

The Dreamed Ones

Austria 2016

Director: Ruth Beckermann

Reviewed by Catherine Wheatley

Little was known of the relationship between Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan, two of the most important German-language poets (though not German) of the past century, until the publication of their letters to one another in 2008. Their correspondence revealed an unlikely friendship. Born in Czernowitz, Bukovina, a then thriving cultural centre, Celan was a Jew whose parents had died in the Nazi death camps. She, meanwhile, had been raised in a middle-class family in Austria, the daughter of a Nazi party member. When they first met in Vienna in 1948, Celan was already a highly regarded poet. Bachmann, six years his junior, was still writing her doctoral thesis on Heidegger, yet to find her own literary voice. They would spend only a few months together before Celan left for Paris, but from the encounter would spring a 20-year correspondence: one that was passionate and fraught with the tensions of the post-war era. After their first meeting Celan sent Bachmann a poem, in which he summons the spirits of ancient Jewesses to bless this nascent relationship between a stateless Jew and his Gentile lover, to “Adorn her with the pain for Ruth, for Miriam and Noemie”.

This poem, ‘In Egypt’, opens Ruth Beckermann’s *The Dreamed Ones*, an intimate, elliptical marriage of fiction and documentary. The first lines are read aloud by an unnamed actor (a mesmeric delivery by Austrian thespian Laurence Rupp), while the camera lingers on the sculpted face of a young woman (Anja Plaschg, who performs in Austria’s alternative music scene as Soap&Skin). The pair are recording Celan and Bachmann’s letters for radio. The location is Vienna’s renowned Funkhaus, but we don’t realise this for some time, since for the first seven minutes of the film we see nothing but the faces of these actors, in close-up, as they read.

Positioned at microphones facing one another, these actors close the distance that separated Bachmann and Celan, yet the gap between them still feels boundless. Each scrutinises the other’s face for signs of a long-delayed response, Dieter Pichler’s masterful editing collapsing a lifetime of correspondence into a 90-minute conversation. As Rupp and Plaschg read, DP Johannes Hammel’s handheld camera seems to breathe with them. It is as if they are possessed by the poet lovers. When Plaschg reads a letter from Bachmann excusing herself for a missed encounter, Rupp’s lip curls into the suggestion of a sneer, eyes hooded with contempt. Plaschg herself seems evasive, upset: her eyes downcast and teary. Eventually she asks for a break.

The pauses between readings both trouble and redouble the bleeding of actor into character. As they smoke, share a meal and chat, in a series of mostly unscripted encounters, the conversation is often banal; yet a curious tension arises between the actors. At one point Plaschg drapes herself across a lip-shaped sofa. On another occasion the pair lie perpendicular to one another the floor, listening to James Brown. Rupp jokes that maybe theirs will be “a terrific collaboration in the end”. Both relationships, however, are but briefly glimpsed, full of allusions we can’t understand, references





The weight of the past: Anja Plaschg, Laurence Rupp

to conversations we haven't heard, books and reviews we haven't read. There is a terrible row between Celan and Bachmann over a family heirloom that features only in snatches and is so divisive that it splits the soundtrack from the image itself, as we watch Plaschg out of character, alone and smoking, out of character while her off-screen voice reads Bachmann's words. Celan pleads for a response, yet all he receives is the same repeated phrase: "Are we the dreamed ones?" Is this Bachmann's repetition? Or Plaschg's? Or is it a clever trick of Beckermann's?

A respected political film-essayist, Beckermann is the child of Jewish Holocaust survivors and her previous films have all, after a fashion, explored the construction of history, the legacy of the Shoah and questions of migration and diaspora. This first foray into fiction might seem at first a departure but both Celan and Bachmann experience the push-pull of homeland and the ramifications of WWII in their separate ways. Their correspondence

offers an elegant rebuke to Adorno's interdiction on poetry after Auschwitz, but also a biting commentary on the politics of the age. For Bachmann, Vienna is a "hotbed of half measures where one must be careful not to lose one's intellectual bearings". The barb travels down the centuries, finding an echo in Plaschg's comment that her fellow musicians are talented but mediocre, sharing "a do-as-you're-told mentality".

Apart from a brief spell in Paris, Celan and Bachmann never lived together. He married the graphic artist Gisèle de Lestrang; she took up with the Swiss writer Max Frisch (the semi-autobiographical novel she wrote subsequently, *Malina*, was filmed in 1991 by Werner Schroeter, with Isabel Huppert as Bachmann's alter-ego). Still, their protracted longing for one another provided a strange kind of constancy. Beckermann's film shows us how carelessly the world passes us by. Yet in Celan's haunting words to Bachmann, there was always, "in the slipstream, thousandfold: you".

Credits and Synopsis

Producer
Ruth Beckermann
Screenplay
Ruth Beckermann
Ina Hartwig
Dramaturge
Bernadette Weigel
The correspondence
between Ingeborg
Bachmann and

Paul Celan was
published under
the title *Herzzeit*
The epilogue is from
the novel *Malina* by
Ingeborg Bachmann
Cinematography
Johannes Hammel
Editor
Dieter Pichler

Sound
Georg Misch

©Ruth Beckermann
Filmproduktion
**Production
Companies**
A film by Ruth
Beckermann
Produced with

the support of
Österreichisches
Filminstitut, ORF
Film/Fernseh-
Abkommen,
Filmstandort Austria

Cast
Anja Plaschg

Ingeborg Bachmann
Laurence Rupp
Paul Celan

In Colour
[1.78:1]
Subtitles

Distributor
Contemporary Films

Austrian
theatrical title
Die Geträumten

Vienna, the present. Over the course of a day two actors, a man and a woman, record extracts from the letters of the poets Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan.

Bachmann and Celan met in Vienna in Spring 1948. The son of Romanian Jews killed in a Nazi death camp, Celan was already a highly regarded poet, travelling through Vienna en route to Paris. Bachmann, whose teacher father had been an NSDAP member, was six years Celan's junior and at the time still a student, working on her doctoral thesis.

After that first meeting the pair were separated until 1950, when they spent two months living together – disastrously – in Paris. In 1951 Celan married the artist Gisèle de Lestrang, much to Bachmann's grief. In 1957 Bachmann and Celan met again at a symposium in Wuppertal, and resumed their affair,

although this phase of their relationship ended after Bachmann began living with Swiss writer Max Frisch, the following year. They continued to write to one another for over twenty years, but Celan's letters took an increasingly sour tone: the result of Celan's feelings of persecution having suffered false accusations of plagiarism. Bachmann moved to defend him, but with little success. Celan committed suicide in Paris in 1970. Bachmann died three years later after a cigarette caused a fire in her bedroom.

We watch the two actors at work, but also during their breaks: smoking together, listening to music, lunching and discussing the relationship of the two poets. The film is bookended by a reading from Celan's poem "Egypt" (1948), and one from Beckermann's novel 'Malina' (1971).