

PRESSEHEFT // PRESS KIT

ABENDLAND

Film von Omer Fast, Deutschland 2024, 115 Min. //

A Film by Omer Fast, Germany 2024, 115 min.



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ABENDLAND — a film by Omer Fast

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BESETZUNG // CAST

Stephanie Amarell - Merkel
Marie Tragousti - Alien / Angie
Sebastian Schneider - Vogelscheuche / Jason
Ivy Lißack - Jason / Vogelscheuche
Janina Stopper - Angie / Alien
Amon Wendel - Aladin
Sebastian Schulze - Fawkes
Berna Kilicli - Waldfee
Benedikt Laumann - Hase
Milton Welsh - Waldarbeiter
Susanne Bredehöft - Amsel

LOGLINE

Nach einer Protestaktion gegen Waldrodungen stürzt eine maskierte Aktivistin in eine Schlucht. Verletzt und gestrandet, irrt sie durch den Wald, bis sie schließlich eine abgeschottet lebende Kommune entdeckt, deren maskierte Bewohner*innen eine Alternative zum gescheiterten deutschen Staat suchen.

LOGLINE

Following a protest against loggers, a young activist falls into a ravine. Injured and stranded, she wanders through the forest until she finally discovers a small commune whose masked inhabitants have withdrawn from the failing German state and declared independence.

KURZINHALT

Eine Gruppe von maskierten Klimaaktivist*innen greift Holzfäller an, die tief im Wald arbeiten. Kurz überwältigt die Jugend das Kapital, doch der Staat schlägt unweigerlich zurück. Eine Aktivistin kann entkommen. Sie trägt eine Angela-Merkel-Maske und wird von der Polizei durch den Wald gejagt, bis sie eine steile Schlucht hinunterstürzt und in einem Brombeerdickicht landet, wo sie bewusstlos liegen bleibt.

Die Realität, in der Merkel wieder aufwacht, ist zugleich fremder und konkreter, als wäre sie in eine Parallelwelt geraten. Aber anders als bei *Robinson Crusoe* oder *Alice im Wunderland* ist die seltsame neue Landschaft, die sie erkundet, ihr eigenes Land und die Eingeborenen, auf die sie schließlich trifft, sind ihre eigenen Landsleute. Diese leben in einer versteckten Kommune hoch oben in den Bäumen, die ihre Unabhängigkeit von dem gescheiterten deutschen Staat erklärt hat. Auf den ersten Blick erscheint die abgeschottete Gemeinschaft wie eine magische Utopie. Doch Merkel bleibt ein Flüchtling und eine Außenseiterin. Sie hat Schwierigkeiten, sich zu integrieren und bringt ihre Gastgeber zunehmend in Schwierigkeiten. Als die Spannungen zunehmen, beginnen Freund und Feind um sie herum beständig zu wechseln. Merkel flieht in den Wald, doch eine der Kolonist*innen folgt ihr.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

A group of masked activists charges at loggers working deep in the forest. Youth briefly overwhelms capital, but the state inevitably strikes back. A single activist escapes. She wears an Angela Merkel mask and is chased by the police through the forest, until she tumbles down a steep ravine, crashing into thicket of blackberries, where she lies unconscious and stranded. The reality Merkel wakes up in is both stranger and more concrete, as if she had entered a parallel world. But unlike in *Robinson Crusoe* or *Alice in Wonderland*, the strange new landscape she explores is her own country and the natives she eventually meets are her fellow citizens. They live in a hidden commune high up in the trees, having declared independence from the failing German state. At first, the isolated commune seems like a magical utopia. Still, Merkel is a refugee and an outsider. She has difficulties integrating and increasingly troubles her hosts. As tensions rise, friends and foes keep shifting around her. Merkel escapes to the forest, but one of the colonists follows her.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Das Aufsetzen einer Maske bedeutet immer das Betreten einer besonderen Zone, einer sozialen Dimension, in der normale Regeln außer Kraft gesetzt sind, in der man sich vorübergehend von der eigenen Identität abkoppelt, um sie zu übertreten.

