



a documentary film by KATERYNA GORNOSTAI

125'  
Ukraine / Luxembourg / Netherlands / France  
2025  
1.78  
Dolby 5.1  
Ukrainian



Kateryna Gornostai's **TIMESTAMP**, a documentary about Ukrainian schools during the full-scale war, has been selected for the Competition of the 75th Berlin International Film Festival. It is the first Ukrainian-directed film to compete for the Golden Bear since Kira Muratova's **THREE STORIES** in 1997.

### **Logline**

Despite the war, school life continues in Ukraine, with students and teachers striving to continue learning even under constant threat.

### **Berlinale screenings**

**20.02.2025**

08:45 / Berlinale Palast (Press Screening)

**21.02.2025**

12:45 / Urania

**22.02.2025**

20:30 / Haus der Berliner Festspiele

**20.02.2025**

15:30 / Berlinale Palast (Premiere)

**21.02.2025**

18:30 / Uber Eats Music Hall

**23.02.2025**

10:00 / HKW 1 - Miriam Makeba Auditorium

### **For international media inquiries:**

Claudiatomassini & Associates

Claudia Tomassini: [berlinale@claudiatomassini.com](mailto:berlinale@claudiatomassini.com)

Lorenzo Ormando: [lorenzo@claudiatomassini.com](mailto:lorenzo@claudiatomassini.com)

### **International sales:**

Best Friend Forever

Martin Gondre: [martin@bffsales.eu](mailto:martin@bffsales.eu)

Charles Bin: [charles@bffsales.eu](mailto:charles@bffsales.eu)

Marc Nauleau (Festivals): [marc@bffsales.eu](mailto:marc@bffsales.eu)

Polar Vaes: [sales@bffsales.eu](mailto:sales@bffsales.eu)

### **For the U.S. press:**

Cinetic

Ryan Werner: [ryan@cineticmedia.com](mailto:ryan@cineticmedia.com)

Lauren Schwartz: [lauren@cineticmedia.com](mailto:lauren@cineticmedia.com)

### **For Ukrainian media inquiries:**

Anastasiia Pugach: [anastasia.pugach@gmail.com](mailto:anastasia.pugach@gmail.com)

Osvitoria

Zhanna Dufina: [dz@osvitoria.org](mailto:dz@osvitoria.org)



## Synopsis

Keeping schools open in Ukraine is an attempt to recreate at least some of the normal life they had before the war — until February 24, 2022 (and in some regions even earlier, in 2014). Without interviews, narration and reenactments, *TIMESTAMP* provides an insight into how the war is affecting the daily lives of students and teachers. The film has a mosaic-like structure: it explores how a school functions in-person and online in these terrible times, both on and off the frontline, how day-to-day life is intertwined with constant danger.

## About the Film

*TIMESTAMP* portrays rural Ukrainian schools in all parts of the country as symbols of resilience, where teachers and students persevere under extraordinary circumstances. The film provides an intimate and rare glimpse into how the war in Ukraine is affecting the daily lives of students and teachers, capturing the challenges of providing education and a sense of normalcy for children amidst constant danger.

A country at war is portrayed without directly showing the war. The sun still shines and there is little destruction, but the constant danger is both physically and emotionally palpable. In various scenes and episodes, the documentary observes students, teachers and their classes as they live in a continuous state of emergency. Despite the hardship, the film highlights the courage and resilience of a society that the Russian army is trying to destroy.

By intimately documenting a year in the lives of students and teachers in Ukraine as they face the challenges of schooling during wartime, the film sheds light on how the war shapes the educational experience.

Although *TIMESTAMP* is very much about the continuing war in Ukraine, we hope that its documentation of growing up in a time of war will help audiences around the world to build empathy and understanding for the situation of children in war zones anywhere.



