



The Dreamed Ones (Ruth Beckermann, Austria) — Wavelengths

BY ANDREA PICARD IN CINEMA SCOPE ONLINE, TIFF 2016

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Sehnsucht: Ruth Beckermann on *The Dreamed Ones*

By Andréa Picard

“This longing, these sighs from soft pillows, I am happy, endlessly happy, to be so filled with this thought. Maybe you will come,

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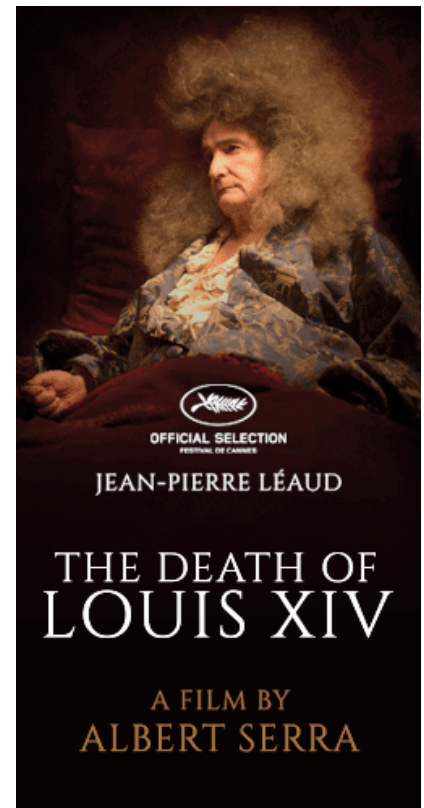
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maybe you will walk through the door and take from me. I am so ready to give.”—Ingeborg Bachmann, *Letters to Felician* (July 6, 1945)

Cinema is synonymous with longing. Projections of desire, fleeting moments of past experience replayed, forbidden fantasy, formal beauty smouldering or abstract—there are countless ways in which film is imbued with, but also transmits, expressions of longing. Its singular relationship to time allows cinema to bridge great distances, to spur on existential enquiry, to transcend reality and proffer alternate modes of existence but also, as clichéd or as glib as it may sound, to alter or affect the ways in which we see and feel the world around us.

One of the year’s dreamiest films is also one of the most elegantly and ingeniously realized films on longing: Ruth Beckermann’s *The Dreamed Ones*. Revisiting and resuscitating the deeply complex, longtime clandestine correspondence between the two great postwar German language poets, Ingeborg Bachmann (1926-73) and Paul Celan (1920-70), Beckermann has moved outside of her distinctive essayistic mode and into a sensual, more amorphous one where the choreographed, improvised, and unexpected meet. Excerpting passages from the estranged duo’s relatively recently published letters (which took the form of postcards, telegrams, and posted letters with attendant poems), Beckermann conceived a clever, confined mise en scène whereby an audio recording in a studio also becomes a sort of séance where the poets’ words and feelings are spoken and embodied by young, contemporary surrogates, whose own fascination with the epistolary exchange we seemingly witness in real time.

Forging a work of profound beauty about the timelessness and universality of love and heartbreak (and yes, cyclical hatred and social divisions), Beckermann employs passages from this extraordinary, compulsively readable, and cumulatively wrenching two-decade correspondence to reveal an impossible love wedded to the trauma of the times. The war had just ended, but its horrors never would for Celan, a Jew from Cernowitz whose parents perished in the Holocaust, or for Bachmann, whose father was a Nazi and who felt as though she lived among “the mad and the assassins.” Both disproved Adorno’s claim that poetry was impossible after Auschwitz, each reinventing a soaring yet personal poetic lyricism, though the barbarism Adorno cited would certainly wend its way like wounds through both lovers, who were born into opposite factions. He was the victim,



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Hello Destroyer (Kevan

but that dynamic shifted and swayed with the power plays of their relationship; the hurt and despair would often resurface and oscillate. The letters are revealing and intimate, but also extravagant in their yearning and their professional pursuits, ranging through jealousy, regret, avowals of love sickness, vulnerability, and undying *Sehnsucht* (especially on behalf of Bachmann, as Celan married another woman and had a child in Paris). Both, it turns out, were driven letter writers and even included their companions in their writings. In fact, Bachmann's first major work at the young age of 18 was a collection of love poems entitled *Letters to Felician*, the enigma of this person still debated by scholars. The correspondence between her and Celan harbours a more pragmatic quotidian feel, but also a more tragic and hopeless dimension—their longing nevertheless became a crutch to help carry on living.

