



OFFICIAL
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ROTTERDAM
2025

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СТРАНДЖА STRANDZHA

whispering mountain

a film by PEPA HRISTROVA

in co-production with SWR & arte

a production by FÜNFERFILM & AGITPROP



Strandzha meditates on the mystical crossroads between socio-historical territories and descends into Eastern Europe's haunted past through moments of traditional practice, folkloric storytelling and oral histories. Though faced with hardship, locals indulge in the memory of their Thracian ancestors through Bacchanal feasts and nymph-like garb.

Deep in the woodlands of the Strandzha Mountains, Pepa Hristova spins a mesmerising web made up of those pushed to the social margins. Strandzha tells us that forests are ambiguous spaces standing steadfast and resilient at the intersection of territories, shifting borders and political structures. While the world around is built and destroyed, nature finds a way to grow and survive, but the toll of the volatile past is an ever-present burden.

Hristova zeros in on the lingering collective consciousness of the forest dwellers, some who have retreated to the borderlines, others who have been installed there. Soldiers, deep-

ly religious fire dancers, traumatised children and institutionalised women, are all haunted by secrets of their past selves, manifesting in different ways. Strandzha portrays life on the periphery, in a place where people have gone to disappear for generations, that has historically been torn between the global and socio-political East and West, the urban and rural, and modernity and tradition. The audience is taken into the homes, customs and rituals of a complex society that is constantly changing but never far from its history.

– OLIVIA HĂRȘAN











STRANDZHA

a *film by*
PEPA HRISTOVA

Germany / Bulgaria / 1h35 / colour / 2025
Bulgarian with English subtitles

film production Germany

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In Europe's last primeval forest, between Bulgaria and Turkey, the Strandzha Mountains hold ancient myths and migration stories. This magical landscape becomes the backdrop for a film that blurs the lines between reality and fantasy, as the film's evocative images and sounds immerse the viewer in a journey where observation intertwines with the mystique of ritual. Here, fire dancers, ex-soldiers, children in abandoned military barracks and mentally ill women embody the trauma, spiritual power and timeless history of a place that transcends time and borders.



to celebrate mysterious, intoxicating feasts. The earth seems to hold both intergenerational trauma and spiritual power, where past and present collide. In this terra incognita, deeply religious fire dancers, seekers of meaning, former soldiers scarred by violence, children playing in abandoned military barracks and mentally ill women engage in ancient rituals and personal struggles. At the crossroads of traditions, generations, borders and languages, the film paints a multifaceted portrait of the human experience on the border—and raises the question: What do these physical and mental divides do to us?

SYNOPSIS

Nestled by the Black Sea, the Strandzha Mountains hide the rugged borderland between Bulgaria and Turkey in one of Europe's last primeval forests. One of the continent's oldest border zones, it was a passageway for those fleeing East Germany's communist regime and seeking to escape from West to East during the Cold War. Today, hundreds risk their lives every day to travel from east to west along alternative Balkan routes.

Centuries ago, the Thracians settled in this liminal space between Asia and Europe. In honour of their ancestors, the locals continue











*DIRECTORS
STATEMENT*

Borders in themselves have something open, weightless, which cannot be described and defined—a form of canyon, a way out, an end, before something new comes. Borders are everywhere—they are not a question of topography, but of faith.

What fascinates me about Strandzha is the presence of the most diverse borderline experiences. Here the subject matter becomes multi-layered and fascinating. After over 27 years abroad in Germany, the distance has opened my eyes to my old homeland Bulgaria.

I myself am a border crosser between cultures, East and West, rural and urban. I look for niches where customs and practices are passed on from one generation to the next and

outlast social change. My inner conflict, the being torn between closeness and distance, home and foreign, love and loathing, is my narrative drive for this film and will create a true rush of images. Everything is intense. It feels like being on an inner border, attracted by the darkness and uncertainty of what lies on the other side.

Intertwining the stories told through the protagonists the overall course of the film describes a narrative arc that makes it clear that the seemingly fixed boundaries that determine our thinking and our everyday life are negotiable and that change is ultimately the central constant.



*SHORT
DIRECTORS
BIOGRAPHY*

The photographer Pepa Hristova, born in 1977 in the middle of the Bulgarian Balkan Mountains, has been living in Germany for 27 years. She studied communication design with a focus on photography at the University of Applied Sciences, Hamburg. Since 2006 she has been working as a freelance photographer for various major magazines, as well as on her own projects, exhibitions and publications. Her book *Sworn Virgins* was published by Kehrer Verlag in 2013. 2006 to 2016 she was a member of the renowned photographer agency OSTKREUZ in Berlin. Her work is driven by her fascination with the fractured beauty of the east and her interest in social phenomena and archaic traditions, leading to an examination of the unknown, changing side of Europe.

