



a film by SANDRA WOLLNER

# THE TROUBLE WITH BEING BORN



# THE TROUBLE WITH BEING BORN

Austria/Germany 2020 | 94 Min | German with subtitles | 4:3 | Dolby 5.1



## Cast

Lena Watson  
Dominik Warta  
Ingrid Burkhard  
Jana McKinnon  
Simon Hatzl

**Directed by** Sandra Wollner

**Written by** Sandra Wollner, Roderick Warich

**Cinematography:** Timm Kröger

**Editing:** Hannes Bruun

**VFX Supervisor:** Matthias Halibrand

**Original Music:** David Schweighart, Peter Kutin

**Sound Design:** Peter Kutin

**SFX Make-Up:** Gaby Grünwald

**Production Design:** Pia Jaros

**Commissioning Editor/ZDF:** Burkhard Althoff

**Co-Producers:** Andi G Hess, Astrid Schäfer,  
Viktoria Stolpe, Timm Kröger

**Producers:** Lixi Frank, David Bohun

## Production Company

PANAMA Film KG  
Geusaugasse 31/4  
1030 Vienna, Austria

## Co-production

THE BARRICADES  
Werbellinstr. 59, 12053 Berlin, Germany

## ZDF / Das kleine Fernsehspiel

ZDF-Straße 1, 55127 Mainz, Germany

## Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg

Akademiefhof 10, 71638 Ludwigsburg, Germany

## Supported by

Bundeskanzleramt – Innovative Film  
ORF Film/Fernsehabskommen  
Cine Art Steiermark  
Land Niederösterreich  
Stadt Wien Kultur MA 7  
SKE / austro mechana

## International Press

Gloria Zerbinati  
+33 7 86 80 02 82  
gloria.zerbinati@gmail.com

## World Sales

CERCAMON  
Sebastien Chesneau, sebastien@cercamon.biz, +33 6 21 71 39 11  
Karina Korenblum, karina@cercamon.biz, + 420 603 880 048  
Dorian Magagnin, dorian@cercamon.biz, +336 83 94 34 66

## Download Press-kit, photos & clips

[www.cercamon.biz](http://www.cercamon.biz)



**“I’ve always been there for the rest of our lives. A hundred and a half hour ago.”**

*christmas song  
written by A.I.*



# Synopsis

**Elli is an android and lives with a man she calls her father. Together they drift through the summer. During the day they swim in the pool and at night he takes her to bed. She shares his memories and anything else he programs her to recall. Memories that mean everything to him but nothing to her. Yet, one night she sets off into the woods following a fading echo. The story of a machine and the ghosts we all carry within us.**

# Press Review

Sandra Wollner's ability to work with time and space, with image and sound, is simply extraordinary. If she continues on this level, one day the Berlinale will be proud to say that they discovered a new star of world cinema.

Bert Rebhandl, **Frankfurter Allgemeine**

Berlin Hidden Gem

Alex Ritman, **Hollywood**  
REPORTER

"What have I just seen?" is a question you won't be able to shake off any time soon.

Ekkehard Knörer, **die tageszeitung**

Unsettling as any sci-fi tale should be.

Carlo Chatrian, 

Possibly the best film of the Berlinale [...]

Rüdiger Suchsland, **artechock**  
FILEMAGAZIN

A small sensation: a brave, polarising, blend of drama, horror, science-fiction and psychological thriller – that simply cannot be pinned down to one genre. With incredible elegance, the film shows us what we want to reject – in a way we haven't seen for a very long time.

Annett Scheffel, **Süddeutsche Zeitung**

This film - the highlight of the Encounters Competition - shows a director, who (with only her second feature film) enters a much bolder territory than most German-speaking directors are able to.

Hannah Pilarczyk, **DER SPIEGEL**

Artificial intelligence has never felt as brutalising as it does in this second feature by Austrian filmmaker Sandra Wollner.

