

# NoBody's Perfect

A film by Niko von Glasow

Premiere 11.9.08

Ventura Film

## Crew

Screenplay **Andrew Emerson · Kiki von Glasow  
Niko von Glasow**  
Director **Niko von Glasow**  
Editor **Mechthild Barth · Mathias Dombrink**  
Camera **Ania Dabrowska · Andreas Köhler**  
Sound & Sound Design **Claas Berger**  
Photography **Ania Dabrowska · Niko von Glasow**  
Executive Producer **Ewa Borowski**  
Facilities **Henrike Müller**  
Make up **Nancy Friedrich · Claudia Reiter**  
Assistant to the Director **Stephen Kennedy**  
Production **Niko von Glasow · Anne-Sophie Quancard  
Frank Henschke**  
Production Assistants **Jens Kaulen · Julian Kazmierczak  
Jan Stollenwerk**  
Film Administration **Jürgen Brock Mildenerberger**  
Photographic Studio **Fotostudio StempelSchulz**  
Digital Image Editing **Jenny Cremer**  
Mixing **Falk Möller**  
Reproduction **CinePostproduction – Geyer Köln**  
Editorial Staff, WDR **Jutta Krug · Katja De Bock  
Enno Hungerland**  
Many thanks to **Jola Dylewska · Rafal Wroblewski  
Kurt Steinhausen · Daniela Pukropski  
Sybille Hofter · Tielmann Hahn  
Dennis Todorovic · Andrea Gärtner  
Moritz Niederprüm**  
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## With

**Stefan Fricke  
Sofia Plich  
Bianca Vogel  
Sigrid Kwella  
Doris Pakendorf  
Theo Zavelberg  
Petra Uttenweiler  
Andreas Meyer  
Kim Morton  
Fred Dove  
Mat Fraser  
Niko von Glasow  
Mandel von Glasow**

D 2008, 84 Min., Colour, 35mm & digital. 1:1,85, Dolby-Stereo

*“I’m a filmmaker who has short arms due to the effects of the drug Thalidomide. The first thing people react to when they meet me is how I look. Even if they don’t say anything, they either stare or look away. They show that they’re uncomfortable around me. I can hardly blame them; I’m very uncomfortable about it myself. All my life I’ve tried not to think about my disability, tried to ignore the truth. Many disabled people find it hard to deal with the disgusted, confused or pitying stares they receive when they’re out in public.*

*Society needs to get used to the way we look, and stop seeing us as beings from another planet. Of course we look different, but it is possible to see beyond that. I’ve found a way to help make that happen.”*

Niko von Glasow

## Synopsis

Director Niko von Glasow, whose short arms identify him as a grown-up “child of Thalidomide”, looks for eleven other people affected by Thalidomide to join him in posing naked for a book of photographs. With humour and a surprising lightness of touch, *NoBody’s Perfect* is a portrait of twelve extraordinary characters, from childhood to today. These are people who have got used to furtive glances from passers-by, but now they have to stand completely unprotected in front of a camera, and look at their own bodies in a new light.

## Press Release

*NoBody’s Perfect* follows Niko von Glasow as he looks for eleven people who, like him, were born disabled due to the disastrous side-effects of Thalidomide, and who are prepared to pose for a book of photos. And to pose naked – to allow those who regularly throw furtive glances at Thalidomiders and other physically disabled people, to take a good, long look. In the process Niko discovers many fascinating characters who work in such diverse areas as politics, the media, sport, astrophysics and acting. Characters who have learned to live with their disability to an impressive level of “normality”.

With a darkly humorous touch, and no deference to political correctness, *NoBody’s Perfect* explores the specific problems which these twelve extraordinary people have faced during childhood, adolescence and adulthood, and shows them reacting with curiosity, enthusiasm or (like Niko himself) horror towards the photography project. The final results of the photoshoot – in itself a frightening ordeal – give the models entirely new perspectives on themselves. A public exhibition of large-scale prints of the photos provokes surprising reactions from passers-by.

Niko tries to confront the company responsible for Thalidomide – *Chemie Grünenthal* – and its owners the Wirtz family, with his photos. These attempts are not met with any response at all. Half a century after the Thalidomide scandal, one of Germany’s most affluent families is still able to close its eyes to the images in front of them ...

## Director's Statements

### Childhood and Thalidomide

During my childhood my parents did everything they could to banish the dark side of my disability from our lives. Within the family it wasn't an issue – there I was normal. And I went to a wonderful, tolerant, anti-authoritarian school, where most pupils had short arms or legs, and our few non-disabled classmates were the “different” ones. So my life in Germany, at home and at school, protected me from having to confront my disability.

