



## International PR

WOLF Consultants

Michael Arnon | Gordon Spragg

hello@wolf-con.com

+49 178 547 0179

www.wolf-con.com

## German PR

Pressebüro Berlin

Patricia Bauermeister | Anton Lorenz

patricia.bauermeister@pr-bauermeister.de

anton.lorenz@pr-bauermeister.de

+49 30 34 35 18 28 | 27

## International Sales

Lucky Number

Ola Byszuk

ola@luckynumber.fr

+33 6 59 18 12 35

www.luckynumber.fr

## Production

Walker + Worm Film

info@w2-film.de

www.w2-film.de



# WHAT MARIELLE KNOWS

A FILM BY FRÉDÉRIC HAMBALEK

WAS MARIELLE WEISS – Germany – 87' – 1:1.85, Sound 5.1 – German, French



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## SYNOPSIS

Julia and Tobias seem to be the perfect couple. Yet behind the facade and designer kitchen, trouble is brewing. Their fragile balance is shattered when their daughter Marielle suddenly develops telepathic abilities, giving her the power to see and hear everything her parents do, day and night. The couple soon realizes the lies they've been telling each other will not get past Marielle anymore. As Julia and Tobias' most uncomfortable secrets are exposed, they engage in a manipulative game, leading to increasingly awkward, absurd situations and unleashing unexpected consequences...

# IN CONVERSATION WITH FRÉDÉRIC HAMBALEK

## INSPIRATIONS — FINDING MARIELLE

The initial inspiration for this film came a few years back, when someone showed me a baby monitor with a built-in camera, which then was a brand new thing. The image of this sleeping child, completely oblivious to the fact that it was being watched, somehow felt wrong to me. I started to realize the degree to which parents can run surveillance on their kids nowadays. What used to be “keeping an eye on” children has now gone so far as full-blown spying. Parents today have so many tools at their disposal – if they chose to, they can basically create a state of total surveillance around their kids. Once I made that observation, I started asking myself: What would happen if you reversed that power dynamic? What would parents do if they were monitored by their kids? Thinking about this idea created a lot of questions in my mind, about privacy, about how parents relate to their children and vice versa, about the power structures that exist and shift within a family.

Another thing that struck me and led me to this film, is how children ‘experience’ their parents. To a small child, their parents are virtually gods. They seem to know everything and can do anything. It’s only when starting to grow up that a child slowly realizes: these gods can make mistakes, too. They are struggling with life as well, much harder than we probably ever imagined as a kid. Marielle is going to get a crash course on all of this in the film, breaking some of her illusions, which is another aspect that adds weight to the story.

Telepathy came in much later during the execution of the idea, because I didn’t want technology to distract from these more existential themes.

## PRIVACY ERODED

The film is also about privacy, the questions we face around it as a wider society. It’s interesting to me that we seem to give up our privacy more and more, and to do it without asking too many questions. I think we shouldn’t forget with each step to ask how it’s changing us and how it’s changing our behavior.

If someone really did lose their privacy all of a sudden – all of it – how would they change as a person? Would they rebel against it, and how exactly? Would it be a bad thing all around? What would be the positives, if any?

I think that human beings would react in many different ways, ranging from funny to absurd to tragic to sad, and I wanted to draw out all of these aspects in the film. I like it when a situation or a scene can be many things at once. I don’t think about genre when crafting a story. I prefer to follow the idea where it takes me. To me, the high concept aspect is just there to kick off a search for deeper, more relevant questions. I wanted to lean into those complex situations that can be funny and dramatic at the same time.



## A BURNING LENS

In many ways, this couple, Julia and Tobias, is representative of a certain segment of the wealthy German and Western societies we live in, and the aspirations these societies promote.

They have their basic needs met and now they have time to worry: does my spouse still love me? What does my daughter think of me? How can I perform better at work?

These are the challenges I think a lot of people really face up to on a daily basis. But now Julia and Tobias have to answer to a higher power, so to speak, which adds weight and pressure to these interrogations. I wanted to put our everyday behavior under a burning lens.

We decided to create a slightly stylized version of the kind of place these characters would inhabit. This wasn't hard at all, because the minimalism you see in the film is just cooked into all of these modern, slick places. We shot everything except the publisher's office on location. I wanted to stay true to, but also magnify, certain aspects of our modern world.

## ACTORS

The main thing for me was casting the best actors available, and I was very lucky to work with Julia Jentsch and Felix Kramer, as well as the supporting cast. Laeni, who plays Marielle, had just turned 13 when we began filming. I was simply amazed by her skill.

We did a certain amount of preparation but I also didn't want to overdo it, because I wanted them to have their own ideas and stay as free as possible. There's just one thing I asked of them: be flexible and open for exploring. I had a lot of fun watching what they had in mind for a scene, and then egging them on to try the opposite of that or entirely different variations. The idea is to always try to find something I hadn't thought of before, something new.



## OPEN ENDINGS

Life for this family will go on in some way, and it was important to me to have an ending open enough to leave the audience a certain space for fantasy. In real life, not a lot of things will be "solved" or clarified for good, ever, especially when it comes to relationships.

