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**TITLE:**

**Frontline: Writer/Director Iryna Tsilyk on filmmaking in Ukraine during the Russo-Ukrainian War (2014-)**

Iryna Tsilyk is a filmmaker and writer born in 1982 in Kyiv. Since 2014 her work has captured the events that followed Russia’s invasion and annexation of Crimea, the subsequent war in the Donbas, and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine which took place in February 2022.

Iryna’s short film *Home* (2016) was included in the short film collection *Ukrainian New Wave 20/16+* and her films *Tayra* and *Kid* formed part of the anthology documentary *Invisible Battalion* (Dir. Gorlova, Lishchynska, Tsilyk, 2017)released as part of a global advocacy project that documented the participation of Ukrainian women in the conflict.

Her own debut feature documentary *The Earth Is Blue as an Orange* won the Directing Award at the Sundance Film Festival in 2020, and formed part of the official selection for Berlinale, IDFA, CPH:DOX, Hot Docs and more than 100 other international film festivals. The film featured single mother Hanna Gladka and her four children, bringing to life the family’s experience as residents of the front-line war zone in Donbas, Ukraine.

Iryna is also the author of eight books of poetry and short stories published both in Ukraine and having been translated into a number of languages. Her next project is the feature-length fiction film *Rock. Paper. Grenade*, adapted from the novel “Who are you?” by Ukrainian novelist, and Iryna’s husband, Artem Chekh.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

You studied filmmaking in Kyiv in the 2000s. Can you talk about that experience?

**IRYNA TSILYK**

When I started in film school it was during a period of stagnation and depression in the Ukrainian film industry following the collapse of the Soviet Union [in 1991]. These were times of poverty and uncertainty, cinema art is highly dependent on funding and suffered greatly compared to other arts and because of that our teachers hadn’t had the opportunity to shoot anything new and were subsequently losing skills and, perhaps, some kind of connection with reality. I graduated as a Director of Television in 2004 and started my work in advertising. That was quite a cool school of practise where I had the chance to meet different professionals which was really useful, but advertising was a completely different world to cinema which I already dreamed of and I realised that I had a choice – to either do something else or commit to becoming an advertising director. I decided to take a break and moved to the countryside for three years with my husband. We had a real downshifting and the time helped me put things on the right track. When I came back to the city, something had changed. The Ukrainian State Film Agency were supporting younger directors and I got opportunities first to shoot short films, and eventually made my debut feature documentary and fiction films.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

Your work from that period and beyond has been characterised as forming part of a Ukrainian New Wave in cinema. Can you describe how it felt to find your voice as a filmmaker in a nation that was redefining itself?

**IRYNA TSILYK**

It was some kind of revival. It was very fresh, and I’m glad I was able to be a participant. We had endured a time of depression in our film industry, but had started reinventing the wheel in some way. It had a lot of energy as Ukrainian cinema was changing so fast from year to year. Of course, there are obvious reasons why it is happening, especially during the last eight or nine years where everything has accelerated since the revolution. Almost all the filmmakers I know grabbed cameras, even smartphones, to capture the moment. They had a chance to shoot unique footage and the result has been some really strong documentaries and fiction films in the last few years. I think most of us want to react on what is happening to us, as a nation. The war situation makes it less easy to use the tools of fictional film because usually fiction needs distance between the situation itself and the artist who wants to reflect on the situation.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

After the invasion and annexation of Crimea, your work took a radical turn. It has an immediacy and brings the places and people whose stories you present that perhaps in other areas of Europe, we see in the news but don't have that experiential sense of what it is to live under occupation or live with conflict, so close to your doorstep. The main shift was your moved from fictional shorts to documentary and resulting in your contributions to *Invisible Battalion* – can you describe how that was connected to the overthrow of the Ukrainian Government that took place in 2014?

**IRYNA TSILYK**

You know I moved into documentary by accident and had never thought that I could be a documentary filmmaker. I'd never studied documentary. After the Revolution of Dignity [of 2014] many filmmakers started to try. Many of my colleagues did some fantastic things and I found that really inspiring. There was a moment when one of my friends, a very well-known activist Maria Berlinska, found the budget to make a film about the women who were fighting to defend Ukraine. She proposed *Invisible Battalion* to me. It was unexpected because I’d never tried something like that before, but I told her yes immediately.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

Can you talk through your experience of shooting your two films for *Invisible Battalion*?

