

WHEN LIGHTNING FLASHES OVER THE SEA

Director Eva Neymann

Germany, Ukraine | 2025

124 min. | Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish with English subtitles

Cinematography Eva Neymann, Saša Orešković. **Editing** Pavel Zalesow. **Sound Design** Walentin Pinchuk, Sasha Valent. **Producer** Kirill Krasovski. **Co-Producer** Eva Neymann. **Commissioning Editor** Rolf Bergmann. **Production company** Blue Monticola Film (Magdeburg, Germany). **With** Fadey Fadeev, Madona Hupenia, Igor Vlasenko, Nina Ulchik, Valeriy Bassel, Irina Babanina, Solomon Nuzhyn, Dmytro Shulyakov.

Synopsis

Day labourers smoke while looking at the Black Sea, workmen stretch out on the roof of the damaged cathedral, a boy manoeuvres us through the sunny streets and courtyards of Odesa while he dreams of a medium-size chocolate cake for his birthday and a job on a cruise ship. Yet this cheerful everyday life is tempered by a feeling of unease, for the many gaps – the holes in the historical facades, the absence of family members or the darkness caused by the power blackouts – render the omnipresence of the war far more shocking than its deceptively far-off rumblings.

The memories, experiences and dreams of the astounding people that Eva Neymann shows on her extended, attentive expedition through the harbour city become a means of survival. A refugee from Abkhazia, a nomadic clergyman, a widow who takes care of street cats, a single father whose sons live on different sides of the front, a Shoah survivor and many more give us seldom insights into the reality of a place surrounded by myths, a poetic space full of resilient humanity. (Irina Bondas)

Eva Neymann, born in 1974 in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine, studied law in Marburg and film directing at the DFFB Berlin. Following her successful short film *FREEZE, THAW* (2001), she directed several documentaries showcased at international film festivals. In 2007, her feature debut *AT THE RIVER* premiered at the IFFR Rotterdam. Her second feature, *HOUSE WITH A TURRET* (2012), was part of the East of the West competition at Karlovy Vary, where her third feature, *SONG OF SONGS*, also premiered in 2015. Her documentary *PRYVOZ* had its world premiere at Doclisboa in 2021. Neymann lives and works in Berlin.

Films: 2001: *Samri Otomri / Freeze, Thaw* (short film). 2004: *Vse po-staromu / Everything as Usual*. 2005: *Uvidet more / Seeing the Sea* (short film). 2007: *Puty Gospodny / Ways of God, U reki / By the River*. 2012: *Dom s bashenkoy / The House with a Turret*. 2015: *Pesn pesney / Song of Songs*. 2021: *Pryvoz*. 2025: *When Lightning Flashes Over the Sea*.

Director's Statement

Countering the Stigma of Being Merely a Victim

The everyday life of Odessa's inhabitants during wartime

Odessa, my hometown, how are you? I wander with my camera through your present, life in times of war. The camera collects environments and dreams which are being defended against the stigma of being merely a victim. A widow helps Odessa's street cats pull through, an erudite tramp flirts with me, an old friend dies, and once again the power goes out. Generators create islands of light, here a mendicant is washing up, gifting the next beggar his dinner; the draft threatens a young man, his biological brother too, but in Moscow. In the end, in the major summer storm, everyone thinks: only thunder and lightning! Odessa, may you only be struck by thunder and lightning!

Eva Neymann

Interview

Tangible Freedom and Enduring Dreams

Eva Neymann talks to Christiane Büchner and Barbara Wurm about artistic engagement with the war and the special power of her chosen home Odesa

THE INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED IN RUSSIAN.

Barbara Wurm: Eva, thank you for your wonderful, sensitive film. Let's start with the title of the film: **WHEN LIGHTNING FLASHES OVER THE SEA**.

Eva Neymann: The working title was based on the topic of dreams. But then I met a boy who taught me fortune telling. He said that when there is lightning over the sea, wishes come true. I took that very seriously. That's where the new title comes from.

Christiane Büchner: How did you start the project? How did you get to know the people and work with them?

