

'Ein Mann, dem die Welt vertraut': Kurt Waldheim's global legacy in Ruth Beckermann's Waldheims Walzer

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‘Ein Mann, dem die Welt vertraut’: Kurt Waldheim’s Global Legacy in Ruth Beckermann’s *Waldheims Walzer*

In *Die Ringe des Saturn* [The Rings of Saturn, 1995], W.G. Sebald’s narrator recalls reading a newspaper article about the brutality of so-called cleansings carried out during the Second World War in the Nazi puppet state of the Croatian Ustache. He concludes the chapter by noting that among the Wehrmacht intelligence officers stationed in Banja Luka was a young Kurt Waldheim:

Im übrigen ist an dieser Stelle noch anzumerken, daß in der damaligen Zeit unter den Nachrichtendienstoffizieren der Heeresgruppe E ein junger Wiener Jurist gewesen ist, der in erster Linie befaßt war mit dem Konzipieren von Memoranden, betreffend die aus humanitären Erwägungen heraus dringlichst in die Wege zu leitenden Umsiedlungen, für welche verdienstvollen Schreivarbeiten er von dem kroatischen Staatsoberhaupt Ante Pavelić die silberne Medaille der Krone König Zvonimirs mit Eichenlaub entgegennehmen durfte. In den Jahren nach dem Krieg soll der schon zu Beginn seiner Laufbahn so vielversprechende, verwaltungstechnisch überaus versierte Offizier aufgestiegen sein in verschiedene hohe Ämter, unter anderem sogar in das des Generalsekretärs der Vereinten Nationen. In dieser letzteren Eigenschaft ist es angeblich auch gewesen, daß er, für allfällige außerirdische Bewohner des Universums, eine Grußbotschaft auf Band gesprochen hat, die jetzt, zusammen mit anderen Memorabilien der Menschheit, an Bord der Raumsonde *Voyager II* die Außenbezirke unseres Sonnensystems ansteuert.

[In this connection one might also add that one of the Heeresgruppe E intelligence officers at that time was a young Viennese lawyer whose chief task was to draw up memoranda relating

to the necessary resettlements, described as imperative for humanitarian reasons. For this commendable paperwork he was awarded by Croatian head of state Ante Pavelić the silver medal of the crown of King Zvonimir, with oak leaves. In the post-war years this officer, who at the very start of his career was so promising and so very competent in the technicalities of administration, occupied various high offices, among them that of Secretary General of the United Nations. And reportedly it was in this last capacity that he spoke onto tape, for the benefit of any extra-terrestrials that may happen to share our universe, words of greeting that are now, together with other memorabilia of mankind, approaching the outer limits of our solar system aboard the space probe Voyager II.]¹

Although Sebald does not use his name, the ‘junger Wiener Jurist’ is, on account of his subsequent biography, unmistakably Waldheim. The lugubrious narrator charts Waldheim’s professional trajectory without comment, but the irony is not lost on the reader: a man charged with recording details of an utterly inhumane campaign proved himself so adept in this administrative capacity that he went on to hold the highest office at the United Nations, a vast postwar international organization committed to, among other things, advocating and protecting human rights, and, in this role, became humanity’s spokesman on a NASA space probe. It is, moreover, a particularly Sebaldian irony that a man involved in very different types of memory work – writing memoranda during the war and contributing to the cosmic time capsule known as the Golden Record three decades later – should be unable to remember his wartime past during the Austrian presidential election campaign of 1986.

Sebald does not refer to the election, but he details Waldheim’s implication in war crimes, which was at the heart of the political controversy that became known as the

¹ W. G. Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003), pp. 122-23; *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage, 1999), pp. 98-99. Sebald’s erroneous claim that Waldheim spoke on tape is noteworthy because of the iconic status of the Voyager Golden Record and because the author is so interested in the connection between media and memory.

Waldheim affair. Although Waldheim won the election and held the office of President until 1992, accusations about his past plagued him and left him politically isolated. A commission concluded that Waldheim was not guilty of war crimes, but knew of the actions being carried out around him, making him morally culpable. Rendering the myth of Austrian victimhood untenable, the Waldheim affair is regarded as a turning point in the country's postwar history and relationship with its Nazi past. Apparently a mere aside, Sebald's reference to Waldheim in fact stands out because it brings together two aspects of his biography that are usually seen separately, namely his moral failings as young officer and his message on the Voyager Golden Record.² Two identical copies of the disk were launched on both Voyager I and II, which entered interstellar space in 2012 and 2018 respectively. Onboard the furthest human-made objects from earth, Waldheim's greeting spoken for and in the name of all humans is destined to survive long after our extinction.³ Indeed, if, as Bernhard Malkmus argues, Sebald's text shows 'awareness of the Anthropocene *avant la lettre*',⁴ his allusion to Waldheim's cosmic legacy should be understood in direct relation to the visions of ecological disaster and species extinction that haunt the narrator – for example, when earlier in the same chapter he notes the appearance of the earth, viewed from an aeroplane, as devoid of human life but covered with the remnants of human-made objects.⁵

Waldheim's ensnarement in a national scandal about the past and his contribution to a project oriented toward a distant future in deep space have been brought together again more recently in Srikanth Reddy's book of poetry *Voyager* (2012) and Ruth Beckermann's

² The article recalled by Sebald's narrator concludes with a wry observation connecting Waldheim's wartime past and senior UN role, but does not allude to the Golden Record (Robert Fisk, 'Cleansing' Bosnia at a Camp called Jasenovac', *The Independent*, August 15, 1992, p. 23).

