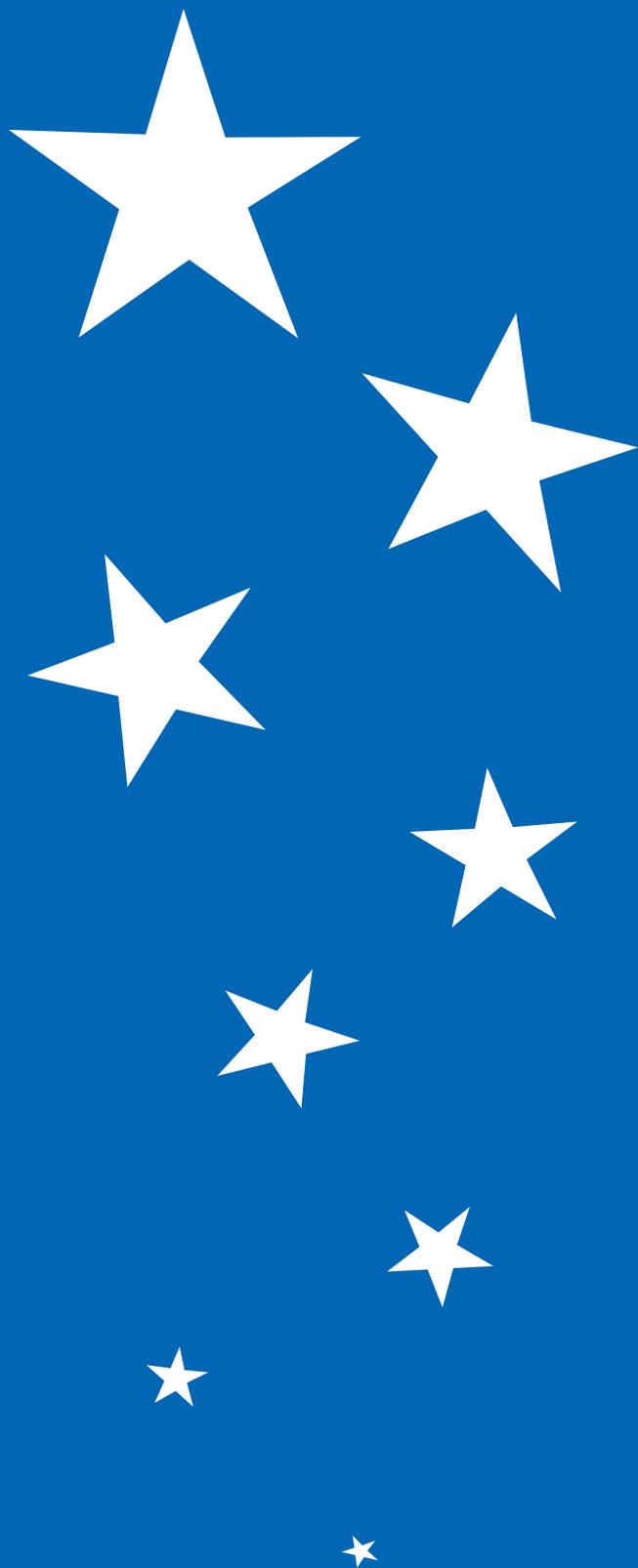


AMERICAN

PASSAGES



A FILM BY RUTH BECKERMANN

RUTH BECKERMANN FILMPRODUKTION PRESENTS AMERICAN PASSAGES CAMERA ANTOINE PAROUTY, LISA RINZLER SOUND ATANAS TCHOLAKOV, MATTHEW DENNIS

EDITING DIETER PICHLER EXECUTIVE PRODUCER URSULA WOLSCHLAGER MUSIC WAITSTILL BAXTER WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY RUTH BECKERMANN © 2011



www.ruthbeckermann.com

AMERICAN PASSAGES

A Film by Ruth Beckermann

CINÉMA DU RÉEL

Centre Pompidou, Paris

SCREENINGS

March 31, 9:00 pm

Followed by a Q/A with the director

April 1st, 1:00 pm

Followed by a Q/A with the director

April 2nd, 5:00 pm

120 min., Color, 1:1,85, Dolby SR, 2011
English with French subtitles

PRODUCTION COMPANY

Ruth Beckermann-Filmproduktion
Seidengasse 15/2/17
1070 Vienna, Austria

Tel.: +43 699 11 50 74 98
sekretariat@ruthbeckermann.com
www.ruthbeckermann.com

FESTIVALS

Austrian Film Commission
c/o Anne Laurent
International Relations
Stiftgasse 6
1070 Vienna, Austria

