



# Anamnesis

a film by Chris Wright and Stefan Kolbe  
111 min, Germany 2021

Ma.ja.de Filmproduktion in co-production with ZDF/3sat  
Funded by MDM, Kulturstiftung Sachsen and Creative Europe Media

# Anamnesis

**Anamnesis** (noun):

1. a recalling to mind (reminiscence)
2. a preliminary case history of a medical or psychiatric patient

## Logline

How do you picture a man who has murdered?

A film about the story of Stefan S. and the limits of our imagination.

## Short Synopsis

The filmmakers first meet Stefan in 2015, in the therapy ward of Brandenburg Prison. Their first impression is of a polite, shy man. A warder tells them Stefan is an ice-cold woman-killer.

The filmmakers follow him through the last years of his prison term.

They face some uncomfortable questions. Can anyone really know what is going on inside this man? The part of the protagonist is taken by a puppet, the scenes shift into theatre.

Truth and falsehood blend in a cascade of presumption.

## Synopsis

The filmmakers first meet Stefan in 2015, in the therapy ward of Brandenburg Prison. Together, they are part of the therapy group *Masculinity and Identity*. Their first impression of a polite, shy man is quickly called into question by one of the warders – he tells them Stefan is an ice-cold woman-killer.

The filmmakers follow him through the last four years of his prison term. Stefan completes the modules of the therapy programme, one of the most progressive in Europe for the treatment of violent criminals and sex offenders. His release approaches. Increasingly, Wright and Kolbe ask themselves some uncomfortable questions: Can anyone really know what is going on inside this man? What can we really understand of his crime? How effective can any treatment for toxic masculinity be, in this world behind bars? And what are they really doing with this difficult protagonist?

Stefan S. does not want to be recognizable in the film. The filmmakers move scenes they have shot into a theatre space. The part of the protagonist is taken by a puppet, manipulated by two female puppeteers. The film moves between forms, at the limits of representation. Truth and falsehood blend in a cascade of presumption.



## Directors' statement

It was a long and difficult process to arrive at this film. What kept us going was the sense that we couldn't carry on making films like before.

After our last feature *Priests*, we were both burnt out and had lost faith in our form of documentary. For some 20 years, we had tried to get as close as possible to our protagonists (leading the film critic Matthias Dell to coin the phrase "proximity film"). Now, we doubted whether that method would get us any further. We were tired of delving so intensely into people's lives, then disappearing out of them.

What's more, we had the feeling that audiences didn't understand our approach. We had repeatedly debated with people

who accused us of not presenting our subjects objectively, from several perspectives. They apparently hadn't recognized that for us, objectivity was never the aim; we see the documentary process as the subjective crystallization of our experiences in dealing with the world.

When researching our projects, we listen for resonance, look for surfaces that reflect our questions. This time, we found that in the world of therapy. On one hand, we recognized ourselves in the patients (the first working title for this film was *Supervision*). But we also identified with the therapists, who form a kind of intimacy with people in the course of their work and – to process this experience on a personal level – must establish a professional role for themselves.

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We heard of rapid advances being made in a field that therapists have long shied away from, and which is politically controversial – therapy for offenders, in particular for violent criminals and sex offenders in prisons.