Auf der einen Seite betont das Verdecken oder Maskieren das Phantasmagorische und Wandelbare, das Verdrängte und Tabuisierte. Andererseits gibt uns das Verdecken und Maskieren auch die Freiheit zu bestimmten Aktivitäten, die uns sonst als Individuen gefährden oder kompromittieren würden. Das ist natürlich der Grund, warum Aktivist*innen Masken tragen. Aber es ist auch der Grund, warum Polizeibeamt*innen das tun.

Für eine liberale, individualistische Gesellschaft ist der eigentliche Schrecken, wenn sich herausstellt, dass die Maske das wahre Gesicht ist, wenn das Abnehmen der Maske nicht mehr möglich ist oder wenn sich am Ende nichts darunter befindet.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Putting on a mask means entering a special zone, a social dimension in which normal rules are suspended, where one is temporarily uncoupled from one's own identity in order to trespass or transgress.

On the one hand, covering up or masking emphasizes the phantasmagoric and mutable, the repressed and taboo, a darker realm from where myths and fairy tales infiltrate the social order. On the other hand, covering up and masking also frees us to engage in certain activities, which would otherwise endanger or compromise us as individuals. This is why activists wear masks. But it's also why police officers do.

For a liberal individualistic society, the real horror is when the mask turns out to be the true face, when taking the mask off is no longer possible or when there is nothing underneath it.

BIOGRAFIE OMER FAST

Omer Fast wurde 1972 in Jerusalem geboren. Er absolvierte einen BA in Englisch an der Tufts University, ein BFA in Visual Arts an der Boston Museum School of Fine Arts und einen MFA am Hunter College, City University of New York. Einzelausstellungen im Whitney Museum in New York, Jeu de Paume in Paris, Museum moderner Kunst in Wien und im Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin. Gruppenausstellungen dOCUMENTA13, 52. Biennale in Venedig, Guggenheim-Museum in New York und Centre Pompidou in Paris. Fast erhielt den Bucksbaum Award für seine Arbeit „The Casting“ auf der Whitney Biennale im Jahr 2008 und den National Galerie Preis für junge Kunst in Berlin im Jahr 2009 mit seiner Arbeit „Nostalgia“. Sein Kurzfilm CONTINUITY gewann 2013 den deutschen Kurzfilmpreis LOLA. ABENDLAND ist Omer Fast's dritter Spielfilm. Fast unterrichtet an der HfbK Hamburg.

BIOGRAPHY OMER FAST

Omer Fast was born in Jerusalem in 1972. He holds a BA in English from Tufts University, a BFA in Visual Arts from the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts and an MFA from Hunter College, City University of New York. Solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum in New York, the Jeu de Paume in Paris, Museum of Modern Art in Vienna, Guangzhou Times Art Museum and Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin. Group exhibitions include dOCUMENTA13, the 52nd Venice Biennale, the Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Fast received the Bucksbaum award for his work “The Casting” at the Whitney Biennial in 2008 and has also won the National Galerie’s Prize for Young Art in Berlin in 2009 with his work “Nostalgia”. His short film CONTINUITY won the German short film award LOLA in 2013. ABENDLAND is Omer Fast’s third feature film. Fast teaches at the HfbK Hamburg.

FILME VON OMER FAST // FILM WORKS OF OMER FAST

- 2007 — THE CASTING, 35mm Film/SD Video, 14 min
- 2009 — NOSTALGIA, 16mm, Film/HD, TRT, 45 min
- 2011 — 5000 FEET IS THE BEST, HD, 32 min
- 2012 — CONTINUITY, Short Film, HD, 41 min
- 2015 — REMAINDER, HD, 97 min
- 2016 — CONTINUITY, HD, 85min
- 2016 — AUGUST, 3D, HD, 15 min
- 2018 — THE INVISIBLE HAND, Virtual Reality Short Film, 11 min
- 2019 — DE OYLEM IZ A GOYLEM, HD, 25 min
- 2020 — KARLA, Holographische Projektion / HD Video, 35 min
- 2022 — GARAGE SALE, 3 Filme, Photo Essay, 29 min
- 2023 — 13 SCHRITTE ZUR BEFREIUNG DEUTSCHLANDS, 3D Film, 24 min
- 2024 — ABENDLAND, HD, 115 min

