a collection
of documentary
film reviews

FORUM CRITIQUE

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FOREWORD

Documentary cinema is often perceived as the cinema of reality. But reality is never simply a given. It is a space of constant negotiation that determines what will be remembered, what will become visible, in what language it will be told and who will have the right to be heard. Each documentary film, whether it works with an archive, with observation, with personal history or with political investigation, poses the question not only of what happened, but from whose perspective we understand what happened.

The texts in this book do not arrange the films from the sixth edition of the Rhodope Film Fest as a complete festival archive, but as a series of different optics towards reality. Sometimes it is modeled by political power, other times it is experienced through the body, inherited as trauma or reveals a world beyond the human perspective. This book offers a kind of map of attention – not to everything that has happened, but to what has insisted on being seen this year. Arranged side by side, these stories begin to form a topography of the anxieties, hopes and blind spots of the contemporary world. That is why the arrangement here does not follow the chronology of the screenings, but the movement of the questions themselves.

The first part, "Images of Power", collects films in which the political is not a backdrop, but a mechanism for producing images, fears and truths. Propaganda, war, disinformation and institutional violence do not exist only as external systems. They enter the school, the language, the archive, the memory, the daily gestures of consent or refusal. Here documentary cinema appears as a form of recognition: it does not eliminate the lie, but shows how it works.

The second part, "The Personal as Political", shifts the gaze to the bodies that power tries to order, mark or exclude. The female political figure, the "drag" scene during war, people with intellectual disabilities – these different stories insist that dignity is not an abstract value, but an everyday struggle for a place in the common world. In them, the political is not limited to institutions; it passes through voice, vulnerability, scene, care, the way a society decides which lives deserve attention.

The third part, "Fragments of the Past," moves through legacies that cannot be fully concluded. Soviet missiles, family secrets, borders, wars, disappearing species, personal and historical disintegrations—these films think of the past not as a time gone by, but as a matter that continues to change bodies, landscapes, and relationships between people. Here, the journey is not an escape, but a return to traces: to what is left in the land, in family memory, in political divisions, in the image itself.

The final part, "Beyond the Human Gaze," opens the book to a broader perspective. It asks what happens when documentary cinema stops placing

the human at the center of the world. Animals, nature, sleep, sensory perception are not embellishments to human stories, but an opportunity to shake up the very hierarchy of viewing. These films remind us that the crises of modernity are not only political or social, but also crises of perception – of the way we see our relationship with all life.

The films discussed here are different in form, origin and sensitivity. But there is a common tension between them: they do not take reality for granted. They layer it. They show that behind the public image there is a hidden construction; behind the political event – a human cost; behind the personal story – historical force; behind the landscape – a memory of violence; behind the animal – a gaze that does not belong to us.

These texts do not seek to close the meaning of the films. They rather trace the threads that each of them leaves behind.

Galina D. Georgieva

01. IMAGES OF POWER

What does evil look like?

"Riefenstahl" (dir. Andres Veiel, 2024)

By Kalina Nikolova

When Berlin's museums opened their doors to filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl's archive in 2018, the president of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation Hermann Parzinger, stressed that „it is of utmost significance not only to engage with Riefenstahl's archive on an aesthetic level but above all to approach it critically." It is precisely such a critical reassessment that Andres Veiel offers in his film Riefenstahl (2024). Drawing on previously unexplored documents, letters, deleted scenes from documentaries featuring Riefenstahl, and audio recordings, the director uncovers new facets of her complex personality. This rich archival material allows him to tell, in a particularly intriguing way, the story of one of cinema's most controversial filmmakers and to trace the mechanisms through which Riefenstahl constructed and defended her own image – carefully crafted by herself decades after the end of the war.

The first part of the film reveals a Leni Riefenstahl who is purposefully downplaying the influence of her propaganda films and the role they played in consolidating the Nazi regime. She claims that she was too young and innocent („yes, that's exactly the word I was looking for," Riefenstahl remarks) and was interested only in the extraordinary technical possibilities of cinema. It is true that Leni Riefenstahl was immensely talented and that she employed the best elements of both the German and Russian avant-garde. For the filming of Triumph of the Will, she and architect Albert Speer devised an elevator concealed between the poles carrying Nazi banners, where they positioned one of the cameras; allowing them to capture some of the film's most striking panoramic shots. Her revolutionary approach to cinematography transforms her films into true spectacles, while the extraordinary brilliance with which she emphasized the monumentality of Nazi pageantry made her Hitler's favorite. And that's to no one's surprise! The Führer's image glides through the clouds like a mythical god (the opening scene of Triumph of the Will), the ranks of soldiers move in perfect synchronization, and the individual is reduced to a speck of dust in the masses . The ultimate triumph of the collective and the total fracture of the individual human soul.

At first glance, her films appear to be a job well done by a director whose aesthetics happened, by fortunate coincidence, to align perfectly with that imposed by the Nazi regime. As Veiel's film unfolds, however, it becomes clear that things are not quite what they seem. Or, as the Bulgarian film critic Prof. Vladimir Ignatovski writes, „Leni Riefenstahl's justifications sound much like those of Jacopetti, who, while filming Lumumba's execution, ‚merely' asked that he be moved to the sunlit side so that the shot would look more impressive."

Every ideology utilizes simplified explanations and clearly distinct categories („the good ones" are us, while „the bad ones" are the other, the different) in order to justify exercising violence and to manage its own destructive, perverse impulses. It is through precisely such psychological mechanisms that Riefenstahl herself justifies violence and reshapes a complex reality into a narrative convenient for her . One of the most compelling aspects of Veiel's film is that it does not settle for portraying Riefenstahl simply as an accomplice of the regime; rather, it seeks to trace

the mechanisms of her postwar self-justification and her selective erasure of certain memories. Gradually, from the archival materials a portrait emerges from the archival materials of a person for whom the trauma of Nazi Germany's collapse, and the trauma of the war itself, is so profound that acknowledging guilt seems impossible. In its place come denial, rationalization, and the conception of her own version of the past.

In a Bulgarian context, the film may evoke associations with Adela Peeva's documentary Long Live Bulgaria (2017). In its final sequence, we see footage of the so-called Lukov March – an annual procession presented as a commemoration of General Hristo Lukov, which over the years has become a rallying point for far-right and neo-Nazi groups. A procession that has no place in a modern Bulgaria, yet unfortunately it remains part of our contemporary Bulgarian reality. We must not close our eyes, as does the protagonist of Veiel's film, to this troubling aspect of the reality we live in. Films like Riefenstahl matter because they encourage us to reflect on contemporary and local issues as well.

Rather than offering unequivocal judgments, Andres Veiel confronts us with uncomfortable questions about memory, guilt, and self-justification. The director guides us through a profound analysis but leaves the conclusions to us, the viewers. In this sense, Riefenstahl is a genuine test of our critical thinking. Through an impressive and creative use of archival materials, the film constructs one of the most comprehensive and nuanced portraits of Leni Riefenstahl ever created in the history of cinema.

"Riefenstahl" (dir. Andres Veiel, 2024)

How is war cultivated?

"Mr. Nobody Against Putin" (dir. David Borenstein and Pavel Talankin, 2025)

By Kalina Nikolova

The Danish-Czech co-production Mr. Nobody Against Putin is a compelling testament to the penetration of the Kremlin's imperial ideology into the everyday life of the Russian provinces. This is not the kind of film one can see every day, and making it under a totalitarian regime and war conditions is almost impossible. Not, however, for its directors - David Borenstein and Pavel Talankin, who deservedly won an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature at this year's Academy Awards.

