

THIS LAND IS MY LAND

Ein Film von Susanne Brandstätter



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



What the hell happened to my country?

November 2016. The day after Donald Trump's election, I was shocked - like a lot of people. And as time passes, this state of shock has only been confounded by bewilderment, incomprehension and for me and as for many, a roller-coaster of feelings alternating between hopelessness, frustration and rage. Donald J. Trump's presidency has polarized not only the United States, but people around the world.

The divide is growing. The fronts seem solidified. On one side there are the fervent Trump supporters, for whom he can do no wrong. They see in him the

successful, non-conformist business-man turned politician, who fears nothing in his quest to rebuild the country and "make America great again." On the other side, there are the Trump opponents, who see him as the ultimate threat to democracy - an unscrupulous autocrat, who doesn't shy from bending or flouting laws to his own advantage. A bully, a racist, a misogynist - an incompetent, corrupt, egocentric politician, focused only on his own personal agenda. A danger, not only to the USA, but to the entire world.

After Trump's election four years ago, I knew I needed to make my new film about this phenomenon. I'm an American, who's lived all her adult life in Europe - most of

the time in Austria. But I was born and raised in L.A. in a progressive family of Democrats. And I wanted to understand what had happened. During the course of the shoots for "This Land Is My Land" I witnessed how polarization increasingly took hold of my protagonists. What was driving this division? Can you reconcile a "broken" society? If so, how?

Many of Donald Trump's voters were from groups that were not expected to vote for him. Who didn't fit into any of the stereotypes of "Trump voters". The women, the minorities, the life-long Democrats, the college-educated upper middle-class. So I decided to choose a very diverse bunch of Trump voters in Ohio - a Swing-State - along with some of their family, friends and colleagues. These voters are surprisingly different from the average Trump voters - yet they're representative of millions of others like them, who swung the vote in Donald Trump's favor in the 2016 US-presidential elections. 19-year-old Austin, a student from a small town, dreams of becoming a video game designer - if he can manage to pay his way through college. University-educated Shizuka, 45, a Japanese immigrant, became an American citizen in 2016, when she voted for the first time - for Trump. Ronny, 60, is a former iron worker, who now runs his own successful business. He was a life-long Democrat - until Trump.

When I first met them, I explained that I, as well as most Europeans, need help in understanding why they, and so many others, support Donald Trump. Especially because I've been living in Europe for such a long time, I needed them to fill in the blanks.

My golden rule was: Don't argue, listen. A rule I stuck to - though it often wasn't easy. In my attempt to understand why these voters were for Trump, I also got to know them - I interacted with our protagonists and began to understand them. Then something strange happened: I started to like our protagonists. There were times when I felt like a traitor because of that. Not that they changed my opinions about Trump! Their statements and points of view often made my hair stand on end! Or got me really furious. That's when I decided the film had to have my viewers experience the same kind of emotional ambivalence I was feeling. The documentary takes the viewer along on my emotional self-experiment and explores what happens when you truly *listen* and try to empathically understand someone who has ideas diametrically opposed to your own.

Can we understand people on the other side of the divide? The Trump voters? Bolsinaro voters? Le Pen or Orban voters? Not easily, especially when their position is completely opposite to your own. How did these voters get where they are? Our protagonists and I talked about all kinds of things together - family, love-life, hobbies, work. But when it came to Trump I just asked questions and listened. I began to understand where they are coming from - why they think the way they do.

I also listened to Trump opponents. Our protagonists met in front of the camera with other family members or friends, who were absolutely and massively *against* Trump. They discussed issues. They argued. They ranted. They raved. In short, it was emotional. Yet the arguments were always grounded in mutual respect.



"This Land Is My Land" explores feelings and emotions - those of the protagonists', of my own and especially those of the viewers. Are we willing to *really* listen to the "other"? Not just once, but repeatedly? It can and will make you uncomfortable. It should.

Is there a way out of the polarization that we are experiencing throughout the U.S. and Europe? "This Land Is My Land" doesn't offer any pat solutions - instead the film involves the viewer in an on-going process, testing the viewer's own capacity for confronting and understanding the "other". Implicit throughout the film, is the invitation to step out of our bubbles and engage with people who think differently from us. Not just once, but again and again. That doesn't mean giving up on issues that are important to us - or compromising our core values. But it does mean learning to interact with the other side and deal with the causes of our division, instead of just tuning them out. It's

about active resistance - not against the other side, but against those who look to divide us and profit from our division.

The political and social polarization of society is currently one of the major problems facing both the USA and Europe. Not to listen to opposing viewpoints, not to take them seriously, is, in my opinion, a dangerous mistake.

Why: "Don't argue, listen."

We all have biases. That's part of human nature - of everyone's human nature. Proven scientifically. From an evolutionary point of view, bias makes sense as a kind of short-cut that provides us unconsciously with cues to either fight or flee. But when bias makes us blind to manipulation, it becomes problematic.

Numerous studies have shown that when a politician appeals to our emotions (which most of them try to do), we can become



more easily convinced by this politician. That's common knowledge. But what a lot of people don't know is that this can happen even *subconsciously*. After this, if a second politician tries to bond with us emotionally, it is nearly impossible for him or her to attract the same kind of support we felt for the first politician. As our belief in this first person strengthens, so does our bias. If we hear something that is consistent with our belief about him or her, we find it reliable. If it contradicts that belief, we dismiss it as being unreliable, unrepresentative or just plain wrong.

