

EVOLUTION OF VIOLENCE

A DOCUMENTARY FILM BY FRITZ OFNER



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film



SYNOPSIS

Guatemala. The war ended long ago. Though the people want to forget it, the violence continues, and it has spread throughout the society like cancer. Each day, journalists wait to report on the next murder victim, and a social worker helps the relatives of women who have been killed. The global hunger for cheap resources has been another cause of violence, and a war over bananas has taken on a life of its own. The society suffers from the aftermath of the 36-year civil war. Mass graves are found in the mountains, former rebels mourn their comrades, and a war criminal has nightmares about all the things he's done. Peace continues to elude Guatemala.

CREDITS

A 2011, 77 min, Colour

SCRIPT, DIRECTOR, CINEMATOGRAPHY:
Fritz Ofner

EDITOR:
Karina Ressler, Oliver Neumann

SOUND EDITOR:
Atanas Tcholakov

PRODUCER:
Oliver Neumann

PRODUCTION:
FreibeuterFilm

WAR IN PEACE

BY CORINNA MILBORN

In the first ten minutes of “Evolution of Violence” several murders are shown. One crime scene after another: A young man, a child, a young woman: Nothing but corpses or shapes in body bags behind striped tape are visible. A journalist, after reporting on murders throughout his career, has become a victim himself. Demonstrators for increased public safety turn into a lynch mob. This is too much for the police to handle. The first part of the film is like a news report from Guatemala, a country where murder is an everyday occurrence and rarely results in consequences, a normal part of daily life. The victim's family and friends at the crime scenes cry and wail, while everyone else goes about their job, unimpressed, or looks on indifferently. A mother watching a body being removed must be told to take her children away. She merely moves a few steps to the side, and the youngsters with her continue to stare at the body. The journalist who had just interviewed some of the bereaved says to the camera with smile, “This is a great job.” And then, “If you study journalism, you know what you're getting into.”

In the density of “Evolution of Violence”, a portrait is painted of a society rife with violence, every day and everywhere. The initial reaction it produces is stunned disbelief. Then digging for the roots begins: In therapeutic workshops for women, in the words of lawyers who fight for the punishment of violent crime, and finally in interviews with members of the indigenous population in the mountains and former members of the army, the source of this violence becomes increasingly clear. In a society with centuries of repression and a 36-year civil war in its past, human life is not worth a great deal.

The deepest wounds were made during the country's recent history. The USA has exercised a great amount of influence on this small Latin American country since it won its independence. The United Fruit Company, which controlled large portions of the country, treated the government like a personal servant. For the short span of

ten years the company's power was interrupted: In 1944 a coup brought democracy and civil rights. The new government wanted to initiate sweeping land reform, in which unused plots were to be confiscated and given to landless farmers. But this period came to an end in the spring of 1954: The CIA and the United Fruit Company orchestrated a second coup, which was followed by military dictators, persecution and finally a civil war. From 1960 to 1996 four groups of leftist guerrillas fought the military dictatorships, which were increasingly brutal. The climax of the violence occurred in the early 1980s when dictator and sect leader Ríos Montt practiced scorched earth warfare on extensive areas of the country. Hundreds of thousands were butchered, and similar numbers fled into the mountains or to Mexico. The guerrillas were never defeated, and the fighting ended after a peace accord in 1996. The violence, however, continued: At present more people die violent deaths annually than in some years of the civil war. And the violence can now come from anywhere: former soldiers, police officers who fatten their salaries as gang leaders, sexual violence, murders of women, kidnappings and spontaneous murders - no one is truly safe, nowhere and at no time of day. The violence has deep roots in the country's society - and it's being passed on to the next generation.

The reason for this most probably lies in the inconceivable brutality of the conflict, which has never really been brought to a close. The Catholic Church's report entitled “Memoria Historica,” which includes reports from victims and perpetrators put together in the late 1990s, provides a partial look at what the country has been through: Not only the victims have been seriously traumatized by the massacres they witnessed, or experienced brutal torture. Many perpetrators suffer from serious post-traumatic disorders also. Both sides are given a chance to tell their stories in “Evolution of Violence”: A weeping Maya villager talks about the day his parents were murdered, when he and his brothers and sisters were shut up inside a hut - which was then set on fire by soldiers. A former member of the army also

speaks, describing how, as a young recruit, he was forced to cut out an alleged rebel's heart. He tells us about the present he was given after completing his basic training: a 15-year-old girl that the troops were permitted to rape.

