

SHARDS OF LIGHT

A film by Mila Tessaieva and Marcus Lenz

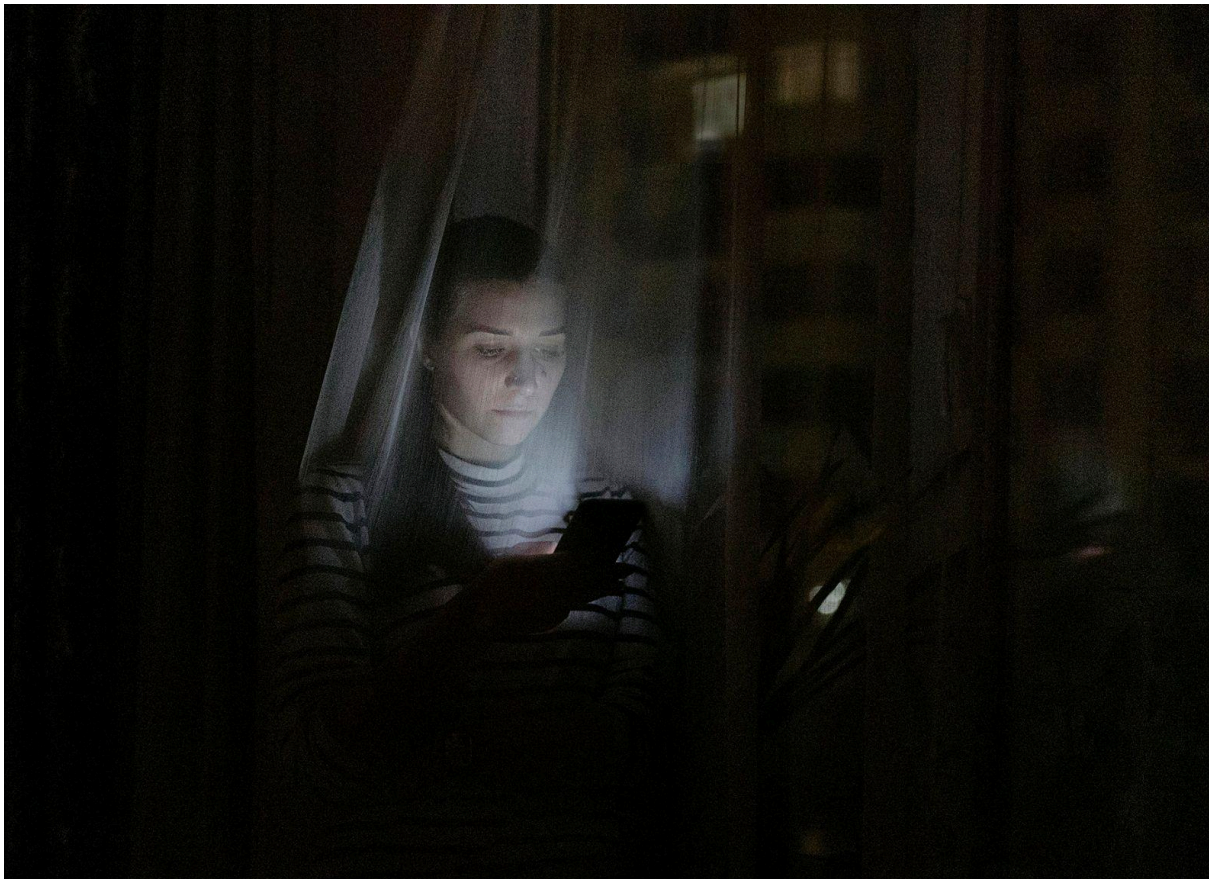
Germany - Ukraine

2025 - 93 mins

PRESS NOTES

World premiere

**Sheffield
DocFest**



[>> Press materials](#)

[>> Trailer \(vimeo\)](#)

Press notes SHARDS OF LIGHT @ Sheffield DocFest
June 2025

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CONTACTS & SCREENING DATES

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SCREENING DATES @ Sheffield DocFest

Sat, June 21 21:00 pm

Sun, June 22 12:45 pm

The Light

Curzon

World premiere, Q&A with the directors

Q&A with the directors



SYNOPSIS

LOG LINE

After surviving the Russian occupation of Bucha, five characters attempt to rebuild their lives amidst the growing tensions and trauma of a society transformed by war.

SHORT

The residents of Bucha, Ukraine, are rebuilding their city from the rubble after surviving the horrors of Russian occupation. A newly married couple, a schoolgirl, a city official, and an elderly housewife have all endured the painful experiences of war, yet they manage to hold onto hope and solidarity. But how do you rebuild in the wake of growing trauma, especially with war still raging in your country? As time goes on and hopes for a peaceful life fade, they must grapple with mounting tensions within their communities. Shot over a three-year period, the film follows five protagonists navigating the complex terrain of inner conflicts, trauma, and a longing for justice, posing questions about the future of a society at war.

