



## Notebook Festival

# Berlinale 2018. Presidential Secrets and Lessons in Screenwriting

The Berlin Film Festival starts strong with Ruth Beckermann's incisive "The Waldheim Waltz" and Hong Sang-soo's spectral "Grass".

Daniel Kasman • 16 FEB 2018

### Related Films



**THE WALDHEIM WALTZ**  
Ruth Beckermann



**GRASS**  
Hong Sang-soo



**FILM OF THE DAY: SWAGGER** Directed by **OLIVIER BABINET**

**WATCH NOW**

The Berlin International Film Festival, or Berlinale, is a cultural event well-used to hand-wringing by all sorts over its programming and trajectory. This is, of course, also true of the other two major European film festivals, Cannes and Venice, but the discussion around the mission and scale of the Berlinale always seems more acute. To this outsider, such debate can be a real curiosity and, at its best, invigorating: it is unusual in the American tradition to question cultural institutions, but particularly rare in the field of film, which still struggles to be recognized as an art by the greater public. Every year I come to Berlin some group seems upset about something or other about the film festival. There's the too-often tepid competition—whose admirable acclaim for including sharply politically-engaged films ironically holds it to a standard too high to achieve (and actually says more about other festivals)—the super-branded nature of the festivities, the sprawling number of sections and seemingly ever-expanding count of films, a superfluous red carpet, the festival's attachment to the massive European Film Market, where films are presented, bought and sold (or not), and which ensures a fecund industry presence both related to and completely untethered from the actual Berlinale—and so on. Three years ago an unrelated but plucky new festival, the Berlin Critics' Week, was founded and takes place simultaneously in a valiant effort at highly focused curation buoyed by surrounding debate; meanwhile, 2019 will be the last year of festival director Dieter Kosslick, whose successor has the unenviable task of somehow re-invigorating the Berlinale at the same he or she maintains the income from the city's great economic Goliath.

Much of this has been discussed in open debate in the city in the lead-up to the 2018 festival in the presumed hope of defining what the festival should be, to whom, and for what purpose. Meanwhile, I've arrived here excited for some and curious about many films strewn across the Competition, Forum, Panorama, Retrospective, and even further afield

Competition, Forum, Panorama, retrospective, and even further-arena sections of the festival, in the hope not to categorize or criticize the year's programming—this is only possible, I think, for those who can fully dedicate themselves to a particular section to get a full picture of what is being presented; or for those who live in the city and for whom the festival has a far different meaning than to us international visitors—but rather to pinpoint, inside its bulk, what has the power to stand apart.

The first film screened for us visitors set a good standard: Ruth Beckermann's tightly focused, dryly corrosive documentary ***The Waldheim Waltz***, on the controversy surrounding the Austrian presidential campaign of Kurt Waldheim in 1985. In the weeks before the election it came out that Waldheim, who previously had been the Secretary General of the United Nations for ten years, and before that Austria's Foreign Minister, had been more deeply involved with the German army during World War 2 than he previously stated in his autobiography—which skipped over several crucial war years, in which he served under General Alexander Löhr, who was executed for war crimes—and about which he repeatedly lied about or glossed over in the years since. The horror isn't just that someone who had risen to such power—as Waldheim points out, he had no superior in the world in his position at the United Nations—could have such a stained history, but that so few people, and especially so few of his countrymen, would inquire into his past. Or, once finally brought to light, that so many people would make excuses on his behalf—or not care at all.

As Beckermann is direct to point out, eventually the Waldheim affair became not just about one person, but how an entire nation has dealt with its war history, how Austria easily accepted its the role as victim rather than, perhaps, collaborator or, worse, willing perpetrator.

Beckermann's documentary uses archival footage of rallies, news reports and interviews to underscore Waldheim's dance of culpability. and

and interweaves to underscore the filmmaker's sense of culpability, she integrates her own youthful footage of protests among her circle, making clear that while this event was in the past—and Waldheim died in 2007—that many of those to whom it has paramount meaning are still alive and, indeed, may have cut their teeth on it trying to rectify national history, current politics, political activism, and the role of filmmaking. With its withering exposé of a politically—and, greater still, morally—crippling guilt remarkably, tragically, and deftly managed by a seasoned professional on his rise to the highest of powers, *The Waldheim Waltz* is, obviously, brutally relevant not only for its native Austria, whose new 31-year-old Chancellor has raised alarm bells of conservative extremity, but also for all world leaders who have the ghastly ability to somehow survive the fiercest and most upright scrutiny.



*Grass*

Also premiering in the Forum—widely accepted as the program at the Berlinaline that takes the biggest risks and has the most interesting films, and featuring an Expanded section which also includes gallery exhibitions—was a new film by Hong Sang-soo. ***Grass*** is the South Korean director's fourth film to premiere in a year—he was in Competition last Berlin with *On the Beach at Night Alone*. and brought two more

excellent films to Cannes. Its 66 minute run-time and section “downgrade” to the Forum (in some circles, a compliment) underscores the unique position of this director whose productivity and willful disinterest in the absurd requirements that world-renowned filmmakers must continually produce bigger, more ambitious or showy films makes him one of the most unabashedly honest and modest of contemporary auteurs.

A miniature ensemble film of couples meeting for coffee, meals and drinks, each observed, to some degree, by Kim Minhee, playing someone who seems to be taking notes on the conversations, arguments, and accusations she overhears, *Grass* at first seems like a hodgepodge collage portrait of how someone like Hong (but not Hong) constructs his films: by observing the heartfelt, perverse, and innervated relationships around him that people make surprisingly public. But despite his always charming—to this viewer, at least—use of sparse aesthetics and awkwardly self-conscious conversations, nothing is ever quite so simple as it seems in a film by Hong Sang-soo.

Even though the drama takes place in only a few locations, each couple’s conversation seems severed from the space its in, occurring as if on another plane of reality from the woman who is eavesdropping or, indeed, the other couples that may also be meeting in the same place. The film is clearly intimate, yet the sense is of vast, disconnected and unexplained distances between the groups. This creates a discordant surreal quality reminiscent of Alain Resnais’s *Private Fears in Public Spaces* (2006), which likewise created a network of characters at once unified through crossed-paths and interests, and utterly separated in their own episodic, artificially staged dream-worlds. With a sorrowful, subdued tone in keeping with 2017’s two longer and more serious pictures by the director, and shown in black and white—like *The Day After* (2017) and *The Day*

*He Arrives* (2011)—this is a small but unexpectedly spectral film from Hong. Three separate mentions of suicide darken the edges of many of the couple's conversations, while a cast refreshingly varied in age keeps the divergent groups spry and the audience, no doubt trying to find a pattern or connection between it all, off-guard. Kim Minhee's eavesdropper (who claims she is not a writer yet could also be the author of what we're seeing) realizes multiple times—heard in musing voice-over—that many of the people she's eyeing are in fact professional actors, calling into doubt, as is so deliciously common in this director's films, just what it is we're seeing. Is this a dream? Imagination? Fantasy? A wake? A brief but truly unexpected use of lens focus and shadowplay, for this usually formally minimalist director, ripples with such uncertainty. Whatever state of existence *Grass* is taking place on, one thing is for certain: It's Hongian playfulness of surprisingly soulful intrigue.

## Tags

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