When I was 10 we went on holiday to Italy, where my parents were no longer able to predict and prevent other people's reactions to my short arms. Children pointed, stared and asked questions. A few were spiteful, most were just curious. It didn't matter which they were; their interest showed me I was different, and I didn't like it at all.

Even today it's mostly children who remark on my appearance, and often children of liberal upper-middle-class parents. Perhaps they're just not brought up to respect the privacy of others – their Mummies and Daddies are proud of their Little Darlings' curiosity, delighted that they show an interest in everything, and that they're so self-confident in their dealings with adults. It doesn't occur to them to teach their children that sometimes it's better to keep one's thoughts to oneself.

I have a daughter and a son, and having my own children has allowed me to see that their interest in my disability is entirely natural. They've asked me questions and I've explained everything. Nowadays they forget that I'm disabled, as long as I forget about it too. The issue arises maybe once a day, when their old dad gets an itch in some embarrassing place which he can't scratch discreetly. Otherwise they see me as a complete, unique person. Of course they know I have flaws, but these don't have anything to do with my short arms. I'm their father, and our love for each other is unconditional.

### A Crazy Project

What has possessed me – a balding, big-bellied German Thalidomide man – to want to become a nude photographic model?

I look like a pink, tubby, bespectacled penguin, and because of my little arms I can't even bring myself to take my shirt off on the beach. And yet I've persuaded myself and eleven other first-time models, who share my disability, to strip naked and pose for me.

The idea was to take a series of honest, beautiful photographs which I could exhibit, and put into a film and a book. So I had to find my unwitting victims and use my non-existent charm to persuade them to take part in this crazy project. And I had to find the courage to expose myself, look at myself, and accept the truth that NoBody's Perfect.

Up till the point in my life where the film starts, I'd been happy to avoid confronting my disability and body image. I hadn't addressed disability in my filmmaking, and I'd been determined not to think of myself as different from everyone around me. So what if I can't do press-ups, tie my shoelaces or carry pianos up flights of stairs? The missionary position isn't the only way to make love. I could get through life just fine without these things.

But a fact I couldn't deny is that when people see me, the first thing they respond to is the way I look. Even if they don't say anything, they react. Some stare, but most look away politely, determined not to show they've noticed, or hide their embarrassment by violently scratching imaginary itches on their noses. And I could hardly blame them. I've always been deeply uncomfortable about it myself. At least my younger days of cape-wearing self-consciousness are far behind me now, and I and my short arms are a familiar sight on the film festival circuit and on the streets near my home. But I know many disabled people who are reluctant or unable to go out in public, for fear of the disgusted, confused, amused or pitying stares they'll encounter. And these are the people I want to turn into nude models!

Many years ago, I had the idea of taking a series of beautiful nude photos of disabled people. My psychiatrist advised me only to do it if I was prepared to strip for the camera myself. This horrified me into dropping the idea, and it might have stayed dropped forever except that the German TV company WDR invited me to make a personal, original and funny documentary about people affected by Thalidomide. I was far from enthusiastic. I'm a serious (by which I mean grumpy, temperamental and unpredictable) filmmaker who values his privacy and does his best to forget his disability. Why should I want to make a film about Thalidomide, and how the hell would I make it funny?

But the invitation must have come at a point in my life where I was realising I couldn't – or shouldn't – keep denying my disability and distancing myself from those who share it. If I want people to stop staring, maybe I have to let them get it out of their systems and give them something to stare at. And force myself to do some good hard staring too.

It wasn't just a question of taking the photos. I had to exhibit them, and record the reactions of the art world and the general public, as well as of the models themselves. Then I wanted to produce a book of the photos – but would anyone buy it? Anyway, first things first – I needed my models.

Thalidomide was sold in almost every country of the world. At least 10,000 babies were affected worldwide, of whom 4000 died before reaching their first birthdays. The drug was made by a German company, Chemie Grünenthal, and around 5000 German Thalidomide babies were born – I'm one of the surviving 2,800. As Germany and the UK were two of the highest-affected countries, and as I live and work in both, these are the places where I based the project.

### The Search for Models

I started my search among my former classmates from my school for disabled children in Cologne. I was amazed that only two turned me down. Everyone seemed to understand the importance of the project from a personal perspective, and as an aesthetic and political statement. My years of filmmaking must have made me good at persuading others to do brave and foolhardy things for no money – within a week I had all my models. I met them, got to know them, and tried to help them over their uncertainty and nervousness. And I encouraged each model to choose a person, animal or object to accompany them in their photos.

