

Arcadia Pictures presents



**"Every revolution is an adventure..."**

— Angel Wagenstein

a film by  
Andrea Simon

US/Bulgaria • 85 minutes • 2017

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# ANGEL WAGENSTEIN: ART IS A WEAPON

## Synopsis

*"Angel Wagenstein's life and work are a secret history of the twentieth century."*

Elizabeth Frank

This provocative documentary portrait of the Bulgarian Jewish film artist Angel Wagenstein introduces Western viewers to a brilliant and charismatic storyteller, for whom art became a form of resistance against a series of oppressive and corrupt regimes. At 94, Wagenstein remains a passionate witness to history, and an active participant in the political debate on Europe's rocky post-communist future.

Wagenstein's improbably adventurous life story includes command of a daredevil Jewish partisan brigade in WW2, early dreams of a socialist utopia, furious disappointment when those dreams began to crumble, and a central role in the democratic reforms that ended communist rule in Bulgaria. But his most striking quality as a documentary subject -- in addition to his ferocious intelligence and massive charm -- is his willingness to think critically about whatever historical situation he is placed in, rather than succumb to the temptations of ideological purity.

ART IS A WEAPON explores many of Wagenstein's beautiful and deeply ironic films, focusing in particular on STERNE ("STARS"), his autobiographical masterpiece, which beat *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and *The 400 Blows* to take the Special Jury prize at Cannes in 1959. STARS details an initially indifferent German soldier's reluctant awakening to how he is personally implicated in the horror of what is happening to Europe's Jews. It also brings to life a neglected chapter of Jewish resistance that challenges toxic myths of Jewish passivity during the Shoah.

The documentary considers other features -- the witty utopian space epic EOLOMEA, the darkly allegorical GOYA (Wagenstein's autobiographically inflected portrait of an artist torn between compromise and resistance), and the heroic Marxist Westerns HEROES OF SEPTEMBER and ALARM. Through these films, and the complicated history of their production and repression, we glimpse something of the idealism with which Europeans after World War II launched the socialist experiment, and their rage and disappointment as the system descended into chaos. Rare material from Russian, German and Bulgarian archives is included as well, while our own original footage captures the beauty and strangeness of the Bulgarian landscape, with its Greek ruins, 18<sup>th</sup>-century Ottoman villages and gargantuan, crumbling Soviet-era monuments.

**ANGEL WAGENSTEIN: ART IS A WEAPON** opens up a fresh perspective on the past hundred years, taking us down unfamiliar historical and ideological paths, and inviting us to revisit the revolutions of 1989 with a critical eye. Wagenstein's life and films raise fundamental questions—more timely now than ever—on when, how and why to resist the totalitarian impulse ... and where the paths of resistance may lead.

## **Short Synopsis**

### **“94 YEARS, 52 FILMS, 3 REVOLUTIONS”**

As a teenager in wartime Bulgaria, Wagenstein commanded a daredevil Jewish partisan brigade, surviving capture and torture by fascist police. When post-war dreams of a socialist utopia turned to dust, his films became a kind of covert resistance against the brutality of the Stalinist era. This is one of the great untold stories of world cinema: at 94, Wagenstein is still a man of massive charm and ferocious intelligence, a passionate witness to history and influential voice in the debate on Europe's rocky post-communist future. Intimate conversations, excerpts from his films, and rare archive materials inform this visually striking and provocative documentary on a remarkable artist.

Trailer:

<https://vimeo.com/217574243>

***"A GEM OF A FILM!"***

**Thomas Elsaesser**

**CREDITS:**

Directed and Produced by Andrea Simon

Executive Producer: Felice Firestone

Director of Photography: Daniel Epstein

Editors: Adrienne Haspel, Elka Nikolova, Mary Ann Toman

RT: 85:30

Shot on location in Bulgaria, Germany, Macedonia, Russia, and the USA  
In Bulgarian, English, German, Russian and Ladino with English subtitles

**FESTIVAL SCREENINGS 2017:**

[New York Jewish Film Festival](#) | January 2017

Review in "[New York Jewish Week](#)"