Ela Bittencourt, **Sight&Sound**

A great director is born.

**Film**tv

[...] the director joins the pantheon of uncompromisingly intellectual Austrian formalists like Ulrich Seidl and Michael Haneke. But in terms of daring, Wollner may even outstrip her countrymen: Her film's eerie, glassy surface conceals deep cuts into ontology, memory, identity and our increasingly boundary-obliterating relationship to tech. [...]

Jessica Kiang, **VARIETY**



# Director's Note

An android in the body of a girl looks at the world - and the world looks back. This android doesn't care for what purpose it was built, whether it spends its life as an appliance in the corner or as a companion. It is an object. It does not wish to be human, it only wants what it is programmed to want. It follows external stimuli and looks for pre-defined patterns - nothing else seems to matter. This object does not need a reason to exist. It simply is.

The creature in this film very much represents an idea of the future, and in this sense it is more of a fable character than an actual depiction of technical reality. It becomes a mirror for our innermost desires, even the ones that would normally remain hidden. Within it, the most unbearable ambiguities can co-exist - and they do. Every dialogue with it remains a monologue, and that very fact reminds us of the boundaries of our own existence, our fundamental isolation, our own virtuality, as it were. It is merely a container - a container for our memories and our imaginations which mean everything to us, but nothing to this creature.

The strange overlap of memories and imagination is a theme that has been following me since my last film *The Impossible Picture*. Memory as the identity-defining narrative that keeps us from drowning in the chaos of meaninglessness. Memory as programming, human narration as the very foundation of our

existence. Everything has a beginning and an end - the myth of individuation that also seems to dominate cinema since its inception. In contrast, a machine's existence is something fundamentally eternal in its potential - suggesting, to me, an altogether different kind of narrative.

I find the concept of eternity unsettling. It's hard to imagine such a thing. One way to even attempt to grasp it could be to imagine a moment in time as "now" and "now" and "now" - or, say, to repeat a word, over and over, so many times that it begins to lose its meaning - and you start to get lost in it.

To get lost, as if entering a strange reverie, in which causal principles cease to function, which remains inexplicable, slowly pulling you into its chaotic depths - that, for me, is a potential of cinema: to deliver an experience not unlike those we have in our dreams, riddled with contradictions, voids and dark echos.

I am fascinated by what is hidden behind the structure of reality (that structure which is, in essence, a human fiction; a fiction that we seem to need in order to live our lives). The creature in this film has no need for such a fiction. It was never born, it will never ask about its origins or the origin of the world, and it needs no end and no beginning. And all external signs we

attribute to it - gender, age, affection and identity - remain arbitrary and fleeting.

THE TROUBLE WITH BEING BORN is not a film about artificial intelligence, but about a container - a kind of echo, a flicker of fading meanings and attachments - and about the people who seem to get entangled in their memories, unknowingly having become the ghosts of their own stories. I suppose they are the ghosts we have always been.

*Sandra Wollner*



# Interview

*The title of the film, THE TROUBLE WITH BEING BORN, immediately throws up a certain line of questioning. What kind of squabble with our existence is at the root of this, your second feature film – perhaps of your film-making in general?*

**SANDRA WOLLNER:** Squabble is good. That alleviates the tragedy a little. We live in a world which appears relatively structured and organized in terms of meanings, but at the same time I feel it's possible to sense the chaos behind that. In a way, you can sense how fragile this reality is. Maybe I can illustrate that with an example. If I repeat the word "Marille" 500 times, it loses all meaning. There is a brief moment when you lose your bearings, and everything collapses into pre-linguistic chaos. The people in the film are marked by this feeling. The vague suspicion that this world, in essence, is anything but organized, and perhaps only appears to be so in our perception.

