

Khrystyna Bunii, a young Hutsul activist and archivist, began her 'punk' ethnography practice in 2017. Traveling through her mountainous home territory in the Carpathian Mountains of western Ukraine, she has digitised around 2500 photographs from people's private archives to date. These pictures, at once quotidian and compelling, span the breadth of the twentieth century, showing farmers and artisans, musicians and quilt-weavers, village feasts and funerals of this remote, trans-national region.

We follow our protagonist as she travels solo in pursuit of her work, traversing the mountain range as villages prepare for a major annual festival. At the end of May, shepherds leave their houses and lead the flocks of sheep up into the high meadows (Ukrainian: Полонини/polonyny) for summer pasture. The celebrations, involving music and rituals, stretch throughout the whole month and last until the final procession up the hills.

Roads in rural Ukraine are poorly maintained and the progress is slow. Bunii hikes, catches local buses, and takes rides from locals. The backdrops for her travels sometimes border on the romantic, but are far from unspoiled, with the remnants of the Soviet oil industry and a dysfunctional approach to contemporary capitalism intermingling with the rural landscape and its traditional way of life. Hutsulshchyna has outlasted numerous regimes, but the landscape bears the marks of each one, producing a complex palimpsest of the past century of life in the region.

Upon arrival at each village, Bunii approaches inhabitants in their houses. With time, conversations emerge and we bear witness to intimate encounters and unexpected connections. The houses are often small and poorly lit, filled with antiquated and recent family photos, with walls covered floor-to-ceiling with traditional wool blankets. Bunii scans the photos carefully, the light from the machine momentarily illuminating the rooms with a white glow.

These vérité scenes are interspersed with images sourced from Bunii's digital archive, accompanied by her commentary - a conversation recorded late at night in a cabin in Hutsulshchyna, over a shared bottle of slyv'yanka (plum brandy). The voice lingers on the materiality of the photographs and meanders through stories of people, objects and places in the context of their colonial past. Bunii follows threads linking images from different times and places, drawing associations that were forgotten or unknown. A passionate expert, she navigates her heritage with a critical eye, commenting on contemporary Hutsul life and addressing acute questions regarding solidarity and sustainable living.

In one of the backyards of the village of Kryvorivnya, a local orchestra comes together to practice before their concert for this year's festival. They perform traditional songs from their repertoire, singing about labour, exploitation, desire and love. There is a small ensemble of singers accompanied by cello, Hutsul bagpipe, dulcimer and trembita. The performance is staged for the camera, with the players arranged in a theatrical mise-en-scene. With slow pans and zooms, the camera loses itself in the performance, capturing the body language of the individual musicians, their energy as a group. As they play, they summon the memories of past festivals, and prepare the village once again for the passage to the high meadows.