EN: I was in Ukraine when the Great War began on 24 February 2022. I was there when everyone experienced the initial shock and the evacuation. It was very difficult, especially in the first few days. I knew immediately that I had to document the time and place, that I would make this film regardless of what happened, with or without funding. It was incredibly important to me. At the beginning, I had to come up with something and I arranged meetings with my friends, acquaintances and relatives. But the most important thing for me was the city itself. I knew from the beginning that I had to take the camera out on the streets to capture the spirit of the time. That was quite difficult because when I started filming, there were actually no changes on the surface. Except for the warning sirens. But while I was filming, nobody seemed to react to them. It was relatively quiet back then, there were no bombings, the nightmare of today didn't exist back then. But still, something invisible hung in the air.

I set myself the goal of capturing this mood in Odesa. Odesa is a special city, you can go out on the street and just approach people, talk to them, and they talk to you. These spontaneous encounters are absolutely normal there. So I really hoped for them and worked with them. Some of the protagonists are my friends, acquaintances and relatives, the others are people I met during the shoot.

BW: When you say that not so much has changed on the outside, but everything has changed internally and atmospherically – how did you deal with that?

EN: Yes, the shops were open, the hairdressers and beauty salons, too. They didn't close for a single day. The hairdressers became my main source of information of all kinds. Everything is discussed at the hairdresser's, seriously, the end of the war was proposed there, the start of the grain deal... basically everything was decided there. New solutions were found daily, under great pressure, with a lot of suffering and pain, throughout the city. People talked about it, but later they avoided these conversations, somehow coming to terms with the situation. Of course, then as now, everything revolves around the colossal suffering within, which is barely visible on the outside.

CB: What I really like about the film is that each scene is tailored to the person in it. The people are so different and the approach changes with them. The method used in each case leads to a great openness. How did you go about constructing each scene?

EN: For me, the freedom of the process, this creative freedom, is central. It means everything to me as a director. Of course, I approach each person differently, everyone has their own values. I understood that the scenes didn't fit together. But maintaining a consistent style also seemed boring to me. Everyone has a different sense of humour. I like different things in a conversation. I guess I'm old enough to live the way I want to, and to be with each person the way I want to be with them. It's about the people, not about the style I come up with.

BW: What was the most exciting conversation?

EN: Not all of them made it into the film. There was this one woman who was surrounded by countless cats. I approached her and it turned out that she was from near Mariupol and had fled in 2014. Since then she has been living in a rented apartment in some backyard and had brought 28 cats with her! She told me how they came here in the car and began to cry, as I had hardly seen before. She said that this year was incredibly difficult, the most difficult of her life. She recounted a list of everyone who had died: Anatoly, Liza, Tatyana Stepanova. Then she stopped, just cried and apologised for only talking about the cats. Anatoly, Liza, Tatyana Stepanova – these were her cats. I understood that the war had taken everything from her, the city she lived in no longer existed, and everything revolved around her cats. That's how it is with all of us – everyone has something of their own that they cry about more than anything else.

CB: How long did you film?

EN: A very long time. You can see the seasons in the film, so a whole annual cycle, and in fact not just one. I started in autumn 2022 and shot until April 2024.

BW: The atmosphere must have changed during that period.

EN: Absolutely. I went through various waves myself. At the beginning there was even euphoria, then disappointment, shock, then tiredness, getting used to it, then euphoria again, then at some point life just went on. Of course, I hoped that I wouldn't be able to finish the film in time. That was my hope: that the war would be over before then. If it has to go on for a long time, then the change in mood is only natural. That all of it brings fatigue and that euphoria fades. You already knew that while you were euphoric, after all, it's not the first war the world has

seen. Yugoslavia was already an example: my cameraman and husband is from Croatia. That's exactly why I didn't focus on one situation or another. I understood only one thing: that the situation would change again. And that this film should have a longer life: beyond this particular state of being captured on film. I hoped to be able to make a film that is universally valid, and that is not about either the peak of euphoria or the peak of despair or even the withdrawal of feelings.

CB: Could you talk about the special nature of the city of Odesa?