Review in Arts Blog "[Apollo's Girl](#)"

Review in "[Women's Voices for Change](#)"

SEEfest Los Angeles | April 2017

[Audience Award](#) - Documentary

Article in "[People's World](#)"

Washington Jewish Film Festival | May 2017

Screening at the [AFI Silver Theatre](#)

Screening at the [National Gallery of Art](#)

Review in cinephile blog "[Unseen Films](#)"

Review in arts and culture guide "[DCist](#)"

[Jewish Film Festival Berlin-Brandenburg](#) | July 3, 2017

Review in German newspaper [Berliner Zeitung](#)

[Woods Hole Film Festival](#) | August 3, 2017

[International Film Festival KineNova Skopje](#) | October 6–11, 2017

[Dallas Video Fest 30](#) | Closing Night October 8, 2017

[CineLibri](#) Sofia | October 17, 2017 and four additional screenings/discussions organized by US Embassy  
October 19-25 in Sofia, Blagoevgrad, and Plovdiv

Live 22-minute interview with Wagenstein and Simon on Bulgarian National TV's morning show,  
"[Denyat zapochva s'Kultura](#)"

Coverage from screening on October 18, 2017, at [American University in Bulgaria](#), Blagoevgrad



## **SCREENINGS 2018:**

[Columbia University Harriman Institute of Russian and East European Studies](#) | April 3, 2018

Screening and discussion, focusing on anti-Semitic attacks on ART IS A WEAPON before and after our Bulgarian premiere in October, and an ongoing series of extremely bitter online debates

[Massachusetts Multicultural Film Festival](#) | April 11-12, 2018

Screening of ART IS A WEAPON 4-11-18, followed by STARS 4-12-18

Both screenings followed by panel discussions with Bulgarian and US scholars

[Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv](#) | May 21, 2018

Screening and discussion

[Barcelona Jewish Film Festival](#) | September 21 and 30, 2018

Screening on September 21 followed by discussion

Additional public conversation on themes of the film with Andrea Simon and Arnau Pons on Saturday, September 22, at the [Casa Adret](#), Barcelona

[Kino Movimiento](#) Berlin | December 11, 2018

(The oldest continuously running Kino in Germany!)

Premiere Screening of new German subtitled version, followed by discussion

Presented by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung

[Werkstattkino](#) Munich | December 17 and 30, 2018

Screening of German subtitled version

## **SCREENINGS 2019:**

[Yiddish Book Center](#) | February 3, 2019, 2:00PM

1021 West Street, Amherst, MA 01002

[Rolling Docs Traveling Documentary Festival](#) | April 6, 2019, 4:00PM

Chitalishte "Hristo Botev - 1834," bul. "Evropa" 10, 2227 zh.k. Zhilishta, Bozhurishte, Bulgaria

[Port Townsend Women's Film Festival](#) | April 14, 2019, 1:15PM

Rosebud Cinema, Rose Theatre, 235 Taylor Street, Port Townsend, WA 98368

[Augusta Jewish Film Festival](#) | May 14, 2019, 7:00PM

Jabez Sanford Hardin Performing Arts Center, 7022 Evans Town Center Blvd, Evans, GA 30809

[Cineding](#) Leipzig | June 28, 2019, 7:30PM

Screening of German subtitled version, followed by discussion, as part of "Jüdische Woche"

[Schaubühne Lindenfels](#) Leipzig | October 17, 2019, 7:30PM

Screening of German subtitled version, followed by discussion with Jan Emendörfer (*Leipziger Volkszeitung*), Norbert Wehrstedt (*Leipziger Volkszeitung*) and Hans-Werner Honert (producer, Saxonia-Media)

## **SCREENINGS 2020:**

[Bundesplatz-Kino Berlin](#) | February 9, 2020, 11:00AM

Screening of German subtitled version, featuring Jakobine Motz, cinematographer for the film's German shoots (and pupil of Werner Bergmann, DP on STARS and GOYA)

## **Broadcast**

[TV Stara Zagora](#) Bulgaria | September 8, 2019, 8:00PM

Broadcast of Bulgarian subtitled version, presented as part of a nationwide commemoration honoring the 75th anniversary of Bulgaria's 1944 anti-fascist uprising, and the 9-9-1944 liberation from its wartime pro-German government.

