

BLACKBOX FILM PRESENTS

WELCOME TO SODOM



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SOUND DESIGN & SCORE HEIMWERK AUDIO | JÜRGEN KLOIHOFFER | FELIX STURMBERGER | MASTERING MARTIN LÖCKER | COLOR GRADING CHRISTIAN KERMER | PRODUCTION ACCOUNTANT SUSANNE KRÖNES | PRODUCER ROLAND SCHROTTHOFER
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER CHRISTIAN KRÖNES | LINE PRODUCER GAMELI FILMS AMANORTEY KISSEH | PRODUCED BY BLACKBOX FILM & MEDIENPRODUKTION GMBH

BLACKBOX
FILM & MEDIEN

Syndicado

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Das Land
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→ Kultur, Europa,
Außenbeziehungen

WELCOME TO SODOM

A FILM BY

FLORIAN WEIGENSAMER AND CHRISTIAN KRÖNES

92 MIN. | AUSTRIA | 16:9 | AC3

WELCOME-TO-SODOM.COM



WORLD PREMIERE: CPH:DOX*, COPENHAGEN

MAIN COMPETITION DOX:AWARD 2018





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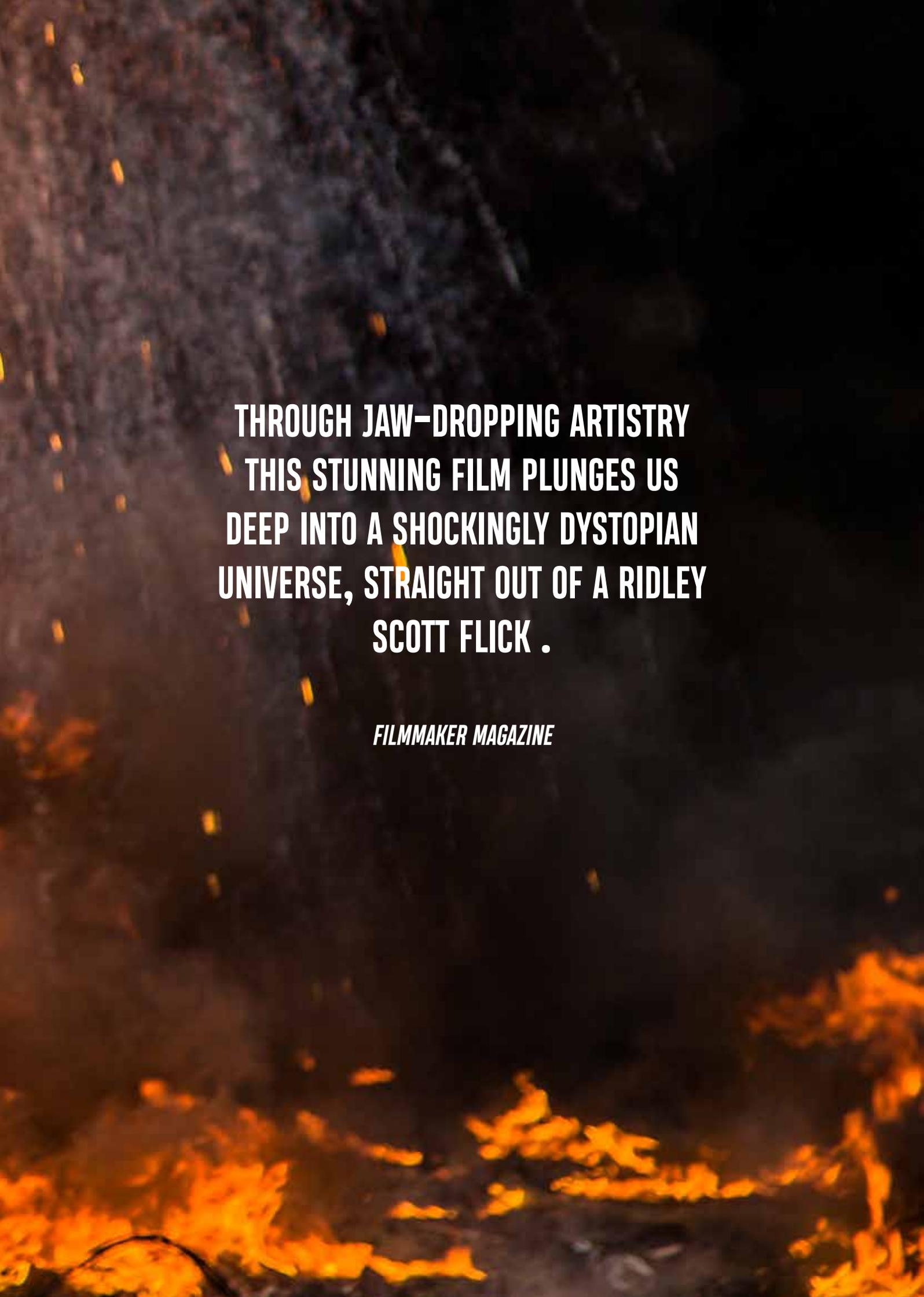
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**THROUGH JAW-DROPPING ARTISTRY
THIS STUNNING FILM PLUNGES US
DEEP INTO A SHOCKINGLY DYSTOPIAN
UNIVERSE, STRAIGHT OUT OF A RIDLEY
SCOTT FLICK .**

