

A FILM BY
VALENTYN VASYANOVYCH

REFLECTION

78
MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE
D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2021
Official Selection



**"A COMPELLING STATEMENT ON THE HORRORS
OF ARMED CONFLICT, SPECIFICALLY [IN] THE EARLY DAYS
OF THE STILL-ONGOING RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR."**

— Variety

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125 minutes | Ukraine | Ukrainian and Russian with English subtitles
5.1 Surround Sound & 2.0 Stereo | Aspect Ratio 2:39:1



SYNOPSIS

In 2014, Ukrainian surgeon Serhiy enlists to fight Russian military forces in the Donbass region, where he is captured by enemy soldiers. Now a prisoner of war, Serhiy is forced to witness horrifying scenes of humiliation and violence at the hands of the Russian invaders, his medical background co-opted to dispense mercy killings to the tortured. After his release, he returns to his comfortable middle-class apartment, still suffering from the trauma of his experiences. Looking inward, Serhiy tries to find a purpose in life by rebuilding his relationship with his daughter and ex-wife, learning how to be a human being again through being a father. Written, directed, produced, shot, and edited by acclaimed Ukrainian filmmaker Valentyn Vasyanovych, REFLECTION is a meticulously-composed depiction of pain and redemption that Variety called "one of the most intellectually provocative and rewarding films" of the 2021 Venice Film Festival.

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The beginning of my work on this story was inspired by a pigeon. It crashed against our window, flying at a high speed. The pattern that was left was both beautiful and horrifying. The detailed imprint of the wings, the bloody trace from the impact of the head, feathers that stuck to the glass my 10-year-old daughter saw it all. In the next few days, we were affected by this event. Her worries, questions, expectations of miraculous resurrection, denial of the irreversibility of this event, and attempts to understand death from a child's point of view prompted me to write a story about a father-daughter relationship in the midst of grieving over the death of a loved one. The death of one of the characters is directly connected to the war, which continues in the eastern part of the Ukraine. By connecting the comfortable day-to-day life of the capital city with the deadly reality of the war, we can establish a high intensity background for a story about children's fears and their first encounters with real death, and highlight the helplessness of adults. It is a translucent story about the child's realization that human life is finite. This is also a story about the responsibilities of adults to loved ones, to themselves, and the whole world in which they fulfil their potential. The child and the adult will help each other to understand this cruel and beautiful world, so similar to the imprint of the pigeon on the glass.

INTERVIEW WITH VALENTYN VASYANOVYCH

by Marta Bałaga

You show conflict in the film, but also what happens later, after the return from the warzone. Which is something people don't like to talk about, especially if they have experienced it.

When it comes to this particular war, nobody has really faced it and it has been 7 years. From the beginning, there was this divide between those who wanted to participate and those who waited to see what happens. Now, it's even worse – people have been killed or wounded and the rest really doesn't want to talk about it at all. Unlike in most countries, our veterans don't really exist in the social sphere. There aren't any rehabilitation programmes and no infrastructure to help them out. Most of them struggle with PTSD but no one provides them with professional help, which leads to high rate of suicides. It's a very "inconvenient" topic for all of us in Ukraine. In **REFLECTION**, I decided to concentrate also on former prisoners. Maybe it's hard to imagine but today, in the 21st century, in the middle of Donetsk there is this huge political prison called "Isolation". Ironically enough, it used to be the centre of contemporary art. Once the war started, Russian special troops turned it into a concentration camp, which is still operational. What happens there is unimaginable.



Did you talk to the ones who survived it?

Yes, we worked with a couple consultants. One is quite well known, Stanislav Aseyev, who wrote a book about it [In Isolation. Dispatches from Occupied Donbas]. He said that once he started to struggle with PTSD, he would run. Really – that’s how he survived. He could do it anywhere, even on his way to the shop. Whenever he felt something was coming, he ran. Another person, his name was Kozlovsky, didn’t commit suicide only because he had a son with special needs. He knew that no one else would take care of his child.

In this prison, they put television sets in every single cell. Why? Because when they are torturing someone, other prisoners can see it. It’s still happening! I wanted to tell this story, saying: “Come on, guys. We are in Europe, things like that still go on and nobody really cares.” I wanted to show what happens when these people come back, which is why the film is divided into two parts. What happens “after” is just as important.

There are two worlds clashing here. People live normal lives, watch their kids play paintball, but violence is always near.

This is something I really wanted to emphasize. Everything starts with these innocent games – just like paintball. These kids, they are playing, pretending to “kill” each other. But then they grow up and they do.

We have a train called “Kyiv-War”. It takes you to the war zone straight from the capital, in just five hours. In the city of Avdiivka, you can take a taxi to the frontline. People sit in restaurants, children go to school and then, after just a few minutes spent in a car, you see tanks and people killing each other. In Ukraine, all these different layers of reality happen at the exact same time.

Did you want to show how difficult it can be to explain all this to a child? To admit that death is around, be it a bird crashing into your window or war?

This bird is how this film came about. It really happened to my own daughter, who also acts in the film. When my producer asked me why I wanted to cast her, I said that you can't ask somebody else's child to repeat a scene 17 times. Just your own.

