherman. The fisherman, a co-worker of the accordionists from the Greek suburb, is fined for 220 grivinas (9 Euros), for the seven fishes he caught in the river by the factory (there is yet a law to be passed that would penalize the harvest of fish that go bottoms-up to the surface after stray missiles hit the sea). Valera, his shoemaker, lends him money. The House of Culture, during a rehearsal of the play loosely based on some Greek myth, barely avoids another rocket. Albina witnesses death for the first time.

But the film is about something else, something else than absurdity, sneakiness, and surreal in times of wars: it is about voice, materiality, and body of the off historicity, mimesis, desire. It is a question of the question of tragedy, the non-representable at the expense of the image.

Or else, it is a reflection on the poem once written by a mad Chilean author. It is a dedication to the poets and shoemakers of Mariupolis.

Listen carefully, my son: bombs were falling
over Mexico City
but no one even noticed.
The air carried poison through
the streets and open windows.
You'd just finished eating and were watching
cartoons on TV.
I was reading in the bedroom next door
when I realized we were going to die.
Despite the dizziness and nausea I dragged myself
to the kitchen and found you on the floor.
We hugged. You asked what was happening
and I didn't tell you we were on death's program
but instead that we were going on a journey,
one more, together, and that you shouldn't be afraid.
When it left, death didn't even
close our eyes.
What are we? you asked a week or year later,
ants, bees, wrong numbers
in the big rotten soup of chance?
We're human beings, my son, almost birds,
public heroes and secrets

Roberto Bolaño



Note:

This film emerges from the research that conceptually lingers on the notion of negativity in its tight relation to affective and aesthetic states and forms. It engages with and explores the claims loosely clustered around the concept and the visualization of the 'non-representable', especially in relation to the body and its limit experiences. Deflecting from post-human renditions on the body and questioning the current turn towards ontology, it attempts to understand the co-implication of political materialities, bodies, and aesthetics while working within literary and cinematic medias. It is part of the long term film project on dispossession and desire in Odessa, Istanbul and Athens ("Stásis", produced by Studio Uljana Kim, Extimacy Films, Rouge International, Twenty Twenty Vision).

Basic premise of the project is that aesthetics and politics are intrinsically intertwined; any choice within cinematic language is already a claim. Yet, it considers that long term cinematic observation of the minutae of everyday life could precisely unravel the complex historicity and cultural forces at work in a transformation of the polity. It attempts to rarify visually reality at stake and holds that during the state of emergency the make-up of social order and human conflict can manifest and be

cinematically unraveled in unexpected ways. Hence this film is an attempt to understand the complexity and interrelation of nationalism, religion and history; to pick on the role of art forms – music, painting, theatre – as they intertwine with the mechanisms of war; to bring to the fore the involvement of industry and human labor in such situation; to question the established ideas about human and non-human agency and the role of representation in creation of contemporary conflicts; on the different register to speak about absurdity of war and resilience and joys of human life.

On an obvious and urgent level, these are critical gestures towards the practices of global media culturethat incessantly indulges in, and indulge us in, normative and othering representations of the human body, while bracketing subjectivity and excessively staging new forms of subalternities, sexualities and dystopias. Simultaneously, it is an invitation to rethink the body politic and bodily excess beyond the focus of contemporary art on bodily performances and bio-art in their implications within high-end technologies. It is the inquiry into the formation of visuality in the process of sensing the other, in the classical ethical sense, and asking how visuality organises our sensibilities, even more, how it produce certain affects and materialities that work in the register of the non-representable.

Author:

Mantas Kvedaravicius teaches visual cultures and critical theory in Vilnius University and conducts a long term film project in Athens, Istanbul and Odessa. He holds MA from University of Oxford and PhD from University of Cambridge in cultural anthropology and has a standing academic and cinematic interests in absence, materiality and body in their performative and political manifestations. His last project concentrated on disappearances and dreams in Chechnya and resulted in an award winning documentary essay “Barzakh” and a monograph “Knots of Absence”.

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