

L'ANIMALE

A FILM BY KATHARINA MUECKSTEIN



WHAT DO WE WANT TO BE, ANIMAL OR HUMAN? A CONVERSATION BETWEEN KARIN SCHIEFER AND KATHARINA MUECKSTEIN

In the first take of L'ANIMALE, two motocross riders, armored in full protective gear, circle one another, but especially themselves. We hear the roaring of the engines, the dizziness, the whirl, the power they have to master, the fragile balance, their self-involvement. Is this beginning a visual metaphor that represents everything to do with the specific age of the adolescents at the center of your film?

KATHARINA MUECKSTEIN: The subject of motocross riders appealed to me because it contains something very powerful. The armored figures are a good image for the lack of permeability and the hard, almost impenetrable surfaces we carry around with us. It is also simply a metaphor for masculinity and coolness, also very important topics in my film. My intention with this first sequence was not so much to put the adolescents center stage. Rather, I wanted to let the film begin with something full of movement and action. In this project, I really wanted to use all the possibilities the budget allowed, and the motorbike scenes are part of that.

Your film tells about being young in the countryside, not in an urban environment. What led you to situate your story in the country?

I am interested in the interface between city and country, the suburban sprawl that is also the interface between Nature and Civilization. It is a great setting for themes such as the romanticizing of the Natural, the mystification of Nature as opposed to Civilization and Progress. We live in a time of constant negotiations as to in which direction we should orient ourselves: do we hark back to a romanticized state of nature or do we transcend the fear of the unknown, forge ahead and look for progress? This is one of the topics of L'ANIMALE that imbues all levels of the film, story, location and tonality.

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Did this zone between city and country also appeal to you as an area, in which traditional and open, contemporary interpretations of gender roles come into conflict?

Since my youth, I have been preoccupied with feminist and queer philosophy, and I find it very irritating that we make all sorts of speculative assumptions about the “naturalness” of gender relations, depending on our discursive aims. We want to have it both ways: see ourselves as sensitive, civilized beings, but on the other hand we invoke nature and natural drives whenever we feel like it. What do we want to be, animal or human? And what aspects of each do we carry within us? I was intrigued by combining these two contrasting ways of self-perception because I believe that both belong to being fully human. We need contact with our intuition, connection to some kind of naturalness, to emotion as well as the will to shape things, i.e., an emancipation from natural drive and incorruptible reason.

We meet your protagonist Mati with a strange haircut, in a dress that neither fits nor flatters her. It is clear from the beginning that she is someone not comfortable in her own skin. You have written another leading role for your protagonist in “Talea”, Sophie Stockinger. Why did you want to work with her again? How did this character take shape?

After “Talea”, I absolutely wanted to make another film with Sophie Stockinger before she was fully adult. I adapted my entire work process to this, knowing how long it takes to realize a feature film. There was not a lot of time. Sophie was 14 when we shot “Talea”, 18 when we shot L'ANIMALE. With “Talea”, I had experienced what can develop when the two of us work together. I was deeply impressed that a young actress without any classical training could have such technique, grasp of characters and scenic understanding. I didn't want to miss out on that. In L'ANIMALE I also wanted to take Sophie further and write a role for her that is more distant from who she is.

We approached the character of Mati both through numerous conversations and through body work. In detail, this consisted in a fight training and group rehearsals with boys in which she trained her “male” behavior. I like finding the path into a character together with the actors through their bodies. While it is a precondition to intellectually grasp one's role, it is a totally different matter to fully internalize that in one's being. To me as a director, the way through the body seems most logical. Sophie is very good at that, but even she had a few hurdles to take for this role.

Mati definitely rejects girls her age but still wants to belong and has found a place, but not necessarily her place, in the boys' motocross gang. She asserts herself by mastering her bike but still is not immune to the macho attitudes of the boys who extend their protection to her only as long as she is a potential sexual subject. Gender relations are extremely tough for this generation. Is this based on your observations in the research for the film?

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I see that slightly differently: Mati is immune from the macho attitudes as long as she pretends to be one of the men. As soon as she becomes an object, she is subjected to the same intimidation as all other girls. I wrote these scenes from the viewpoint I had on young men my age when I grew up. Together with Rita Waszilovics, we auditioned many boys and girls. And when we told the boys that we didn't have rules of polite conduct and that they should behave as uninhibitedly as possible, there might have been some initial shame, but once the breaks were off, no one had to think twice. Every one of them knew how disparagingly men talk about women. We may live in a time where gender relations are openly negotiated, and political correctness might hide some things, but I would claim that everyday practices lag far behind the discourse.

