

are similarities to the Robinson Crusoe story (*Robinsonade*) because the heroine is stranded alone in an isolated environment and has to find ways to survive. It can be seen as an existentialist scenario with allusions to Camus' *The myth of Sisyphus*. As the woman finds a way to live in harmony with nature in the repetitive daily routines of caring for her animals and herself we can readily identify with Camus' assessment of his subject: "*We have to imagine Sisyphus as happy.*"

"*One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin.*" The opening sentence of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* has parallels with *Die Wand*. Suddenly "... *hier, drei Meter von mir, hinderte wirklich etwas Unsichtbares, Glattes, Kühles mich am Weitergehen*". Like Gregor Samsa, the life the woman knew before doesn't exist anymore and something new and utterly alien has replaced it. What could be more Kafkaesque than a wall appearing around us: we don't know why nor do we know for how long nor even if an escape will eventually be possible.

The nightmarish world created by Haushofer puts a critical focus on our existing civilization. How far are we removed from providing for our immediate necessities? How much knowledge do we still have about the natural cycles and what do we know about caring for animals? How much have we been sheltered from the destructive power as well as the ultimate beauty of nature? And is the social fabric of our society a help or a hindrance when we strive to find out who we really are?

The loneliness and unhappiness which the heroine realizes she felt in her former "normal" life will resonate with many people: "*Später (nach dem Größerwerden der Kinder) war ich nie mehr glücklich gewesen. Alles veränderte sich auf eine trostlose Weise, und ich hörte auf, wirklich zu leben.*" It is fair to assume that these are the sentiments of Marlen Haushofer herself. If she felt she had stopped living and everything seemed *trostlos*, then *Die Wand* can also be construed as an attempt to explore lifestyle changes and alternative modes of living, however radical or counter cultural they might seem in relation to the status quo.

*Die Wand* raises a host of provocative questions: questions about the nature of western society, about our ability or inability to recognize who we are within that society, about the nature of happiness and finally questions about how harmony with the natural world could be reestablished. In the strictest sense *Die Wand* is speculative dystopian fiction, and in the best tradition of that genre, it persuasively suggests a way to find answers to our questions: perhaps the surest way to "break on through to the other side" resides in our lonely heroine's attempt to find her way back "*zu ihren urmenschlichen Instinkten und Fähigkeiten*".

# THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

## *Friday Film Fest Series*



## **Die Wand**

**By Julian Pölser**

**April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015**

**• 6:30 PM •**

**Film, Food & Discussion**

**Non-Members \$15, Members \$12**

**The German Society of PA**

**611 Spring Garden St.**

**215-627-2332**

Support provided in part by the  
Philadelphia Cultural Fund.



## Die Wand (2012)

### Credits:

**Director:** Julian Pölsler

**Country:** Austria

**Based on:** Die Wand by Marlen Haushofer (1962)

**Length:** 108 Minutes

**Cast:** Martina Gedeck

**Commentary:** Karl Moehlmann



### Der Albtraum

It seems like a nightmare. A woman travels with an elderly couple to their hunting lodge in the Austrian Alps. The couple leaves to do some errands in a nearby village. They don't return in the evening nor the next morning. Along with the dog which the couple had left with her, the woman sets out to look for them. Walking down the road which leads back to the village, they abruptly run into an invisible wall. It doesn't seem to consist of glass because nothing is reflected in it. *“Auf der anderen Seite der Wand, ich habe mir angewöhnt, das Ding die Wand zu nennen, den irgendeinen Namen musste ich ihm ja geben, da es nun einmal da war ...”*

The woman tries to get through in different directions but the wall seems impenetrable. Slowly she realizes that she is imprisoned in some mysterious way. A desperate escape attempt with the couple's car ends in a crash and the grim realization that no one can get in or out of this alpine territory that seems devoid of other human beings. The few people that she spots outside the wall look frozen and lifeless.

In time the woman adapts to living alone in this large scale prison. She begins to organize her survival, exploring her surroundings and starting to hunt. She plants potatoes and makes hay for the pregnant cow that she found and brought to the lodge. The dog, a cat, the cow, the calf and a white raven are the only creatures that keep her company in her involuntary hermitage. Her best friend among those companions is the dog *Luchs*.

Several seasons pass. Snow falls and *Donner und Blitz* storms batter her lodge. She is able to survive in relative tranquility until another human being appears at the upper mountain cabin where she spent her second summer with the cow, the calf and the dog. It is an evil man who wreaks havoc in her world. He kills the calf and also her beloved dog before she can get her gun and kill him. The motive for the brutality of this man remains unclear. *“Ich möchte wissen, warum der fremde Mann meine Tiere getötet hat. Ich werde es nie erfahren, vielleicht ist es auch besser so.”*

Shortly after this incident she starts writing a report about her entire experience. She starts writing in November of her third year in the mountains. She spends four

months writing throughout the winter until she has no more paper left. It leaves her at peace. *“Jetzt bin ich ganz ruhig. Ich sehe ein kleines Stück weiter. Ich sehe, dass dies noch nicht das Ende ist. Alles geht weiter. .. etwas Neues kommt heran, und ich kann mich ihm nicht entziehen.”* The cow will have another calf and maybe there will be young kittens again. After she finishes her diary on February 25 around 5 p.m. she goes outside to feed a white crow that she had befriended. *“Sie wartet schon auf mich”* are the last words of the book.

### Wirkungsgeschichte und Lesarten

Marlen Haushofer was born in 1920 in Frauenstein, Oberösterreich and died in 1970 in a hospital in Vienna, only 50 years old. She had been suffering from bone cancer in her last years. *Die Wand* is her most famous novel. It was published in 1963, first in Germany and then in Austria. Although she won the Arthurs Schnitzler-Price for her work, the novel received little national or international attention at that time. It took decades until her foreboding vision of human isolation became a *Weltbestseller*. In 1983 the newspaper *Die Frankfurter Rundschau* serialized the novel in fifty parts and captured the imagination of a large segment of the reading public in the process.

The growing feminist movement saw in Haushofer's heroine a protagonist of radical emancipation who exemplified female independence and strength. Haushofer's work was compared to Simone de Beauvoir's *The second Sex* and the latter's feminist existentialism. It is indicative that the only other human being inside the wall is a man who is portrayed as violent and evil. The contrasting images of the male aggressor and the female provider and protector were popular with the women's movement at that time.

The peace movement of the 80's recognized in the story a post-nuclear apocalypse in which a neutron bomb had destroyed almost all human life with no harm to the material world. And when the novel was presented again in the German broadcast *Lesen* and in a Brigitte edition in 2006 by Elke Heidenreich it shot to the top of the bestseller list. Haushofer's work achieved cult status in 2012 when the Austrian director Julian Pölsler decided to turn the book into a movie. Fifty years before it had been deemed *unverfilmbar*.

Martina Gedeck sustains and animates this movie with a marvelous solo performance. There is no dialog, only her monologue. There are no other actors except for the short scene with the couple in the beginning. Gedeck's countenance must register the entire spectrum of emotions experienced by the lonely heroine in the midst of all her struggles. Despite the sparse plot the movie maintains its tension from beginning to end. The viewer is inexorably drawn into the altered world of the *Ich-Erzählerin* as she narrates the nature of her isolated existence in a calm, almost detached tone.

The recent attention garnered by the book and the movie is probably due in no small way to the fact that it lends itself to so many different interpretations. There