## **Kateryna Gornostai, director and screenwriter, speaks of TIMESTAMP:**

In field medicine, a timestamp is part of every tourniquet kit: it's crucial to mark the time of applying a hemostatic device to prevent the loss of blood-starved tissue. Nowadays, every schoolchild, unfortunately, knows what a tourniquet is and how to use it, as it is now part of school education in Ukraine. But this is not the main theme of the film.

We focused on ordinary and simple school experiences, like tears during the first bell ceremony, a senior student playing the role of Santa Claus, or colorful ribbons in the hands of graduates. All of this, of course, is now imbued with the context of war: students often study in shelters during air raid alerts, the principal shows the destroyed and sealed-off part of the school while lessons continue in another wing, and at an online graduation, a bell rings out that was salvaged from Russian-occupied Bakhmut.

The war has deeply penetrated this daily life, but we have no choice but to continue living and learning. And even to find joy in the everyday, because, as one of our heroines tells her students:

- And what is life? Come on, read it, she asks a little boy.
- Beautiful, young... he reads.
- And what is the most precious thing for each of us? the teacher asks the class.
- Life! the students reply in unison.
- Exactly! We must cherish it.



## An interview with director Kateryna Gornostai

### **You returned to school. How did that happen?**

I feel like I never really left. But honestly, I'm ready to move on from school. Everyone joked about making a documentary version of my last film, *Stop-Zemlia*. Well, here it is.

### **But when did you realize that you would make a film about Ukrainian schools during the war?**

The initiative to create this film came from the educational NGO Osvitoria. They wanted to shoot material that would advocate for teachers' interests during this difficult time, highlight destroyed schools, and push for change. They organize the Global Teacher Prize and work to popularize the teaching profession. They wanted to make a film about this and reached out to producer Olha Bregman in early 2023, and Olha then contacted me. The idea was to make the film within six months and release it by September 1, at the beginning of the new school year. I immediately realized that even if we started shooting in the spring, school would be over too soon, and we wouldn't have enough time to film anything. Nevertheless, we went ahead. I was well aware that Osvitoria at the time envisioned the film differently—probably as something that could be shown at conferences, with a lot of explanations, context, and people speaking on camera.

We recorded the first interview with a teacher, and I immediately realized that interviews weren't as interesting, and I wanted to capture observations of school life as a whole. After all, a school itself is a complex organism where everything is worthy of attention. So we realized that both children and teachers should be in the movie.

At that time, I started to develop a rough script of what I would like to shoot, the scenes to look for. On the one hand, there were key points in the school year: September 1, which we chose to film in Kamianske on the Dnipro River, close to Zaporizhzhia; the New Year, which has changed in schools now, with the traditional "Father Frost" now called "the Wizard"; events marking the anniversary of the full-scale invasion, held in some schools; and, of course, graduation ceremonies. On the other hand, we were looking for ways to visually depict online education. We had the idea of finding a family where both a mother and her son were attending lessons at the same time via Zoom, him as a student and her as a teacher. Thanks to Osvitoria, we found such protagonists.

Much was also dictated by events. You open the news — there's a drone strike on a school in the Sumy region. And of course we would go there as soon as we could.

So we accumulated material in two ways: a part was more like reportage, captured through quick reactions to unfolding events. Other parts were planned in advance. Nikon Romanchenko (the film's editor) and I realized that piecing everything together in the edit would be challenging because there weren't many locations we kept returning to — only Cherkasy and our protagonist Svitlana from Borodianka. It can be more difficult for viewers to get emotionally involved in a movie where they don't recognize the characters whose fate they can follow. We realized that the film would be a kind of patchwork quilt, and as a viewer, you have to let it unfold. You might meet a person in this film only once, but that moment has to be full of meaning.

### **Did you keep the international viewer in mind?**

Yes, partly because we were submitting the film project to various international pitch sessions and looking for funding. That's how Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and France became involved as co-production countries. Of course, co-producers provided feedback on what we were creating. One particular comment stood out: the audience might struggle to empathize with characters they see only once and never again, and that all the schools looked too similar. I thought: okay, we need to work on this, we had to film and select material in a way that made these school experiences feel distinct from one another.

