

Seeing Soldiers Work: Ukrainian Cinema and the Future of Labor

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The Ukrainian premier of *Reflection*, the latest film from director Valentyn Vasyanovych, was held at Kyiv Critics' Week in October 2022, more than a year after its theatrical premiere at the 78th Venice International Film Festival. The war in Ukraine has limited the film's domestic distribution, though Vasyanovych has indicated his primary audience is an international one. *Reflection*, like the director's previous feature *Atlantis* (2019), examines the war in Donbas from the perspective of Ukrainian servicemen, to remind viewers of the conflict that preceded Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. Vasyanovych's films give powerful expression to the horror of combat, and the trauma that pursues military veterans. Sadly, this sensitive treatment of soldiers' experience and subjectivity contrasts sharply with the formulaic representation of post-Soviet workers in *Atlantis* and *Reflection*. In both films, Vasyanovych casts the Donbas working class as a relic of the Soviet past, bereft of political consciousness and agency—a perspective that has proven still more problematic in the last year, as Putin cynically declares Ukrainian statehood to be merely a [Soviet fabrication](#), "Vladimir Lenin's Ukraine," to justify Russia's assault on the country. Given the region's history, as a crucial site of Soviet modernization, and its cultural identity as the center of the USSR's heroic working class, the Donbas proletariat demands greater attention than Vasyanovych devotes to it. Assigning a marginal position to Donbas labor and laborers, Vasyanovych's cinema reflects, and potentially reinforces the marginalization of the working class in Ukrainian political discourse, at a time when cultural production should conceptualize a place for workers beyond the battlefield.

Set in 2014, during the initial stages of the war in Donbas, *Reflection* centers on Serhiy (Roman Lutskiy), a surgeon who volunteers as a medic in a Ukrainian territorial defense battalion deployed to Donetsk. Serhiy is captured by pro-Russia separatists, tortured, and forced to observe the brutalizing of fellow Ukrainian soldiers—including Andriy (Andriy Rymaruk), the current partner of Serhiy's ex-wife. Released in a prisoner exchange, Serhiy quickly succumbs to PTSD, and struggles to resume his daily life in Dnipro. The aftermath of military conflict is also central to *Atlantis*, ostensibly a work of science fiction set in 2025, one year after a war between Ukraine and Russia. In the film, Ukraine has achieved military victory only to secure a Donbas devastated by ecological catastrophe, a landscape of flooded mines and unexploded ordnance. Assuming the standpoint of the conflict's survivors, *Atlantis* reveals how the war has overdetermined life in its totality, dictating whatever form the *time after* might assume.

The proximity of war and everyday life is central to *Atlantis* and *Reflection*, and Vasyanovych, who has a background in cinematography and documentary, has developed a cinematic language suited to this subject. Serhiy returns from Donetsk precisely at the mid-point of *Reflection*; images from his civilian life recall ones first encountered in the context of war, in a mirroring of forms and compositions between the film's two halves. In *Atlantis*, fixed long takes record landscapes ravaged by war and industrial decline, mapping the lingering presence of past violence. Vasyanovych's cinematography exploits the forensic potential of the image, the way the scrutinized character or

location produces evidentiary detail. The visual predominates in his work, and sound is correspondingly deemphasized: his films contain minimal dialogue, and the earlier feature *Black Level* (2017) dispenses with spoken language entirely. In approaching the Donbas conflict, Vasyanovych also prioritizes the realia of war, evident in his preference for non-professional actors, including military veterans. Over the past year, this artistic ideology expanded to the documentation of war itself. In [a statement to the Federation of European Screen Directors](#), published the day after Russia's invasion began, Vasyanovych expressed his intention to remain in Kyiv, "to be among people who are aware of their ethnic, cultural and political affiliation," allowing him to "create true stories" about the city's residents. As the war unfolded across Ukraine last spring, the director reportedly filmed the fighting and its aftermath near the capital.

Vasyanovych's cinema confidently asserts its capacity to access the reality of war, as well as the recursive effects of psychological trauma. Simultaneously, *Reflection* interrogates how trauma can distort perception, as illumination gives way to illusion, enlightenment to misdirection. After he returns to Dnipro, a pigeon dies colliding with the window of Serhiy's apartment, startling his daughter. "I think it saw a reflection of the sky in our window," he explains. The pigeon mistakes death for freedom—like those who imagine they have returned from the front by escaping the trenches and prisons of Donbas. Long after the pigeon meets its end, its pattern marks the window, a spectral memorial filtering perception of the outside world. Whether after the conflict, or outside the conflict zone, Vasyanovych's characters continue to see the war, or at least see through it: vision itself is restructured, self-identity reconstituted.