This is a story told in pictures. The pictures in the exhibition, and on the cinema screen, portray people who've succeeded in a hostile world. Living proof that beauty can lie in imperfection. These pictures speak of strength, integrity and dignity, which often contrast with the harsh reality of the lives, struggles, doubts and fears behind the images.

I show each of my models as an individual hero, and bring them together into a group which, at the end of the film, presents a strong, triumphant and unified statement to the world. The film and its images should provoke exploration of the notion that nobody is perfect, and that by looking with honesty at our own imperfections and idiosyncrasies we get to know ourselves better, and allow room for spiritual growth.



**NoBody's  
Perfect**

## The Heroes

First, there's **STEFAN FRICKE**, who as a child he thought he was a lion. Instead, he grew up to be an astrophysicist. We visit the planetarium together and talk about time and space. Stefan has very short arms and legs, and is almost spherical; his appearance and mine make our discussion with some of our fellow models about the concept of beauty especially unusual. Stefan's Vietnamese wife left him, leaving only some origami birds behind. Of all the Thalidomiders I've met so far, he seems to be most accepting of, and at peace with, his situation. Sitting serenely among the paper birds, he comes across to me like a little ball-shaped Buddha.

**SIGRID KWELLE** is a lesbian tango dance instructor who lives in Berlin and paints in oils. This would be a peculiar enough CV for any woman, let alone one with very short arms. Sigrid is very active in the field of women's rights, especially for disabled women.

**MAT FRASER** is a British actor and writer who toured the UK with his show "Thalidomide!! – a musical". Some of my models are uncertain, reluctant – Mat can't wait to thrust his genitals and his political views at me. He challenges and bickers with me constantly, and makes no secret of giving himself a helping hand right before his shoot so that everything looks as big as possible for the camera.

**DORIS PAKENDORF** is in the middle of a divorce. She smokes and drinks too much, but inside she's a true lady. Her pose has a sculptural elegance as she holds a wine glass thoughtfully between the toes of her left foot.

**ANDREAS MEYER** is an intellectual, a Contergan activist whom I find rather stiff at first, but he has all the facts and figures of the Contergan scandal at his fingertips. He says that Grünenthal's head chemist started his career experimenting on Jews in the concentration camp at Krakow. After sharing a few beers, Andreas and I become very close and together we plan to found an underground Contergan terrorist movement. The morning after, heads pounding, it doesn't look like we'll do this after all – or will we....?

**SOFIA PLICH** was a social worker, and was unemployed for many years. She dreams of being an actress, and of flying. In the build-up to her shoot, worrying about her appearance, she comments that gravity has taken its toll on all of us now that we're middle-aged. So for her photo, I ask her to jump, so I can show her in mid-flight, defying gravity.

# NoBody's

**THEO ZAVELBERG** is a gardener, a man of nature, with a face like an ancient oak tree. Shy and reserved, he hides behind a rose bush for his photo.

**KIM MORTON**, from Belfast, has been a professional singer, author, and Mayor of her district council. She staged a hunger strike, which won higher compensation for British victims of Thalidomide – three to four times as much as her German counterparts. She brings a photo of her son to keep her company in her session – he’s a soldier in Afghanistan. She’s one of six sisters, and they’ve never seen each other topless, let alone naked. Despite her personal and political strength, posing naked for me is an intimidating challenge.

World-class dressage rider **BIANCA VOGEL** knows exactly what her prop will be – her beloved 800 kilo horse, Roquefort. I can’t say no to this beautiful, intelligent lady, but how the hell are we going to squeeze the huge beast into the studio? In the end I had to compromise the searing honesty of the photos and resort to digital trickery.

Then came **FRED DOVE**, a broadcaster and presenter on the BBC World Service and one of the loveliest men I’ve ever met.

**PETRA UTTENWEILER**, from Stuttgart veiled herself secretively for her photo. Her great charm and talent for flirting left me almost speechless. Just as well I’ve been happily married for twenty eight years!

And now it’s my turn: **NIKO VON GLASOW**. My prop is indeed something very dear to me – my lively, cheeky son Mandel. He has no interest at all in my little arms; he’s far more amused by being asked to pose alongside his naked father. Like a happy little Oedipus, he points and laughs at my willy, and makes the ordeal a whole lot more bearable than it would otherwise have been.

When the photo shoots were finished I invited everyone to a big party, a short-limbed Last Supper, where we relaxed, exchanged stories and got happily drunk together.

Has the experience changed me at all? When it was over, I went with Mandel to Dover Beach, where I took off my T-shirt and we ran into the sea. In the past, I would have been bothered by people gawping at my short arms – now, I was only worried about the chilly English drizzle which fell onto the waves, and onto my skin.

