

SCARS PUTSCH

PRESSKIT

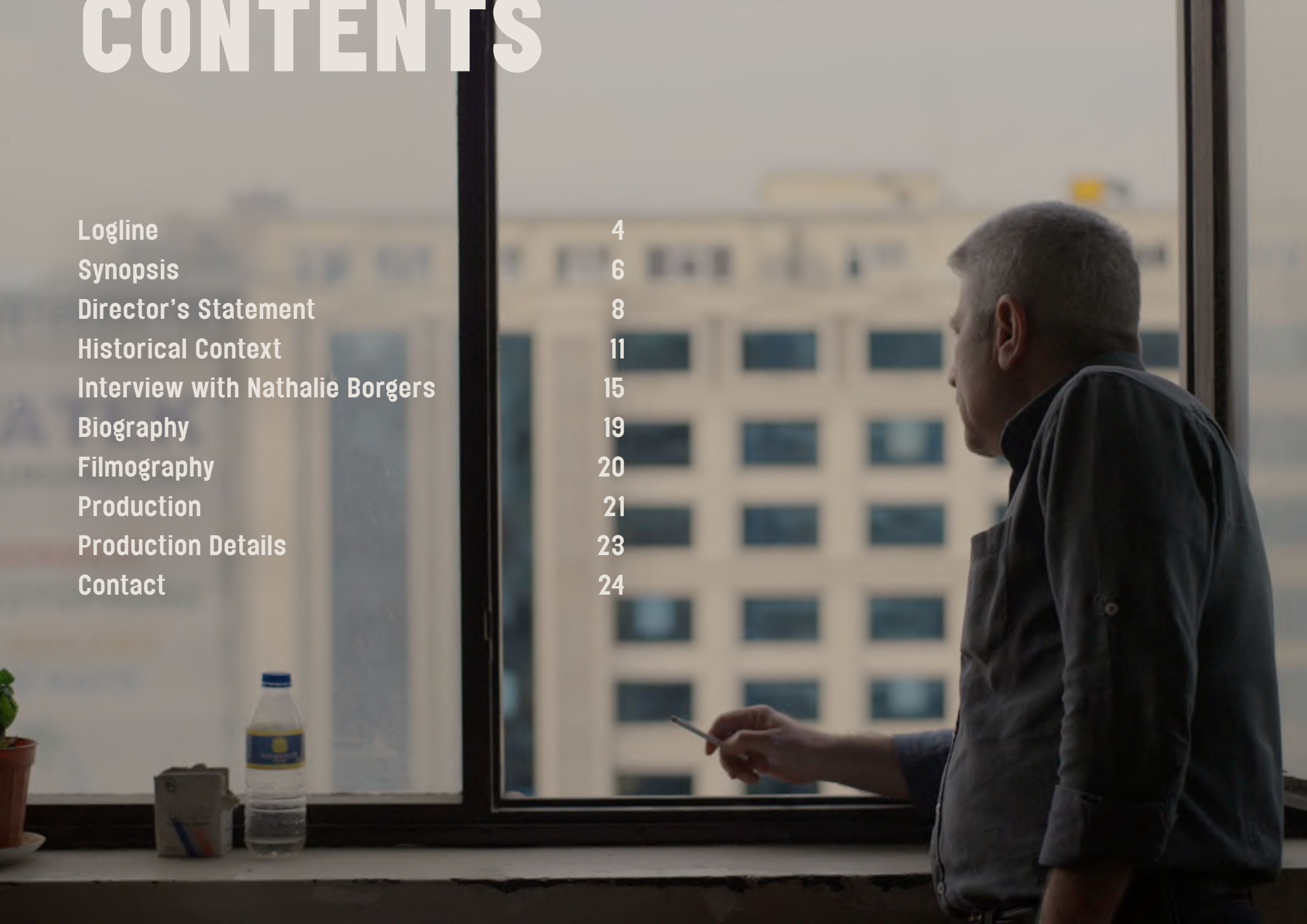


75th Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
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CONTENTS

Logline	4
Synopsis	6
Director's Statement	8
Historical Context	11
Interview with Nathalie Borgers	15
Biography	19
Filmography	20
Production	21
Production Details	23
Contact	24



LOGLINE

The director's personal quest behind the scars on the body of her husband Abidin, a Turkish revolutionary of the 70s: The military coup of September 12, 1980, the end of the dream of a democracy in Turkey, the rise of political Islam.