LONG

After the liberation of Bucha, Ukraine, the residents are rebuilding their city from the rubble after surviving the horrors of Russian occupation. A newly married couple, a schoolgirl, a city official, and an elderly housewife have all endured the painful experiences of war, yet they manage to hold onto hope and solidarity. But how do you rebuild in the wake of growing trauma, especially with war still raging in your country? As time goes on and hopes for a peaceful life fade, they must grapple with mounting tensions within their communities.

Entering Bucha on the first day when the survivors cautiously left their hiding places and the full extent of the war crimes became visible, the directors' camera captured a "zero hour" of history. Shot over a three-year period, the film follows closely five protagonists navigating the complex terrain of inner conflicts, trauma, and a longing for justice, posing questions about the future of a society at war.



INTERVIEW

Mila Tessaieva: «This experience-fractured, painful, but real-is our new shared foundation.»

Shards of Light by Mila Tessaieva and Marcus Lenz is a haunting and intimate documentary that captures the long shadows cast by war on the lives of ordinary people in Bucha, Ukraine. Rather than focusing on the battlefield, the film turns its gaze to those left behind - survivors navigating the fragile aftermath of occupation, justice-seekers caught in bureaucratic limbo, and children using theatre as a quiet form of healing. Through deeply personal stories, Shards of Light explores how trauma reshapes daily life, how hope flickers even in ruins, and how memory becomes both a burden and a necessity. It's not a film about heroism in the traditional sense - it's a film about endurance, complexity, and the silent strength required to simply keep going. Film critic Nataliia Serebriakova (Dmovies.org, Liga.net) talked with the director.

The occupation of Bucha is a painful subject. Why did you choose it for the film — that is, life after occupation?

Bucha is not just a subject for me. I was born and raised in Kyiv, and I've known Bucha from my childhood as an ordinary, quiet town outside Kyiv. As I entered the town on the day of its liberation, and faced the scale of the tragedy, the scale of the war crimes committed by the Russians, I did not come as a filmmaker, I came as a Ukrainian, whose land and people had been turned to ashes.

But this moment of liberation... it was like Zero Hour. With all the pain, shock, and impossibility to process what had happened, I witnessed incredible solidarity and strength to rebuild, to restore life from those ashes. Those first months of the war were full of immense pain but also collective determination to rebuild, to prove that life can indeed overcome death.

This resonated deeply with me, and that was the beginning of our film.

What was special in this story for you?

The process of transformation. How personal situations have changed over time. Those three years we worked on a film in Bucha, we could simultaneously observe a society AFTER the end of the occupation and the PRESENT of life in times of war. Being so close with our protagonists and living through those moments of personal and collective transformation with them, we saw the complex stages of war's aftermath - both for individuals and the society: from solidarity to conflict, from suppressing pain to exposing the anger, the stages of trauma, and the consequences of the war which, I believe, is universal.

I believe that by seeing this film, we can learn about our histories, and this history is what we share in Europe. While working on the film, I gained a deeper understanding of what

my family went through after World War I and World War II. I believe we carry these experiences inside us.

As an artist, I mostly work with history and memory - with how nations endure their tragedies, how these tragedies shape societies, and how collective memory is formed. This isn't just a theme for me - it's the core of my artistic life, that's something I am not just working on but am truly engaged in as a researcher and a person. When the full-scale invasion began, I packed my things in Berlin and left for Kyiv the very same day. I just had to live this moment with my country, it was important for me to be in Kyiv from the first day, to see and feel everything personally.

So the film became your answer?

The film became a tool to raise questions. What comes after the war? How do we deal with all the trauma and conflicts? How will we, Ukrainians, each carrying different experiences of this war, find a common ground to rebuild? And is it possible at all to rebuild? But also, the act of filming and dedicating myself to giving voice to the people was my tool to survive mentally through this experience.

You made your first film, 'When Spring Came to Bucha', about the direct aftermath of the Russian occupation. What made you continue?

The first film was an honest, sensible, but very immediate response to the war, the war crimes in Bucha, and the power of humans to restore life.

The war has changed reality for everyone. And for our protagonists in the most direct sense. Each of them went through a turning point, faced challenges no one could have predicted. They are those Lights, broken into pieces, but still "shining" - living, fighting for their values.

Each of them has a common starting point: the liberation of the Bucha district and the discovery of the Russian war crimes. Each of them has a common goal: to restore life to normal. And finally, each of them must experience ongoing war, trauma, division of society, and search for justice. And we can live their experiences in a very personal sense.

They show what we often find less important in the stories about the war, or what we don't want to talk about. But these stories are the ones we can connect personally. They're about the impossible challenges, about how war breaks ordinary lives into pieces.