The „Mr. Nobody" is Pavel Talankin himself – a teacher and videographer at a school in Karabash, a small town at the foot of the Ural Mountains notorious for having some of the most polluted air in the world due to the vast quantities of toxic waste deposited there. Shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine begins, the school curriculum changes completely. Lessons give way to ideological propaganda, and textbooks are replaced by weapons. Talankin begins documenting how the school is transformed into an instrument of patriotic re-education and the militarization of children. He openly expresses his concern and opposition to the newly introduced curriculum, fully aware that holding such a position could cost him, if not his life, then at least his personal freedom. But Talankin refuses to submit. After all, ever since childhood he has been accustomed to not fitting neatly within accepted norms. He is the only teacher with Harry Potter posters and the flag of the Russian democratic movement in his classroom, which has become a kind of refuge for all the artistic and unconventional-minded children. Talankin continues to carry out his duties at the school, but his footage gradually turns into testimony to the lies about the necessity of the invasion, presented to children as unquestionable facts.

As the film unfolds, the camera ceases to be merely a recorder of events and begins increasingly to reveal the author's perspective. The footage of the daily nationalist rallies, almost carnivalesque in their absurdity, betrays irony, even contempt. But when the lens turns toward the children, the peeling classroom walls, the grey concrete apartment blocks, and the soot-blackened clouds constantly hanging above the town, the tone changes. Through these images emerges the love and pain of a man who loves his homeland- genuinely, not in a performative, slogan-driven manner, but who also recognizes his own helplessness in this new reality.

Cinema long ago abandoned the heroic Hollywood image of the saviour and fell in love with the ordinary person, even one who might appear slightly clumsy at first glance, who stands up against an all-powerful system determined to crush the individual. This is Jimmy Stewart in Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939) and Henry Fonda in 12 Angry Men (1957). The examples are numerous, especially in the postmodern era, when cinema increasingly turns its gaze toward the „little" person rather than the great hero. But if fiction films can invent such characters, documentary cinema has the privilege of discovering them in reality itself. And in an increasingly authoritarian world, seized by the madness of a handful of political leaders, we need figures like Pavel Talankin.

When it comes to unconventional characters, it is also worth giving the history teacher Pavel Abdulmanov, who, interestingly, is not a typical antagonist either, a closer look. He is no caricatured fanatic. We see an intelligent, educated man capable of emotion – the few tears he sheds at the end of the film over Talankin's departure testify to a humanity that has not been entirely erased. This is precisely what makes him such a troubling figure. When Talankin asks which historical individuals he dreams of meeting, Abdulmanov enthusiastically names Lavrenty Beria (Stalin's right-hand man and the „father" of the Gulag) and Viktor Abakumov (head of Stalin's counterintelligence). It is paradoxical

that a historian who knows the bloody history of his country so well dreams of the „extraordinary professions“ (to use his own words) of some of the most notorious perpetrators and repressive figures of the Soviet past. He is a victim of a system when it succeeds in displacing critical thinking in people who should be defending it; when it turns historical knowledge from a tool for understanding the past into an instrument for its ideological rewriting in the present.

Although the film shows the pain and losses from the Russian side, it in no way equates aggressor and victim, nor does it seek to level the suffering of the two sides of the conflict. On the contrary, the grief of the families of Russian soldiers who never returned, the shattered families, and the disoriented young people stand as evidence of the destructive consequences of a regime upon its own society and testify to the cost of a war paid by those in whose name it is supposedly being fought.

Yet Talankin offers us hope that even a „Nobody“ can contribute to change, as long as they do not turn a blind eye to what is wrong . And above all, Mr. Nobody Against Putin offers a valuable lesson in patriotism – that true love for one‘s homeland manifests itself in a critical attitude toward what destroys it from within, and in the courage to oppose it not in spite of that love, but precisely because of it.

“Mr. Nobody Against Putin” (dir. David Borenstein and Pavel Talankin, 2025)

When does the truth no longer convince?

"Change My Mind" (dir. Robin Kvapil, 2025)

By Kalina Nikolova

Czech documentary cinema has its own tradition of playing this delicate game of experimenting with reality. Some titles that immediately come to mind are Caught in the Net (2020), Vít Klusák's short debut Jazz War (2001), and above all the iconic Czech Dream (2004) by Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda. In Czech Dream, the two directors spent months building a large-scale advertising campaign for a new supermarket under construction, culminating in thousands of citizens gathering for its grand opening in the middle of a field, only to discover that the store... simply does not exist. The only thing that is real is the façade – a giant blue banner bearing the words „Czech Dream," concealing the empty scaffolding behind it. The purpose of the experiment was to explore the power of advertising and society's willingness to succumb to media manipulation. It is no coincidence that Klusák and Remunda's film coincided with the period of the Czech Republic's accession to the European Union and became a distinctive critique of society's susceptibility, trust, and lack of awareness when confronted with claims presented to them as an absolute truth.

Two decades later, Robin Kvapil's Change My Mind (The Great Patriotic Trip in the original Czech) (2025) emerges in a very different political context - the war in Ukraine. Yet it poses a similar question: what happens when a collective vision of the world, in this case one brainwashed by ideological propaganda, collides with reality?

Much like his colleagues, Kvapil begins with a provocation. He publishes an advertisement that reads almost like a pro-Russian social media post: „Do you believe that the war in Ukraine is a hoax? Do you think the media are lying about the number of casualties and the consequences of the ‚special military operation'? Come to a casting call and become a protagonist in a new film." Around sixty people respond to the call. Three are selected – Nikola, Ivo, and Petra - Czechs who sympathize with Russia and believe unreservedly in the Kremlin's narrative of the war. Together with the director and his crew, they travel to some of the most dangerous territories in Ukraine.

But what happens when you leave the comfort of the online world behind and find yourself caught in reality's "trap"? More specifically, in a place where everyday life is marked by the piercing sound of air-raid sirens, where missiles fall mere metres away from you, and where, if you find the forest a peaceful place for a walk, there is a chance you may stumble into a mass grave of Ukrainian soldiers. The protagonists are confronted with tragedies that shatter their worldview. For a brief moment, there is doubt, there are even tears. Then the mind's defence mechanism is activated: „Russia has no other choice." Perhaps the closest they come to empathy is acknowledgement. „Yes, the horror is real, but I'm sorry, I'm from the Czech Republic and it doesn't concern me. This is a problem between the two countries." Instead of embarking on a journey toward a gradual transformation of their beliefs, the protagonists move relentlessly down the path of retreat and indifference.

Kvapil has at his disposal exceptionally powerful visual material, for which he deserves nothing but admiration- not only as a person willing to experience the horrors of war firsthand, but also as an artist who dares to film it. On the screen appear destroyed apartment blocks, hospitals after missile strikes, and a school operating in the metro, where teachers strive to preserve the fragile glimmers of hope. The film bears witness to the terror of people living under the constant threat of war. This is real. It is precisely for this reason that, at times, the excessive presence of the protagonists' commentary begins to weigh on the film. The director persistently follows their reactions and reflections - he believes in the goodness of human nature until the very end, and he can hardly be faulted for that. Yet

at certain moments it feels like the images themselves are not given enough space to speak , even though they are powerful enough in their own right. Some of the film's most impactful moments are those in which words prove unnecessary and the viewer is left to process what they have seen – such as the sad, beautiful scene of Petra embracing the elderly Ukrainian man whose granddaughter had sent him out for tea right before a missile struck their home. That's how he survived, but lost his entire family.

Robin Kvapil is among the most significant contemporary Czech documentary filmmakers, and Change My Mind stands as a testament both to his civic stance and to his artistic courage. Few directors would risk not only their lives but also the possibility that their film might never achieve the truly „great" element of this „patriotic trip"- namely, the transformation of its protagonists. Yes, Kvapil's film does not change the world. It fails to change even the minds of a handful of people confronted face to face with the horror of war. However, its value lies in the way it lays bare the world we live in and raises the question of whether dialogue is possible at all between people inhabiting different realities. Change My Mind turns out to be less a film about three pro-Russian Czechs than a portrait of a society that has lost the shared values and common language, with which to speak about truth. And encountering a similar reflection in the mirror is painful and incredibly frightening.