# Perfect

## A Conversation with the director Niko von Glasow

Overcoming fear is always a great triumph.

*Where do you live?*

I live in London with my wife Kiki, who is a writer and filmmaker, and our children Juli and Mandel, who are 12 and 10. We have two cats and two guinea pigs.

*Why do you live in London?*

I spend half my time in Cologne, where I come from. Ever since school I've had a love-hate relationship with Germany. I'm always happy to go back there, and happy to leave.

*Why is that?*

It probably has something to do with my disability. In proper world cities like London or New York, I don't get stared at so much.

My family background plays a part too, because my Jewish father always wanted to emigrate. He didn't achieve this. So I've become a sort of half-emigrant. But I love Cologne. England is both far enough away, and close enough. And of course, I dream of making English-language films. But it's probably just that I like travelling.

*Did you also want to get away from the pressure of your family, who are very well known in Cologne?*

I come from a real family dynasty:

There's the Jewish-melancholy side of my father, Ernst Brücher. His sister is Hildegard Hamm-Brücher. She became a politician and he became a publisher. Hildegard Hamm-Brücher is a wonderful woman; she's not just my aunt and godmother, she's my friend too. My father was the publisher of DuMont Art Books, which was one of the best publishing houses in its field during the 60s and 70s. And on my mother's side is the creative-capitalist strand of the family. One of my great-grandfathers was Franz von Lenbach, a count and artist from Munich. And my mother comes from the newspaper and book publishing dynasty, Neven DuMont. There are also a couple of nice diplomats, among others. That's a lot of family. As individuals they're all interesting and likeable, but as a clan they can be a bit much.

*How did you get into filmmaking?*

I always wanted to make films. When I was five I used to make my cuddly toys fight each other so I could photograph the action. I made loads of Super-8 films. Straight after school I worked with Fassbinder, and spent ten years as an assistant to several directors including Alexander Kluge and Peter Zadek. Then I studied film at New York University and at the Film School in Łódź, Poland. That's where I made my first film, WEDDING GUESTS

*To what extent has your disability influenced your life?*

In many respects it has, of course. Positively too. For example, I've been with my wife Kiki for 28 years. This fidelity and this strong relationship are thanks to my short arms, because women don't come onto me so much, and I can't just leap into bed with some woman every time I'm at a party. So it has its advantages.

*When did you become aware that you were disabled?*

As a child, I was barely aware of it. That only really happened when I hit puberty, when at first I didn't get on with girls as well as the other boys did. In the end, I always had very nice, very pretty girlfriends. It was always difficult at parties, where I was forced to recognise that I was different. But that only lasted a couple of hours each time. I don't feel disabled all day, every day.

*What effect does your disability have on your wife?*

I think it's normal for her. She probably has more problems with my personality than with my physical disability. If she pitied me, we would have separated a long time ago. Love and pity don't go together, because pity requires dominance – you only pity those who are worse off than yourself. In an equal partnership, you can't pity each other.

*When and how did your children first realise that you were "different"?*

When they were three or four they noticed it, wondered what it was, and became slightly physically distant from me. I spoke to them, explained everything, and their discomfort quickly disappeared.

Sometimes it amazes me how my son quite naturally holds my hand when we're out walking. He wants to hold my hand. It draws attention to us, but he does it anyway because he likes it and it's completely normal.

*Did you go to a special school?*

I went to a school for disabled children in Cologne. It was the 60s, and it was a very anti-authoritarian school. Like "Summer Hill for Disabled People". Our teachers were young, and treated us with an incredible amount of love.



## A Conversation with the director Niko von Glasow

There were a few non-disabled children too, and you really didn't notice that you were disabled because everyone looked unusual in some way.

Nowadays, when I'm out and about and I look around, I feel that, in comparison to the "normal" people around me, I don't look that unusual.

If you look closely, most people look odd.

*Thanks to your family, didn't you have a rather privileged "Thalidomide childhood"?*

I didn't have a "Thalidomide childhood" at all, because I grew up relatively isolated, in a wonderful big garden surrounded by nice people. So I never had to confront reality.

*When strangers meet, they usually greet each other by shaking hands. How do people greet you?*

I notice straight away if people shy away. Then I shy away too, and two shy people stand looking at each other. We both notice it and get even more uncomfortable. The discomfort is very pronounced with children and young people. Incidentally, women just shake my hand, much more matter-of-factly than men. If I can tell that someone is simply unsure what to do, I remove that uncertainty by making a joke, or patting them on the back. You can hide your uncertainty by patting me on the back or taking a bow. But the uncertainty is there and you have to deal with it. You can't pretend it isn't there – that's pointless.

