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THIS LAND IS MY LAND

A film by Susanne Brandstaetter

THIS LAND IS MY LAND

A FILM BY
SUSANNE BRANDSTAETTER

A 2020, 105 min, engl. OV w. subtitles

Cinema release: **September 4, 2020**

thislandismyland-film.com

PRODUCTION

SUSANNE BRANDSTAETTER FILMPRODUKTION e.U.

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SYNOPSIS

SHORT

“What the hell is happening to my country?” After Donald Trump’s election, American-Austrian documentary filmmaker Susanne Brandstaetter searches for explanations for the USA’s growing divide. Among Trump voters in Ohio, she discovers surprising parallels between America and Europe. “This Land Is My Land”: a cinematic seismograph not only for the US elections in November, but also for changes in Europe’s political landscape.

LANG

“What the hell is happening to my country?” With this burning question, American-Austrian documentary filmmaker Susanne Brandstaetter visits Trump voters in Ohio – where she discovers a microcosmic universe of a deeply divided USA. As the filming progresses, the filmmaker gets close to some atypical Trump voters, and so do we too.

Brandstaetter poses the question: “Can I really understand someone who thinks and feels principally so differently than myself?” In doing so, the documentary film “This Land Is My Land” reveals striking parallels between voters of all parties, and at the same time, draws parallels between the political developments in America and Europe. Especially when looking into the question of why we humans are so stubborn about holding onto our political (and other kinds of) convictions. What one found difficult to understand, becomes suddenly tangible and clear.



SUSANNE BRANDSTAETTER DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

“What the hell is happening to my country?”

November 2016. The day after Donald Trump's election, I was shocked – like a lot of people. And as time passes, this state of shock has only been confounded by bewilderment, incomprehension and for me and as for many, a roller-coaster of feelings alternating between hopelessness, frustration and rage. Donald J. Trump's presidency has polarized not only the United States, but people around the world.

The divide is growing. The fronts seem solidified. On one side there are the fervent Trump supporters, for whom he can do no wrong. They see in him the successful, non-conformist business-man turned politician, who fears nothing in his quest to rebuild the country and “make America great again.”

On the other side, there are the Trump opponents, who see him as the ultimate threat to democracy - an unscrupulous autocrat, who doesn't shy from bending or flouting laws to his own advantage. A bully, a racist, a misogynist – an incom-



petent, corrupt, egocentric politician, focused only on his own personal agenda. A danger, not only to the USA, but to the entire world.

After Trump's election four years ago, I knew I needed to make my new film about this phenomenon. I'm an American, who's lived all her adult life in Europe – most of the time in Austria. But I was born and raised in L.A. in a progressive family of Democrats. And I wanted to understand what had happened. During the course of the shoots for "This Land Is My Land" I witnessed how polarization increasingly took hold of my protagonists. Can you reconcile a "broken" society? If so, how?

Many of Donald Trump's voters were from groups that were not expected to vote for him. Who didn't fit into any of the stereotypes of "Trump voters". The women, the minorities, the life-long Democrats, the college-educated upper middle-class. So I decided to choose a very diverse bunch of Trump voters in Ohio – a Swing-State – along with some of their family, friends and colleagues. These voters are surprisingly different from the average Trump voters – yet they're representative of millions of others like them, who swung the vote in Donald Trump's favor in the 2016 US-presidential elections.



When I first met them, I explained that I, as well as most Europeans, need help in understanding why they, and so many others, support Donald Trump. Especially because I've been living in Europe for such a long time, I needed them to fill in the blanks.

My golden rule was: Don't argue, listen. A rule I stuck to – though it often wasn't easy. In my attempt to understand why these voters were for Trump, I also got to know them - I interacted with our protagonists and began to understand them.

