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Interview with Edet Belzberg

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Interview with Edet Belzberg

Abstract

This is a summary of an interview with Edet Belzberg, director of *Watchers of the Sky*.

Author Notes

Rubina (Ruby) Ramji is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Cape Breton University. After serving as a Chair of the Religion, Film and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion and then the steering committee, Rubina continues to serve on the Executive Committee for the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion as President and is the Film Editor of the *Journal of Religion and Film*. Her research activities focus on the areas of religion, media and identity, religion in Canada, and religion and immigration.

Interview with Edet Belzberg, Director of *Watchers of the Sky*

Edet Belzberg made her directorial debut with the film *Children Underground*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2001: it documented unwanted children placed in



orphanages in Romania who were now living in the streets after the fall of Communism. Not afraid to examine emotionally tragic situations where people are displaced and discarded, Belzberg's next documentary *Watchers of the Sky* doesn't shy away from the raw emotion of humanity's cruelty to others.

Belzberg has a connection with Raphael Lemkin; both are Jewish and know the history of genocide that has been inflicted upon the worldwide Jewish community for centuries. When asked if she felt the need to examine the topic of genocide as a Jew, Belzberg felt that she wanted to move beyond the Jewish element of genocide, to capture humanity: humanity's ability to destroy its own people, and humanity's ability to fight for the rights of the people, all people. This documentary is, in a way, Belzberg's witnessing of genocide that has devastatingly affected peoples of different religions, ethnicities, and nationalities within their home countries. Belzberg outlined Lemkin's mission to see the

beauty in humanity, while also understanding that the wiping out of one group equals the wiping of culture as a whole. In effect, this documentary illustrates Lemkin's trajectory from being Jewish to becoming a Humanist – his concern to end genocide was not only based on what happened to his family in Poland and in World War II, but also what happened to the Armenians and other groups that were systematically displaced or killed by their own country members because they were of a different religion or race. He gave his life to bring about a law to punish those who use sovereignty as an excuse to wipe out entire groups.

Not only does Belzberg use the writings and voices of lawmakers and politicians to show how genocide must stop, but she takes a perilous but necessary step in the documentary, by providing the viewer with individual faces and lives that have been devastated by genocide, people who have lost all their family members, who have been displaced from their homelands and live as refugees, living nowhere and forgotten by the world. This daring step provides the viewer with a much needed emotional connection to the concept of genocide, its effects on the lives of people, and its effects on humanity; we are implicated in the continuation of these atrocious acts occurring in the world right now.

Benjamin Ferencz is also a major focus of *Watchers of the Sky*: Belzberg wishes to show how he has taken a twentieth century legal model, created by Lemkin, and is moulding it into 21st century law. His legal work to end crimes of aggression began in Nuremberg as a chief prosecutor, and he has spent his life

trying to fulfill Lemkin's mission of creating international laws to prosecute those who commit these atrocities. Ferencz is like Lemkin; both are aware that humanity is driven to commit these acts over and over again. In a way, Edet Belzberg has played her own part in being a watcher of the sky; she has created a work of art that will help those on the mission to create a way to end genocide or at least prosecute those who continue to commit it. One hopes that her work as a watcher will influence future law makers to see how we continue, as a human race, to allow nations to persecute and kill their own members and to see that this must stop, now.

— Rubina Ramji