In exploring Serhiy's psychological development, Vasyanovych employs visual metaphors that translate the protagonist's interiority to the screen, charting his journey from combat and captivity to post-deployment efforts at recovery. By comparison, *Reflection* attributes far less psychological complexity to Ukrainian workers. During Serhiy's imprisonment, he is forced to deliver the corpses of Ukrainian POWs for disposal in an incinerator, imported from Russia (in a truck marked "Humanitarian Aid," no less) to render the war invisible. The operator of the incinerator, a Donetsk native, explains his dream of buying a used car to operate as a taxi, even asserting the purchase would allow him to achieve "freedom." In pursuit of this aspiration, he considers selling a prosthetic hip joint, salvaged from the incinerator, on the black market. Disappointed to learn the sale won't be possible, the man instead accepts a bribe to secretly bury the corpse of a Ukrainian serviceman, which Serhiy negotiates to facilitate the retrieval of the body by the soldier's family. One way or another, the incinerator operator will derive income from the remains of the war's casualties. Economic conditions in Donbas, which likely precipitated his impoverishment, go unremarked, and the anonymous man is instead subjected to moral evaluation.

A stock character in a horrific scenario, the incinerator operator is not a sympathetic individual, though he is representative of the way Vasyanovych sees the Donbas working class: feckless, ideologically disengaged, essentially indentured. We could ask who would be the fare in this hypothetical taxi, though *Reflection* is not interested in the answer. A scene in *Atlantis*, on the floor of a Donbas steel works, offers similar commentary. A representative of foreign management announces that the facility will close for renovation, then invites the now-redundant workers to drink. Debating how the plant has ceased to be profitable, one employee turns on the protagonist (also named Serhiy; also played by Andriy Rymaruk), a fellow worker and veteran of the Ukrainian military; he never asked Serhiy to defend him on the front, he claims, and at least there was steady employment before the war. The argument escalates, and fighting ensues. Like the incinerator operator in *Reflection*, Serhiy's antagonist is put forth as representative of a working class that is prepared to serve any master, having abandoned its political convictions and commitments.

As the manager addresses the steel workers, his face is displayed on a large video screen; afterward, his image is replaced by footage from Dziga Vertov's *Enthusiasm: The Symphony of the Donbass*

(1930), which is projected behind the workers as they argue and fight. Vertov's first sound film, *Enthusiasm* documents the drive to industrialize eastern Ukraine, locating the "voice" of the Donbas proletariat in Soviet modernization. Nearly a century later, *Atlantis* counter-narrates the proletarian experience heralded by *Enthusiasm*. Vasyanovych ironically juxtaposes Vertov's heroization of miners and metallurgists with the ongoing collapse of Donbas industry. In place of Vertov's celebration of a collectivized, politically conscious proletariat, *Atlantis* portrays Donbas workers as politically atomized, framing the triumphant portrayal of labor in *Enthusiasm* as an archaic ideological construct. Simultaneously, the steelworks scene in *Atlantis* critiques the idea that Ukraine's hard-won Western orientation will ensure prosperity, demonstrating how market liberalism facilitates the raiding of the country's industrial capital (a reading the director [has endorsed](#)).

Whereas Vertov applies the bellicose rhetoric of the Five-Year Plan to industrial and agricultural labor, characterizing Soviet shock workers and *kolkhoz* brigades as "fighters in the front line of fire," Vasyanovych traces a more literal conjunction of labor and militancy. In *Atlantis*, war replaces factory work as a professional opportunity: military veterans continue to conduct target practice, and one considers a mercenary career abroad. With the closing of the metalworks, a former employee considers salvage work on the "19 kilometers of bridge" that has collapsed in Crimea, a reference to the Kerch Strait Bridge connecting the annexed Crimean Peninsula to Russia (and the site of a recent explosion that collapsed part of the bridge). Remaining in Donbas, Serhiy is hired to deliver fresh water to workers and soldiers, and contributes to the work of Black Tulip, an NGO that locates and identifies the remains of combatants. Though more hopeful, his work is also a form of salvage, economic activity borne of destruction.