What themes became central for you in Shards of Light?

For me, this film is about long-lasting and often unspoken consequences that war brings to people and society. About the impossibility of finding justice in the war. The impossibility of a system to manage the challenges. and a future that's blurred. These are stories of seemingly "ordinary" people, but they're extraordinary. They reveal everything that doesn't make it into the official narratives of war. It's not about heroism. It's about broken lives that cannot be put back together.

Your film made a strong impression on me — it made me reflect, even cry a little. These human stories are deeply moving. I'd like to ask you this: when we look at contemporary Ukrainian documentary cinema - Militantropos, Songs of a Slow Burning Earth, Timestamp - many of these films are more meditative, often wordless, without distinct protagonists. On the other hand, there are rawer, more report-like films. But there are very few that follow real characters and tell personal stories. Could you tell us about your background? Where did you study?

Every film done by Ukrainian directors in the past years is unique: as we all live the pain of war through our skin. And then, while living the war in real life, we are trying to communicate the pain to the outside world through the films. Every one of us finds their unique language, their unique focus.

As for the background, I don't have a film school behind me. But as an artist, for over 20 years, I worked on multiple long-term photographic projects. I was always searching for the specific visual language, depending on the topic, and the subject would dictate how I should convey reality.

However, one thing connected all of my projects: they were always focused on a person, and through this person, to a collective phenomenon /a social tendency told through personal stories.

These projects would take years - two, three, four - and they were structured much like films: with character searches, visual decisions, and structuring narrative. And when a project culminated in an exhibition or a book, it already resembled editing a documentary. I honestly never planned to make films. I truly love photography - its independence, the ability to work alone, the magic of a still image. But in those first days in Bucha, I realized that photography can't work as my language. It couldn't convey what I was seeing, feeling, or what I wanted to tell. Reality could no longer be reduced to a single frame. It was something far more complex and painful: sounds, smells, inner motivations of our characters...

And while working on the first film, 'When Spring came to Bucha', I realized that, although I never formally studied directing, I intuitively knew how to build the film – both during the shooting and later in the editing room. How to have this personal, honest approach.

So why do you choose to focus on protagonists? Where does your attention to personal stories come from?

Each of our protagonists is a microcosm of society. Through them, we can understand the war on a deeply personal level. They embody those "Shards of Light" - they are active, they are alive, despite their worlds being broken into splinters. Those personal stories deeply resonate with me, and so I believe I was able to bring them to the film.

Over time, their stories have evolved, and a strong personal connection has been formed between us. My film is built on deep trust. These are not just characters — they are people with whom we share genuine mutual openness. I'm honest to the ground with them, and very gentle with their emotions and their personal space.

That trust, which I believe is visible on screen, is also the result of my respect for them. And it's precisely what allows us to create an honest space where important things can be said through personal stories.

This really means a lot, not only for the quality of the film but for me personally.

Was the full-scale invasion the real starting point for your protagonists? Or is the story more about the moment Bucha was liberated?

It's both the invasion and the liberation of Bucha. The world you lived in, which seemed normal, collapses. Everything you used to do, everything that was your foundation, is either destroyed or has lost its meaning. From that moment, our protagonists begin a new timeline.

For each of them, it's their own path. Some, for instance, devoted themselves to the fight for justice. That became the meaning of their lives for years, unfortunately, without results. Take Olga: during Bucha's liberation, she was saving people - she truly was a hero. But then, for three years, she had to defend herself against accusations of something she hadn't done - to prove she wasn't a collaborator. And that was nearly impossible, because she had been accused "just in case."

Each of our protagonists embarked on a new, unknown, painful journey. And it was important for me to be with them along that road. For example, Maksym and Anya. In April 2022, when they got married, they were euphoric. He had defended Irpin, and they believed in a quick victory. But when he came back from the frontline in 2024, he was really broken. Reality had changed. And no one was prepared for that.

This film is important to me, particularly because through it, I can speak about this new reality: the reality of war, and their attempt to navigate in this uncertain reality. Through them, through their fates.

I saw the text at the end of the film saying the case against Olga wasn't closed, only suspended. Is that true?

The case hasn't been closed. Officially, she isn't guilty and isn't under arrest, but she hasn't been exonerated either. Everything is in limbo. No one responds to her appeals, and no one is moving the case forward. It's frozen. And most likely, it will remain that way until all the collaboration cases in Kyiv Oblast are resolved - they've been merged into a single dossier. And that's a process that could take years.

What is this children's theatre group we see in the film — the one putting on a play?

The ZAREVO theatre studio is in Borodianka. Overall, the three key locations where we filmed were Bucha, Irpin, and Borodianka. And it was in Borodianka that I met a teenager named Olenka in the spring of 2022. At the time, she was the only child in her class who was in the classroom - all the others had either gone abroad or relocated somewhere safer. So the teacher was giving lessons just for her.

