

YOU WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND THIS

TEXTS AND PRESS

SYNOPSIS

My movie is about three women who belong to what is historically referred to as the generation of perpetrators and victims. With their different stories of life, different narrations and memories they all belong to one family, my family.

BIOGRAPHY

Anja Salomonowitz, who studies film in Berlin and Vienna, is mainly interested in exploring the border between fiction and documentary.

Her works in the field of documentary have been attracting international attention: Her movie „You will never understand this“ won the „Prix Regards Neufs“ at the renowned film festival in Nyon and was shown at numerous festivals in the world.

Anja Salomonowitz is now in preparation of her new movie „It happened just before“ and works as Ulrich Seidl's assistant director.

CREDITS

Camera: Leena Koppe
Sound: Markus Moll
Dramatic Consultant: Dieter Pichler
Sound Editing: Philipp Kemptner
Music: Sami Zeciri
Line Producer: Elke Kratzer

ACTORS

Gertrude Rogenhofer
Margit Kohlhauser
Hanka Jassy
Yael Salomonowitz
Ludwig Jassy
Josef Kohlhauser

A 2003, 35mm, 52 min., colour

TEXTS AND PRESS

Anja Salomonowitz portrays three women in her family who were young girls during the Nazi regime. All three have influenced the education of the director. They stood on different sides during the war and have their own interpretation of facts and history which reflect various collective memories. Hanka Jassy, the Director's great aunt, survived Auschwitz. Gertrude Rogenhofer, her nanny, was a socialist and supported her uncle in the Resistance. Margit Kohlhauser, her grandmother, lived in Graz during the war. She did what the majority of citizens did about the terror regime of the Nazis: nothing. The movie confronts the story of the family, examining the effects of history and the mechanisms of how it is passed on from one generation to the next. While the grandmother insists to have forgotten what happened, Gertrude Rogenhofer remembers the blank spots that were left by deported Jewish acquaintances. She tells us that: "of course people knew about the deportations". Hanka, on the other hand, is unable to express what she cannot forget.

Anja Salomonowitz confronts herself and her family with their various memories. Her film and commentary reflect the filmmaker's contradiction of standing as much in the genealogy of the collective of victims and also of the collective of perpetrators. The Director reveals her attachment to her family as well as her effort to visualize the mechanisms of defence, denial, and story-telling and concealing. In putting her grandmother in the film and asking her questions, she is as much a granddaughter as she is a descendant of survivors. (Nora Sternfeld)

The attempt to confront the complications, cracks and contradictions of so-called history with the most simple means is as legitimate as it is problematic. In her documentary film "You will never understand this", Anja Salomonowitz commits herself to the difficult task of finding simple images and words for the "indescribable" that has been repressed so long. She portrays three women in her family who she has known all her life. Each of them was affected by the terror of the Nazi regime in a completely different way. One of them was in a concentration camp, one resisted the terror, and one did nothing at all - thereby taking part in the extermination. Although they talk about their experiences, they prefer to be silent about much of what they saw during the time when so many were deported and murdered and others looked away or collaborated also out of self-protection.

Salomonowitz rehearses the theme personally and artistically, inflicting essayistic excursions, and gently stylizing by keeping clothing and interiors white. At the end the filmmaker appears, facing the responsibility of the impossibility of explaining and understanding the scope of the film's theme. She will never understand what it means to have experienced a concentration camp. Hanka says this dogmatically and refuses any further contribution to the film. Nevertheless, one can easily see from the filmmaker and her work, that this ending is momentary: we must describe the indescribable. (Stefan Grisse mann)

THE COLOUR WHITE BY DANIEL KOTHENSCHULTE

A tremendous example to which impressive form documentary film has arisen throughout the last years is Anja Salomonowitz' stern movie "Das Wirst Du Nie Verstehen" ("You will never understand this"). Portrayed are three elderly women who the filmmaker has known since her early childhood. They all experienced the Second World War as young women, but out of a conceivable different perspective: Firstly the aunt, who survived Auschwitz; the nanny, an avowed socialist; and lastly the grandmother, who lived the years of war like most Austrians- with closed eyes. Through finding a gently staged room for conversation- the colour white develops into the visual guiding theme of the memory- she makes the actual, unseen and lost protagonist of every "oral history" visible: the grandeur named remembrance. Her form and realisation often reminds of works of Dreyer and Bergmann. It seems to be long ago that cinema dared to ascend the highly disciplined investigation of human existential orientation.

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."