What's left is a society with an enormous collective trauma that was never worked out after the war ended. The government in place during the final years of fighting remained in power. The next elections, while fairer than the one that preceded them, were still far from true democratic standards. Even the horrors of the civil war were never really scrutinized officially: While eyewitness accounts of the massacre were taken down, mass graves were exhumed and ceremonies were held, all that was done by civil-society organizations and the church. The perpetrators were never held responsible for their actions. Human-rights activists who protested disappeared and were later found dead. The lives of government critics were in just as much danger as during the war - although the guerrillas had reformed into a normal political party. The dictators and generals of the past remained honored members of society: Ríos Montt, the strong man who had 400 villages destroyed and their residents exterminated in the 1980s, ran for public office again and is currently a member of Congress.

These traumas and the general atmosphere in which violent crime goes unpunished are at the root of the violence depicted so dramatically in "Evolution of Violence." Interviews and critics will sum up an analysis of the issues - and individuals engaged in a struggle against the situation will also be portrayed: such as a social worker who represents victims and their families in court. And a therapist who works with groups of traumatized women - and also deals with the country's past. They don't offer a solution: Collective trauma therapy would probably be necessary, rebuilding the government from the ground up, initiating legal proceedings against those responsible for the massacres, and thoroughly weeding out corruption. But none of that will happen soon - and the film offers no reason for high hopes: Near the conclusion

two journalists talk in view of Guatemala City's dump and the hundreds of garbage pickers there, discussing cases of unidentified bodies being unceremoniously disposed of on piles of trash. Then they go to the next murder scene while loudly singing "Funky Town." They're accustomed to the violence - which is part of everyday life in Guatemala.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Violence pervades life in Guatemala. Just leaving your house involves a real danger of being attacked or becoming a victim of violent crime. Throughout the country, all day and all night. Many citizens have armed themselves, and it doesn't take much to provoke acts of violence. Human life is not worth much.

While such problems are common in numerous Central and South American countries, the situation in Guatemala is much worse. Furthermore, the country has to contend with the horrible legacy of a 36-year civil war and wholesale killing of its indigenous population. A hike in the picturesque Highlands will take the visitor through a number of villages where descendants of the Maya live on what their modest plots of land produce. When speaking with locals, certain phrases are heard again and again: "Here in our village 50 people were killed and buried back there." And: "They burned them all alive." Vast

numbers of people were murdered here - and the world looked away. While Rwanda, Darfur and Srebrenica caused an international outcry, the fate of Guatemala's indigenous population aroused little interest.

I asked myself whether there's some kind of connection between the genocide and the violence of today. Why "Evolution of violence"? When the first Europeans arrived in the New World, they created societies based on extremely unjust social orders. While in many areas entire native populations were exterminated (e.g. in the USA), the descendants of the Maya represent the majority in Guatemala. The unfair and exploitative structures, however, never changed. A society like that is destined to live in continual violence. And all attempts to change this order have been hindered with the aid of the USA and Europe.

Guatemala is considered the archetype of a banana republic. This term designates countries where banana exporters are so powerful that they are in fact in control. Whoever opposes their interests is often simply liquidated. Bananas symbolize a world order turned upside down, in which the majority sweats and slaves to create wealth for a small minority. In this film bananas also serve to create a link back to Europe.

In my opinion Guatemala provides an example of a global ideology according to which economic exploitation is veiled by cynical political rhetoric. The film shows archival footage of a speech given by Ronald Reagan. By replacing the word "Communism" with "terrorism" and, in a different clip, switching "bananas" to "oil," the spectator is brought to the armed conflicts of our time. "Evolution of Violence" goes a step further to examine a society after a conflict has ended, or more precisely: to examine a culture of continual conflict. I'm convinced that a similar film could be made about Iraq in 30 years, after the exploitation of a different resource justified by a different political pretext in a different part of the world has come to an end, when the Iraqis are finally left to themselves, all the TV cameras are gone, and the violence has taken on its own life.

Fritz Ofner

INTERVIEW

How did you choose the theme for your film "Evolution of Violence"?