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SYNOPSIS

On September 12, 1980, Turkish army tanks invaded Anatolia and General Kenan Evren seized power. It was the third military coup in 20 years, but it was the hardest and most violent, and the one that left the deepest mark on Turkish society. For the left, this putsch was a fatal blow.

Abidin, the director's husband, was a revolutionary in the 1970s. He fled Turkey for Vienna after the military putsch. Some of his comrades managed to escape like him, and rebuilt their lives in exile, but most were arrested, tortured and spent years in prison.

At that time, Western powers wanted to believe in Turkey's positive development as a bulwark against the USSR and went so far as to support the Islamic brotherhoods. On the contrary, they did not condemn the coup d'état, its human rights violations and the liberticidal constitution drawn up by the generals. Economic and geostrategic goals were more important. Today, these same powers are astonished that Turkey has turned away from democratic ideas and towards political Islam.

This film tells the story behind the 1980 military putsch and the transformation of Turkish society in the form of a personal quest that begins with the scars on Abidin's body: the scars of six bullets fired at

point-blank range by a fascist militia. The wounds on his body have healed, but they still haunt him today. To understand what's hidden behind them, the director (a Belgian woman) searches for traces of "her husband's" Turkey, the one he grew up in, the one he fought for, and the one that is crumbling before his eyes. She wants to know how the putsch "operated", how political Islam came to power in his country. Because these wounds are not just his own, they are those of an entire country.

This quest goes back and forth between Vienna and Ankara. On her journey, the director meets her husband's family and former friends in the struggle, women and men who fought for social justice and democracy. It also takes her to communities, places and landscapes, symbolically charged and marked by the country's transformation, as well as in the archives.

Little by little, this largely unknown page of Turkish history emerges in the form of a journey into the world of the man the director has been living with for 15 years, yet whose past she knew little about.



K. Bektaşköy
Erenköy
Bostancı
D-100
↓

Atasehir
Barbaros
Yenisahra
↗

Çınar Berk

BİÇERDÜBÜMÜS

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Nathalie Borgers

In 2008, I met my future husband, Abidin, a Turk who had fled to Austria thirty years earlier, after the coup in 1980. Although he seemed firmly rooted in his host country, Turkey would not let him go. He was concerned about the future of his homeland, hoped that his country would turn towards democratic values and saw how it was moving further away from this every day.

In the 1970s, Abidin was part of the student movement that wanted to shape Turkey into a free and democratic country in which social justice prevailed. His activities as an opposition activist led to him being shot by a far-right militia. As he fell to the ground, one of his attackers stepped close to him to kill him with six more bullets at close range. But Abidin survived. He resumed the fight after his convalescence until the military coup on September 12, 1980 put an end to the dream of an entire generation.

I didn't know much about the political complexity of his country. I had images of Turkey in my mind's eye of the banks of the Bosphorus, the sweetness of life in the shade of olive trees and the scents of the Orient. Turkey appeared to me as a secular nation with a diverse natural beauty and a fascinating cultural richness.

“Europeans had fallen into the Islamists’ trap. Today, they watch in amazement at the authoritarian drift of Turkey into a country with an ultra-liberal economy.”

In 2008, when Abidin and I met, Erdogan was prime minister and the Western world wanted to see him as the man who would create the synthesis between Islam and democracy. But Abidin was more aware than anyone else of the authoritarian tendencies of the Turkish state and the inevitable regression that a political project like this could mean: “Political Islam as such is an overall project that regulates society as a whole, and its application in politics naturally leads to a totalitarian state.” He raged against the Europeans who supported the prime minister instead of helping an opposition that had been suppressed for years.

Europeans had fallen into the Islamists' trap. Today, they watch in amazement at the authoritarian drift of Turkey into a country with an ultra-liberal economy. An economy that solely serves the interests of a grateful oligarchy whose power is based on the influence of radical Islam. Supported by this, Erdogan sees himself in the role of an international spiritual leader. His religious conservatism has become a strong mobilizing force, and his "neo-Ottoman" foreign policy is opening up spheres of influence in the former territories of the Ottoman Empire, especially in the Middle East.

For Abidin and his fellow fighters at the time, the decline of Turkey began after the coup of September 12, 1980, when the junta laid the foundations for political Islam and prepared the ideological ground for a man like Erdogan. This is not just Abidin's subjective personal feeling. Turkish historians agree on this point, and I am always amazed at the ignorance of Europeans towards the countries of the Middle East, especially Turkey. I do not exclude myself from this. And that in view of the hundreds of thousands of Turks who have become our citizens or neighbors. I have realized how little I knew about the life of my husband, this former "revolutionary", even though we had been married for ten years.