³ The title of Emer Reynolds' 2017 documentary film, *The Farthest*, references the remote position of Voyager I in relation to Earth. This celebratory retrospective is typical of contemporary interest in the mission, which notes Waldheim's greeting, but not the subsequent political scandal that surrounded him.

⁴ Bernhard Malkmus, 'The Anthropocene of Literature: Diffuse Dwelling in Graham Swift and W. G. Sebald', in *Readings in the Anthropocene: The Environmental Humanities, German Studies and beyond*, ed. by Sabine Wilke and Japhet Johnstone (New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2017) pp. 263-95 (p. 270).

⁵ Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn*, p. 113.

documentary film *Waldheims Walzer* (The Waldheim Waltz, 2018) signaling the importance of thinking these two seemingly unconnected parts of his biography together for our times. Discussing Reddy's *Voyager* briefly and Beckermann's film more substantially, this article argues for the current relevance of this connection in thinking about key questions provoked by the designation of the Anthropocene, a new geological age in which the impact of humans will be permanently inscribed on our planet. As Jussi Parikka has argued, this geological impact will not be limited to earth: the mineral extraction that underpins the production of media technologies, for example, means that evidence of human actions on earth will be found in the 'future fossils of human-made space debris'.⁶ The persistence of human-made debris – both terrestrial and cosmic – after the end of humanity in turn affects how we think about memory. According to Susanne C. Knittel and Kári Driscoll, the designation of the Anthropocene confronts us with 'the suddenly real possibility of a posthuman future and the question of what will remain of us when we are gone'.⁷ From this perspective, media take on an almost autonomous role in determining memory, which evolves 'in the wild' as part of 'media ecologies'.⁸ Confronting us with the threat of our own extinction as a result of our actions, the Anthropocene, as commentators have noted, 'contains a paradox of arrogance and humility',⁹ and thus the potential to both decentre and reaffirm our anthropocentric view. As we try to articulate an understanding of our place in the world, this has implications for narrative; we must consider 'who is telling the story, and is it accurate?'¹⁰

Insights such as these about the extent of anthropogenic change, posthuman memory, the persistence of anthropocentrism, and the stories we tell about ourselves and others ask us

⁶ Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 129.

⁷ Susanne C. Knittel and Kári Driscoll, 'Introduction: Memory after Humanism', *Parallax* 23. 4 (2017), 379-83 (p. 380).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 381.

⁹ Heidi Hart, *Music and the Environment in Dystopian Narrative: Sounding the Disaster* (Cham: Palgrave, 2018), p. 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

to reconsider the significance of the Voyager Golden Record as humanity's furthest envoy. Although astronomer Carl Sagan and his team strove to represent diverse peoples and cultures through, among other things, recordings of short greetings spoken in fifty-five languages and 116 images depicting aspects of life on earth, the Golden Record has been seen as anthropocentric, ethnocentric and selective. For artist Trevor Paglen, it is precisely these Western assumptions about a universal humanity that make the project formally and ethically important, confronting us with 'the problem of multiplicities speaking univocally, and [...] the indignities associated with speaking for others'.¹¹ His own project, *The Last Pictures*, a silicon wafer of encoded images launched into space onboard a satellite in 2012 is both a critique of and dialogue with the Golden Record. Representing an ambivalent human history as a narrative of the Anthropocene, *The Last Images* undoes the Golden Record's story of peace and progress, which was told by strategically omitting any depictions of war, famine and disease. Quoting other critical commentary on the NASA project, Paglen also notes how its insistence on a heteronormative narrative of human reproduction within the nuclear family left others '[p]redictably erased': this supposed document of civilization became a document of violent exclusion.¹² The intense discussion of the contents of the Golden Record, both at the time of its production and since the launch of the Voyager probes prove that this was as much as a terrestrial – and political – project as it was intended for aliens. NASA even vetoed naked images, so concerned was the agency about 'sending smut to the stars'.¹³ In retrospect, it is ironic that the disc would include a greeting on behalf of all humans spoken by a man whose reputation and moral standing would become so badly

¹¹ Trevor Paglen, 'Friends of Space, How Are You All? Have You Eaten Yet? Or, Why Talk to Aliens Even if We Can't', *Afterall* 32 (2013): 8-19 (p. 10).

¹² Paglen quoting Connie Samaras, 'Friends of Space', p. 14.

¹³ Carl Sagan et al, *Murmurs of Earth: The Voyager Interstellar Record* (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 34.

tarnished and perhaps surprising that the reputation of the Golden Record, which still has enormous popular appeal, has not suffered more in the light of this connection.¹⁴

Waldheim's greeting is a curious mix of self-importance and humility that resonates with the paradox of the Anthropocene in both displacing and reinstating man – emblematically here, the man Waldheim – at the centre of all things:

As the Secretary General of the United Nations, an organization of 147 member states, who represent almost all of the human inhabitants of the planet earth, I send greetings on behalf of the people of our planet. We step out of our solar system into the universe seeking peace and friendship, to teach if we are called upon, to be taught if we are fortunate. We know full well that our planet and all its inhabitants are but a small part of this immense universe that surrounds us, and it is with humility and hope that we take this step.¹⁵

Waldheim's message seems all the more presumptuous given that, according to Sagan, he recorded it without being asked. Sagan and his team approached the UN in their search for speakers of various languages but, constricted by bureaucratic and diplomatic protocols, ended up with very different resources than the ones they had sought, including a greeting from the Secretary General himself. Although this was never part of the planned content, the team were so struck by its humility that they decided to include it.¹⁶ In hindsight Waldheim's posture of humility seems incongruous with his dogged insistence on victory in his later election campaign, despite the serious allegations made against him. Indeed, as I discuss below, for Ruth Beckermann, Waldheim speaking on the Golden Record is a grand gesture,

¹⁴ The academic appeal of the project can also be seen in a recently published volume which considers the record from a musicological and philosophical perspective (Daniel K. L. Chua and Alexander Rehding, *Alien Listening: Voyager's Golden Record and Music from Earth* (New York: Zone Books, 2021)).