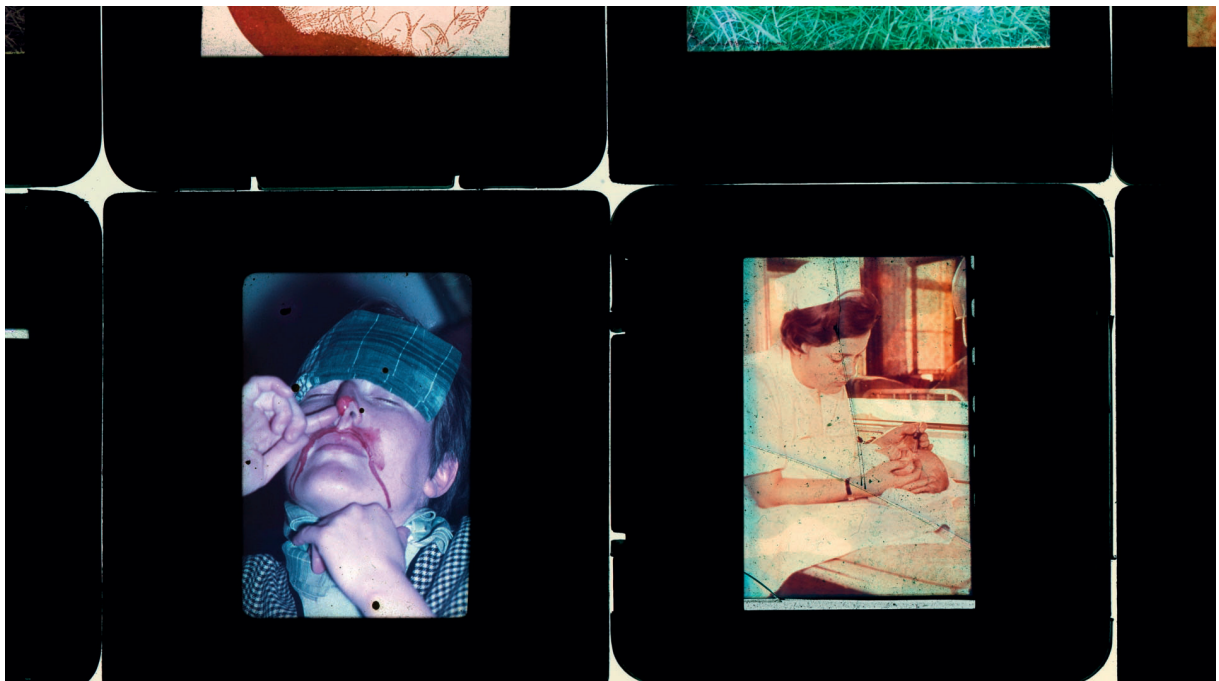
We first met Stefan S. in Brandenburg Prison, in the group *Masculinity and Identity*. Every Friday, for 10 weeks, we joined these sessions. We observed the men, but also observed ourselves. What went through our minds, confronted with these men who have committed crimes we could barely imagine? We realized that these imaginings and pre-conceptions must be a major part of the film.

Stefan S. was reluctant about being filmed. With his speech defect, he is often difficult to understand and he leaves long pauses. Closeness as a filmic approach was out of the question.

Puppets are often used in therapy situations

to allow patients to step back from their experiences and see the wider picture. For a while, we had been curious about two comments from a theatre director we know who has also worked with puppets. When a puppet comes to life, he said, you have to believe it. But nothing can be so dead as a puppet.

We followed Stefan for more than four years, but to this day he is as opaque to us as a puppet. We have often doubted whether the therapists have more insight than us. Does Stefan pose a danger, now he has been released? We can only believe in this system, with its psychologists, instruments, evaluations, judges, recommendations and counter-recommendations. After this film we are left with a feeling of unease. That is linked to our powerlessness. What can we really know about ourselves and, in particular, about others? Confronted with our conceptions of what is “evil”, we see that our options are limited: we can only show faith, and live with it.





## Directors

### Biography Chris Wright

\*1972 in Bolton/UK

Chris Wright was born in the Northern English town of Bolton, studied in Cambridge and then at film school in Babelsberg. Since the mid-90s, he's lived in Berlin, working as an editor and documentary maker.

His recent credits include Salomé Jashi's *Taming the Garden* (Sundance, Berlinale Forum 2021) and Thomas Heise's *Heimat is a Space in Time*, which won him a nomination for the VG Bildkunst Editing Award. In 2017 he won the German Camera Prize in the category best feature-length editing for Susanne Binniger's *Fighter*. He teaches the documentary course at the German Film and Television Academy (dff) and works as editing consultant on documentaries and fiction films.

