

Who Killed Walter Benjamin...



...not just a reconstruction of a death but the living portrait of the scene of the crime.

a documentary film by
David Mauas

produced by

Medianimación
Milagros Producciones

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NIK Media (The Netherlands)

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Ajuntament de Portbou, Portbou
Patronat de Turisme de Costa Brava, Girona
Master de Documental Creativo, UAB, Bellaterra

technical details

screening format digital betacam pal

colour colour

sound stereo

original language in Spanish, Catalan, English,
Hebrew, German and French.

subtitles in English, Spanish or Catalan.

voice -over in English, Spanish or Catalan.

available in English version, Spanish version or Catalan version.

running time 52 minutes or 73 minutes

principal credits

direction	David Mauas
executive producers	Miquel Alvarez David Mauas
scriptwriters	David Mauas Joan Ripollès
director of photography	Rachel Rusinek
sound recording	César Fernández Shinya Kitamura
original music	Xavier Maristany
editing	Pau Valiente Victor Vidal

synopsis

In September 1940, after seven years of exile, Walter Benjamin crosses the Pyrenees in a desperate attempt to escape the Nazis.

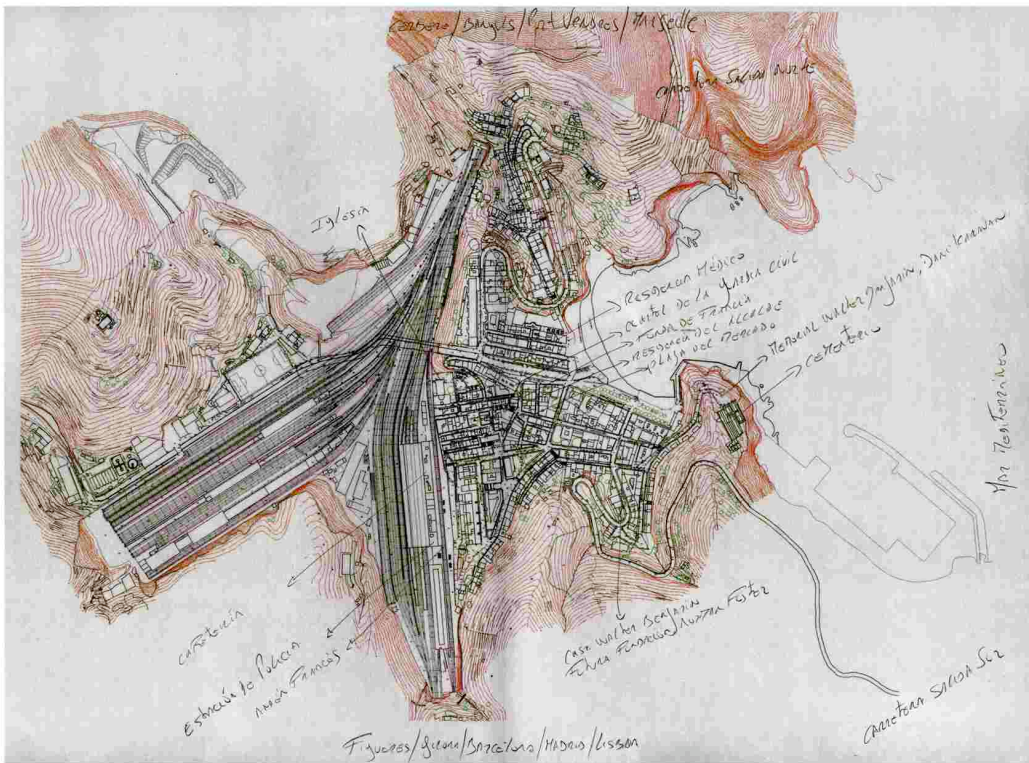
According to the official version, Walter Benjamin did make it across the French-Spanish border successfully. But when he arrived in the Catalan town of Portbou, a sudden change in legislation impeded his entry into Spain and he was obliged to spend the night at a local hotel under the close vigilance of three guards, whose orders were to deport him the following morning. In utter despair, Benjamin took his own life, swallowing and overdose of morphine. The local doctor, however, declared it a natural death and Benjamin was given a Catholic burial in the municipal cemetery, under a wrong name. Did the doctor conceal some hidden cause of Benjamin's death? Was there really a change of legislation? Was Walter Benjamin aware that Portbou was a pro-Franco town virtually occupied by the Nazis?