*Gradually android robots are starting to play a role in human existence, even when a robot like that in THE TROUBLE WITH BEING BORN is still a dream of the future. Was the android robot in itself the central topos that provided you with an impetus to start writing?*

**SANDRA WOLLNER:** The idea of making a film about a childlike android came originally from Roderick Warich, with

whom I wrote the screenplay. I was initially working on a different story, where a girl increasingly has the feeling she doesn't see the world the way it really is. She develops the desire to move away from her own viewpoint, a human viewpoint. The desire to see the world the way it is, without evaluating it, and instead simply just to be. Essentially, like an object. When I look back now on the process that gave rise to THE TROUBLE WITH BEING BORN, I realize that's why the idea appealed to me so much: because the robot girl represents the vessel I had been looking for previously.

*To what extent were you also interested in debating the isolation of the individual in this film?*

**SANDRA WOLLNER:** I was interested in the virtuality of our own reality, i.e. the structures that organize reality. To what extent are we always merely conversing with the persona of another person? To what extent can we really step out of ourselves and actually see the world as it is? Or is it just the appearance of this world? That's the crucial question driving me: how virtual is our own reality? The people in this film very much want a genuine opposite number, but really they're just looking into a mirror. Consequently every conversation with this robot remains a monologue at first, which forces them back on their

own isolation, their own virtuality. After all, our human experience is characterized by a self, an awareness, which is what actually makes us thinking beings in the first place. It is by means of this self that we separate ourselves, consciously to some extent, from the world. So essentially we are always fighting this isolation.

*Even in your first film, The Impossible Picture, loss and decay, disappearance and memory – as well as the desire to hold on – played a crucial role. Do you regard THE TROUBLE WITH BEING BORN as a fictional narrative or more as an essay about loss, memory, desire and longing? Would it be accurate to locate your work in films at this interface?*

**SANDRA WOLLNER:** I have the feeling that the kind of cinema which interests me at the moment is located at this interface between narrative patterns and subjective moments of observation. It seems to me that the majority of contemporary art, apart from film and literature, doesn't subjugate itself to these narrative conventions – and perhaps even deliberately rejects them. That is also decisive in my work. I notice in my own artistic environment a powerful desire to unify these phenomena. To make a kind of metaphysical film which, however, also tells a story. The need for narrative and the radical, subjective observation of an issue are of equal value here.

*Is the image, or the medium of film itself, more like a means for you to make contact with this pre-linguistic level?*

**SANDRA WOLLNER:** That's an aspect of the cinema which interests me, yes. The return to pre-consciousness: cinema as dream. A cinema where voids are also possible, along with dark echoes and narrations that dissolve – just like a dream, in fact. In this case, a very curious one.

*To what extent are you also concerned with applying a vision of the future to the present?*

**SANDRA WOLLNER:** It was important to me from the very start that the film should not be located in a sci-fi setting, because the issues addressed by the film have essentially been anchored in our everyday present for a long time. I think the term fairytale is quite appropriate for this film. Kubrick's idea for A.I., for example, essentially refers back to Pinocchio, and the film tells the story of becoming human. Actually, I wanted to do precisely the opposite, but nevertheless the themes and characters in the film are archetypical. The people there remain outer shells, to a certain extent, never becoming completely genuine. It's only by means of the androids, which serve as receptacles for their memories and concepts, that they attain clear delineation. And the robot itself is, in the final analysis,

more my idea of robot than an illustration of a technical reality.

*In the middle of the film a turning point arises which causes us to lose sight of the first two protagonists. Are you also interested here in pursuing the motif of loss on a formal level?*

**SANDRA WOLLNER:** Definitely. I wanted to show a very human android which at first only reveals in isolated moments that it's actually a machine. So when we are observing this being, we can't avoid humanizing it. It's only with the loss of the characters and the derailment of the narration that I was able to indicate a non-human perspective. As viewers of the film we have a wish to see the narrative ended; we want to know what happens next. But since it's only the way this robot girl has been programmed, what happens next is completely irrelevant. She doesn't attach any meaning whatsoever to the content or to her own fate. One program is deleted, and something else continues instead. I found that fascinating in formal terms.