FILMMAKER MAGAZINE

LOGLINE

Agbogbloshie, Accra is the largest electronic waste dump in the world. About 6000 women, men and children live and work here. They call it „Sodom“. Every year about 250.000 tons of sorted out computers, smartphones, air conditions tanks and other devices from a far away electrified and digitalized world end up here. Illegally.

Cleverly interwoven, the destinies of the various protagonists unravel the complex story of this apocalyptic society. Their very personal inner voices allow a deep insight into life and work at this place – and of Sodom itself.

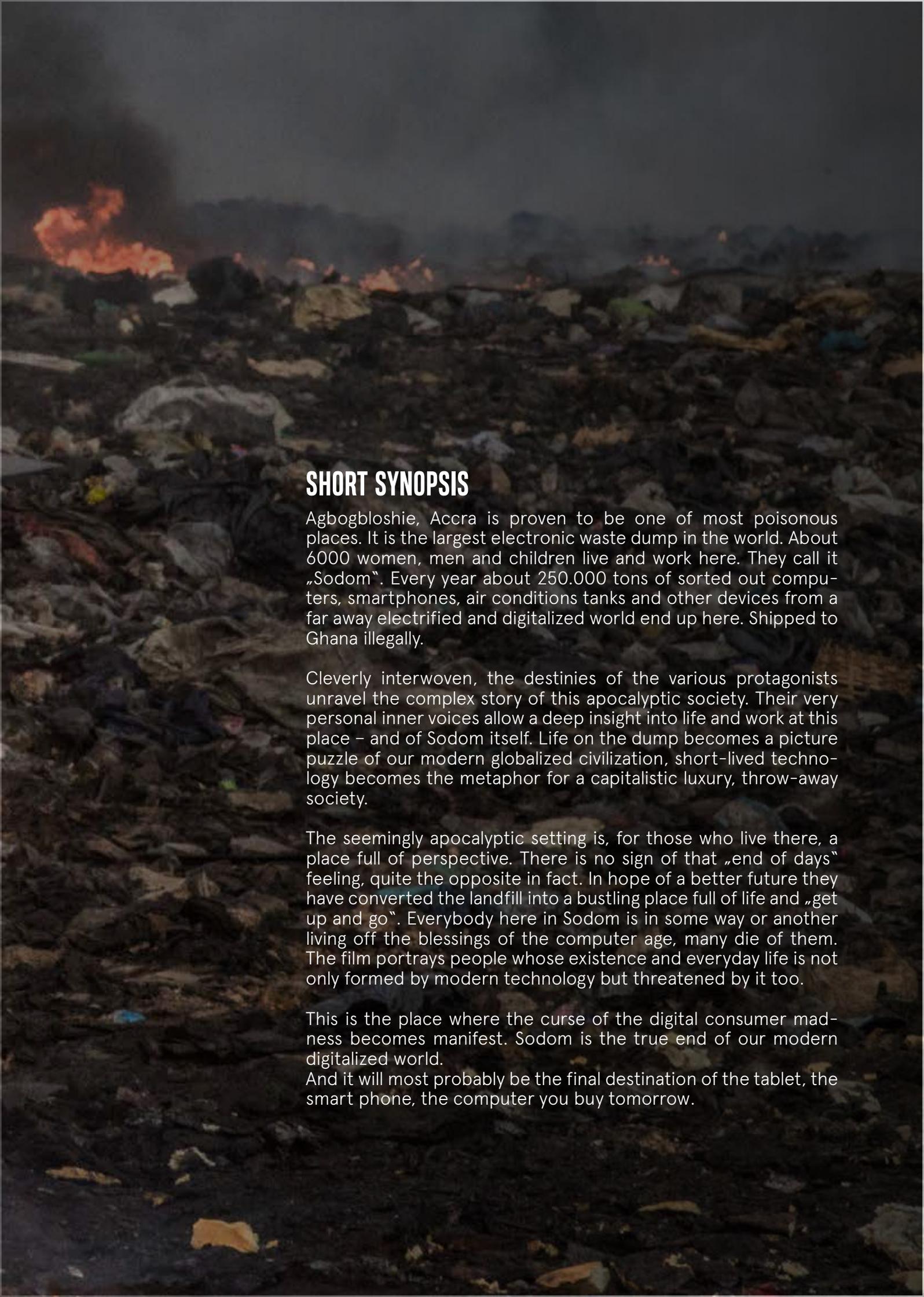
And you can be sure – it will most probably be the final destination of the smartphone, the computer you buy today.