THE LABORATORY OF SILENCE
DIETMAR KAMMERER

ANJA SALOMONOWITZ' YOU WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND THIS

Anja Salomonowitz undertakes an investigation of history. She allows three women to speak about what they experienced when they were young, during the era of Nazi dictatorship. Back then the three women didn't know each other; today they are members of Salomonowitz's family. But that is all that connects them. And separating them are the experiences of the past. Margit Kohlhauser, the grandmother, lived in Graz during the war. What she knows most about this time is: "the population suffered so greatly from the war." Gertrude Rogenhofer, the nanny and "second granny," was in the Socialist Turnverein (Athletic Club). Her fondest memories from this era are of the demonstrations, in which she took part. She still has the red pennant. And she supported people from the resistance.

Hanka Jassy, the great aunt, survived Auschwitz. She refuses to speak about what she had to endure in the concentration camp. In a discussion at the Viennale film festival, the director called Salomonowitz's film a "clinical laboratory situation," a "study." And yes, it is indeed "clinical." She asked her interview partners to wear only white clothing for the filming. The conversations, which were conducted in the women's apartments, used white backgrounds wherever possible; sofas and beds were covered with white materials: An unusual step, certainly in the context of an introduction to one's own family, and also for the depiction of memory work. We are generally accustomed to something different for this conversational situation, "interview with a historical witness," in the dominant image code: warm color tones, a decidedly personal ambient, a comfortable living room that always contains a table and a bookshelf. And this scenario can be found even more extensively in feature film productions: not a single historical film about the Nazi era would go without the "brown-beige patina of coming to terms with the German past" (Katja Nicodemus). In the context of these kinds of stagings, Salomonowitz's gentle, sub-cooled methods are like balsam. The staging here is reductive, "to denaturalize the environment," in order to arrive at what is essential, explains the filmmaker. Of interest is not the present, the everyday lives of those portrayed, but the theme. A precautionary measure, a necessary operation. Salomonowitz has the film begin with Hanka opening the door to her apartment, which is secured by five locks. A torturously long and complicated scene. Whoever has to secure themselves to that degree does not want anyone to get too close. She is the only one of the three that does not wear white, because she decided not to take part in the interviews. At some point she will speak with her niece, but only over the telephone. The sentence that the film takes for its title is from her, but it could also be from the grandmother in Graz, coming from a conversation about the generation gap: "Did you ever use the greeting 'Heil Hitler'?" "I don't remember." "You were as old as I am now." "Please, that was sixty years ago." Other things—such as the rationing of butter during the war—the grandmother remembers quite well. There are different kinds of silence, says Salomonowitz: one that talks in order to silence the others, and one that is silent, because it remembers too well. A concept and its implementation: what the filmmaker wanted to expose, was, in her view, more the functioning of the standards of memory and less so personal confessions. Similar to the way that the discourse on "historical witnesses" as a rule gives both victims and perpetrators collective rather than individual speaking positions. Perhaps the refusal of her great aunt Hanka to take part in the study as the "survivor" allowed her to settle any open accounts. Perhaps the service of the film and its title lies in having recognized this. (Appeared in *kolik.film - Sonderheft Österreichisches Kino*, [Special edition on Austrian cinema] March 2004, p.32-33)
www.anjasalomonowitz.com

"WHITE SPOTS ABOUT THE FACES" BY CHRISTOPH HUBER, "DIE PRESSE"

With her film "Das wirst du nie verstehen", Anja Salomonowitz performs a general overhaul of the genre historical witness film. A great little documentary film from Austria. By Christoph Huber

Hanka will not speak about the time in Auschwitz; that's what was agreed. Hanka is the great aunt of Anja Salomonowitz, and one of the three elderly protagonists of "Das wirst du nie verstehen," a groundbreaking attempt to approach the genre of the historical witness documentary from a new perspective. The second figure is simply called "Tante"; during World War II, she was a nanny for the filmmaker's family, a devoted Socialist who supported their uncle in his resistance to the Nazi regime. The third figure is Salomonowitz's grandmother, who lived during that time in Graz. "She did the same as everyone else did: nothing," summarizes the filmmaker in her commentary from the off.

"My best friend summed it up as: a kind of film about the roles of perpetrator and victim roles, both from your family" Salomonowitz immediately states, and adds, "and I think, like a lot of people: but my grandparents are no perpetrators." Thus she asks questions, not least of herself: How to stage a film about memories, which she knows in advance will contradict each other? Salomonowitz decides on a type of laboratory experiment that makes memory itself the lead actor.

"Das wirst du nie verstehen" differs from what we are used to seeing when survivors talk about the war: the apartment interiors, the survivors, are clad in white. There is no personal ambient; no comfortable living room situation: a decision that stresses not only what is spoken, the core of the recollections, but also once again makes the director's ambivalent initial position visible. White spots about the familiar faces: that which cannot be discovered even with the closest intimacy, that which does not want to be torn from the darkness of memory.

How is memory constructed?