Hristova received multiple fellowships and awards including the C/O Berlin Talents Award, the Otto Steinert Award for subjective photography, a fellowship from the Berlin Academy of Arts, the Border Crossers grant of the Robert Bosch Stiftung, The N-ost Reportage Award. Her work has been on display at House of Photography/Deichtorhallen, Hamburg, C/O Berlin, the Berlin Academy of Arts, Bozar, NRW Forum Dusseldorf, Stadtmuseum Munich, The National Galerie Sofia, BOZAR Centre for Fine Arts Brussels and elsewhere.











Fünferfilm is a Hamburg-based production company dedicated to films with a distinctive auteur voice. We focus on supporting emerging talent and producing a diverse range of projects, from feature films to documentaries and shorts. Committed to pushing cinematic boundaries, we collaborate with talented filmmakers and international co-producers to create films that challenge, inspire, and connect with audiences around the world.

Since its founding, Fünferfilm has made a notable impact internationally. Our first feature, *Drift* (2017) by Helena Wittmann, premiered at the Venice Critics' Week. Wittmann's second film, *Human Flowers of Flesh* (2022), co-produced with France's TITA Productions, premiered at Locarno, solidifying her reputation. In 2023, our documentary *La Empresa* by André Siegers premiered at Rotterdam, followed by *Reproduktion* (2024) by Katharina Pethke at Berlinale +Forum+. *Der Fleck* (2024) by Willy Hans received a special mention at Locarno's Pardo Verde. In 2025, *Strandzha*, a documentary by Pepa Hristova, co-produced with Agitprop, Bulgaria, premiered at Rotterdam International Film Festival.

DER FLECK (2024)

Fiction feature by Willy Hans
Co-produced with 8horses (CH)
Premiere at Locarno 2024

REPRODUKTION (2024)

Documentary feature by Katharina Pethke
Premiere at Berlinale +Forum+ 2024

LA EMPRESA (2023)

Fiction feature by André Siegers
Premiere at International Film Festival Rotterdam 2023

HUMAN FLOWERS OF FLESH (2022)

Fiction feature by Helena Wittmann
Co-produced with Tita Productions (FR)
Premiere at Locarno Film Festival 2022

AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA (2020)

Documentary feature by Karsten Krause
Premiere at International Film Festival Rotterdam 2020

OLANDA (2019)

Documentary feature by Bernd Schoch
Premiere at Berlinale +Forum+ 2019

DRIFT (2017)

Fiction feature by Helena Wittmann
Premiere at Venice Critics' Week 2017





*ABOUT
AGITPROP*



AGITPROP unites a group of professionals from different areas related to filmmaking, photography, music, and graphic design. Throughout the years we have found our own room in the visual and creative industry market in Bulgaria and Europe. Currently AGITPROP is a well-known production company working on creative documentaries, TV programs, commercial video spots, as well as art and advertising photography, graphic design, pre-press and print. Agitprop produced and premiered Family Fortune, 2007 and Goodbye to all that, 2007, as well as the two other international strikes, The Mosquito Problem and other stories, Cannes 2007 and Corridor#8, Berlinale 2008, followed later by Omelette, Sundance 2009, The Boy

Who Was a King, Toronto 2009, Dad Made Dirty Movies (sold to more than 30 territories). Among the latest AGITPROP's films are: Touch Me Not, Golden Bear Winner, Berlinale 2018, Palace for the People — film (Dok Leipzig 2018, Dok Buster Award) and four-part TV docu series for ARTE, aired on BBC, ARTE, MDR, NHK, SVT. AGITPROP is also producer of successful factual TV series for National Geographic and HBO, as well as of Father's Day high-end drama series for Bulgarian National Television in 2019.











The border with Turkey runs through the Strandzha Mountains in south-eastern Bulgaria, the country's largest nature park. This remote, wild region with its dense forest landscape is the most sparsely populated region of one of the poorest countries in the European Union.

This small area between Europe and Asia is extraordinarily shaped by antiquity, the Ottoman Empire, communism and repeated streams of refugees. Here political past and present, faith and superstition, nature, mysticism, culture and crime collide. Thus the region was one of the first areas in Europe to be settled by humans and has since then functioned as a hub between East and West, Asia and Europe.