“I am always amazed at the ignorance of Europeans towards the countries of the Middle East, especially Turkey. I do not exclude myself from this. ”

This film has offered me the rare and special opportunity to experience and present a great European history through the personal story of Abidin's life. It was my desire to understand the process that brought Turkey to where it is today and to find meaning in the scars that cover my husband's body. After 45 years of ignorance, it was time to connect the threads of the great story, break the silence and look back at this fundamental event that had been forgotten.

FAŞİST CUNTA
VE
ANAYASASINA
HAYIR



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2025 marks the 45th anniversary of the military coup in Turkey on September 12, 1980. Few newspapers have so far taken an interest in its significance. And yet this event is an essential key to understanding the development of today's Turkey. This military coup marked a break with the country's contemporary history and fundamentally changed the Turkish state apparatus. It ushered in a new political, economic and social era that is still ongoing four decades later.

The military junta used extraordinary force to close down opposition parties and media outlets, banned trade unions, arrested hundreds of thousands of people and systematically tortured left-wing activists. In this way, the infrastructure that could ultimately have led to a European-style social democracy was nipped in the bud. General Kenan Evren was freed from all opposition and drew up a new constitution, which he described as democratic, but which in reality established an authoritarian and autocratic regime. The apparent basic freedoms were conditional on not endangering the state – only to be judged by the state itself.

This constitution is still the basis of the Turkish government today. President Erdogan can therefore describe any criticism of his policies as an attack on the integrity of the state and have suspects imprisoned without trial. The situation in the country is dramatic in this

respect: all leaders and representatives of the only opposition party, the HDP, are in prison or in exile despite having been democratically elected. The same applies to all critical voices, whether academics, journalists, lawyers, representatives of chambers of commerce or trade unionists.

At that time, the Turkish army, which remained in power from 1980 to 1983, not only eliminated the opposition, but also ensured both the liberalization of the country's economy and the Islamization of society. After the country was plunged into terror through bloody repression, the junta was able to implement the measures for the "neoliberalization" of the country that the International Monetary Fund had wanted for decades. These measures consisted of massive privatizations, wage cuts, eradication of workers' rights, cuts in public spending on education and health, etc. To this end, the junta sought support from the country's most conservative forces, including religious brotherhoods, which were subsequently even legalized. In addition, the new constitution enshrined the obligation of Sunni Muslim religious education in elementary school. This was in line with America's "green belt" policy to fight communism by supporting political Islam in border countries with the USSR.

It is striking that little was said at the time about the real reasons for this coup and its consequences. In fact, the Western countries were satisfied with the coup. Meanwhile, in a particularly tense international context – after the Iranian revolution and the USSR’s invasion of Afghanistan – the alliance could only reassure the takeover of an authoritarian and pro-American regime in Turkey, which guaranteed the protection of the West’s interests from turbulence. The coup was even prepared with the help of NATO. The public was told that only the army could free the country from the violence between “radical leftists” and extreme right-wing militias, who also clashed in street battles. The coup of September 12, 1980 was thus justified and the army was presented as the sole guarantor of the republic.

The official discourse, including all literature and press articles on the coup at the time, placed the various opposing groups on the same level. However, nothing could be further from the truth. The situation at the origin of the junta’s intervention might have degenerated into a “street war” between opposing factions. This was because the far-right militias instrumentalized by the authorities had begun to systematically kill the regime’s left-wing opponents from 1975 onwards. Only in recent years has it been possible to investigate how these events actually took place. The research now confirms their accuracy. The book “La violence politique en Turquie. L’État

en jeu, 1975 – 1980” (“Political Violence in Turkey. The State in Action, 1975 – 1980”, 2014) by political scientist Benjamin Gourisse, for example, provides evidence that the two groups involved did not have access to the same resources or measures. One group was supported and coordinated by the MHP, an ultranationalist party in power at the time, while the other was deprived of any access to government and state authorities. This difference in scale calls into question both the type and nature of the violence that led to the coup and the coup itself – especially as the ideological connectivity between the far-right militias and the officers behind the coup is now beyond doubt.

It is also surprising that Turkey has never done collective memory work on its authoritarian past, as was and still is the case in Argentina, Chile or Poland, or even closer, in Germany. But even if the approach is still very marginal, some people are trying to document the 1980s today.