ABENDLAND — a film by Omer Fast

FILM TEAM

Buch und Regie // Director and Screenplay: Omer Fast
Bildgestaltung // Director of Photography: Lukas Strebel
Szenenbild // Production Design: Anne Schlaich
Kostümbild // Costume Design: Silke Sommer
Maskenbild // Make-up Artist: Annegret Schmidt
Masken-Design & Herstellung // Masks Design & Making: Claus Grüßner
Tonmeister // Sound Recordist: Oliver Göbel, Rainer Gerlach
Montage // Editor: Janina Herhoffer, Omer Fast
Musik // Music: Dirk Dresselhaus
Mischtonmeister // Mixing Sound Engineer: Matthias Schwab
Casting: Viviana Kammel, Anna Bitter
Farbkorrektur // Color Grading: Gregor Pfüller
Sound Designer: Jochen Jezussek
Set-Aufnahmeleiter // Set Manager: Oscar Meyer-Ricks
Produktionsleitung // Production Manager: Hans Broich
Produzent*innen // Producers: Frieder Schlaich, Irene von Alberti
Produziert von // Production: Filmgalerie 451

Gefördert von // Supported by: Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien (BKM), Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, Deutscher Filmförderfonds

FILM INFORMATION

Originaltitel // Original, German, English title: Abendland
Produktionsland // Country of production: Germany
Produktionsjahr // Year of production: 2024
Sprache // Original language: German
Kategorie // Category: Feature Film
Laufzeit // Running time: 115 min
Originalformat // Original format: Digital
Vorführformat // Film Format: DCP (4K, 25 f/sec)
Seitenverhältnis // Techn. Ratio: 1.85:1, 3996 x 2160 pixel
Leinwandformat // Screen Ratio: 2.00:1
Ton // Sound: 5.1 PCM
Farbe / s/w // Color / B/W: Color
Untertitel // Subtitles: English
Weltpremiere // World Premiere: Woche der Kritik 2024
Kinostart // Theatrical Release: Summer 2024

ABENDLAND — a film by Omer Fast

PRESSEFOTOS UND SCREENER

// PRESS PHOTOS AND SCREENER INFORMATION

Pressefotos // Press Photos: <https://www.filmgalerie451.de/de/presse/pressebereich>

Username: Presse | Password: Presse451

Screeener auf Anfrage // Screener on request: presse@filmgalerie451.de

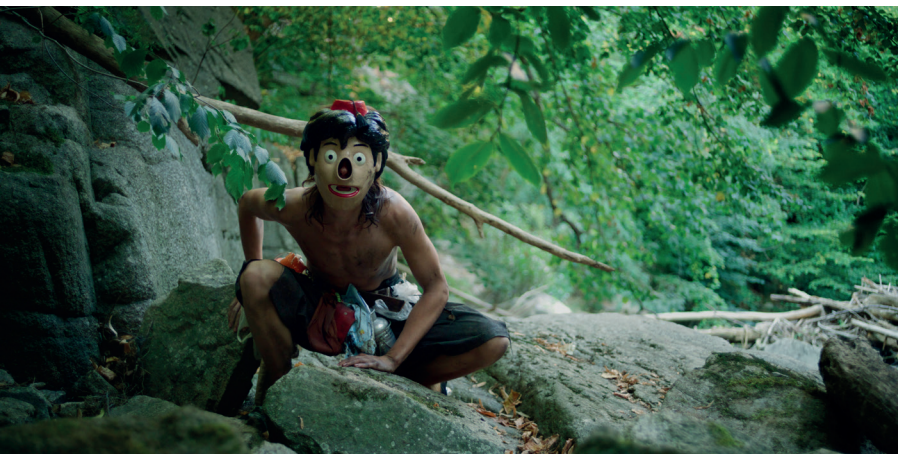
Pressefotos Vorschau // Press photos preview:



Stephanie Amarell in ABENDLAND, by Omer Fast, 2024, © Filmgalerie 451 / Piffel Medien



Stephanie Amarell in ABENDLAND, by Omer Fast, 2024, © Filmgalerie 451 / Piffel Medien