**IRYNA TSILYK**

It was completely new territory for me and I was learning while I was shooting. Of course, I made some mistakes, but I found that magical energy of documentary filmmaking. When you are observing real people, strong personalities doing incredible things, you feel that you are doing something important. I think all artists experienced a metamorphosis during the first few years after the invasion of Ukraine. We asked ourselves what could we do? How can we react? What is happening to us? Some took weapons in their arms but I try to convince myself that storytelling is a weapon too – a tool to tell stories of the people around us, and to show the world what was really happening here. The experience of *Invisible Battalion* was really special, and full of challenges.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

The people you were documenting were subject to intense trauma, and each part of the film states what these individuals did prior to the invasion, outside of the conflict, and how they had stepped into their wartime roles. Can you describe how you encouraged them to speak openly with you and your team?

**IRYNA TSILYK**

My first experience was with Tayra, the combat paramedic in the film. She was a complicated person. She could be very open one day but close down the next, and we spent a lot of time with her. The first lesson for me was that the most important thing in making documentary portraits was to find the key to each personality and character. There were just three of us; me, my cinematographer, and my sound engineer. We arrived at the frontline where these paramedics were based and spent nine days with them. On the first two days Tayra was really open but she was expecting a fast process, as usually the TV journalists would come, shoot people very fast and then go. When she realised that we were waiting for something more and wanted to observe her during her daily routine and different situations, she became distant and even tried to avoid us. We didn't know what to do. We were just waiting and waiting. When you are waiting for nine days but don't know what you are waiting for, it's not that easy to inspire your crew.

We talked to Tayra and explained that we didn’t intend to invade some secret or intimate territory of her life but at the same time wanted to show something sincere and that to do that she needed to be more open. Then we were filming her on the 9th May, which is Victory Day in Russia [commemorating the victory over Nazi Germany in 1945. Ukraine prefers to celebrate it on the 8th May ]. It was a day of shelling, some people were injured and we were filming Tayra trying to save a young guy. He was 19 years old and after she brought that injured man to the hospital, sadly, he died. We felt powerless and realised that we were witnessing something terrible. I was asking myself ‘should I stop filming, in this heartbreaking moment? Should I just stop?’ It's real life, you have to make decisions fast and don't have a chance for the second take but, in that moment, Tayra told us it was OK to continue. This event became the climax of the film and I was really grateful to her for giving us a chance to show her not only as a brave paramedic who saves lives, but that were many moments like that where she was not able to save someone – the front line is full of those situations.

By the way, this year Tayra was taken captive by Russians in March. For three months she was in captivity before she was freed. I didn’t have a chance to talk to her after the liberation. I know this strong woman wasn’t broken but she went through terrible trials.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

That’s a great example of how the film captures its subjects as fully rounded people rather than characters and that sincerity you describe is evident in your filmmaking.

**IRYNA TSILYK**

On one hand, viewers think that you propose truth, but I always understand myself as being the author of the film, seeing the result of my choices. Which character am I observing? What am I filming? How do I put shots in the edit together? It's my author's view on these characters and is one of many possible versions of that truth that I can tell the viewer about these people. I'm scared about this responsibility that documentary filmmakers have, because of the ability to manipulate reality. When I tell stories about real people with their real fears and dreams and lives, I have a sense that I need to be careful. It's not easy, and I took away a bunch of important lessons from that *Invisible Battalion*. When I'm working through footage looking for shots, I remind myself that it’s my relationships with the characters that is most important. The authenticity of any film comes through that relationship between the director and their subject, right? You need to remember that you're giving these people a voice through your own eyes.

Of course, when you arrive with your camera into someone else's life, you immediately change it. I realise that I somehow manipulate them because I want to tell *my* story about them but I am always asking myself - am I being fair to the subject, am I being fair to the viewer? I see it as a symbiotic relationship that is built and created together with my characters. As a director I try to create a reality where my subjects forget about the camera, and for those people to trust me fully. That really matters to me. It is a complicated choreography and partly comes from experience, but mostly from intuition.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

It’s striking in your films how you show moments of happiness, people being real in that environment - not just as combatants but having a life of joy, whether that’s enjoying sunshine on their face or the wind in their hair. Why is that important for you?