Atlantis and *Reflection* accurately depict the relentless devastation of Donbas, and the way the war has accelerated the dispossession of the region's workers; and yet, both films portray the workers themselves as enfeebled, having long sacrificed any ideology beyond self-preservation. The war veterans of *Atlantis* complain that their fellow factory workers, those who declined to take up arms, want "a tsar to come and solve all their problems." In a [Radio Liberty interview](#), Vasyanovych critiques the same characters in similar terms, asserting that their "ability to manage their own lives has atrophied" across generations of industrial employment. The workers, he contends, longing for the stability of the Soviet welfare state, are eager to cede personal responsibility to factory management or the government, including those of the separatist authorities of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Unfortunately, this perspective is not uncommon among the Ukrainian (or more broadly, post-Soviet) intelligentsia; it also reflects a general evaluation of the post-Soviet working class, for which the Donbas proletariat is emblematic. Vasyanovych developed *Reflection* in collaboration with project consultant Stanislav Aseyev, a Ukrainian journalist abducted by separatist forces in Donbas in 2017. Aseyev survived 28 months in the infamous Izolyatsia prison, a former insulating materials factory and arts center in Donetsk, which was seized by pro-Russia militants in 2014, and used as a black site for detention, interrogation, and torture. In his essay collection *In Isolation: Dispatches from Occupied Donbas*, Aseyev also presents the region's working class as passive and apathetic, as well as nostalgic for the Soviet period—not in ideological terms, but emotional ones. For the post-Soviet proletariat, "Lenin is Kashtan ice cream for 28 kopecks and a warm May rally with their dads in 1979," an experience of comfort and complacency. Aseyev not only invokes the sociological construct of *Homo sovieticus*, the pejorative *sovok* paradigm, as characteristic of the Donbas population, but formulates the model of *Homo donbasus*, a figure marked by disillusionment and indifference.

Considering the challenges faced by Donbas in the post-Soviet period, and the consistent disempowerment of the region's workers, disillusionment seems all but inevitable. The Donbas

economy declined more precipitously than that of other parts of Ukraine after 1991, amidst oligarchic privatization of industrial assets. The war in Donbas wrought considerable damage to the regional economy, which only accelerated with Russia's military invasion, and the concentration of fighting in eastern and southern Ukraine. Simultaneously, Ukrainian economic policy has done little to improve the conditions or prospects of the Donbas working class. Since 2014, Ukraine has rapidly deindustrialized, signaling the further erosion of workers' position in the nation's economy. In the same post-Maidan period, the Ukrainian left has been systematically marginalized, with numerous opposition parties banned in an ongoing process of "de-communization." This contraction of Ukraine's electoral field denies a political voice to disenfranchised workers, compounded by the dismantling of progressive labor legislation. Over the last year, the Ukrainian government passed multiple amendments to the labor code, substantially weakening employment rights. Law 5371, ratified in August 2022, removes labor protections for approximately 70% of Ukraine's workers, and curtails the authority of trade unions during the period of martial law—a sunset provision that was only added [under pressure from unions](#). Meanwhile, the government continues to pursue economic liberalization, advocating privatization, deregulation, and other policies that are arguably [illogical for a war economy](#). Proposed plans for Ukraine's reconstruction also favor corporate interests, but they include no provisions for state-led restoration of the industrial sector.

Whenever the fighting in Ukraine ends, Donbas faces the potential of permanent economic damage, which is likely to disproportionately impact the region's working class; the "losers" of the post-Soviet transition, as current policy and post-war planning suggest, have been consigned to lose once more. Typically focused on middle-aged, middle-class protagonists adrift, Vasyanovych's films fail to register the ongoing degradation of the post-Soviet proletariat, as well as the potential implications for Ukraine's political future. By eliding labor from his cinema, the director demonstrates a tendency common to the post-Soviet intelligentsia, which, [as Ilya Budraitskis argues](#), identifies its mission in a battle with the communist past. This "struggle with remnants," Budraitskis notes, leads to the "dematerialization of reality"; in the case of Vasyanovych, a filmmaker committed to realism and documentary veracity, this distorts the representation of post-Soviet Ukraine, and limits critical perspective on its future. While *Reflection* and *Atlantis* illuminate the traumatic outcome of ongoing violence in Donbas, they are also indicative of a broader post-Soviet effort to deconstruct Soviet representations of heroic labor, positing an antipathy between intellectual and proletarian constituencies. Vasyanovych has developed a modernist cinematic idiom that concedes a failed modernity project, content to aestheticize its ruins. Instead, his work should utilize the resources of the modernist legacy to represent collective experience, delivering complex, fully dimensional portraits of the working class, and rigorous analysis of economic and social conditions. When the war in ends, it will be urgent to envision a future for Donbas workers beyond the military and its residue, a future based in solidarity and progressive action, to ensure participation of the working class in the Ukrainian political project. For now, even as Russia attempts to absorb Donbas, and fighting in the region continues, it is critical to bear in mind that such a future is attainable, and to bring its representation to international cinema audiences.

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