L'ANIMALE is among other things a film about masculinity and about the question what it means for an adolescent girl to realize on one hand, that there is this male world of power, privileges and the freedom to misbehave and on the other hand having to find out that women do not have these same liberties in our society.

I think that outside of the progressive, urban bubble it is still very difficult for women or girls if they don't necessarily want to join the game of being hunted and letting yourself be caught. But L'ANIMALE also shows that those who enjoy traditional male privileges are only apparently free and should take the blame for what they do to others. Mati is guilty when she joins her friends' harassment of other girls. She acts as if it doesn't matter that she is a girl herself, and in the end, she is not able to balance this precarious position for very long.

She experiences for the first time the dilemma of emancipation that to decide in favor of someone also means to decide against someone else.

The characters in L'ANIMALE seem self-determined at first glance but are really stuck in a tight social straight-jacket. In order to be free, they would have to give up their idea that everything is harmonious, that one can please everybody, that everything can always be safe and calculable. I am driven by a desire for society as such makes a step towards growing up and autonomy. That means to distance oneself as an individual from childish wishes for security and being accepted by others and deal more critically as a community with questions of authority and power.

The aim is to move ahead, towards a combination of reason and emotion. My characters exemplify that this is tied up with great anxiety caused by leaving safe positions, but that we can dare to do so all the same. This is where the personal and the political connect: there are things everybody can learn for herself or himself, and there are things that we should learn as a society to develop visions for the future.

To be different in the country can have grave consequences. In her German lesson, Mati calls overcoming fear the central doorway to freedom. Isn't it the fear of stagnation, of making the wrong life choices, of drastic changes that besiege Mati in the phase of her life immediately prior to graduation?

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That is certainly true for Mati. But the story of her parents is central, too. They also feel that they cannot stay forever where they are now. This realization frightens them enormously. They may have a vague idea what a liberated self would look like. How to reach this is more difficult. That is why I am so interested in characters torn between want and ought. Who can project enormous self-confidence externally but tremble inside because they know they will have to leave their position. Parents exemplify what we could become. Willing to suffer a lot beneath the surface to keep in control of appearances, even though this hurts us. But they also are loveable and show us that you cannot always do the right thing in life.

The story of the parents in L'ANIMALE tells us what suffering it causes to learn late in life that one has deceived oneself for too long, that one wasn't truthful or denied oneself something. But also that it is never too late to take a stand for oneself and find a more authentic existence.

Franco Battiato's song "L'ANIMALE" has a significant role, not only in the course of the story. What did this Italian song add to the development of your material? Why did you have the protagonists sing in the moment of their greatest solitude? What is caused by this moment of singing?

Aa I started to work on the script, I happened to hear the song by Franco Battiato, a piece I already knew. Suddenly it became clear to me that any of my characters could sing this song because it is about the central theme of the film. Battiato sings of the animal inside but doesn't describe it as driven by instinct, but rather as something completely authentic that cannot dissimulate. He also looks at this animal ironically because it always wants something that he doesn't want or shouldn't want. At the same time, he knows the animal will always keep the upper hand.

I like the thought that we can never hold back or hide what authentically happens inside of us, try as we might to mobilize all our strength and tighten our social straight-jackets. It will always find a way to the outside and claim its place. In my artistic work I always search for something between the lines, that open spaces for thinking and feeling. Music is one of the means for this.

Since I don't want to use music manipulatively, I preferred to use it directly. The moment when all characters start to think is one that I would like to see more often in the cinema. It's meant to be a moment to just let go.

Buildings, houses and constructions in themselves with their recesses, thresholds and back doors, open, half-lit and dark zones, perfectly arranged and unfinished interiors function as signifiers in all your interior scenes. This coherence between location and scene is especially evident in L'ANIMALE. What is it that is so important to you about this?

Both as a filmmaker and as a moviegoer I always long for films in which time and place are not immediately clear, which allows you to find your way into a narrative space that is suspended above the things you see. That is the effect I tried to realize together with my cameraman Michael Schindegger and my set designer Katharina Haring. For example, there is not a single cell phone in the entire film, the houses are in the middle of the forest, many things are left out, such as the way to school and its surroundings. Darkness plays a key role, as hiding place, as a place of fear, as a projection space. Again and again, there is movement from ill-defined, psychoanalytically meaningful non-spaces to concrete spaces. There is always the attempt to connect interior and exterior, the concrete and the vague.