FRITZ OFNER: I first traveled to Guatemala in 1997 and witnessed the civil war's aftermath right after it ended. Only six months had passed, and the scars were still easy to see. I witnessed the mourning and the trauma up close, and for the first time I heard about the connection between the United Fruit Company and bananas, the civil war. The fact that a war is waged because of bananas, or the control of bananas - I just couldn't stop thinking about it.

Then I was in Guatemala again in 2004, and that time it seemed that the trauma caused by the war and this legacy of violence was beginning to take on a life of its own, that the entire society had been militarized, that the violence had penetrated many different areas of life there.

In 2007 I received an offer to work in Guatemala for six months, and at that point I definitely wanted to make a film, though I wasn't sure what it would be about. But when I arrived there, the violence was so omnipresent, and I got caught up in a scene like the one shown in the film, where an angry mob attacks some police officers, then exercises a form of mob justice on men thought to be criminals. After that, making the film represented a personal search to find out what could have caused so much violence. When a crowd believes that violence is the only way they can obtain justice, it represents a low point in a spiral.

When you talk about violence, what levels and different kinds are involved?

FO: My film proceeds from the assumption that violence in Guatemala was caused by political and economic factors, then took in a life of its own and spread to all areas of life there. During the civil war hundreds of thousands of young men were taught to kill, to rape and to torture. Then all these men returned to civilian life, and many of them had no opportunity to lead a normal existence. And they introduced what they



learned, how to use violence, into all areas of their lives, into their family lives, or made use of it in organized crime.

The film sticks a finger into an open wound: Violence is the topic in Guatemala, it determines political life, the economy, simply everything - in Guatemala no theme is bigger than violence.

How did you meet and then select the protagonists?

FO: As I already mentioned, it all began with this scene of mob justice. After that I was certain that contemporary violence involved the violence of the past in some way.

Then I tried to contact some people who witnessed the genocide, and with the help of an American friend I visited an indigenous village where a horrible massacre took place in 1982.

My arrival was announced over a PA, and the entire village committee got together. I had to introduce myself, and they asked me who I am, what I want, and why I want to hear their stories. From the moment the committee accepted me and gave me a green light for the shoot, the peoples' reactions were incredible. Everybody came to see me and wanted to tell their story about the massacre.

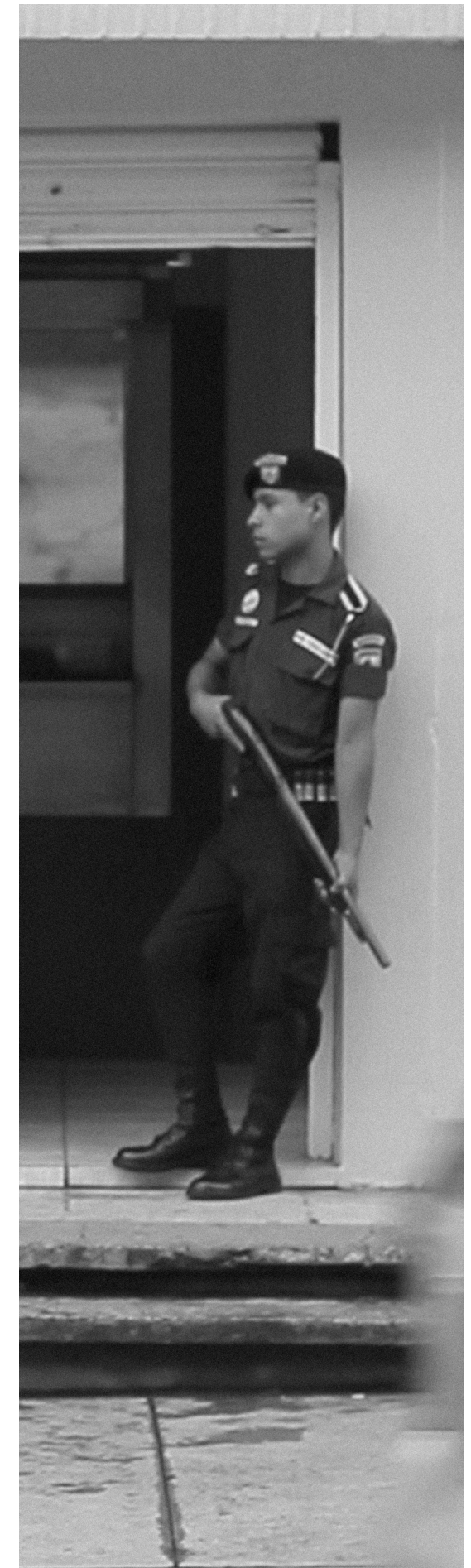
Although the massacre took place almost 30 years ago and nobody was able to bring charges, they never had an opportunity to tell anyone that it really happened. Suddenly, because a foreign filmmaker was there with a camera, there was someone they could tell their story to. It's a story that's suppressed in Guatemala, something no one wants to hear. The political establishment employs all the means available to prevent a search for those responsible, and that the story of the civil war is dealt with, because the guilty parties are still in power. The entire village came to see me, and everybody wanted to tell me about their family members, everybody wanted to say what they had experienced during the war. A great deal of openness and even affection developed between me and the protagonists. I visited this village again and again, until a sufficient amount