“Our broadcast of ANGEL WAGENSTEIN: ART IS A WEAPON was the best possible way of commemorating September 9th 1944 and all it means for us in Bulgaria. The documentary’s portrayal of the power of art is profound. And Wagenstein’s fantastically adventurous life as an anti-fascist, a socialist, a humanist, always in opposition to the great networks of power that continue to dominate our world is truly inspiring. It honors all those who gave their lives in the struggle against fascism, and those who survived the battle, and renews the call to peace. Thank you!”

— Trifon Mitev, Production Executive, TV Stara Zagora

## **Awards and Accolades**

[SEEFest Los Angeles](#) | April 2017

Winner, Audience Award - Documentary

[AHA John E. O'Connor Film Award](#) | May 25, 2018

Nominated for the American Historical Association’s 2019 John E. O'Connor Film Award

## Selected Press Quotes

"His considerable output in cinema—over 50 films—deserves greater recognition outside the former Warsaw Pact countries; but the vagaries of film distribution, beset by commercial exigencies and political tensions, have left him all but unknown outside Eastern Europe. Seeing Simon's graceful, handsome and intelligent film, and being delighted by Wagenstein's earthy, candid wit, one hopes that the situation can be ameliorated."

<http://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/a-feminist-lens-on-hummus-and-more/>

"The USSR had Sergei Eisenstein, while Bulgaria had Angel Wagenstein. ... The life and work of the 94-year-old screenwriter and novelist are wonderfully depicted in Andrea Simon's top-notch documentary. ... I'm delighted to report that *Angel Wagenstein: Art is a Weapon* was "weaponized," winning SEEFest's Documentary Audience Award."

<http://www.peoplesworld.org/article/new-bulgarian-documentary-angel-wagenstein-art-is-a-weapon/>

"The scriptwriter, author, socialist, and political activist Angel Wagenstein is not a household name in the English-speaking world, though Andrea Simon's bracing documentary about him suggests that he should be. ... Simon wisely keeps the always fascinating Wagenstein at the center of her film, skillfully weaving the complex tapestry of this dynamic life and work into a vivid, but candid, portrait. Is it time for a Wagenstein retrospective?"

"[Cineaste](#)," Winter 2017

"ANGEL WAGENSTEIN: ART IS A WEAPON is one of my favorite films of 2017. ... Not to put too fine a point on it: ART IS A WEAPON is amazing. It is an ever enriching film that alters how you see the world and yourself. I can't recommend this film enough. It is a great portrait of a great man and it will make you a better person."

<https://unseenfilms.blogspot.com/2017/05/angel-wagenstein-art-is-weapon-2017.html>

"*Angel Wagenstein* is extremely well made. ... Wagenstein himself, now in his 90s, plays a large role in the film, recounting events in a uniquely poetic and philosophical manner. In this documentary, Bulgarian history reads as a kind of microcosm of the world at large, with lessons we should all take to heart."

[http://dcist.com/2017/05/the\\_dcist\\_guide\\_to\\_the\\_2017\\_washing.php](http://dcist.com/2017/05/the_dcist_guide_to_the_2017_washing.php)

"This is a truly stunning work on every level, from an accomplished filmmaker with a subject made for her talents. Even in the Festival's august company (Kentridge, Zweig, Gert), the 94-year-old Wagenstein dominates the screen. ... I shudder to think of how hard [Simon's] choices must have been, and mourn the thousands of feet of footage that had to be left behind, even as I celebrate the brilliance of her decisions and the film she has made from them packed into only 84 succulent minutes."

<https://apollogirl.wordpress.com/2017/01/11/apollos-girl-85/>

“In her masterful new documentary, [\*Angel Wagenstein: Art is a Weapon\*](#), filmmaker Andrea Simon reminds us that, ‘The history you know is not the only history.’ Simon draws on historical documents, breathtaking contemporary footage, and powerful scenes from Wagenstein’s catalog of politically charged films. The result is an intriguing portrait of a great screenwriter, novelist, and lifelong revolutionary.”

