



© NGF

Über die Jahre

Over the Years

Nikolaus Geyrhalter

Producer Nikolaus Geyrhalter, Michael Kitzberger, Wolfgang Widerhofer, Markus Glaser. **Production company** Nikolaus Geyrhalter Filmproduktion (Wien, Austria). **Director** Nikolaus Geyrhalter. **Screenplay** Nikolaus Geyrhalter, Wolfgang Widerhofer. **Director of photography** Nikolaus Geyrhalter. **Sound** Andreas Hamza, Ludwig Löckinger. **Sound design** Peter Kutin. **Editor** Wolfgang Widerhofer.

DCP, colour. 188 min. German.

Premiere 8 February 2015, Berlinale Forum

World sales Outlook Filmsales

When we see nappies being packed in cellophane by hand, we already suspect it will all soon be over. Taking the demise of a textile factory in Austria's Waldviertel region as its starting point, with the antiquated manufacturing plant initially shown in full operation, this film poses the question of what work means for people's self-image and character. After the factory goes bankrupt and closes, the filmmaker accompanies some of its employees as they continue to make their way, questioning them about their daily routines, the circumstances in which they live, about looking for work or the new jobs they find. One woman's situation is precarious, but that doesn't prevent her from bringing up her two grandchildren. Another woman works here and there, flexible and resourceful. One man blossoms visibly in his newly unemployed state. Bit by bit, different aspects of their private lives and personal misfortunes emerge. What begins as the documentation of a branch of industry dying a slow death develops over the course of ten years into an epic documentary tale of life and work in the post-industrial era. It is an outstanding, moving film devoted to people.

Birgit Kohler

A dying craft

In 2003, we heard about a textile factory in northern Austria's Waldviertel region, where time has supposedly stood still in. The owner, well past seventy, was said to produce traditional kinds of fabric with museum-piece machines and the last of what were once three hundred employees. The products were less and less marketable.

Soon thereafter, we entered the factory for the first time, without knowing where this journey would take us. It soon became clear that we wouldn't have much time before the company closed its doors forever.

At any rate, we wanted to accompany the people we encountered there for a while yet. Ultimately, it has been more than ten years between the beginning and the end of this film.

Nikolaus Geyrhalter

Open-ended life histories

A project. A film project: an old textile factory in the Waldviertel region in northern Austria, reportedly devoted to traditional production methods and craftsmanship that will soon vanish. Hence the idea to document it all. There follow encounters with, and recordings of, five, six, or seven people at their workplaces. But very soon this workplace, and actually also the film project, is steam-rolled by an accelerated demise. The factory is closed. But the filmmakers want to continue observing, for another three or four years, what that means: unemployment, the job search, and what it all does to people in whose region jobs are a rare commodity. From the beginning, *Über die Jahre*, the new film by Nikolaus Geyrhalter, was an incalculable project with unforeseeable results.

'You collaborate with a future that, in every way, is unforeseeable and unknown': this is what the American director Richard Linklater is supposed to have said about his opus magnum, *Boyhood*. For ten years, at regular and less regular intervals, Linklater had followed a young American boy as he grew up and underwent an education sentimentale – 'a crazy undertaking'.

Über die Jahre certainly has an affinity to this kind of insanity and its vulnerability – who could predict, for example, that you could rely on technical continuity or a compact ensemble of protagonists over such a long period? But here there was the crucial difference that, unlike Linklater, Geyrhalter and his co-author, editor Wolfgang Widerhofer, could not refer to a 'prewritten', 'secured' network of fictions and screenplay twists that could have guaranteed continuity.

No, every new encounter, each new shooting over these ten years resulted in new, unforeseeable twists that, as is generally so stupidly said, 'are written by life'. Sometimes they are like cheerful little tremors 'through the years'; for example when a man reveals increasingly unusual hobbies: archiving 1,800 songs, for example. Sometimes they are like cold shivers from a past about which someone didn't want to speak for a long time: a married couple tells about a family disaster. And sometimes they achieve an almost grotesque, apocalyptic pitch: someone rummages in scrap metal containers in a rain-swept no man's land to supplement his low basic salary with a few salvaged aluminium cans.

