

An Interview with Anja Salomonowitz and Dimitré Dinev on SPAIN, by Karin Schiefer

“We wanted passionate characters and passionate people”

What induced the two of you – coming from different artistic backgrounds – to team up on this project?

Anja Salomonowitz:

I had been planning a documentary about a binational couple because I wanted to investigate the issue of how relationships are made impossible and love destroyed by regulations imposed by the immigration police. While researching this subject, I came up with the idea for a screenplay about a threesome involving an immigration police officer, his ex-wife, and her young lover, a foreigner. The police officer has the power to destroy the budding relationship between the latter two. I soon decided that I would rather collaborate with someone on the screenplay than not, and the idea was to find someone who would be able to flesh out the character of the young foreigner. A friend recommended Dimitré Dinev to me, I met with him and we decided almost immediately that we wanted to work together.

Dimitré Dinev:

The cinema played an important role in my socialization as an artist; I was a fanatic moviegoer. In this sense I was very fortunate to grow up in a communist country because film culture was something that was cultivated strongly there. The cinema has always inspired my literary work and, as fate would have it, my first written work in Austria turned out to be a screenplay. Unfortunately we never made the movie, but we got a grant for it. Symbolically speaking it was the first acknowledgment of my work as a freelance artist, and it gave me the courage to continue. At first I was hesitant about writing literature in German. The screenplay is a form of writing that made it easier for me because it is not really literary.

How exactly did your collaboration take place in practice?

Anja Salomonowitz:

We worked together for the first time in the summer of 2007 and maintained very regular working hours, since I had a six-month-old baby and I was only able to make time for exactly half a day. We didn't send various versions back and forth but sat together at the office and worked every day from 9:30 a.m. till 2:30 p.m. Dimitré usually sat there thinking, while I typed everything into the computer. We were very disciplined. Once Dimitré said: “Tomorrow I won't be in until noon; tomorrow I'm getting married.” We took the day off.

To what extent did the two of you complement each other?

Dimitré Dinev:

Writing is a mystery, even to the writer himself. When I write alone, I don't know how I wrote what I wrote. There is no key to a subject. I like working with another person, especially on the kinds of texts that contain dialogue. The whole screenplay arose out of our dialogue. We set high standards for ourselves in terms of form and stuck to them: whatever could be expressed visually wouldn't be repeated in the dialogue. We thought up scenes for certain situations and conditions and made sure they felt moving and authentic. That was the challenge and also added suspense: waiting for the first word. And because the words are so rare they are also very important. Each word has to express something that isn't in the picture or allude to something that will come later.

Anja Salomonowitz:

In 2007, after an initial writing phase that lasted about seven weeks, we decided to put the screenplay aside, and two years later we revised it. This was a very enjoyable task. By then you knew what worked and what you could cut out. With just 62 pages, the screenplay is unusually short, but everything is there and the characters are very real. I wanted to infuse this story about the immigration police with yearning and life, with something very profound. Watching this film the viewer should get a sense of many layers.

The film has several story lines, but they are not interwoven in the classic sense; there is even a temporal aspect involved. What role does chance play in the story?

Dimitré Dinev:

We didn't give chance any particular role here, bad luck was more important to us and the eternal issue of whether or not it is possible to build one's own happiness on the ruins of someone else's misfortune. Chance doesn't play an explicit role except in the life of the gambler, which is completely determined by chance. Without wanting to explain it, we convey a kind of divine prescience through the character of Gabriel, through the allegory of a man whose job lets him hover over the rooftops, but who, at the same time, has fallen deep into material dependency.

Anja Salomonowitz:

Sure, one person's fate triggers the next story. Sava virtually appears out of nowhere, falls from the sky. To me it was a challenge to narrate the various stories as if they were happening simultaneously, when in fact, as would be revealed later, they turned out to be events occurring one after another. Then we came up with SPAIN as the title, and beneath that as a joke I wrote the subheading: "A Western by ..." without either of us ever having intended it as a Western. Only the basic structure fits: a man comes to town by chance, messes with the sheriff, fucks his wife, seeks revenge on his tormentors, and then disappears again. He leaves behind him a changed town.

The film shows a church being restored, icons being painted, a priest gives Sava a place to stay – there is a clear religious undertone, what role does religion play?

Dimitré Dinev:

It can hardly get any more material than this, all transcendence has been sucked out of it. If anything is divine, then it is survival itself.