<https://womensvoicesforchange.org/andrea-simons-new-documentary-examines-the-endless-loop-of-history.htm>

### **FOR GERMAN SPEAKERS:**

Please see this extensive October 2019 [article](#) from the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, a major German newspaper.

## **Interviews**

[Bulgarian National Television](#) | October 16, 2017

Discussion of film with Angel Wagenstein and director Andrea Simon on Bulgarian National Television (in Bulgarian)

[freie-radios.net](#) | April 2, 2018

Interview with director Andrea Simon on German radio station Radio Corax (in German)

[The Shmooze](#) | January 31, 2019

Interview with director Andrea Simon on the Yiddish Book Center's podcast The Shmooze

## Stills



## Director's Statement

We live in the era of Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orban, Donald Trump. And for me, the question of the hour is this: What does it mean when a big, beautiful idea loses its credibility? How did that happen to Communism? Is that what's happening to Democracy right now?

I had no idea when we began shooting **ANGEL WAGENSTEIN: ART IS A WEAPON** six years ago how unsettlingly topical it would turn out to be. But these issues pop up at every screening! I suspect it's because this brilliant and subtle film artist and very charming man—I call him the Bulgarian love child of Leon Trotsky and Yves Montand—has valuable information for us about what exactly it means to *resist*: bravely, carefully, cleverly, lethally ... effectively.

He's 94 years old and still "an uncomfortable thorn in the side of power," one scholar says. Also worthy of note: in 2017 the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in honor of its role in the wartime rescue of Bulgaria's 48,000 Jews. We need to know more about why not just Wagenstein, but an entire society, managed to summon up this spirit of resistance.

This is a man who takes the long view: Bulgarian journalist Plamen Petkov said to me: "*He carries around in his head every moment of the last two thousand years.*" Wagenstein makes connections and remembers everything. And now, more than ever, knowledge is important. Nuance and complexity and detail are important. FACTS are important!

I've always been interested in stories that are a little bit odd. What does the history of the world look like, seen from an unfamiliar perspective...? In America and especially in my hometown, New York, we live in the belly of the beast, at the heart of the empire. But what about the stories, the histories, the knowledge that come from the *margins* of empire?

Bulgaria is central to what used to be called "Western" civilization ... so, OK: what about Bulgarian history? And what about the repressed or forgotten Muslim history of Europe? (For example: the Ottoman Empire's welcome of 125,000 Jewish refugees after the barbaric Spanish pogroms and forced conversions of 1391-92, and final expulsion of 1492. This ensured the survival of Jewish civilization -- and Wagenstein's ancestors -- and mine.)

Rana Dasgupta says in the film: "*The history that you know about the world is not the only history.*" Indeed.

One April day I heard the name Wagenstein for the very first time — twice. First from the literary scholar/translator Elizabeth Frank, and an hour later from the film historian Thomas Elsaesser. I watched STARS, was completely stunned: surely this is one of the greatest films ever made about the Shoah. A few days later, I hopped on a plane to Bulgaria, where I spent a happy week in the company of AW and other witty, chain-smoking, hard-drinking unrepentant true believers in the Socialist utopia. I fell in love with Wagenstein's enigmatic and beautiful films, his incredible humor and energy and salty demotic polyglot language, and through him

with Bulgaria and Bulgarian history. I soon returned with my cinematographer Dan Epstein and executive producer Felice Firestone to shoot: no funding, no game plan. I didn't speak a word of Bulgarian: all I knew was that this was a film I'd been waiting to make all my life. Cinema! History! Socialism! And Jews, Jews, Jews! All my favorite flavors.

Examining the failures of 1989's democratic transition was not a popular activity at that time. Bulgaria is the only East Bloc nation that, in its first free elections, democratically returned a communist majority to power and when I found that out I had to ask, "Why?"