Tel: +43 1 526 33 23
Fax: +43 1 526 68 01
festivals@afc.at
www.afc.at

WORLD SALES

Cinephil - Distribution & Co Productions
18 Levontin Street
Tel Aviv 65112, Israel

Tel: +972 3 566 4129
Fax: +972 3 560 1436
info@cinophil.co.il
www.cinophil.co.il

AMERICAN PASSAGES

A Film by Ruth Beckermann

SYNOPSIS

Initially, there's that moment of happiness: an African-American celebrating in Harlem cheers "We're free!" as if Barack Obama's victory meant the ultimate end of slavery.

AMERICAN PASSAGES is an associative journey through the United States: a disillusioned Iraq veteran, gay adoptive fathers, black judges, white party animals and a pimp at a casino table in Las Vegas.

The extreme contrasts of black and white, rich and poor, winners and losers are often as surprising as the meaning of the constitutional right to the pursuit of happiness in these times of crisis.

An epic panorama of America.

SYNOPSIS

Tout commence par cet instant de bonheur: un Afro-Américain fête la victoire de Barack Obama à Harlem et clame "Nous sommes libres !" comme si cet événement mettait un terme définitif à l'esclavage.

AMERICAN PASSAGES est un voyage collectif à travers les Etats-Unis: un vétéran de la guerre en Irak désabusé, des pères adoptifs homosexuels, des juges noirs, des noctambules blancs et un proxénète assis à une table de jeux à Las Vegas.

Les contrastes extrêmes entre les noirs et les blancs, les riches et les pauvres, les gagnants et les perdants surprennent souvent tout autant que le sens du droit constitutionnel à la recherche du bonheur en ces temps de crise.

Un panorama épique de l'Amérique.

AMERICAN PASSAGES

Interview with Ruth Beckermann

February 24, 2011

Did the political events and developments inspire you to make a documentary in and about the USA or did you want to make a film about America as a place of desire, a running theme in your other works?

It's both. I wouldn't describe the USA as a place of desire, but rather a place of utopian concept. I am very interested in utopias which is why I chose to question the American Dream and reality after exploring the Zionist utopia in "Towards Jerusalem".

Apart from the right to life and freedom the Declaration of Independence of 1776 also includes the right to the pursuit of happiness. The founding texts have a mythical quality in the USA and the Constitution acts as an umbrella for the incredible multitude of ways of life to be found in America.

The decision to start this project prior to another one was triggered by Obama's election campaign and the financial crisis. This dual shock made me think that the timing was right, something of utmost importance in documentary filmmaking. "American Passages" doesn't concentrate on the current events of the past two years but it still conveys the particular mood of the time: there's a kind of melancholy, a change in thinking as well as a tendency to keep going as usual. Much is left open which is a good starting point for a documentary.

The title "American Passages" evokes your film "A Fleeting Passage to the Orient." What does the term "passages" mean to you?

The term "passage" can also be found as "rite de passage" in "Zorro's Bar Mitzva." In Walter Benjamin's "Passagenwerk" the term "passage" not only pertains to the geographical dimension but also takes on a temporal and psychological meaning. It describes various passages. "American Passages" functions as a projection surface and gives food for thought and feeling. The viewers can then complement this with all the scenes from US movies and series they have in their heads. It also shows where the US movie industry gets its plots and characters from. They really do exist; those sheriffs with little gun tie tacks. The all-encompassing naïveté is a reality.

What characterizes your image of America?

My generation's image of America is rather ambivalent. On the one hand it was the Americans who freed us from the shackles of war. From a Jewish perspective there were only two real options for those who survived: the USA or Israel. America was the epitome of security and I remember my father changed all the money he earned into US dollars. On the other hand, this attitude changed during the 70s and 80s due to the USA's involvement in the Vietnam War. People began to analyze American politics more critically, although I have to say, to me the positive aspects still outweigh the negative ones.

I lived in the USA in the mid 70s under the pretext of writing my dissertation. In fact, I was enrolled at the School of Visual Arts to study photography and I spent my time wandering through New York with my Nikon. It was in New York that I first delved into the art of imagery and discovered the cinema as well as modern art. It was the first time I felt completely free, also free in my creativity. At the time New York was quite broke and in no way as "gentrified" as it is today: the Bowery was dilapidated and the East Village was dangerous and full of junkies. Since then American documentary photography has

become a significant influence on my work. It deals seriously with the country and its society. In this context I should mention William Egglestone, Zoe Strauss, Steven Shore and of course Robert Frank who inspired me to undertake this project. It was fifty years ago that he travelled across the country and photographed American people in a broadly conceived and essayistic form.

