



# Not Reconciled: Ruth Beckermann Discusses "Waldheim Waltz"

The tremendously relevant documentary is a barometer for measuring of amnesia and denial can do to a country's self-image.

David Perrin • 27 MAR 2018



Ruth Beckermann's tremendously relevant documentary *The Waldheim Waltz* is an excellent barometer for what 40 years of collective willful

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denial can do to a country's self-image. The stage is Austria in March amidst of the presidential election when revelations come to light regarding and former UN General Secretary, Kurt Waldheim's war-time record in 1944 in Yugoslavia and Greece, whereby he is accused of possibly or at least having had knowledge of war crimes, including the deportation of Thessaloniki's Jewish population—details that he conveniently chose to omit in his autobiography. Less concerned with establishing the facts and valid charges, Beckermann chooses rather to zero in sharply on Waldheim's evasions around the truth, his *waltz* from one obfuscating statement to another, filling the gaps in memory and frustratingly daft expressions of bewilderment voiced by the media about the issue. Yet Beckermann's indictment extends beyond Waldheim; her film is an interrogation of all of Austria, a country that, until 1945, had comfortably and complacently played its illusionary role as the first victim of Nazism with the Anschluss in 1938. And so the voice of Waldheim becomes the voice of Austria, his repeated denials doubling as a mirror for the country. At one point in the film we see an excerpt from a television interview from 1986 with Austrian journalist Hubertus Czernin, whose initial reports in the *Profil* magazine eventually boiled over into what became known as the Waldheim Affair. "He was the perfect president for Austria, but it's a shame." Yes, indeed.

Beckermann, along with her longtime editor Dieter Pichler, have ingeniously constructed *The Waldheim Waltz* exclusively out of television archive footage from the 1970s and 1980s, collating together material from a variety of international networks that covered the controversy, much of it from the US and the World Jewish Congress, the central acting body in the affair, whose investigation into Waldheim's election led to further uncoverings, each one more nefarious than the last. From disparate sources we encounter the many contradictory sides of Waldheim: a self-assured man speaking grandly about his role as General Secretary of the UN, and ten years later bumbling through an interview about his war activities and his efforts to salvage his image. Stitched together with this material from the international front is Beckermann's own fascinating footage that she shot during the time in the days, weeks and months leading up to the election, documenting the activities of the local activists—many of them her friends—the heated protests that erupted in the capital's main square, all accompanied by her steely, humorous voiceover. She explicitly inserts herself into the story, turning

numerous voiceover. She explicitly inserts herself into the story, but just into an objective eyewitness account, but also into a personal ta Cradling the narrative is a masterful countdown structure of the wee leading up to the final election on June 8, 1986. Inserted calendar da appropriately in the red and white colors of the Austrian flag, mark a in the proceedings, the result being that the film unfolds almost at th intensity of a thriller, a kind of edge-of-your seat effect that one woul an archive documentary. Beckermann leaves the footage largely un the type of rapid inter-cutting between scenes that define the aesthe thereof) of the TV documentary. Form and content run hand in hand of unabridged material of Waldheim speaking, providing him with me incriminate himself.

It is impossible not to note that nearly all of the anti-Waldheim footag front is what Beckermann shot. The Austrian media coverage of the resoundingly pro-Waldheim, a circumstance the filmmaker uses for s troubling juxtapositions: blood-curdling scenes of public displays of a Vienna's Stephansplatz shot by Beckermann, colliding with state ne Waldheim at some rained-out rally in a rural village, conducting a br Austrian anthem, his awkwardly oversized arms and hands clearly n is as if the two materials were combating each other, with Beckerma representing the rift that had torn a hole in Austria's warped version previously dealt with her homeland's dubious positioning towards its wartime atrocities in her documentary from 20 years earlier called *E*. In it she films the visitors to a Vienna exhibition detailing the war crim the Wehrmacht on the eastern front. The public, many of whom were veterans and present when said crimes took place, react dismayed, outright incensed at the lies they felt were being spread by the exhibit two films form a diptych: a portrait of a nation suffering from historical

All of which leads to the unfortunate relevancy of Beckermann's *Wa* coalition government, newly elected in October last year, is headed Chancellor Sebastian Kurz of the ÖVP (Austrian People's Party), an Heinz Christian Strache, who along with his party the FPÖ (Freedom has had a long history of associations with neo-Nazi groups, and wh

policy based on xenophobia and nationalism.

No doubt Beckermann's film is sure to make inroads at home, but then the unfortunate fact that in some countries a skewed version of history is entrenched in the national psyche.

I sat down with Ruth Beckermann to talk about her film during the Berlin Austrian Film Café.

