

Head Cold
(Schnupfen im Kopf)



A Film by Gamma Bak

Germany 2010

Running Time 92 min · OV (German, English, Hungarian) with English subtitles
Colour · DVD

In the Programme of the Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin / Berlinale 2010

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About this film

Psychosis – an illness that is apparently incurable, a diagnosis that literally turns the lives of those involved upside-down. Nothing is the same as it once was, and the sojourns in psychiatric wards are often followed by a life-long dependence on medications that have severe side-effects. Talking about the illness is a taboo—for who wants to voluntarily declare themselves as a lunatic? For the first time ever, the afflicted author and director Gamma Bak dares to make an autobiographical film dealing with the various stages of her illness. The result is a highly intimate and fascinating self-portrait that offers not only an introduction to the complex issue but also provides a direct insight to both the struggles involved with the diagnosis of psychosis and the associated stigmatization.

What happened?

At the age of 18, I went to film school and became a filmmaker.

At 30, I had a nervous breakdown, a psychosis. And then again, and again. I became chronically ill.

After seven years with the illness I began to film myself and also asked my family and friends for video letters. Eight years later, the film is finished: the long-term observation accompanied my journey back to a "normal" life.

Director's Comment

Head Cold is an experimental long-term observation. By exposing myself to the film as a process, I allow a direct insight into the struggles that I have experienced due to the diagnoses and resultant stigmatization. The subjective approach to the topic seems necessary to me, even if it was initially very difficult for me to "out" myself. The position that I take is that of both how I live with and how I have adjusted to the illness.

Head Cold is an autobiographical work that emerges in several stages. The form and content of the experiment arises from my method of working, which is based upon expansive collecting and careful probing. The actual work on the project began in the summer of 2001 with an initial project outline; the MiniDV archive of materials consisting of the self-interviews, the conversations held with me, and the video letters from my family and friends began as of spring 2002. **Head Cold** is biographical narrative, and my story—as both an incentive and an example in one—offers an introduction to the complex topic.

People with the illness are branded and tossed aside. They usually live a highly marginalized life on early retirement pensions or social benefits, and only in the rarest of cases can they pursue regular employment. Life is torn apart by frequent periods of hospitalization and convalescence. The crises are often followed by depressions that are almost as bad as the crises themselves because they last even longer. The self-esteem is battered and the eternal conflicts with the required medications and the given side-effects—which substantially reduce the quality of life—are grueling.

When I look at the self-interviews, I discover something remarkable: The persistent attempt, over years, to truly convey what it means to endure and live this difficult illness. That which I demanded from myself was worth it. It is an unsparing gaze lacking all voyeurism. I chose the interview format to enable the formation of a highly impressive, personal picture through these narratives. The story is completed by that which is not said and the commentary from external sources such as the video letters.

For the specific target groups—the next of kin, the afflicted, therapists and doctors—this film is of profound importance and should lead to a highly committed and controversial discussion regarding my position as a "compliant"¹ patient. But the film goes beyond the process of dealing with a psychotic disorder from a personal point of view. It also shows the life—the path of life—of a freelance artist in midlife, full of doubt about why everything came to be as it did.

The central issues of the film revolve around the questions of taking responsibility of one's own life, of one's illness, and of solely taking charge in general. It is always about the great isolation in which I find myself, and the desire to share the responsibility. These levels of the film make it both universal and enthralling. The film poses questions asked by many women my age, including those that do not have to struggle with the stigma of being psychologically ill.

Gamma Bak

An interview with the director

How did you come to make this film?

I was feeling bad after the first psychoses, but I didn't know exactly how bad—loosely speaking, I thought I won't make it. I wanted to fight using my own means and began to record interviews with myself. I was pretty sure that it could be used to make a film one day. But it took a long time—a total of eight years—until the film was finished.

Where does the title come from?

My boyfriend at the time of the first psychosis said to me at some point, "It's all like a cold in the head, it'll pass." Even if the title maybe sounds cute for something very heavy and daunting, it also reflects the idea of dealing with it as something normal, like a cold.

¹ "Compliance" refers to when the patient complies to the drug therapy and regularly goes to the psychiatrist as prescribed and does not arbitrarily change, for example, the dosage or medication without prior medical consultation.

How did you choose the people from whom you wanted a video letter?

My family is used to me picking personal topics to talk about larger issues. In the film about my father, "*East... West... Home's Best*" (1992), I already asked my family to appear on screen and in interviews. Now some friends have been added. It's not an easy decision to take part in a film and to speak openly, and I'm very grateful for their efforts. The video letters and conversations add context to the story and give depth to the thoughts regarding the issue. In a video letter, one inevitably talks of oneself as well as to the addressee. That's something that interested me very much in this project.

The film is dedicated to your mother. Why doesn't she appear in the film?

My mother's been just great during the last 14 years. She's the secret hero of this story. Her grown-up daughter, at 30, suddenly became so ill that it was no longer possible to see how life would go on. She took care of me during the crises and made sure that I could stay as free and independent as possible between the mills of the health insurance, unemployment benefits and so forth. But I wasn't ill all the time. Many years actually passed in a very toned down and hampered atmosphere, with the meds. When I asked my mother whether she would be in this film, she gave a simple answer: "I live a real life with you—I don't want to destroy that." I respected it, so I didn't force her to appear in front of the camera just for considerations of the film.

In the film, you reach way back into your personal archives. How did this discovery come about?