Amon Wendel in ABENDLAND, by Omer Fast, 2024, © Filmgalerie 451 / Piffel Medien

ABENDLAND — a film by Omer Fast



Stephanie Amarell in ABENDLAND, by Omer Fast, 2024, © Filmgalerie 451 / Piffel Medien



Film still ABENDLAND, by Omer Fast, 2024, © Filmgalerie 451 / Piffel Medien



Marie Tragousti, Stephanie Amarell in ABENDLAND, by Omer Fast, 2024, © Filmgalerie 451 / Piffel Medien

ABENDLAND — a film by Omer Fast

OMER FAST IM INTERVIEW MIT BOMB Magazine // INTERVIEW WITH OMER FAST

Zur Online-Version // Read interview online:

<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/omer-fast-by-euridice-arratia/>

Omer Fast by Euridice Arratia

While editing his second feature film, *Abendland*, the artist reveals its leitmotifs: “Everyone wears masks, truth is up for grabs, and identity is very much at issue.”



Film still from *Abendland*, 2023. © 2023 Filmgalerie 451, Berlin.

Before making his first feature film, *Remainder* (2015), Omer Fast was already widely known for his multi-channel video installations which splintered the conventions of storytelling, media reportage, and historical representation. Many of his works took as launching pads testimonials or interviews that the artist conducted with different individuals: performers of a living history museum in *Godville* (2005); the funeral directors of *Looking Pretty for God* (2008); an asylum seeker in *Nostalgia* (2009); a drone operator for the US military in *5000 Feet Is the Best* (2011); or adult film performers in *Everything that Rises Must Converge* (2013), to name a few. The results are portraits of arresting images and complex nonlinear narratives that put into question notions of memory and identity.

Whether he's crisscrossing the minefields of politics, contemporary warfare, or the economy of sex, Fast's meticulous editing and his use of devices such as repetition, doubling, reenactment, and the loop (which allows for intermittent viewing) all result in narratives that weave together the eyewitness account and the reconstruction, the staged and the documentary, fact and fiction, and open them up to novel ways of storytelling.

Lately, Fast has been experimenting with virtual reality in *The Invisible Hand* (2018) and has produced a

work consisting of three videos displayed on mobile phones: *A Place Which Is Ripe* (2020), shown inside a wardrobe locker at the former Stasi Headquarters as part of the 2020 Berlin Biennale. His video installations have expanded to include sculptures, drawings, and even live performances in elaborate immersive sets that privilege the viewer's spatial and sensory experience.

I first met Fast in 2005 in Berlin, his adopted hometown. What I thought would be a quick studio visit turned into a lengthy and exciting conversation that sparked an ongoing dialogue. Early this year I caught up with Fast in New York City, first in person and a few days later on Zoom, and he gave me generous insight into his second feature film shot in Germany, *Abendland*, which he was in the midst of editing.

Euridice Arratia It was a treat to sit with you in New York and watch footage from *Abendland*, the film you are currently editing. After we met, it struck me that we last saw each other in December 2020 in Berlin. At that moment we were in the middle of the Covid pandemic and the situation was pretty dismal and difficult. Like many other artists, you had exhibitions canceled and your ambitious show at the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich was forced to close very soon after it opened. We discussed then how funding for you, as for many artists, had dried out. Then, by the summer of 2022 you were already shooting this new feature film. What happened between the lockdown and the moment you began to shoot last summer?

Omer Fast The project was originally supposed to be a series, but then our TV partner dropped out after reading the script and realizing that all of the film's characters would wear masks. Things looked really bleak. Already a few other projects had beached and withered. But then we decided to submit to the film fund of the German Cultural Ministry. It's a kind of Hail Mary fund for strange projects that have no commercial chances. We got lucky. They gave us most of our financing. I am very grateful to them.

EA That is so fortunate. I know from working with you that your projects often relate and inspire each other. Were any of your previous works a springboard for *Abendland*?

OF I work serially, which means that problems from one project contaminate and migrate to the ones that follow. In 2018, the curator Nikita Yingqian Cai invited me to create a new work for an exhibition at the Times Museum in Guangzhou. My short VR film, *The Invisible Hand*, was shot in and around Guangzhou with a local cast speaking Mandarin, but the plot was derived from a medieval Yiddish fairy tale involving greed, transgression, and punishment. In my adaptation, an entire family is punished for their misdeeds by a ghost who renders them incapable of telling lies for the rest of their lives. Shamefaced and ostracized for always telling the truth, they choose to hide their faces by wearing masks.