### Biography Stefan Kolbe

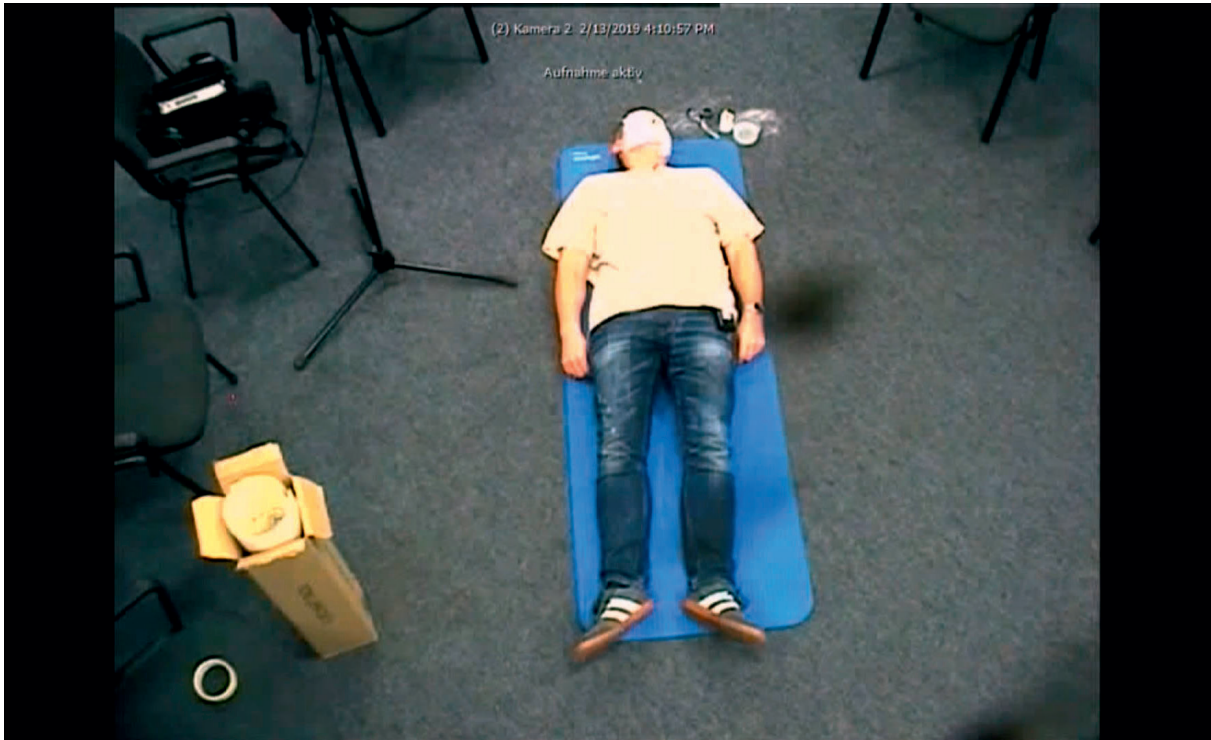
\*1972 in Halle an der Saale/GDR

Kolbe worked as a newspaper photographer and journalist and studied at Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen Konrad Wolf in Potsdam-Babelsberg.

He works as a freelance documentary-maker and cameraman and lives in Franzigmark, Berlin and Uckermark.

## Filmography

- 2021 *Anamnesis*, 111 min, doc
- 2016 *Mother's Joy*, 40 min, doc
- 2014 *Priests*, 90 min, doc
- 2010 *The Home*, 87 min, doc
- 2010 *The Disciple*, 29 min, short doc
- 2006 *Das Block*, 75 min, doc
- 2003 *The Progress of Happiness*, 68 min, doc
- 1999 *Nernich – Nowhere Nothing*, 76 min, doc
- 1997 *Bread & Pickle* (with Robert Jäger), 42 min, doc



## Interview with Steven Feelgood, Head of the Social Therapy Wing of Brandenburg Prison

**The Wing is housed in a separate building inside the prison walls. It has room for 80 violent criminals and sex offenders, who live in one-bed cells in a group structure.**

*One thing is unusual in the Therapy Wing – you refer to the prisoners as clients.*

That's right, we call them clients. So the distinction is clear, that this is a Therapy Wing, not just the usual prison structure. The aim is that the clients feel part of the therapeutic process, and not just like normal prisoners.