For example, the Turkish-German sociologist Elifcan Karacan, daughter of left-wing activists who had to flee the country at the time, collected memories of the victims of the coup about their years in prison and their torture. She published her study in 2018. (Remembering the Turkish military coup of 1980: memory, violence and trauma).

Scars of a Putsch was born in the context of remembrance work and at a time when the rise of repression and the increasingly blatant Islamization of Turkey forces us to look to the past in order to understand the situation today.

For the consequences of the coup, especially the “re-Islamization” of the country and the strengthening of nationalist ideology, which began on the first day of the military junta's seizure of power in 1980, led to a social dichotomy between ultra-nationalists and supporters of democracy, which today are even playing out in Turkish communities on European territory.

Nathalie Borgers

Translation: Leonie Wieser



INTERVIEW

Nathalie Borgers

You start the film with a close-up of your husband's upper body. The camera, which refocuses time and again, searches for scars that are barely visible but conceal within them the history of a man and an entire country. Were these scars a taboo which prompted you to set off in search of the explanations behind them?

There wasn't a taboo. Abidin told me about it when we first met. He personally put these events behind him long ago. And I must say I was very happy to meet a man who existed completely in the present and was content with his life. I'm ten years younger than him, and as a 16-year-old in Belgium I'd heard virtually nothing about the military coup in Turkey. In any case, we haven't based our relationship on these political experiences. In 2008/2010, Turkey was in turmoil. Abidin said at the time that political Islam and democracy were completely incompatible. I have gradually appreciated from his analyses, that his assessment of the political situation in his country was correct from a long perspective. When we were confined to the apartment during Covid, he was obsessed with following the Turkish news. The idea grew within me that I didn't really know my husband, and I began to ask questions: Where do these scars come from? What shapes his relationship with Turkey?

Your husband Abidin came to Vienna in January 1981. Can you describe the political background that forced him to leave his home and his family?

Abidin was born in 1954 and began studying at the Middle-Eastern Technical University in Ankara in the early seventies. At that time, it was a stronghold for left-wing and democratic modes of thought. Abidin's university was a particularly active campus. The movement grew stronger and stronger, but from 1975 fascist militias began to appear on the scene, intent on dismantling it step by step. These efforts were supported by the far-right party, which had come to power in a coalition. Representatives of the left-wing movement were shot in the street, people were blackmailed, there were serious bomb incidents which were then blamed on the left. Abidin was wounded by gunfire in 1976. Some sectors of the movement then armed themselves, and a kind of civil war developed on the streets. The military coup didn't take place until 1980, officially to put an end to the civil war. Between 1975 and 1980, however, the attacks of the Grey Wolves on the Left were already preparing the ground for that. In previous years the IMF had called for neoliberal measures, which were successfully resisted for a while by the left-wing movement.

Why did Abidin leave Turkey?

After the coup of September 12, 1980, left-wing political activists had two options: they could either stay and end up in prison, or flee. Abidin knew that if he was caught, there would be no mercy for him; even though he had never been on the front line, he would be imprisoned and tortured. He immediately went into hiding, but he couldn't expect friends and family to hide him in the long run. It was clear that he had to leave. A few months after the coup – just as the Christmas holidays came to an end – he came to Vienna on a guest worker bus.

As well as depicting the consequences of his gunshot wounds, the film also reveals the scars that political developments have left in his family, in his immediate environment and in society. Did you expect this personal story would lead you to such a far-reaching examination of the topic?

The overall social context was very important to me, because I wanted to make it clear that the foundation for the present political situation was laid at that time, when neoliberalism was coupled with a military regime that brought religion into the equation and fostered those two forces in parallel. On another level, I would have liked to explore Abidin's story more, but I couldn't involve many of his family members without putting them in danger. Some couldn't talk at all, while others only wanted to talk about certain topics.

“The overall social context was very important to me, because I wanted to make it clear that the foundation for the present political situation was laid at that time, when neoliberalism was coupled with a military regime that brought religion into the equation and fostered those two forces in parallel.”

During the period when I was developing the film, the situation became more complicated. Simply travelling to some of the places would have been too dangerous. So I had to find a wider spectrum of people to talk to, including some people Abidin didn't know.

Did you become conscious of a discrepancy between your knowledge about the country, rooted in your private connection, and the image formed by external media perceptions?

