

# STARBUST



PRESSKIT



## FACT SHEET:

Genre: Documentary

Runtime: 90min

Production country: Germany

Languages: Kazakh, Russian, English

Year of production: 2025

Writer, Director, Producer: Nils Eberwein

Technical details: 1.85:1 / color / 5.1

Subtitles: English, German

Date of world premiere: 23. November 2025 (Hof international film festival)

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## TRAILER:

<https://vimeo.com/774342243/1cb75a3e5f?share=copy>



## **LOGLINE:**

A road movie through Kazakhstan's vastness, where people share stories of collecting space debris, slaughtering horses, and witnessing nuclear mushroom clouds.

## **SHORT SYNOPSIS:**

Through the eyes of a filmmaker, we embark on a daring road trip through a country that lies somewhere between the Wild West and the disintegrated Soviet Union. Always on the trail of rocket parts and other unique fragments from an era when nuclear weapons were still detonated in the open air, the film repeatedly encounters unique characters.

Sergei, who lives in the dense forest of the Altai Mountains, shares stories of collecting rocket debris in the 1990s and selling it as scrap. Yerlan, a nuclear weapons expert, takes us to meet fishermen who cast their lines into radioactive craters. And Batyrbai, a horse herder, pauses mid-slaughter to reveal that he knows where rocket parts remain hidden.

The film portrays the status quo of a population caught between rocket debris that poisons their livestock and destroys the ozone layer, a former nuclear test site that will remain uninhabitable for generations, and a capital city that soaks up the country's wealth like a sponge.





## LONG SYNOPSIS:

Since 1955, the Russian space organization “Roscosmos” has been dropping the burnt-out stages of its rockets from the sky. They land in the almost deserted steppe of Kazakhstan. Through the eyes of the filmmaker, we embark on a daring road trip through a country somewhere between the Wild West and the disintegrated Soviet Union. Always on the trail of rocket parts or other unique fragments from a time when nuclear weapons were still being detonated in the open air, the film repeatedly encounters unique characters.

Sergei, the scrap metal collector in the dense forest of the Altai

Mountains, who tells us how he collected rocket debris in the 1990s and sold it as scrap metal. Yerlan, the nuclear weapons expert who takes us to fishermen who fish in radioactive craters. Or the horse herder Batyrbai who, while slaughtering one of his horses, tells us that he knows exactly where rocket parts could still be hidden in the steppe.

The film portrays the status quo of the population of an ex-Soviet republic between oppression and nostalgia. Between rocket scrap in the steppe that poisons their livestock and destroys the ozone layer, a former test site for nuclear weapons that has been unused since the early 1990s but remains uninhabitable for generations to come, and a capital that soaks up all the foreign currencies the country produces like a sponge.

In the end, the film leaves the viewer with real Russian missile parts, but also with the question of the future of a country that lives off the reserves of a bygone era and what this could mean for our very own future.

## DIRECTORS NOTE:

With this film, I want to shed light on a region of the world that is unfortunately discussed far too rarely and, if at all, far too romanticized. The story is not about the Silk Road, eagle hunters or throat singing. For me, it's about portraying a current reality and society. To gain an insight into the lives of many people and to be able to make your own discoveries through these impressions. The subject of rocket scrap moves me, because for me it condenses many aspects of the current Russian imperialism and the demands for power that have formed since the end of the Soviet Union. They reflect in a microcosm how Russia behaves towards former Soviet republics and the self-image with which its own interests are implemented on foreign soil and without regard for the local population.



## BIO:

Nils Eberwein is 30 years old and is currently studying documentary film directing at the Baden-Württemberg Film Academy. A few years ago, he focused on the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and has since traveled to Russia, Ukraine, Georgia and Kazakhstan to unearth and research various stories that have been forgotten by the global public. Some of these investigations have resulted in photographic, prose and film/documentary works. Due to the current events, understanding these issues is more important and more relevant to the future than ever.



## FILMOGRAPHY:

Gortipohl / Documentary Film / 2022 / 43:30min

Follows the life of a calf in an Austrian mountain village over the course of a year, while addressing the slowly dying profession of alpine



Altantropa / Experimental Film / 2023 / 15:57min

An experiment that uses artificial intelligence to bring the planned but never realized megalomaniac infrastructure project "Atlantropa" to life.



Consider the Eel / Documentary Film / 2024 / 27:47min

Depicts the relationship between humans and eels, placing this connection in a broader context about humanity's behavior towards the environment.



## CONTACTS / SOCIAL MEDIA:

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## PROTAGONISTS:

Sergei

Bawurzhan Bitenov

Amanzhol M. Tulenbekov

Talgat Smaganbet

Nurzhighit Zhamantai

Alikhan Zhakypbekov

Yerlan Shegenov

Karipbek Kuyukov

Nadezhda Feoktistovna Golovina

Serik Abzhanov

Jeksen K. Seitkenov

Batyrbai M. Zeidildin

## CREW:

Sound design: Fred Hellmann (Resonanz Kollektiv)

Dialog editing & Mix: Timo Klabunde (Resonanz Kollektiv)

Translator & Guide: Yerlan Shegenov

Still photography: Eddo Hartmann

Miniatures: Micha Stähler, Adrian Sagolla, Nils Eberwein

Kazakh translation: Assiya Amen

Russian translation: Dmitry Klenin

Color Correction: Jona Riese

Voice over recordings: Lara Maria Humm



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION / INTERVIEW:

### Why is the topic relevant?

The underlying theme I wanted to address with the film goes far beyond the problem of rocket debris or nuclear radiation. I wanted to use the film to talk about how Russia exercises its power beyond its borders. This imperialist claim, which the country and its president have made on all countries of the former Soviet Union, has grown historically since the collapse of the Union and has been maintained over the last 35 years. The spaceport and the nuclear weapons test site serve as a magnifying glass through which we can observe how Russia acts in post-Soviet countries and what responsibility it assumes for these facilities – or fails to assume. Unfortunately, these claims are not only directed against the infrastructure, but now, as for example in the case of Ukraine or Georgia, also against the territorial independence of the countries and, not least, against the people living there.