**SODOM IS LIKE A BEAST.
SOMETIMES YOU KILL THE
BEAST. SOMETIMES THE
BEAST KILLS YOU.**

MOHAMMED ABUBAKAR





SHORT SYNOPSIS

Agbogbloshie, Accra is proven to be one of most poisonous places. It is the largest electronic waste dump in the world. About 6000 women, men and children live and work here. They call it „Sodom“. Every year about 250.000 tons of sorted out computers, smartphones, air conditions tanks and other devices from a far away electrified and digitalized world end up here. Shipped to Ghana illegally.

Cleverly interwoven, the destinies of the various protagonists unravel the complex story of this apocalyptic society. Their very personal inner voices allow a deep insight into life and work at this place – and of Sodom itself. Life on the dump becomes a picture puzzle of our modern globalized civilization, short-lived technology becomes the metaphor for a capitalistic luxury, throw-away society.

The seemingly apocalyptic setting is, for those who live there, a place full of perspective. There is no sign of that „end of days“ feeling, quite the opposite in fact. In hope of a better future they have converted the landfill into a bustling place full of life and „get up and go“. Everybody here in Sodom is in some way or another living off the blessings of the computer age, many die of them. The film portrays people whose existence and everyday life is not only formed by modern technology but threatened by it too.

This is the place where the curse of the digital consumer madness becomes manifest. Sodom is the true end of our modern digitalized world.

And it will most probably be the final destination of the tablet, the smart phone, the computer you buy tomorrow.



SYNOPSIS

„Sodom is like a Beast. Sometimes you kill the Beast. Sometimes the Beast kills you.“
Mohammed Abubakar

Agbogbloshie, Accra.

Not too long ago it used to be untouched swamp-land. Today it is the largest electronic waste dump in the world. It is proven to be one of most poisonous places on the planet. About 6000 women, men and children live and work here. They call it „Sodom“.

Every year about 250.000 tons of sorted out computers, smart phones, air conditions tanks and other devices from a far away electrified and digitalized world end up here. Shipped to Ghana illegally.

The demand in the First World for the newest electronic accessories is exploding. Producers are seeing their turnovers reach record heights. Computers, televisions and notebooks are already „out“ after a short period of time and quickly become classed as junk. Hundreds of

thousands of them end up in Ghana where children and youths work away in the open air smashing up this electronic junk. In the huge clouds of dark black smoke rising up into the skies new raw materials are being created. One man's „clean“ business is another man's daily dose of poison.

Everybody here in Sodom is in some way or another living off the blessings of the computer age, many die of them. And yet it is a place full of hope and joy. The film portrays people whose existence and everyday life is not only formed by modern technology but threatened by it too.

The seemingly apocalyptic setting is, for those who live there, a place full of perspective. There is no sign of that „end of days“ feeling, quite the opposite in fact. This electronic graveyard attracts people from all parts of the country, they even come from neighbouring countries for the promise of a modest income. In hope of a better future they have converted the landfill into a bustling place full of life and „get up and go“.