WHO KILLED WALTER BENJAMIN... reaches for answers among the suspicious circumstances of his death. Giving at the same time, a portrait of a frontier town anchored between two fronts, constant witness of evasion, persecution and false hopes.

Who Killed Walter Benjamin... not just a reconstruction of a death but the living portrait of the scene of the crime.

interviews with

Narciso Alba
Francina Alsina
Félix de Azua
Narcis Bardalet
Anna Caixàs
Pere Calderer
Juan Ramón Capella
Comisario Cordero
Cuca Gorgot
Simon Granollers
Isidro Gubert
Joan Gubert
Stéphane Hessel
Dani Karavan
Antonio Lasierra
Stéphane Mosès
LLuis Novell
Nati Peral
Teresa Puig
Alfonso Romero
Francesc Rosa
Ferran Sánchez
Gary Smith
Rolf Tiedemann
Roman
Josep Valls
Santiago Vancells
Xavier Vicens
Patrick Von Zur Mühlen
Bernd Witte
Erdmut Wizisla



david mauas - biofilmography

David Mauas is born in Buenos Aires in 1968. In 1994 he graduates as a BFA (Bachelor in Fine Arts), by the Video and Photography Department at the BEZALEL Academy of Fine Arts and Design (Jerusalem).

He directs short films and videos (**La Hora Sin Sombra, Over the Line, Sara Take II, Beiad Chazaka**) and different reportages on art for television.

Between 1995 to 1997 is working at the Video Department at the Jerusalem Cinemateque.

In 1997, he moves to Barcelona to enrolling into the Audio-visual Communication Department Doctoral Studies Program at the Universidad Autònoma de Barcelona. He obtains a scholarship given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Spain.

In 2000 he premieres the documentary **Tales of a Bookseller**, which focuses on the trial against a known fascist organisation. The documentary is awarded with the First Prize at the Festival de Creación Audiovisual de Navarra and is screened in several festivals around Europe.

Then, he enrolling in different projects, among others: tour manager for of a circus company, assistant director for documentaries, production manager for television programs, production and direction of cultural television reportages.

In 2003 obtains an artist residence for the Kunsthochschule für Medien in Köln, Germany.

Who Killed Walter Benjamin... is his first feature length documentary film.

some notes before starting...

Any university student who has taken studies in communication, art, film, translation, language or philosophical thought has come across the name Walter Benjamin at some stage. My first incursion into Benjamin, the thinker, as a student at the Academy of Arts in Jerusalem, was through “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, obligatory reading and a key work when it comes to trying to understanding the destiny of artistic and particularly audiovisual production as the result of technological progress.

Years later, then settled in Barcelona, the Israeli Television commissioned me to do a special report on the event of the sixtieth anniversary of the philosopher’s death. I was greatly surprised and, in retrospect, ignorant, when I realised that the life of this illustrious thinker culminated just a few hours from Barcelona, in a small town then unknown to me called Portbou.

As a consequence of making that report, the need began to grow within me to investigate the events more deeply with a view to elaborating a proposal for a documentary. All I had read until then about Benjamin’s death didn’t fully convince me, and the verification of events in situ, that is, in the town itself, left considerable room for doubt.

A clear profile was slowly crystallizing. The death of Walter Benjamin in Portbou was not only the sad end of an eminent personage, but the representation of a whole generation of refugees trying to save themselves from the claws of Nazism by fleeing desperately across the Pyrenees. But it was also the encounter with another, no less relevant, historical avatar: the wounds of a fratricidal war, occupation, reprisals, corruption. Before me lay the possibility of examining the confluence of two universes, of two violent encounters that each marked the twentieth century: the Second World War and the Spanish Civil War.

The further my research advanced, the more convinced I became that it was

necessary to move away from the classic historical model, which vainly attempts to establish what happened without making a thorough investigation of the milieu. It was not sufficient to focus on Walter Benjamin alone; it was also imperative to make a careful study of that small township: of its contraband networks – of both goods and people-, of the relationships between the townspeople, elucidating the part played by of each of the different characters who directly or indirectly met on that fateful

night of September 1940: the doctor, the owner of the guesthouse, the judge, the mayor, the police superintendent, and others.