How were you able to enter that world, how did you meet the people?

It took me a very long time until I truly comprehended how the people there work and I found a way in with them. Initially, I thought they were quite similar to us Europeans – after all we live according to the same Western principles. However, when I embarked upon my research journey I realized they were completely strange to me. I became very curious about the diversity and suddenly found myself interested in the fantastic image cultivation seemingly more inherent to a homeless guy under the Las Vegas "Strip" than to most show masters in Europe. I was also greatly impressed by the seriousness with which everyone contributes to the public welfare. It's a society with a highly civilized system of coexistence which reflects the positive aspect of this lawsuit mania, sometimes so hard for us to understand.

Under what premise did you do your research?

I embarked upon several trips, one of which was three weeks long, to fathom the general filming conditions and to find my mixture of topics, people and cardinal points. You have to be very careful not to cramp your own concept in order to stay on top of your appointment schedule. You have to strike the right balance and remain open towards the unexpected and if necessary, overthrow your own plans.

You travelled across eleven states, how did you come up with the route?

I didn't want to show specific locations; instead I chose generic locations that are the same all across America: highways, diners, garages, etc. – mainly locations with a specific function. Modern day life takes place in these "placeless places."

I chose passages through America in order to mount scenes of variety which culminate in a collage – a fragmented picture: down south, middle America, then towards the west. Then two atypical locations which are very typical on a symbolic level: New York and Las Vegas. I was filming in Harlem on the night of the election; New York is one of the few places in America where the racial segregation really seems a thing of the past and where there is a mesh of people of all kinds of backgrounds. Las Vegas on the other hand is a piece of fiction turned into a reality in the middle of the desert, a Brecht's "Mahagonny," an expressionistic tale of a pleasure city.

A Hollywood film built from concrete. It shows the American attitude towards life which is diametrically opposite to that of the European: sexual prudery and hedonism. Prostitution is illegal in Las Vegas so as to not distract the players. Life in general is viewed much more like a game: you invent yourself, you present yourself in a role, you try your luck and if you fail you keep going and try again. Bankruptcy or failures are not as sanctioned by society as they are in Europe, and the courage to take a gamble is highly valued. In the desert cities of the

west, in this paranoid suburbia, the brutality of this way of life is highlighted – only victory counts. Victory over the slot machines, victory over the desert.

What roles do Kurt Weill/Bert Brecht play?

It's astonishing how relevant "Mahagonny" is in today's crisis even though they wrote it in Berlin in the 1920s; it's fitting that someone is singing the "Alabama Song" in Las Vegas. At the end it is sung again in a jazzier version by Dee Dee Bridgewater – a wonderful combination of European and American modernity.

Which themes are you aiming to address in "American Passages"?

There are certain topics I wanted to have and there were others that drew me towards them. At first I wasn't interested at all in Native Americans. It seemed everything had been said before. One of our bases was in Tulsa, Oklahoma where you are confronted with the history, whether you want to be or not. There's an entire museum dedicated to Native American art. When I visited I came across a picture that worked with writings and monochrome figures and I felt I had to meet the artist. This is how we got to know Bobby Martin who surprised us with his stories about the current meaning of Native American blood. What surprised me about the history of black people was that it is still ever-present and virulent. I was also interested in exploring different lifestyles – I am thinking of the homosexual dads I interviewed in Arizona, a totally conservative state yet they were able to adopt children easily. The fact that we were the first team ever allowed to film in a casino was really quite surprising. Because Jerry is such a high roller and the times were slow going the head croupier spontaneously gave us his permission. It is so wonderful that this old gambler is such a bad guy and yet still likable. Ambivalence and the element of surprise are main ingredients of the "comédie humaine" and consequently of documentary film making.

Were you trying to capture a snapshot of society or did you proceed from the concept of the "American Dream" and juxtapose dream and reality in opposition?

The question I wanted to examine was: where and in what way is this dream expressed nowadays? Of course, it's a rhetorical question because you can't capture myths, dreams and memories on film, only the moment they flash through someone's mind. This happens repeatedly in this film: at the beginning we see a black man screaming "we are free, we are free!" during election night. Obama's election was seen as the endpoint of the long history of slavery in America by African-Americans. The Constitution is often quoted by left-wing and right wing voters alike. For example, there's the Tea Party supporter holding a speech on Memorial Day or the teacher in Alabama who admires Benjamin Franklin

How much did the editing influence the final film?

