



Abschied von den Eltern ***(Farewell)***

A Film by Astrid Johanna Ofner

Based on a novel by Peter Weiss

PRESS KIT



Farewell

A FILM BY ASTRID JOHANNA OFNER

Austria 2017

Produced and Directed by

Astrid Johanna Ofner

Associated Producers

Paolo Calamita
Peter Roehsler

Cast

Sven Dolinski
Lawrence Tooley
Anna Conradi
Nora Conradi
Coline Cisar
Selma Bindewald
Johanna Schmidt

Screenplay

Astrid Johanna Ofner and Hans Hurch
based on a story by Peter Weiss

Photography

Astrid Johanna Ofner
Peter Roehsler

Camera and Sound Assistants

Gabriel Krajanek
David Rabeder

Montage and Editing

Astrid Johanna Ofner and Hans Hurch

Assistant Editors

Eva Rammesmayer
Marion Kesmaecker
Zuzana Brejcha

Post Production

Simon Rabeder (The Raven Films)

Produced by

trotzdemfilm
Little Magnet Films
Nanookfilm

Funded by

Bundeskanzleramt : Österreich, Abteilung Innovative Film
Land Oberösterreich
Land Niederösterreich
Stadt Wien

Technical Information

Format (presentation): DCP / HDCAM
Shooting formats: Super 8mm (4:3) / HD (16:9)
Aspect ratio: 16:9
Running Time: 78 min.
Color and b/w



SYNOPSIS

The film *Farewell* is based on the story *Abschied von den Eltern (Leavetaking)* written by playwright and author Peter Weiss in 1960. In this autobiographical work, Weiss tells of his childhood and adolescence in 1920s and '30s Germany, followed by the journey across half of Europe by his half-Jewish family in their efforts to escape persecution by the Nazis.

It is an odyssey that also represents the young first-person narrator's existential struggle as an artist, as he strives to build an independent life for himself as a painter and author.

Starting from Weiss's story, filmmaker Astrid Johanna Ofner sets off to cinematographically researching the central strands of his autobiographical text. In the free, sensuous interplay between fiction and document and between realistic description and stylized invention, *Farewell* seeks to reignite yesterday by means of today while bringing the book's text into the present and the world's material to justice— in order to create something all its own, something lively, something new.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

"The thing about Peter Weiss's text that I found particularly fascinating was its specific form, namely the simultaneity with which he describes his memories and reflects on what happened. And the great challenge was to come up with a filmic equivalent to this. Ultimately, the film turned into a forensic undertaking. It's a film about escape, family, and art; and about cities, images, sexuality, loneliness, history, violence, and friendship. And in a peculiar way, it's also a film about houses and about the old and new Europe."

Astrid Johanna Ofner

FAREWELL

“I have often tried to contend with the figures of my mother and father, wavering between rebellion and submission.” So begins the voice-over and proceeds, “I could never grasp the essence of these key characters in my life. Their near simultaneous death showed me how deeply estranged from them I had grown.” It is with this characteristically cutting clarity that Peter Weiss provides the point of departure for his autobiographical book, *Abschied von den Eltern* or *Leavetaking*, a story which finds its echo in the astounding audiovisual resonance chamber of Astrid Johanna Ofner's first feature film, *Farewell*. Peter Weiss narrates his story in 160 pages of paragraph-free text – as found in the Suhrkamp paperback Ofner displays next to a picture of the parents – describing his family's “utterly failed attempt at living together”, as well as other societal prisons that lead to paralysis, but also ultimately to the transcendence of these circumstances. Weiss' inspiring story is an unsparing report on the laboriously fought battle to become one's own person, by emancipating one's self. Peter Weiss' *Leavetaking* stands in a league of its own that is not confined to the realm of German language literature.

It is a work that would seem “unfilmable” given its highly condensed succession of imagistic memories and reflections, with hardly any dialogue and no plot. Yet Ofner's debut feature film *Farewell* succeeds in pulling this feat off in a startling way – expanding on the method she used for her short film *Tell me Tuesday* (2007) which was based on (love) letters written by Franz Kafka, an author Weiss greatly admired. Ofner set off on a search for traces of Weiss' search decades earlier, gathering images (and occasional black “non-images”), as well as sounds. The result does not dominate the text but rather runs alongside it, resonant with its own beauty, strength and clarity. An echo chamber arises hosting the profound feelings, difficult insights, and passionate battle for self-realization Weiss' text evokes: “I could feel my explosiveness, and I realized I had to dedicate my life to expressing this volatility.”

Farewell is not a literary adaptation but rather a sensitive and mindful personal approach to the Weiss text and to the heart of its matter, namely the ripening process of an individual told in a way that describes what is universal. Although he retrospectively comprehends the struggle for an independent existence – “Recognition always comes later, when everything is over” – Weiss conveys what it means to (have) become a free person – socially, politically and humanly. At the outset, Ofner offers a premonition of emancipation that eventually comes full circle: The Weiss character played by Sven Dolinski stands at the seashore with his back to the camera, looking out at the (eventful) expanse of a broad horizon. Such hopeful, unaffected images of nature contrast to the feeling of imprisonment associated with the parental home (actually the several homes inhabited on their exiled “journey of numerous border-crossings”), and also including other repressive circumstances.