This way of approaching the subject, allows us to draw up a narrative strategy which is at once universal and local. On the one hand, Walter Benjamin, and the universe in which those refugees found themselves; on the other, Portbou, the portrayal of a Catalan town, one of the last strongholds of resistance against the unstoppable advance of Franco's rioting troops. Once occupied, it was to become the terrible scene of hunger, reprisals, corruption, and favouritism. A township whose wounds have barely healed, at times anxious to express itself, at others to remain silent. A sort of enigma that needs be unravelled. A town that, despite the years gone by, continues to be the scene of clandestine crossings, immigrations, deportations and deliberate silence.

The universal and the local. The challenge of portraying a time which has no end, riddled with fissures through which to continue observing, or, if we like, the fascination for a moment in history which seen from the distance of this new century, contains much of the present.

And so, more than ten years later, I find Benjamin's texts upon my desk once again. And something else; the story of a town, the biographies of people hitherto unknown to me but who might come to our aid in deciphering the enigma, not only of the philosopher, but of Benjamin the man, the loner, the refugee.

David Mauas

the keys of the history

Walter Benjamin

On July 15, 1892, Walter Benjamin, one of the twentieth century's greatest thinkers, was born in Berlin. Closely associated with the philosophers of the Frankfurt School, exegete of the Marxism and Zionism then in usage, he is the author of an atypical and unclassifiable body of intellectual works which includes translations, historical, linguistic and artistic essays.

After the arrest of his brother at the beginning of the thirties, Benjamin left Germany to avoid the harassment of the National Socialist regime and settled in Paris, from whence he made frequent visits to Denmark and Spain.

In 1939 he lost his German nationality, which however, didn't help to avoid his being retained in a foreign internment camp for two months. In the summer of 1940, in the face of the arrival of the Germans, he fled Paris and hid out for 6 weeks in Lourdes. He managed to get a visa for the United States but never succeeded in embarking in Marseilles. As a last resort to escape from the rat-trap that France had become, he crossed the border into Spain clandestinely on September 25, aiming to reach Lisbon and get a boat there for America.

However, twenty-four hours later he died under strange circumstances in his room at a guesthouse in the Spanish border town of Portbou.

Versions of the Events

On September 25, after seven years in exile, Walter Benjamin crossed the Pyrenees in a desperate attempt to escape from the Nazis. In his black leather suitcase, his only luggage, he carried his latest manuscript. He was planning to cross the border clandestinely, together with a small group of émigrés, in order to cross Spain and pick up a ship in Lisbon bound for the United States. However, a sudden change in Spanish legislation prevented his entry to the Peninsula. Benjamin was obliged to spend the night under guard at a boarding-house in Portbou, the Fonda de Francia, awaiting deportation to French soil the following morning.

That same night, the German-Jewish philosopher fell violently ill and died twenty-four hours later.

Despite the fact that the medical report classed the death as natural, the premise of suicide has always been accepted. In the nineties, the official reports were found that refer to death by natural causes, throwing more shadow than light upon a case riddled with irregularities. Today, both in and outside the town of Portbou, there are those who are not hesitant to speak of a possible murder.

A Portbou native who knew the patron of the boarding-house personally, still today recalls the moment when the latter rushed into their home in distress, bringing the news of the demise of that unknown tenant.

The version told by this woman and fellow townspeople, all direct witnesses of the time, together with our own investigations into historical and private archives, open the door to new investigations that challenge the commonly held assumptions regarding Walter Benjamin's death.

From this point, the documentary follows the thread of the different testimonies, which gradually create an increasingly clear photograph of an event that was evidently plagued with irregularities on all sides – the police force, the medical profession, the church and the government.

Was the patron of the boarding-house a pro-Franco collaborationist, as many witnesses claim? Did the doctor conceal the true cause of Benjamin's death? Did the Spanish authorities have prior knowledge of the importance of this "foreign traveller" who was buried in observance of Catholic rites under a mistaken name? And last but not less important, which is the source of this case? Who is the original testimony? How born the "narrative" of the suicide?

Was it really a case of suicide?



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