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BERLINALE 2026 Berlinale Special Review: *Wax & Gold*

by [SUSANNE GOTTLIEB](#)

20/02/2026 - BERLINALE 2026: Documentary filmmaker Ruth Beckermann dives into the long-lasting impact of former Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie and the Western view of his conflicted legacy



Wax and gold refers to the workings of Ethiopia's Amharic language, explains filmmaker **Ruth Beckermann**. It means saying the opposite of what you think, but in such a way that those involved understand the intended message. Beckermann also has to decipher mixed messages, nuanced opinions and a critical examination of the past in her documentary *Wax & Gold* [+], which had its world premiere in a Berlinale Special screening at the 76th [Berlinale](#).

The reason Beckermann finds herself unpicking this delicate narrative lies with the subject at the centre of her tale: former Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, who ruled from 1930 until he was overthrown in 1974. As one of the few African personalities on TV in Beckermann's childhood, at first glance standing for modernisation, the abolition of slavery, and technical progress. Beckermann confides that she admired him. Then, in 1978, Polish

journalist **Ryszard Kapuściński**'s book, *The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat*, in which he accused Selassie of being an authoritarian despot who let his people live in misery, destroyed that image.

Is it a dramatized tale by a white Westerner? A more aggressive critique of a political phenomenon very familiar to the West, namely the idolisation of an authoritarian ruler who clings to power by successfully selling the idea of freedom and self-determination? In Ethiopia, according to Beckermann, few have read Kapuściński's book. The Rastafari movement, which singer Bob Marley was a part of, worships him as a god to this day. To challenge her youthful idealisation and her gaze as a white European woman, and to seek out more intersectional input, Beckermann ends up at a crossroads between African identity and elitist Western standards: the fancy Hilton Hotel in Addis Ababa, whose pool Selassie is said to have designed himself. Even the blaxploitation film *Shaft in Africa* was shot here.

Beckermann talks to employees, artists, great thinkers and even the emperor's last servant. Some admire Selassie. Some criticise the sensationalism with which the book and his legacy are handled. Yet, as Beckermann intertwines talking heads with archive footage, a peculiar view establishes itself. Selassie, a fighter for African identity and solutions whose pet project was the founding of the Organisation of African Unity, seemed to replicate the lifestyle of Western imperial powers. The images of him eating at the table, the fancy European chefs, and the Western fashions could have been shot in any royal European household. Domesticated predators like lions are kept like lap dogs.

The film doesn't pass judgment on Selassie's legacy but rather draws a complex picture of a country that was never colonised by the West yet is still struggling with its history. The historic centre has been destroyed in favour of modern skyscrapers, but the infrastructure is still lacking, with people waiting in endless lines for buses.

It's a conversation in wax and gold. An effort to decode the multi-layered narrative that Beckermann is faced with. A narrative predominantly held by white Westerners. Giving the local population a voice might not provide all the answers, but "reporting on things differently means reporting on different things", the director insists, quoting French sociologist **Pierre Bourdieu** at the beginning of the film. And that's exactly what this is: a beginning and a step towards a narrative shift.

Wax & Gold was co-produced by Austrian firm [Ruth Beckermann Filmproduktion](#) and Italy's [Citrullo International](#). The film is distributed internationally by [Celluloid Dreams](#).

more about: Wax & Gold



Interview: Ruth Beckermann • Director of *Wax & Gold*

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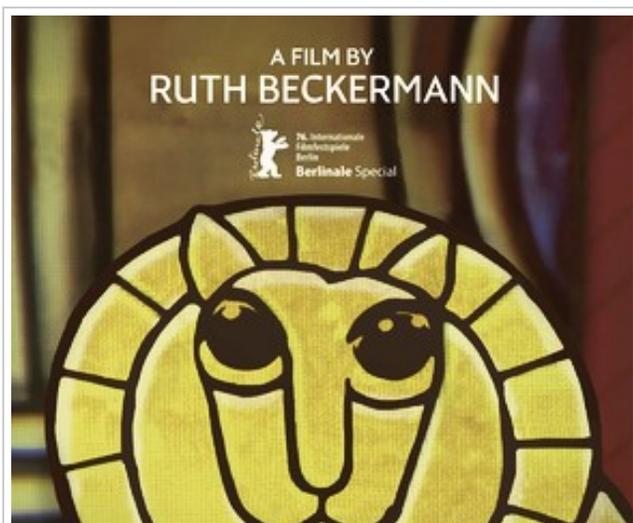
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international title:	Wax & Gold
original title:	Wax & Gold
country:	Austria, Italy
sales agent:	Celluloid Dreams
year:	2026
directed by:	Ruth Beckermann
screenplay:	Ruth Beckermann

main awards/selection

Berlinale Berlinale Special
2026

full film profile

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