

JANINE ZIEHT AUFS LAND

Janine Moves to the Country

Director Jan Eilhardt

German | 2025

74 min. | German with English subtitles

Screenplay Jan Eilhardt. **Cinematography** Irene Cruz. **Editing** Verena Neumann, Jan Eilhardt. **Music** Ulf Wrede, Peter Uehling, Sanaa Schlaeger. **Sound Design** Harald Ansorge, Michael Gabelmann, Cedric Hommel. **Production Design** Johanna Meyer, Shel Yan, Katharina Zerr. **Make-Up** Vera Michel. **Animation** Maria Zbarskaya. **Producer** Jan Eilhardt. **Executive Producer** Santiago Gómez Rojas. **Production company** Eilhardt Productions (Berlin, Germany). **With** Janine Lear, Maximilian Brauer, Adrian Wenzel, Kathrin Angerer, Pierre Emö, Susanne Bredehöft, Daniel Zillmann, Beatrice Cordula.

Synopsis

"In order to withstand the contempt of those days, I often imagined that the village was a glittering stage. And now I want to return to the village." Janine has made up her mind. Together with her asthmatic partner, she's turning her back on Berlin. Yet in the lifeless village streets, her queer appearance doesn't just awaken positive associations. Processing his own provincial past, Jan Eilhardt weaves a selection of private videoclips and photos into his film which reveal that Janine has been accompanying him for many years. They also show his memories of his mother Brigitte, who realised that growing up in a village formed an important test: rural stigmatisation as a sort of German Little Rock. It's a path that still lies in front of neighbour Peter, who lives with his overwhelmed mother and his brother Enrico. Janine's arrival stokes his yearnings, but also implies coming out and all the fears that entails. Eilhardt translates the encounter into a campy, eroticising and often dramatic 360-degree view of a hostile milieu. Confronting old wounds, Janine subverts this milieu with lasciviousness, music and the confidence of someone who's never had anything to prove to themselves. (Carolin Weidner)

Jan Eilhardt studied Film and Performance at the HFBK Hamburg (including classes with Marina Abramović) and was an assistant to Heiner Müller at the Berliner Ensemble. His films and experimental projects have screened in international film festivals, cinemas, and museums. His feature debut SCHERBENGERICHT premiered in 2013 at the Slamdance Film Festival. FREMDENVERFÜHRERIN (2022), a queer-activist Super 8 short film, was shown in international festivals and won many awards. His autobiographical inspired feature JANINE MOVES TO THE COUNTRY follows in 2025, supported by mediatalents (nordmedia).

Films: 2002: Straße der Revolution / Streets of the Revolution (short film). 2003: Dance (short film). 2004: Tertiär (short film). 2005: Quasar (short film). 2006: CDF 1 (short film). 2007: CDF 2

(short film). 2012: Moby Dick Piece (short film), Scherbengericht / The Court of Shards. 2013: The Last Night of Baby Gun (short film). 2014: Gun Street Girl Sings Tom Waits. 2021: The Real Court of Shards. 2022: Fremdenverführerin / Sanaa, Seductress of Strangers (short film). 2025: Die Bienenverweigerin / Beer Refusic (short film), Bad Luck (short film), Janine zieht aufs Land / Janine Moves to the Country.

Director's Statement

The Bedroom Studio as a Safe Space

Transgenerational experiences of violence which marked life in and after the village

JANINE MOVES TO THE COUNTRY is the first part of a trilogy, a sequel. I began the project while taking care of my deathly ill mother. In her final weeks, she talked about her experiences of violence as a woman. And she made it clear to me that there is a connection between her female biography and my queer history.

Reflecting on a transgenerational level about experiences of violence was a new facet and created an almost uncanny abyss. I grew up in a village. As I kid, I had already started cross-dressing and calling myself Janine. When I was around twelve years old and it became dangerous to run around the village streets in girls' clothing, my mother bought me a video camera. The activity now took place in my bedroom, remodelled as a studio, and were reflected in many, many recordings. When I turned fifteen, my mother regularly allowed me to go to the closest small city on weekends. There was a queer scene there and I met Nadja, who saw herself as a young man and went around as a dandy. We moved freely through the city. By the age of nineteen, I left the village and moved to a big city.

