

# EXIT

## LEAVING EXTREMISM BEHIND



**WMM** A WOMEN MAKE MOVIES RELEASE

# EXIT: LEAVING EXTREMISM BEHIND

A film by Karen Winther

Norway/Germany/Sweden, 2018, 85 minutes, Color  
English/Norwegian/French/German/Danish, Subtitled



## SYNOPSIS

When she was a teenager, filmmaker Karen Winther was a member of an extreme far-right movement in Norway. In 1996, when she was 17, she finally managed to leave and start a new life. In EXIT, she now parallels her own past with the experiences of other former extremists, in an effort to learn what makes someone join neo-Nazis, Jihadists or other hate groups, and what makes them decide to leave.

Winther introduces us to Angela from the United States who spent over ten years as part of a violent right-wing group. After the Oklahoma City bombing, she had a wakeup call and decided to get out. We also meet Ingo and Manuel from Germany and a former jihadist in France. And in Denmark, we witness the other side of the spectrum when former left-wing extremist Søren shares the story of his life. Through these intimate conversations with those who made the leap to abandon their radical movements, Winther looks at the ways people enter these worlds as well as the threats they face when they attempt to leave them behind.

With far right-extremism spreading throughout the United States and around the world, EXIT is a personal and urgent examination of the ways radicalized people legitimize hatred and how some, when confronted with the realization that everything they once believed is wrong, are able to gather the courage to embark on extraordinary journeys to turn their lives around.

## FESTIVALS

CPH:DOX

DOC NYC

DOK Leipzig

UNAFF - United Nations Association Film Festival

Love & Anarchy - Helsinki International Film Festival

Nordisk Panorama

International Documentary Festival Visionsi dal mondo, Immagini dalla realtà

Dokufest

Oslo Pix

Nordic Docs

## REVIEWS

*"EXIT draws a complex and nuanced picture of extremism and the way out - daring to lay bare the grim face of violence."- MODERN TIMES REVIEW*

"This film excels in showing the humanity behind the extremism. The faults, the pain, the blind anger and how it's easy to get involved with a group that simplifies those emotions into "us versus them." – BLACKLISTED



## FILMMAKER BIO

### KAREN WINTHER

Karen Winther was born in Norway in 1978 and graduated from the NFTS, National Film and Television School in 2012. Her first feature was her graduation film at NFTS, THE BETRAYAL, a personal film about her involvement in extremist groups in Norway in her teenage years. The film premiered at IDFA and received several awards. In her second feature EXIT, Karen continues to explore violent extremism from a personal angle and what can make extremists change. EXIT premiered at CPH DOX in 2018 and received a Special Mention at the Nordic Docs festival.

### Filmography

2008 Rock Heart Beijing – documentary, 58 minutes

2011 The Betrayal - documentary 64 minutes

2018 Exit - documentary 80 minutes

### Awards

The Betrayal: IDFA Best Student Film Award, Best Student Film at Sheffield DocFest, the Royal Television Society award, a Grierson, British Documentary award and the New Nordic Talent Award at Nordisk Panorama.



## **SUBJECTS BIOS**

### **Manuel Bauer**

Manuel grew up in East Germany, where his parents became unemployed after the DDR. When he was 11 years old he encountered Nazi skinheads for the first time and was only 13 when he joined a neo-Nazi group. Manuel became violent and got the nickname “the pistol.” In prison he got into a fight when two Turkish inmates came to the rescue – a moment of truth for Manuel. For the first time he started questioning the race propaganda he had been indoctrinated with. Manuel received help from Exit Germany to leave the extreme right in 2006, but is still living in hiding.

### **Ingo Hasselbach**

Ingo grew up in East Berlin during DDR. When the wall came down he wanted political change and saw National Socialism as a real alternative. He started an NS party and became a leader in the extreme right movement. They called him “The fuehrer of Berlin.” Filmmaker Winfried Bonenegel started making a documentary about Ingo and kept asking questions and challenging Ingo’s beliefs, which gradually created doubt in his mind. Two Turkish families in Molln died in an arson attack by neo-Nazis and for the first time Ingo was shocked and realized that he didn’t want to be part of the extreme right anymore. With the help of the filmmaker, Ingo went into hiding in Paris and wrote a book about his past. The filmmaker made a fiction film based on Ingo’s story and Ingo helped start Exit Germany to help others. A letter bomb was sent to his mother but luckily it didn’t detonate. Ingo recently started speaking publicly again.