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The outside in your imagery is very much dominated by verdant nature. We can experience it as summery and pleasant, as uncanny and as protective. The motocross track, however, is a mineral world of gravel and stone, free from vegetation. Another impressive location is the parking lot with the screen of an abandoned drive-in movie theater. How did you choose your external locations?

We chose the quarry and the drive-in theater for Mati and the boys because I wanted to give everything a touch of a Western. I wanted to show how strong you can feel on the strength of acting cool, the conviction that the world belongs to you and that you are entitled to determine the lives of others. When you are in permanent competition with others, measure yourself against them and derives enormous confidence from defeating them. As an adolescent, I envied men enormously for acting within such a simple system of always being buddies and competitors at the same time.

I wanted to make a film in which I could play with male themes, and a fitting physical environment was part of that. The quarry is like the desert in a Western. The gang has specific spaces that are like an arena to show off their glory. Also, while the quarry required an insane amount of logistics it also was incredibly fun to zip around all day on quads and film motocross riders, both male and female.

There are two valves the young adults use to release their energy, their pent-up hormones and their desire for freedom, motocross and dancing. The latter is their way of being themselves, of forging connections with others that would be impossible without the dancing. How did you develop these scenes, how did you stage and choreograph them?

When I was writing, the dancing was a very useful means to set my characters free to show what happens inside of them. For the scenes in the disco, we spent a lot of thought on what music they would listen to, how they would dance to it. It was fun to develop these scenes and the somewhat awkward style of the guys. When Mati and Carla dance, we tried to build up a contrast and show how dancing can also be something that connects. It is sometimes easier to move together than to talk together. There wasn't any real choreography in most of the dance scenes, but we did rehearse the dancing ahead of time to have an idea of who could let go to what extent. I only choreographed the transitions of scripted action and dancing.

You have worked with many youths; how did you manage the casting and preparations?

For both Carla and the guys, I auditioned a vast number of teenagers. My casting agent Rita Waszilovisc, who had casted Jack Hofer, Simon Morzé and Dominik Singer in Stephan Richter's "Einer von uns" recommended the three of them to me. From the first time we rehearsed, it was clear that that was an optimal constellation. From their prior shoot, they were already a tightly knit group, while Sophie came in new. That mirrored very well what happens in the story.

For Carla, I was looking for an actress who was slightly older than Mati. I met several young actresses for the role. Julia Richter convinced me because of a certain inherent coolness. I wanted her character to show how you can be a self-determined girl without having to dissemble. This strength of not caring about pleasing everybody is something that radiated from Julia from the beginning.

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Literature intrudes again and again through the various quotes in the German lessons. To what extent is literature an inspiration for your work? How important is a teacher figure at this life-stage?

I was always conflicted about school. It was both a prison and a window to the world. I wanted to show school as a place where a society is formed. A place where a handful of people try to transmit values and big thoughts. Literature certainly opened up many things for myself. Several times in the film, we hear a quote from Goethe's poem „Blissful yearning“. One of its verses goes „And while thou spurnest at the best / Whose word is „Die and be new-born! „ / Thou bidest but a cloudy guest / Upon an earth that knows not morn.“ When I was writing, I had associations of costume dramas, of 19th century stories in which people suffer so much from the social straight-jackets and fight with their inner revolt.

What wins in life? Fear or passion? A glance at the generation of the parents leaves many open questions. We will not know for either Mati nor her father whether they will be drawn to one sex only, and if so, to which one. It also remains uncertain how courageously Mati will address her future. Many things remain suspended. Did you also try to narrate this state of limbo?

While I was working on the script, I talked often with Michael Kitzberger, Wolfgang Widerhofer and Libertad Hackl about a possible ending for L'ANIMALE. I always returned to the same point: considering humanistic emancipation, but also today's gender discussion, it would have been romanticizing to narrate a final emancipation. But since freeing oneself is something I think all human beings are capable of, and something I wish they will achieve, I would hope people leave the film encouraged to do just that. Emancipation is possible.

All characters in the film realize in the end that whoever emancipates themselves, goes against conventions and doesn't always play along will have to reckon with enmity and possibly aggression. That's where we stand as a society. I couldn't bring myself to write a happy ending, but neither did I want to end on a fatalistic note, and so it was clear that the film would have to be open-ended.

Interview: Karin Schiefer, Austrian Film Commission, November 2017