

Anja Salomonowitz: *The 727 Days Without Karamo*

Interview by Karin Schiefer, December 2012

You have chosen a finely branched approach to give rise to the experiences of numerous couples in an ultimately mosaic-like picture of a basic experience and legal situation. You have your concept: to tell documentary stories differently and have further refined the principle of refraction and fragmentation here. With what assumptions have you approached the work for this film?

My premise was that there exists this basic, common experience and unfortunately this was confirmed to me intensively during my research interviews. I was interested in the subject of these couples because love and free will have so clearly collided with the law. Because the system directly and mercilessly engages in private life and transforms it. Daily life changes, and sadly often too the course of the love story.

How can the injustice of this situation be depicted without making the people portrayed and affected appear responsible? Or have to lead through the film? Carry the film on their shoulders? How can one separate the common, enforced experience from the people? By having the story told collectively.

I was searching for a documentary strategy to epitomise the simultaneousness and maintain the individuality at the same time. I did not want a simple figure to carry or be carried through the film, but rather to gather a different kind a strength and power through the collective. So that, like a snowball rolling through the snow, they would become bigger and stronger with every new person and history encountered on the way. The force of mass can scare; the force of the regulations and laws to be satisfied, just as much so. It is told soberly and built up simply because the authoritative madness speaks for itself, so much so that this snowball could perhaps crash through a windowpane.

You shot with many people, and many more must have been the number of cases and fates among your research. Over what period of time did you conduct your research and how did you approach these people and stories?

The story of this film started long ago for me. This film was namely continuously accepted and rejected by the funding bodies in turn and one has to receive multiple go-aheads at the same time in order to be able to realise the film. So there was always money made available but not enough to really shoot with. For years we held numerous rounds of "castings", which means conducting long research interviews with affected people. We approached them and, if they were agreeable, we let them tell their story for about 20 minutes while we filmed with a video camera. All in all we filmed at least 150 couples. It was striking that the stories touched on many of the same points and were similar, completely irrespective of the setting, profession or financial possibility the people had. For example, all of them believed that they should get married quickly, that that would make things better, and then realised what a horror it is to get all the documents in order – and it is after the wedding that the problems really start. Individual love stories are therefore standardised by the legal situation at critical points.

I have divided this *one* story into its single elements (getting to know each other/marriage/ problems arise/ ...to splitting up – which sadly I have heard about often, because the pressure is just too strong) and filmed every segment with a new couple. Here what is also important to me is that the people happen to be in the exact situation they are showing of themselves, so the couple that gets married actually got married (it was their real wedding) and they do not know what is in store for them later on. It was also important to me that one still felt the differences between the people, that they were portrayed sensitively, that the commonalities in the system were shown but also the individual differences of those concerned.

The voices, which have their say in *The 727 Days Without Karamo*, are primarily those of bi-national couples fighting (not always successfully) to legalise their relationship and be allowed to live together under one roof. In between there is, every now and then, the off-screen voice of Angela Magenheimer from the union *Ehe ohne Grenzen (Marriage Without*

*Borders*), who explains legal terms from immigration law and the regulations and procedures of the authorities. Why do you choose to tell the story of the government side, not through people but only through their actions?

What the regulatory requirements mean to people's lives and what they specifically bring about, without justification from individual officials, is what is narrated. The common thread that runs through the film is immigration law itself. The rules that befall people are accounted for in the order of their occurrence and the affected people are living examples of what triggers these rules.

I was adamant not to have public officials in my film because it's about the legislation executed by them and what this activates – of which they may know nothing about. It is also not about accusing an individual official. It is a system that protects itself well through its "apparatus", which opposes and is also non-transparent. It is a battle like David against Goliath.

I want to strengthen the side of the couple and show their point of view. They should have their say - and not be interrupted.

In *The 727 Days Without Karamo* you not only address a very emotional facet, a principle question is raised here: How far is the legislator permitted to intervene in the private lives of citizens? Did you, in your research, have the impression that there is a fundamental assumption on the part of the authorities that the marriage is a sham? In the treatment of binational marriages, does the argument for the prevention of abuse stand firmly in the foreground?

It's like this; the registry office has to report to the migration authorities when a binational couple get married. So that this couple can then be checked up on, in any case the surveillance already begins with this step. In my opinion, this is a racist and clearly much too personal intrusion into individual choices. And yes, almost everyone had this marriage check. This was a humiliating and belittling experience to everyone who told me about it. I ask myself how it's possible that in 2012 neighbours can still be questioned about whether Mr XY leaves from here or there. That's spying. Why is there no collective revolt in the building?

What in the course of your research most affected or upset you that you want to draw awareness to in this film?

Families being torn apart. I met a woman who was insanely happy with her husband from Ghana. They met in a museum where she was working as a guard. She experienced real love for the first time and soon became pregnant with his child. He was deported shortly before the birth, despite the marriage, because he was still an asylum seeker. The baby turned around in the womb, the birth was a caesarean, the woman was alone. How can such a thing happen?

