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Unmasking an Icon: Ruth Beckermann revisits '80s protests in 'The Waldheim Waltz'

By [Simi Horwitz \(Http://www.filmjournal.com/taxonomy/term/291\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/taxonomy/term/291) Oct 18, 2018



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Austrian-born documentarian Ruth Beckermann does not subscribe to George Santayana’s oft-quoted adage, “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” World events have proven that premise wrong, she asserts. And the idea that films can (or should) be educational vehicles for change is equally foolish. “Movies don’t change the world,” she says in a cultured voice, made all the more so with her German

accent, “but they can open up a conversation.”

She is thrilled, for example, by the large number of young audiences in Austria, Germany, Spain and Italy who are talking about her latest film, *The Waldheim Waltz*, a documentary that zeroes in on former UN Secretary General and Austrian President Kurt Waldheim’s rise to power in the 1980s and his (and Austria’s) cover-up of his controversial past as a Nazi sympathizer, if not worse.

“He was a German intelligence officer and could have made his career in the Nazi party but didn’t, not because he had any moral compunctions about it,” explains Beckermann. “He understood it wouldn’t last long, so he moved on. He was a careerist, an opportunist. But I’m not sure I would call him a Nazi.”

Charming, erudite, with a flurry of ingratiating hand gestures, he’s almost credible but not quite. With Beckermann’s running commentary—she serves as the film’s narrator—coupled with her own footage of buffoonish Waldheim supporters blathering on about Jews controlling

the world, exaggerating Holocaust atrocities and/or bringing it on themselves, the movie doesn't pretend to be "balanced." *The Waldheim Waltz* is Austria's official selection for the 2019 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film and another impressive Menemsha Films selection (*The Women's Balcony, Dough*).

Beckermann has no doubt that her enthusiastic youthful moviegoers see parallels in Waldheim and Austria in the '80s and the current scene in Europe and beyond. "We're talking about politicians who lie and use populism to construct common enemies and stir up patriotism as a way of generating support," she says. "Years ago it was anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism still exists, but it's beneath the surface. In fact, the right wing has tried to integrate Jews by referring to the Judeo-Christian tradition versus foreigners. Islamophobia and xenophobia are the big issues today. Young people know the history, but they are especially interested in the protest movement, the demonstrations against Waldheim that we shot for the film. They want to know what we did and how we did it."

The filmmaker, who met me in a Midtown Manhattan hotel restaurant, is every bit the activist-artist for whom the political is personal and vice versa. After launching her career as a reporter, she turned her talents to filmmaking in the late '70s. She has helmed more than a dozen documentaries and in her spare time creates art installations including a multimedia piece she's building now that explores James Joyce. It'll be on display in Salzburg next year.

Jewish history is an implied, if not informing, presence in many of her films. Perhaps her best known are *Return to Vienna* (1983), *Paper Bridge* (1987) and *Towards Jerusalem* (1991), forming her trilogy of Jewish narratives of loss, memory and identity.

In *Paper Bridge*, for example, Beckermann explores her parents' pre-World War II journeys (literal and metaphorical) to Vienna, although the film's theme is how second-generation Jewish-Austrians (such as herself) navigate their own lives in Austria given their parents' experience that's so much baggage.

Still, the Holocaust has never played a central role in her films, not least because there are far too many pictures on the topic and a fair number are repetitious, banal and clichéd, she contends. Holocaust films need to have current application, she stresses. Otherwise, what's the point? Not to be misunderstood, she insists the Holocaust should never be forgotten and credits the 1978 miniseries "Holocaust" for opening up the subject and in fact making the word more commonplace. "Before that, we'd say 'mass murder,'" she notes. "And because of Holocaust films, the victims of other global atrocities are seeing their stories told on film too."

In retrospect, her most startling film to date is *East of War*. Shot in 1995, it was set in a Berlin gallery featuring a controversial exhibition about the crimes of the German army ("Wehrmacht"). Hundreds of photos lined the walls, but Beckermann chose not to shoot any of the pictures (many of which were graphic), but rather focus her lens and narrative on the former soldiers who filed through the exhibit and were eager to speak with her.

"It was as if they needed to confess something, not unlike attending confession in a church," she recalls. "It was also possible they were willing to speak to me because I was a woman and therefore didn't really count. Like Waldheim, they constructed a narrative of the war that

included, ‘I never knew these things happened.’ ‘I never witnessed them.’ Their new memories replaced what happened with memories that were far less horrible.”

At the moment, her thoughts are centered on *The Waldheim Waltz*, appreciating the positive responses and fascinated by the respective filters through which various countries and subcultures view the film, she says.

In Tel Aviv, where the two screenings were totally sold out, many audience members saw elements of Waldheim in Netanyahu. In Belgrade, moviegoers wondered what Waldheim’s relationship was with the former Yugoslavia.

“And then there are those neo-Nazis and their sympathizers who have never seen the film and yet write the most hateful things about it on the Internet,” she says. “They make hateful anti-Semitic remarks like ‘Here it is, another film about how the Jews were mistreated.’”

Beckermann concedes that she looks at her footage with new eyes, most pointedly the mid-’80s cars and clothes and how few women are in positions of power or even present in any significant way at the protests.

“I just didn’t think about that then,” she says. “Also, I remember how angry I felt about Waldheim. Now I view my anger a little ironically. After all, we won, didn’t we? Yes, there is a renewed right wing. But at the same time, young people have been re-politicized and that’s good news. My film doesn’t have any one message. I just want people to think critically, not automatically believe everything they see on Facebook, Fox or CNN.”

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