*And what about sex?*

There are some who are lucky, who've found a partner and enjoy a very good sex life. But for many it doesn't happen, because it's so hard to overcome the physical timidity. If we appear intelligent and happy, we can find partners. But if depression and malcontent set in, it will always be very difficult.

*How did you come to make this film?*

The TV company WDR approached me to make it. At first I didn't want to do it at all, but my wife said: "Niko, it's time you confronted this subject." So I made the film.

*What was your motivation?*

I wanted to overcome my greatest fear, the fear of acknowledging my disability. And to present to people a funny, interesting film, to demonstrate my theory that if you spend a longer period of time – like the 90 minutes of the film – with disabled people, you get used to them, see them as quite normal, even become friends with the concept of "disability". The joy, the humour, the love for life which this film shows are particularly important to me.

*You feel the same about the photos?*

Yes. The film is the story of a Thalidomide film director who exposes himself in order to persuade other people affected by Thalidomide to expose themselves for a series of nude photos. It's the story of this journey.

*What will happen with the photos?*

The photo of Kim Morton is hanging in the National Portrait Gallery in London. There are lots of exhibitions in public spaces in Germany – in Cologne, Berlin, Frankfurt and other cities. We want them to be hung in museums and galleries, and we want to show them to as many people as possible.

*There's also a book?*

The book has the same title as the film, **Nobody's Perfect**, and it's being published by Sandmann Verlag. The 12 models write about their lives, so you can see the photos and read our stories from our perspectives. I think it's a very moving, funny and important book.

*In the 60s, Thalidomide children were a part of everyday life. Now they've grown up into disabled adults. How are they doing now?*

They're doing as differently as you would expect from 2,800 different people. Even though I myself am disabled due to Thalidomide, it was only through working on this film that I fully realised that everyone is different. Even the difference between having no arms, 10-cm-long or 40-cm-long arms can change everything. But the most crucial difference is how you deal with these disabilities spiritually, as well as how each person is shaped by their individual childhood experiences. If your parents raised you with love and honesty, you're probably better able to cope than if you were shoved into a hospital or just given away.

## A Conversation with the director Niko von Glasow

*What dealings did your family have with Grünenthal, the company which produced Thalidomide?*

Kurt Neven DuMont, my grandfather and former publisher of the Koelner Stadtanzeiger newspaper, very quickly took a vehement stand against Grünenthal and supported the needs of the victims of Thalidomide. He spoke out with great strength against the company. He cared about the fate of all Thalidomide children, not just about my fate.

*We still talk about Thalidomide children, even though they're now approaching the age of 50. We don't talk much about the adults.*

You could say that Thalidomide children looked very funny. As children we were living "demonstration models" of disability. Now the situation has changed, and only those of us who have become top sportsmen and women, singers like Thomas Quasthoff, or directors like me, are presented as "demonstration models". But many, many of us are unemployed and will never find work. The fear of employing disabled people is too widespread, and everyone – including me – is afraid of contact with disabled people. Everyone thinks that getting involved with disabled people makes life more awkward and difficult.

*That reminds me of the scene in the film where a black boy makes fun of disabled people.*

Most children leave us in peace, especially if they've been well brought up. But there are two types of children who are particularly annoying: Firstly, the children of liberal, "muesli"-type parents, who are so proud of the interest their kids take in everything. These parents send their children over to us: "Ask him what's wrong with him". I find that ignorant. You shouldn't do it, even children know that. But "muesli-children" have no boundaries. And then there are under-privileged children, who often get stared at themselves, who've had no real upbringing, and who also have no boundaries. These children will point and say: "Look, he's got short arms". And that just hurts.

*Do you feel differently in the company of people like you, than when you're with non-disabled people?*

Until now I used to discreetly cross the street if I saw another Thalidomider approaching. I was scared of them, because they were a reflection of myself: "Oh God, that's what I look like too". I'm not scared of disabled people, and I have many disabled friends. But I've always avoided Thalidomide victims. It's only through making the film that I've become friends with them.

*What differentiates you from many other disabled people is that we can name the cause of your disability. The company, Chemie Grünenthal.*

Worldwide, roughly 10,000 children were born disabled because of Thalidomide, and around half of them survived. Roughly 5,000 were born in Germany, and around 2,800 survived. We don't have any more accurate figures than that because Grünenthal refuse to publish them.

Grünenthal belongs to the Wirtz family. This company and its proprietors caused our disability. They are not only responsible for our disabilities, but also for the deaths of countless children. They have tried by all possible means to evade this responsibility. After the settlement of the trial in the 70s, they paid 100 million DM into a trust – tax-deductible of course, so the state reimbursed half of it.