### **You said that you focused on making the scenes full of meaning. What does that mean to you? What is the meaning of this movie for you? What brought this movie together in the end?**

In a way, this film is a documentary in its purest form. There were days when we arrived to shoot, and nothing happened: lessons took place, they were interesting as such, but they did not have the context we needed (to put it crudely, the war woven into everyday life). We wanted to avoid interviews with protagonists giving explanations. There was one school where they just didn't talk about the war at all, so the children didn't mention it, even the day after a major attack. Sometimes there were entire filming shifts that you couldn't put into the edit because nothing happened on those days.

And then, at some point, when you've already come to terms with the fact that you won't capture what you're looking for — like a scene with an air raid alarm, for example, because how can you imagine a film about education during the war without one — it suddenly happens. Everyone moves into a massive shelter for a thousand people, and we film this scene where children are sitting underground, grouped by classes. You hear this incredible

sound when everyone is talking, singing, shouting at the same time.

We were looking for scenes where reality itself is packed into the plot. You recognize it the moment you see it. For example, we were filming the "Dzhura", a sort of patriotic game. An air raid alarm began to sound, so everyone moved into the basement, and instead of wasting time, they began a tactical medicine lecture. A soldier was giving the lesson, and the kids, also dressed in camouflage, were listening — it was incredibly telling. It's cynical, but we were looking for such stories so that the context would say a lot about the time we live in.

### **How did you deal with the moments of fragility of your characters, especially children? Sometimes you follow the camera behind the children, sometimes it's even a close-up. How did you work?**

It was easier for me, as I was sitting at a remove, in front of a screen. It was my DoP Sashko Roschyn who was doing the filming. So I could let myself sometimes cry, hiding behind the bookshelves. But we were working with lenses which work well when zooming in, so we wouldn't come too close to people and could still be very close visually. We gave them space. When we started filming, I was worried that we'd show up with our huge camera - we shot on an Alexa - along with the boom mic and sound equipment, and scare everyone off. But as it turned out, it really depended on the school. Some schools had a relaxed and easygoing principal, great teachers, and that energy made the kids feel at ease. But in others, where the environment was strict-



er, the children were more tense, and working there was more challenging.

But, of course, the children still reacted to the camera, and we decided that we would leave ourselves in the film a little bit too — there are moments when they wave at us, for example, or look directly into the frame.

**Did you have any personal ethical reservations on the set? Was there anything you captured that you decided not to use in the documentary?**

In a very few instances, I granted myself some leeway. For example, I am very fond of the principal from the school in Mykhailo-Kotsiubynske, which was partially destroyed by shelling. When I first met him over Zoom, he eagerly showed me everything, taking his laptop and virtually “walking” me through the school.

Here you have a school that is half ruined, and in the other half children are studying. How do you show it visually and give it context? You’re not going to ask him directly about it. Besides, as I said before, I tried to avoid interviews in the movie. We had only one case when the protagonist told us something on camera as journalists. But I realized that this was not a method, and in such situations we asked that someone close to the hero should always be in the frame with him. We wanted to avoid interfering with reality as much as possible, although sometimes we had to push it a little.

In the case of the school in Mykhailo-Kotsiubynske, I came up with a situation similar to the one in which I met the principal. We figured out who would call him and who he would tell about the school, its destruction, and its work. I believe that we did not manipulate reality here: we recreated the scene, which he does himself all the time. In such moments, we used “directing”: we thought about how to make reality unfold in front of us. But in general, our method was purely observational. In such conditions, when we didn’t have much time, and we were bound to certain shooting schedules, a large and noticeable camera, there was no other way out.



**Because of the large camera, you can’t really be a fly on the wall.**

No way. But that’s good, because in such circumstances you don’t cross the intimate line. Once we asked to accompany our protagonist Olya to her university entrance exam. She ended up getting in — by the way, to the Kyiv National I. K. Karpenko-Kary Theatre, Cinema and Television University. When we first arrived to film her, we discovered that she wanted to study directing, and now she’s in her second year.

