



Berlinale 2022 review: Mutzenbacher (Ruth Beckermann)

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One of the more peculiar examples of anonymous fiction is *Josefine Mutzenbacher* or *The Story of a Viennese Whore, as Told by Herself*, a novel published in the early 20th century. It was written by an unknown author but most commonly attributed to Felix Salten, who is best known for writing the beloved fable *Bambi*, a text that could not be any more different from this sordid tale of a young woman discovering her sexuality. This novel is the foundation for a fascinating experimental documentary by the revolutionary Ruth Beckermann, albeit not in the way we would expect – instead of adapting the novel into a film, she endeavours to craft a documentary around the creation of a nonexistent version of this story. Situating herself in a warehouse armed with only a table and an old sofa, and her ever-trustworthy camera, she recruits dozens of men to come in to read for what they imagine will be an adaptation of the text. Previous acting experience (or even an understanding of the material) is not necessary – the only criterion is that they must be between the ages of 16 and 99, and need to have a willingness to engage with the text, whose sordid details they may not be aware of when they first step into what they think is an audition room. What starts as a bewildering series of discussions gradually evolves into an engaging and compelling deconstruction of desire and the role gender politics play in defining sexuality, all filtered through conversations based on an obscure text that forces the viewer (like the individuals in this film) into a place of profound but intriguing discomfort.

Mutzenbacher is a peculiar film – at a cursory glance, it functions as a vivid portrayal of a filmmaker exploring her challenges with adapting a text, which we have seen covered countless times before, but rarely with the fervent dedication with which Beckermann approaches the source material here. However, the film is not necessarily interested in the social and cultural milieu from the time the text was written, but rather placing its themes in the contemporary space, which leads to a much more engrossing experience, especially when it starts to gradually move further away from a textual analysis and becomes more of a critique of gender politics, using *Josefine Mutzenbacher* as the starting point. Beckermann presents us with a voyeuristic view of sexuality – like the director, we are situated on the other side of the camera, observing a myriad of men from every conceivable demographic describe their perspective on sexuality and desire, using the text as a foundation to gradually reveal their own complex relationships with the politics of gender. These are all found through the selected excerpts they are given to read in what they imagine is an audition, not

being aware that the director has carefully curated these fragments of the novel to spur insightful conversation around sexuality, asking questions that provoke these men to confront their own interpretations of the text and its content.



Mutzenbacher is certainly a layered film – it is focused on the process of the male gaze interpreting femininity and issues relating to women, but allegedly written by a male author, and captured here by a female director – and Beckermann does not let the complexity of this situation go unnoticed, effectively exploring it through these stark but compelling discussions with a wide range of individuals. Beckermann has the rare ability to take a text as disreputable and immoral as *Josefine Mutzenbacher* (which was too depraved to even bear the author’s actual name in fear of societal scorn), and still find a way to make an effective and profoundly captivating film which addresses the fundamental themes of the novel. The documentary format allows the director to find elegance in a crude and hypersexual text, which she does through developing the structure of the film as it goes along, working closely with the participants to craft the central conversations. Each of the men who comes in to audition is as responsible for shaping these discussions as Beckermann, some of them even noting how they are aware of the camera and how it can be used to reconfigure their words to mean something completely different. This is essentially the entire purpose of this film, whereby an older text is taken and deconstructed to its fundamental components, which are subsequently the source of a challenging critique of gender roles.

Throughout *Mutzenbacher* you can feel the director’s discerning gaze, even when she is off-screen. Her disembodied, stern voice interrogates these individuals with some truly uncomfortable questions and provokes them to push themselves beyond the point of comfort. It is a deeply experimental work, and it does take some time for the viewer to fully acclimate to the atmosphere and begin to understand exactly what Beckermann was trying to achieve with this challenging work. Ultimately, it remains up to the viewer’s individual interpretation, as everything is kept intentionally vague, with the general tone implying that the director was interested in taking this notoriously salacious text and using it as the foundation for a riveting investigation of femininity through the eyes of a range of male characters, gleaning their perspective and opinions and determining whether the wide grin of perversion with which the original writer composed this text was still applicable, or if mentalities and perceptions around gender have changed over time. The efforts that went into the creation of *Mutzenbacher* lead to an extraordinarily complex and masterfully constructed documentary that works best as a meta-fictional voyage into the heart of desire, curated by a filmmaker whose interest in this subject is only matched by her enthusiastic desire to challenge conventions.

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