„Welcome to Sodom“ is a journey into a dystopian world where different destinies fuse into a uniquely strange community. We get to meet Awal, the master of the fireplace, where mountains of cables stripped from monitors and computers are waiting for burning and smelting. D-Boy, one of the workers on the fire, is the secret star of Sodom. A wooden shack serves as his studio where he records his rap songs. Hiding over on the edge of the landfill is a student of medicine who had to leave his country because of his homosexuality and finds himself now living on the edge of society in conservative Catholic Ghana. A Christian missionary on a futile and unsuccessful mission delivers strong preaches day-in and day-out to the thousands of Muslims on the site. A young girl struggles with her own identity. Dressed as a boy she can get better paid work – dragging a magnet around the burnt earth around the fires she manages to pick up the smallest remnants of metal waste.

Cleverly interwoven, the destinies of the various protagonists unravel the complex story of this apocalyptic society. Their very personal inner voices allow a deep insight into life and work at this place – and of Sodom itself. Life on the dump becomes a picture puzzle of our modern

globalized civilization, short-lived technology becomes the metaphor for a capitalistic luxury, throw-away society.

Sodom may well be one of the most toxic and inhospitable places on this earth, but it is also a wonderful universe full of ingenuity and resourcefulness, oozing with imagination and human skillfulness. The momentous dump is also a recycling plant, a place where things meet their end and a place where new things come into being.

The documentary „Welcome to Sodom“ allows viewers to see behind the scenes of Europe’s largest e-waste dump – in the middle of Africa. The focus is not primarily on the mechanisms of the electronic junk trade, but on the lives and destinies of people stuck on the back end of the global value-added chain.

This is the place where the curse of the digital consumer madness becomes manifest. Sodom is the true end of our modern digitalized world. And it will most probably be the final destination of the tablet, the smart phone, the computer you buy tomorrow.

STATEMENT BY THE TEAM

The demand for the newest electronic accessories is exploding in Europe and the US. Producers are regularly topping their turnover records. Mobile phones, LCD TVs, notebooks and other electronic devices are often „out“ after a short period of time due to changes in fashion and planned obsolescence and thus become junk. Hundreds of thousands of these devices end up in Ghana, where children and youths break down the electronic junk amongst swathes of thick black smoke. A „clean“ business for some, a toxic everyday life for others. In this film we wish to touch on a most controversial and current topic: The waste disposal of millions of tons of western electronic junk in the “Third World”. It is this electronic junk from an un-known, distant world, the accomplishments of the Golden West that keep this microcosm alive and may soon lead to its downfall. The effects of the in-part, illegal export of electronic junk on the microcosm of Agbogbloshie in Ghana is shown in illustrative, theatrical episodes.

We spent over three months with the people of Sodom on the dump – one of the most toxic places on the planet. It was not easy and it took a long time for us to gain their trust and to be allowed so close to them and for them to open up to us. We did not just want to scratch the surface and deliver shocking images designed to evoke pity like the many other reports on the subject have done. In order to understand this place and the life in this, perhaps anti-place might be a better description, it requires a deeper look to gain a deeper insight.

It was this closeness that was necessary for „Welcome to Sodom“ to give a voice to those people whose existence and everyday life is formed and threatened by modern technology. That was the only way of seeing and showing this apocalyptic world from their own perspective. To get an idea from a completely different kind of existence, at the bottom of the value-added chain.

With the film we hope to make users reflect on their desire to always have the latest devices in hand. This film is trying to close the gap somewhat between these two worlds. „Welcome to Sodom“ focuses on a subject of highest topicality. We hope this film appeals to a young and critical cinema audience and will bring them to reflect on their own purchasing behavior and sensitize them against the current doctrines of our throwaway culture. We are certain that this subject has great potential for a provocative, open and challenging discussion and creates multifarious reflections.



Q & A WITH THE DIRECTORS

YOUR FIRST SHOT OF AGBOGBLOSHIE REVEALS A SCRAPYARD WITH HERDS OF SHEEP AND GOATS GRAZING ON IT AS IF IT WERE A MEADOW. NATURE COLLIDES WITH A PARTICULARLY REPULSIVE FACET OF CIVILIZATION AS THE TOXIC SCRAP OF CONSUMER MANIA IS PASSED ON TO PEOPLE WHO POSSESS NOTHING, WITH UTTER INDIFFERENCE AND NO CONCERN FOR THEIR ENVIRONMENT. WAS IT THIS COLLISION WHICH GAVE THE LOCATION THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC FORCE WHICH PROMPTED YOU TO MAKE IT THE SUBJECT OF A FILM?