This film is a montage and Dieter Pichler and I went over and over the material for months. Once you're finished filming there are a multitude of editing constraints, such as geography, seasons, etc. You have to be able to shake yourself free from these fixed ideas. It is crucial where you position something

and which kinds of associations lead to the next. A cut has to evoke one or several associations and shouldn't follow geographical logic or weather conditions.

"American Passages" works because of its elements of surprise: A scene or a topic comes up and you get into it and then you're gone again. The challenge was that everything is intertwined yet always new – it's a ballad of many verses. To keep this up is especially difficult when you've got many protagonists and more than one main theme. This applies to the filming and even more to the montage.

The historian in the film points out that the "American Dream" is a household name whereas there is no such thing as a "French Dream" or "German Dream". Do you have an explanation for that?

I think it's because in America everyone can invent themselves. There's a kind of freedom that's not existent anywhere else. However, it's also very volatile; a freedom to climb but also to fall. The feeling you get in America is that everything is possible and this is highly appealing to people. If I can take what's in me and bundle up my energies and put myself out there, then I have a chance of becoming "someone." It really works and there are numerous examples. One could argue, of course, that there are a lot of people living in miserable conditions, but still, humans need role models and to be able to fantasize about their own potential and the possibilities out there, and these are attractive qualities in this country. As long as the USA has these great universities, research possibilities and this power to invent, they will remain a leading nation. After all, Facebook and the iPhone were invented there. China has to try and do that. Just copying ideas is not enough. You need to have the environment which enables people like Mark Zuckerberg or Steve Jobs to find a face or a pedestal. You are constantly stimulated. That's what I liked so much about filming this documentary – I really got that vibe and I told myself "we can do anything and we can get anywhere."

Would you say that "American Passages" is more of a documentary and less of an essayistic film compared to your earlier works?

I would say this is an essay, even though it doesn't rely on text like "A Fleeting Passage to the Orient" does for example. This gives the viewer more freedom and he/she doesn't have to deal with me as the author so intensively. There are topics that need to be processed – I am thinking of "Paper Bridge" or "East of War."

"American Passages" has more lightness. America gives you the feeling of lightness.

Interview: Karin Schiefer

© 2011 Austrian Film Commission

AMERICAN PASSAGES

Written and Directed by **Ruth Beckermann**
Director of Photography **Antoine Parouty**
Lisa Rinzler
Sound Recordists **Atanas Tcholakov**
Matthew Dennis
Editor **Dieter Pichler**
Executive Producer **Ursula Wolschlager**
Additional Cinematography **Johannes Hammel**
Eric Goover
Camera Assistants **Michael Parry**
Richard Fricker
Matt Turner
Additional Sound Recordist **David Ward**
Sound Assistants **Diego Reiwald**
Benny Martin
Editing Consultant **Gertraud Luschützky**
Music by **Waitstill Baxter**

with

Michael Vogt, Bobbie Martin, Sheila Jackson-Johnson, James & Marie & Grace Stack, Sheila Skemp, Michele Mitchell, Lynetta Lyon, James Collette Iii, John Parkerson, Brian Whitfield, Linda & James Waltman, Ruth Haefliger, Phil Mcentee, Constance Slaughter-Harvey, Tomie Green, Johnnie Moore, Charles & Robert & Alison & Asher Hahn-Lowry, Juan Delgado Soto, David Epstein, Michael Light, Paolo Soleri, Joseph Arpaio, Mary Justice, Nancy Herr, Jaki Baskow, Larry Hart, Caroline Swindle, Tony Heart, Rich & Marie Little, Frank Randall, Genevieve Dew, Jesse Garon, Patricia Larsen, Andreas Mitisek, Eric & Phil, Jerry Goldberg

Research

Peter Stastny, Richard Fricker, Diego Reiwald, Nick Prokesch, Chelsea Smith, Kaitlyn Plum, Frances Bartlett, Gabe Jones, Winston Jones, Matthew O'Brien, Sabine Schlunk, Eddie Fickett

Producer **Ruth Beckermann**
Associate Producer **Gabriele Kranzelbinder**
Production Assistants Vienna **Ruth Kaaserer**
Daniela Praher
U.S. Producers **Karen Annarino**
Marisa Lloredo Saez
Postproduction Manager **Marie Tappero**
Production Accountant **Özlem Sümerol**
Assistant Editor **Peter Jaitz**
Sound Editor **Atanas Tcholakov**
Re-Recording Mixer **Bernhard Maisch**
Color Grading **1Z1 Screenworks / Kurt Hennrich**
Graphic Design **Oliver Neumann**

Special thanks to Robert Frank

Filmed in New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Arizona and Nevada.