At such moments, you think: how can this go on? But that it does go on, and how it does – that's what the film narrates. Or more precisely, the situations that always move forward in Geyrhalter's

pictures and Widerhofer's montage, toward happy and less happy moments, narrate themselves – through the film, as it were.

Within Austria's arts and culture, which are not exactly lacking in images of country life – cruel, oppressive, idyllic – *Über die Jahre* is an incomparable individual case. That is due in no small part to its orientation towards lifetimes and working (and unemployed) times. In the childhood recollections of a Franz Innerhofer, Gernot Wolfgruber or Josef Winkler or in the catastrophic tirades of a Thomas Bernhard, it is usually memory that structures events and thus also their arc of suspense. They knew what they wanted to narrate and show. Geyrhalter and Widerhofer had no recourse to such safeguards – through experience, virtuosity or whatever. Open-ended life histories demand an open approach, an open form.

Thus, *Über die Jahre* may come closest to a life and travel journal, a diary. One writes forward through the days, sometimes coming to a conclusion that is often rescinded because of knowledge gained a few days, weeks or months later. A great quality of this film is that it doesn't present itself as retroactively 'smarter'; it doesn't place itself above the people and situations it found, much less formulate wise maxims. It accompanies and observes over the years, and from the wealth of observed details it takes on immense power and challenges us emotionally and intellectually. *Über die Jahre* is, as Nikolaus Geyrhalter and Wolfgang Widerhofer put it, 'an epic, but an intricately fashioned one'.

Claus Philipp

"I like to move in forgotten places"

Ten years of work on a project like this... What led you to trust that the protagonists would stick with it?

Nikolaus Geyrhalter: Ten years was not originally the plan. In the beginning, we thought we would shoot for three or four years, because it was important to me to depict this process of how, over a certain period of time, people lose their jobs and look for jobs again. The more time passes, the more happens, of course. At some point the project developed its own dynamic, and time no longer played a big role. In some phases, our contact with the protagonists was less close. Again and again, it was definitely an effort to visit some of them again and persuade them to let us film them again. From the time when it became clear that the film would really be a long-term project, we strived to extend it as much as possible, of course. That the project is finished now, after ten years, has many reasons: the factory will now indeed find a new owner; we finally had to settle accounts with our backers; and ten years was simply a good time to close this vessel.

Speaking of the forming of this vessel: Wolfgang Widerhofer, when did you begin editing the film?

Wolfgang Widerhofer: We sat down at the editing table with the initial material relatively early, to see what it could do. In the meantime, however, we were making several other films. I began editing the current version of the film in January 2014. For twelve months from that point on, I dealt with the material. Then we shot the last chapter of the film last year, and we asked ourselves what topics we wanted to talk about with which people.

How did your questions change over the ten years?

Nikolaus Geyrhalter: We didn't have any set questions in the proper sense. It was soon clear that from the moment when the factory, which we were still quite able to portray in detail, no longer existed, what would follow were the stories life tells. This film developed like a tree that you plant without knowing what directions its branches will grow in. While shooting, I withdrew to the approach of intervening as little as possible and simply waiting to see what happened in the individual biographies. Ten years times seven protagonists equals seventy years of life – a whole lifetime – and quite a bit happens. To pour all this into a film, to find images that do it justice – that's what I saw as my task. But in fact, the lives of the protagonists are what primarily wrote this film.

Wolfgang Widerhofer: Our position was to respond to the lives of the protagonists. I find it crucial that this is ultimately what shaped the film's form. In the beginning, we had an awful lot of material from the factory, and you see that this factory material gives the film a certain security: everything is stable. There's a compact space, a self-contained building, and the people all on-site. So at first the camera has a relatively confident position. But then comes this turning point; the factory is locked up and suddenly everything is set in motion. Suddenly there is the hand-held camera and a playful dynamic develops, a form open in all directions – like many streams flowing together and diverging again, with all the factors of chance.

Most of the film's protagonists are not very eloquent, if not to say, taciturn. For example, right at the beginning, one of your first questions – 'Describe one of your days' – is followed by a non-description. It's amusing and frustrating at the same time.

Nikolaus Geyrhalter: I liked that the protagonists were selected as if at random. They were simply still there at the time when we were shooting in the factory. If we had cast them from a larger number of people, it would raise many questions: Why did you choose those people? What are they supposed to represent? I think it's wonderful to simply accept this given situation and to give the people a space that they don't otherwise have.