So, the work proposes a dynamic between mask-wearing and truth-telling, which might seem counterintuitive if we think of masks hiding our true faces. But the concealment of one's face can also empower the mask wearer to transgress, to speak truth to power, or try on a different identity. I've always been attracted to paradoxes and transgressions, especially in the realm of truth and identity. In the end, the work I made was banned by the Chinese government and never shown by the museum that commissioned it. So, *Abendland* picks up where *The Invisible Hand* left off, but in the interim a pandemic happened, and we all became mask wearers.

EA Why was your film banned in China?

OF If I remember correctly, the censors declared that there are no more ghosts in the People's Republic of China and that any film showing ghosts in a contemporary context is promoting superstition. In this film, a poor family had made a deal with a ghost in order to climb the socioeconomic ladder and become wealthy. Years later, when the ghost unexpectedly appears at their son's wedding, the family matriarch publicly disavows and insults it. Spurned and humiliated, the ghost dramatically curses the family: just as it was shamed by their lies, they will from now on be shamed by the truth. Their brush with the supernatural ends, but no one in the family can henceforth lie and the consequences are of course horrific and comic.

The film is melodramatic, at times dreamlike, and not overtly political. So I'm not sure why it was banned, and I don't necessarily buy the censors' explanation. Perhaps it has to do with the deal the family makes, which trades away truth for a chance at prosperity. *Abendland* is set in a post-Covid, post-fact Western-European democracy: Everyone wears masks, truth is up for grabs, and identity is very much at issue.



Still from *The Invisible Hand*, 2018. VR digital video in 3D, 13 minutes.

Photo by Vega Fang.

EA How did the process of writing this film compare with writing your previous feature film, *Remainder*? There you worked closely with Tom McCarthy, the author of the book on which the film is based. For *Abendland*, you conceived the story and wrote the script alone. How did the narrative come about?

OF *Abendland* is partly inspired by Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which of course has already spawned many film and literary adaptations. Two contemporary adaptations of *Robinson Crusoe* reimaged Defoe's classic for the postcolonial era: In J. G. Ballard's *Concrete Island*, a London architect has an accident and ends up on a traffic island underneath the highway. Much like Crusoe, he explores and eventually conquers the island and its natives. In Foe, J. M. Coetzee expands Defoe's story to include a female protagonist. There's a mutiny on a ship crossing the Atlantic, and she's set adrift in a small boat that washes up on Crusoe Island. And so she enters the story obliquely, as an extra character who ends up taking over after Crusoe dies.

I had been interested in adapting both books at some point, but it didn't work out. So I decided to write my own version of *Robinson Crusoe* but set it in an even more contemporary, post-Covid world, and in Germany.

EA Although the film is still in the making, would you mind revealing some details about the enigmatic main character in *Abendland*?

OF The Crusoe-like protagonist is a castaway, but she's stranded in her own native land, which has somehow changed and become strange, threatening, and unfamiliar. At the outset, the protagonist joins a group of climate activists who want to disrupt the clearing of a forest. All are masked to hide their identity. When the police crack down on them, the main protagonist escapes but loses her way in the woods.

Unlike Crusoe, she cannot really survive on her own, and the natives she eventually discovers are a group of separatists who live according to their own rules in a hidden colony deep in the forest. When the protagonist arrives, the masked colonists are suspicious. Is she a spy or a refugee? Should she be integrated and absorbed? Might she be carrying a virus?

There is also another problem with her identity—a member of the colony is already wearing a mask identical to the one of the newcomer. The two are mirror images of one another, which makes the newcomer even more suspicious. Incidentally, that mask, which the protagonist does not take off until the very end, has its own widely familiar story. It is a German face that's accompanied us for almost two decades, literally the face of Germany.

EA It's a face known all over the world. Can we reveal whose face it is or would that be a spoiler?