¹⁵ Waldheim's greeting on the Golden Record, YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrcAPuQn4_Q [last accessed 24 March 2021].

¹⁶ Sagan et al, *Murmurs of Earth*, p. 27.

emblematic for the way he constructs himself as a figure of ultimate authority, elevating him to a hegemonic position from which he runs his election campaign and seizes power. Made on behalf of others and representative of an elite European male ruling class, this gesture is also violent, excluding those who are not part of this tradition. Moreover, while refusing to clarify his past during his campaign, Waldheim uses his superior status, insisting that he is civilized or respectable (“anständig”), to deflect any challenge to his authority. Waldheim’s posturing and lying are political gestures that have been emulated in recent times by other populist leaders. They are fundamental to the unequal distribution of power that contributes to anthropogenic climate change (which some scholars argue makes Capitalocene a more appropriate term to describe our age)¹⁷ and to the manipulation of truth that contributes to, among other social injustices, climate inaction. Thus, after the Waldheim affair, the Golden Record greeting speaks of the failure of the humanist values it claimed to represent. In the combined contexts of the Golden Record and Austria’s presidential election campaign, Waldheim becomes a troublingly prescient figure for our times, asking about the effects of human – and more specifically male, European – dominance on the world.

In his extraordinary work *Voyager*, the Indian American writer, scholar and poet Srikanth Reddy uses only Waldheim’s words as found in his memoirs, to recall the Voyager greeting in light of the Waldheim affair. Focused largely on his time at the UN, *In the Eye of the Storm*, was published in 1985, together with its German version, *Im Glaspalast der Weltpolitik*, in a strategic move to raise Waldheim’s profile and promote his international reputation ahead of his presidential bid, but it became a catalyst in the campaign against him, since it was here that he had omitted details of his wartime past.¹⁸ Reddy turns to Waldheim’s memoirs, then, as a project of self-aggrandizement and a performance of calculated amnesia.

¹⁷ See for example, Donna J. Haraway and Cary Wolfe, ‘Companions in Conversation’, in Donna Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press) pp. 202-96 (pp. 237-8).

¹⁸ See Jacqueline Vansant, ‘Political Memoirs and Negative Rhetoric: Kurt Waldheim’s *In the Eye of the Storm* and *Im Glaspalast der Weltpolitik*’, *Biography* 25 (2) (2002): 343-62.

In a careful process documented on his website, Reddy blacks out large portions of Waldheim's text to leave isolated words and phrases from which he distills his poetry.¹⁹ Through a kind of uncanny archaeology of the repressed, Reddy is able to articulate ideas that are not the subject of Waldheim's memoirs, but whose component parts are nevertheless always already there, such as the ironic facts of his biography:

Aboard, I read, was a deeply-etched record of the world that floated away, full of popular tunes and beautiful technological problems. Perhaps an observer far in outer space might study this information in days to come. He would have to weigh carefully in his heart the words of a man who by some quirk of fate had become a spokesman for humanity, who could give voice to all the nations and peoples of the world, and, so to speak, the conscience of mankind.

This man, legend states, likely knew of the mass execution of groups of people as a capable officer required to collect and analyze data, prepare reports, conduct investigations, and otherwise facilitate operational projects in the last war. At the time, however, he did not express his concern at this action. To a degree this

¹⁹ See <https://www.srikanthreddypoet.com/books> [last accessed 29 March 2021].

is understandable. His voice failed. Now, after years have passed, our little record is carrying his words as Secretary General of the United Nations to a government above.²⁰

Reddy's technique allows him to reflect on the use of memory in the construction of power and authority and vice versa. Moreover, as Langdon Hammer has brilliantly shown, it allows him to probe the power and failure of voice. Waldheim's 'voice failed' first when he did not speak out against war crimes, then in his memoirs, which did not fully recall his wartime past, and again, we should add, when he was called to account during his election campaign.²¹ Yet this 'failure of voice' is masked by 'the fluent speech of a bureaucrat'.²² His memoir is an example of the growing use of English in the postwar period by 'global elites' as the language of bureaucracy and power.²³ Although Waldheim's English text appears commandingly written, upon closer scrutiny, Hammer argues, it betrays the awkwardness of language acquired.²⁴ By deconstructing and reassembling the language of the memoir, Reddy draws attention to both its artificiality and manipulability. Crucially for Hammer, *Voyager's* distillation and imitation of Waldheim's official mode of speaking effects a critique of reason. As the language of power it is endowed with 'official rationality', which appears to order the world, but in so doing prevents us from thinking, questioning, enquiring. His 'fluent speech' is designed to prevent us from scrutinizing the silences left by his failure to speak.²⁵ Reddy renders Waldheim's failure of voice all the more troubling by drawing attention to his

²⁰ Srikanth Reddy, *Voyager* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 20-21.