Wolfgang Widerhofer: No answer is often the expression of a character or of a resistance to questions. While editing, it was interesting for me to see how Niki, as filmmaker, becomes a person pushing this film forward. The film also traces once again what it's like to make a film. Sometimes not getting an answer or having to stop an interview... I'm fascinated by such uncertain moments.

What was the creative dialogue between the two of you like?

Nikolaus Geyrhalter: Many of the working procedures have become so well-established between us over the years that much seems to happen on its own. Wolfgang is like a corrective to me. What you see when you shoot differs from what you see when you edit. It's also a big advantage that Wolfgang is never present on the set. That means that, when he's at the editing table, he sees only what's really in the material.

Wolfgang Widerhofer: Niki once described it himself: field work and in-house work. And that's how I view editing: as work on the interior of the film. Niki doesn't even look at everything he's filmed; I do. From this material, I extract something like the substance of what this film can tell us about life. What's inside all of this material? How can this story be best told in this open form? What is the real nitty-gritty of this film?

For this film, it's very important that Niki is so present with his questions; that you see how the people respond to the film team; that they help shape the situation itself and can liberate themselves from it, rather than the reverse: that the protagonists are forced into a situation. The film shows these moments of interaction again and again.

How is it that the film in its final version seems so compact, although it took so long to shoot it?

Nikolaus Geyrhalter: I, too, was surprised. It probably has to do with the way I make films, to which I'm very dedicated, and in which I'm probably not very flexible. I've already worked for longer than these ten years with certain basic principles according to which I want to depict places, and especially people and encounters. That may be why this now seems like there's continuity – I'm a bit astonished by it myself. I didn't come up with a special visual language for this film; I merely wanted to apply the same standards here with which I always work.

Wolfgang Widerhofer: Especially important for us was that the film should go in a positive, powerful direction. You watch this film, experience changes and transience, you also experience tragedy, but – and now comes the big but – every single one of the protagonists finds his very own way to deal with all the changes and special challenges.

What do you associate with the term 'life history'?

Nikolaus Geyrhalter: Life moves forward, you have no influence over it. You can go to the labour office, or not: ten years pass, whether you shape them or let them be shaped. In the end you are ten years older. As I grow older, I sometimes think you become more reconciled with life, your own and also the lives and fates of others. If I had known ten years ago how much that is tragic would happen in this film, I might have been afraid to make it. I now simply accept it with more composure, because I know that you have to accept everything anyway. This greater composure probably transferred to the shooting, especially at the end.

Wolfgang Widerhofer: Yes, anti-dramatic. Trusting the calm and the normal. Continuity has a special significance for all Geyrhalter films, actually, and in a way that I am more and more conscious of when working on them. All Geyrhalter films address the question: What is it like after something? What is it like after a catastrophe? What is it like after this factory is shut down? What comes afterward? This long view is probably needed to expose the many layers resulting in this afterward. How do people cope with changes? This is a basic theme running through all my work with Niki.

Nikolaus Geyrhalter: It's funny; in my life, I really always look to the future. But it's true: like when we shot *Das Jahr nach Dayton* in Bosnia, or *Pripyat* around Chernobyl, my interest always really grows from the point when a topic disappears from daily news reporting. Apparently I like to move in forgotten places.

Interview: Claus Philipp, January 2015



© Philipp Horak

Nikolaus Geyrhalter was born in Vienna in 1972. Since 1992 he has worked as a director, cinematographer and screenwriter. He started his own production company in 1994. Since then, he has also produced numerous films.

Films

1994: *Angeschwemmt/Washed Ashore* (86 min.). 1997: *Das Jahr nach Dayton/The Year After Dayton* (Berlinale Forum 1998, 204 min.). 1999: *Pripyat* (Berlinale Forum 1999, 100 min.). 2001: *Elsewhere* (240 min.). 2005: *Unser täglich Brot/Our Daily Bread* (90 min.). 2008: *7915 km* (106 min.). 2010: *Allentsteig* (79 min.). 2011: *Abendland* (90 min.). 2012: *SMZ OST – Donauspital/Danube Hospital* (TV, 80 min.). 2013: *Cern* (TV, 75 min.). 2015: *Über die Jahre/Over the Years*.