"Change My Mind" (dir. Robin Kvapil, 2025)

How do you talk to distrust?

"Truth or Dare" (dir. Tonislav Hristov, 2025)

By Denitsa Ganeva

Over the past several years, fake news has established itself as one of the most powerful tools for manipulating public opinion and deepening political division. At the heart of Tonislav Hristov's latest film, this issue unfolds through an investigative documentary that exposes a complex network of people and media practices dedicated to spreading disinformation. By revealing the mechanisms through which truth is distorted, the film ultimately suggests that the greatest challenge of contemporary freedom is no longer the right to express an opinion, but the ability to decide what to trust.

Spanning several years, the film follows the work of Genka Shikerova, a well-known Bulgarian investigative journalist, and Ivan Gerasimov, an activist who disseminates conspiracy theories. Equally committed to their respective missions, the two protagonists' paths intersect in their pursuit of what they each believe to be the truth. Set against the backdrop of election campaigns in Bulgaria, the documentary expands beyond individual stories to examine the broader vulnerability of modern democracy and the role of the media in shaping public trust.

Truth or Dare begins as an investigation into the origins of fake news and the motivations behind its spread. As the story unfolds, it successfully answers the question of how truth is manipulated, exposing internet troll farms and tracing their political connections across the Balkans, the Kremlin, and the European Parliament. Yet the film goes beyond uncovering specific disinformation schemes. Through its portrayal of the protagonists and the ideals they defend, the documentary evolves into a reflection on humanity's search for truth and the growing difficulty of distinguishing fact from conviction in an environment where every „truth" may ultimately serve someone else's interests.

The question of perspective is explored not only through the subject matter itself but also through Hristov's narrative approach. One of the director's distinctive qualities is that he doesnt treat his protagonists merely as lenses through which to examine a social issue. Instead, they become the very foundation upon which the film develops its ideas. The stark contrast between Genka Shikerova and Ivan Gerasimov creates the central tension of the narrative. On one side stands investigative journalism, grounded in evidence and driven by a commitment to uncovering the moral motivations behind competing viewpoints. On the other stands an attempt to validate deeply held beliefs which, through their fanaticism and internal contradictions, remain rooted in subjective interpretations of reality. The conflict between these opposing forces unfolds both directly through the events and media scandals depicted, and indirectly within the viewer's own process of interpretation.

Much like in his previous documentary The Mailman, Tonislav Hristov approaches both of his protagonists with empathy and genuine curiosity, regardless of whether they stand on the side of truth or deception. Although the director's own position becomes perceptible from the beginning, Truth or Dare treats its audience with respect by allowing viewers to understand not only the strengths but also the vulnerabilities of both perspectives. While Shikerova risks her own safety in her determined pursuit of facts, Gerasimov appears only partially aware that he is simultaneously an active participant and a victim of a much larger system.

One of the film's greatest achievements lies in the gradual development of its protagonists. As the narrative progresses, viewers are invited to move beyond first impressions, explore each perspective in depth, and ultimately decide for themselves which worldview they find more convincing. This character-driven approach, more commonly associated with fiction filmmaking,

narrows the distance between audience and subject, making the documentary accessible even to viewers who might otherwise shy away from its controversial themes.

The film's conclusion functions as Hristov's philosophical statement, positioning Truth or Dare as the beginning of a much broader conversation about the information landscape we inhabit. As events unfold, both Genka and Ivan lose their public platforms, suggesting that the struggle for justice is not necessarily synonymous with the triumph of truth. Instead, Hristov redirects attention toward the process of searching itself – to doubt, questioning, and the necessity of critical thinking. In this sense, the film offers no definitive answers. Rather, it reminds us that in a society overwhelmed by information, responsibility for the truth does not rest solely with journalists or politicians, but with every individual who makes daily choices about what to believe.

"Truth or Dare" (dir. Tonislav Hristov, 2025)

What does civic courage look like?

"Galina Vasilievna Vs." (dir. Egor Gavrilin, 2025)

By Denitsa Ganeva

What is the cost of resistance in a world where political repression evolves from external coercion into the individual's internal self-censorship? Set against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine and the suppression of dissent in Russia, an elderly woman refuses to accept silence as a strategy for survival. Going far beyond the boundaries of a personal portrait, Galina Vasilievna Vs. (2025) explores the price of standing up to a system that seeks to convince its citizens that the fight for justice is ultimately a fight against their own right to live a normal life.

Following the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, public anti-war positions have become increasingly dangerous. Against this political climate, political scientist Alexander Pirogov describes the mass protest against the construction of a church in Yekaterinburg's public park as the catalyst for a broader wave of civic dissatisfaction with the ruling elite. It is therefore no coincidence that director Egor Gavrilin chooses to introduce Galina Vasilievna through the event that has remained in history as the only successful public resistance against the deteriorating quality of life in contemporary Russia. Combining archival footage with the emotionally charged recollections of the 80-year-old activist, the film suggests that the significance of an event is often measured not by its public scale, but by the transformation it brings about in an individual's life.

Having established its interest in the formation of personal conviction, the film shifts its focus toward an intimate portrait of Galina Vasilievna. Using biographical details sparingly, Gavrilin traces the many forms of civic engagement through which her character reveals itself. In doing so, Galina gradually transcends her identity as a single individual and comes to function as a symbol. In the twilight of her life, she leaves behind the trivial concerns of everyday existence and dedicates herself to creating change for a future she may never live to witness. It is within this paradox that the key to her character lies. She embodies not a struggle for personal gain, but a steadfast commitment to values that extend beyond individual interest. Galina thus becomes a symbol of civic responsibility as an act of care for future generations and as a refusal to accept injustice simply because it no longer affects one's own life directly.

Yet the central conflict in Gavrilin's film extends far beyond the opposition between an individual and social injustice. In the film's final act, after Galina is left alone with her cause and is unjustly convicted, it becomes clear that repression is sustained not only by institutions but also by the fear of ordinary people who preserve their personal comfort through silence. In this way, the documentary is a broader reflection on self-censorship as one of the driving forces behind social stagnation. Galina's sentence becomes symbolic of the price paid by everyone who refuses to surrender to injustice.

Gavrilin follows both the events and the subsequent trial through an openly critical lens that exposes the mechanisms of concealed political repression. Within the narrative, it becomes evident that the imposed fine serves a purpose far beyond its legal function. It operates as a warning not only to Galina herself, but also to anyone who might dare to follow her example. The film convincingly argues that one of the most effective forms of social pressure is the attempt to persuade citizens that resistance inevitably leads to the loss of peace, security, and the possibility of a dignified life.

It is in the film's conclusion that the title Galina Vasilievna Vs. acquires its deepest meaning. The open-ended „Vs." initially appears to point toward a specific opponent, yet gradually reveals itself as a confrontation with far less tangible forces—fear, indifference, and the abandonment of moral responsibility. In this sense, Galina ultimately stands against the very logic of a system that seeks to

transform obedience into a prerequisite for living an ordinary life.

Viewed within an era of globalization and digital interconnectedness, the film's message extends well beyond the realities of contemporary Russia. In a world where support for social causes is increasingly expressed through the comfort of digital solidarity, public engagement rarely demands genuine commitment or personal risk. Against this backdrop, Galina Vasilievna's story reminds us that every act of civic responsibility begins with a personal choice whose true value is measured not by its public visibility, but by one's willingness to bear the consequences it entails.

"Galina Vasilievna Vs." (dir. Egor Gavrilin, 2025)

02. THE PERSONAL AS POLITICAL

When does idealism become action?

"Petra Kelly – Act Now!" (dir. Doris Metz, 2024)

By Ilina Peryanova

"Life itself is politics. How can you separate them?" This quote from the beginning of the film poses the central question around which the documentary narrative unfolds, exploring the life, death, and numerous personal and political struggles of Petra Kelly – co-founder of the German Green Party and one of the most influential political figures of the 20th century.