Wagenstein has a beautiful sentence in one of his novels: "Everyone has the right to his own memories, and his own amnesia..." Again, the magisterial opening scene of STERNE asks: "*Wie war es damals? Warum wenden wir uns wieder dieser Zeit zu?*" ("What was it like in those days? Why do we keep returning to them?") The answer is, I think, the subject of all his films: we look at the past so we can do better. "*There's only one right train,*" as he said in his great Filmmakers' Congress speech, in early 1989. And it's leaving the station!

Wagenstein's story ties everything together for me. This life, these films, raise fantastically interesting questions about the importance of art—particularly cinema—as a strategy for nurturing critical thought, and thereby projecting the possibility of resistance at the individual level, in a political system that subordinates individual to collective will. Lessons here, I think.

This is an interesting moment: for the last few decades we've been moving into a larger world, where stories from the margin are finally acknowledged to be as important as those from the imperial center. It's a revolution as big as Galileo's, and the rage of those who are no longer at the center of things is limitless.

"EVERY REVOLUTION IS AN ADVENTURE. ... REVOLUTIONS ARE BORN IN ORDER TO DIE."

Galileo was silenced. Wagenstein (*Kinneh ha-Rah*) is right here: a living, breathing, flirting, writing, citizen of this new world that is grappling with the limitations and disappointments of democracy. He's pushing its boundaries as he pushed the boundaries of Socialism. An Angel wrestling like Jacob with those powerful and painfully elusive angels of Hope and Progress and *Liberté* and *Fraternité* and *Mir i Druzhba* ... Let's hope he wins !

## Film Team



**ANDREA SIMON** (Director, Producer) is an award-winning documentary filmmaker whose work has explored the interaction between politics, culture, and religion in a variety of times and places. Praised as both visually striking and intellectually provocative, her films include many museum commissions (from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MoMA, the National Gallery of Art, and The Jewish Museum) as well as the wryly subversive ethnographic chronicle *Koriam's Law* (Grand Prize at Royal Anthropological Institute Film Festival), PBS arts specials *Destination Mozart: A Night At The Opera With Peter Sellars* (Grand Prize, Montreal Festival of Films on Art), "An indispensable primer for those who need to understand the vast potential of opera on television ... as entertaining as it is informative" (*Hollywood Reporter*) and *Tales From The Shadow World* on Indonesian art and culture. *Talk to Me: Americans in Conversation*, her populist film-essay on American identity, was broadcast nationally on PBS as part of the DEMOCRACY PROJECT series, and has since been shown in hundreds of schools, churches, synagogues, mosques, and community meetings: "More eloquence than in a decade's worth of Presidential speechifying ... The Whitmaniacal spirit has been brought to film by Andrea Simon. This America sings." (Todd Gitlin, *New York Observer*) "Covers the territory with grace and honesty. ... The momentum is all toward intellectual and emotional risks—thinking, not pontificating." (Margo Jefferson, *New York Times*) "Intriguing PBS documentary could serve as a wake-up call.... Stylishly illustrates the diversity in heritage and outlook that is the nation's very backbone." (*Variety*) As Senior Producer of Bloomberg TV's arts show MUSE, Andrea profiled 110 major artists including Laurie Anderson, Leonard Cohen, Umberto Eco, Philip Glass, Günter Grass, Philip Roth, and Kehinde Wiley.



**FELICE FIRESTONE** (Executive Producer) has spent her long and distinguished career producing, directing and managing documentary productions. She is the recipient of many industry awards including a Peabody Award, four Emmys, a DuPont Columbia Gold Baton, three Gracies, a Christopher Award, a Silver Gavel and others. Her work has appeared on PBS, NBC, CBS, HBO, TBS with ten years as executive producer for Bill Moyers at his production company. There she oversaw production of more than 200 hours of programming including fourteen documentary specials and five multi-part series, such as *America's First River: Moyers on the Hudson* and *Becoming American: The Chinese Experience*, plus the weekly series *NOW with Bill Moyers*. Other work included *America in the Forties*, launching Consuelo Mack/WealthTrack, the PBS series *The Irish in America* and the start-up of a TV station in Slovenia. She was Consulting Supervising Producer for the multiple-award winning series *Women, War & Peace*. Recently she worked on *Twice Born* which examines the life-saving surgeries of unborn babies, and the documentary *Against All Odds: The Fight for the Black Middle Class*.