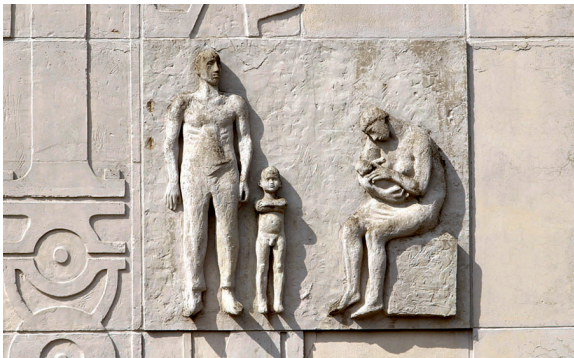
*What happens during the therapy process?*

It's a multi-modular programme, with different phases of treatment. The main module is our self-management group. It takes place twice a week, with up to 8 men. Each module covers various themes related to the risk factors for violent or sexual criminal behaviours. One expectation we have of the men is that they don't just sit there passively and listen. It's not like school. They have

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to interact and we try to teach them particular skills. One of those skills is self-reflection. They tell us their biography, their crime is integrated into the whole life story. For many, it's the first chance they've had to tell their personal story and this process is always throws up conflicts.

We have to proceed very carefully, so the men don't feel they're being cross-examined. They've already been through all that and we can't slip into the role of prosecutors or the police. We are part of the criminal justice system, and our clients are well aware of that. The big challenge we face is to push that aside, so the therapeutic process is also possible inside the justice system.



In the past, therapists focused on the concrete circumstances of the crime and making the men confess everything. Coming clean was something they often talked about. Today, we don't expect them to always tell the truth. I think that would be asking too much of them. It just has to be enough. In the end, it's healthy for people to lie. They are protecting themselves. If I lie, I know I've done something I might feel ashamed of. The clients who don't lie, who tell us everything, they can be very problematic.

Firstly, they can't protect themselves. And secondly, they tell us everything so freely that maybe they don't feel guilty at all. Maybe they think they did everything right.

*So lies are naturally a part of these stories they tell? Is there an intrinsic truth to these stories?*

That's a philosophical question and in my opinion – yes, there is a truth, independent of us and how we see things. But it's quite possible that we won't learn this truth, maybe just parts of it. Because people were involved, and people always tell their own stories, which are more or less true. As psychologists, we are relatively good at speculating, but we shouldn't be so arrogant to assume that we can tell exactly what happened, what it felt like, what he thought. I think that's impossible. It's always speculation in part.

That's particularly true of these very serious crimes; we can't explain them. Judges and experts called in for evaluations try to do this. They want to explain every single step, because they have to prove intent to kill. But it's a fact that in every crime, one factor is the immediate situation, where so many things come together. In one case, there's a murder, in another, it's grievous bodily harm. It's very difficult for our justice system to deal with this. Courts and investigators need clear lines, so they can show responsibility.

*I have the feeling that, faced with a crime like this, it's only human to ask, Why?*

Yes, why? Exactly!

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*But is there any answer?*

I don't think so. Or I think there are answers, but they always leave us dissatisfied, as therapists and especially as a society. Someone says, I was so angry I killed her... Who is really satisfied with that, even if it's true? Everyone else will think, I've been really angry in the past too, but I didn't kill anyone! It's always about the overall situation: being angry and all the other factors that come together. It's a bit like a puzzle. And in the whole context, anger can explain something. But only half-explain it.

Most of us aren't happy with these answers and at the end of the day we might say, they are sick, they are sick sex offenders. But that's not an answer either, it's a label, nothing more.

In therapy, I try not to spend too much time on these questions. We look at the concrete circumstances in the immediate run-up to the crime and work on steps where the client can take responsibility. In the case of Stefan S., how come he was in the flat? He says, I climbed through the window – that's something a therapist can work with. I stole underwear and had an unhealthy relationship to this woman – that's something to work with in therapy. These are the really important things. That's where Stefan S. has total responsibility.

I know that society sometimes thinks we concentrate only on the men, but that's not true. We have access to the case files and we see the misery that victims suffered, how they were killed, or how women and children were abused. If children were involved, many colleagues here have chil-

dren of their own and you have to be able to separate off those personal feelings in this job. You can never forget the victims... That's also a burden we have to carry.

Our goal is that the men never re-offend after a possible release. If we make mistakes in our assessments, it can have serious consequences for the men and for society.