EN: I was born and raised in Zaporozhe. Odesa is the city I chose for myself. The city of my dreams. Until today. I chose a home, so to speak. So it happened that all my films – since my time as a student – were shot in Odesa. This is my centre, a root that nourishes me, and which I am afraid to stray too far from. That's what Odesa means to me. It is a surprising city where an incredible number of different things come together and live. People with completely divergent views can sit peacefully at the same table here. In Odesa, anything is possible. Nobody looks at you strangely or judges you here. They remain your neighbours, thinking their own thoughts about you, but we continue to coexist peacefully. It is precisely this environment that creates a sense of freedom. Odesa probably became the city of my dreams because there, freedom is an absolutely tangible state that you simply enjoy being a part of. Such are the historical conditions for this freedom. A multinational, multicultural city. It has always been like that. And I hope it continues.

BW: So the mythology of the city plays a lesser role, Eisenstein, Babel, the tourists. You are more concerned with the people and the atmosphere.

EN: It's all part of it, Babel, the myth, the tourists, whatever comes together there becomes something madly enchanting, fascinating. That's how it seems to me. The city is not easy, it's not always pleasant, sometimes it's really unpleasant. There is crime. When I talk about freedom, others would probably call that the myth. Odesa is full of myths and charm, and of history and people. But everything is changing. Today, completely different people live there than when I was a child.

CB: How did you edit the material that you shot over such a long period of time?

EN: Actually, without any major catastrophes or struggles. The editing was determined by the footage itself. The respective access to the protagonists was defined by the recordings, intuition and a few finds. It all happened simultaneously. After one of the meetings, I sat down at the editing table and realised that I had to edit the protagonists one after the other. On the one hand, the conversations guided the editing, but on the other hand, the city itself is also one of the most important protagonists. That's extremely important to me. It's not just about the transitions from one hero to the next, but about the mood and spirit in the city. It was also clear that we wanted to show all the seasons in the city.

BW: It seems to me that the transitional moments are very important, the views out of the window, the cats, what connects the portraits – the Abkhazian woman in the kitchen, who is so open and speaks so freely in front of the camera, the philosopher on the park bench... You were interested in the dreams they all have. I read that it was inspired by Natsume Soseki's 'Ten Nights of Dreams'.

EN: I read that just before I had the idea that it should be about dreams, it confirmed it for me. It's about the craziest dreams, beautiful, illogical, everything you can imagine in Japanese art. This freedom within a dream, how it moves with the literary material, how it deals with it. I found that endlessly exciting and wanted to do it that way too. I am convinced that if we want to preserve ourselves, it is absolutely essential that we preserve our ability to dream. It is about something beyond so-called reality. We need to

turn to our inner selves. There we can find comfort and hope. This search was important to me, and also to help other people with it. As a director and artist, it is essential for me to see more than reality, something that will last longer than the specific state of being. I do not think that people should only be seen as the product of their circumstances. Are people victims in war? Yes, undoubtedly. But I don't want them to see themselves only as victims, as a product of their circumstances. That way, they are not interesting to each other. It's easy to fall into that trap, but I want to resist it.

BW: Did you tell your conversation partners about these considerations?

EN: No. They asked me what kind of film it would be and what it was called. I said it was a documentary film called 'Dreams'. What do you mean by that, they asked. At that point, I tried to cover my tracks. I didn't want to say anything more about myself or why I was equipped with a camera. We just started living.

CB: Maybe that's where the feeling comes from that the protagonists are basically listening to their inner selves. This is where the paradox sets in that you have to show something that you can't show.

EN: Exactly! I'm not hiding, it's not just about them, it's quite obvious that while they are speaking, I am also there, a person with a camera. My presence is also part of the document. I talk to them and they talk to me. We mirror each other.

CB: A question about the music selection. I only notice the music after a third of the film and understand that it also tells a story.

EN: You know, it used to be that I would find the music first and then start thinking about the film. That was always the case. But this time it was difficult. I knew what kind of film it would be, but I didn't have any music. Until now, the music drove me, everything came from it. At some point, everything came naturally, the access to the respective protagonists, to each episode on the street. I recorded a lot of street music or music that can be heard in the respective location. A church choir, a bayan player, flute players, people playing on the street. They determined the situation and the sound. That also happened at the same time as everything else, the shooting and the editing. I heard some of the music through the window. That was how it was with the march that accompanies the cats. I heard it like that: the cats were on the street, the music was in my ears.

BW: Who are the older protagonists who have experienced earlier wars and talk about them?