The 100 million DM ran out in 1987. Now we get a pension from the German state which was recently doubled, from a maximum of € 545 to a maximum of € 1090. But with € 1090 you can't, for example, cover the costs of care. You have to imagine what it's like to wake up in the morning and be unable to get out of bed by yourself, because you have no legs. Even if you just want to scratch your own backside, you need help. Most Thalidomiders need care, and care is very expensive.

*The same is true for all physically disabled people.*

Yes, but the difference in our case is that specific people are responsible for causing our disability.

I have great sympathy for other disabled people, but in our case, someone caused it. Basic morality states that, if you hurt someone, you must be held responsible and make amends.

Since the TV film was shown, Grünenthal supposedly plans to pay a further 50 million, half of which is of course once again tax-deductible. A ridiculous amount: if we enjoy only the average German life-expectancy and reach the age of 81, that means I'll live another 35 years which works out as € 1.50 a day. That wouldn't buy me an ice cream.

A sincere apology from the Wirtz family would be very helpful. The new head of the company, Sebastian Wirtz, is in his mid-30s, so he was born into his situation. And in fact, he himself is very much a victim of Thalidomide, because the issue will pursue him throughout his life, as it will the rest of his family. I can imagine them taking on Thalidomide victims as shareholders in the company. It would cost them a lot, but it would gain them so much publicity and cause such a sensation for them and their company, that their problems would be alleviated and this awful shadow would be lifted from the family.

## A Conversation with the director Niko von Glasow

*Victims of Thalidomide as shareholders in Grünenthal?*

They make billions upon billions of profit. Why don't they just give us some of it? Even a member of the Wirtz family can only sleep in one bed and eat from one plate.

*Have you suggested this to Grünenthal?*

Of course. No response.

They're scared of us. They're really frightened of coming in contact with us. During all the attention surrounding the Adolf Winkelmann film ("Thalidomide – One Single Pill") Sebastian Wirtz met some Thalidomide victims. But it wasn't a genuine, committed meeting, it was a pure PR exercise which completely backfired. The tokenistic offer of 50 million can only be a tiny plaster, where a huge bandage is required. They don't really want to help the people affected by Thalidomide. One fact remains. The huge suffering of Thalidomide will persist, even after we're all dead, and I just hope that industry and politicians draw conclusions from what has happened. The laws are already better than they were. But I also hope that my children don't inherit this suffering. That's another reason why it's so important for me to talk honestly with my children, and with the public at large, about my disability and my life.

*We've just heard that Mäurer & Wirtz have obtained a temporary injunction against the Thalidomide victims who have called for a boycott of their luxury products. What is your position regarding the call for a boycott?*

There should certainly not be a boycott of Grünenthal's medical products. But I will obviously not buy any luxury or cosmetic products made by the company Mäurer & Wirtz, products such as 4711, Tabac, Nonchalance, Tosca, Sir Irish Moos and whatever the others are. Not until the Wirtz family or Grünenthal have paid adequate compensation. People can do whatever they want, but I myself won't use any of these products. I'm not allowed to call for a boycott, and that's not what I'm doing. But everyone has a brain to think with and a heart to feel with. And who doesn't enjoy solidarity and civil courage?

There are Thalidomide victims who are so badly off that they go hungry at the end of the month because they simply have nothing left to eat. Or who are trapped indoors for at least a month if the electric wheelchair on which they are dependent breaks down, because the repairs take so long and they don't have a second wheelchair.

*Do Thalidomide victims only have defects to their limbs and extremities, or are there other defects?*

It's not just the recognisable external defects. All other organs can be affected: ears, eyes, heart, liver, everything. The only organ which isn't affected is the brain. Well, indirectly that can be affected too.

People treat us kindly, but day by day we are ostracized or hidden. Society has always hidden disabled people away, because people don't like to deal with cripples. But it's not just society that hides us – many of us hide ourselves away because it's simply too stressful to keep confronting this hostility. It's a subtle kind of hostility which isn't limited to any particular section of society, but which appears across the board as a fear of contact with disability.

People are scared of us.

This is another reason why so many victims of Thalidomide are so spiritually damaged that they no longer want to live. The suicide rate among Thalidomiders is much higher than the state average. Depression is a significant collateral damage caused by society's hostility.

Of course there are other Thalidomiders who are doing very well, because they make good money as, for example, lawyers. But those are exceptions.

Life as a disabled person is simply more expensive than a normal life.

*What are your next plans and projects?*

Definitely the Tibetan Film School which we founded last Autumn, and of which I'm the director.