Ingeniously seizing upon both the captivating power of their correspondence—its prose, but also its confessional nature—and the distance that time and transference inevitably instill and conflate, the film depicts the intimate reading of some of Bachmann and Celan's letters to each other. A dreamy, sensual dance transpires between two young, winsome actors, who beautifully get caught up in the exchange, and, perhaps, in each other, as glimmers and glances give way to goosebumps. Staged like a recording for an audio book or radio play in Vienna's venerable Funkhaus (befitting as Bachmann and Celan's first encounter took place in a still-divided Vienna just after WWII), the letters are delivered by theatre actor Laurence Rupp and enigmatic singer-songwriter Anja Plaschg, who performs as Soap&Skin in Austria's alternative music scene. (Plaschg's intensity is something to behold, her gaze teary and concentrated throughout.) While *The Dreamed Ones* is largely structured like a cross-cutting *Kammerspiel*, the film also soars in cutaways to the duo's smoke breaks and languorous pauses between sessions, which are light and flirty but also terrifically fraught with awkward tension. Time becomes elastic, and banality is quickly usurped as the film convenes the spirits of our forlorn lovers, who are absent but certainly not gone from this world. With astonishing economy, confidence, and grace, and in effortless defiance of documentary/fiction conventions, *The Dreamed Ones* testifies not only to the strength of sustained longing, but of cinema's powers of transcendence and its ability to renew our faith in borderless romantic love in an era of effluvial epistolary e-mail exchange. The alternately universal and specific dimensions of the film also ensure a mysterious urgency for today, which is best left unspoken, for it is perhaps just too overtly romantic a sentiment.

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Cinema Scope: Despite conflicted feelings of voyeurism, I immediately bought the French version of Bachmann and Celan's correspondence when it was published in France in 2011. Were their letters to one another available in German earlier? In many ways, a great number of their poems were missives to one another, were they not?

Ruth Beckermann: The correspondence was published in 2008; it provoked quite a buzz because nobody knew of the intimate relationship between the two most important German-language poets after 1945. There might have been rumours in literary circles. I certainly didn't know anything, but immediately read the volume. First, because I love the work of both Bachmann and Celan, but those letters captivate you from the first page. They put so many of one's own thoughts and feelings, doubts and longings, in the most refined and accurate language.

Scope: I remember the controversy that accompanied the publication of Susan Sontag's letters (by her son), when many thought that private correspondences should remain private for the sake of the dead. In the case of Bachmann and Celan, these letters are filled with truly private declarations of love, despair, desperation, and anger, and oscillate between proclamation and confession. The overwhelming beauty of the exchange and the extreme nature of its unfortunate circumstance lend a mythic, and, yes, dreamy quality to it. How did you confront these issues when you decided to make this film? Or perhaps you have a different take on the letters?

Beckermann: For me, this love story is paradigmatic. It is a modern love story, a love story happening after the catastrophe, the Shoah. Imagine those beautiful young people who belonged to two collectives that had been enemies a couple of years ago falling into each other's arms in the spring of 1948, and in Vienna of all places.

It is also modern in how they view the Other. The Other as a stranger, someone you will never fully understand. In his first letter, which is the poem "In Egypt," Celan already shows her the limits of their possible relationship: "You should say to Ruth, to Miriam and Naomi: I sleep next to her." He remembers those Jewish women and he tells his lover that he does. Her place is the place of the stranger.

I had no problem whatsoever concerning intimacy. I think those letters are somehow fictional; they partly invented their love by writing letters. In fact they spent only a couple of months together but exchanged letters for 20 years. Written words can be very intense—very erotic—and they can hurt a lot more than spoken ones. Both of them struggle to express their feelings as accurately as possible.

Scope: You co-wrote the script with literary critic Ina Hartwig. How did you collaborate?

Beckerman: We discussed extensively to find out what was important and what was not; for instance, we left out all names and events concerning the literary world. The film should work without even knowing who Bachmann and Celan were. We met several times as Ina lives in Germany, but mainly sent each other every new version of the script—at least 25 I think.

Scope: I read that you had initially planned to film in various locations where the two poets had lived, Vienna, Paris, Rome, etc...but that the intensity of the actors in a cloistered space convinced you to focus on one location. Can you discuss the film's structure and the transformations that occurred on a filmic level prior to and during production?