Or cannot. The title of the film comes from its ending. It is the last sentence by Hanka, whose discomfort with the film project was already clearly perceptible: over the phone she declares that it is impossible for her to disclose what remains of the suffering of concentration camp survivors: "You will never understand," she says and the screen becomes completely white. It is a forced ending, but not necessarily a failure and even if it were, then it is more the productive kind. At this point in time it has already been made clear that Salomonowitz is not concerned with individual explanations, but with a more complex relationship to memory, to historical memory itself.

It was not until after 1946 that he really knew hunger, the grandfather says. But Salomonowitz also "learns from Tante that the war was worse than the post-war years." How is memory constructed? In essayistic commentaries from the off, Salomonowitz describes the

rules of historical witness discourse, points out how deeply speaking from perpetrator and victim roles has been collectively normalized—which the discussions also show, exemplarily. Hanka's final rejection can also be read as a refusal to be pushed into this role.

"Das wirst du nie verstehen" fascinates and moves us beyond the individual narratives in its attempt to lend resonance to the contradictions between the "subjective," the personalities and the current everyday lives, and the "objective," the historical and the complex contradictions in relationship with the past. Unavoidably, this results in more dissonance, but as such, a dissonance that sharpens our awareness. The white upon which Solomonowitz builds her film serves to illuminate, not to fade out.

ON THE VOICES AND SILENCE OF GRANDMOTHERS BY WERNER HANAK AND PETER MENASSE

Anja Salomonowitz, a young filmmaker of the "third generation," lets her own grandmother speak in "Das wirst du nie verstehen." What results is not a family film, but a vivid documentary about ignorance, powerlessness, and guilt.

The black letters DAS WIRST DU NIE VERSTEHEN on the poster's pure white background announce the strictly enforced concept. The color white plays a dominant role in the film: The entire background, the walls, and the upholstery in the apartments are white; even the people are dressed in white. The filmmaker wants to prevent viewers from being distracted by unimportant details; she wants the content to take effect without optical irritants. And yet another element becomes a great strength in Anja Salomonowitz's film—the actors' involvement with each other and with history. At the center are three women, the three "grandmothers" of the 28 year-old filmmaker. The real grandmother comes from Graz and has a-to put it mildly—murky memory of the Nazi period. The second protagonist, "Hanka," the great aunt, is a Jewish concentration camp survivor from today's Czech Republic. The third elderly woman was once the family's nanny, called "Tante" in family jargon and is a proud old school Viennese Social Democrat. Certainly it provides, if the word can be used for a personal family film, interesting casting. Yet the "grandmother trio" first comes into play through a convincing dramatic artifice: Anja Salomonowitz's younger sister Yael, who asks questions that appear naive, but in reality are merciless, becomes a central figure in many different respects: not yet twenty years old, the young woman symbolizes the age of the three women during the time on which the film focuses—World War II. She is the figure that is needed to create a connection between the three women. She is the stranger through whom, as in Ibsen, the story unrolls and she is at the same time right in the middle as the representative of the filmmaker, who is equally present and absent. A wise and fortunate constellation for a film in which the appropriate mixture of distance and proximity is decisive for the quality. "Das wirst du nie verstehen" is a film about identity and memory, a film in which the so-called third generation, intellectually prepared, asks very personal questions and with this know-how, investigates their own family history. If one asks the filmmaker in an interview why she as a young woman wants to continually bring up the past when the second generation has already said for years that finally, enough is enough and one should let the old days rest, she surprisingly casts this question aside. And the insistent questioner will also not learn of her inner sentiments. It is obvious to her that she must uncover this seething illusion, but apparently without taking a strict position in the old discussion, as the second generation was constantly required to do: "I was sitting at the table at a family party. The grandmothers were talking, having cake and coffee, and I asked myself how is this possible?" The silence over what the three women experienced from three different perspectives is what inspired Salomonowitz's attempt to have the women speak in the film. The viewers are offered exactly this scene, in which the grandmothers meet for cake and coffee. And together with the filmmaker we are somehow happy that once again they don't bring up any difficult topics. For it is sometimes said of artists and historians of the third generation, whether they are offspring of the perpetrators or victims, that they comprehend the period of World War II only as a family story and neglect to consider history as a coherent structure. Anja Salomonowitz also presents an uncompromisingly personal family film, but with the identifying concept of trying to track down the general: "It is not only about personal experience, but about the relationship between personal and collective memories. And there is always the question of whether the statements of historical witness are really personal experiences or presentations of collective assumptions. Do people believe they really experienced something or do they merely repeat collective memories?" This problematic was portrayed particularly well in the scenes of the grandmother with her husband, a German from Sudetenland, who lost a leg in the war, when they speak about which time was actually worse: before or after the war.