Despite its radical condensing of the original, the film preserves the philosophically humanist aspects as well “narrative” components of Weiss' narrative: the movements of his Jewish family across Europe during the Nazi dictatorship and WWII – Berlin, London, Varnsdorf in Bohemia, Alingsås in Sweden – and like Weiss, lends the associatively structured flow of emotional landscapes an inner coherence in the style of an individualized coming-of-age novel. That being said, although Ofner's film is an essayistic poem about being human, it often paradoxically presents itself (in part and with enchanting results shot on analog film), through a succession of objects and “abstract” impressions: houses and artefacts, original documents, and paintings, irretrievable light conditions and cityscapes that have altered over the decades.

It is here that Weiss' compelling factual poetry meets with Ofner's, who made her way to original sites in order to feel and resuscitate the progressive ideas of the original: the realization of the self facing the odds of oppressive conditions created by parents and other authorities, to discover a different “secret life” in oneself, through encountering actual, invigorating art – whether books, images, or music, “that deeply resonated within me”; through genuine communing with other people, such as the encounter with the mysterious Jacques (played by the director Lawrence Tooley), liberating impulses of being that had long seemed extinguished, a thirteen-day dream that plays like a film within a film. And it is emblematic of the union between the Weiss text and the Ofner images and sounds that *Farewell* begins to sing, free of sentimentality, fully informed by the struggle with oneself and the world, as well as delving into the darkest passages.

Ofner sharpens the political component of the original and seamlessly weaves what Weiss thoughtfully establishes in the background: the rise of totalitarianism, racism, war, emigration movements, the dark “premonition of an apocalyptic time”, as well as a cutting analysis of alienation in the (triumph of) capitalism. Weiss' insights emerge as keenly contemporary, including his resistance to a “culture of loneliness” and a universe of alienation ubiquitous in our age of neoliberal consumerism, “We ceaselessly continued to produce while the world outside fell to pieces.”

Ofner's film, like Weiss' text, nonetheless declares that one has to resist and conjure alternative visions. With tender fleetingness and lasting intensity, *Farewell* reminds us – to quote the narrator, “I saw my footprints in the sand of the lakeshore. For a brief moment, I was filled with the vision of these traces leading from my birth to this very place. In a single instant I saw their dark pattern. I recognized and immediately forgot it again.” But the moment of recognition itself remains unforgettable and effective. Thanks to Ofner's film, it again (and again) comes to light.

Christoph Huber
Translation: Eve Heller



INTERVIEW

Christoph Huber: What drew you to *Leavetaking* by Peter Weiss?

Astrid Johanna Ofner: The book really impressed me as a young woman. It didn't matter at all that it's the story of a man. The text by Peter Weiss is so universal that a woman can also entirely identify with it. I found essential things: How as one's own realizations and perceptions make themselves felt, it allows other issues to retreat into the background, such as pervading moral codes, working conditions, and parental expectations. The realization that it's possible to resist and put up a fight. I was deeply moved by the reflections packed into this text – in regard to individual as well as political concerns. The book showed me that I was not alone in my thinking about how hard it is to find and go your own way. Also, to discover and relate to your own body and how to depend on yourself.

CH: For the purposes of the film, the text by Peter Weiss had to be drastically shortened and distilled.

Astrid Johanna Ofner: It was a long process. I photocopied the book and then cut out excerpts of the text which I proceeded to piece together into a new order – I have to have a tactile way of engaging in this work. I continued to edit the text down and was forced to let go of many passages that were very important to me. But the resulting distillation clearly resulted in greater coherence. The abrupt, almost brutal succession of one excerpt after another allows the viewer more space and freedom for their own reflections. After all, the great thing is that every text is read differently by every person, and each image is seen differently.

CH: The film does not foreground itself, but runs “alongside” the text. It creates a kind of resonating chamber for the Peter Weiss story, in stark contrast to more traditional literary adaptations.

Astrid Johanna Ofner: It is my hope that the viewer or listener can discover themselves in the film, despite being confronted with a great deal of text. The viewer should not be overrun or feel forced into something. I wanted to succeed without using filmic rhetoric or padding. Every image should exist for itself and make sense. There is nothing coincidental or random, rather everything is placed in relation to the text according to a hopefully fitting rhythm.

CH: The film involved a tremendous amount of research, and for the first time you did not work exclusively with analog film but also employed digital tools.

Astrid Johanna Ofner: It was important that we see each of the cities in which Peter Weiss lived – in Germany, Bohemia, England and Sweden. I often visited each of these places – some more difficult to find than others. So, the film turns out to be about houses, too. On location things sometimes work out very quickly. I set up and start shooting right away because I instantly sense how the situation is right. I capture the mise-en-scène without spending a lot of time searching for the image. But sometimes it's more difficult and I need time. For the house in Sweden I often spent the whole night alone on the street in order to see it under different lighting conditions. It is a matter of patience: you have to lay a snare to capture coincidence. If I had shot every-



thing on 35 mm with a big film crew, it would have been counterproductive for such an intimate film. Because it's all about shooting directly from the heart. If a group of people had to wait around me and get bored, I couldn't access my feelings. But I was glad I could also work with analog film and mix materials. For me the digital was in fact a catastrophe: It is simply a different medium. The analog process is less technical and more magical: You never know exactly what you are going to get when the light hits the emulsion. It is always a surprise.

