

BACKGROUND

a film by Khaled Abdulwahed

Short Synopsis

A photo camera is cleaned. Click. The shutter works. Bright light. A crackle and hiss in the sound. A broken "Hello?" opens a conversation between Khaled Abdulwahed, a Syrian filmmaker living in Leipzig, and his father in Aleppo. The son reconstructs his father's journey, arriving in the GDR as an exchange student in 1956. His son applies for asylum more than 60 years later as a refugee. The civil war in Syria separates their stories, the film brings them back together and continues them.

script | director | photography | montage

Khaled Abdulwahed

dramaturgy | production

Alex Gerbaulet & Philip Scheffner

assistant director

Amel Alzakout

production manager | researcher

Ayla Güney

produced by

pong film

funded by

Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg

Kulturstiftung des Freistaates Sachsen

Length: 64 minutes

Country: Germany 2023

Format: 2K DCP and ProRes mov | 16:9, 24 fps, 5.1 & Stereo, color & b/w

Language: Arabic and German with English, German, French, Arabic subtitles

World Premiere:

FID International Film Festival Marseille | International Competition 2023

Awards:

- Grand Prix | Int. Competition | FID Marseille 2023

- Young Jury Award | Int. Competition | Filmmaker Festival Milano 2023

Contact

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Festivals 2023:

- FID Marseille
- Pravo Ljudski Film Festival Sarajewo
- Message to Man IFF, St. Petersburg
- Duisburger Filmwoche
- idfa
- DOK Fest Kassel
- RIDM
- Filmmaker Festival Milano

Synopsis

In the beginning there is a camera: Contax F, a GDR brand with the engraving of the Dresden Ernemann tower, produced between 1956 and 1959. It was not allowed to be exported to the West. The lens is unscrewed, blown on with the bellows and wetted with cleaning fluid, the inside is cleaned. The shutter works. This occupation with the apparatus and then with the products of photography opens up a search for traces from the present back to the late 1950s. Syrian filmmaker Khaled Abdulwahed was granted asylum in Germany in 2015 and now lives as an artist in Leipzig. He interviews his father Sadallah in Syria, who left for the GDR as an exchange student in 1956. The conversations from Leipzig to Aleppo and back about this period, the journey to Europe, the language lessons at the Institute for Foreign Studies in Leipzig and the engineering studies in Dresden are wrested from repeatedly interrupted telephone connections. To these sound recordings we see images of the filmmaker retouching and reconstructing two small crumpled black-and-white photographs showing his father as a young man. "Yes, a documentary needs documents," the father says. In his very practical dialogue with the photos, the filmmaker scans, duplicates and assembles the rare images of the father, inserting him into possible and impossible backgrounds. He finds traces of him in archives and is all the more preoccupied with his disappearance: In the telephone conversations, the connection between the two countries becomes increasingly fragile. A historical film discovered during the research about the international exchange students of the time comments on them as "true builders of socialism," and the son thinks he recognizes his father in the enlarged blurred image. He tries in vain to bring the father to Germany, to organize the papers for him, while the war noise in the background of the telephone conversations gets louder and louder. So does the father's cough. The father dies in 2019, and Khaled Abdulwahed continues to work on the film and the photos, and to record his own voice messages. The subtle sound scape – the whirring and buzzing of devices, overlapping snatches of music and noise, a noise that is not just technical – combines with still, often abstract images of local window views, backyards, cityscapes, night skies, industrial landscapes to create the possibilities and impossibilities of a transitory family history.

CV Director

Khaled Abdulwahed, born 1975 in Homs, Syria, lives as an artist, photographer and filmmaker in Leipzig. Since 2011 he has realized numerous video art works as well as experimental documentaries, which have been shown worldwide at festivals as well as in art contexts, and some of which have received multiple awards. His videos BULLET (2011), TUJ (2012) and SLOT IN MEMORY (2013) have been shown a.o. at the Centre Georges Pompidou, the Berlin Art Biennale and on Arte. Since 2015 he has been collaborating with the Berlin based production platform pong film. In 2016, his first feature-length film JELLYFISH about the Syrian civil war was invited to the Berlinale Forum. His current works include the short film BACKYARD (2018), the feature-length documentary film PURPLE SEA (2020) by Amel Alzakout, which Khaled co-directed, and his own second feature-length film BACKGROUND (2023).