Thousands of archaeological finds throughout the mountains bear witness to significant prehistoric sites (including megalithic tombs and dolmens). The mountains are still covered with ruins of Thracian, Celtic, Roman and ancient Greek origin.

The area was especially influenced by the Thracians for many hundreds of years. Since at least the 8th century BC, Thracian tribes settled in the region. At this crossroad between Anatolia and Central and Western Europe, their culture

grew in exchange with the Greeks, the Persians, the Scythians and other Eurasian steppe peoples, the Celts, the Romans and even with the Egyptian Empire. It was a constant give and take. At the same time, however, Thracian culture did indeed develop its own characteristic formal language in architecture and art. And it created its own heaven of gods, whose numerous members were worshipped and celebrated with individual rites. The Thracians believed in a life beyond death. The most famous Thracian myth in the world describes Orpheus' journey to the underworld, where he sees his wife Eurydice again and wants to bring her back to the living in daylight.

To this day, a multitude of Thracian places of worship, graves and healing springs can be found and mysterious, archaic practices and rituals are lived and celebrated—and have been revived more and more in recent decades: Spring marks the beginning of the annual cycle of rituals and festivals that are an integral part of the everyday life of the inhabitants* of Strandzha.

One slaughters to make Christian offerings (Kurban), one worships healing springs which are said to be the expression of the mother god-

dess (Indipasha), forest nymphs are worshipped and feared (*Samodives) ...

The beginnings of Bulgarian statehood are seen in the 7th century. After the Great Bulgarian Empire had disintegrated again after only a few decades, Slavs invaded the Balkan Peninsula together with the nomadic Bulgars. Together with the Thracian and Roman population of the area, they founded the First Bulgarian Empire, which at times encompassed almost the entire Balkan Peninsula. Immigrants merged with the local population and Bulgaria became the third recognized state in Europe. For about 500 years, until 1878, the region was significantly shaped by its membership of the Ottoman Empire. Muslims and Christians lived

here closely together as neighbors. The Russian-Turkish war at the end of the 19th century put an end to this peaceful coexistence. Decades of war, murder and expulsion followed. In the course of national conflicts between Russia, the other Balkan states, the Ottoman Empire and later Turkey, tens of thousands of people were displaced here because of their ethnic or religious beliefs.

Several times the region of Eastern Thrace changed its national affiliation. On several occasions, inhabitants had to flee to the neighboring national territories because of their Christian or Muslim faith. The area was heavily militarized during the communist era to stop refugees from the GDR, Czechoslovakia,



Poland and Hungary on their way to the West. Forged maps led some of the fugitives astray in the impenetrable thicket of the forest and the Bulgarian border troops were ordered to use firearms in case of attempted escapes. The exact number of those who were buried in the woods is not known. But the number of „missing“ tourists between 1961 and 1989 amounts to 415, and dozens of GDR citizens alone were probably killed. These cases were never solved, never were soldiers or politicians accused.

Today those fleeing to the West from the opposite direction are treated similarly. In 2016, a three-metre high barbed-wire fence was erected on behalf of the EU and border surveillance was intensified. And yet, according to local people, hundreds of people cross the border every day and put their lives in danger. A lucrative business relationship has developed between the traffickers and the border police.

Just like history, nature shapes the region. The „Strandzha Nature Park“ is the largest in the country and includes almost the entire mountain range

on the Bulgarian side of the border. 80% of the park is covered with deciduous forests. The glaciation of the Ice Age left out only this area and the Caucasus within Europe. Therefore,

rare, endemic and also highly poisonous relict plants survived here, which cannot be found anywhere else in Europe. Trees, wild flowers, herbs and insects that existed 60 million years ago. Some trees are more than 500 years old. Even on the brightest and hottest days, the dense foliage of the trees prevents the light from reaching the ground of the jungle and sometimes colors everything surreal green. „Via Pontica“ is the name given to the great north-south route of migratory birds that runs over the mountains, along the western Black Sea coast. Millions of birds use this route between their breeding grounds and their wintering grounds. The overflight of storks at the end of August is particularly impressive. Mafia bosses illegally lease the nature reserve to hunters who exploit the unique wildlife for business with rich hunting enthusiasts. Italian and French hobby hunters populate the primeval forests because of the „flying viagra“. The meat of the snipe is said to have aphrodisiac properties and is considered a delicacy.









**CREW &
SUPPORT**

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montage
FRANZISKA VON BERLEPSCH

music
NIKA SON

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sound recording
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VESELIN ZOGRAFOV

sound design
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sound mix
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F

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