### **Angela King**

Growing up in South Florida, Angela was surrounded by racism and was raped at age of 14. She was angry and traumatised and joined the extreme right movement. She became a member of Aryan Nation and Church of the Creator. The Oklahoma City bombing made her want to leave the extreme right, but her comrades threatened her, making her stay. She helped rob an adult video store and was sent to prison, where she was treated with unexpected acts of kindness. She felt rehumanized and wanted to start a new life. Angela is openly gay and now works fulltime for Life After Hate to help others who want to leave an extremist movement. She speaks at schools to prevent violent extremism.

### **Søren Lerche**

Søren grew up in a well educated, non-violent, loving family. He struggled in school and had problems with dyslexia. He found friends among the autonomous movement in Copenhagen through pot-smoking and listening to reggae music. He joined a militant anti-fascist group where he attacked neo Nazis on the streets and beat them severely. He started selling hash to finance violent activism but realized that gradually money and crime mattered more than politics. In solitary confinement in prison, Søren started thinking about changing his life. Encouraged by letters from his sister, he decided to get an education. Søren works as a teacher at Grundvigs Folk High school teaches about radicalization and how to prevent

violent extremism. He organises activities for youth – like street lab, conferences on CVE- counter violent extremism and local communal dinners at the school.

### **David Vallat**

David grew up with his mother just outside Lyon, a quiet, multicultural city. He started stealing cars at 15 out of boredom. He was attracted to the spiritual side of Islam and converted. He joined the French army and went to Bosnia to aid Muslims, and was radicalized into a jihadist to escape the fear of dying in the battlefield. He was sent to a training camp in Afghanistan by radical islamists he met in Bosnia and France and became a member of GIA (Armed Islamic Group) responsible for moving cash and weapons across borders. After a series of terror attacks in France in 1994, David was arrested and sentenced to six years in prison for aiding the terrorist. Surprised about the humane treatment he received, David gradually started changing his outlook in solitary confinement. David started reading classical literature and interacting with other prisoners. He decided to start a new life when he got out. At first he was depressed, but then he fell in love and started a family and started speaking publicly after the attacks against Charlie Hedbo and Bataclan. David's message is that everybody deserves a second chance in life and we must protect the right to be blasphemous.



## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

There has been much debate about why people are radicalised, the reasons why people become extremists, but what about the way out of extremism? What can make an extremist realise that everything they believed was wrong?

I was in a radical left-wing group and the far-right movement in Norway from the age of 15-17, almost 18. I changed my life around I 1996, but what gave me the courage to leave the movement?

I discovered the world of former extremists when I was making my graduation film at the National Film and television school. I attended a conference in Sweden where they had put together a panel with a former right-wing extremist, former left, former jihadist, former cult member and a former criminal gang member. It was remarkable how similar their stories were, both the process of joining and leaving. The radicalisation and disengagement/deradicalization process.

I met with other former extremists and realised there are lots of people out there with experience from extreme movements. I thought with my background I could use my knowledge and personal experience to come closer to an understanding of what can make extremists change. Professor Tore Bjørgo, (director of the C-Rx centre for extremism research in Oslo) said that Exit programs are essentially counter terrorism work. If you reduce the number of terrorists there will be fewer terrorist attacks.

On a personal level I would like to stop feeling ashamed and embarrassed that I was part of the far-right movement when I was a teenager. I hope I can also make it less difficult for other former extremists to acknowledge their past and speak out.

When I started making the film I felt that there must be something wrong with me to make me join a violent extremist group. You can't blame it on a difficult childhood, there are lots of people that struggled in life, but never came to close to joining an extremist movement. I felt guilty and seriously questioned if there might be something evil in me. At the same time, I wondered if there was a key moment that could make an extremist change. Was there a person who said something to them or an event in their life that made them realise they were wrong? Was it possible to pinpoint when the changing process started? Perhaps I could finally make something good come out of this dark and painful experience, give hope and useful tools in the counter violent extremism work?

I now believe that there is certainly more than one factor needed for an extremist to change. I think all the formers I met joined because of social issues and their reasons they left were complex, but followed a similar pattern:

1. Too much violence – an event that shocked them and made them see the movement in a new light

2. An unexpected act of kindness – a person they thought were their enemy showed them mercy, compassion and kindness – making them realise the extremist narrative was false

3. Isolation – time to think away from the movement – mainly in prison

4. Input from the outside – Interaction with people outside the movement, non-judgemental questions that made them think and realise there are nuances of grey, not just black and white.