*A disturbing feature of the first half of THE TROUBLE WITH BEING BORN is the ambiguity of the father figure, where the sense of grief and loss about the disappearance of his daughter and sexual desire for her (or another underage girl) achieve an interlocking independence. Another possible view is that he is able to program in one single robot memories of his*

*daughter and his sexual desires which were triggered by her. The ambivalence remains. Why do you play with these aspects?*

**SANDRA WOLLNER:** First of all, it's in principle just like Vertigo: a man attempts to bring the object of his desire back to reality – which is in itself of course a problematic topos. In my film a man has already brought the object of his desire back to reality and can shape it entirely according to his own wishes. On the one hand this desire is reasonable, because it's dictated by loss and grief concerning a real person, while on the other hand it is unreasonable – far more dynamic than desire alone, because he wants to live out his sexual fantasies. I found it interesting that both exist at the same time and can also be lived out simultaneously in this virtual being. The bizarre aspect is that it doesn't make any difference at all to this being: it even says it's pleased, because that's what it's been programmed for. It's unbearable for us, but it's a matter of complete indifference to the robot. Personally, I find the idea incomprehensible, offensive. But it doesn't matter at all to that object. And of course that is a provocation for us. A challenge which essentially throws us back on our human condition.

*The idea of telling a story with an android robot entails a technical challenge for the production. What can you tell us about the genesis and implementation of this idea in technical terms?*

**SANDRA WOLLNER:** For a very long time I worked on the assumption that Jana McKinnon, who I've worked with in the past, would play the robot girl. Jana is a fantastic actress, and the preliminary work and conversations with her were essential for this film. But at some point I simply realized that I had to work with a much younger girl for this material. Actually, that did occur to me right at the beginning, but I suppose I was just afraid of going through with it and creating that image. Could I do that? Was it permissible to do so? It took a while before I could answer that question in the affirmative. And then with Lena Watson we found our actress, and she simply slipped into the role of the android. It wasn't an easy task. And the whole thing was only possible because of the incredible support from her parents, with whom we had a number of honest and fundamental conversations; they were present during filming.

*Does THE TROUBLE WITH BEING BORN, and your film work as a whole, occupy a space between what slips away from us, impossible to hold onto, and what won't let go of us all through our lives, dictating those lives?*

**SANDRA WOLLNER:** The way memories and ideas are superimposed on one another is a subject that accompanied me on my last film: memory as the narrative that provides meaning and identity, without which we would sink into meaningless

chaos. Memory as programming, narration as the fundamental basis of human existence. Everything has a beginning and an end: the myth of self-fulfillment, which after all is also dominant in the cinema. In opposition to that is the fundamental endlessness of a machine's existence, with its narration that can't be immediately comprehended. I find that fascinating.



# Sandra Wollner

Born in 1983 in Styria, Austria.

For her first feature film THE IMPOSSIBLE PICTURE she received the German Film Critics' Award in 2019.

THE TROUBLE WITH BEING BORN is her graduation film at the Film Academy Baden-Wuerttemberg.

## Filmography

### THE TROUBLE WITH BEING BORN

Austria / Germany 2020 | Feature Film | 94 Min.

PANAMA Film

In co-production with The Barricades,  
ZDF / Das kleine Fernsehspiel  
and Film Academy Baden-Wuerttemberg



Special Jury Award, Encounters Competition,  
Berlinale International Film Festival 2020

Golden Romy for Best Feature Film, Academy Award Romy 2020  
Special Jury Award, Thomas Pluch Script Award 2020

### THE IMPOSSIBLE PICTURE

Germany / Austria 2016 | Feature Film | 70 Min.