OF It's not a spoiler. It'll be obvious to anyone looking at the images that will accompany our conversation when it's published. The protagonist is masked with the face of former chancellor Angela Merkel. When we first see her, she's part of a group of activists, who are all festively masked. But while they are active, she is a rather passive figure, documenting their action with her mobile phone. She's a filmmaker—the documenta-

rian, the witness to the event. I feel sympathy toward her, not because she has this famous politician's face, but because of her tenuous and oblique relationship to the action. She's not an active protagonist or a colonial hero intent on reshaping her new surroundings like Crusoe. She's mostly reactive to her circumstances, which are, after all, difficult and threatening and very unstable. Perhaps this brings her full circle back to Merkel, who, for much of her tenure was also not a very active politician, but more deliberative and reactive.

EA Can you talk about the character's relationship to the mask she wears? She's frequently quoting from Angela Merkel's speeches and seems to embody parts of Merkel's personality and history.

OF Yes, in a sense, the film is a portrait—a very skewed and strange portrait of the former chancellor. I mean, we have a character who looks a lot like Merkel, but because she wears a mask, it's obviously not her. Who the protagonist really is remains an open question. Of course, we know that politicians have a public persona and must, metaphorically speaking, wear masks. Who they are privately is a matter of speculation and hearsay. Like actors, they must perform a role, which projects credibility and authenticity. And we, the electorate, their audience, must believe in that role, accepting the implicit split between who the public person is and who the private person is, just as we do with actors. And so this film's protagonist is weak, not least because she appears like somebody else, who is famous and powerful. She is an obvious fake, patently inauthentic, a double, or a medium.

At the beginning, we have very few clues about who she is. She doesn't talk much. But when she experiences stress, which happens a lot during the film, she has this almost automatic, compulsive reaction and begins to recite quotes from various speeches by the former chancellor. So, yes, the film is a kind of strange, fragmented, and patently inauthentic portrait of Merkel—or at least of her double or medium.



Film still from *Abendland*, 2023. © 2023 Filmgalerie 451, Berlin.

EA I'm curious about your criteria for selecting the speeches for different scenes of the film.

OF The protagonist kicks off the film with a long off-screen monologue, which was Merkel's public address to the nation at the start of the pandemic. In this opening scene, two very dramatic circumstances are established: This is the chancellor speaking. And there is a profound crisis taking place across the land. So the film takes place in this volatile time, which is marked by an external threat to one's existence as an individual (or to an entire society) and an internal crisis involving the inauthenticity or fragmentation of one's identity. The quotes I selected reflect this volatility and the development of the chancellor from a passive member of society ("I was not a dissident; I did not attack the wall.") to someone actively involved in shaping it ("Those who are coming to us are not masses but individuals.").

People have different stress reactions—they can have tics, or they have certain expressions or physical gestures that they perform to deal with stress. These involuntary reactions to stress are arguably authentic markers for who we are as individuals since we can't really control or fake them. This particular character, as a response to stress, has a tendency to quote the former German chancellor. She mutters the quotes. They're barely audible and sound like prayers. What she's doing is very natural and authentic. Still, the idea is to reach beyond the immediate social context of the film and to allude to the larger political circumstances that have shaped it.

EA I had the impression that by using speeches you produced a kind of estrangement effect. The viewer is simultaneously pulled into the narrative and pulled out of it. While watching, I kept wondering, Who is doing the talking? What is she saying and to whom? Did you deliberately interrupt or stop the flow of the narrative with the speeches?

OF I guess you are pulled out of the narrative and into a more estranged or critical mindset once you realize where these quotes actually come from. I'm about halfway through editing the film and still don't have a good overview of how interesting these compulsive quotations are, nor how often they need to appear. But since the character is always wearing a mask, I can very easily cut them out if they're too disruptive. No one will ever know she's talking somewhere underneath there.

EA The story gets more complicated once she joins this utopian commune that is functioning outside the Bundesrepublik. And there she encounters a doppelgänger, another person who is wearing the same mask. I was intrigued by this plot twist.