Also, I wanted the last scene to really hit the core of this story in a cinematic way, opening itself up to complexity, while also staying simple, focused and straightforward.

## BIOGRAPHY

Born in Karlsruhe, Germany in 1986, he studied film and American Studies in Mainz and won a scholarship to attend the Middlebury Bread Loaf School of English in Vermont, USA. While studying, he made several short films. His first script won the 2016 Tankred Dorst Prize and his screenwriting has also been nominated for the Grimme-Preis and the German Television Awards. In 2020, his no-budget feature film Model Olimpia premiered at the Tallinn Black Nights Festival. What Marielle Knows is his second feature film.

## FILMOGRAPHY

WHAT MARIELLE KNOWS (WAS MARIELLE WEISS)  
2025 - 86 min - Berlinale Competition

MODEL OLIMPIA (MODELL OLIMPIA)  
2020 - 89 min - Tallin Black Nights

IN THE WOODS (IM WALD)  
2017 - 5 min

MOUNTAIN FEVER (BERGFIEBER)  
2016 - 8 min

THE THREE OF US (ZU DRITT)  
2013 - 12 min



## JULIA JENTSCH BIO

Julia Jentsch was born in Berlin in 1978 and attended the renowned Ernst Busch drama school. She began her theater career at the Münchner Kammerspiele, where she was a permanent member of the ensemble from 2001 to 2006. Her breakthrough as a film actress came in 2004 in Hans Weingartner's feature film *THE EDUKATORS (DIE FETTEN JAHRE SIND VORBEI.)* In 2005, Julia Jentsch appeared as Sophie Scholl in *SOPHIE SCHOLL – THE FINAL DAYS*, Marc Rothemund's Oscar® nominated film, for which she received a Berlinale Silver Bear, the German Film Award and was named Best European Film Actress. Julia Jentsch has since been in demand in Germany as well as internationally (*33 SENCES OF LIFE* by Malgorzata Szumowska, *I SERVED THE KING OF ENGLAND* by Jiri Menzel). Notable roles in recent years include Hermine Huntgeburth's *EFFIE BRIEST*, Margarethe von Trotta's *HANNAH ARENDT* or the highly acclaimed drama *24 WEEKS* by Anne Zohra Berrached. The film celebrated its world premiere at the Berlinale 2017 and was awarded the German Film Prize, Silver and the Gilde Prize. Jentsch's TV credits include the award-winning ARD TV mini-series *THE VANISHING (Das Verschwinden)* by Hans Christian Schmid, for which she was awarded the German Television Award for Best Actress in 2018, the lead role in ZDF series *OSTFRIESLANDKRIMI*, and acclaimed Sky series *PAGAN PEAK (Der Pass)* from 2019-2023, as well as the upcoming Austrian series *DRUNTER UND DRÜBER* for Amazon Prime. Other recent cinema appearances include the acclaimed film by Hermine Huntgeburth *LINDBERG! MACH DEIN DING* and *8 DAYS IN AUGUST* by Samuel Perriard.

## FELIX KRAMER BIO

Starting in 2018 with his portrayal of Inspector Kurt Grimmer, the lead role in German Netflix series *DOGS OF BERLIN*, East Berlin-born Felix Kramer has established himself as a leading actor of German film, TV and streaming. After training at the renowned Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts in Berlin, first theater engagements followed, including at the Staatstheater Stuttgart and the Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg. Kramer's TV roles include mystery crime series *ODERBRUCH (2024)* which reached over 13 million viewers, as well as the role of Tronte Nielsen in the internationally acclaimed Netflix series *DARK*. Felix Kramer is also regular presence on the big screen, with roles in films including Feo Aladag's war drama *INBETWEEN WORLDS (2014)*, which celebrated its world premiere in competition at the Berlinale, *BLACK BOX* by Asli Özge (2023), winner of the Best Screenplay award at the Rome Film Festival, *SOMEDAY WE'LL TELL EACH OTHER EVERYTHING* by Emily Atef, which premiered in competition at the Berlinale in 2024, and alongside Mads Mikkelsen in Nikolaj Arcel's historical drama *THE PROMISED LAND* which premiered in Competition at the Venice Film Festival in 2023. He is currently shooting the Netflix series *BONE PALACE* in Berlin.





## CAST

Julia Jentsch (Julia)  
Felix Kramer (Tobias)  
Laeni Geiseler (Marielle)  
Mehmet Ateşçi (Max)  
Moritz Treuenfels (Sören)

## CREDITS

Director - Frédéric Hambalek  
Screenplay - Frédéric Hambalek  
Cinematography - Alexander Griesser  
Editing - Anne Fabini  
Sound Design - Steffen Pfauth  
Production Design - Bartholomäus Martin Kleppek  
Casting - Ulrike Müller, Anne Walcher  
Producers - Philipp Worm, Tobias Walker  
Co-Producer - Frédéric Hambalek  
Commissioning Editor - Jörg Schneider (ZDF)





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