of trust was built up, and then I shot a lot of material.

Later I did some shooting with journalists after noticing that reporting about murders took up most of the space in newspapers, and they were the most common theme of TV news reports. I approached a broadcaster and asked whether I could ride along with its journalists to document their daily work. My presence was immediately met with a great deal of openness there too, and I was given an opportunity and permission to accompany these journalists with my camera.

This reminded me of what soldiers told me, that the only way to survive or recover psychologically from the horrors of war is through comradeship. Right away I felt that it worked in the same way with these journalists. You're constantly confronted with these extremely traumatic situations, and comradeship within the group is what gets you through it all. I experienced that myself, and I think my film conveys it to a certain extent: This laughter, this joking, that's not cynicism, it's a survival technique for dealing with this difficult-to-deal-with reality.

The social worker is employed by the country's most important organization, which deals with violence done to women and gives them a voice. In Guatemala violence on women is a huge topic, and people speak of femicide. I introduced my project to them and was welcomed immediately - again because my film bears witness. The violence of the civil war is similar to the violence in the country's present: They're both covered up, and aren't dealt with. The justice system doesn't work, and 97 out of 100 murders go unpunished; in other words only 3% of all murderers are convicted. When I visited mothers whose daughters were killed, they welcomed me into their lives in spite of my camera, because I bore witness here too. What happened isn't forgotten when a camera records it, and it reaches an audience—this hope was there the entire time. With this approach I was able to film many scenes that were extremely intimate and sad, because this desire to bear witness had always been there.



The most difficult thing was finding a soldier, a war criminal, who was willing to appear on camera and talk about his crime. I talked to a large number of soldiers, but none of them wanted to go on camera, because they were afraid of getting killed themselves. Then I put an ad in a newspaper, and a few people answered it. One of these men became the film's protagonist. He wrote a book that still hasn't been published. He wrote down his story in order to work out this trauma, including from the perpetrator's perspective. In a way he wanted to externalize this story, to put it on display, to free himself from it a little bit.

The government hasn't shown any interest in clearing up the past. What's the feeling among the population?

FO: I think that there's a major fault line in the country's society, and the two fronts from the civil war haven't grown back together yet. Many people who now work in the cultural field or for NGOs in Guatemala belonged to the guerillas during the civil war. In other words they were all leftists, and they still are. The people in power, who possess the economic and political power today, backed the military dictatorship. So the conflict has never been worked out because that wouldn't be in the interest of the groups in power.

There probably isn't a single family in Guatemala that doesn't have victims or perpetrators. But there's a great deal of effort to repress memories of the violence committed during the civil war, and this repression continues to feed the spiral of violence. The violence of the present day is often even worse than while the fighting was taking place, which is the reason for the film's title, "Evolution of Violence."

Of course, there's also a powerful movement among intellectuals, and the left wing, and also grassroots organizations that wants to examine the past.

For example, in the scene with the self-help group and the 15-year-old girls who were raped, you can see clearly that a lot of them don't know what happened during the civil war taking place when they were born.

Will the film be screened in Guatemala?

FO: Yes, definitely. I tried to make the production process in Guatemala extremely transparent. For example, I screened the rough cut for university students - that was really exciting. I expected that ten or twenty people would come, and suddenly there was an audience of 100 in the lecture hall. I showed clips from the film, and they triggered some passionate discussions. That the film started discussion is important in Guatemala.