I came to realize yet again how little we know about politics in other countries. Including me. We have a particular way of thinking, and everything is filtered through it. That keeps us from looking at things from a different perspective. Turkey has a very complicated history. A lot of people don't appreciate the conditions there. We even had

someone in our team who was really surprised that Turkish people could have a modern worldview or wear shirts and sweaters. In SCARS OF A PUTSCH, I wanted to go back and trace the origins of political change. But of course, as a result of talking to Abidin and our Turkish friends, I had a different kind of understanding than the general public here. Simply because I had to ask a lot of questions again and again.

You also portray very moving encounters with women: your sister-in-law Kıvanç, Perihan, the mother of Cahit, an activist who spent eight years in prison, and Yeter Güneş, who escaped the death penalty as a very young woman. What did you find particularly impressive?

The women impressed me a lot. My sister-in-law Kıvanç, and Yeter, are the same age as me, so they were 16 at the time of the putsch, and in the years before that Yeter had been very committed and played a role in the movement, though a small one. What impressed me very much about the women was their personal devotion to social justice and, above all, to gender equality. In conversations with my sister-in-law, I discovered some very fine things about my husband. He loved his "little" sister very much and did a great deal to support her, as the youngest in the family. It was touching to learn how he took care of her, and to see how women supported their sons:

Cahit's mother, for example, shared her sons' political ideas even though she was afraid that they might lose their lives for a political struggle. She persevered and always thought it was important.

During the course of your work, did you sense in this generation of activists a desire for amends to be made, or at least for history to do justice to those times?

These people, who have suffered so much, lost loved ones and survived years of prison and torture, have also seen themselves lumped together with all opposition movements and labeled as terrorists. The people who campaigned for democratic causes back in the seventies have never been recognized for the positive results of their commitment. On a broader level, the chapter is not closed when the opponents of the democracy movement are still in power. The fact that so much was taken from them, simply because they fought for a humanistic ideal that harms nobody, is a huge wound.

“I have two main aims in my films: that the audience should develop an understanding of other people’s experiences and the context in which they took place, and that the protagonists’ traumatic experiences should not be forgotten.”

SCARS OF A PUTSCH establishes a connection with your last work, “The Remains – After the Odyssey”, and underlines your deep concern with the importance of memory work. What brings you back to this topic?

I have never consciously seen it like that. But actually, my next work also deals with a topic in the past. I believe that if the past isn’t processed, it will continue to affect future generations. The more you try to push it away, the stronger it comes back elsewhere. What concerns me are people’s traumatic experiences and the question of how they deal with them. “The Remains – After the Odyssey” isn’t essentially about the Assad regime in Syria; it’s about the fate of the refugees who emerge as a direct consequence.

These people are a plaything of politics, they count for absolutely nothing with the political decision-makers, but they have to live with their plight – and so do the next generations.

Your films contribute to the task of coming to terms with trauma. At a far more fundamental level, though, you give visibility and existence to events and personal fates. It is a work that combats disappearance.

People who see my films can develop a sense of the experiences of people they don’t know. And maybe they know someone like a person from my film. I have two main aims in my films: that the audience should develop an understanding of other people’s experiences and the context in which they took place, and that the protagonists’ traumatic experiences should not be forgotten. This is close to my heart, but at the same time, the way I keep returning to a similar basic subject area is very unconscious.

Interview: Karin Schiefer | AUSTRIAN FILMS
Translation: Charles Osborne
January 2025

BIOGRAPHY

Nathalie Borgers

Nathalie Borgers, born 1964 in Brussels, Belgium. Initially worked as a journalist for Belgian television (RTBF). Moved to San Francisco in 1987, where she studied radio, film and television, receiving the student award for “Documentary Writing”. Completed her M.A. in 1990.

Several short documentaries with Atriom Productions as director and producer. Working as an independent film maker in Paris from 1991.

Since 2011 she lives permanently in Vienna. Since 2020, teaching at the Paris film school LA FEMIS, workshop “Concevoir et écrire un projet documentaire” (developing a documentary project).



FILMOGRAPHY

Nathalie Borgers (selection)

The Remains

2019/Feature Documentary/Direction: Nathalie Borgers

Prizes: Best Documentary, DIAGONALE 2019/Special Jury Prize, Festival International des Films sur les Droits Humains 2019/Documentary award, Women's International Film & Television Showcase 2019

Nominee: Willy Brandt Prize for Freedom and Human Rights 2019/Prix Europa, Potsdam 2019

Catching Haider

2015/Feature Documentary/Script & Direction: Nathalie Borgers

Honourable Mention: DOK.Fest Munich 2015

Greetings from the colony

2011/Feature Documentary/Script & Direction: Nathalie Borgers

Prizes: Best Documentary, Hylliwod, International Rwanda Film Festival 2012/Best Documentary, Quintessence, International Rwanda Film Festival 2012/Étoile, SCAM 2012/Prix de la Mémoire, Ecollywood 2012/Special Jury Prize, Festival Lumières d'Afrique, Besançon 2012

Nominee: Magritte du Cinéma, Belgium 2011.