The film *Petra Kelly – Act Now!* by director Doris Metz delves deeply into the life of an exceptionally charming and charismatic woman who dedicated herself to the struggle for peace, human rights, gender equality, and the protection of nature. Through a wealth of archival footage and interviews with her family, friends, and political allies, viewers gain insight into her dreams, fears, convictions, and her relentless resistance against political and social injustices. The film is not only a portrait of an individual but also a story about the origins of the green movements in Europe. Petra Kelly herself recounts that she was deeply influenced by her sister's death from cancer and the aftermath of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is precisely these personal and historical traumas that form the foundation of her political activism.

The film has been selected as the opening film for the sixth edition of the Rhodope International Film Festival in 2026. This choice is no coincidence. This year's festival theme is ""Politics as Theater" — a theme that is vividly reflected both in Petra Kelly's life and in the way the film presents her public and personal history. Kelly is a politician who fully understands the power of public presence, the media, and symbolic gestures in political action. Director Doris Metz succeeds in crafting a multi-layered narrative that bridges the past and the present. Through carefully selected archival footage and testimonies from people in Petra Kelly's inner circle, her political allies, and contemporary activists inspired by her legacy, the film not only portrays the historical figure but also highlights the enduring impact of her ideas. It is precisely this interweaving of different times and perspectives that makes for a compelling exploration of the relationship between politics, public image, and collective memory.

Beyond the biographical narrative, the film raises the question of the power of civic action and the possibility that one person can change the world. In our times – an era of social media, political polarization, and the rise of extreme ideologies – Petra's story resonates particularly strongly. In a society where the language of hate and radicalization is increasingly given a public platform, her figure seems both historic and surprisingly relevant. She believes in peaceful protest, but also in the necessity of civil disobedience when institutions refuse to listen to the voice of the people.

Petra Kelly's legacy lives on in today's climate movements and, above all, in the "Fridays for Future" protests. The film also explores the themes of feminism and environmentalism as inextricably linked. One of the young activists in the film says that Petra Kelly "planted the seeds" for these contemporary struggles. Working in a political environment dominated almost entirely by men, she constantly faced prejudice and underestimation. Her presence in European politics in the 1980s is an example of how difficult it was for women to be recognized as equal leaders.

The film is dynamically structured both in terms of editing and visual storytelling. The various types of archival footage, television recordings, personal photographs, and contemporary interviews create a multi-layered structure that successfully jumps between different time periods. Particularly impressive are the archival clips featuring the protagonist herself, which reveal her charisma as a speaker and politician. We see her both with her family and in television interviews, among ordinary citizens and activists, as well as in institutional settings, where she confidently defends her positions against nuclear energy and the arms race. Petra is portrayed as a person of great sensitivity and vulnerability. The camerawork and editing create a sense of constant movement and urgency, reflecting her life itself – filled with constant travel, protests, meetings, struggles, and threats.

Petra Kelly is the epitome of the modern woman – independent, intelligent, dedicated to her causes, and refusing to conform to the traditional roles imposed on women in politics and society. But unfortunately, like other female political leaders and revolutionaries mentioned in the film – including Rosa Luxemburg – she left this world far too soon. At just 44 years old, she was murdered by her partner in life and politics, Gert Bastian – a man with whom she shared not only her personal journey but also the building of the green movement in Germany.

Doris Metz's film is valuable precisely because it draws attention to a figure whose significance is often overshadowed by better-known political figures. Petra Kelly succeeded in bringing the Green movement into the Bundestag and making environmental issues part of Europe's political agenda. She strove to bridge the divide between East and West, worked for peace during the Cold War, and never ceased to defend human rights regardless of borders or ideologies. Her energy seems inexhaustible – she fought against apartheid in South Africa, defended the rights of indigenous peoples in North America, and met with leaders from the Eastern Bloc, including Brezhnev. It is no coincidence that she is portrayed in the film as a modern-day Joan of Arc. She possesses a rare blend of passion, compassion, idealism, and political courage.

"Petra Kelly – Act Now!" (dir. Doris Metz, 2024)

Can performance be a political act?

"Queens of Joy" (dir. Olga Gibelinda, 2025)

By Denitsa Ganeva

Questions of gender identity and sexuality have long been politicized and turned into arenas for ideological conflict. Yet when the discussion of LGBTQI+ identities is placed within the context of war, the issue of identity acquires an unmistakably political dimension. Through the successive amendments to Russia's „gay propaganda" law between 2022 and 2023, the Kremlin has drawn people of diverse sexual orientations into an outdated ideological narrative opposing East and West, transforming individual lives into the backdrop of a political performance. While this rhetoric resonates far beyond Russia's borders, for the protagonists of Queens of Joy (2025) its consequences are immediate and deeply personal. Against the backdrop of war, their identities become not only expressions of selfhood but also public statements, while the stage itself emerges as a space where the right to be oneself takes on political significance.

In her documentary, Olga Gibelinda follows three drag queens – Monroe, Marlene, and Aura, whose performances raise funds to support the defense of their homeland, Ukraine. Beneath the apparent lightness and glamour of drag performance, the film explores how theatrical spectacle can become a form of civic resistance.

In keeping with its title, Queens of Joy opens by introducing its protagonists through scenes of color, exuberance, and carefree celebration, giving little indication that a war is taking place beyond the walls of the nightclub. Vibrant costumes, provocative dance performances, and alcohol-fueled festivities create the impression that the bar is a sanctuary where pleasure can exist without consequence. This illusion is quickly shattered once the patriotic purpose behind the performances becomes clear. To emphasize the connection between stage persona and social responsibility, the narrative gradually reveals the everyday struggles that shape the lives of Monroe, Marlene, and Aura. Material hardship, care for the vulnerable, and the internal struggle to affirm one's identity do not simply contrast with the glamour of the stage, they intertwine to construct a richly layered portrait of the performers. By portraying the dual lives of its protagonists, the film expands the theme of war beyond a socio-economic crisis, presenting it instead as a condition that penetrates private life and fundamentally alters how individuals understand themselves and their place within society.

Viewed through this lens, identity transcends the boundaries of personal experience and becomes inherently political. The stage persona is not presented merely as an expression of gender identity, but also as a means of participating in a collective cause. By drawing audiences into the spectacle and allure of drag performance, the queens simultaneously articulate a public position, dissolving the traditional boundary between the personal and the political.

To emphasize precisely this idea, Gibelinda deliberately extends the screen time devoted to the preparation for each performance. Through careful editing and meticulous attention to detail, scenes of dressing, applying makeup, and transformation acquire an almost ritualistic quality. Within the logic of drag performance and transgender experience, this preparation for assuming a stage persona does not stand in opposition to „real life" amid wartime; rather, it becomes its natural continuation. In this sense, drag ceases to function merely as theatrical performance and instead becomes a political gesture.

Once the distinction between role and identity begins to dissolve, the stage reveals itself as a space where personal resilience is forged under external pressure. The protagonists' different life

paths offer no single answer but instead coexist as multiple ways of adapting to an increasingly fragile reality. Vulnerability experienced not as weakness but as a consciously embraced aspect of existence becomes a mechanism for preserving identity. In doing so, the film ultimately argues that in times of crisis, the political manifests itself not only through external conflict, but also through the internal effort required to preserve one's integrity as a human being.

"Queens of Joy" (dir. Olga Gibelinda, 2025)

Where does compassion end?

By Denitsa Ganeva

The way a society treats its most vulnerable members reveals its true moral principles beyond official political rhetoric. The question of institutional care for people with intellectual disabilities has been turned into a taboo under more than one political regime. Viewed in this context, personal stories cease to be merely accounts of suffering and instead become testimonies to the distortion of human values under the pressure of political systems. Although set in different countries and historical periods, Actually I Didn't Want to Stay Long (2025) by Andreas Grützner and Some Happy People (2025) by Maria Andreeva ask the same fundamental question: how does society determine the limits of its empathy toward those it perceives as different?