Beckermann: The main idea was to film in a sound studio: two very young actors who play speakers on the radio recording the correspondence for an audio book. We chose a radio studio because the radio was the leading media of their time, from the '50s to the '70s. It was very important for the distribution of their work. Bachmann worked as a correspondent for Radio Bremen when living in Rome, and Celan was invited many times to read his poetry in German radio stations.

But I also planned to film in a very associative way, at the places where they had written the letters: Vienna, Paris, Rome, Berlin, Ischia, and Zurich. The idea was to show a Europe of today with so many people belonging to different ethnicities, religions... While preparing for the main shooting I filmed in several locations, but as the main shooting approached, I secretly hoped that we would not need the outside world. When we very rapidly assembled the first rough cut I knew that this was it: we want to stay in this beautiful studio with paintings on the wall. The paintings are our windows to the world. We want to have time and space to explore the inner world of our poets and the relationship that develops between the actors.

Scope: Celan and Bachmann's relationship is a devastating one—a veritable impossible love that ebbs and flows but never extinguishes itself despite fate and their own choices inevitably keeping them apart. But there is always movement in their relationship, their respective physical displacements, but also the growth of the relationship (and sometimes even its regression), which takes on a fascinating shape in the letters. I feel like this movement is superbly captured in the handheld cinematography by Johannes Hammel—who is also a filmmaker in his own right—who is so intimately close to the actors and attentive to every gesture and glimmer. One also senses the slight tremor in the cameraman's hand as a witness to life unfolding, and here, a sort of transference across time and space. What had you discussed with him about this approach?

Beckermann: Many people would agree that it was a devastating relationship because they never really lived together. I'm not so sure; sometimes a fugitive physical encounter reverberates more in our life than a steady relationship. Bachmann never let him down. She had a great talent for friendship. And their relationship is reflected in their poetry and letters: Isn't that a successful relationship too?

Johannes and I discussed a lot and—as Johannes would put it—we made the right decisions. The handheld camera is one of them. I didn't even allow a tripod on the set. It's too tempting to use it for a master shot. The film needs to breathe, and therefore using a camera on a tripod was too academic. We had solutions for all the scenes, a precise decoupage—and of course we changed most of it on set. With Johannes this is possible. He is very intuitive and flexible. When the camera is on his shoulder, he works with his whole body and not only with the brain. I'm always looking for something rough, something alien to break this digital sterility of the image. That's why there is this travelling shot filmed in a taxi on a rainy day using a flip camera.

Scope: After seeing your film for the first time in the Forum at the Berlinale, I thought about how *The Dreamed Ones* partakes in a pantheon of Viennese films, whose locations are charged with historical and cultural meaning. I recalled images from Werner Schroeter's *Malina* (1991)—an adaptation of Bachmann's novel, a work of auto-fiction from 1971—which also harbours a cloistered quality as Bachmann's character (played with brutal, physical intensity, and breathless mania by Isabelle Huppert) is so often self-confined to her grand Viennese apartment, but also to Haneke's *La pianiste* (Huppert again!) and his great use of the

Wiener Konzerthaus. What is the historical place of the Funkhaus in Vienna?

Beckermann: I like the *Kammerspiel!* My film *East of War* (1996), about the memories of former soldiers of the Wehrmacht, takes place in one exhibition hall. I like reduction; it helps us to focus. Maybe this is one of the main powers of cinema today, to help us focus instead of dispersing our thoughts in all directions. The Viennese Funkhaus was opened in 1939 by the Nazis but had been built before. The frescos on the walls of Studio 3 had also been painted before the Nazis took over. In this building, history was written or spoken. And now they sell it—they believe in synergy, meaning putting all the media together on a hill outside the city with a big newsroom and streamlined journalists.

Scope: This is the first time that you worked with actors and moved into the realm of fiction. Was there a level of extemporization in the interstitial scenes between the readings or was it largely scripted?

Beckermann: Casting took a long time because I wanted to work with actors who would be able to improvise. There were no rehearsals—we filmed from the first day. Our deal was that we film them in the pauses, when they go outside to smoke or when they chat in the corridors. We had prepared the locations where we wanted to shoot, e.g., the canteen or the music rehearsal in the big auditorium, but also the beautiful staircases. However, large parts of the dialogue were spontaneous. Sometimes I threw a sentence at them to lead them in a direction, and sometimes they ignored me.