Winds of Sand, Women of Rock

2009/Feature Documentary/Script & Direction: Nathalie Borgers

Prizes: Coup de Cœur, Festival International du Film d'Environnement 2010/Best Film, Watch Docs, Warsaw 2010.

Desperately seeking Belgium

2008/TV-Documentary/Script & Direction: Nathalie Borgers

The Arrangement

2005/TV-Documentary/Script & Direction: Nathalie Borgers

Nominee: Europa Prize, Berlin 2006

Citizen Krone

2002/TV-Documentary/Script & Direction: Nathalie Borgers

Nominierung: Prix Henri Storck, Belgium 2002

Truth under Siege

1994/TV-Documentary/Script & Direction: Nathalie Borgers & Leslie Asako Gladsjo

Prizes: Special Jury Award, Golden Gate Award, San Francisco 1995/First Prize, Buenos Aires International Video Festival 1996

PRODUCTION

MISCHIEF FILMS

Mischief Films is a Vienna-based independent production company, founded by producer Ralph Wieser and award-winning director Georg Misch in 2002. It is our mission to tackle socially significant stories and carefully turn them into memorable documentaries.

Focusing on collaborations with innovative auteurs, we also encourage directors to develop their own distinctive style and support their creative approaches from unique angles. Ambitious to reach a wide and heterogeneous audience, our films are screened around the world – whether on TV, in cinemas or on renowned festivals.

Many of our films are international co-productions with Arte, ORF, WDR, SWR, BBC and Channel 4 as well as the US-American film fund ITVS. Our films have won prestigious awards such as the Vienna Film Award, Hot Docs Toronto, Visions du Réel Nyon, Cinéma du Réel Paris.

Mischief Films is member of the Austrian Documentary Association dok.at, Documentary Association of Europe DAE and the Austrian Producers Alliance Die Produzent*innen. Ralph Wieser is member of the European Film Academy and the Austrian Film Academy. Recent films include Henry Fonda for President (Berlinale Forum 2024), I'm not everything I want to be (Berlinale Panorama 2024), Wishing on a Star (Venice Orizzonti 2024), Spheres (Karlovy Vary 2024) and Personale (IDFA 2024).

mischief-films.com

NOVAK PROD

Novak Prod is a Brussels-based independent production company founded in 2001, with more than 50 films completed, most of them being Pan-European co-productions internationally acclaimed. Our goal is to develop and produce films - including fiction, documentaries, animation, and series - that reflect the strong and engaged perspectives of their authors and directors while carrying a unique cinematic vision.

Our mission is to bring audiences films in all their diversity that are both accessible and artistically ambitious. Very open to collaboration, we are interested in projects from around the world, with a particular focus on emerging authors and directors. Novak is Member of Eurodoc, Ace and the UPFF+. Recent films include L'EMPIRE by Bruno Dumont (Silver Bear Berlinale 2024), CONANN by Bertrand Mandico (Directors' Fortnight selection – Cannes 2023), NATURAL LIGHT by Dénes Nagy (Silver Bear for Best Director Berlinale 2021).

novakprod.be



PRODUCTION DETAILS

Scars of a Putsch, AT/BE 2025, 102 min

Tech Specs

Shooting format	Digital
Video aspect ratio	1:42 (flat)
Master	2K
Copy format	DCP
Sound	Dolby 5.1
Subtitles	GER, EN, FR, TR

Crew

Written and Directed by	Nathalie Borgers
Cinematography	Klemens Koscher
Second Camera	Johannes Hammel
Sound	Ibrahim Kahraman, Tong Zhang
Editing	Rudi Maerten
Assistant of Director	Derya Satir
Line Producer	Susanne Berger
Design	Christian Thomas Brand Inspiration e.U.
Producers	Ralph Wieser, Olivier Dubois

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www.mischief-films.com/films/scars-of-a-putsch



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Austrian Press

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A woman with long, wavy brown hair is shown from the chest up, wearing a light blue button-down shirt over a black top. She has her right hand pressed against her face, covering her eyes and forehead, suggesting a state of distress or grief. The background is a blurred office or hallway with a blue door and some papers on the wall.

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