



# LELEKA

a Harald Hutter film



produced by

Harald Hutter / JiaLi Ding

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Sasha, a Ukrainian refugee living in Paris, travels home to commemorate the death of her grandmother.



Sasha, a Ukrainian sculptor living in Paris, is haunted by absence and the war raging in her country. Provoked by the death of her grandmother, she creates a sculpture and travels home with it to commemorate their relationship. Margaux, a filmmaker, accompanies the 2800km drive from Paris to Okhtirka, a small village in Ukraine, documenting their trip with an old Bolex camera. Dreams and reality collide throughout the journey as Sasha shares diary pages revealing her inner turmoil and the nightmares that have troubled her while living in exile.



On the 22nd of February 2022, like many people around the world, I was shocked about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Bewilderment gave way to anger and anxiety. I met Ukrainian refugee Olga Kviatkovska not long after. Olga moved to France, along with her mother, when the full scale invasion started.

Olga is a trained actress who had an active career in film and TV in Kiev. When the war started, all this was thrown up in the air. This career path was further jeopardised when she decided to leave her homeland. Arriving in Paris she had to deal with the nightmare of French administration and, not speaking the language, had to resort to finding a job that had nothing to do with her previous vocation.

Olga and I began meeting on a regular basis. Olga would share the stories that she was hearing about and also, as we started to know each other better, began to share her own personal experiences. Through our many conversations, I was given a deeply personal account of the war. Two words kept recurring during our conversations. The first was mourning — mourning the death of loved ones of course, but also, mourning a country. The second was exile. Those words conjured many images but also a frame of mind — a

frame through which to think about those personal experiences.

Our meetings and discussions, given our mutual love of cinema, naturally gravitated towards collaborating on a film. I started taking notes avidly and meeting other Ukrainians living in Paris, discussing their experiences and impressions of the war. Eventually, a story struck a chord and felt like it would be a good starting point for a film. Given the deep yearning of Olga to return home, a road trip back to Ukraine felt like it would be the perfect way for us to explore themes of displacement, exile and mourning in the face of war.

Alongside the work undertaken with Olga, I was put in touch with Ukrainian artist Taisiia Cherkasova. We met on a regular basis to discuss her experiences and the role of the artist in the face of war. Taisiia invited me to her studio and showed me her work. I was moved by her sculptures and paintings full of somber melancholy. I told her about the film that Olga and I were developing. She told me about the death of her grandmother and about her desire to create a sculpture to commemorate her.



I was looking for a way to enter the film and have a second character counterbalance the character played by Olga. I reached out to my friend, and fellow filmmaker Margaux Dauby, asking her to participate. I did not want her to perform a role but rather simply be herself: a Belgian filmmaker who works with colour 16mm film and shoots on a Bolex camera.

Equipped with many stories we set off on a road trip across Europe with a small crew of six and an even smaller cast of two. We had a basic storyline to follow and accommodations booked along the way, but we had no idea what we would encounter on our journey or any idea of the spaces that we would end up filming. To be sure, we had a very clear idea in mind of how the film should feel and what emotions it needed to elicit in the viewer.

As the journey East progressed, Olga and I sat down regularly to discuss the ongoing journey, the film, but more importantly how she felt and how the journey made her feel. The intensity of the film shoot and being together for sixteen days and nights gave rise to many unexpected situations. The conversations with Margaux opened up a whole world not previously envisioned. Some scenes were

fully improvised whilst others were the result of Olga and I sitting down and figuring out how the character of Sasha — a character inspired by Olga's experiences but also fleshed out from other's experiences — would react to certain situations.

The translation work was done by Oleh Sovenko, a former Ukrainian soldier who was discharged and relocated to Paris recently in order to start a new life. Oleh was also instrumental in advising about the texts used and how relevant they are to his experience of the war. Leleka is the result of intense dialogue and collaboration at all stages. The hope is that it will become a starting point to discuss the ongoing war and the many lives that have been impacted and are changed forever.