²¹ Langdon Hammer, 'Voice and Erasure in Srikanth Reddy's *Voyager*', in *The Fate of Difficulty in the Poetry of Our Time* ed. by Charles Altieri and Nicholas D. Nace (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017), pp. 31-45 (p. 33).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-8.

verbosity, to his desire to speak in self-important terms about his time at the UN and his willingness to speak on behalf of all humans in a recording that will endure long after we have ceased to exist. Showing Waldheim's failure to speak and his willingness to cover over this failure with a false discourse, Reddy not only exposes his role as spokesperson for humanity as bogus, he shows Waldheim as representing 'a general failure of humanistic ideals and democratic leadership'.²⁶

Voyager both exposes and undermines Waldheim's unabashed claim to a position of authority over the world. Reddy repeatedly incorporates the word 'world' taken from this 'book on world / peace'²⁷ to consider what it might mean and how it might be used to create spheres of dwelling and domination. *Voyager* begins with a proposition that encapsulates the impossibility of comprehending and representing what we cannot stand outside or live without: 'The world is the world.'²⁸ It proceeds by undoing and expanding this statement of identity: 'A world is a world is a world [...]. The world is the largest picture in the world'.²⁹ While the speaker remembers that, '[a]s a child, spelling out / *world* was to open a world in myself', as an adult, the world looks rather different: 'In my office a globe was set up, less a world / than a history of imperialism and corruption'.³⁰ The world as it is viewed, constructed and viewed as construct is shown to be precarious, and thus at odds with Waldheim's easy command over the globe, which under his gaze is '[s]ubject [...] to assembly'.³¹ Moreover, where *Voyager* quotes Waldheim quoting Hebbel, Reddy suggests that Waldheim's was eyeing a position of global authority already while making a name for himself in Austrian politics in the 1950s and 1960s: '*Österreich ist eine kleine Welt, in der die Große [sic] ihre*

²⁶ Ibid., p. 32.

²⁷ Reddy, *Voyager*, p. 23.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 4; 15.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 23; 25.

³¹ Ibid., p. 5.

Probe hält.³² Viewed from a different perspective, however, this statement suggests that, in his return to Austrian politics, a return predicated on strategic amnesia and wilful disavowal, Waldheim stages a political performance that will be imitated on a global scale.

In her 2018 documentary *Waldheims Walzer* Austrian director Ruth Beckermann returns to the Waldheim affair to show its relevance for the world today. Her film ‘über Lüge und Wahrheit’ [about lies and truth],³³ puts the political controversy back in international context to remind viewers that the affair drew attention around the world at the time, but also how Waldheim’s way of dealing with the truth represents a ‘postfaktische Avantgarde’ [post-truth avantgarde] that dominates populist politics on a global scale today.³⁴ Beckermann explains that she made her film because Waldheim is already being forgotten – her son and his peers do not know who Waldheim is –,³⁵ and yet it has become clear that he was a prototype for today’s populist leaders – ‘Trump, Le Pen, Wilders und Hofer’.³⁶ As Dagmar Lorenz notes, *Waldheims Walzer* focuses on ‘the demagoguery that ensured [Waldheim’s] success’,³⁷ but crucially, its analysis of the relationship between truth, power and politics is framed through the Golden Record. For Beckermann, Waldheim’s role in this project is emblematic for his claim to global authority, a claim that was fundamental to his election campaign and enabled him to deflect accusations about his wartime past. I argue that Beckermann exposes this power play as a strategic performance of what Donna Haraway has called a ‘god trick’, and counters the single, all-encompassing view it assumes with her own perspective, which refracts instead ‘situated knowledges’.³⁸

³² Ibid., p. 13.

³³ *Waldheims Walzer*, dir. by Ruth Beckermann (Edition Salzgeber, 2018).

³⁴ Ruth Beckermann, ‘Waldheim – Eine Postproduktionsfilm’, in *Ruth Beckermann*, ed. by Alexander Horwarth, Michael Omasta (Vienna: Synema, 2016), pp. 122-29 (p. 129).

³⁵ Q&A with Ruth Beckermann, New York Film Festival 56, *YouTube*, 23 October 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VN873Ct6Z4M> [last accessed 25 March 2021].

³⁶ Beckermann, ‘Waldheim – Eine Postproduktionsfilm’, p. 129.

³⁷ Dagmar C. G. Lorenz, ‘Ruth Beckermann’s Journey to Czernowitz. Displacement and Postmemory in *Die papierene Brücke*’, *Journal of Austrian Studies* 53.3 (2020), 71-84 (p. 72).

³⁸ Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, *Feminist Studies* 14.3 (1988), 575-99 (p. 581).