Beyond their specific narratives, both films examine our ability to see the individual behind the diagnosis and question how social attitudes shape our willingness to embrace difference. While Actually I Didn't Want to Stay Long explores the reality of German psychiatric institutions during the 1970s, Some Happy People addresses the challenges of social integration that arise from the absence of meaningful care.

Grützner's film functions simultaneously as a historical testimony and an intensely personal confession. Drawing on his own experience as an employee at the Alsterdorf Hospital, the director returns to his youth to reveal the failures of institutional care from a first-person perspective. What initially appears to be an investigative documentary gradually transforms into a deeply personal reckoning with inherited guilt and responsibility toward the past. The narrative unfolds through two increasingly intertwined threads: a gallery of intimate portraits of the institution's residents remains in constant dialogue with the filmmaker's own reflections as he attempts to understand his relationship to the historical trauma of the Nazi regime.

This dramaturgical structure is reinforced through one of the documentary's most effective formal devices, namely the contrast between image and voice-over narration. Brief observational scenes allow viewers to enter the inner worlds of several residents of Alsterdorf. These quiet moments of everyday life, filmed with tenderness and restraint, unfold alongside accounts of the institutions' brutality and neglect. The film's emotional impact stems precisely from its refusal to sentimentalize its subjects. Instead, it presents historical facts with quiet honesty, allowing their inherent cruelty to provoke the viewer's moral response. In doing so, the documentary creates a profound sense of ethical unease, reminding us of society's enduring responsibility toward those whose dignity has been systematically denied.

While Grützner's point of departure lies within institutional structures themselves, Some Happy People shifts its focus toward the personal consequences of social exclusion. Through conversations with family members and specialists, viewers are introduced to Ivan, Eli, and Stefi—three adults for whom a diagnosis of Down syndrome once represented a sentence determining the quality of their lives under socialism and in the years that followed. Although all three were born into the same institutional system, their lives unfolded under radically different social circumstances.

By contrasting Ivan's upbringing within his family with Eli's and Stefi's childhoods in specialized institutions from birth, director Maria Andreeva constructs not only deeply moving personal portraits but also a critique of a system that pushed those perceived as different to the margins of society. The contrast between the protagonists' lives illustrates the profound difference between family care, capable of protecting human dignity, and institutional care, which often restricts opportunities for

personal development. Combining observational filmmaking with interviews featuring relatives and professionals, the documentary reveals the long-term consequences of social exclusion through the difficult process of integration into society.

What ultimately defines both films is their refusal to portray people with disabilities merely as recipients of care. Instead, they present them as individuals with their own aspirations, personalities, and the unquestionable right to live with dignity. In doing so, both documentaries awaken the desire to better understand the lives of people with intellectual disabilities, reminding us that genuine empathy begins not with social assumptions or inherited prejudices, but with encountering the human being behind the diagnosis.

Placed within the broader context of institutions shaped by political decisions, these stories demonstrate how political systems influence the ways societies perceive difference. When particular groups are repeatedly represented as „deviations from the norm," these perceptions gradually become embedded in collective consciousness, persisting even in the language of those closest to them. Ultimately, both films invite audiences to ask a question that extends far beyond any specific historical context: to what extent is society truly prepared to accept those who are different as equal?

"Petra Kelly – Act Now!" is a biographical documentary that combines historical research with a political portrait. It comes at a time when the climate crisis, wars, and social divisions are once again placing the issues of peace, the environment, and civic engagement at the center of public debate. Petra Kelly is a unique force for change – a person who never stopped believing that the world could be a more just place. That is why her legacy remains so significant today, and the film serves not only as a record of the past but also as a call to action for the present.

"Actually I Didn't Want to Stay Long" (dir. Andreas Grützner, 2025)

"Some Happy People" (dir. Maria Andreeva, 2025)

03. FRAGMENTS FROM THE PAST

What remains after the end of an empire?

"Stardust" (dir. Nils Eberwein, 2025)

By Ilina Peryanova

"Stardust" by young German director Nils Eberwein is a travel documentary that takes us across the steppes of Kazakhstan in search of the remains of Soviet rockets, but gradually turns into an encounter with the people who live among these ruins. Nils Eberwein presents Kazakhstan in a way we rarely see – far from the romanticized images of the steppes and nomadic singing, and far from the mythology of space exploration. It is a journey into the harsh reality built upon the toxic debris of Soviet scientific progress.

The film opens with the image of a rocket launching into space and gradually disintegrating along the way. Only part of the rocket takes off; the remaining parts fall to the ground, among the forests, the steppes, and the people. This disintegration is not merely a technical process, but a structural principle underlying the entire film – the collapse of the Soviet system and of grand historical narratives as they intersect with people's everyday lives.

"Stardust" is structured as a classic documentary road movie, in which the director is both an observer and a participant. He does not hide his presence; on the contrary, his gaze, voice, and movement through space shape the encounters and the narrative. The film explores the post-Soviet legacy, including the devastating aftermath of nuclear bomb tests and space launches in the Baikonur region. But rather than focusing on historical reconstruction, the film is interested in the present – in the people who live in this reality and experience it every day.

The film has a distinct sense of a real-life journey – the car the director is driving breaks down, the route changes, and his encounters with people seem natural and spontaneous. Niels continues his journey by train. Among the most powerful images in the film is the boy without arms who paints with his mouth and feet. His story is both intimate and deeply connected to the place where he lives. He recounts his family history, marked by death due to radiation, which has affected his family and his entire life. The vast Kazakh steppes served as a testing ground for atomic bombs. And the "beautiful mushrooms" in the air, as described by an elderly woman living near the test site, continue to this day to affect the region, which has dangerously high levels of radiation. At the same time, the director weaves in conversations about rocket debris, toxic traces, and the consequences of the experiments in these eerie landscapes. The history of space and military projects is presented as a tangible reality that continues to shape people's lives.

The raw, unflinching depiction of the horse's killing and butchering, and the scene's almost physical impact, completely shatter any romantic notion. To survive in the steppes, near the space launch site that has left a huge hole in the ozone layer, one needs tremendous resilience. There, the average life expectancy is 60 years, and thousands of wild and farm animals die each year. Against the backdrop of a butchered horse, the local population tells us about rocket debris and how they've sold it over the years. The brutality of these scenes seems to carry the film's entire structure and leaves a clear visual impression on the viewer's mind.

The film begins with a rocket breaking apart and ends with an image that is both absurd and

utterly down-to-earth – a rural toilet located in the middle of nowhere. This ending suddenly brings all the cosmic symbolism back down to earth and leaves the viewer facing a very simple and human reality.

Nils Eberwein is a young German filmmaker who has focused his attention on the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union; he has traveled to Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Kazakhstan to uncover and explore various stories that have been forgotten by the global public. As a filmmaker, he does not hide his involvement in the filming process; on the contrary, he emphasizes his personal perspective through his voice-over. This approach commands respect – he is more sincere toward the viewer, but also toward the documentary material itself, because he does not portray the Eastern world as "exotic and poor," nor does he claim to understand it. On the contrary – he takes the perspective of a foreigner, a traveler who has found himself there briefly, someone who is curious and open to a past and a present way of life that is not his own.

"Stardust" is a film-essay that begins with space but remains grounded on Earth; it begins with rockets but ends with human faces. And it is precisely in this shift that its value lies. On the one hand, Kazakhstan is a country that is currently extremely wealthy and resource-rich; on the other, in the film we meet people who resell rocket debris – metal from spacecraft that were once a symbol of Soviet scientific power. This creates a stark and painful paradox: things that were once the pinnacle of technological progress are now secondary raw materials, leaving a toxic mark on both the people and the land they inhabit.