**How long did the filming last, and in general, did you spend a lot of time in each school? Did you return to many of them?**

We started in April 2023 and finished in June 2024 with the online graduation of a school from Bakhmut. We did return to some schools, but sometimes we took on complex trips where we filmed at multiple schools in different cities within the same region. Our longest trip was to the south, when we visited Ochakiv, Mykolaiv, and Odessa in only four days.

My current dilemma is whether to keep exact geographical markers in the film, because there is a school that is 15 kilometers from Russian positions. They are constantly monitored, drones are hovering over the school. In some places, the calculated distance to the front line as stated in the film has already changed because the front line is moving. In addition, the frontline is not only where the fighting is taking place in the east and south. The distance we measure from our protagonists also includes Ukraine’s borders with Russia and Belarus. I want to keep these distances in the film to emphasize that danger in Ukraine isn’t limited to the front-line — it extends across the entire border with our “neighbors” in the north and east. Not all foreigners understand why we mention Belarus, for example, as a potential threat in this film. And I have to explain: missiles come from there too. With these geographical references, I want to demonstrate that the danger is not just somewhere far away. It is all around us.

**How did your experience with Stop-Zemlia influence this movie?**

For me, Stop-Zemlia became a reputation booster. First of all, referring to this film, it was much easier to explain to educators who we are. The team of TIMESTAMP is almost the same as the team of *Stop-Zemlia*.

**Did those you worked with see Stop-Zemlia?**

Not all of them, but those who did, immediately trusted us. The vibe of *Stop-Zemlia* makes it clear what kind of

films we create, and in essence, this new film is the same, just a documentary.

It seems like the school atmosphere came from Stop-Zemlia — only there we reconstructed it, but here it was already in the place. We came to school and already there was everything — the people in the frame, the colors people brought with them, and the colors of the space. In Stop-Zemlia, we had to put everything together piece by piece, taking care of every element in the frame. And here, on the contrary, all the elements are already in place: we just had to form a frame out of them. This uncontrollability of reality is also very interesting.

I have already watched *TIMESTAMP* dozens of times, and all the faces there, even those of the children whose names I don't know, have become dear to me. I thought: it's so cool that we managed to document this piece of reality, that they will have a movie where they are captured in a specific time, and such a significant one. I'm not even talking about our 11th grade in Cherkasy, whose graduation we filmed entirely on Alexa! It's very luxurious. I wish my graduation was filmed on Alexa by a professional cinematographer!

**The score in *TIMESTAMP* is really something unusual, tell us more about it.**

This music was written by the avant-garde Kyiv composer Alexey Shmurak. I approached him with an ambitious idea — to write music for a children's choir. But we quickly realized that we wouldn't have time to do it well, so Alexey wrote a score for professional vocalists: Kateryna Ryzuniak, Oleksandra Stetsiuk and Olena Tsygankova. The girls perform different sounds, which are pleasant to sing, in a cappella.

At the stage of constant listening and laying down music in the studio, my favorite sounds were “liu liu liu liu liu” and “khi khu kha” — with a hard “h” sound (almost Spanish “j”) — Alexey often corrected his articulation during rehearsals. I'm very glad that our music has character because, to be honest, I'm already tired of the traditional ambient music that is often written for documentaries.

**I read an interview you did in 2023, when you were on the jury of the Generation competition at the Berlinale. There, you said that for a few months after the full-scale invasion began, you dropped out of filmmaking and volunteered in a kitchen. Tell us how you came back. I, for one, went through a long period when I couldn't watch films and take them seriously as something that could bring about positive change.**

Well, wait, what about Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*? I watched it a year ago, just in the context of “usefulness”

or “uselessness.” A man made a movie during the World War, actually laughed at something terrible, and it seemed to be disarmed. That's the power of that movie: it's not a stupid comedy sketch, it's a tragicomedy. The speech in the movie is very powerful. I try to imagine what it was like when this movie was released and people watched it during a huge war. I feel this effect, how the movie could support them at that moment. It's important to get rid of despair. Also, at some point, I guess we just peeled too many potatoes.