**IRYNA TSILYK**

Whether I'm shooting combatants or civilians who live in the frontline zone, I try to put on their shoes and find some kind of light. Life is full of beauty, and people are full of life - even in the war zone. It really surprised me when I started to go into this combat zone that there are plenty of people who can inspire us. In my second film, I wanted to show that life is full of poetry and that there are plenty of moments of stillness and beauty around us. I'm trying to find the answers for my own questions.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

*The Earth is Blue as an Orange* is your debut full length feature documentary and my own introduction to your work. It played on the BBC here as part of the *Storyville* documentary strand and brings home the message you articulate that people will always make the best of their lives, how that doesn't stop in a conflict or an invasion or an occupation. Life continues. It’s a beautiful film.

**IRYNA TSILYK**

I had a chance to tell a story about women and to focus on the experience of children in the war zone. We spent one year together with the family in the story, coming again and again to this small town in the war zone and living together with them. I wanted to do something active somehow and not to be only the passive that victims of this war and it really helped me. A useful lesson for me was when one of the children was going to enter film school, I really wanted to shoot the process of exams despite her not wanting me to. Of course, You don't want to be followed by people with camera because it highlights you for the teachers and the other students but I really wanted to shoot it and we almost had a conflict. I felt I was losing something really important between us and there was a moment when I had a chance to destroy our friendship and sincere relationship Later, I understood that stopping was the right decision because it's like in the any kind of other relationship – whether friendship or love. You should trust yourself and if you feel that you are doing something wrong you need to stop before you can destroy everything.

Sadly, many of the locations from the film don't exist anymore, the school is ruined and Hanna told me that her neighbours had called and told that her house is partially destroyed but luckily that all of them are doing well and we are still friends. They were in Kiev in February when invasion began because we were going to go all together to the Lithuanian premiere. That was really scary because, you know, I was responsible for my family and at the same time felt a huge responsibility for them. We were able to help them to flee, they moved away from the country and, though they miss home, they are trying to live a normal life in Vilnius.

It's a whole other story about the people have left Ukraine and what they'll come back to, the rebuilding of the country when the war will be over. The amount of diaspora out in the world is incredible, in that there are places go in that they're safe, but we need to think about how and when they return. I changed a lot too. I was different person with different optics when I was filming this film. When the war came to my city too, it changed my attitude to many things. I found myself speechless, I couldn’t have any distance between myself and the reality anymore. But now I feel that I am coming back to myself.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

*The Earth is Blue as an Orange* took Hanna and her family’s experience into the world, it won an award at Sundance, played a lot of festivals and certainly brought the Ukrainian story to a wider audience prior to the full-scale invasion.

**IRYNA TSILYK**

It was quite a unique project for Ukrainian cinema in that it had this fruitful life of festivals and screenings, and was quite successful because it took won many awards. These tools of cultural diplomacy and all the Q&As and meetings with the viewers from around the world, helps to create dialogues with other people. It matters. I saw how it worked when we had the premiere at Sundance and subsequent screenings, there and there were people in the audience reacting to the film - laughing, crying and asked so many questions. It’s had screenings where people have raised money for donations, and helped to raise more than 100,000 euros for people in need. So it's a little easier for me to believe that it all matters, that the movie is not just a piece of art or some artistic expression, but it's also an instrument of some other fight.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

One of the reasons I reached out to you is that we're living through the most significant moments of European history, and how documenting the lived experience of conflict and occupation is something the news media struggles to do. For me, your work forms part of a resistance, this a propagation of ideas and telling of people's stories to try to convey an understanding to others of what it is to be conscripted or to fight for your country is an important one.

**IRYNA TSILYK**

We have somehow got used to this bizarre reality. Human beings have this capacity to get used to anything - even something this terrible and heartbreaking. During years of Russia’s war against Ukraine, I’ve been to the Donetsk and Luhansk regions many times. First, I took part in literary readings, then later I was shooting documentaries. I was trying to find any reasons to come back to the East of Ukraine, because it's become impossible to think about anything else when such a huge disaster is going on so close to you. When the war came to my city, to Kyiv, it changed everything. Before I was just the observer. I had a huge empathy for my characters and I was really connected with their lives but I was able to come back to peaceful Kyiv. When the war came here it seemed impossible - I found myself speechless and powerless and wasn't able to talk about the war to shoot or write about it. When you are at the epicentre of events, you can't be above the situation. As an artist, you need distance, otherwise you see everything in close-up and can’t be objective.