It was clear to me that I was making a film about the psychotic illness from the inside out. I had a lot of self-interviews and conversations with friends, video letters. Then I realized that it's important to show who the person is that's struggling with the illness and trying to put everything into words. Since I began making films at 18, I've been in my films. Initially I acted, but since 1991 I've worked with autobiographical moments and stories. So from my archives, I could select that which closely shows me as a person. The staged video diary from the fragment "*A Woman and her Double Bass*" is fantastic in doing this. They're shots that were made two years before my first breakdown. I'm acting out the video diary, but I present myself in such a way that you can get goose bumps—like a forewarning of the psychosis?

Why is the film bilingual, in German and English and with Hungarian sections?

It's an unusual decision to say that you're going to make a film about yourself. The work is always difficult, accompanied by doubts about how you're presenting yourself. In this case, to talk about psychoses, I found it the most honest to begin with myself and to tell what happened. There's something radical about focusing strictly on yourself. In the film I speak German and English because I'm bilingual, I feel at home with both languages. It's my intention to show both facets of my person, which grew up in two cultures. Beyond that, all video correspondents speak in the language of their choice. During the conversations we sometimes speak German, sometimes English, depending on whom I'm talking with and what our common language is.

What do the segments with images and music signify for you?

I decided that I didn't want to translate the visual experience of the psychotic states into scenes. Since experiences like that are comparable to the sensation when you're on hash or cocaine, I found a low budget attempt to visualize them probably wouldn't work. I conceived the experimental image sequences with music together with Dieter Vervuurt. We wanted to create reduced, clear and concentrated situations—to tell about my past on the one hand and to also express the inner emotional state of mind. They're fragments, or splinters, that provide a glance. Silvia Ruszev developed the design and visual effects of these interludes with music in the editing. We shot the studio scenes at different times, some in 2008 and the rest in 2009.

For these scenes we used several tracks from the CD "*Propellers in Love*" by Arnold Dreyblatt. For me, the music of the 1980s combines well with the experimental images and it also evokes the period when I came back to Germany from Canada in 1985. The music of Sean Scruff Newton in the Canada sequence is a song that he wrote for me back when we were roommates, when I was 17/18. It's about how there is pasta at our place tonight—a little joke, because at that time I really did cook pasta every day. The closing music, by the violinist Felix Lajko, is reminiscent of the period in the early 1990s that I talk about in the video diary, when I was underway all the time and became acquainted with his music at a festival in Hungary.

What are you planning to do next?

Last year I made an autobiographical film using my text archives. It's an experimental video piece, a photo film with extracts from unsent love letters. This year I'm going to start a similar project that doesn't look into the archive but rather creates a new personal archive. As of my birthday on March 5th, 2010, I'm going to upload one-minute video postcards of my life onto YouTube every day. It's a diary postcard project that'll run for one year. The title is: "*Wish You Were Here*".

Interview conducted by Michael Höfner.

Bio/Filmography

Gamma Bak

Born: March 5th 1965, Germany

Filmstudies: Simon Fraser University (Vancouver), Center for the Arts in the Mid-80's

Lives in Berlin and works as Director and Producer.

1983

LIVIN' IN THE CITY

12 min., S-8, Three-Screen-Projection

Experimental Film

1983

DO YOU KNOW THIS MAN?

3 min., 16 mm, B/W, silent

Short feature

1985

RUBBLEWOMEN / TRÜMMERFRAUEN

15 min., 16 mm, Colour & B/W

Directed in collaboration with Ian Doncaster and

Bryan Sutton

Experimental Documentary

1989

SUMMER OF INNOVATIVE FILM 1989 I+II

2 x 20 min., Betacam, Documentary

Directed in collaboration with P. Buitenhuis

RIAS-TV, Berlin

1992

EAST...WEST...HOME'S BEST

75 min., 16 mm, Documentary

Director and Producer

1994

A WOMAN AND HER DOUBLE-BASS (Fragment)

approx. 10 min., M II, short film

Director, Line Producer

Part of the compilation film „Liebessplitter“ 3 sat

1997

ABOUT WALTER BENJAMIN I-III

3 x 12 min., Beta, arte, Documentary (Bio-pic)

Author/Director

2009

BORN UNFINISHED

28 min. DVD

Photo film, autobiographical Documentary

Director/Producer

2010

HEAD COLD

92 min., digital

Feature length Documentary, personal long-term observation

Director/Producer

Credits

with

Gamma Bak, Janos M. Bak, Polly M. Bak, Zsófia Bak, Friedhelm Bartscht, Jackie Crossland, Adele Eisenstein, Kristin Günther, Wiebke Müller, Alexandra Pätzold, Karsten Piel, András Surányi, Dieter Vervuurt

Concept / Director / Producer	Gamma Bak
Co-Producers	Edit Köszegi, András Surányi (Digipost Kft)
Dramatic Advisor 2007-2009	Cornelia Klauss
Dramatic Advisor 2003-2004	Gina Kovacs
Research / Text Editing	Michael Krause
Translations	Réka Gyulas, Finbarr Morin, Bryin Abraham
Subtitles	Alexandra Demetriou
Transcription	Alexandra Kusche
Film Bookkeeping	Wiebke Müller
Accounting	Rainer Baumann
Camera	Dieter Vervuurt
Camera 2002-2008	Ulrike Solbrig Volker Langhoff , bvk Christopher Rowe, bvk Nyika Jancsó, hsc Neil Thompson
Sound	Manuel Wilhelm Andrea Geiselhart
Editing	Szilvia Ruszev
Mix	Till Wimmer
Color Grading	Tobias Schaarschmidt
Music	Arnold Dreyblatt CD „Propellers in Love“ Sean Scruff Newton „Pasta Queen“ Félix Lajkó „Serenade“

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