With the support of    Film/Fernseh-
Abkommen

FILMOGRAPHY

www.ruthbeckermann.com

Arena Besetzt

Austria 1977, Video/16mm, bw, 75 min.

Production: Videogruppe Arena (Josef Aichholzer, Ruth Beckermann, Franz Grafl)

Auf amol a Streik

Austria 1978, 16mm, bw, 24 min.

Director: Ruth Beckermann und Josef Aichholzer

Production: Filmladen

Der Hammer steht auf der Wiese da draußen

Austria 1981, 16mm, color, 40 min.

Director: Ruth Beckermann, Josef Aichholzer, Michael Stejskal

Production: Filmladen

Return to Vienna

Austria 1983, 16 mm, bw & color, 91 min.

Director: Ruth Beckermann und Josef Aichholzer

Camera: Tamas Ujlaki

Production: Filmladen

Der Igel

Austria 1985, Video, color, 37 min.

Director: Ruth Beckermann with students of the History Workshop, Salzburg

Paper Bridge

Austria 1987, 16 mm, color, 91 min.

Director: Ruth Beckermann

Camera: Nurith Aviv

Editing: Gertraud Luschützky

Production: Filmladen

Towards Jerusalem

Austria 1990, 16 mm, color, 84 min.

Director: Ruth Beckermann

Camera: Nurith Aviv

Editing: Gertraud Luschützky

Production: Filmladen

East of War

Austria 1996, High8/35mm

Director: Ruth Beckermann

Camera: Peter Roehsler

Editing: Gertraud Luschützky

Production: Filmladen

A Fleeting Passage to the Orient

Austria 1999, s-16mm/35mm, 82 min.

Director: Ruth Beckermann und Josef Aichholzer

Camera: Tamas Ujlaki

Production: Filmladen

homemad(e)

Austria 2001, DV/35mm, Color, 85 min.

Director: Ruth Beckermann

Camera: Nurith Aviv, Ruth Beckermann, Peter Roehsler

Production: Ruth-Beckermann-Filmproduktion

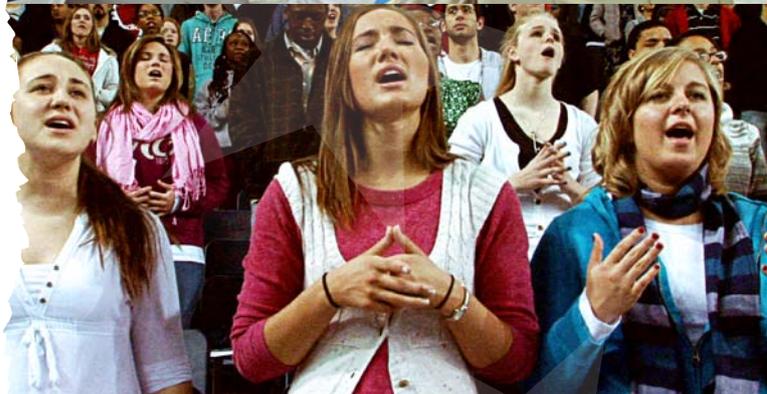
Zorro's Bar Mizwa

Austria 2005, Color, DV/35mm, 90 min.

Conceived and Directed by Ruth Beckermann

Ruth Beckermann was born in Vienna, where she went to school and graduated at the University of Vienna. She spent some time in Tel Aviv and New York, worked in Zurich and lives today as a filmmaker and author in Vienna and Agay (F).





AN EPIC PANORAMA OF AMERICA

Initially, there's that moment of happiness: an African-American celebrating in Harlem cheers "We're free!" as if Barack Obama's victory meant the ultimate end of slavery.

AMERICAN PASSAGES is an associative journey through the United States: a disillusioned Iraq veteran, gay adoptive fathers, black judges, white party animals and a pimp at a casino table in Las Vegas.

The extreme contrasts of black and white, rich and poor, winners and losers are often as surprising as the meaning of the constitutional right to the pursuit of happiness in these times of crisis.

CINÉMA DU RÉEL

Centre Pompidou, Paris

SCREENINGS

March 31, 9:00 pm

Followed by a Q/A with the director

April 1st, 1:00 pm

Followed by a Q/A with the director

April 2nd, 5:00 pm