

ÜBER DIE JAHRE (OVER THE YEARS)

A Film by Nikolaus Geyrhalter

Open ended life stories

by Claus Philipp

A project. A film project: An old textile factory in the Waldviertel, reportedly still wedded to traditional production mechanisms; a craft that will soon cease to exist. Thus, the idea to document everything now. This is followed by meetings and recordings with 5, 6, 7 people at their workplace. But very quickly, this workplace, and for that matter the film project, are overrun by an accelerated decline. The factory is closed down. But the filmmakers want to observe, for another three or four years, what that might mean: Unemployment, the search for jobs, and what it does to the people in this region where jobs are a rare commodity. "Über die Jahre" ("Over the Years"), the new film by Nikolaus Geyrhalter, was an unpredictable project with unforeseeable results from the start. Three or four years morphed into ten. And now, "Über die Jahre," a masterpiece in every respect, is coming to the big screen.

"In every respect, you're collaborating with an unknown future." That's supposedly what director Richard Linklater said about his magnum opus "Boyhood." For more than ten years, Linklater followed the growing up and the "Sentimental Education" of a young American boy—"a crazy undertaking."

"Über die Jahre" comes very close to this craziness and its vulnerability (who, for example, can predict that he can rely on the technical continuity or a compact ensemble of protagonists over such a long period of time?). The main difference here is that, unlike Linklater, Geyrhalter and his co-author, editor Wolfgang Widerhofer, couldn't even rely on a "prescribed," "fail-safe" net of fictions and screenplay twists that could have guaranteed continuity.

On the contrary, every new encounter, every new period of filming over the course of these 10 years resulted in new unforeseen turns—in the kind of “great stories” that are, as is commonly held, “written by life itself.” Sometimes, they are like small amusing quivers “over the years,” such as when a man reveals increasingly unusual hobbies (archiving 1,800 songs, for example). Sometimes, they are like cold showers from a past that one didn't want to talk about for a long time (a married couple tells of a catastrophe within the family). And sometimes, they reach an almost grotesque, apocalyptic fever pitch (in a rainy no man's land, a man climbs into scrap metal containers in order to improve his meager salary with a few collected aluminum cans).

In these moments, you think, “How can this go on?” But that it does go on, and how, is the subject of this film. Or rather, the circumstances that press onwards in Geyrhalter's images and Widerhofer's montage, towards moments of happiness as well as despair, speak of this—through the film, as it were.

Austrian art and culture does not want for images of rural life—cruel, oppressive, idyllic as the case may be. But within that framework, “Über die Jahre” is incomparable and unique. And that is owed primarily to its orientation towards lifetimes and work times (as well as times of joblessness).

In the childhood memories of Franz Innerhofer, Gernot Wolfgruber or Josef Winkler, in the catastrophic tirades of Thomas Bernhard, it is usually memory that structures the events and thus their suspense. What is to be told and shown is already known. Geyrhalter and Widerhofer couldn't rely on such sureties—be they based on experience, virtuosity, or something else. Open ended life stories require an open mind, an open form.

In that sense, “Über die Jahre” comes very close to a life and travel journal, a diary. You write through the days; sometimes, you draw a conclusion, but it is not uncommon for this conclusion to be knocked on the head by the insights that you gain just days, weeks, or months later. It is one of the outstanding features of this film that it doesn't present itself as “smarter” in hindsight. Thus, it doesn't place itself above the people and circumstances that it came upon, and it certainly doesn't declaim any nuggets of wisdom. It accompanies and observes, over the years, and from the details of this observation it draws an immense power, challenging both emotion and intellect. According to Nikolaus Geyrhalter and Wolfgang Widerhofer, “Über die Jahre” is “an epic, but a finely chiseled one.”