But there was a funny story: our volunteer kitchen was working under World Central Kitchen, a global organization, and one day the head of this organization, José Andrés, came to visit. He brought Cary Fukunaga with him. The two of them came to our restaurant, where there was a very cinematic and theatrical volunteer party. Everyone knew who he was, that he had made another James Bond movie. And this movie was the first one that my partner and I watched during the invasion: just because we saw the person who made it, and we were curious.

It was a strange experience when you watch an action movie where all the deaths and explosions look very fake. You feel how much cinema, especially in this industrial format, is a soap bubble. It is beautiful and shimmers, but it is empty. However, Fukunaga's arrival was both surreal and at the same time a return to something more global. Because we, like everyone else, were stuck watching missiles, threats, war, reading the news and telegram channels. And then suddenly the world opens up and a Hollywood filmmaker comes in, and you remember: oh, this still exists.







## **KATERYNA GORNOSTAI, Scriptwriter and Director**

Kateryna Gornostai was born in Lutsk in 1989. She graduated with a degree in biology and later studied journalism at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. In 2012–2013, Kateryna studied documentary filmmaking at Marina Razbezhkina's School of Documentary Films and Theater. She returned to Kyiv during the Revolution of Dignity to film the events. Later, she started exploring narrative and hybrid forms of filmmaking. STOP-ZEMLIA, director's narrative feature debut, premiered in the Generation 14plus 2021 at the 71st Berlin International Film Festival and received the Crystal Bear Award from the Youth Jury. She lives and works in Kyiv, and teaches film directing.

### **Filmography /selected/**

#### **2021 Stop-Zemlia (122')** fiction

Berlinale Generation 14Plus - Crystal Bear of the Youth Jury Generation 14+; Five Lakes FF, Germany - Main Prize Award; Odesa IFF, Ukraine - Grand Prix Award, Best Ukrainian Feature Film Award, and Best Acting Work Award; IFF Molodist, Ukraine - Winners of the National Competition; also among the festivals where the film was shown - Karlovy Vary IFF, Czech Republic; Thessaloniki IFF, Greece; Edinburgh IFF, UK; Trieste Film Festival, Italy and others

#### **2017 Lilac (30')** fiction

FIPRESCI Award and Jury Prize at OIFF 2017, Ukraine.

#### **2015 Maidan is Everywhere (36')** documentary

Andriy Matrosov Award from the IHRFF DOCUDAYS UA 2015, Ukraine

#### **2015 Away (11')** fiction

Best Film award at the National Competition Molodist IFF 2015, Ukraine; Best Ukrainian Film at the Wiz-Art Film Festival 2015, Ukraine; Best Actors at the OIFF 2015, Ukraine.



## Crew

Director	KATERYNA GORNOSTAI
Editor	NIKON ROMANCHENKO
Cinematographer	OLEKSANDR ROSHCHYN
Music composer	ALEXEY SHMURAK
Sound	PAVLO MELNYK, MYKHAILO ZAKUTSKY, LODE WOLTERSOM, ARTEM KOSYNSKYI

## Protagonists

OLHA BRYHYNETS as herself  
BORYS KHOVRIAK as himself  
MYKOLA KOLOMIETS as himself  
VALERIIA HUKOVA as herself  
MYKOLA SHPAK as himself  
SVITLANA POPOVA as herself  
YELYZAVETA LOZA as herself

“Creating this film, we understood that we were appealing to universal values. Schools and education are something everyone in the world can relate to. And Kateryna has an unmatched ability to bring this to life on screen with subtlety and depth. The war has profoundly altered the lives of those in Ukrainian education, and we believe we captured this marker of time, this timestamp,” said OLHA BREGMAN & NATALIA LIBET, co-founders of 2BRAVE PRODUCTIONS and producers of the film.