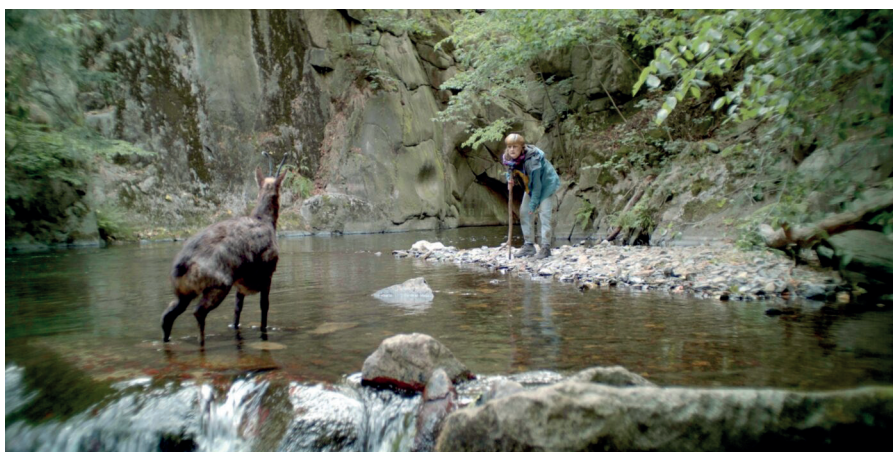
OF The whole notion of identity is certainly a big, messy issue in the film. When "Merkel" arrives at the commune, she's a refugee, a migrant, an outsider. The colonists are not open to strangers. They worry about being discovered and forcibly evacuated and they're also suspicious of the virus they've heard about. Plus, they're Luddites—they prohibit technology, mobile devices, and don't want to communicate with the outside world. Their politics are complex, neither left nor right, but definitely nonhierarchical, ecologically-minded, and totally communal.

When this refugee arrives, she discovers—and we discover—that there's already a person in this commune who has the same mask. And this other Merkel is extremely antagonistic toward her, as she should be. I mean, if somebody all of a sudden shows up with your face, that might be funny for a moment, but I suppose it's creepy and strange, and ultimately threatening. Our whole system is based on our being individuals. It certainly causes problems for the character, and for the commune: how to absorb or integrate this newcomer Merkel, not least of which because they already have one.

EA You shot the film in what looks like a lush, tropical forest—a place that's hard to imagine existing just three hours from Berlin. You mentioned that finding this location was central for you in terms of exploring certain conventions of the Heimat film genre.

OF The film's working title is *Abendland*. For an English speaker, this might sound like evening land but in reality, the word in German means the Occident, the West. The other working title for the film is Heimatfilm. The Heimat film is a German genre that's a little like the American western. It uses landscape and character in an idealized way. Historically, Heimat films presented an innocent version of Germany, often a countryside populated by idealized figures.

My film is also a Heimat film in the sense that it doesn't occur in a real place, and its masked characters are patently unreal figures. The German forest is the stuff of legends, fairy tales, and Heimat films, but it's not a real place, at least not a wild one. It's literally impossible to walk in any German forest for more than ten minutes without running into hikers with waterproof gear and mobile phones, or people walking their dogs. Nature is highly managed and fire paths crisscross the forest. So of course, the isolated community depicted in the film is highly unrealistic. The film is almost like a fairy tale for adults. *Robinson Crusoe* is also a fairy tale, but for colonial times. Its white male Western protagonist ends up in this other world, an idealized natural terrain, a kind of paradise which is hostile at first but thanks to his technical ingenuity he is able to master it. And of course, this idealized hero will also subjugate whoever he finds there. *Abendland* is a mix of the *Robinson Crusoe* story and the Heimat film. My protagonist doesn't have to conquer an island or a jungle, but she must find her place in the very heart of German identity, deep within the Black Forest.



Film still from *Abendland*, 2023. © 2023 Filmgalerie 451, Berlin.

EA A few months ago, the German government cracked down on the extremist Reichsbürger movement, detaining some of its main members. As you know, they deny the existence of the Federal Republic and became radicalized during the Covid pandemic. There are obvious differences to the fictional community in *Abendland*—they don't seem to want to violently overthrow the government—but I wonder if Germany's current crisis was on your mind when conceiving the film?

OF Well, they're not exactly nonviolent in *Abendland*. When the protagonist first encounters the commune, we see this classic scene from historical depictions of colonial encounters: the explorer, the Western subject as it were, meets the natives. Only here these natives are not indigenous others but fellow citizens. And while they approach very carefully, some actually do bear archaic weapons. So, potentially they could be violent.