After it hit the window, she started to ask all these questions. When children are 5 years old, they want you to promise you will never die. They never think of death as something that can happen to them – just to everyone else. Relatives, animals. It changes later, when they are in their teens and their questions become different. It's a good moment to discuss what really is going on, also because there is too much information – when I was younger, it wasn't the case. There wasn't internet, YouTube, TikTok. In the film, my protagonist has been through death already. He survived it; he saw things most people wouldn't be able to stand. Which is why he can talk to his daughter from a completely different perspective. From a perspective of death, you could say.

He survived torture, too. How did you want to show these scenes? Many films run away from it, employ handheld camera and different tricks. You don't run – you watch.

On one hand, I never wanted to concentrate on torture too much – there are no close-ups. But I couldn't avoid showing it, because we need to understand his trauma. Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to follow him on this emotional journey. This man, he is not a hero. He isn't the one dying for his principles – it's someone else. Even when he tries to commit suicide in his cell, and as a surgeon he definitely knows how, he can't. He is weak, he is normal.

I realise that some audience members won't be able – or willing – to watch it, but then they won't be able to follow his journey either. You won't be able to understand what happens next unless you go through it with him.

You opted for long, symmetrical takes here. It made me think of some representations of the Pietà.

I have already explored this style in one of my previous films, *Black Level*. It's just what I like as a DoP – I like symmetry. I work closely with my art director, who is also a friend and a painter, and the starting point is the location itself. That dictates what is going on in the frame. You could compare it to religious artworks from the old masters of the 17th century.

These scenes are not hectic because when you are not entertained, you start noticing small details. That's the magic of cinema. We are too entertained by the contemporary cinema. When someone takes it away, you have time to just sit and think, and to be with this man. It sounds controversial, but it works. Take the scene with the mobile crematorium – I want the viewer to think about it a little. People use them all the time, also because they need to dispose of the corpses of Russian soldiers. This war is hidden from the Russian society – they don't know about it or they don't want to – but people still die, so they burn them.

There are no bright colours anywhere in the film. Even in the “normal” world, which still feels grey and empty. Why?

This man, even when he is back, he is never far away from what happened. If the sun was shining and everything would feel bright and full of life, it would stand in stark contrast to his internal struggle. When you are back, it doesn't mean you are really back. Only a part of you is still living, even despite the fact that he has this new, deeper relationship with his daughter and his ex-wife.

Your main actor, Roman Lutskyi, doesn't express much. His delivery is very subtle.

He decided to go really deep into his role. I often say I like to live with my actors when we are making a film. They are always around – during pre-production, rehearsals, when we choose the locations. We live through it all, for one year or two, as long as it takes. We become friends in real life, like with my protagonist in *Atlantis*.

Most of our rehearsals happen on set, with the crew, in full costume – it's just that the camera isn't running. I do so many things on my own, so I can afford to experiment: shoot some scenes, show it to my actor and wonder if it works or it doesn't. We had 25 shooting days on this film, but with rehearsals it was 96. We don't shoot a lot of material we don't end up using.

You directed the film, wrote the script, shot it and edited it. Is it easier this way?

I am not a very talkative person, so it would be hard to explain to someone else what I want. Especially when sometimes I can't even express it myself. It's important to follow my intuition, check what is right and what's wrong for the story. I learn a lot when I am doing all these different things – I notice my own mistakes. Of course, I have my friend [producer] Vladimir Yatsenko by my side, and we are like an old couple already, but he understands me without words. It's just so complicated, trying to communicate with other people. We all have different experiences and values.

You mentioned that some people still try to “hide” this war, but you are not hiding anything in this film. Are you worried about any possible controversies?

With this particular topic, given that we are talking about torture and real people, I want to draw the attention to them. That's why I am not hiding. This is happening. Take it or leave it, but it's true. Now, it's happening in Afghanistan too and so many other places, but in Ukraine it has been going on for 7 long years. It's not even the question of war between Ukraine and Russia anymore; it's the question of humanity. People are not ready to fight for their own values in Europe – that's the biggest catastrophe. I am not afraid of controversy and scandals. I just want to wake people up.

DIRECTOR



Valentyn Vasyanovych

Valentyn Vasyanovych is a director, producer and DOP. He was born in 1971 in Zhytomyr, Ukraine. He graduated from the Karpenko-Kary National University of Theatre, Film and TV as a cinematographer in 1995 and a documentary filmmaker in 2000. In 2007, he finished his studies at the Wajda School in Poland. In 2012, he made his debut feature film ***Business As Usual*** (Odesa International Film Festival, Special Jury Mention, FICC award). In 2014, Valentyn Vasyanovych produced and photographed ***The Tribe*** by Myroslav Slaboshpytskyi. In 2019, the feature anti-utopia film ***Atlantis*** won the Best Film Award in Orizzonti at the 76th Venice International Film Festival, and a large number of prizes and awards around the world. In 2021, his newest feature ***Reflection*** has been selected for Competition at 78. Venice International Film Festival.