"Stardust" (dir. Nils Eberwein, 2025)

What does memory inherit?

"In Search of Satyr Efendi" (dir. Rena Efendi, 2025)

By Ilina Peryanova

"Searching for Satyrus" by Rena Effendi (Azerbaijan, USA, 2025) is an emotional and touching documentary that poses a deeply human question: How do we live with the absence of the people who have shaped our lives, yet who were never fully "there"? Rena sets out to follow in the footsteps of her famous father, Rustam Effendi, trying to get to know him through his past. Her journey, however, reveals not only family secrets but also a present in which climate change and war have left their mark on people's lives and the nature that surrounds them.

The film unfolds in several directions at once. On the one hand, it is a family portrait of a woman searching for her father through a journey connected to a butterfly bearing his name – Satyrus Effendi. The father is a figure of absence, but also of mythologized memory: a scholar, an entomologist, a man whose life was spent traveling, among many women and relationships, wine, and research, and who failed to be a stable presence in any of his families. On the other hand, it is a journey through the history and territory between Azerbaijan and Armenia – a space marked by a thirty-year war, political tensions, and shifting borders. In the past, this was a place of free movement and exchange; today, it is a place of discord and deep trauma. Among the film's most memorable observations is the idea that butterflies remain indifferent to the borders that people draw between themselves. Where we see conflicts and divisions, they recognize only a single shared landscape.

At the heart of the film lies the image of the Satyrus Effendi butterfly – an extremely rare and endangered species that lives exclusively in the mountainous landscape of the Caucasus. The butterfly's range is on the Armenian side – a place that was easily accessible to Rena's father, but not to her. She has to apply for a visa and provide a lengthy explanation for the purpose of her visit. The driving force behind her travels in the film is precisely this obsession: to see, at least once in her life, the critically endangered Satyrus effendi butterfly, whose name she herself bears.

The most intimate layer of the film is the personal one – Rena gradually comes to realize that she is a child born out of wedlock and part of a complex family structure in which her father has numerous relationships and children, while she herself remains on the periphery of his life and memory for a long time. This leads to one of the film's most striking scenes – Rena points the camera at her mother and forces her to reveal family secrets. A complete breakdown ensues – Rena had always believed that she was the legitimate child, while the others were the illegitimate ones. At the same time, she realizes that no one in her father's immediate professional circle knew of her existence. Particularly poignant are her encounters with her two half-sisters, during which the three of them gradually piece together the image of the same man. It is they who recall that his funeral was attended mostly by women, each with her own story—an open or secret relationship with the famous and charming entomologist.

In the end, Rena manages to capture the elusive: she finds the black Satyrus effendi butterfly. After seeing numerous collections of dried-up, crumbling butterflies throughout the film, we expect Rena to keep this butterfly for herself. But she sets it free, saying, "You're more beautiful when you're alive," and it's as if this phrase encapsulates the film's message. Rena, who has followed in her father's footsteps, overcomes her own ego and the desire to possess the butterfly, with the clear

understanding that there is no value in preserving a critically endangered butterfly whose existence and habitat are threatened by climate change.

In the end, Rena manages to capture the elusive: "Searching for Satyrus" is the debut film by Rena Effendi, known as a documentary photographer with a distinctly humanistic approach. She constructs the film from a personal perspective, in which the line between observation and intimate experience gradually blurs. Following her father's path through science, memories, and the landscapes of the Caucasus, Rena Effendi creates a beautiful and multifaceted film about memory and legacy – both a personal narrative about her absent father and a reflection on the boundaries that people constantly draw between one another. And above them all, the butterflies remain – indifferent to wars, politics, and divisions.

"In Search of Satyr Efendi" (dir. Rena Efendi, 2025)

What do borders remember?

By Denitsa Ganeva

At the heart of the audience's experience of documentary cinema lies a sense of authenticity. When viewers sit down to watch a documentary film, they generally assume that both the story and the manner in which it is told are grounded in real events and factual reality. It is precisely this trust that makes documentary filmmaking such a powerful instrument for shaping public opinion, but in the wrong hands, can have irreversible consequences. Propaganda films are perhaps the clearest example: rather than simply presenting a particular version of reality, they actively participate in its distortion in order to manipulate audiences. Conscious of this historical legacy, contemporary viewers recognize that documentaries, like all cinematic works, rely on the expressive tools of film language to communicate their stories in compelling and meaningful ways. In this sense, a documentary's authenticity cannot be equated with the direct or unmediated presentation of reality itself.

Even when striving for maximum objectivity, documentary filmmaking inevitably confronts the problem of authorship and two opposing forces: factual evidence and the filmmaker's interpretation of those facts. Within contemporary documentary practice, directors increasingly acknowledge the active role of the audience, prompting a search for new ways of representing reality. One of the most distinctive tendencies is the turn toward autobiographical storytelling, in which filmmakers narrate their own experiences in the first person, transforming subjective perspective into a means of achieving a deeper sense of authenticity. Yet personal experience often remains embedded in memories, emotions, and associations that resist conventional documentary representation. This creates a need for alternative cinematic forms capable of visualizing what cannot be directly observed.

My Grandmother Is a Skydiver (2025), an animated documentary by Polina Pidubna, follows the director's attempt to reconsider her own identity through the story of her grandmother. Moving between Soviet Central Asia in the 1960s and Ukraine in 2022, the film constructs an imagined dialogue between two generations of women separated by time yet connected through shared experiences of war, displacement, and the preservation of cultural memory. Beyond making this narrative possible in its present form, the choice of animation directs attention toward imagination and memory as legitimate sources of documentary material. Through color, visual texture, and music, Pidubna succeeds in visualising what exists beyond the reach of archival footage: memory, inherited trauma, and the sense of historical destiny passed from one generation to the next.

Determined by its chosen form, the film does not attempt to reconstruct history as a sequence of objective facts. Instead, it engages with our perceptions of the past as catalysts for self-reflection. The central motif of travelling through time as a means of understanding identity is expressed through the film's sound design, where Polina addresses her younger grandmother through voice-over narration. This approach conveys an emotional experience in which personal and collective memory continually overlap. The use of animation ultimately suggests that when memory, identity, and transgenerational trauma become the subject of documentary inquiry, the most truthful image is not necessarily the archival document, but rather the one capable of expressing how the past continues to inhabit the human mind.

Border (2025), an experimental documentary by Estonian filmmaker Sasha Shprotser, follows the director's journey to visit her grandmother's grave in Russia. Crossing the Estonian-Russian border on foot, Shprotser records sections of the journey using a 180-degree camera. The film's visual

language reflects a pursuit of maximum immediacy. Devoid of aesthetic embellishment, the footage consists of raw fragments of the road ahead, resembling a video diary that significantly reduces the distance between filmmaker and viewer.

Throughout the journey, the audience never sees the protagonist, yet constantly hears her voice. Her voice-over unfolds as a fragmented stream of consciousness, revealing an inner landscape where memories, associations, and present experiences merge into one another. On one level, the film documents a physical journey; on another, it gradually becomes a journey toward self-understanding. By placing viewers in the position of observing events whose motivations remain deliberately unresolved, Shprotser invites them to experience uncertainty alongside her. In doing so, she shifts the focus of her documentary away from the external event itself and toward the process of searching for one's own identity. Within this experiment, where the filmmaker's personal experience becomes the central subject of documentary inquiry, documentary cinema transforms into a tool for self-discovery and personal reflection.

Although radically different in their aesthetics and cinematic language, both films exemplify contemporary documentary cinema's growing effort to expand its scope by turning toward intimate, subjective experience. Increasingly, documentary filmmaking seeks not only to record factual events but also to recreate the ways in which those events are remembered, experienced, and understood. In this sense, these emerging forms of expression do not represent a departure from truth, but rather an attempt to reach dimensions of reality that traditional observational filmmaking alone cannot capture.