Then something strange happened: I started to like our protagonists. There were times when I felt like a traitor because of that. Not that they changed my opinions about Trump! Their statements and points of view often made my hair stand on end! Or got me really furious. That's when I decided the film had to have my viewers experience the same kind of emotional ambivalence I was feeling. The documentary takes the viewer along on my emotional self-experiment and explores what happens when you truly listen and try to empathically understand someone who has ideas diametrically opposed to your own.

Can we understand people on the other side of the divide? The Trump voters?

Bolsonaro voters? Le Pen or Orban voters? Not easily, especially when their position is completely opposite to your own. How did these voters get where they are? Our protagonists and I talked about all kinds of things together - family, love-life, hobbies, work. But when it came to Trump I just asked questions and listened.

I also listened to Trump opponents. Our protagonists met in front of the camera with other family members or friends, who were absolutely and massively against Trump. They discussed issues. They argued. They ranted. They raved. In short, it was emotional.

“This Land Is My Land” explores feelings and emotions - those of the protagonists’, of my own and especially those of the viewers. Are we willing to really listen to the “other”? Not just once, but repeatedly? It can and will make you uncomfortable. It should.

Is there a way out of the polarization that we are experiencing throughout the U.S. and Europe? “This Land Is My Land” doesn’t offer any pat solutions – instead the film involves the viewer in an on-going process, testing the viewer’s own capacity for confronting and understanding the “other”. Implicit throughout the film, is the invitation to step out of our bubbles and engage with people who think differently from us. Not just once, but again and again. That doesn’t mean giving up on issues that are important to us – or compromising our core values. But it does mean learning to interact with the other side and deal with the causes of our division, instead of just tuning them out.

Not to listen to opposing viewpoints, not to take them seriously, is, in my opinion, a dangerous mistake.

SUSANNE BRANDSTAETTER

FILMOGRAPHY



Susanne Brandstaetter was born and grew up in Los Angeles. Moved to Austria in 1975. Worked as a writer/director for the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF) from 1983 to 2002. In 2002 she became an independent filmmaker and producer. As of 2014, began teaching at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna. Brandstaetter's main focus is making cinema documentaries. She lives and works in Vienna, Austria.

FILMS (EXCERPT)

- 2019 **This Land Is My Land** – Documentary, 105'
- 2020/2021 **Anna through the Mirror** – Documentary, 69', (Work in Progress)
- 2013 **Colliding Lives** – Animation/Short, 2'50
Doris Nowak, Manuela Schwarzl, Barbara Löffler, Penelope Reindl, Michaela Rentsch, Susanne Brandstätter, Petr Špatenka, Julia Laggner, Milena Nowak
Audience Award – Tricky Women International Film Festival 2014
- 2012 **The Future's Past** – Documentary, 91'
Amour Fou Filmproduktion, Minotaurus Film
- 2006 **Rule of Law – Justice in Kosovo** – Documentary, 99'/58'/45'
Premiere: Locarno Film Festival
Wiener Filmpreis 2007, Critics Award – SEE International Film Festival
Los Angeles 2008, Best Documentary – DocumFest Timisoara 2008
- 2004 **Checkmate – Strategy of a Revolution** – Documentary, 60'
Premiere IDFA International Film Festival
Romy 2005, KinoGlaz International Filmfestival (2nd Prize)
- 2001 **The Velocity of Being** – Documentary, 70', 3sat
- 2000 **On the Road: Franz Werfel's Point of View** – Essay, 11', ORF
Silent Rebels: China's Muslime – Documentary, 45', ORF

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

THIS LAND IS MY LAND

by Susanne Brandstaetter

AT 2019, 105 min

Writer and director	Susanne Brandstaetter
Cinematography	Joerg Burger
Sound-mixer	Nora Czamler
Editor	Susanne Brandstaetter Michaela Müllner
Dramaturgical consultant	Eric Collins
Editing consultants	Monika Willi Dieter Pichler
Sound design	Wolf-Maximilian Liebich
Line producer	Hanne Lassl
A production by	Susanne Brandstaetter Filmproduktion e.U. Envision Film

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