As a response to the criticism that the recent writing of history has become lost in the presentation of individual family histories, Anja Salomonowitz proves that the ability to tell these subjective family stories is the special and unique contribution that this third generation has to offer. Whereas sometimes a window was opened by either parent or a child in the wall of silence that developed between the first and second generations, the window was never opened by both at the same time. In contrast, grandparents and grandchildren are, in principle, much more capable of speaking openly with each other. Nevertheless, it is evident that this possibility is exhausted only by a small "avant-garde": after all, most grandchildren and great-grandchildren are still willing to take on the prefabricated family rhetoric. Additionally, there is a tendency from generation to generation to view ancestors positively and to accept them. In many families it is similar to that of the lawyer who, after 1938, first shamefully robbed his Jewish clients and then had them deported. His children see him as a man who didn't have an easy time of it during the war years. And because it is a deep wish to want to believe only

the best about one's ancestors, for the next generation grandfathers and great-grandfathers mutate into resistance fighters who helped many poor Jews escape. "Das wirst du nie verstehen" proves to us that subjectivity and differentiation are not contradictory-even within a short hour. We experience on the one hand the "defensive rhetoric" of the grandmother, for example, as she over-emphasizes the suffering of German prisoners of war. Or the ever-present helplessness of the "Tante," when she explains that it wasn't possible for her to give water to the Jews imprisoned in a hot wagon in the sizzling sun at Westbahnhof. In an interview, Salomonowitz states that not being able to reach the outstretched hands mirrors the powerlessness of the worker's movement in the face of the Nazi regime. Toward the end of the film, the Jewish great-aunt Hanka refuses to talk. She can't speak about it any longer; the case is closed. What she would speak about would be too horrible-this history of suffering and then the "survival guilt." She is silent, because it is the only way to spare her from her memories. The three grandmothers meet on the occasion of their "granddaughter" Yael's birthday. The "aunt," the former nanny, sits between the familial poles: the grandmother who never learned any better and the Jewish great aunt. They talk over coffee and cake-never about their histories. When Anja Salomonowitz notes in passing, that "nothing at all happened" at this meeting we almost detect her relief that we all know so well when we bring together people who are important to us, but who are strangers to each other. And when the filmmaker brings her viewers' attention to the fact that Hanka has forgotten on this day to wear white clothing, as arranged for all of the days of filming, we sense not only the closeness of the filmmaker to her own "actresses" but also a sympathetic irony to her own strictly "white" concept. Anja Salomonowitz has succeeded in making an outstanding film about Vienna. With simple means, she finds a language for the complexity of the history of this city. And because she, despite inner resistance, decided to remain strictly personal, it is also a film that does not require a discussion from the target audience. It is as well-received among the residents of Vienna as it is at foreign film festivals, because it convincingly explains the problems of a city that everyone knows is beautiful but whose residents all too willingly repress the past. With this film, however, it becomes clear to the viewers that there are occasionally people who do not want to give up because-simply and ultimately-they want to understand. "Das wirst du nie verstehen"-Documentary by Anja Salomonowitz Publikumspreis [Audience prize] at the festival of the Filmakademie Prize for New Films at the documentary film festival, Visions du Réel in Nyon (Switzerland) Agency/Contact: sixpackfilm (office@sixpackfilm.com).

FESTIVALS

Filmakademiefestival Wien International Student Film Festival: Audience Price
 VIENNALE 2003 Vienna International Film Festival
 ISFF, New York International Student Film Festival
 Berlin, Arsenal Kino: Diagonalen. Kino zur Gegenwart aus Österreich
 FIPATEL, Biarritz
 EntreVues Festival du Film Belfort
 Diagonale 04 - Festival des österreichischen Films 2004
 Nyon – Visions du Réel: Prix Regards Neufs
 Sehnsüchte 2004, Internationales Studentenfilmfestival „Konrad Wolf“
 19. Internationales Dokumentarfilmfestival München
 Ingolstadt Filmfestival „Der Oktober ist eine Frau“
 Poolbar Festival, Österreich
 FEMINALE 2004, Köln
 City of Women Festival, Ljubljana
 Österreichische Filmwoche im National Film Institute (NFI), London
 Jüdische Filmwoche Wien
 Reihe Kurz:Film, RadioKulturhaus Wien
 JIHLAVA IDFF 2004
 Zagreb Film Festival 2004
 New York Jewish Film Festival
 Warschau Jewish Filmfestival 2005

Votiv Kino Wien ab 23. April
 Top Kino Wien ab 02. Oktober 2004
 TV : 3 Sat, ZDF, May 2004

Oskar Kino Feldkirch
 Ki&Ju-literaturwoche Wien, April 2005
 41st International Exhibition of New Cinema, Pesaro Film Festival
 Admiral Kino, Wien
 Filmarchiv Wien: "Filmhimmel Österreich"
 Paris - Austrian Filmweek

AWARDS

Filmakademiefestival Wien International Student Film Festival: Audience Price
 Nyon – Visions du Réel: Prix Regards Neufs