"My Grandmother Is a Sky-diver" (dir. Polina Pidubna, 2025)

"Border" (dir. Sasha Shprotser, 2025)

04. BEYOND THE HUMAN VIEW

Where does the human gaze end?

By Ilina Peryanova

Three titles stand out in the short film competition program of the Rhodope Film Festival; each, in its own way, places nature and the animal world at the center of its cinematic narrative. Although they differ in setting and narrative structure, all three films are united by a common effort – to move away from the dominant human perspective and offer a different way of seeing: through the eyes of animals, through nature and its fragility, but also its harshness.

"Perfectly a Strangeness" by Canadian director Allison McAlpine (Canada, 2024) is an immensely intriguing visual film without dialogue, in which we observe an observatory in the Atacama Desert through the eyes of several donkeys. The director herself shares in an interview with Deadline that the idea came to her when, while filming in Chile, she saw donkeys peacefully grazing next to the giant metal domes of abandoned astronomical observatories. That's when she began to wonder how these animals see the world and how cinema could capture their perspective.

The film literally tries to see the world through the eyes of the donkeys. Through the use of specific anamorphic lenses and lighting directed straight into the animals' black eyes, a sensation is created that the donkeys' eyes themselves are transformed into cosmic spaces – reflections appear within them that resemble galaxies. Particularly impressive is Ben Grossman's score, composed of unconventional instruments and metallic sounds, which establishes a soft and neutral tone and leaves room for contemplation. Through its original approach, the film allows the viewer to imagine the world through the donkeys' eyes, earning it an Oscar nomination in 2025 and a selection at the Cannes Film Festival.

„Flayers" by French director Hippolyte Burkhard-Uhlen (France, 2025) is also a film entirely without dialogue – a visual, experimental poem in which we witness an intense natural event. At the heart of the film is a scene in which dozens of vultures swoop down on a carcass in an unstoppable rush. Their bodies form a wave of feathers, beaks, and bones that moves like a single organism. The film places the viewer in the position of a pure observer, without explanation and without distance. What unfolds before the camera is both raw and hypnotic – the very process of decomposition and consumption, which is part of nature's natural cycle. The director strives to create a sensory and captivating experience in which nature is not merely a backdrop, but an active force with its own rhythm. This is the director's second appearance at the festival. In 2024, "CORPS À CORS" was screened in the competition program. In both films, Hippolyte serves as both director and cinematographer – he possesses an exceptional talent for capturing animals in their natural habitat.

"Boom 7," directed by Marit Vresvik and Gabriela Forfot, begins with a funeral – but it is not the funeral of a person, but of a tree. The film places trees, their history, and their interconnections with humans in an urban environment at the center of the story. The human characters in the film sing "Stop the Deforestation," which is also the film's central theme. According to the directors, the motivation behind the film's concept is the need to understand people's ambivalent attitude toward nature: on the one hand, people value nature and recognize its vital role in their lives; on the other

hand, they exercise control over it down to the smallest detail, while at the same time becoming estranged from it. From urban tree advocates to the ecologist who simulates plant growth on Mars, the encounter with nature is multifaceted. In the end, the tree is cut down to make way for a new bike path, and the locals mourn the loss of the eighty-year-old elm. And the viewer is left with a thought about them – the trees, which cannot speak, but have been watching people for centuries and observing how they treat them and the world around them.

Although they tell different stories, all three films invite us to look beyond the human perspective and see the world through the eyes of its non-human inhabitants. In this way, nature ceases to be merely a backdrop to human dramas and becomes a character in its own right – with its own memory, logic, and presence.

"Perfectly a Strangeness" (dir. Allison McAlpine, 2024)

"Flayers" (dir. Hippolyte Burkhard-Uhlen, 2025)

"Boom 7" (dir. Marit Vresvik and Gabriela Forfot, 2025)

How is sleep filmed?

“Prophetic Dream” (dir. Nao Yoshigai, 2026)

By Ilina Peryanova

“Masauyme” by director Nao Yoshigai poses a fundamental question: how can cinema capture a person’s inner state without imprisoning it, without turning it into a definitive form, and to what extent does the very act of filming alter the experience it seeks to document?

The film is a meditative journey into the depths of human consciousness, but also into the very language of cinema as a practice of observation, transformation, and inevitable interpretation. As someone who practices meditation and works with images, this film draws me into a space where personal experience and cinema intertwine to the point where the boundary between them begins to blur. It is precisely this personal perspective that is important here—because the film itself calls for intimacy, for individual contemplation, rather than detached analysis.

Beyond the narrative of mourning a mother and spiritual recovery in a Zen temple, “Masauyme” is actually a film about the connection between the body, consciousness, and memory. The director draws on her own deep personal trauma – the death of her mother – which left behind not only an emotional void but also a sense of alienation from the body in its most basic functions: eating, sleeping, and simply being present.

Through Zen practice, she gradually returns to her physical body, not as a stable structure, but as a constantly changing process. In this sense, one of the film’s most powerful ideas is that there is no fixed “self” – there is a flow in which the absence of a constant turns out to be the only constant in life. “Masauyme” stands at the intersection of documentary cinema, essay film, and performance art. It moves freely between observation, reconstruction, and inner monologue, without adhering to classical dramatic structure.

In this context, the film can be considered alongside the work of filmmakers who blur the boundaries between documentary and fiction. This is cinema that does not “tell a story” but rather thinks through images. One of the film’s most important features is its hybrid structure. It incorporates personal archives, photographic series taken during periods of grief, as well as images of food – shots that mark the transition from a rejection of life to a gradual restoration of vital energy. Here, food is not a pleasure but a function, a necessity, almost a minimal act of survival. This narrative thread intertwines with the director’s physical presence in the Zen temple. The film was selected for the Forum section of the Berlinale, where, during a Q&A with the audience, Yoshigai shared that after spending a long time at the temple, she realized she needed to return to life there with a camera. For me as a viewer, even back then, the key question remained: how do you film something that, as an experience, is difficult to capture during the process of meditation? What happens to the spiritual experience when the camera becomes part of it? In Zen Buddhism, the physical body is not viewed as a problem to be escaped or overcome, but as a direct foundation for consciousness. And on her second visit to the temple – this time with a camera – Yoshigai managed to capture precisely that soothing “simplicity” of life and physical presence that grounds the body, yet also skillfully transports us into the world of the unconscious.

Dance is another key element in this film. As a dancer herself, the director creates highly stylized choreography. Dance becomes a metaphor for a person trying to find a foothold – within themselves and in the world – while constantly falling apart and reassembling. The filmmaker herself says she

was inspired by Michizo Noguchi, the founder of “Noguchi Taiso” (a movement method that forms the basis of butoh dance). According to this method, the body is perceived as a vessel filled with fluid, free to expand and contract, in which the bones, organs, and brain float – and this sensation is skillfully brought to life on the big screen.

Sound plays an almost physical role. The audibility of bodily processes, including digestion, transports the viewer into a realm where cinema ceases to be merely a visual experience and becomes a bodily one. This is a rare and radical gesture: the body is not an object, but the very medium of the film itself. The editing creates a sense of continuous transformation – shots that do not strive for logical sequence, but rather for the associative movement of consciousness. This serves as a reminder that cinema, even documentary film, is often a form of memory reconstruction.

“Masauyme” is a radically personal film that does not strive for universal accessibility, but rather for honesty toward the inner experience. It is a film that cannot be reduced to a single category – neither purely documentary, nor purely essayistic, nor purely experimental. It is precisely in this difficult, sometimes even “uncomfortable” form that its necessity lies. It ranks among that rare breed of films that do not merely tell stories but create a space for contemplation. Such films teach us to slow down our perception, to enter our own bodies, and to observe thought as movement rather than as truth. To enter the world of physical sensations, which are constantly changing, just like the world around us.