After my mother's death, I made regular trips back to my hometown. The village left wounds not only in her, but also in me. To create resonances between these wounds and my own memories and repeated encounters with old and new residents of the village via my mother's stories was an occasion to enter the village again as Janine – and, this time, very openly armed with my camera.

Jan Eilhardt

Interview

'I wanted to bring some dynamic into people's thinking, into hardened fronts.'

Jan Eilhardt talks to Irina Bondas and Barbara Wurm about art as a protected play space, the film's autobiographical context, and village life then and now

Barbara Wurm: So wonderful to have you in our Forum selection, Jan! How long have you been carrying this film with you?

Jan Eilhardt: I started writing the film in 2020, in the first Corona year. In that year of Corona, nothing was possible. Then Max

Brauer, the second lead actor, who plays Peter, asked me why we don't do something small. The whole time, I was preoccupied by footage of my mother, whom I had cared for until her death. Before Covid started, I kept going back to the village where I grew up in order to do research. And **JANINE MOVES TO THE COUNTRY** developed out of my impressions there. In 2021, I applied for funding from Nordmedia in order to make the project. No big subsidy, as you can see. The film was shot with meagre means.

BW: Your film is partly autobiographical or auto-fictional. When were the videos of young Janine made?

JE: The footage from my childhood and adolescence were made approximately between 1984 and 1987. I grew up in a village and started running around as Janine at the age of 12 or 11. At some point, my mother realised that this was dangerous and bought me a video camera, so I could perform at home and be Janine there. I ran around on the streets with nail polish or dyed hair, but not 'entirely' as Janine. That was pretty dangerous. These video recordings saved me in a way.

Irina Bondas: So the documentary footage comes from you, from your persona, Janine. But there is also the Janine in the movie. Who is this Janine? And how was she created? Where does she come from?

JE: I think Janine has been around since I was five. There is also a photo of this in the film. At some point, I named myself Janine. That was my persona. That was me. I started dressing up as Janine and running around like that. My parents let me go on holiday with them as Janine, so, allowing me to completely live that out, and that's the origin. When it became too dangerous in the village, when I was 15, I was allowed to go to Göttingen often on weekends. There was a queer scene there. It was really great. I could just be Janine there, a gender-fluid person. Sometimes there was more Janine in me, sometimes less. Sometimes more visible, sometimes less visible.

BW: Did the fact that you had already started filming yourself early on help in making a film as a director while also spending most of the time in front of the camera?

JE: Yes, of course. I accumulated experiences with the camera very early on. It's a mix of things too. At eleven or twelve, I started doing ballet. Then in my room there was a kind of small stage where I would put on shows with other ballet students, which were recorded on video or translated to film. The idea of making films was present very early, and I was always more or less in the films myself.

BW: With the neighbours' house in the film, did you introduce a new family, new characters? Are they fictional or based on people you met?

JE: They are. When I started going to the village more often and at some point had the idea that I wanted to make a film there, it quickly became clear to me that it would not be a film about a lack of prospects or pitiable people. I know the people and met them again while doing the research. Part of the cast are non-professionals and I partly had role models for the actors embodying the village residents. The only character who is a little bit more fictional is Enrico. There is a real Enrico, who is from Berlin. I shot another film with him. But he couldn't do this one for health reasons. That's why we cast Adrian Wenzel in this fictional role. But Sieglinde, for instance, is really from the village. I'd already shot with her when I was studying at art school.

BW: Can you talk a bit about your background? Your film studies and your community, and how you situate yourself here, in film terms as well?

JE: I studied at the HfbK art school in Hamburg. At the time, Marina Abramović was there. That somehow made sense. My background is in performance and I felt myself absolutely at home there. At that time, there were almost only men at the HfbK. Coming from the countryside to art school, I felt that a certain queerphobic and, in any case, very masculine atmosphere dominated. And then Marina was there and that was really great. But she left and I switched to a film class. I did a collaboration with another artist and she said: You were always making films before, you should make films again. So I spent the rest of my studies with films. Then I came to Berlin and have been making films ever since. In different contexts. Small films, activist films, a few films with people with handicaps. Very different, in different communities. In terms of budget, **JANINE MOVES TO THE COUNTRY** is my biggest project yet.