I became the mother who’s responsible for my own child trying to make the right decisions in this time of war. At one point I was sitting in the corridor in my apartment with my son, who is shaking because of the fear, listening to the sounds of shelling. This year has been very different and many artists joined the Army or have become volunteers and paramedics, including my husband. I count myself amongst the other artists who try to fight on the other fields like information and culture. Art matters and cultural diplomacy matters. At the end of the day, these films and books help us to talk with other people from other worlds and to build bridges between us.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

Can I ask how do you approach nationalist and ethno-nationalist symbolism, the danger of propagandising and the ideological implications in your work?

**IRYNA TSILYK**

Mostly I try to rely on my intuition and follow my beliefs. I follow people who inspire me and try to express and show the world of this person, but of course, it depends a lot on my beliefs, too. Talking about propaganda, it’s dangerous. I try to avoid everything related to the tools of propaganda and I feel that some red lines are very thin. Regarding ethno-nationalist symbolism, when I was shooting these female combatants, of course, their lives are full of national symbols but I don't see anything wrong with these symbols, it's just a system of recognizing like-minded people among strangers. We need something to lean on, these symbols do connect us together and the setting is in the context of facing a very cynical, Russian invasion, in fact, the genocide of Ukrainians. Meanwhile, Russians have used their tools of propaganda to show Ukrainians as some dangerous radical nationalists or even Nazis, but I know that it is bullshit. Ukraine has a very small percentage of people with these beliefs compared to many other European countries.

When the war started it divided my own life into before and after. When war comes to your country, everything changes. It changed the life of my family and my personal life. My husband is the author of 10 novels but became a soldier, first in 2015 and now in 2022. It's surreal. I'm a modern woman living in the 21st century and I'm waiting for my man who is serving in the army. I don't know how to explain this, how our lives are full of these surreal moments. As an example, at the moment everyone around me is discussing what we should do if Putin uses nuclear weapons. How should we protect ourselves? My son is 12 years old and trying to prepare himself. It's crazy and it's impossible for people who live in peaceful countries to imagine.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

Can I ask how you manage to shoot in such high-pressure environments where you're seeing these things happen in front of your eyes. How do you cope with that and what thoughts go through your mind.?

**IRYNA TSILYK**

You never know what the right decision is and there are no clear rules around morals and ethics. We should trust ourselves and, more importantly, we should be good people. I mean, that sounds stupid, but is true. Tere there is always this balancing on a tightrope: guided by the principles of humanity. I want to take care of the feelings of my characters and not offend them in any way, and as a director I have to think about how the best and strongest material could be shot. It’s difficult…

I want to share with you something about else about these moral dilemmas, because at the moment, we have a scandal in Ukrainian cinema. Some foreign production houses have started to come to Ukraine. One producer proposed me a full -length fiction film about Bucha. Do you know this place where Russians commited atrocities against civilian people this spring? I discovered some of my colleagues had been approached and refused as well but I understand some people have started to shoot this film, staging fictional reconstructions on the real locations where atrocities had just happened. Can you imagine, where your neighbours have been tortured and killed and then you see a film crew bringing in tanks marked with the Russian Z. For me it's beyond the red line, but some filmmakers have decided that that is OK. To be devil's advocate for those filmmakers it doesn't breach that line - they think it's an important story to tell but for me it was impossible to do that while being sensitive to the community that that had experienced that so recently. My concern would be around triggering trauma in the people who live there or interfering with ongoing investigations. I understand that we should make films about everything that has happened and I think it's possible to shoot documentaries that catch the situation as the moment is unique, but I have a question of what is possible in this situation and what is not. It's challenging for filmmakers to negotiate, isn't it?

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

How do you push through the mental and physical exposure of making this kind of work, around conflict or around trauma?