For now it's a nomadic film school, which operates where Tibetans are currently living; both in Tibet, and in exile in India. We've started to raise money, we're holding the first seminars and making short films. We hope to buy premises in the next two or three years and to set up a proper film school.

It's all financed by donation, and operated on a voluntary basis.

The lecturers and professors are friends and contacts from the industry and from companies involved in filmmaking. They volunteer to deliver the training and they pay for their own flights – the Tibetans just provide accommodation.

*And what projects is your company Palladio Film working on?*

We have three feature films in development, including a musical and a horror film. It's getting ever harder to finance a film, so for now I'm enjoying working on smaller productions such as *Nobody's Perfect*, just because you can make and realise them more quickly. It's a bit boring to make one film every five years.

## Niko von Glasow: biography

Niko von Glasow (né Brücher), producer and director for Palladio Film, began his training with Rainer Werner Fassbinder (*Lola* and *Theater of the world*). He then worked for a number of film directors including George Stefan Troller, Hellmuth Costard, Alexander Kluge, Peter Zadek and Jean-Jacques Annaud. Niko has also worked for film distributors, film studios, and the first European Low-Budget Film Festival in Hamburg. He studied drama coaching with John Costopoulos and film directing with Jack Garfine. Niko studied film at New York University and at the Film Academy of Łódź in Poland. This is where he made his first feature film in 1990, *Wedding Guests*, which won several awards including the German Film Critics Award and the Grand Prix Lino Ventura. In 1994 Niko wrote, directed and produced *Marie's Song* starring Sylvie Testud. This film also received several awards at renowned international film festivals. In 2004 he directed and produced *Edelweiss Pirates* starring Ivan Stebunov, Bela B., Jan Declair and Anna Thalbach. In 2007 Niko's TV film *Look At Me* was broadcast in WDR's "Menschen Hautnah" series. This is a personal portrait of his life as a filmmaker born with short arms due to Thalidomide. In 2007 he began filming his cinema documentary *No-Body's Perfect*. Current projects are the foundation of the **Tibetian Film School** ([www.tibetianfilmschool.com](http://www.tibetianfilmschool.com)) and the development of three feature films: *Pig, a girl from Tibet* and *Touching Bluebell*.

Niko von Glasow lives in London with his wife Kiki and their children Juli and Mandel. He runs his company Palladio Film from both London and Cologne.

### Niko von Glasow: filmography (as director)

- 2008 *NoBody's Perfect*  
Int. Filmfestival Locarno 2008: Semaine de la Critique
- 2007 *Look At Me (Schau mich an)* (TV)
- 2004 *Edelweiss Pirates (Edelweisspiraten)*  
Chamizal Independent Film Festival 2005 (US):  
Winner Mejor Pelicula (Best Picture);  
Cine-Jeune de l'Aisne (Frankreich) 2006:  
Jury's Top Prize
- 1994 *Marie's Song (Maries Lied)*  
Nominated for German Film Prize for Best Film;  
German Film Prize: Best Camera Direction & Best Music; IFF Kiev: Best Film, Best Décor, Best Costume
- 1990 *Wedding Guests (Hochzeitsgäste)*  
Festival Premiers Plans: Grand Prix Lino Ventura;  
Berlin Film Festival: German Film Critics Prize;  
Dresden Film Festival: Dresdner Film Prize;  
Int. Short Film Festival, Oberhausen:  
young filmmakers award

## The Wirtz Family's Business Concerns

The company *Chemie Grünenthal GmbH*, founded in 1946 in Stolberg in the Rheinland, is now called *Grünenthal GmbH* and is based in Aachen. Its sole partner is *Grünenthal Pharma GmbH & Co. KG* whose shares are owned by the Wirtz family.

*Grünenthal* works primarily on the research, development and production of medication for the alleviation of pain.

The active agent *Tramadol* (private brand *Tramal*) which was developed by *Grünenthal*, is the most widely sold painkiller in the field of opioids.

*Grünenthal* has further research and business operations in the fields of gynaecology, anti-infectives and dermatology, and in the manufacture and marketing of the contraceptive pill Belara and the pain relief plaster Transtec.

The Wirtz family also owns *Dalli-Werke GmbH & Co. KG*, the former soap factory founded by Andreas August Wirtz in 1845 in Stolberg. The company makes the well-known *Dalli* brand products, as well as countless *trademarks* for discount stores (soaps, crèmes, hair care products, household cleaners etc). *Tandil* washing powers, stocked by Aldi, are probably the best-known example.