IB: When we were discussing the movie, we kept thinking of comparisons but at the same time we kept emphasising how the style is so idiosyncratic. Names like Fassbinder and Müller, with whom you worked, came up, or Schlingensief. Your film is related to certain traditions. Where would you situate it? Is one of your methods to draw, so to speak, on the box of tricks of filmmakers and theatre-makers?

JE: I'm of course not free from influences. While I was writing the film, I re-watched **TEOREMA** for the first time in a long time. I don't know if that influenced me, but of course it's interesting that there is a character who shows up in a situation and wreaks havoc. Yes, there's Fassbinder, the German cosmos. But we are nevertheless in another era. That's why it is also far away from Fassbinder. Recently, somebody said the film reminded them of Chantal Akerman. She acted in her own films, too, at least in the early ones. I hadn't thought of that at all, but I was actually watching her films a lot at the time. Perhaps a very unconscious influence.

BW: You said you're from a village in Lower Saxony. The city left behind in the film is Berlin – that's why I was initially thinking of Brandenburg. Is the precise location, local or regional, important?

JE: In fact, I wanted to show an abstract village. Although architectonically, there is a certain sense of recognition with the Harz region. When I started travelling for research purposes to the surrounding villages after my mother's death, not only was the country/city divide noticeable. After 15, 20 years, it was crazy how everything had changed. There are no more winter sports in winter because it doesn't snow. And in summer, you hike through apocalyptic landscapes. That is very specific to the Harz – dried spruce forests attacked by bark beetles. Friends said: In fact, we now need a firefighting helicopter because the risk of forest fires is so big. There is a lot less tourism. The houses are falling apart and people vote differently.

BW: Do you view your film as political? Is it tailored to current events too? It is set in the present.

JE: I would say the film is political. For instance, what I didn't know: In the village where I grew up, some of the houses were taken over by members of the Reichsbürger movement. When I was growing up there, there was some violence and, as a queer person, I was excluded, but somehow I was still accepted as a foreign body or I was nevertheless part of the village. With the thought that Reichsbürger live in the village, I don't think my mother would today encourage me to grow up queer in that way, as she did. And I also don't think that, as a private citizen, I would move there now. It's different than it used to be.

BW: Worse?

JE: The situation has simply become extremer. Sure, there are a lot of villages close to cities and people who are well-off live there. It would be no problem there. But there are villages where

it is extreme. In the village where I grew up, it used to be possible to live with that. I doubt that is still possible.

BW: A hard observation. I wouldn't have thought so.

JE: Of course, I can't speak for every village, but during the shoot, I had some very borderline experiences, even though I had the film crew kind of shielding me.

IB: You just mentioned how you came from the country to the city. In the film, Janine moves from the city to the country. It's very noticeable that Janine in fact belongs in a big city. And we can somewhat imagine how it must have been or how it is. At the same time, the film still shows something different, and precisely not a hopeful image. None of the protagonists is portrayed derogatively. In a way, it comes across as more bearable than in reality.

JE: I absolutely wanted the village residents not to be stereotypes, but complex, to have their own stories, for them to be broken and partly ironic. For people to have a certain empathy towards them. For me as Janine, this meant taking a step back, being more of a projection surface. Perhaps in that way a little more vulnerable. It isn't that they are nice to Janine, but still, they have a certain humanity, even if it ends with a kind of witch burning.

IB: It's remarkable that the people are not necessarily nice to Janine, but Janine – or you – is nice to the people, making this openness still present. Is this also for you an approach for healing or a kind of closeness or overcoming, artistically as well?