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**NOTEBOOK:** Why did you choose to preface the film with famous th Lincoln quote: "You can fool all the people some of the time, and so the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time," followed by

**RUTH BECKERMANN:** At a certain point I wanted to call the film "V because for me it is a film about lying. So I thought this quote, and a President, would fit perfectly. I mean, it is not the most original quote known, but I wanted to give the audience from the beginning the ide about lying. And it was always about that because I was not interest record. I was interested in the way he behaved, in his denial, which denial. Also, I opened with my own footage because it is my own bio Waldheim Affair is very important in my own life. It's a turning point f was also a turning point for me, because I met so many people who which makes you feel more comfortable in this fucking country. As I makes you feel less lonely. Before the Jewish community tried to hic key—and then it changed. It was about Austria's failure to reconcile

**NOTEBOOK:** Throughout the film you have this refrain, to documen was always an issue of either/or. But with this affair, it seems that yc fuse the two, documenting as a form of protest.

**BECKERMANN:** Of course, but when you film you have a distance. banner and a camera, but in the way that I filmed, as you saw, I was of the action. You might remember that scene of the protest on Step guy yelling who pushes the microphone away.

**NOTEBOOK:** Did you always want to make the film solely out of arr

**NOTEBOOK:** Did you always want to make the film solely out of archival no interviews or talking heads?

**BECKERMANN:** Yes, the artistic challenge for me was to make a film out of television footage. Of course, I did interviews with people from different backgrounds for myself, but I think it is boring. I remember this, and I think this TV-style of documentary filmmaking was not something I was interested in. And there is another thing to do with it: if you bring the present time into it, if you have talking heads, et cetera, people are less encouraged to think for themselves, they just accept what they think today. If you have already people who tell you what they think, there is no work for the spectator. I wanted the audience to see the film and talk amongst each other, which actually happened at the after-party. It was great. Usually people go to an after-party and they talk about something else, but here people really talked about the film, about Waldheim, about Austria, and about Trump, and that was actually the reaction that I wanted.

**NOTEBOOK:** You also allow the footage to play out for very long. I'm especially interested in the scene of Waldheim's son during the Congressional hearing.

**BECKERMANN:** But at the same time I think this footage of the son is quite interesting because you also feel sorry for him: why does he defend his father, why is he so uncritical? Also the Congressman who interviews him in that scene was a Hungarian, Tom Lantos is his name. He had survived in Budapest during the war, about Raoul Wallenberg, he was the Swedish ambassador to Hungary who saved many Jews, and Lantos was one of the ones that was saved. So he knew the area, he knew about Austria, and I think that's why he has this sympathy towards the son.

**NOTEBOOK:** What surprised me was the amount of international coverage of the affair you included, yet there appeared to be no Austrian backlash.

**BECKERMANN:** Nobody grilled him in Austria. The response was very positive except us of course. That's why all of the footage of the local counter-protest against Waldheim was all footage that I shot.

**NOTEBOOK:** I knew that Waldheim won the election, but somehow I forgot, so that when the election results came in I was shocked.

the film I forgot, so that when the election results came in I was stuck to do with this thrilling countdown structure.

**BECKERMANN:** Yes! During the premiere, when it says that Waldh election with a majority of 53% or something, there was also this audience. And I'm sure they knew too, but like you say, you forget, you for a happy ending. I plunged into the material for a long time, and then eventually this structure emerged. I definitely wanted to make it an a this simple mechanical structure of ticking down the days gave me the freedom to go to into these digressions: to talk about why these changes happening now, particularly then in the 1980s, to talk about the Bitburg about the film *Shoah*, which was very important to me, about Waldh Secretary General at the UN, and other questions I was interested in it could come back to this chronological counting down, because the end comes back to this mechanical structure. I also thought that this would film forward. The film starts on March 3, and ends on June 8, so with frame to work with I felt that a forward thrust would benefit the film.

**NOTEBOOK:** Were you surprised that he had won the election?

**BECKERMANN:** No, not at all. For us it was completely obvious that generation, the people who fought in the war voted for him, not despite affiliation and they had built up this atmosphere of resentment, of an patriotism, and it's the exact same way as the people who won the election same xenophobic agenda. It doesn't change. *Immer wieder Oesterreich* translation: Always Forever Austria]—that's the song, or the slogan that election parties singing this song.

**NOTEBOOK:** Have you considered organizing a screening for Char Strache?

**BECKERMANN:** No, but actually the Minister of Culture of Austria, instead to Kurz, was at the screening yesterday, and I managed not to meet the end credits, and didn't stay for the discussion.

**NOTEBOOK:** Do you think the film will prompt some kind of real political

Austria?

**BECKERMANN:** I think there will be strong reactions, because a couple of days before the film premiered there was a whole page in *Der Standard* [an Austrian national daily] dedicated to the film, and they had already about the film, and they had hundreds of postings, many of them were very positive about Waldheim. It was unbelievable—I did not expect that.

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• 23 MAR 2018

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