All these factors can start the changing process, but after that there needs to be a way out. Somewhere to go, or someone to talk to. It could be an Exit program that helps finding a job and a place to live or it could be social workers, parole officers or supportive family members.

I know now that there wasn't and isn't anything particularly "wrong" with me. Manuel from Germany said that he doesn't think he was an evil man, because if he was he wouldn't be able to change. I think that's true. I believe that all extremists can change, unless they have some kind of mental illness, are psychopaths, unable to connect normally with other human beings. I think the author Johann Hari is onto something in his book Chasing the Scream where he writes that "the opposite of addiction isn't sobriety – it's connection."

I have found out many more details about my own exit-story too. I didn't remember exactly how it happened. The truth is that I didn't fit in and got into conflict with people in the far-right movement that led me to feeling unhappy and wanting to leave, but I felt stuck. The wakeup call happened at a Nazi concert in Lower Saxony in 1995. I was excited to be there, but when more than a thousand German skinheads started shouting Nazi slogans I realised it was not a game, I got scared and knew I had to leave the movement.

I contacted Tore Bjørge and through our conversations I started believing it was possible to exit and start a new life. At the time there was no Exit program in Norway, but professor Tore Bjørge helped me get in touch with people that offered to help. I called a friend from the radical left-wing movement and she agreed to help. I was very lucky to get the help and support I needed. The ideology was never an important factor for me, I think it was all about finding a place to belong and finding my identity.

From meeting Angela and Shannon, I learnt the importance of having a former's network to share experiences with someone who truly understands. It also made me realise that choosing a destructive movement like we did could have something to do with not knowing how to deal with emotional trauma.



## Real life takes center stage at 2018 DOC NYC documentary festival

By DAVID MORGAN November 6, 2018

Non-fiction is the star attraction on screens in New York City beginning this Thursday, with the start of the [ninth annual DOC NYC Film Festival](#), America's largest documentary festival. Held November 8-15, the festival includes more than 250 features and short films (including many world, U.S. and NYC premieres), as well as special events, including panel discussions, appearances by noted documentary directors, and workshops for aspiring filmmakers.

**"Exit: Leaving Extremism Behind"** (New York City Premiere) is the powerful story of radicals who had been attracted to extremist and nationalist groups and then tried to break away, only to discover that, as with a mob family, it's not really an option. Filmmaker Karen Winther herself had joined a right wing group in Norway when she was a disaffected youth seeking a welcoming family. At first she was OK with the violence, but eventually decided to leave, and with no "exit programs" available for former group members, she had to depend on the kindness of a left wing extremist group member to escape. The film also shares the stories of people such as Angela, an American who sought to leave her white supremacist group behind after seeing images of a child victim of the Oklahoma City bombing; Søren, a Dane who joined a militant anti-Fascist movement, who today teaches courses on radicalization; David, a Frenchman who was jailed for his participation in an Islamist terror group; and Manuel, a German who can no longer legitimize kicking people in the face now that he is the father of an adorable toddler. An immensely valuable work for anyone wanting to understand the mindset of extremism and the possibility of rehabilitation. **Screens Sunday, Nov. 11.** (A Women Make Movies release.)



## DOC NYC 2018: 9 Under-the-Radar Documentaries to See At This Year's Festival

*IndieWire picks the most anticipated films from the fest, including some awards contenders, a handful of buzzy debuts, and more.*

By Kate Erbland, Eric Kohn, Anne Thompson, Chris O'Falt, David Ehrlich, Jude Dry

New York City's annual [DOC NYC](#) festival kicks off this week, boasting a packed slate of some of this year's most remarkable [documentaries](#). If you've been looking to beef up on your documentary consumption, [DOC NYC](#) is the perfect chance to check out a wide variety of some of the year's best fact-based features. Ahead, we pick out 9 of our most anticipated films from the fest, including awards contenders, a handful of buzzy debuts, and more.

### "Exit"

In 1996, at age 17, Karen Winther managed to extricate herself from an extreme right-wing movement in Norway. With her new film "Exit," Winther uses that personal experience to explore why someone becomes a neo-Nazi, Jihadist, or a member of any other number of hate groups. Talking to people like herself, who left extremism behind — may it be left or right, Oklahoma or Denmark — "Exit" reveals both how blind anger can lead to radicalization, as well as the dangers involved with cutting ties with hate groups. "Exit" is a sober look at an urgent and relevant topic, finding parallels between what is happening in Europe and U.S., while including that rarely seen perspective of women in a world and movement we largely associate with angry men. -CO