

ANJA SALOMONOWITZ – „YOU WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND THIS“

BY DANIEL EBNER

The Director of the Film Museum described the documentary, "Das wirst du nie verstehen" by Anja Salomonowitz as the "best Austrian film in years.". Celluloid spoke with the filmmaker about her career, future plans, and of course about her latest work.

Completely soaked, Anja Salomonowitz enters Café Bräunerhof. It is pouring out; ideal weather for an interview in an old Viennese coffee house near the Hofburg and the Institute for Theater, Film and Media Science. This young filmmaker studied there for a time, but soon switched to the film academy, where she specialized in directing and editing. She further honed her editing technique in Berlin at the Konrad Wolf Film and Television University, Potsdam-Babelsberg. Today, approximately eight years after she began her studies, Anja Salomonowitz (born 1976) is one of Austria's greatest hopes among aspiring young film directors.

This is largely on account of her documentary film, "Das wirst du nie verstehen," which commanded great attention last October at the Viennale as well as the Diagonale this year in March, and also received the "Prix regards neufs" at the renown "Visions du reel" festival in Nyon, Switzerland. Also, the fact that a film lasting only 52 minutes makes it into the cinema is highly uncommon. The former Viennale director and now the director of the Austrian Filmmuseum, Alexander Horwath, even spoke at the Diagonale about the "best Austrian film in years." What do the film and its maker have, that so many domestic productions don't have? "Das wirst du nie verstehen" is, in the broadest sense, a documentary about individual and collective memories of World War II. In a narrower sense it is also a family story about three women who were directly involved: The great aunt was in a concentration camp; the nanny supported the Socialist resistance; the grandmother did nothing. Anja Salomonowitz confronts herself and her family with a difficult subject. On the one hand, she reveals her close family ties, and on the other, she provides a formal study of the mechanisms of suppression

of memory, denial, and the principle of victim reversal.

Film as scientific work?

I "[do] not [treat] personal experience, but instead, how the personal experience is bound up in the collective," the filmmaker explains, then contemplates and stirs her coffee. It is about "investigating these rhetorical forms and revealing, for example, that sometimes someone says something by not having said something else." Thus, the documentation already follows a certain goal that Salomonowitz has consistently worked toward; the film becomes a "staged documentary." "I don't film reality; I study it based on a hypothesis," she says, and continues along the lines of Josef Haslinger's dictum that reality can only be perceived by staging it: "I shape reality; I give it certain structural conditions." This is where Salomonowitz's tendency toward formalism comes to the fore. She uses white clothing on a white background "... to neutralize. Everyone has the same basic conditions," which gives the three women's words and stories the center stage. By showing everyone within their own frame (the grandmother, while studying with the sister; the great aunt with her son, etc.) the scenes become more open. With the everyday events scattered throughout (above all the scenes of her grandparents driving the car), the film becomes more relaxed.

"Involvement is not accepted as a construct," the filmmaker says knowingly, and accompanies the film with her own voice from the off, until she finally steps in front of the camera at the end, so that she can take the call from her great aunt who explains why she does not want to be filmed and questioned any longer: "You'll never understand that..."

Something political for the future

One can see that the topic was important to Anja Salomonowitz; that working with her family was an intimate experience. When she is speaking of the documentary, she is serious. If you ask her about her upcoming plans, she smiles. The final film project for the Film academy has yet to be completed; she does not have exact plans for it. Before "Das wirst du nie verstehen," the sympathetic filmmaker created the short films "Carmen" (2000) and "Projektionen eines Filmvorführers in einem Pornokino" (Projections of a projectionist in a porn cinema, 2001) and was director of casting and photography for Ulrich Seidl's "Jesus, du weißt." Seidl also accompanied her as an advisor in her most political work to date. Whether her next work will also be political is still open; it is, however, certain that political film is something she takes to heart. The Viennese filmmaker enjoys the film program of the "kinoki" group who were present at this year's Diagonale with "Filme, die wir nicht sehen können" (Films that we cannot see). She sees "political themes" as crucial for the Festival des österreichischen Films (Festival of Austrian film) in upcoming years. The recent politicization of the Diagonale may have woken up this domestic filmmaker a bit. As Salomonowitz attests: "I think that here there is a real feeling of rebellion." One thing we most certainly are able to understand; she will, as it was put at the Viennale, "sooner or later be counted among the greats of Austrian cinema."