I also screened it for Guatemalan filmmakers, which was extremely interesting too, because I was told that the people there are so used to violence that they weren't really conscious of it until they saw the film, and they tended not to notice it in their daily lives. An outsider's view helped them see the obvious connections between the civil war and everyday violence.

Several times I showed rough cuts in Guatemala to start discussions, and I wanted to see whether my view from the outside would be accepted. The film was accepted, and people said: "We want the film too!" The finished film will have a theatrical release there.



WHO STARTED THE VIOLENCE IN GUATEMALA?

EXCERPT FROM OPEN VEINS OF LATIN AMERICA,
EDUARDO GALLEANO

Dictator Ubico was swept off his pedestal in 1944 by a revolution of liberal hue, led by some young officers and middle-class university people. Juan José Arévalo, elected to the presidency, instituted a vigorous education plan and a new labor code to protect rural and city workers. Trade unions sprang tip; United Fruit, the virtually untaxed and uncontrolled owner of vast lands and of the railroad and port, was no longer omnipotent on its domains. In

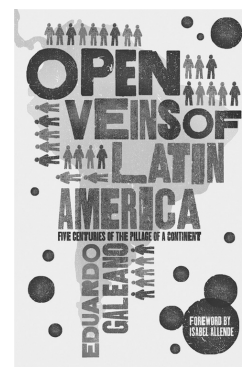
his farewell speech in 1951 Arévalo disclosed that he had had to deal with thirty-two conspiracies financed by the firm. The administration of Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán continued and extended the reforms. Highways and the new port of San José broke United Fruit's monopoly of transport and export. With national capital, and without bagging from any foreign banker, various projects were launched to lead the country to independence. An agrarian reform law, aimed basically at developing a peasant capitalist economy and an agricultural capitalist economy in general, was approved in 1952. By 1954 over 100,000 families had benefited, although the law only affected idle lands and paid expropriated owners and indemnity in bonds. But since United Fruit was using a mere 8 percent of its land, which extended from ocean to ocean, its unused lands began to be distributed to the peasants. A frenetic international propaganda campaign was launched: "The iron curtain is falling over Guatemala," roared the radio, newspapers, and the bigwigs of the Organization of American States. Colonel Rodolfo Castillo Armas, a graduate of the Fort Leavenworth military post, invaded his own country with troops trained and equipped for the purpose by the United States, and with support from U.S.-piloted F-47 bombers. "We had to get rid of a Communist government which had taken over," Dwight D. Eisenhower said nine years later. Testifying before a Senate subcommittee on July 27, 1961, the U.S. ambassador to Honduras said that the "liberating" operation in 1954 had been worked out by a team which included himself and the ambassadors to Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua. Allen Dulles, then the number one man at the CIA, had cabled them his congratulations on a job well done. Dulles had previously been on United Fruit's board of directors, and a year after the invasion his seat was occupied by another CIA man, Walter Bedell Smith. Allen's brother, John Foster Dulles, had shown burning impatience at the OAS conference that approved the military expedition against Guatemala; it so happened that the United Fruits contracts in the Ubico era had been drafted in his law office.

Arbenz's fall started a conflagration in Guatemala which has never been extinguished. The same forces that bombed Guatemala City, Puerto Barrios, and the port of San José on the evening of June 18, 1954, are in power today. Foreign intervention was followed by a series of ferocious dictatorships – including the administration of Méndez, who lent democratic trappings to the tyranny. Arbenz's agrarian reform was blown to smithereens when Castillo Armas fulfilled his mission of returning the land to United Fruit and other expropriated landlords; Méndez promised agrarian reform but merely signed an authorization for landlords to carry guns and to use them.

The worst year in the orgy of violence begun in 1954 was 1967. Thomas Melville, a U.S. catholic priest expelled from Guatemala, told the National Catholic Reporter in January 1968 that in little more than a year right-wing terrorist groups had murdered more than 2,800 intellectuals, students, trade union leader, and peasants who were trying "to combat the sicknesses of Guatemalan society." Melville based his figure on information in the press, but most of the corpses never earned any report at all: they were poor Indians of no known name or habitat whom the army included – sometimes only as numbers – in its communiqués on its victories over subversion. Indiscriminate repression formed a part of the military "search and destroy" campaign against guerilla movements. Under the newly adopted code, members of then security forces were not held responsible for homicides, and police and army communiqués were accepted as full proof by the courts. Plantation owners and managers had the legal status of local authorities, with the right to carry arms and form punitive squads. The systematic butchery set no teletypes humming; no news-hungry reporters flew to Guatemala, nor was any reproving voice heard. The world turned its back while Guatemala underwent a long Saint Bartholomew's night. All the men of the village of Cajón del Río were exterminated; those of Tituque had their intestines gouged out with knives; in Piedra Parada they were flayed alive; in Agua Blanca they were burned alive after being shot in their