Anja Salomonowitz:

The priest asks Sava why he wants to go to Spain, and Sava answers: "People there still fear God. A God-fearing country is a good place to live." What we are alluding to here is that there was an amnesty wave in Spain in which illegal aliens were granted legal status, and I also know of binational couples who found it easiest to get married in Spain. Of course, there are real political reasons, but one explanation might also be that the people in Spain consider marriage something good and important and that the morals there are different. What Sava's pseudo-religious words are really saying is that he can get by better there under the prevailing laws.

Emigration, asylum, and immigration are subjects that have come up repeatedly in Austrian films in recent years. Why do you think this issue has become so viral?

Anja Salomonowitz:

Because the current deportation policy, the borders, and the way people are treated on these borders constitute a real political drama. Immigration is a fact, and we cannot continue denying its existence. That it isn't allowed is reflected in today's crazy political situation and extreme cynicism.

Dimitré Dinev:

We have to give this issue the dignity that it has always had. In all mythology there are kings who come from a foreign land. Even the Bible is just a collection of migration stories. The essential element is always the yearning for a fair and just place, a place where everything is different, where life is better. It is yearning that changes the world, not rational thought, which always has its limitations. In SPAIN the foreigner is the one with the most power to make his own decisions and who sees life most clearly. He gives a distraught woman hope and love, and another point we wanted to make was that the whole structure of this society has been built by foreigners. Once one starts to ask who built certain buildings, the monolith of a culture starts to crumble. It doesn't really exist. It is mutual exchange that keeps each culture moving ahead and allows it to survive. Our society has become alienated from survival, and because survival is now alien to us, we are becoming increasingly merciless, unjust, unscrupulous. That is what is so absurd, that prosperity doesn't make people good-natured.

This is your first feature film, that means working with actors for the first time. How did you approach this task?

Anja Salomonowitz:

While writing the screenplay I always imagined Grégoire Colin in the role of Sava. At first I wanted to find an actor who looked like him, then I thought to myself: why not ask him, and to my great delight he said yes. He had read the screenplay in English, and the agreement was that he would play the part in German. I met him in Paris, where I gave him the German screenplay, and that was a big shock for him. I had to persuade him not to back down, and we gave him a coach who helped him memorize his lines word for word. He also learned how to carve and gild, all in all, a very intensive preparation period.

All the actors had to invest a lot of time and energy in the preparation stage because I consider the character's work and environment just as important as rehearsals. When it came to casting with Eva Roth, our first step was to establish our parameters for the search. I was looking for the kind of actor who was willing to metamorphose in the process and become his or her character. I expected my actors to really immerse themselves. We worked through the scenes for several weeks. During the actual shooting we only made small changes if any.

I thoroughly enjoyed working with the actors because it was something we shared and that stayed with us when we were on location too, as a kind of common goal leading us through the chaos.

The film has its own visual atmosphere. Where does the stylized set design in certain places and the consistent use of the color brown come from?

Anja Salomonowitz:

Brown is the color of the Western. The sand and earth are brown. Brown is the color of tilled soil, ground made arable for mankind. You can toss seeds into the brown soil. And brown is used in color theory to represent down-to-earth people. One of the many models influencing our imagery was the work of Caravaggio in terms of lighting, of course, but in choice and coordination of colors as well. The color range I envisioned was basically just brown and more brown. Other "permitted" colors were red, yellow, orange, and dark purple, all related colors. I wanted everything to be brown. Not just the chairs, tables, walls, everything, even the ashtray and the bottle. Once the production designer and the costume team realized that I wanted to be very consistent and how determined I was, they came up with terrific ideas and worked openly and intensively to help me implement my concept. I wanted to tell a fairy tale, a story with characters that were strongly bound to reality through the plot and the social context but who still had something overdrawn, fairy-tale-like about them, and this is underscored by the visual atmosphere.

Now that you can look back on making both documentaries and feature films, how do the two genres compare?

Anja Salomonowitz:

With a documentary you ask people if they want to be in it because they are the way they are, and a lot of the time it is a long, hard process until they finally commit fully. The great thing about feature films is that everyone really wants to be a part of them and is happy to be asked. I wasn't used to that. Of course there are hurdles and shooting is strenuous, but there is a path pointing the way through the project. With a documentary film you are constantly creating order in reality and drawing a story out of it, though there is no story to begin with. With a feature film you have the story right in front of you. They are two completely different worlds and each has something to offer.