*And how do you cope with that responsibility?*

We have to remember that we can never arrive at a perfect decision, it is always an assessment. With the training and the instruments we have, we can arrive at relatively good decisions, based on research. If I do everything according to the manual, to the best of my knowledge, then I can mostly sleep well at night. But there is always a risk. It remains informed guesswork.

But what also helps is that in the release process, the justice system divides responsibility. We write reports, the state prosecutor writes a report, there is an external evaluation, in the courtroom there is at least one other judge involved in the ruling, the prisoner has a defence lawyer calling everything into question and at the end of the day... Perhaps there wasn't a consensus, but there was a process and a debate.



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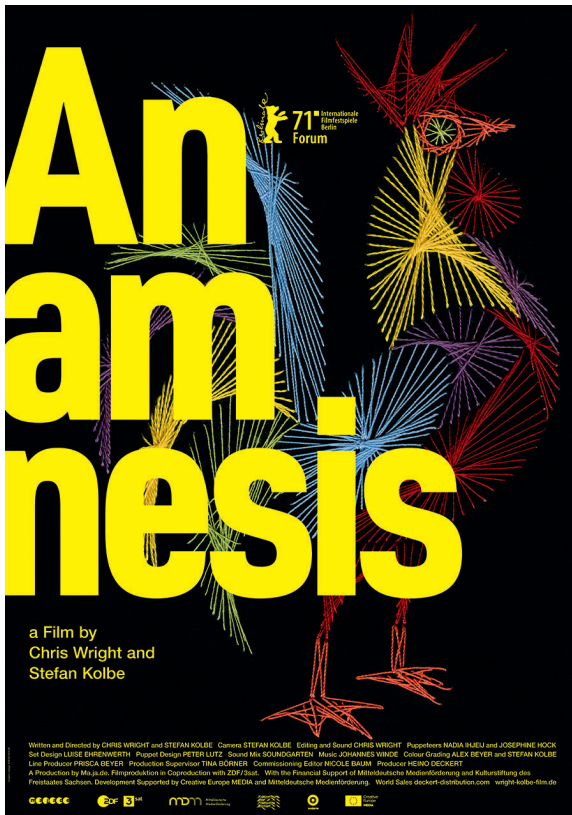
*Does the system make mistakes?*

Yes, it does. If we decide not to release someone – that kind of mistake is hard to register, because he doesn't have the chance to show that we were wrong. He stays in prison. The mistakes that register are the cases where people re-offend. With high-risk men who have committed sex offences, the relapse quota is around 50%, and those are just the reported offences. There is a large number of cases that remain undetected, and that is even larger if we don't treat the men. If we treat them, we can reduce the figure by about 40%. So it goes down from 50% to 25 or 30%. Of course society will say, that's still too high. And I agree. But I know that these men will be released, as a group,

and if we do nothing, we will have a relapse quota of at least 50%. And I couldn't live with that. In other words, I have to accept that some people will re-offend because it would be much worse to do nothing. The alternative is a justice system like in the US, where men receive sentences of 20, 40, 50 to several hundred years for crimes that we hand down 5 or 6 years for. Then we would have many more prisons in Germany and we would also destroy many families. These men who have committed the most serious crimes, they are also part of our society. Now they have to show that they can take responsibility for their behaviour. But if they show that, and if we are convinced, then I believe we should give them that chance. It makes us better as a society.



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**a film by** Chris Wright and Stefan Kolbe

**Original title** Anmaßung

**Country of production** Germany

**Year of production** 2021

**Length** 111min

**Shooting format** HD

**Screening format** DCP 1:1.78 (16:9)/

Dolby 5.1/25fps

**Language** German

**Subtitles** English

**Color or b/w** Color

**Production** Ma.ja.de Filmproduktion  
in co-production with ZDF/3sat

**Authors and directors** Chris Wright and  
Stefan Kolbe

**Puppeteers** Nadia Ihjeij and Josephine Hock

**DoP** Stefan Kolbe

**Sound** Chris Wright

**Editor** Chris Wright

**Music** Johannes Winde

**Commissioning editor** Nicole Baum (ZDF/  
3sat)

**Producer** Heino Deckert (Ma.ja.de Filmpro-  
duktion, Germany)

**World Sales** Deckert Distribution

## Festivals

2021 Berlinale Forum