I was following Olenka and her friends since then. On one level, the theatre is just a play. Although for me, that scene held a deeper meaning in the film.

What was it about the theatre performance that struck you so?

That's a very literal moment to see how the lives in Ukraine exist in overlapping, but still different realities. Just a day before they rehearsed this play about the war, there had been a funeral – we see it in the film, taking place right outside the theatre's windows. And the next day, one of their neighbours would be leaving for the front. The war is literally just beyond the wall; they also saw it during the occupation. But it is still unreal for them. This fragmentation, this multi-layered reality - it's the essence of life in Ukraine today.

Children are still children: they laugh, they joke, they perform in a play as if it doesn't touch them. But the moment they start talking about what they've been through - the occupation, the bombing of Borodianka, the evacuation under bombs - you suddenly realize the depth of their trauma. It hurts them to remember, so they try to just keep going, to live as best as they can.

But that trauma will stay with them forever. And the society they grow up in will be marked by the scars of this war.

It sounds like this is exactly what you wanted to convey in your film — the complexity and multifaceted nature of the wartime experience?

Right, and I really aimed to make this film honest, to raise questions about all 'war taboo' topics. And about the future for our protagonists, about the future of Ukraine. This coexistence of laughter and pain, of children's theatre and funerals, of life and loss, conflicts and hopes, all seen with the backdrop of the war just outside your door. This experience-fractured, painful, but real-is our new shared foundation.

June 2025



ABOUT THE DIRECTORS

Mila Teshaieva



Mila Teshaieva is a Ukrainian/ German artist and filmmaker whose work explores how historical narratives and political structures shape both individual and collective identities. Her work received worldwide recognition and was presented in institutions such as MIT Museum, Red Cross Museum, the Museum of European Cultures, and is held in multiple public collections. In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Teshaieva returned to Kyiv and its surrounding regions to document the unfolding events. Her first feature documentary "When Spring came to Bucha" premiered at IDFA in 2022 and in 2023 received Audience Award at HotDocs, German Documentary Film Award, Grimme Award and Main Award at AJB DOC.

Marcus Lenz

Marcus Lenz is a German director and cinematographer based in Berlin. He graduated from the German Film and Television Academy Berlin (DFFB), and is an author of numerous documentary and fiction films. His latest fiction film "Rival" had its world premiere simultaneously at the Busan International Film Festival, Korea, and the AFI Fest in Los Angeles. In Hof it won the Förderpreis Junges Deutsches Kino, and many international prizes followed.



ABOUT THE PRODUCTIONS

Wildfilms

Founded in 2016, the German production company wildfilms is dedicated to the development and realization of artistically ambitious feature films and documentaries. Curiosity about life and the exploration of the structures that shape our world determine the films we produce in close collaboration with our authors.

THE WHY

The non-profit media organisation based in Denmark produces and distributes public media campaigns globally. Since its founding in 2004, it has reached hundreds of millions of people through 70+ broadcasters and 50+ outreach partners in over 200 countries and territories. Its mission is to ensure access to fact-based information about human rights and democracy by making locally made documentary films freely available to new audiences, with the belief that films have the capacity to educate people on nuanced topics and the potential to change hearts and minds. THE WHY's upcoming media campaign WHY FREEDOM? - five documentaries exploring the meaning of freedom in the world today - is scheduled for release in early 2026.

Quiet Talks

Founded in 2018, Quiet Talks is a Kyiv-based production working with independent, author-driven films and artistic projects in Ukraine and beyond. It produces and co-produces documentaries with a focus on creative collaborations with international and domestic directors and producers who have a unique voice, a high artistic ambition and share the passion for the art of cinematic storytelling.



CREDITS

| | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Written & directed by | Mila Teshaieva and Marcus Lenz |
| With | Olga Malakh Taras Vyazovchenko Liudmyla Kizilova Anna Tarasiuk Maxim Lisnytskyi Olena Tymkova Yuri Bilous Alla and Valeriy Nechyporenko |
| Cinematography | Marcus Lenz |
| Editing | Agata Cierniak |
| Music | Carl Ludwig Wetzig |
| Sound Design & M | Dominik Avenwedde |
| Producers | Marcus Lenz, Patrick Waldmann (wildfilms) Mila Teshaieva (Quiet Talks) Mathilde Kirstein (Why Freedom) |
| Executive Producer | Mette Meyer Hoffmann (Why Freedom) |
| Associate Producer | Marina Orekhova |
| Commissioning Editors | Britta Windhoff, WDR Lucie Kon, BBC Storyville Jutta Krug, WDR Mirjam Dolderer, SWR Anders Bruus, DR Asta Dahlman, SVT |
| Funded by | Film- und Medienstiftung NRW |
| Broadcasters | WDR, SWR, BBC Storyville, 3Sat, SVT, DR |