According to Beckermann, the starting point for *Waldheims Walzer* was an encounter with footage she had shot of the protests against Waldheim in May 1986.³⁹ Thirty years later, Beckermann returns to this material to consider, among other things, how Waldheim – the man and the affair – is remembered. As scholars have noted, memory is a recurring theme in Beckermann’s work, often used to counter to what Christina Guenter calls the ‘mystified autochthony’ of Austrian Heimat and evoked through transnational, transcultural journeys.⁴⁰ In *Waldheims Walzer*, Beckermann develops these interests to show the contemporary ‘global resonance’ of Austrian memory politics.⁴¹ Her film shows how memory – personal and collective – is constructed and reconstructed according to the needs of the present.⁴² It also shows how media, such as her footage, can be seen in relation to individual memory and memory on a larger scale: ‘Insofern war es nicht nur interessant, mit einem Abstand von dreißig Jahren mein eigenes Material wieder zu sehen, sondern auch meine eigenen Erinnerungen zu überprüfen und mir in großem Ausmaß und im internationalen Kontext das Material, das damals zur Affäre Waldheim gedreht wurde, anzuschauen’ [In this sense, it was not only interesting to see my own material again after thirty years, but also to examine my own memories and to look, on a large scale and in international context, at the footage that was shot at the time of the Waldheim affair].⁴³ Beckermann’s ‘postproduction film’ also uses other archive material – principally television news reports – not only from Austria, but other countries, thereby recalling the international resonance of the affair and reasserting this for the present. Beckermann’s work with an international archive was also an encounter with a digital archive, rendering the film’s concern with memory in terms not only of generational

³⁹ Beckermann, ‘Waldheim – Eine Postproduktionsfilm’, p. 123.

⁴⁰ Christina Guenter, ‘Cartographies of Identity: Memory and History in Ruth Beckermann’s Documentary Films’, in Robert von Dassonowsky and Oliver C. Speck (eds), *New Austrian Film* (New York: Berghahn, 2011), pp. 64-78. See also, for example, Katya Krylova, *The Long Shadow of the Past: Contemporary Austrian Literature, Film and Culture* (Rochester, NY: 2017), pp. 25-48.

⁴¹ Lorenz, ‘Ruth Beckermann’s Journey to Czernowitz’, p. 72.

⁴² Ruth Beckermann in interview with Karin Schiefer, ‘Ruth Beckermann zu *Waldheims Walzer*,’ December 2017, <https://www.waldheimswalzer.at/de/content/interview/> [last accessed 25 March 2021].

⁴³ Ibid.

difference but media and technologies. She felt as if she was looking for material from a bygone era, where only digital archives remain.⁴⁴ If a younger generation does not remember Waldheim, technological obsolescence also threatens our memory of the affair. In this way, Beckermann feels her research ensures the transfer and continuation of memory: ‘Was ich auswähle, wird digitalisiert und somit Teil des globalen digitalen Archivs. Auch so funktioniert Erinnerung’ [The material I select is digitalized and so becomes part of the global digital archive. Memory works in this way too].⁴⁵

The archive material that constitutes *Waldheims Walzer* is overlaid with Beckermann’s commentary, which functions as both an act of remembering and a meditation on that act. The film opens with the footage that Beckermann shot herself, and she notes that this is what she remembers best. Describing the outmoded apparatus she used, the material seems threatened by obsolescence; the original film has even disappeared, but a VHS copy happens to have turned up recently. This chance encounter, she suggests, prompts the making of this film, and, as notorious as the affair was, it seems the footage of the protests against Waldheim is especially valuable, because she was the only one filming. Long before smartphones, she notes, people were reliant on state radio and television. Beckermann’s remarks are accompanied by unusual images that stand out in a film made otherwise entirely of archive material. They show Beckermann in an art installation by Peter Weibl, currently in Vienna’s Museum of Modern Art (MOMOK). *Österreich-Zimmer (mit einem Gasherd zur Erzeugung echt österreichischer Stimmung* [Austria Room (with a gas stove to create an authentically Austrian atmosphere, 1982)] is a mock living room with red and white mid-century furnishings, complete with television and radio, and uses closed-circuit technology to relay real-time images of the installation through the TV set. As Beckermann’s voice notes the

⁴⁴ Beckermann, ‘Waldheim – Eine Postproduktionsfilm’, p. 122.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

limited footage of the protests available, we see her watching her own image from the installation's armchair. Caught in a *mise-en-abyme* she demonstrates how footage from state broadcasters is liable to confirm rather than challenge internal expectations. Moreover, like the footage itself which Beckermann has to retrieve from the archive, this media apparatus is seen in the museum, underscoring how the media – and thus collective – memory of the Waldheim affair is threatened by obsolescence.

This sequence in fact provokes Beckermann to revise her earlier commentary: 'Vielleicht ist es kein Zufall, dass das alte Material gerade jetzt auftaucht' [Perhaps it's no coincidence that the old material turns up now].⁴⁶ Her own material might provide a counterpoint to the television footage of the time, but where this is already being forgotten (as her son and his peers prove), it perhaps becomes crucial in countering a more enduring memory of Waldheim. She asks, 'Was bleibt in Erinnerung?' [What do we remember? or, more literally and abstractly, what remains in (our) memory?] and proffers an answer that forces us to think on a bigger scale: 'Vielleicht die Stimme des Kandidaten auf der Goldenen Schallplatte' [Perhaps the voice of the candidate on the Golden Record]. Persisting in the popular imagination where other media are being forgotten or lost, this older memory survives the more recent memories of Waldheim that revolve around his political and moral failings. The Golden Record will define cultural memory of this figure and he in turn, in some distant future, might define the memory of humanity. With her question and answer, Beckermann cuts to footage of the Golden Record being mounted to the Voyager probe and audio from mission control. Then we hear the beginning of Waldheim's greeting over a selection of still images taken from those included on the disc: the earth photographed from space; three people eating and drinking; a group of young Andean women; Olympic runners; a stop-motion image of a gymnast; an astronaut in space; and children looking at a globe.

⁴⁶ Unless stated otherwise, English translations of Beckermann's voiceover are my own.