To some extent it was definitely the visually striking contrasts of this gigantic scrapyard, but it was also the history of the place. If the stories about it are to be believed, not so very long ago it must have been a beautiful lagoon. It has descended into its present condition in just a few years. People say you shouldn't stay there for more than two hours, because it's one of the most poisonous places in the world. We spent almost 2 months there; we wanted to give a face and voice to each of the people living and working there, at the lowest and filthiest end of the value-added chain in our technological age.

In a way, Ghana can be seen as symbolic of dystopian society. There are a few super-rich individuals whose lives are completely sealed off from the majority of people: they have to survive on a dollar or two a day. At the same time, it's a comparatively wealthy country which is sometimes called the Switzerland of Africa. That's why the capital, Accra, exerts a magical attraction on people from the poorer north and the economically weaker neighbouring countries, who move there in the hope of forging new lives for themselves. What everybody in Ghana has in common is the impending ecological collapse of the country. Agbogbloshie is only one of the hot spots, though it's a particularly dramatic one. Over 6000 people live on the electronic scrapyard in the center of Accra. The river that flows through the site is completely dead: the water is extremely toxic... but it is used to irrigate the surrounding fields. Just a kilometer further on the river flows into the Atlantic, contaminating the fish stocks there.

IT IS CLEARLY FAR FROM A COMFORTABLE AND EASY PLACE TO PERFORM RESEARCH. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF IT?

When you set foot in Agbogbloshie it's an absolutely devastating experience. The noise, the working conditions, the filth; you constantly have a metallic taste in your mouth, and you simply can't get your bearings in that vast space. It all began in the early years of this century when secondhand electronic appliances were exported to Ghana as part of a development aid project. Inventive business people quickly realized exporting scrap like that could be a good business on the side. According to the Basel Convention, exporting electronic scrap from the EU is forbidden, so the appliances are officially registered as secondhand. The containers arrive full of monitors and computers, and nobody can possibly check if any of it is actually usable. It's a very cheap way to get rid of the stuff. Disposing of it in Europe in line with regulations would be many times more expensive.

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE YOU TO FORM A PICTURE OF THE WAY THIS MICRO-SOCIETY ACTUALLY WORKS?

At first the place strikes you as absolutely chaotic, and it took me a long time to understand that everything is in fact organized there. Every part of the land belongs to someone, and everyone has a well-defined job. What the people have developed in that scrapyard is a fascinating social structure.

If you take a closer look and focus on the organization, the first apocalyptic image fades into the background. You discover that for the people there, this place is full of perspective: it's a place to celebrate the joy of life and incredible creativity. In the apparent chaos of the scrapyard we discovered a smooth-running organization, an orderly system, and we met people who practice recycling in the best sense of the word. The most important raw materials that can be recovered from the electronic scrap are iron, aluminium, and above all copper, which is released when the cable installation is melted off. One way or another, these raw materials are returned to the economic cycle of the international market.

AT THE VERY BEGINNING HAVE YOU BEEN CONFRONTED BY THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION OF HOW TO APPROACH A SUR-REAL PLACE IN DOCUMENTARY STYLE?

It would be impossible to comprehend Agbogbloshie in all its dimensions, either in pictures or words. We wanted to convey to the audience the same feelings we had when we first arrived there, when we walked through the place: the sensation of discovering, looking around and not understanding.

YOU'VE CHOSEN A SYMBOLIC, ALMOST FICTITIOUS INTRODUCTION. ARCHAIC-LOOKING CLOSE SHOTS OF THE SKIN OF A CHAMELEON, WITH A VOICE OFF RECITING A TEXT WHICH HAS A MYTHOLOGICAL TONE. WHERE DOES THE SYMBOLISM OF THE CHAMELEON COME FROM?

The chameleon isn't so fictitious at all. A few decades ago the creatures were endemic here. We also chose this introduction because the place doesn't come across as real. It seems to be situated outside our world, beyond our imagination. On the West Coast of Africa there is a lot of symbolism associated with the chameleon, with many creation myths and stories surrounding it.