Mr Brichta, who telephones his Chinese wife Zou Youejing in the film, has a long history of suffering behind him. By the way, he stutters only since this period. After his wife was deported he went alone to the ORF on the Königberg. He smuggled himself in and told his story to an editor whose door happened to be open. He went on TV. He went to the newspapers, to the radio, to a lawyer. He tried to fight back. I thought that was incredibly brave and courageous of him.

These people have memorised paragraphs that are so complex one can't even understand them after several read-throughs. They have to get to know regulations you wouldn't believe existed. They can mimmick that strange beaurcratic German perfectly after so many letters. It is an irreversible shock to one's faith in the right of the law.

The association to painting has already been mentioned. In your films one always has the feeling your work has a strong underlying colour scheme. How does this come about?

So far I have given each film a colour. *Das wirst du nie verstehen* (*You will never understand this*), a documentary about my three grandmothers, was all white, to keep the background neutral. In *Kurz davor ist es passiert* (*It happened just before*), each episode has a colour respective to its location and the supporting dramaturgy. *Spanien* was brown like a

western, brown / red / gold to capture a sensual world, to reflect something religiously playful, to feel a sense of despair. For *The 727 days without Karamo*, about the fight against immigration law, I was looking for a colour that is loud, brave, defiant. Sunny, strong, full of life. I didn't want to make a whining film, but a strong and resistant one, as I experience the people I interviewed. A colour that contrasts with the horrors that happen to them.

It had to work that the story be told on and on and the people hand the scene on to the next person, as in a relay race. For this concept to work in the look of the film, all had to be "equal", so that the result was one "he" and one "she", as it were. All of the characters should appear to be one, to support the political statement that this fight affects a lot of people similarly.

It was also important that this colour appear in the rooms and on the people and to work with what was there. So as to merely strengthen what is already available and maintain the individuality of the apartments. *The 727 days without Karamo* is kept in shades of yellow, because there was a lot of yellow there already. Related colours such as orange, red, purple, green and white were allowed. In Susanna Buchacher's scene (she reads the letter out allowed) the orange wall carpet was in the bedroom already. We may have exchanged one or two pillows, but it was pretty much the way it looked. At the Herrera's (that's the young couple in front of the wall with the yellow words) it was already bright yellow and green. They wrote the words on the walls just before we shot and, for me, also in yellow.

**The protagonists always tell their stories in whispers or on the phone, off-camera or in direct conversation. Having the voices varied and displaced is a key element in your documentary films. Why do you choose to give the voice a leading role?**

It's literally a matter of speaking „with one voice“. It's important to lay the stories bare and to be able to divide who is telling what, so that the structure of the story is revealed. That is important, because I wanted to show how laws change a collective lifestyle and how personal stories are standardized. The only reason that can happen, is because there are those laws.

I always already knew the stories that people were telling and we brought them together "into one form". I would set the beginning for them like, "It was a beautiful day in August" or "it was raining". Here again: a symbolisation and stringency of the conditions, a concrete translation. The situations are then set into the film as building blocks. The words and stories all come from the people and are experienced by all of them. And this power and honesty can be felt.

The result is a rap and rhythm, a beat that should reflect the beat given by of the regulations. The hammer that hits you on the head in the morning.

In this way, the words and stories allow for an increase in the pressure the people are exposed to. What sort of income must one have, which German courses and in what order. Regulation upon regulation. Through the listing alone, and the fact that this list seems to have no end, one is made aware of the invincibility of regulatory obstacles and challenges. And so the film ends with a breakup, because they did not know each other that well when they got married and the external pressure destroyed the young couple's happiness.

**Colours, voices and the interplay between on and off-camera voices are strong independent elements, which combine to make a complex mosaic. The same goes for sound design and music. What were your ideas and requirements for these levels of sound?**

The sound and music should dance together, meander into one another, mix with the image. The requirement for the sound was that it should be as smooth as the picture. And for the sound design we invented elements where the sounds grow out of the picture and becomes a tune. It's also simply a lot of fun when the sewing machine grows melodiously out of the picture. I also wanted this pulse to further exacerbate the pulse of atrocities.

*The 727 Days Without Karamo* has a very strong compositional, musical character. How much of this narrative-style occurs in the script and how much in the editing suite?

First I write the screenplay based on situations that are told to me or that I see. That I imagine. I visit the people at home, they show me their daily lives, tell me their stories. Susanne Ceesay whose husband has been gone for about 2 years, told me that she practices maths with their children in the afternoons. So I had the idea to combine the two, to make it part of the homework to calculate the 727 days. I work out a concept. For me this phase is the most creative and artistic because the aim is to structure the narrative in concrete situations and images and create something new. The people need to be willing to go with me on this - and a foundation of trust develops. This way things can also happen spontaneously on set.

This means everything was built in advance. At the editing table we rejected everything once again because if one building block is removed the whole house of cards collapses. I had a great editor, Petra Zöpnek who went through this long period with me. We started from scratch. We didn't even know whether the stories and couples would intertwine, this is how we started, or build up one after the other, this is how we ended. It's a constant thinking-through and discarding process.

The film typifies that this system affects many, many people. I also want to show how strong these people are to fight so courageously against this system. Everyone really enjoyed participating, as it was a big concern of theirs to describe their situation through their suffering. *The 727 Days Without Karamo* is a plea against this immigration law. A plea for free love.