In the context of program selection, a film like this is important to the RIFE audience precisely because it broadens the understanding of documentary cinema as an experience rather than as information. It places the viewer in a state of contemplation, close to a meditative experience – a state that is increasingly rare and increasingly necessary.

“Prophetic Dream” (dir. Nao Yoshigai, 2026)

EPILOGUE

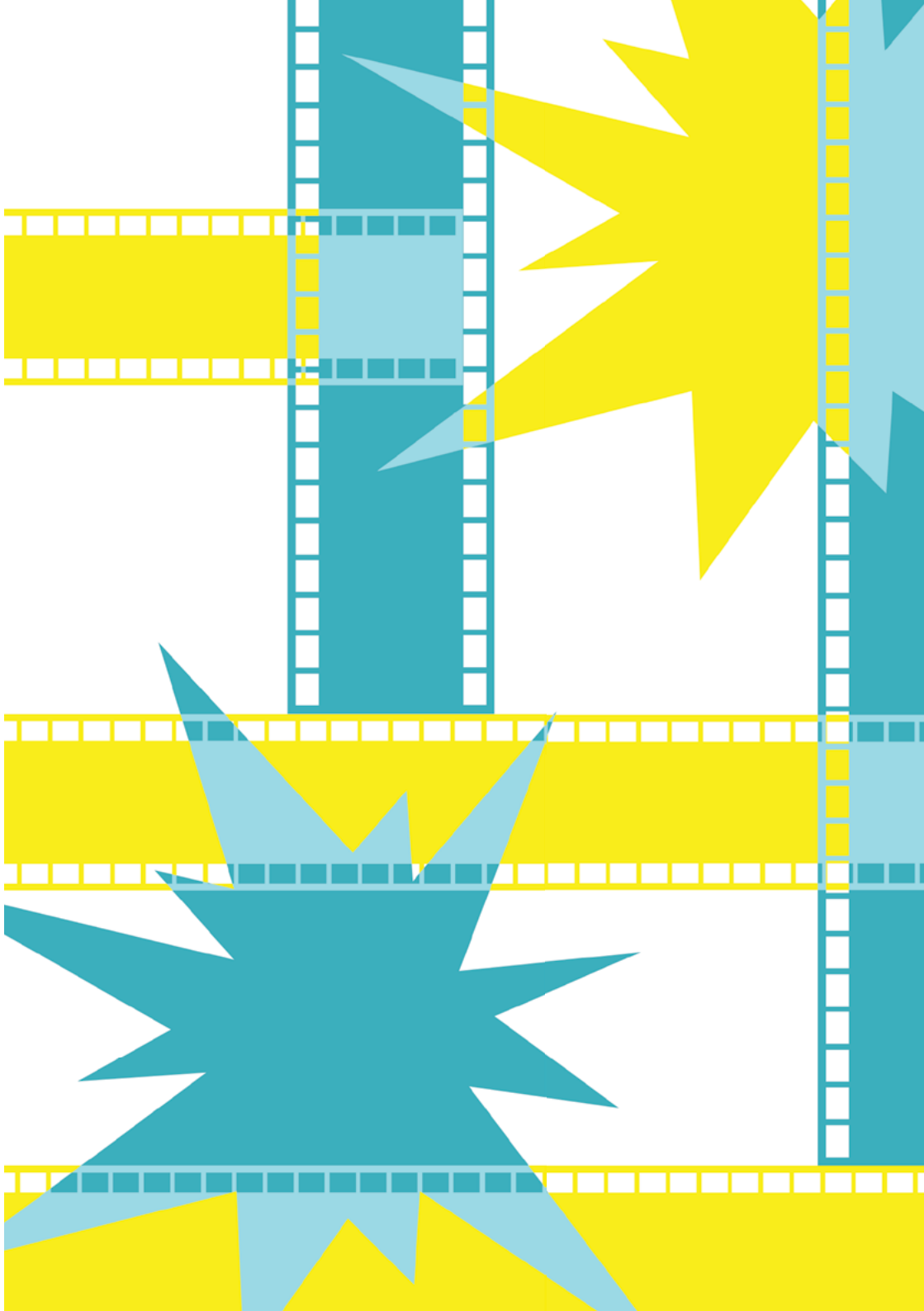
In the beginning, this book was conceived as a map of attention. At the end, one is left with the feeling that any such map is inevitably temporary. It does not seek to encompass everything, but only what documentary cinema has made particularly visible this year. In time, other images will take their place, other stories will demand to be told. But the need to look at what remains on the periphery of the general gaze is unlikely to disappear. If these texts have managed to keep attention on the films and on the questions they leave behind for a little longer, then they have fulfilled their task.

Galina D. Georgieva

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Galina D. Georgieva is a film director, screenwriter and playwright. She has participated in Sarajevo Talent Campus, Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Market and Transilvania Pitch Stop, etc. She is the winner of the award for best screenplay at the international competition NISI MASA (2007). Among her films are the short films "French Cinema" (premiere of the Shanghai IFF) and "Snowdrops at the End of the Train" (premiere of the Krakow IFF), both with numerous international selections and awards, as well as the documentaries "The Biography of Dimitar Peshev" (production of Bulgarian National Television) and "Boulevard Novel" (premiere of the SFF). She is the author of the play "Asteroid 35 111", staged at the Vazrazhdane Theater, and a participant in the New Stages Southeast theater platform. She has worked on several research and cultural projects, her texts have been published in academic journals, she is the author of the monograph "Avant-garde and Socialist Realism" and is a part-time lecturer at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". She has worked as an editor in various media.

Denitsa Ganeva was born in 2002 in Pomorie, Bulgaria. In 2026, she graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Film and Television Directing from the "Krastyo Sarafov" National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts (NATFA), as a student in the class of Prof. Docho Bodzhakov. During her studies, she joined Attic Films Bulgaria, working in various roles on professional fiction and documentary film productions. In 2025, she made her debut as a producer with the short fiction film "Found at Sea", directed by Dimana Markovska. Since 2025, she has been a member of the selection committee for the sixth edition of the Rhodope International Film Fest (RIFE), held in 2026. Her contribution to the collection of film reviews "Negotiating Realities" marks her debut in the field of film criticism. Denitsa is currently developing several short film projects, including her debut professional short fiction film as a director.

Ilina Perianova is an awarded film and theatre director, screenwriter and producer from Bulgaria. She holds an MA in "Fiction Film Directing" from Baltic Film and Media School in Estonia. Her BA is in theatre acting and directing, which she has studied in NBU Bulgaria, France and in workshops in Europe and India. Ilina's short films have been screened in numerous international festivals such as Cairo IFF, Tirana IFF, Festival du Cinéma Européen de Brest, FEST - New Directors, New Films, Sofia IFF, In the Palace IFF, Stony Brook Film Festival (SBFF) and many others. She is a cofounder of the production company Uga Buga Art. In 2026 premiered as a theatre director at the Theatre on the Square in Johannesburg, South Afica. Currently she is in production of two short films, finalising a feature documentary and developping her feature debut. She is head programmer of RIFE since 2023.

Kalina Nikolova was born in Sofia, Bulgaria in 1999. She holds a degree in Film Studies from the University of Strasbourg. In 2021, she returned to Bulgaria, where she completed an MA in Film Directing and worked in various positions on professional documentary productions. Her debut film, „Natural Film" (2026), is a delicate documentary portrait of Bulgarian writer and International Booker Prize winner Georgi Gospodinov. The film attracted large audiences in cinemas across Bulgaria. In 2024, she was an artist-in-residence at the Maison des Écritures in La Rochelle, France, where she developed the script for her feature-length documentary. The project was selected for the Ex Oriente Film Workshop of the Institute of Documentary Film, one of Europe's leading platforms for the development of documentary film projects.