Scope: Let's talk about the casting for a moment. Laurence Rupp is a trained actor from the Burgtheater ensemble and Anja Plaschg is a singer-songwriter with a sort of brooding reputation, who makes music that is haunting, beautiful, and somewhat dark. Both Rupp and Plaschg are terrific in the film, light at times and supremely intense at others. One truly senses that they are being affected and transformed by the letters and the intimacy of the setting. How did you decide upon these two, and how did you work together?

Beckermann: I was immediately intrigued by Anja's personality. She is very intelligent and sincere. As this was my first time with actors I hesitated to work with a non-actress, but I always came back to her. It was really hard to find a young man for the role. Today young actors are more on the sportive side, and I was

searching for someone who would feel the letters. At the same time they had to be different character types.

Their approach to the text was very different. Anja had read a lot and thought a lot about the relationship, Laurence had done some biographical research and relied on his professionalism. In the beginning, he didn't take her seriously as an actress, and she didn't take him seriously as a person, but that changed; they complemented each other wonderfully.

Scope: In one of the film's most memorable scenes, the two are sprawled on the floor listening to James Brown's "It's a Man's World" on an iPhone as Plaschg sways with her hands stretched upward, lost in a sort of wistful reverie. The reflections and framing of that long shot are incredible both from a formal and aesthetic point of view, but also metonymical in a sense as there's a lovely alignment with the painted pastel murals depicting lovers in repose.

Beckermann: We shot it through the window of the Regieraum. So they really forgot us, forgot work and time.

Scope: You must have formed some pretty strong opinions about the two of them! I remember while reading the book being struck by Celan's professional jealousies and vulnerabilities and thinking about how terribly human he sounded. But I could not help but feel for Bachmann, who longed for a man who created a family unit without her. All these entanglements are so heartbreaking, yet one also comes to reflect upon how desire is so crucial in one's life. His exile was crushing, and what if he was her real home? That sounds so awfully unfeminist in a way, but all that longing was funnelled into some of the best poetry ever written and she continued to be a powerhouse until she died.

Beckermann: You're so right. She was a powerhouse. She was full of contradictions—vulnerable poetess and lover on one side, and highly talented networker and pragmatic strategist on the other. In the beginning, my sympathies were more on his side. On the side of the Jew, the victim, the exiled. Then I found out that their fight was also about who is the bigger victim. Of course he is, but at the same time he was very cruel with her and thus made her a victim. I'm not sure if she was his big love, but he was certainly hers. Among her many lovers, he had a unique position. We put an epilogue in the film—some sentences written by "Malina." The manuscript was finished when Celan committed suicide, and she added a fairy-tale description reflecting upon

their relationship. This ended with the sentence: “He was her life. She loved him more than her life.”

Scope: Themes of love, hatred, and heartbreak are of course universal. But the film is relevant to our times above and beyond this—whether in grappling with the distance of exile, cycles of violence, which are sadly replaying, and the dramatic changes in our methods of communication (from telegram to e-mail), not to mention the lack of privacy, which pervades the world today. The film’s interstitial scenes are so clever in that they awaken a correspondence to another era without doing so in a blatant and obvious way. Did any of these issues become a frame of context for you?

Beckermann: I am convinced that our feelings are the same today, even if written in e-mails or text messages. I’m not someone who longs for a so-called better past. Even then people like Bachmann and Celan were big exceptions. What I regret is that even if long love e-mails are written today, they will be deleted and never bound into a book.

Scope: Do you see this film as a turning point in your career, the beginning of new goals as a filmmaker?

Beckermann: With every new film I try to explore a new field, a new form. The older one gets the harder it is to find something new. Right now I am making a film with found footage, a compilation about Kurt Waldheim and the art of forgetting. When the former Secretary General of the UN presented himself for the elections as president of Austria, the World Jewish Congress brought up allegations about him having hidden his wartime record. What interests me is, on the one hand, showing a politician who built his career on lies, who was the perfect opportunist whether he served in the Wehrmacht or at the UN. On the other hand, there is the phenomenon of using anti-Semitism as a tool to win the elections as some politicians use xenophobia for the same goal today. But working on *The Dreamed Ones* was so wonderful, so fulfilling in many respects, that I’m very tempted to try another fictional approach in one of my next movies.

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