Beckermann takes over from Waldheim to describe how his voice was launched into space ‘mit Bildern und Tönen von der Erde als Ort des Friedens und des Fortschritts’ [with images and sounds from the earth as a place of peace and progress], thus alluding to the record’s selective narrative. With her final image of children around a globe, she connects the Golden Record’s universalism to another, earlier project: ‘Die Erde als Family of Man, eine humanistische Hoffnung, die sich 1955 in einer großen Fotoausstellung niederschlug’ [The Earth as Family of Man, a humanist aspiration that found expression in 1955 in a large photographic exhibition]. Despite its unprecedented, international success, Edward Steichen’s exhibition, like the later Voyager Golden Record, has been criticized for its reductive portrayal of human beings. Beckermann quotes Roland Barthes’ famous essay in which he argues: ‘Der Mythos der *Conditio humana* stütze sich auf eine sehr alte Mystifikation, die seit jeher darin besteht, auf den Grund der Geschichte die Natur zu setzen’ [The myth of the human ‘condition’ rests on a very old mystification, which always consists in placing Nature at the bottom of History].⁴⁷ Clearly skeptical of the humanist ideology promoted in both Steichen’s exhibition and the Golden Record, Beckermann goes on to ask if there is such a thing as the family of man and posits the United Nations as a possible example. Over two images of the UN headquarters in New York, one by day, one by night, we hear US President Ronald Reagan addressing the UN assembly in 1985: ‘The United Nations is a symbol of Man’s growing struggle to rise beyond...’ The soundbite suffices to evoke the UN as an institution that shares the ‘humanistische Hoffnung’ of the Golden Record and the Family of Man.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ English from Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 101.

⁴⁸ The speech continues, ‘...his own flawed nature and live by the high ideals that the best of mankind have defined and declared down the ages’ (Ronald Reagan, United States, Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration, 1988, p. 1284). In addition to the links made by Beckermann, it is worth noting that Carl Sagan’s team consulted the Family of Man exhibition catalogue in their search for representative images and included three pictures in the final selection (see Sagan et al, *Murmurs of Earth*, p. 75). The Golden Record also contains nighttime and daytime images of the UN headquarters in NYC (perhaps those seen in *Waldheims Walzer*). The image of children around a globe was taken at the UN international school in NYC, and the final image in Steichen’s exhibition catalogue shows the

Beckermann carefully links these three projects to show how Waldheim constructs himself as a figure of ultimate authority: he both represents and commands the universal figure of Man as defined by a European humanist tradition. She shows how this hegemonic position is crucial to his election campaign, which uses the slogan: ‘Ein Österreicher, dem die Welt vertraut’ [An Austrian the world trusts]. We see this on an election billboard together with a caption giving dates of UN Secretary Generalship, and Beckermann goes on to show how Waldheim relishes this high office with footage from a French news report or documentary, which follows him as he leaves his New York residence for his office at the UN headquarters. Waldheim explains that the United Nations is *not* an international government – it has no executive power – it is a *moral* force. Beckermann seizes on this designation to emphasize how his election campaign capitalized on Waldheim’s moral standing in the international community: ‘Eine moralische Autorität. Ein Mann, dem die Welt vertraut’ [A moral authority. A man the world trusts]. Today Beckermann questions if Waldheim could be trusted to this extent. But, she notes, he was elected twice to Secretary General, ‘zum Mann im 38. Stock des Glaspalasts am East River’ [to the man on the 38th floor of the glass palace on the East River]. The two exterior images of the skyscraper suggest that Waldheim’s commands an omniscient view, an impression heightened by footage of him sitting in his office against New York’s skyline. Here we glimpse him talking to a glamorous woman about space exploration. Although Beckermann shows just a few seconds of their conversation it is clear that Waldheim enjoys holding forth on such a vast topic from his superior position. The excerpt is taken from an Austrian television programme, in which Waldheim is interviewed by the actor Sonja Süttner. Joined by Klaus Peter Heiss, a NASA space expert and advisor to the US government, they discuss how space technologies

UN in session (Museum of Modern Art, *The Family of Man* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1983), pp. 184-85).

– principally surveillance and information technologies – have contributed to improvements for the global population, for example, in agriculture and peacekeeping. Although the conversation sees Heiss advocating for the expansion of the space programme and Waldheim more interested in terrestrial relations, the scale and ambition of the topics allow Waldheim to indulge and demonstrate his global authority, and he is quick to remind Heiss and Süttner that he used to be chairman of the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space.⁴⁹ From this interview and Waldheim’s brief mention of space exploration, Beckermann cuts back to the French footage of Waldheim at the UN, where he gleefully explains that there is nothing and no one above him. Beckermann’s voiceover highlights the arrogance of Waldheim’s self-designation: ‘So beschrieb sich der Kandidat: Als letzte Instanz, als Vater der Familie der Menschen’ [This is how the candidate describes himself: as the highest authority, as the father of the family of man].

Beckermann shows us how Waldheim’s election campaign claim that he is a man trusted by the world is built on his claim to dominance over the world. From his office in the glass palace, from the Voyager space probe, Waldheim positions himself above everything and everyone, but Beckermann makes clear that he in fact performs what Donna Haraway calls a ‘god trick’.⁵⁰ Critiquing the ‘leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere’ and calling instead for ‘feminist objectivity’, Haraway was a driving force behind the ecocritical feminism that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s – this essay was published in 1988 – and which seems to respond to precisely the kind of patriarchal hegemony that a figure like Waldheim embodied and strategically enacted in his bid for power.⁵¹ In an essay published two years later, Yaakov Garb posits the whole earth image,

⁴⁹ ORF-Archiv, *Ihr Lieblingsprogramm*, Beitrag 2 [segment 2] Kurt Waldheim, Sonja Sutter Interview mit Kurt Waldheim [Sonja Sutter interview with Kurt Waldheim], broadcast 17 October 1978, ORF Archive. I am grateful to Ruth Beckermann’s assistant director and the ORF archive for helping me access this footage.