These days the chameleon is almost extinct in Ghana. And the mythical stories which surrounded the animals for hundreds of years are also slowly being forgotten, because of the cultural and technological exports from the West. Just as the natural paradise is being destroyed, so is the mythological one. It's sinking under a mountain of monitors and dismantled computers. So we thought the story finally had to be told, especially to people here in Europe.





IN TERMS OF CAMERAWORK, YOU'VE CHOSEN TO USE VERY LONG SHOTS OF CERTAIN ACTIVITIES, AND ALSO TO MAKE THE PHYSICALITY OF THE WORK EXTREMELY TANGIBLE; I'M THINKING OF THE CHILD COLLECTING METAL WITH A MAGNET, AND THE BURNING OF THE BALLS OF CABLES.

Christian Kermer's subtle camerawork is what makes it possible for the audience to grasp this apocalyptic side. In order to understand this non-place, you have to look deeper. That can't be achieved by using images which are shocking or – even worse – which bestow aesthetic appeal on poverty. We wanted to submerge the audience in this unreal setting and help people feel what living and working in such a relentless place really means.

THE BURNING OF CABLES, THE FLAMES AND THE SWATHES OF SMOKE – IT ALL PRODUCES EXTREMELY SPECTACULAR FOOTAGE. EVEN IF YOU WANT TO DISTANCE YOURSELF FROM SUPERFICIAL TV DOCUMENTARIES, THE SPECTACULAR MUST STILL EXERT A TEMPTATION. HOW CAN THAT BE RESISTED?

That was definitely the most difficult balancing act: on the one hand, to show reality, but at the same time never to become speculative. The impressions you get there are so visually powerful that the images are inevitably drastic. Remaining at the same level as the people in our narrative wasn't easy by any means. By using long shots and wide shots we attempted to dispel the dramatic aspect, to move away from pointing a finger and to get closer to a process of discovery that each member of the audience experiences individually. Christian Kermer performed this balancing act with the camerawork, and later with the editing, in a very sensitive way.

YOU MADE THE FUNDAMENTAL CHOICE NOT TO HAVE ANYONE SPEAKING ON CAMERA; THERE ARE ONLY VOICES OFF. HOW DID THE TEXTS COME ABOUT, ESPECIALLY THOSE SPOKEN BY THE YOUNGER PROTAGONISTS?

It wouldn't have been possible to have those statements made spontaneously on camera. After all, when you're faced with certain questions you need time to think about them. We gave our protagonists issues to consider and recorded their answers the following day. Recording sound there is quite a job anyway. The constant noise is hard to imagine.

We always chose Fridays and Sundays, which are the religious holidays of the two largest groups of people there; that meant there wasn't so much going on. We would head away from the dump to a henhouse, a tin shed, and we moved the hens out temporarily so we could do the sound recording.



WHAT WERE YOUR FEELINGS WHEN YOU LEFT AGBOGBLOSHIE?

When you spend so much time there, and you develop close relationships with people, it's really upsetting to leave again. While we were there we were certainly able to help in a few emergency situations, and to provide a bit of support. You leave the country knowing that the people there have no choice; they have to stay, and you can't give them any sustainable assistance. The most difficult moment emotionally was definitely when one woman asked us to take her daughter with us. How desperate would a mother have to be, to entrust her child to a stranger? She couldn't really understand why it wasn't possible. Being unable to help her was a very oppressive feeling.

HAS WELCOME TO SODOM BEEN YOUR BIGGEST PROJECT IN TERMS OF INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE?

We're living in a globalized world, and we can't isolate ourselves. But the gap between the First and the Third World is getting bigger all the time. Political forces are promoting activities in those countries to give the people new perspectives – purely so they will not set off towards Europe – and then development aid is reduced. And it's becoming harder and harder to make difficult films at international locations. With few exceptions, the focus for subsidies and film financing is on a very local sector. Feel-good cinema and tourist aspects are in the foreground. It's hard to make critical documentary films. But I think as filmmakers it is our task to confront the audience with the truth, even when it's uncomfortable.