EN: First of all, there is Valery Bassel, may God bless him. We worked together and that's how we met. He is an actor and appeared in two of my films. He is a talented and highly intelligent person. We always had a lot of fun together. We appreciated and understood each other. I visited him even after we were no longer able to work together, as a friend. He trusted me and let me record our conversation. There is a moment in the film when his eyes start to shine. They haven't changed! Yes, he loved being charming and flirtatious. His eyes light up and he stops being an old man. That was also very important to me: this is not just an old man. This is a person whose eyes light up. But there is also Dora. A woman who switches to Yiddish in the middle of a conversation. Our acquaintance goes as far as it is portrayed in the film: we only met once. We were relaxed, so she just switched to Yiddish, her language. Then she got tired, lay down, and continued telling me her story. She was preoccupied with her thoughts, I was with mine. That's how it was. I'm very happy to have met someone like that.

BW: What makes the film particularly special is that it is both poetic and authentic at the same time. I like the way you talk about freedom, because that touches on the paradox that is also evident: the war is omnipresent and yet it is a film that has no heaviness, that is light.

EN: That is also due to the special nature of Odesa. Like a phoenix, the city is able to regenerate each time. It gives you energy. I really wanted to remain honest even in this terrible, painful time and not pull people into something. There is a war on. So let's talk about the war. Even if I had wanted to, nothing would have come of it. My job was to see and hear what these people are made of. It may be something you don't expect, but I hope I manage to convince the viewer of it as well.

BW: Do you see your film in the context of the film industry or artistic expression in war? Or are you rather free of such expectations?

EN: I thought about that a lot. I understand that a film about war during war shouldn't look like that. But we are talking about freedom: freedom is not given, freedom is taken. I took a risk. From the very beginning – a financial one. I thought about it and decided to make it, whatever would happen, I wanted to make it for the sake of honour. Even if it is terrible and sounds awful, but it is easier to make an impression with aggressive methods, or by filming suffering, tears, blood. That too is important, to show people that, to document all these things. But beyond that, it is important to see the person, even if they are not crying at the moment. Maybe they will cry tomorrow. God forbid. But that doesn't mean that they are uninteresting. A film like mine doesn't make a strong, terrible impression. It is almost tender, isn't it? But that is precisely where the greatest risk lay. I felt that I had to do it this way. It is my duty because I am in Odesa. In Odesa, there is also a cemetery with flags. In Odesa, there are funerals every day. Every day. But in Odesa, it is about overcoming all of that. And every time I call my aunt, after every air raid, I ask, 'And?' And she says, 'Life goes on.' And life goes on. I had to hold back. So I really appreciate and am very grateful that you have recognised my film and appreciate it. I really hope that we will all have a life after the war. This is not about forgiveness. Things have happened that cannot be forgiven. It is about preserving oneself, remaining human and understanding the value and meaning of life.

BW: At the beginning you said that in Odesa during the filming it was not yet as terrible as it is today. Would it be more difficult to make this film now?

EN: Not really. There were enough dangerous situations, enough terrible things. But when a person is working, making a film – then you are not afraid. There was even a time when this grain deal was really in effect, and it seemed to us that it was the guardian of peace in the city. I don't know if it was a coincidence or not, but before and after that, when everything was very tense, my husband and I decided that we had no right to be together in Odesa, because we have a child and he must not become an orphan. We talked about it. There were moments when it seemed that we had to leave, but we could not risk our child becoming an orphan. Even now, in the midst of all this horror, none of it can be compared to the place where my colleagues are going, to the front line. That is truly terrible. It seems to me that I understand what is terrible and what is not terrible at the same time.

CB: I see a war in your film, but also a society that can balance contradictions without conflict, and such a society is not easily defeated. This also gives the film a sense of hopeful perspective.

EN: Yes, there are these shots in which the girls take selfies. Everyone is only 20, or 48, or 54 once in their lifetime. You can't relive those moments, so you have to experience them to the full. Girls at 20 know that. You can't defeat girls at 20. A society like the one in Odesa knows that there are things you can't defeat right now, today. I really hope that my film can help people to hope.

BW: It seems to me that we should end on this hopeful note!

EN: A huge thank you to you, too! It was very interesting for me to talk to you.