Certainly, their separatist relationship to their mother country could be perceived as antagonistic. They do not want to have any contact with outsiders and so they force the newcomer, the refugee, the migrant Merkel, into quarantine high up in a tree house. Of course, they do this in order to protect their community because they're not vaccinated—and don't want to be.

So, there's a whole mix of politics, I suppose, that makes it difficult to characterize them. On the one hand, they live ecologically, nonhierarchically, and collectively. On the other hand, they are Luddite separatists who aim to reinvent social relations. They go beyond material resources by collectively sharing their identities. They're trying to undo the whole notion of the individual. That's a spoiler so I won't get into it. But I guess this could make them quite radical to some, perhaps threatening to others.

EA Relations of power are a recurring theme in the film.

OF The film starts with climate activists who are trying to stop deforestation. Their brief victory is ended by the police in a violent crackdown. The power of the state, embodied by the police, and the power of capital, embodied by the forest workers, are what's threatening the forest commune. Like all idealists or extremists, they first appear on the periphery, leading a marginal and threatened existence. They've withdrawn from the state, but their new forest home is not safe, and nature is not safe. As I mentioned with respect to the *Heimat* film, it's unclear if nature even exists for them, or whether it's just a resource to be exploited by capital or by reactionary forces or by the government. The community exists as an idealized pocket of individuals who very much understand themselves as endangered others and as antithetical to capital and the German state. This is the volatile social context that can result in progressive change or give rise to extreme movements like the Reichsbürger.

EA At the beginning you mentioned how certain concerns migrate from one of your projects to the other. The community of *Abendland* that wants to exist as separate entity away from the mainstream brought to my mind one of your early works, *Godville*. I remember walking into your two-channel video installation without any preconceptions or expectations and being enthralled but also feeling dislocated. The latter was due to the way you edited the interviews that you had conducted with the people who appear on the screen. They spoke about, I paraphrase, "adopting an identity and establishing a community that would be paradise to them." It wasn't immediately clear if the people appearing in this work were fictional characters, or even a

cult.

OF *Godville* portrays several persons who work as historical characters in an open-air museum in Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia. When I made this work, I was interested in how these people performed a historical identity day in and day out, some of them for years. I wondered about the relationship between their eighteenth-century identities and their twenty-first-century selves—particularly with respect to power relations.

The film edits together bits of conversations that I had recorded with three performers, both in-character as historical figures, and out-of-character as contemporary persons. I made the work in 2005 when social media was just getting started but revisionist tendencies were already in full bloom in the US.

I think the colonists in *Abendland* are similar to the characters in *Godville*. It's not possible to form such a commune in a German forest. It's extremely difficult in Germany to find any pocket to disappear into. Of course, you can start a commune in the city or in the countryside, or even online. But you cannot disappear. The state will always find you.

So the first question the film asks is, Is it possible to escape? And what does the desire to escape mean, politically? Does the group's collectivist and egalitarian ethos—which is something I admire—correspond to their fear and suspicion of outsiders? Is a more progressive but atomized notion of identity endangering solidarity?

EA These are all very timely and fascinating questions. I can't wait to see the final edit of the film. What is the next step? Will *Abendland* be shown in the commercial film circuit?

OF The film should be finished sometime before the summer of this year. We'll duly submit it to festivals where it will likely be rejected. A brave distributor has signed on to place the film in German cinemas. We certainly hope to capitalize on our protagonist's great celebrity. But we're also aware that we're using a mask that only looks convincing in stills. Any moviegoer will realize within the first few seconds of the film that it's not the real former chancellor. I don't know how many will stick around to see what happens to her. The Heimat film is a politically suspect genre.

EA Is directing feature films your main focus from now on or do you plan to keep working on projects for galleries and museums as well?

OF I am very much committed to art-making. I like the experimentation and risk-taking involved in visual arts, which is less possible in cinematic projects.

Euridice Arratia is a curator and writer currently based in Paris. She co-founded and directed the gallery Arratia Beer in Berlin. She holds an MA in Performance Studies from NYU.