⁵⁰ Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges’, p. 581.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

that is, the Apollonian phantasy of our terrestrial habitat photographically realized in the space age, as the ultimate god trick and the ‘*magnum opus* of patriarchal consciousness’.⁵² The whole earth image, moreover, replaces the complex real world that we inhabit with ‘a small, comprehensible, manageable icon’.⁵³ For Waldheim, this gesture, like the reduction of human history to the universal and nuclear family, allows him to show himself as a authoritative figure who controls the world, manipulating its complexity and strangeness into something reassuringly familiar. Beckermann couples images of Waldheim with such iconic whole earth images – the space photograph of earth on the Golden Record, the UN logo seen on the revolving doors as the Secretary General enters the headquarters – as another means of exposing his god trick. She also shows how, in this ‘man’s world’,⁵⁴ the illusion of Waldheim’s omniscience and omnipotence is maintained through patriarchal structures, specifically the family, which, like the human condition, is naturalized and mythologized: ‘Auch die Familie sei natürlich, sagt man. Und der Kandidat ist ein Familienmensch’ [The Family is also natural, it is said. And the candidate is a family man’]. Positioning himself as divine father and *paterfamilias* Waldheim is both a universal and domestic authority that is naturally given and upheld by the myth of the nuclear, heteronormative family, which also serves to police anything that falls outside this: ‘Familie gilt im konservativen Wertekonzept, für das Waldheim bürgt, als etwas Natürliches, allerdings nur in der traditionellen Form Mann – Frau – Kind’ [In the conservative value system which Waldheim represents, family is seen as something natural, but only in the traditional form man – woman – child].⁵⁵

⁵² Yaakov Jerome Garb, ‘Perspective or Escape? Ecofeminist Musings on Contemporary Earth Imagery’, in *The Emergence of Ecofeminism* ed. by Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), pp. 264-308 (p. 275).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 270. Paul Buchholz notes the more unsettling impact of the whole earth image on male Austrian authors in the 1970s in his article ‘Planetary Alienation: Negation of the Whole Earth in 1970s Austrian prose,’ *Journal of Austrian Studies* 48(4) (2015): 27-52.

⁵⁴ Beckermann, ‘Waldheim – Eine Postproduktionsfilm’, p. 128.

⁵⁵ Beckermann and Schiefer, ‘Ruth Beckermann zu *Waldheims Walzer*’.

As ‘Vater der Familie der Menschheit’ Waldheim, Beckermann indicates, cleverly positions himself as world dominant (and thus taming the threat the world presents to his parochial electorate) and a father figure of Austrian Heimat, a national imaginary untainted by history and sustained by the innocent force of nature. As well as footage of Waldheim at the UN, we also see him later on his campaign trail, wearing traditional dress, handing out flowers to supporters, and conducting brass bands. For Beckermann this exemplifies ‘die [...] wunderbar funktionierende Taktik Österreichs, sich mit seinen Naturschönheiten als unschuldig darzustellen’ [Austria’s tactic, which functions wonderfully, of using its natural beauty to portray itself as innocent]. But to portray nature as innocent is a lie: ‘Sie wird aber immer wieder als Mythos hergenommen, um Geschichte zu verleugnen und die Natur als reinen Ursprung darzustellen’ [It is used again and again as myth to disavow history and to portray nature as pure origin].⁵⁶ And *Waldheims Walzer* shows how the myths Waldheim uses, the whole earth, the family of man, Heimat, and of his benevolent authority over all of them, are radically challenged by history. Allegations about his wartime past undermine his international standing and status at the UN, and the World Jewish Congress, which pursues the claims persistently and publicly, questions his association with the organization. Israel Singer asks, ‘His picture hangs in the United Nations along with some of the greatest men and some of the greatest fighters for human rights. [...] Should he symbolize the United Nations for ever?’ Beckermann also shows the UN as a more fractured institution than the impression given by Waldheim in the footage seen at the beginning of her film. During his time in office, it was a stage for Middle East politics, most notably Yasser Arafat’s speech to the assembly in 1974 and the 1975 resolution that determined Zionism as a form of racism, which led to accusations that the UN was anti-Semitic. We see how, as Waldheim’s international reputation suffered and it became clear that the world did not trust him, his

⁵⁶ Ibid.

campaign switched to focus on the national, regional and rural through the myth of *Heimat* and a distrust of the foreign other, with new slogans to reflect this: ‘Wir Österreicher wählen, wen wir wollen’ [We Austrians vote for whom we want] and then ‘Jetzt erst recht’ [Now more than ever]. Having moved via the myth of the family of man between global and local levels of authority to persuade Austrian voters, Waldheim’s campaign shifted rhetoric, emphasizing nationalism through hostility toward a globalized society in ways that resonate strongly with today’s populist politics. While this withdrawal to an insular position and the familiarity of *Heimat* proved the right move to ensure election victory, Beckermann argues that this was still a watershed moment for Austria. The release of Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* in 1985 was decisive in shattering the myth of innocent nature: ‘Und für immer ist der Tod nun eingeschrieben in der Schönheit der polnischen Wälder. In der Schönheit der österreichischen Natur’ [Now death is forever inscribed in the beauty of the Polish forests. In the beauty of Austrian nature]. History is reinstated, making the twin myths of Austrian natural beauty and victimhood impossible to uphold. Positioning Austrian and Polish topographies in a contiguous relationship, Beckermann also refuses the singularity of Austrian *Heimat*, insisting instead on the country’s place in the world, in global geo-politics and a shared ecology.