Interview by Karin Schiefer / Austrian Film Commission

FILMMAKER BIOS

FLORIAN WEIGENSAMER – DIRECTOR

After his studies of Political Science and Communication Science at the University of Vienna Florian gained first journalistic and writing experience at Austria's foremost news magazine „profil“. 1995 he joins the editorial team of Vienna News International where he directed and designed numerous reports and documentaries for European broadcasters. Later on, together with Christian Krönes, he exclusively produced and directed political and social reports and documentaries from Mid/Eastern Europe and Asia for arte. At the same time he worked on film and multimedia content for museums and exhibitions. After collaborating with various artists in different media in San Francisco for more than a year he became founding member, author and director of the Blackbox-Collective in 2006.

ROLAND SCHROTTHOFFER – PRODUCER

Theater-, Film- and Media Studies, Psychology and Business Management at the University in Vienna. During his studies he has already developed and worked on several Theater and Film projects. His short film „Grenzgänger“ has been decorated by the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation ORF with the „Shorts on Screen Award“. As producer and author Roland is a long-term member of the Blackbox-Collective since 2011.

CHRISTIAN KRÖNES – DIRECTOR

During his film and directing studies he was able to accompany and work alongside the legendary DOPs, Vittorio Storaro und Sven Nykvist. In 1985 he joined the Austrian Television and directed a variety of TV formats. In 1990, Christian Krönes started his work for major German broadcasting companies as well as setting up a media agency in Vienna. His work as a consultant and freelance producer allowed him to engage with renowned film production companies. Work on a film project with Sir Peter Ustinov, soon developed into a deep friendship and resulted in years of artistic collaboration for TV and stage productions. Sir Peter Ustinov's wish for Christian Krönes to work for the Ustinov Foundation was soon accepted and so he became the personal advisor and manager for Sir Peter Ustinov up until his death in 2004. In 2006, Christian Krönes formed Blackbox Film and with over 30 years of experience in the film branch is now active as managing director and producer.

CHRISTIAN KERMER – CINEMATOGRAPHY

Studies of Information Design in Graz focusing on moving images. He gained invaluable experience at the renowned Motion Design Studio shotshotshot in Graz. Further studies of Multi-MediaArt specializing in film culminated in a Masters degree graduation at FH Salzburg 2014. He quickly established a remarkable reputation as freelance cutter and DOP, working for well established Film Production Companies and popular TV programmes. Since 2014 Christian is as DOP and editor member of the Blackbox-Collective.





BLACKBOX FILM & MEDIENPRODUKTION GMBH

The company is internationally active and has brought together a team of inter-disciplinary media companies and filmmakers. The main focus of their production work is on documentary films. The team's years of extensive experience form the basis for the creation of their documentary films on historical, cultural and socio-political issues. Blackbox's uncompromising commitment to highest quality standards has enabled them to establish themselves not only as a producer of cinematic productions, but also as a partner for international broadcasting companies. They have set their sights on opening up unusual perspectives for a wide-ranging audience and setting new standards with their innovative productions.

FILMOGRAPHY

WELCOME TO SODOM

(Documentary Film, 92 min., 2018)

A GERMAN LIFE

(Documentary Film, 113 min., 2016)

„I ALWAYS GOT AWAY WITH IT ...“

(Documentary Film, 30 min., 2014)

TIME JOURNEY

(Documentary Film, 45/30 min., 2011)

GOLA ZAREEN – THE WORLD IN A BALL

(Documentary Film, 82/52 min., 2010)

CREDITS

DIRECTOR: Florian Weigensamer, Christian Krönes

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: Christian Kermer

ORIGINAL SCRIPT: Roland Schrotthofer, Florian Weigensamer

EDITOR: Christian Kermer

ORIGINAL SCORE, SOUND DESIGN: heimwerk.audio (Jürgen Klohofer, Felix Sturmberger)

MASTERING: Martin Löcker

LINE PRODUCER: Kisseih Amanortey / Gameli Films Ltd.

PRODUCED BY: Blackbox Film & Medienproduktion GmbH.

TECHNICAL DETAILS

Genre: Documentary

Runtime: 92 min.

Original Language: English

Exhibition Format: DCP

Aspect - Ratio: HD - 16:9

Frames/sec: 25

Color: Color

Sound Mix: AC3

FURTHER INFORMATION

Country: Austria

Filming Location: Accra, Ghana

Time of Production: 2015 - 2018



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