Film Academy Baden-Wuerttemberg

German Film Critics' Prize 2019

Sponsorship Award for Film Art 2018

(Award of the National Gallery)

Ingmar Bergman International Debut Ward /

Gothenburg Int. Film Festival 2017

New German Cinema Prize at the 50th Hofer Filmtage

Lawrence Kasdan Award for Best Narrative Film

Best feature film Bolzano Film Festival

### VIKTOR

Germany 2015 | Short Film | 9 Min.

Film Academy Baden-Wuerttemberg / Arte

### LOUIS & LUK

Germany 2014 | Short Film

Film Academy Baden-Wuerttemberg

### WE ARE DOING WELL

Germany 2013 | Short Film | 7 Min.

Film Academy Baden-Wuerttemberg

Diagonale Festival 2014 /

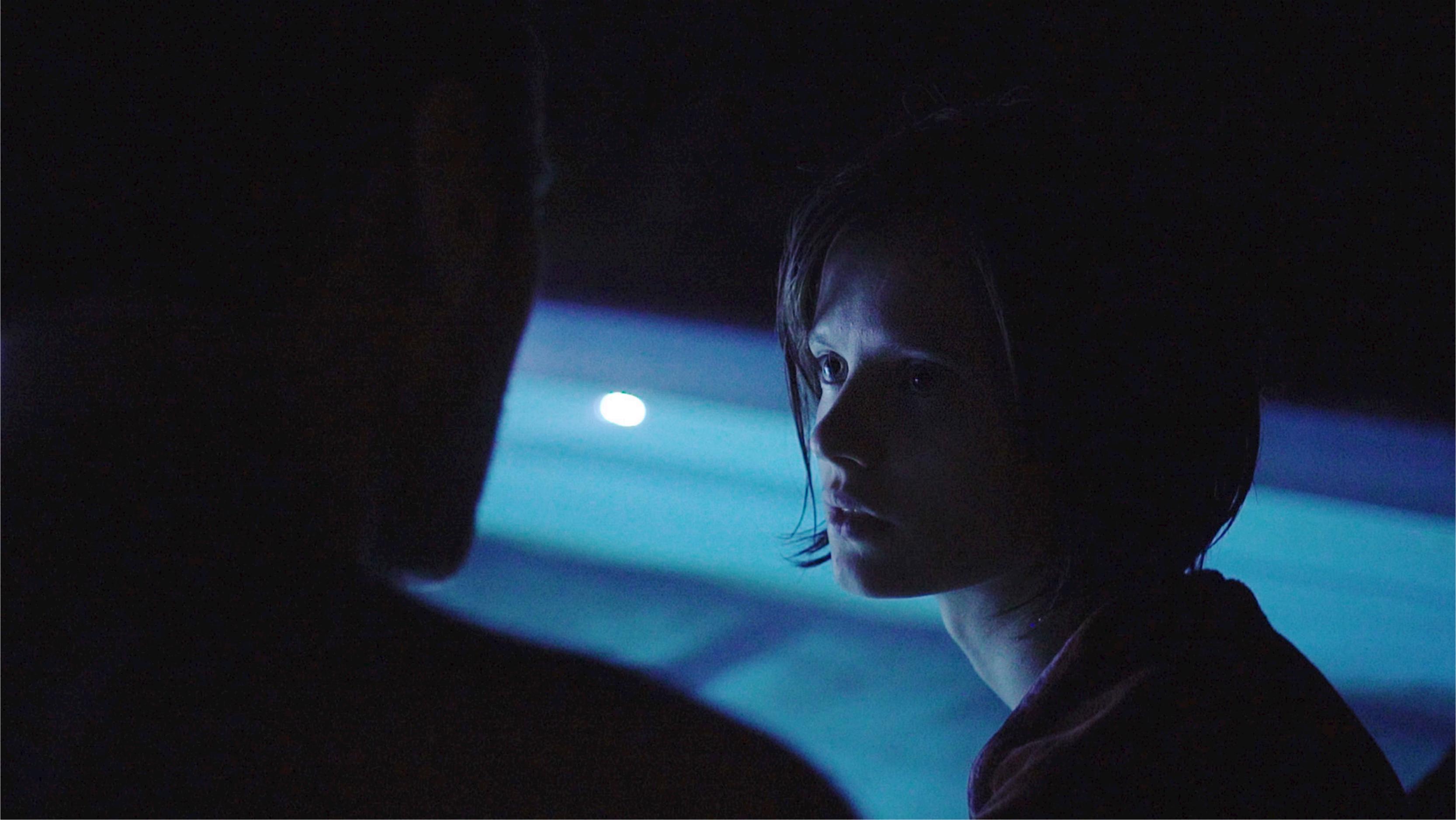
„Prize of the youth jury for the best up-and-coming film“