Harald Hutter — Paris 2025



Leleka carries a ghostly presence — an ethereal road trip that lingers in my mind, calling relentlessly for an embarkment on an unknown journey, while also haunted by the desperate urge to return to home.

As a Chinese diaspora producer, my experience of leaving my hometown, immigrating to the United States, and later living in France has been shaped by a continuous cycle of departure and longing. More than navigating cultural identities and geopolitical landscapes, the deepest wound has been the perpetual insecurity of being forced to say goodbye to my home, my family and my friends. This experience of uprootedness resonates deeply with *Leleka*, a film that is ultimately about absence — the void left behind when one's home becomes unreachable. Diasporas and refugees alike find themselves caught in this liminal space, where displacement is not just a physical condition but an emotional state that endures across generations.

This shared experience of grief and longing was deeply felt throughout the making of *Leleka*. Our crew members, in one way or another, have all lived away from their original homes, each carrying their own sense of loss. The filmmaking process became a space for collective

reflection, where the question of home was not just explored on screen but woven into every creative decision.

But *Leleka* is not only about departure — it is also about the haunting pull of return. The film lingers in spaces of absence, in landscapes that bear the weight of memories, in the silence that follows an unspoken goodbye. Working with Ukrainian artists Taisiia Cherkasova and Olga Kviatkovska was essential in shaping this perspective. Their voices brought a depth of lived experience to the film, allowing us to create something that transcends a single story and instead becomes a shared meditation on loss. Margaux represents those of us who exist in the in-between — who feel the presence of a place even when we are far from it — while Sasha carries the quiet, unshakable grief of knowing that home, once lost, may never be the same again.

During production, when we arrived at the Moldova-Ukraine border, I stood gazing across the river into Ukraine. The water faded into the clouds, dogs barked in the distance, and the hum of car engines echoed through the woods. There were no explosions, no gunfire — just the quiet persistence of life moving forward. This moment struck me deeply, not because of what I saw, but because of

what was absent — the things I had unconsciously expected but never found. It reminded me of how displacement shapes perception, how absence often carries more weight than presence.

Reflecting on my own identity and the creative vision of my production company, JiaLi Films, *Leleka* represents more than just a film — it is part of a larger effort to amplify stories of grief, longing, and displacement within the Chinese diaspora and beyond. My immigrant experience informs my storytelling, emphasising the interconnectedness of our global community and the emotions that bind us beyond borders. At JiaLi Films, we are committed to telling stories that are culturally aware and emotionally resonant, creating films that offer not just representation, but recognition. Through *Leleka*, and through every project we undertake, we hope to explore what it means to belong, to remember, and to long for a place that no longer exists as we once knew it.

JiaLi Ding — Los Angeles 2025



## Biographies:

Harald Hutter — Writer, Director & Producer

Harald Hutter was born in Montreal, Canada. He holds a BFA in Art History from Concordia University and an MA in Film Theory from University College London.

His first feature documentary, *Up the River with Acid*, won the Grand Prize at Cinéma du Réel and received a Special Mention for the Loriden-Ivens / CNAP Prize in 2023. His short films have won prizes, have been nominated by the British Council and have screened at numerous festivals internationally. *Leleka* is his first feature fiction film.

JiaLi Ding — Producer

JiaLi Ding is the recipient of the China Huabiao Film Awards, earned his BFA at Emerson College and Paris College of Art, where he studied Global Film Art. As the CEO and Founder of JiaLi Films, he now works and resides across the United States, China, and France. JiaLi Films provides specialised co-production services and consulting, supported by a skilled team of multilingual professionals. The company is currently engaged in various stages of development and production on a range of documentary and fiction films in Europe, North America and Asia.

# LELEKA

a Harald Hutter film

90m / 1.66:1 Black & White / Super 16mm / 5.1 /

Ukrainian, English & French / Canada-France-U.S.A — 2025

With: Olga Kviatkovska & Margaux Dauby

Cinematography: Alex Nevill

Music: Eduardo Manzanares-Nyul

Editing: Harald Hutter

Sound Design & Mix: Rob Walker

Production: Harald Hutter & JiaLi Ding



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