legs. A rebellious peasant's head was stuck on a pole in the center of San Jorge's plaza. In Cerro Gordo the eyes of Velázquez were filled with pins. The body of Ricardo Miranda, thirty-eight holes in his head, and the head of Haroldo Silva were found beside the San Salvador highway. In Los Mixcos, Ernesto Chinchilla's tongue was cut out. In Ojo de Agua, the Oliva Aldana brother, blindfolded and with hands tied behind backs, were pumped full of bullets. The head of José Guzmán was chopped into a mass of tiny pieces and scattered along the road. In San Lucas Sacatepéquez, the wells yielded corpses instead of water. On the Miraflores plantation, the men greeted the dawn without hands or feet. Threats were followed by execution or by shots without warning through the back of the neck. In the cities the doors of the doomed were marked with black crosses. Occupants were machine-gunned as they emerged, their bodies thrown into ravines.

The violence did not stop after that: it has been a way of life in Guatemala ever since the period of humiliation and fury begun in 1954. Corpses - although not quite so many - continue to turn up in rivers and on roadsides, their featureless faces too disfigured by torture to be identified. The slaughter that is greater but more hidden - the daily genocide of poverty - also continues. In 1968 another expelled priest, Father Blase Bonpane, reported on the sick society in the Washington Post: "Of the 70,000 people who die each year in Guatemala, 30,000 are children. The infant mortality rate in Guatemala is forty times higher than in the United States."



(From: Eduardo Galeano, Open Veins of Latin America. Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent, Serpent's Tail 2009, p. 113-115.)

www.serpentstail.com

BIOGRAPHY / FILMOGRAPHY, FRITZ OFNER

Fritz Ofner was born in Styria in 1977 and studied Journalism and Ethnology in Vienna. After graduating he worked as an NGO activist, freelance journalist and TV producer. Extensive travel through Asia, Africa and Latin America eventually led him to documentary film. In 2011 he received the Axel Springer Award for his TV documentary, "From Baghdad to Dallas." "The Evolution of Violence" is his first documentary for theatrical release. At present he's working on "Beirut Blend," a documentary adaptation of Jim Jarmusch's "Coffee and Cigarettes." Ofner is a freelance film director and cameraman and lives in Vienna.

Films

From Bagdad to Dallas

Documentary, 30 min., 2010
Axel Springer Award, 2011

Evolution of Violence

Documentary, 77 min., 2011

PROFILE PRODUCTION COMPANY

In 2007 FreibeuterFilm was founded by film editor and producer Oliver Neumann, directors Sudabeh Mortezaei and Sebastian Meise, production manager Sabine Moser and production assistant Irina Ivanovic. Their intention was to create a platform for innovative, personal projects in the areas of creative documentaries and fiction film.

FreibeuterFilm values a creative atmosphere for production, one in which the filmmaker and his or her stories occupy the foreground and their work is encouraged by a flexible environment.

Filmography

Children of the Prophet

A 2006, Documentary, 86 min,
D: Sudabeh Mortezaei
Competition First Appearance Award, IDFA, Amsterdam 2006

In the Bazaar of Sexes

A 2009, Documentary, 85 min,
D: Sudabeh Mortezaei
Best International Documentary, DocsDF, Mexico 2011
Main Award, Espiello Ethnographic Film Festival, Spain 2011, Nomination Best Documentary, Austrian Film Award 2011

From Bagdad to Dallas

D/A 2010, Documentary, 30 min,
D: Fritz Ofner
Axel Springer Award 2011

Adrienn Pál

H/NL/A/F 2010, Fiction, 132 min,
D: Agnes Kocsis
Un Certain Regard, Cannes 2010
Fipresci Award, Cannes 2010

Evolution of Violence

A 2011, Documentary, 77 min,
D: Fritz Ofner

Still Life

A 2011, Fiction, 76 min,
D: Sebastian Meise

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