

DIAGONALE 2018

Ruth Beckermann • Director

“I wanted to give the full picture of the time and to look at it from all angles”

by MARINA RICHTER

22/03/2018 - We met up with Ruth Beckermann at the Diagonale to talk about her political documentary *The Waldheim Waltz*, which won Best Documentary earlier this year at the Berlinale



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In *The Waldheim Waltz* [+], her hotly anticipated take on the **Kurt Waldheim** affair that took place in the late 1980s, not long after his accomplished career as Secretary-General of the United Nations (1972-1981), **Ruth Beckermann** unveils the spirit of the time that made it all possible, leaning only on archive material, including her own footage. We chatted to her about the film at the Diagonale.

Cineuropa: Your search for the Waldheim documentary material started back in 2013, but you stopped and returned to it a couple of years later. What was the reason for this break?

Ruth Beckermann: When I decided to make the film, I picked a production company that made me wait far too long, so I started shooting *The Dreamed Ones* [+], my previous film. As it turned out, that was a good decision. If the Waldheim film were released two years ago, it wouldn't have had that timeliness that unfortunately it has today. But I knew all along that I would come back to it one day. I re-watched my old material on four VHS tapes, which was barely over two hours long, and it was pretty exciting to return to it after such a long time.

Was working only with archive material your plan from the beginning?

Yes! For me, that was both aesthetically and intellectually challenging. I knew I didn't want to interview people, because the “do you remember?” approach is so typical of television documentaries. I was far more interested in looking at things that people had to say in Waldheim's time and making my own mind up about it.

The footage you shot in the 1980s must have held some surprises.

Not as such. My own material was preserved in my memory. On the other hand, some of the things we found in the archives were quite astonishing. I was reminded of anti-Semitism and of the terrible things that people were saying on the streets. That was something I had buried away, and it was shocking to experience it again. What was completely new to me was, for instance, the hearing in the US Congress, during which **Gerhard Waldheim** was defending his father. That was a completely new mindset. The film is actually about fathers and sons; there are barely any women in it.

There is the “First Lady”...

Yes; there are three women in total in the film: **Elisabeth Waldheim**, former resistance fighter **Rosa Jochmann**, who appears at the end when she's giving an anti-fascist speech, and the American politician who had suggested to the US Congress to put Waldheim on the watch list.

What were you looking for exactly in the ORF archives, apart from the events that led to the spectacular fall of Waldheim?

I had a look at everything from the year 1986 but didn't stop there. The next two years were interesting as well – 1987, because that's when Waldheim was put on the watch list, and 1988 was fascinating in terms of the consequences. In addition, I had a look at the events that had to do with former Nazis from 1945 onwards. There was the **Franz Murer** trial and the scandal surrounding the university professor **Taras Borodajkewycz**, whose pro-fascist lectures sparked major student demonstrations in Vienna, both in the 1960s, plus many more. We spent a lot of time in the archive. I wanted to give the full picture of the time and to have a look at it from all angles, so I did plenty of research before coming up with the concept for my film.

It's an incredibly reflective documentary without any grand emotions being spilled out. Although your voice leads the narrative, there is a calmness and composure, and you establish a certain distance from your subject matter.

That's because a lot of time had passed since the events. Had I made the film back then, I would probably have been much more emotional. But because there is a big physical distance between then and now, I thought it was right to make an analytical film in times like these, and not turn to emotions, because that's exactly what populists do. They incessantly play with emotions, just like all of the politicians you see in the movie. Big words are spat out, like “fatherland” and “values” – all the trumps in the so-called game of true patriotism. I also think that a film about emotions shouldn't be emotional either, because emotions are present in the archive material anyway.

It's scary how many parallels can be drawn between then and now.

Today's politicians are much more cunning. In earlier times, they were more direct, and they didn't have professionals to coach them on their appearance, language, dress code or body language. Contemporaries like **Sebastian Kurz** are clean-shaven, with white teeth and a neat hairdo. They are all coached to the minutest detail. They know how to address the masses, much better than their predecessors did. Someone who looks like Waldheim did back then could never become a politician in our times. In that sense, plenty of things have changed.

It's an Austrian topic, but the film has a universal quality. How did you feel being awarded at Berlin for a film that deals with an issue that so many people are sadly facing in their countries right now?

Of course, I am happy about the film's success, but on the other hand, it is rather sad that the movie is so relevant not only in Austria, but also in the USA, Hungary, Poland, Italy and so on. The populists are on the rise; they are taking over positions of leadership using envy and hatred as tools of control over the masses, with negative emotions and even worse intentions. But I haven't made a film for myself, because I was there, and I know what happened. It was primarily aimed at young people who showed an interest in the past, and who asked questions because they weren't even born when those things took place. The Waldheim affair was probably the most important event in Austrian history since World War II, because it was a kind of turning point. Up to that moment, Austrians had seen themselves as victims, but after the affair, the search for the truth began. No one in their right mind would call Austria the first victim of the German Nazis today. The affair was the beginning of civil society; it actually got better. After the Waldheim case, people became more concerned with the Nazi period, and there were research projects conducted at various universities. For the first time, one spoke about the Jewish victims, which had not been the case before. As Austrian journalist **Hugo Portisch** rightly said in a television interview shown in the film, Austrians were so busy playing the victims that there wasn't any room for the Jewish victims. The Waldheim affair did something very positive for Austria in the end, but now we are in a situation where we are going backwards towards a state of amnesia.

See also

The Waldheim Waltz [AT] (2018): [film profile](#), [film review](#), [film focus](#), [trailer](#), [interview: Ruth Beckermann](#)