### How did you do your research?

I began researching the Russian space programme while I was still at school, when I was considering studying aerospace engineering. I was fascinated by the technology, its development and refinement from its rudimentary beginnings after the end of the Second World War to the regular, largely problem-free supply of people and materials to the ISS. With this background, I had been aware of the issue of rocket debris for some time.

In the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic, I thought about creating a photo project about this very debris. This is how I first came into contact with *Yerlan Shegenov*, a local tour guide who offers tours to both the

cosmodrome and the nuclear weapons test site and who found my ideas exciting. However, even he did not know if and, if so, where we would find rocket debris. Despite this uncertainty, I decided to travel to Kazakhstan with my camera at least once to see for myself. A few weeks later, I landed in Almaty and tried to find a small piece of metal in the seemingly endless expanses of this country. The photo project quickly turned into a motion picture one, as I realised that I could better capture the dynamism that exists in the country and the humour of the people there in moving images. This gave me the feeling of getting closer to the protagonists and not just having to watch from the outside, as in photography.

### **Who are the Protagonists and how did you find them?**

First, there is *Sergei*, the former scrap metal collector from the Altai Mountains. I found him through a local travel agency that offers hunting and fishing tours through the Russian-Kazakh border region. Thanks to his years of knowledge about the region and the weather and road conditions, Sergei has become their part-time driver. The rest of his time is spent in the woods setting traps, hunting and distilling spirits. The two men at the agency knew about his past as a scrap metal collector, but (as far as I could tell) had never confronted him about it. During filming, I noticed that basically everyone I met in the regions affected by rocket debris had had some experience with it. In fact, everyone had a story to tell.

*Bawurzhan Bitenov* I met through Yerlan. They knew each other from previous tours through the steppe. He is a young, up-and-coming tour guide, driver and rally participant in the region, and the person to ask if you want to go deep into the steppe. He has a love for cars, engines and everything that goes with that. He was also very interested in learning English and was eager to talk to me. During the few weeks I spent with him, he learned English so amazingly quickly that by the end of my time there, we were able to communicate very well. We still do so today, partly via WhatsApp. He embodies the new, young Kazakhstan that is fighting against its past and the leaden heaviness and lethargy of the older generation.



We met horse herder *Talgat* and his son *Nurzhighit* by chance at the side of the road when one of our cars broke down. We were more or less stranded, and he helped us make a spare part that at least got us a little further. In the end, however, we had to leave one of the cars behind at a farm along the way and drive back to the city with seven people in one car.

I had seen the painter and anti-nuclear activist *Karipbek Kuyukov* before in other documentaries. He is the most vocal opponent of nuclear weapons in Kazakhstan and has become something of a celebrity. It was he who put me in touch with *Nadezhda Feoktistovna Golovina*. The 90-year-old is one of the few contemporary witnesses who speaks openly about her youth in the region and her observations of the nuclear weapons tests.

In the final act, the film travels to Baikonur and first meets its mayor, *Serik Abzhanov*. This meeting, like the entire trip to Baikonur, was not planned in advance. Before I came to Kazakhstan, I didn't even know that there was a second Baikonur, that the spaceport was named after the small town but had nothing to do with it. Nor did I know what to expect there – whether I would be welcomed with open arms or chased out of the village. What I experienced were the most hospitable, open and kind people I have met in a long time. No one had a problem with me being there while the horse was being slaughtered or with me filming everyone involved throughout the entire process. Some of them even enjoyed it and gave me a piece of the animal's raw belly fat to eat – which was actually quite tasty.

I could hardly believe the coincidence that *Batyrbai Zeidildin* told me about the rocket parts in his 'front garden' during the slaughter. In general, the entire shoot was marked by fortunate coincidences: the group of farmers in the middle of the steppe whom I helped repair their broken harvester and who, in return, took me to the monument commemorating the Soyuz 11 crash; the fishermen in the crater of the nuclear test site who happened to be fishing there just as I climbed over the crater rim with my camera; or the son of the owner of the copper factory, whom we happened to meet at lunch in the only 'restaurant' in the village on our way to Baikonur, and who gave us a tour of his father's factory.

I am infinitely grateful to all the people I had the privilege of meeting for the film. People who opened up to me and made the entire journey possible. Without them, the film could not have been made in its current form.

## Do you have any notes from the production?

Yes, I still have a message I sent to my family after a particularly memorable day.

"Spent the last two days in Kurchatov (named after the Soviet Oppenheimer). This was the former headquarters for nuclear weapons testing in the area. Around 350 atomic bombs were detonated there. The city is almost completely in ruins. Almost everything is abandoned. The KGB building is completely destroyed – you can just walk right in. One hotel has survived, and hasn't changed a bit since the 1970s.

So yesterday we wanted to go to 'ground zero' of the first 10–15 tests or so. After an hour's drive on the dirt road, the military came and checked us. We had all the necessary documents and were able to continue. Ten minutes later, they came back, stopped us, took our passports and said it was forbidden

and that a signature was missing.

Then we waited for about an hour in the middle of the test site until a truck arrived with five sheets of paper to fill out. Then we waited another hour until we were taken to another, supposedly secret test site to wait for the police, who then took us back to the 'city' to write everything down for the third time and let us go with our passports after about five hours. Now I'm standing on the tiny balcony of my 1970s-style hotel room, drinking a can of beer. My guide promised he'd talk to the mayor, and we'll give it another try tomorrow.

We'll see ..."