CH: A key scene is the unexpected and liberating encounter of the narrator with his friend Jacques, "a 13-day dream". This is about an almost subcutaneous, penetrant form of communication.

Astrid Johanna Ofner: Somebody appears on the scene who is completely different than the narrator – and suddenly his voice returns and his images reawaken in him. These two people experience something that is very important for humans: to find a soul mate with whom to hang out in harbor pubs, go to museums, have conversations and sing. Communication does not only serve as an exchange of news, but as a way of taking part in the world together. Suddenly there is an engagement with this giant city in a foreign country, a sharing in its beauty – whether looking at paintings by Van Gogh and Cézanne or going dancing. One enjoys one another, the world and its art: Enjoying and sharing this world together is the one thing that prevents it from being lost.

CH: The political and social background in Peter Weiss' book takes up relatively little space, even if it is strikingly conspicuous. You strongly highlighted this: the analysis of capitalist dependencies, the rise of fascism and the world war. An apocalyptic atmosphere looms over everything and this feels disconcertingly contemporary.

Astrid Johanna Ofner: This was surprising. The timeliness of Peter Weiss' text overwhelmed me, especially during the last shoot in London when the terrorist attacks took place. The Hitler sequence in the film plays a central role in the book, when his screaming pours out of the loudspeaker and it becomes clear to the narrator that he himself belongs with the persecuted, "to the weaklings, not the strong ones." Peter Weiss' self-reflection is impressive: "Emigration had taught me nothing. I did not care the battle being waged outside also concerned my existence. I had never taken a position regarding the cataclysmic conflicts sweeping the world. The effort to find expression for my being entirely absorbed my attention." With *Leavetaking* Peter Weiss turned his main attention to writing, painting became secondary. He developed into one of the most important political authors in German literature, even though he remained in Sweden his entire life. But his self-reflection already reveals his insight: being political does not simply mean taking part in demonstrations or proclaiming opinions, but rather raising one's own consciousness. In an age of boundless neoliberalism, this has become even more difficult – especially for young people. You have to find yourself and your way to stimulating books, images and films – some of which are no longer even available. This search for meaningful clues is the basis for becoming a truly politically reflective and engaged person. The core is the autobiographical story of the child who develops into their own person by doing the work necessary to leave behind not only parents, but also teachers and all other representatives of a repressive social order.

CH: The unique poetry of the film is, on the one hand, due to the fact of Peter Weiss' story and his language. But there is also a poetry of pure fantasy: Your endeavor to filmically reinvent and rediscover particular feelings and thoughts the book inspired in you continually touches on territories that remain inscrutable.

Astrid Johanna Ofner: The fascinating thing about Peter Weiss' language is how its unbelievable poetry is solely ignited by the factual, by reality. There is nothing complacent or sentimental, very unique in German language literature: His writing is not poetic in the sense of being lyrical but rather in its concrete, crystal clear, sharpness – and yet still tender. Tremendous.

ASTRID JOHANNA OFNER

Born in 1968 in Linz, Astrid Johanna Ofner studied philosophy at Sorbonne Nouvelle III, then film directing and photography at the Vienna Film Academy. She also completed film directing studies at the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (dffb). She worked as an actress at Schaubühne Berlin and had the title role in *Antigone* (1991) by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. She directed the short films *Savannah Bay* (1989), *Ins Leere* (1993), *Jetzt und alle Zeit* (1993) and *Sag es mir Dienstag* (2007).

PETER WEISS

(November 8, 1916 – May 10, 1982) was a German writer, painter, graphic artist, and experimental filmmaker of adopted Swedish nationality. He is particularly known for his plays *Marat/Sade* and *The Investigation* and his novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance*.

FAREWELL PREMIERE AT THE FESTIVAL DEL FILM LOCARNO

August 10, 2017, 19:00 · PalaCinema Sala 1

August 11, 2017, 14:00 · L'altra Sala

August 12, 2017, 11:30 · PalaCinema Sala 2



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AUSTRIAN FILM COMMISSION

Anne Laurent | Stiftgasse 6 | 1070 Vienna | T +43/1/526 33 23-0 | festivals@afc.at

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LITTLE MAGNET FILMS GMBH

Paolo Calamita | Wildpretmarkt 1 | 1010 Vienna | T +43/1/581 29 27 | office@littlemagnetfilms.com

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TROTZDEMFILM | office@trotzdemfilm.at

LITTLE MAGNET FILMS GmbH | Wildpretmarkt 1 | 1010 Vienna | T +43/1/581 29 27 | office@littlemagnetfilms.com

NANOOKFILM | Kleine Neugasse 4 | 1040 Vienna | mail@nanookfilm.com

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