- 1998 – Keepsake (Na zgadku) documentary. Director, DOP.
- 2001 – Old People (Stari liudy) documentary. Director.
- 2004 – Against the Sun (Proty sontsia) documentary. Director.
- 2012 – Business as Usual (Zvychaina sprava) first feature film. Director.
- 2013 – Credenza (Kredens) feature film. Director.
- 2014 – Crepuscule (Prysmerek) documentary. Director, DOP.
- 2014 – The Tribe (Plemya)dir. M. Slaboshpytsky. Producer, DOP.
- 2017 – Black Level (Riven' chornogo) feature film. Director, DOP, Producer.
- 2019 – Atlantis (Atlantyda) feature film. Director, DOP, Producer.
- 2021 – Reflection (Vidblysk) feature film. Director, DOP, Producer.

CAST

Roman Lutskiy

Roman Lutskyy was born on 20 March 1986 in Bodnariv, Ukraine. His father was a photographer, so he had a film camera on hand since childhood, and in the 9th grade, he started filming weddings and other events in his village. After graduating from school, Roman entered the directing of pop and mass spectacles at the Precarpathian National University of Arts. Until the third year, he was engaged in various state celebrations and anniversaries, etc., but he didn't like it. From the third year, Roman decided to go to actors' classes, and in two years he officially changed his specialization. In March 2006, he played his first role as a plumber and father of three in the play Marriage in Italian. In 2008, Lutsky graduated from the course of Honored Artist of Ukraine, Professor Anatoliy Hrytsan and People's Artist of Ukraine and became an actor at Ivano-Frankivsk Academic Regional Ukrainian Music and Drama Theater. Since 2013 he has played roles in films too. He became famous after filming in the Ukrainian fantasy film The Stronghold (2017).

Andriy Rymaruk

Andriy Rymaruk was born in 1985, in Ukraine. His educational background is in psychology. And practical medicine. He also holds a pre-MBA in management and leadership.

In 2005-2009 he was a correspondent and investigative journalist in the magazines "Facts and Comments", "Today", "Glare". In 2009-2014, he served as Head of Corporate Communications in DTEK, Nadra Bank. In 2015-2016 he was commander of the reconnaissance unit of the Ground Forces Brigade and from 2016 to present, he is an instructor and head of the military department of the Charitable Foundation "Come Back Alive". In 2019 he played the main role in Valentyn Vasyanovych's Atlantis that premiered in Venice and won the Award for Best Film in Orizzonti.



PRODUCERS

Arsenal Films

Arsenal Films is a Ukrainian independent production company, producer of unique and artistic films, based in Kyiv. Arsenal Films is led by Valentyn Vasyanovych, one of the most influential producer and director in Ukraine nowadays. Valentyn is the author of «Black Level», «Atlantis» and «Reflection». Arsenal Films develops both fiction and documentary projects, with an innovative and alternative approach.

ForeFilms

ForeFilms (founded in 2020) is a production company, which inherits Limelite (founded in 2005), producing international co-productions and a founding member of the Film Industry Association of Ukraine. During 14 years Limelite/ForeFilms produced more than 600 commercials and several feature films, premiered in Cannes, Venice, Toronto, and other festivals.

In 2020 Vladimir decides to divide the commercials and feature films directions and founded together with Anna Sobolevska the film production company ForeFilms, which will concentrate on the production of high-profile author-driven films.

Vladimir Yatsenko is a former Head of the Film Industry Association of Ukraine, member of the Ukrainian Academy of Motion Picture Arts and European Film Academy. In April 2017-2019, Vladimir was elected as the Chairman of the Public Council under the Ukrainian State Film Agency. From January 2020 Vladimir became the first Representative of Ukraine in EURIMAGES.

Vladimir was a participant of KVIFF MIDPOINT Intensive 2017, EAVE Marketing Workshop 2017, MIDPOINT FEATURE LAUNCH 2018, EAVE Producers Workshop 2018, Cannes Producers Network 2017-2019, ACE Producers Workshop 30.

FILM INFORMATION

Original Title: Vidblysk / ВІДБЛИСК

English Title: Reflection

Genre: Drama

Country: Ukraine

Language: Ukrainian

Year: 2021

Duration: 125 min.

Picture: Color

Aspect Ratio: 2.39:1

Sound: 5.1

Available Format: DCP

CAST

Roman Lutskiy as Serhiy

Nika Myslytska as Polina

Nadia Levchenko as Olha

Andriy Rymaruk as Andriy

Ihor Shulha as Chief of the Prison

CREW

Director: Valentyn Vasyanovych

Screenplay: Valentyn Vasyanovych

Cinematography: Valentyn Vasyanovych

Editing: Valentyn Vasyanovych

Production Design: Vladlen Odudenko

Costume Design: Olena Harmanenko

Sound Design: Serhiy Stepanskiy

Production Company: Arsenal Films, ForeFilms

With support of: Ukrainian State Film Agency

Producers: Iya Myslytska, Valentyn Vasyanovych, Vladimir Yatsenko, Anna Sobolevska