Crucially Beckermann undoes the mythological status of the different symbolic positions of authority Waldheim adopts. Remembering how she was ‘Mittendrin, halb demonstrierend, halb dokumentierend’ [In the middle of it, half demonstrating, half documenting], Beckermann counters Waldheim’s ‘conquering gaze from nowhere’ with her ‘situated knowledges’.⁵⁷ Her own footage of the protests against Waldheim not only provides evidence of opposition to his candidacy, it triggers Beckermann’s memory of her own involvement. Thus her film also shows her situated half in the past and half in the present.

⁵⁷ Haraway, p. 581.

This material also deliberately subverts the authoritative image Waldheim wants to present of himself. It includes Beckermann's only encounter with the presidential candidate, where she focuses on his gestures, on his hands and face. In order to do this, she first shows a close-up of his waist and torso, thus providing something partial and indistinct that undermines his status as authority figure. As his hands come into view, Beckermann explains how his broad, grasping gestures signal his desire to embrace the Austrian people. Yet, as in Reddy's poem where fluent bureaucratic English is used almost persuasively but ultimately awkwardly, Waldheim is seen performing a commanding gesture in a way that is exaggerated and thus borders on the grotesque. As well as these corporeal gestures of dominance, Beckermann also highlights and undermines how Waldheim performs power through association with divine authority. She notes how all Austrian classrooms display a crucifix, and remembers this being an alienating experience for a girl from a Jewish family. Her memory is illustrated with still images from schools, but two of the four show men as they mount their respective crucifixes to the wall, exposing the myth of religion in Catholic Austria as a construct and not naturally given. The President, too, she continues, is found in every classroom, and we see a framed, signed portrait of Waldheim. This is no classroom, however, rather Peter Weibl's installation, and Beckermann stands in front of the photograph, looking the President, who appears in this 1982 installation as an uncanny premonition, straight in the eye. Again Beckermann shows us a construction to counter how Waldheim's authority was cast as natural and thus incontrovertible.

Waldheims Walzer closes with some remarkable footage that also exposes how Waldheim's image of authority was carefully constructed and managed. Although Beckermann was disappointed to find that television archives only include material that was broadcast, these images, showing Waldheim in the final seconds before his first televised address to the Austrian nation as President, were clearly not meant to be seen and were kept

by accident. As Waldheim composes himself, a man touches up his makeup and a woman sweeps away some debris. The footage wonderfully encapsulates how Waldheim's authority was upheld by covering up blemishes and removing undesirable remnants. It also allows Beckermann to return to her concern with memory: without this material, only the flawless broadcast would remain, and perhaps without her film, or other attempts to recall the Waldheim affair, over time, the memory of this event might fade, while the popular interest in the Golden Record and its future promise of posthuman communication endures. Moreover, this final sequence warns us of how inconvenient truths are done away with in the pursuit of power, and leaves us to reflect on how such gestures are increasingly performed in today's politics. That this contributed to her film's resonance with global audiences is, in her words, 'good for the film, bad for the world'.⁵⁸ Waldheim's mode of operating, moreover, has a long tradition. Beckermann shows it is predicated on the ethnocentrism and anthropocentrism that have sustained European humanism and its pursuit of progress, but which are now, in the Capitalocene, being questioned as the structures that have, paradoxically, posed an existential challenge to humanity.

Framing its return to Waldheim's election campaign through the memory of the Golden Record *Waldheims Walzer* invites us to consider the relationship between different spatial and temporal scales of memory – national, international, and planetary or even posthuman. As Stef Craps cautions 'scal[ing] up' memory in this way, can mean 'losing sight of the smaller picture'.⁵⁹ But moving carefully between the national and the international, the local and the global, between the past, the present and the future, Beckermann ensures that the bigger picture brings the 'smaller picture' into focus. Waldheim's greeting on the Golden Record is emblematic of the hegemonic position he claims for himself and from which he

⁵⁸ Q&A with Ruth Beckermann.

⁵⁹ Stef Craps 'Climate Change and the Art of Anticipatory Memory', *Parallax* 23.4 (2017), 479-92 (p. 485).

determines who is excluded from an ostensibly universal image of man as natural order, and it is what makes his legacy particularly significant in the age of the Anthropocene. Trevor Paglen, while aware of the limitations of the Golden Record as a humanist project, insists on its importance, nevertheless, as ‘gesture’. Talking to aliens might seem futile, but it ensures that we consider the ‘relationship we want to have with the other, with the future’ and to refuse this gesture is to ‘turn our backs’ on our responsibility to both.⁶⁰ Whatever the problems with the Golden Record as a project, the subsequently known fact that it carries as humanity’s spokesman the voice of a man who had a proven disregard for the other stands as a failure of humanist ideals and asks how we can redress these failings for the future.

⁶⁰ Paglen, *Friends of Space*, pp. 19, 17.