**IRYNA TSILYK**

I'm trying to discover how. When I was shooting *The Earth is Blue as an Orange*, it was obvious for me. When I was observing how this family were making their own film inspired by their life in the war, they started to consider some situations that had happened to them with a different perspective. We had a very special day for all us when they were shooting an interview scene, because they wanted to use it in their film. It was the first time that they started to ask each other important questions and to answer in a sincere way. When we had first met them and asked about their traumatic experience they were always laughing, rather than talking about the experience itself. It took me time to understand that they were trying to protect themselves and hide under a mask of laughter. When they started to talk in front of the camera it was as though they had taken off their masks. I was observing the mother's face when she was listening to her children and that was such a strong experience for all of us. We were all crying and that was a moment of, you know, some collective therapy for all of us. When I found myself in the place of this mother, responsible for my own kid, I immediately understood. There is another experience when you are just the observer, the artist, but when you are a character yourself and involved in a situation there is a completely different optic.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

There is talk of a new Ukrainian wave and the spotlight on filmmakers such as yourself., in part driven by these events you’ve described, but do you have a sense of why Ukrainian stories hadn't been told or so?

**IRYNA TSILYK**

There are different reasons. First of all, it was not easy to get rid of that colonial past. For many years we've been under the shadow of all this Russian culture and where Ukrainian voices were not represented fully as our own voices. There is still a huge problem that many people from Europe and Western society in general still see us through the prism of this Russian culture and the Russian world. You know, that's quite painful and frustrating and on the one hand, we finally have the floor to talk loudly about ourselves in our own voices but on another hand, it still seems that we need to fight against these stereotypes and this perspective. It's not that easy to speak confidently about ourselves, for example using the language of cinema when we don't have enough money to shoot films with good budgets – this matters, unfortunately. We have had times of poverty, including in cinema. Only now it seems like we started to rise from the ashes like that phoenix. I see the results because I see how my colleagues write and shoot stronger and stronger works from year to year.

At the moment, we have the problem again because we have this full-scale war in the country – fiction films are paralysed and we don't have any chances to get budgets for fiction films. Only if we have some foreign, I don't know, grants, or something like that. At the same time documentary films are doing better because usually they don't need such a big budgets, but that remains a problem.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

It’s interesting in kind of many countries that have experienced this kind of imposition, that the post- colonial moment allows these very rapid emergent voices, that are quite surprising and distinct within the global filmmaking community. Can I ask you about the adaptation of your partners book *Rock. Paper. Grenade* into a fiction film. Was it shot in Ukraine?

**IRYNA TSILYK**

Yes, we filmed two years ago and it was my attempt to shoot something else, not connected with the war. Ultimately, I failed to do that because unfortunately everything that happens to us now is so strongly connected with it. My husband had written an autobiographical novel about his childhood and the shaky 1990s in Ukraine, when we started to live our own lives but at the same time our adults were broken and didn’t know how to how to balance between those realities of the Soviet and post-Soviet Ukraine.

When my husband was a boy he had a friend, his grandmother's boyfriend, who was a veteran of the Afghan war. He had PTSD and was a really traumatised person and at the same time very charismatic and cool. He knew plenty of stories and was a person who could teach you how to use the gun and at the same time, they’d be talking about classical literature. This was a real person in his life and then they lost their connection and, unfortunately, we still don't know how he ended his life.

This story as so cinematic for me that I pitched the project to the Ukrainian State Film Agency. The project presented a chance for me to shoot, not only a film about this friendship, but also about the times of our childhood and teenage years. It was a cool opportunity to look back and to consider how we became adults and, in turn, begin to understand our parents and grandparents. They were so broken on the one hand, but influenced us on different levels. Now I'm adult and also a mother, whenever I make my own mistakes I see my mother and father with fresh eyes. I have another perspective to look at our adults and probably to forgive them something. So this film has few different layers but is mostly about relationships between broken adults and teenagers but also about the possibility to put on the shoes of the other person. When he was a boy and then a teenager my husband hated the military because he saw every single day a person who was so deeply traumatised by the experience of war. He never expected that he would become a

soldier too. Again, this film is not about the war, but it's about us and about the Ukraine in which we live and all these processes that have influenced my generation.

**MAI: KINGSLEY MARSHALL**

Can you talk about what’s next after *Rock. Paper. Grenade*?

**IRYNA TSILYK**

I want to make animation documentary. I’m really curious and interested in this experience, I’m a big fan of *Waltz with Bashir* and would like to be able to talk about my own personal experience and female perspective of the war. For me, the instrument of animation offers a way to talk about something intimate, especially when we want to show something that has happened without having to shoot reconstructions, staged shots with actors or interviews. I know that animated films are bloody expensive and a really long process but I want to try it.