# Production note on working with an underage actress

We would like to emphasize that the priority while creating this film was to ensure the well-being of our lead actress Lena Watson, who is underage. Lena's parents were on set every day and heavily involved in the project. In preparation for the film and also throughout filming, the girl and her family were regularly and adequately informed about all content in the film. In order to work with Lena and her parents on the topics of the film (death, loneliness, feelings of guilt and also pedophilia) in a child-friendly manner, we worked with a certified sex education specialist for children.

During the shoot, Lena wore a silicone mask and a wig every day, in order to create a resemblance to one of our other actresses. All sensitive images were shot with green screen elements and later composited via VFX. In consultation with her and her parents, Lena has given herself an artist name (based on her great role model Emma Watson) and is only mentioned by the name Lena Watson in all public screenings, announcements and publications regarding the film. With all these measures, Lena's privacy will be protected to the fullest extent.



# PANAMA Film

PANAMA FILM stands for films that give expression and space to challenging questions, lingering observations and lost longings. We work with filmmakers who approach their projects with an individual style while casting an undisguised glance at the world with all its fractures and subtleties. Our productions are sometimes created in collaboration with international production companies that share our enthusiasm for cinema.

Panama Film was founded in 2018 by the two producers Lixi Frank and David Bohun. The creative co-founders are the directors Stefan Bohun and Sebastian Brameshuber, with whom there is a constant artistic exchange.

## Filmography

### THE TROUBLE WITH BEING BORN

Director: Sandra Wollner  
Austria / Germany 2020 | Feature Film | 94 Min.  
In co-production with The Barricades,  
ZDF / Das kleine Fernsehspiel  
and Film Academy Baden-Wuerttemberg



*Special Jury Award, Encounters Competition,  
Berlinale International Film Festival 2020*

*Golden Romy for Best Feature Film, Academy Award Romy 2020  
Special Jury Award, Thomas Pluch Script Award 2020*

### MOVEMENTS OF A NEARBY MOUNTAIN

Director: Sebastian Brameshuber  
Austria 2019 | Documentary | 85 Min.  
In co-production with Mischief Films  
In cooperation with Le Fresnoy – Studio des Arts Contemporains  
*GRAND PRIX Cinéma du Réel 2019, Paris  
3sat-Dokumentarfilmpreis Duisburger Filmwoche  
Open City Award London  
Preis DER POLITISCHE FILM Filmfestival Hamburg  
Wiener Filmpreis – Spezialpreis der Jury  
Diagonale Preis für die Beste Bildgestaltung*

### STAMS

Director: Bernhard Braunstein  
Austria 2021 | Documentary | 90 Min.

### SOLDIERS DON'T CRY

Director: Jannis Lenz  
Austria 2020 | Documentary | 78 Min.



PANAMA FILM

THE BARRICADES

ORF Das kleine  
Fernsehspiel

FILMAKADEMIE  
BADEN-WÜRTTEMBERG

cercamon  
world sales

Bundeskanzleramt

ORF Film/Fernseh-  
Abkommen

Das Land  
Steiermark  
→ Kultur, Europa,  
Außenbeziehungen

KULTUR  
NIEDERÖSTERREICH



WIEN  
KULTUR