“We would like to remind the world that the war in Ukraine is ongoing, and our children and teachers are paying an unthinkable price for the basic human right to education. This film should become a means of drawing attention to our struggle. I believe in its powerful potential to evoke empathy and serve as a platform for dialogue in creative, academic, human rights, and political circles,” said ZOYA LYTVYN, founder of OSVITORIA and executive producer of the film.

*OLHA BREGMAN & NATALIA LIBET, Producers*

2BRAVE PRODUCTIONS connects a new generation of Ukrainian filmmakers to the global film industry. Founders Olha Bregman and Natalia Libet have garnered acclaim for introducing exciting new names to audiences both at home and abroad. With their experience and unique access to Ukrainian talents, they work together bringing this powerful force to the market by structuring international coproductions with traditional and alternative financing.

*ZOYA LYTVYN, Executive Producer*

OSVITORIA is Ukraine's leading educational NGO, which has been a key partner to the state and international organizations in major transformations for the last 11 years. During the Russian-Ukrainian war, OSVITORIA has focused on restoring education for all 7 million children affected by the war.

*VIKTOR SHEVCHENKO, Producer*

VIKTOR SHEVCHENKO has been involved in film production since 2005 as a location manager, production manager, line producer, and producer. He has worked with most film studios in Ukraine, and founded the Association of Location Managers of Ukraine. As a line producer he is known for the critically acclaimed "La Palisiada" (2023, fiction, dir. Philip Sotnychenko). His works as a producer are "It Is Quiet Here" (2022, short fiction, dir. Olena Podolianko, Novruz Hikmet), and "Second Wind" (2022, doc short, dir. Maksym Lukashov). He joined the TIMESTAMP team as an independent producer.

*FRANÇOIS LE GALL & MARION GUTH, Co-Producers*

a\_BAHN was founded in Luxembourg in 2013, and has since acquired unique experience in original out-of-the-box and hybrid contents. a\_BAHN produced, among others, the highly-acclaimed animated social impact film "Zero Impunity" by Blies Brothers (2019, Annecy), the documentary series "Draw For Change" (2023, Best series Prize at Canneseries), "Operation Barbarossa: Into the Heart of Darkness" (2024, ARTE) and the immersive work "Ceci Est Mon Coeur" by Blies brothers (2024, Mostra di Venezia). a\_BAHN is currently developing the animated documentary "Red Zone" by Irina Tsilyk and the feature film "Maman Sopra" by Blies brothers.

*RINSKJE RAAP, JULIA ROMBOUT & REINIER SELEN, Co-Producers*

RINKEL FILM & DOCS is an Amsterdam-based film production company founded by Reinier Selen in 1996. We create narratives that give you food for thought. Never afraid to provoke, challenge or rebel to tell our stories. Our first feature film was Van God Los, our last one is not even written yet. In the past 29 years, we have established a remarkable name in the global film industry and we're proud to have produced award-winning features, TV Series and movies. Rafiki, the Kenyan LGBTQ drama has been selected for Cannes and other festivals worldwide. We are proud that our movies are made by Oscar-nominated directors such as Paula van der Oest and Ben Sombogaart.

*VICTOR EDE, Associate Producer*

CINÉPHAGE is a French production based in Marseilles with a catalogue dedicated to gender, childhood, environmental, mental health and war aftermath issues. Cinephage is involved in a large majority of international projects, while having a strong presence in Marseilles and the international industry. Our last films are the hungarian film KIX (CPH:DOX), the Swedish UNANIMAL, and the Balkanic THE MOUNTAIN WON't move both to be premiered this spring.

2BRAVE PRODUCTIONS in association with OSVITORIA (Ukraine), in coproduction with a\_BAHN (Luxembourg) and RINKEL DOCS (The Netherlands), in association with CINEPHAGE PRODUCTIONS (France).

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