The perfume manufacturer *Mäurer & Wirtz GmbH & Co. KG* (House of Perfumes) in Stolberg is a daughter concern of *Dalli-Werke*, and its daughter concerns include Cosmeurop Parfums, Théany Cosmetic, and NewYorker Cosmetics.

### Main Product Lines:

4711 · Tabac Original · Nonchalance · Betty Barclay  
4711 ICE · TNT · Carlo Colucci · Pussy Deluxe · Tosca  
S. Oliver · Gin Tonic Fragrances · Otto Kern · Sir Irish  
Moos

According to *Manager Magazine* (2/2005), the *Wirtz's* group of companies generated a turnover of around € 1.3 billion in 2003, and had around 7,000 employees. Until 1969 *Grünenthal* was run by *Hermann Wirtz*, followed by (among others) his son *Michael Wirtz* until 2005. Since 2005 his son *Sebastian Wirtz* has been a shareholding member of the management board.

## The Thalidomide Scandal – Key Points

From October 1<sup>st</sup> 1957 until November 27<sup>th</sup> 1961, *Chemie Grünenthal* (as the company was then called) produced and marketed the active agent *Thalidomide* under the brand name *Contergan*. The drug was especially effective against morning sickness, and was also released as a tested and non-addictive sedative and sleeping pill for pregnant women.

In 1957 *Thalidomide* came onto the market under the brand name *Contergan*. The drug quickly became Germany's most popular sleeping pill and sedative, and also enjoyed great commercial success abroad. Products containing *Thalidomide* were soon being sold by licensing partners in 46 countries. The targeted advertising of the product played a key role in this success, guaranteeing that the active ingredient was totally non-toxic and harmless.

But just two years after it appeared on the market, a neurologist warned of the danger of damage to the nervous system posed by long-term use of *Contergan*. These warnings increased in number, demonstrating that the non-toxicity of the agent could not be scientifically substantiated.

So, in May 1961, *Chemie Grünenthal* applied to the regulatory agency responsible within the Nordrhein-Westfalia interior ministry, for a prescription requirement for *Thalidomide*, which came into force in August 1961. However this only applied in Nordrhein-Westfalia, Hessen and Baden-Württemberg; in all other parts of Germany *Contergan* continued to be freely available in pharmacies.

From 1959 onwards, doctors and clinics noticed an accumulation of terrible deformities in newborn babies. But as there was no legal requirement to report birth defects, the true extent of the catastrophe did not immediately come to light. Nevertheless several scientists began looking for the cause of this increase. Initial speculation concentrated on the side-effects of the testing of atom bombs, which at the time was the subject of much discussion. But when it became clear that neither East Germany, Belgium nor Switzerland was affected by a similar wave of birth defects, atomic radiation was ruled out as a cause.

Widukind Lenz, a doctor in Hamburg, was the first to demonstrate the connection with *Contergan* – independently from his research, the same connection was demonstrated in Britain and Australia. By 1961 *Grünenthal* had been presented with 1600 warnings concerning defects which had been observed in new-born babies. But the medication remained on the market.

Widukind Lenz's findings were in existence on 16<sup>th</sup> November 1961, but the drug was not taken off the market until the day after the publication of an article in the *Welt am Sonntag* newspaper on 26<sup>th</sup> November 1961.

The figures are inexact:

Roughly 10,000 damaged children were born, around 4,000 of them in Germany. Up to 50% of them survive to this day. It is not known how many affected babies died before birth. *Contergan* was not released in the USA, following a trial phase during which several children were born with disabilities. Following a warning from the Swedish biochemist Robert Nilsson, East Germany did not even begin the licensing and marketing process.

The case came to trial:

The main proceedings lasted from 18<sup>th</sup> January 1968 until 18<sup>th</sup> December 1970. Standing against the three public prosecutors and the chief prosecuting counsel (RA Karl-Hermann Schulte-Hillen) for the 312 joint plaintiffs, were 20 defence lawyers acting on behalf of the 9 (latterly 5) defendants. They were charged with premeditated or negligent physical injury and causing death by negligence.

The parents agreed to a compromise:

They waived their claim for billions of marks' worth of damages, and accepted compensation of 100 million marks. And they also agreed not to pursue further claims against *Grünenthal*.

On 18<sup>th</sup> December 1970, the 283<sup>rd</sup> day of the trial, the criminal proceedings against *Grünenthal* were brought to an end due to insufficient evidence of liability and lack of public interest (§ 153 StPO).

The sum of money paid into the compensation trust ran out in 1987.

All compensation is now paid by the German state.

# NoBody's Perfect



[www.nobodysperfect-film.de](http://www.nobodysperfect-film.de)

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