Every time we decide to stick to our opinion this activates the pleasure center in our brains. Whatever contradicts our beliefs about this politician makes us feel discomfort - actual physical discomfort. Changing our minds or even considering changing our minds activates areas in our brains associated with anxiety. This is often the point of no return. Because if we aren't willing to question our belief, we finally end up in denial - subconsciously refusing to see or accept whatever contradicts that belief. In addition, the stronger we feel about something or someone, the more we double-down, whenever someone openly challenges our beliefs about that issue or person. This is how people with opposing beliefs are driven farther and farther apart. Polarization.

Knowing the above was why I was so committed to following my "golden rule" of "Don't argue, listen".

The Film

In January 2017, at the time of Trump's inauguration, I went to Ohio for research and filming. Two shoots followed in the

span of two years. The film concentrates on entering the lives and mindsets of my main protagonists - all Trump supporters. These are voters, who we wouldn't have expected to vote for him and who swung the vote in his favor: the white working class, the university-educated, white women, minorities, students, former nonvoters and Democrats. I wanted to get to know them, follow them around, see where they live and work, where they go to have fun, where (and if) they go to church or prayer, where they grew up and went to school.

In short, first I wanted to look into what influenced them and how. Was their support for Trump only about politics? Or was it about identifying with and belonging to a particular social group? Did they support Trump because he made a specific campaign promise? Was it about jobs and money? Or was it a vote against the political "establishment"?

Secondly, what were/are the *feelings* and *needs* that motivated these Trump supporters?

I wondered if there were more overlaps or differences between these people. I wondered if I could find a common denominator. Maybe Donald Trump inspires hope because he projects the American ideal of the self-made man - despite the fact that he inherited a great deal of his fortune. Or it could be more about his exploitation of emotions and fears.

So...what are these fears? How do Trump's supporters see the world? And why do they see it that way?

Thirdly and most important, I want to create an emotional experience. My

protagonists are likeable. Despite their hair-raising opinions. Paradoxically, maybe in part because of them, since we begin to grasp how their hopes, worries and fears propelled them toward Trump. My involvement with them and my empathy for them leaves me with terribly conflicting feelings. Because sometimes the things they said got me really furious or upset or both - and I wondered how long I could contain myself. I felt highly critical of their views, but still learnt to care about them. I want the viewers to experience something similar. What will their empathy do with them?

The Location, the Visuals and the Dramaturgy

My filming was concentrated in the State of Ohio - a swing-state in the Midwest considered a microcosm of the United States. Ohio's population is diverse. All of the demographic groups that made a difference in the 2016 election are represented there.

Ohio has its extremes. One of the states in the so-called Rust Belt, the recessions of the 1980's and 2008 caused the shrinking or closing down of many industrial manufacturing plants. This is very visible in some areas of Ohio, where an economic downward spiral led to unemployment and decreasing populations. Complete with abandoned factories, rows of closed-down shops and crumbling, decaying homes. Other areas of Ohio are well-to-do or even cater to the rich - for example suburbs of Cleveland like Beachwood, Pepper Pike or Shaker Heights with their colonial and Tudor-style homes surrounded by park-like gardens.

Together with prize-winning cinematographer Joerg Burger, with whom I have a long and great working-relationship and friendship, we worked out a visual concept for this film.

The filmic language reflects the feelings and atmosphere sometimes hidden beneath the exterior, sometimes emerging to the surface. Read people's emotions. Capture the anger and frustration, the fear and insecurity, the despair and hope, the faith and optimism. In the faces of the protagonists and in the streets of the towns and cities. Joerg Burger and I set out to capture the moods behind the words - and behind the thoughts.

Since my specific viewpoint as an American and European is significant for the film, my questions are often heard, and in some scenes, I'm also seen interacting with the protagonists.

The dramaturgy

Whether in up-scale Beachwood or in economically devastated Coshocton, the film followed its protagonists during Donald Trump's first two years in office. We began research and shooting in the days before, during and just after Trump's inauguration, January 2017. The fervor and ecstatic joy we witnessed in Ashtabula during Trump's swearing-in, the atmosphere of desperate hope peppered with fears in Coshocton - all this made for powerful material.

In April 2017 we returned to Ohio and filmed a second block at the turning point of Trump's first 100 days in office. Despite a chaotic presidency and a string of major disasters and upheavals in the White House (for example, the Russia collusion



affair), my protagonists still supported Trump - though two seemed to have first doubts.

The third shoot took place one year later, again in Ohio at the time of the Midterm Elections. During this block, I examined how my protagonists' feelings about Trump had evolved. Filming within the space of two years allowed me to intensify my relationships with the protagonists: I was able to go into depth, while having the time to follow personal and political developments. The chronological arc is mirrored by the emotional arc, which upholds the film's main dramaturgy - exploring our protagonists' feelings about Trump and how these feelings developed over time. Trying to understand them in spite of our extreme differences in opinion. Creating relationships, while recreating

similar experience in the viewer.

The third filming block is also when I filmed my protagonists with family members and close friends who were adamantly *against* Donald Trump. It was fundamental for me to include both sides of the political spectrum - but the timing was crucial to the dramaturgy. When these highly emotional, confrontational scenes finally take place, the viewers have already gone through a process similar to my own.

This film was never about keeping up with current events. It's actually about what the film does to you, while you watch it. If someone you know pushes all your buttons, driving you nuts with their political opinions, what do you usually do?

I wanted to find out where this experience would take me - and my viewers.