JE: When I made the videos as a kid, the films were like a weapon to survive in this small cosmos. Now I come back as a person who makes films, with a film crew, so with a certain protection and power. As a private person, I would not get involved in some of the situations which are shown. However, in the fiction, I can allow Janine to act fragile or nice. I wanted to bring some dynamic into people's thinking, into hardened fronts.

IB: Art as protection too?

JE: Perhaps. As protection and a possibility to open up something in my head. The dramatic structure is playful/experimental or conceptual and I test out possibilities with it.

BW: Can you talk a bit about these gimmicks, namely the split screens?

JE: I use split screen once with the footage from the 1980s, placing what is happening in the childhood and adolescent bedroom next to the outside reality of the village. And then I place Janine and Peter side-by-side many times, how they think about each other.

BW: I was fascinated by your film's camp aesthetics, the awkward, direct representation of love, of sex. Nevertheless, there is this community, which is like a common denominator, a mutual collection of transgressions. Nothing is simply 'too much'; there is a framework for what is socially negotiable. This earns the film a lot of depth and believability. Did you discuss these relatively extreme decisions with other people too? The film somehow radiates togetherness.

JE: When I was ready with the concept, I gave it to the people who I'd first gotten onboard. We went to Brandenburg and did a small test shoot. Then another Corona phase came, in which I wrote the script. Later, on set, non-professional actors from the village joined the professional actors. I didn't say to anyone: We need to do this and this in this way now. Meaning, directing in a hierarchical manner. Part of the temporal possibilities meant there was room for experimentation. I did not want to serve a pseudo-realism at all. That's why I ended up deciding to dare

more extreme things, musically too. The music is very, very important to the film.

IB: The music is a strong element. It gives a freedom to the whole thing and shapes it too. And it also influences the acting and the other way around. That's why I'd like to ask how you came up with the individual tracks and the decisions of where to place them?

JE: Since I'd done the test in Brandenburg, there was already footage. I started experimenting with it. I quickly got the idea of using harpsichord and I noticed that an abstract level arose between music and image. It's not like in Pasolini, where a liturgical or sacred level comes in, but rather a camp level is created. After the shoot, I hired harpsichordist Peter Uehling, who was careful about which music he would use. For the scene in which Peter stands naked at the window, I looked for temp tracks. Then the harpsichordist reacted to it with the other pieces. Furthermore, there was the idea of using the mother's voice, spoken by Beatrice Cordula, and she sings at the same time too. This gives it something musical-like. We tried it out with Sanaa Schlaeger and Ulf Wrede and I found it very special because it enters into Janine's head and past, and consequently made things possible in the editing that would not otherwise have existed.

IB: The figure of the mother, the voice in Janine's head at the beginning is important for the film. At the same time, it is completely in the background. And yet, it also seems to be a film about her or for her?

JE: In a way, Janine is a very privileged character. We don't learn anything about Janine's financial situation – apparently the partner has money, but we never really know if Janine has money. She may just as well be a poor artist. But that isn't the point at all. She's privileged because her mother really supported her as a queer person. Then she meets Peter, who lives in the village, in whose life the mother figure is also important. But his mother doesn't support his queer life. I contrast two queer characters who are both from the village. They are different ages, but they both have a past in the village, maybe a past with violence. It remains open if Peter has already lived as queer. It isn't a coming out story. But both characters are shaped by their relationship to their mother.

BW: A small question to wrap things up. For me, it is also a film about sexual liberation. Would you agree?

JE: It depends, for whom (laughs). But yes, you could say that. About sexual possibilities in any case.

BW: I had the feeling that this attraction is transferred. In fact, Janine feels it for everyone, even for those whom she finds repulsive. That is, this person's quality, the openness and the courage and everything she embodies. She even infects the straight people, who relax a little too... For me, this is also a kind of post-modern film about sexual liberation as a political statement.

JE: Absolutely. As sexual possibility or utopia, absolutely. I'm curious to see how many contradictions the film generates, for queer people too. Because there is something controversial about the character as well. At least, that has always been the question for me, what fragility does she show? As a queer person, I like to see myself as entirely self-defined. But in this context, Janine is not always self-defined, but instead lets herself be defined by the village, partially, because she opens up to her past.