**DANIEL EPSTEIN (Director of Photography)** Since graduating from the fabled film department at Hampshire College Daniel has carved out a freelance career doing many forms of television production. His work has been featured on a diverse group of broadcast and cable channels over the years, shooting in many different genres. Sports, food, entertainment, theater and news are some of the areas that the productions he has worked on have covered. He especially enjoys working in the documentary form. Dan started working with

Director/Producer Andrea Simon in 2006 on Bloomberg's *Muse* show and has continued ever since. Now a NY-based, middle-aged, relatively non-practicing Jew (who somehow looks like his father, grandfather and mother) his lifelong interest in the history of the 20th century has intersected with his professional career in a most stimulating way.



**ADRIENNE HASPEL (Editor)** is a narrative and documentary film and television editor. She has worked on shows for *Frontline*, *Need to Know* and *Wide Angle*, including the Emmy-nominated "Lord's Children." Her narrative work has been shown at many film festivals including Tribeca, Cannes, and Edinburgh. Her collaborations with video artists have appeared in museums and galleries in the U.S. and abroad. In 2011 she completed various installations and documentaries for the Moscow-based Russian Jewish Museum and

Center for Tolerance, including one about the Holocaust on Soviet Soil. Currently she is working as an editor for *Fault Lines*, an Emmy, Peabody- and DuPont-award-winning documentary series on Al Jazeera English that focuses on U.S. and international current affair issues.



**ELKA NIKOLOVA (Co-Producer, Co-Editor)** studied psychology in Bulgaria, and was politically active in the Bulgarian democratic reforms of 1989. In 2001 she received a MA in Media Studies with focus on film from the New School, and soon after began working in the film industry as an art department coordinator on various productions. From 2003 to 2007 Elka worked as an assistant editor at *Dateline NBC* and the *Today Show*. While there she wrote and directed her documentary *Binka: To Tell a Story About Silence* (2006),

about one of the first women directors in Eastern Europe, Binka Zhelyazkova. Her son Philip was born in 2006, and she took some time to raise him, while researching and developing a two-part documentary about the fate of the Bulgarian and Northern Greek Jews during the Shoah. *Part 1: The Road to America* focuses on the role of the public in the survival of the Bulgarian Jews. *Part 2: The Dressmaker* deals with this theme through the story of one Sephardic family from New York.



**LORA MYERS (Consulting Producer)** is a writer, film producer, and educational outreach coordinator who has worked in the USA, Italy, and Brazil on numerous award-winning documentaries, public television specials and feature film scripts. She has written feature articles for international magazines, children's books for *Time for Kids*, and dozens of documentary grant proposals. She developed high-school and college-level curriculum guides for *People Like Us*, a documentary on American social class produced by the Center for New American Media, and for *The Freedom Files*, an ACLU video series. A specialist in adult literacy, she created and administered New York City-based high-school equivalency programs for adults, and has co-authored two books aimed at showing parents how to strengthen their children's reading and writing abilities. For more than ten years, she was Curriculum Director and staff writer for an Emmy-winning public television show, *TV411*, and its companion website.



**SILVIA VACHKOVA (Coordinating Producer)**, a distinguished Bulgarian journalist who has worked all over Europe, was born in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 1941. She studied Russian and German Philology at Sofia University. After graduating she worked as a Filmredakteur (News Producer) for INTERFILM, where the Redakteur in chief was Angel Wagenstein, and remains a close friend. In 1990 Silvia started her own company, FILMSERVICE, to provide location services to foreign productions in Bulgaria with a strong focus on political and social issues, as well as other productions, including many dealing with culture and tourism. For the past 35 years she has been a stringer, producer and a reporter for the German TV ARD, CNN, DW and numerous other foreign TV stations for Bulgaria.

**Stay Tuned**



Photo ©Bruce Guthrie

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