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The Waldheim Waltz

By [Sierra Pettengill](#) | October 19, 2018



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The Waldheim Waltz

Dir. Ruth Beckermann, Austria, Menemsha Films

"You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time." This apocryphal epigraph, often erroneously credited to Abraham Lincoln, opens Ruth Beckermann's documentary *The Waldheim Waltz*, which recounts the 1986 Austrian Presidential election of former Nazi Kurt Waldheim using all archival footage. It's a wickedly delightful meta-error to introduce this proto-post-truth documentary, illustrating the warping of historical memory through time, a subject the film explores expertly and to devastating effect.

Kurt Waldheim began his Presidential run after serving as the Secretary-General of the United Nations for the majority of the 1970s—a position he proclaimed made him the "moral authority" of the world. The official story he tells of his role in World War II is that he was forcibly drafted into the German army, discharged following an injury in 1941, and that he then focused on studying law. It's a wartime experience that's been normalized as a narrative among Austrians, as it aligns with the collectively agreed-upon delusion that Austria's citizens were "Hitler's first victims." *The Waldheim Waltz* is structured as a tense countdown to Election Day. By the time the clock runs out, a tsunami of evidence detailing Waldheim's participation in genocidal SS operations has swelled.

When Waldheim's election bid began in the mid-1980s, Beckermann had made several documentaries in her native Austria. She was also an engaged activist, recording some of the protests against his burgeoning campaign. *The Waldheim Waltz* draws from Beckermann's personal VHS tapes to augment broadcast news coverage of the lead-up to his election. Despite her dedicated political involvement—in one scene, she is part of a group of sign-wielding protestors interrupting a live, televised press conference—the ruminative and poetic narration that Beckermann voices throughout the film is far from polemical. Contemplating the choice to include Waldheim's voice on the famed Voyager Golden Records, shot into space in 1977 to speak for all of Earth's humanity, she asks, "What will be remembered?" Though the film unfolds over two months in the spring of 1986, moments like these show that she is taking the long view, looking back with a zoomed-out perspective.

Once it starts, the damning evidence, mostly uncovered and presented by the World Jewish Congress, doesn't stop revealing itself. First there's Waldheim's military record card, revealing that he had been a member of the SA, or storm-troopers, and the National Socialist Student's League since 1938. Then there's the revelation that he was on the staff of Austrian war criminal General Löhner, who was hung for his crimes in 1947. There is the supposition of his participation in the 1942 Kozara massacre, in which 2,000 partisans and civilians in Yugoslavia were murdered, and finally the impossible-to-miss deportation of 60,000 Jews from Thessaloniki, Greece, where Waldheim was revealed to

have been stationed in 1943. The candidate, his party, and his family are shown repeatedly dismissing all accusations. Facts and evidence be damned—their defensive tactics flip through the playbook of Jewish conspiracy, foreigners meddling with internal politics, thinly veiled anti-Semitism, and appeals to narratives of WWII Austrian victimhood. "I went to war, but I did my duty like thousands of other Austrians who served as soldiers in the war," Waldheim says, denying that he was anywhere the many

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photographs reveal him to be, or that he witnessed a quarter of Thessaloniki's population being loaded off to concentration camps. It's astounding how simply the truth about his background is uncovered, and equally so astounding how long Waldheim held major diplomatic positions on the world stage without anyone bothering to look through an archival record or two. One of Beckermann's larger points is that it shouldn't be astounding at all: *The Waldheim Waltz* is not a film whose primary mission is to convince the viewer of Waldheim's complicity, though it effectively manages that beyond a shadow of a doubt. Instead, it's a film that slowly reveals the dangers of warped and buried historical memory. By utilizing a structure that builds the inevitability of his guilt alongside the inevitability of his victory, *The Waldheim Waltz* ultimately shows how little the mere revelation of truth actually matters, absent a much grander reckoning.

The archival video material that forms the bulk of *The Waldheim Waltz* comes from a mix of international and national broadcast television sources: U.S. Congressional hearings, a series of World Jewish Congress press conferences, Austrian television chat shows and interviews, long-form British television reporting, and staged campaign appearances and rallies. Cinematically, this secondhand archival footage is mostly banal. Aside from a few explosive interview moments where Waldheim loses his patience with his inquisitors, the rehearsed reasonableness that is the hallmark of the evening news flattens the uncovered allegations and atrocities, reducing their impact. Many filmmakers have taken various approaches to transforming the staleness that's often the defining feature of archival documentation—particularly that of the bureaucratic kind—into emotionally and narratively persuasive cinema. For instance, Eyal Sivan's dramatic and controversial interventions of exaggerated sound design, editing, and visual effects into the staid Leo Hurwitz footage of the Adolf Eichmann trial—itsself an event whose banality famously challenged our perceptions of evil—for *The Specialist* (1999). Beckermann's touch is lighter, if arguably more probing, calling direct attention to what is being documented and why. "What does one see? What does one not see?," she asks, showing photographs of the Thessaloniki deportation taken by German photographer Walter Dick. She simultaneously wields these photographs as proof of the vast and unavoidable scale of the tragic event (there's no way Waldheim was there and missed it) and to point out that no one has ever asked what, exactly, Dick himself was doing there during the war. It's a subtle but consistent interrogation, and by calling attention to what images are projected and received, she reveals the process by which narratives can be made and unmade.

"Why had people suddenly become interested in him? What had changed?," her narration asks, as the press starts to pay attention to Waldheim's past, having ignored it since his political career began in nearly 40 years prior. After paying lip service to a series of publicized political events—Reagan's visit to the graves of Nazi soldiers at Bitburg, the repatriation of war criminal Walter Reder from Italy back to Austria—Beckermann's answer is, in the main, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, released in 1985. "Ultimately," she