

THE UNBEARABLE INSISTENCE ON AUTHENTICITY

BY CHARLOTTE HANSEN

Ulrich Seidl may be hard to pick out in a crowd and quietly spoken, but the impression his films leave behind is quite the opposite, namely powerful and insistent. It is hard to imagine anyone leaving the cinema after having seen one of his films without feeling just a little unhinged. The Austrian filmmaker is currently visiting Britain in order to present his latest film *IMPORT/EXPORT* (2007) and one of the stops on Seidl's tour is the Cambridge Film Festival, which is showing four of his films. He gave an insight into various aspects of his filmmaking on a seemingly ordinary Monday night.

Although Seidl originally made his mark as a documentary filmmaker targeting such diverse subjects as the love between people and their pets (*ANIMAL LOVE*) and the world of models (*MODELS*), he is adamant that the whole notion of an unobtrusive camera that does not interfere with or even distort reality is pure nonsense. The camera always gets in the way and creates another reality, there is no such thing as an objective reality. And from the beginning, his films have split people into two factions, namely into that of friends or into that of foes. Either people are bowled over by the films or quite simply repulsed. This probably has to do with the fact that Seidl sometimes frames very long shots of passive people who seem vulnerable, or that



Ulrich Seidl (Photograph by Tom Catchesides)

AUSTRIAN/AUTEUR

he also shows people in almost unbearably intimate situations (of either a sexual or emotional nature). But, Seidl himself prefers extreme reactions, as they show that people watching his films are not able to maintain the distance between themselves and what is projected on the screen, they simply must take a stand.

The four films being shown at CFF 08: *LOSSES TO BE EXPECTED*; *DOG DAYS*; *JESUS, YOU KNOW* and the aforementioned *IMPORT/EXPORT* all bear testimony to what have become recognisable and stylistic features of Seidl's work. Blurring the divide between the genres of documentary

and fiction, Seidl employs both professional and non-professional actors and does not refrain from showing that human life is sometimes lived on the edge of despair or even depravity. This insistence on portraying the world in what to him is a truthful way has meant that Seidl has often, and unjustly so, been reduced to being labelled a misanthropic filmmaker. In reality, he is best described as a filmmaker who believes in the power of hope and redemption - regardless of what shape or form it may present itself in. He does not wish to make

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HOT TICKET

MICHEL LÉVIANT WILL BE PRESENTING HIS FILM IN MEMORY OF US ON TUESDAY 23 SEPTEMBER AT 5.30PM

HOWARD S. BERGER WILL BE PRESENTING HIS FILM A LIFE IN THE DEATH OF JOE MEEK ON TUESDAY 23 SEPTEMBER AT 8.30PM AT THE JUNCTION

FEATURES

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films that only reaffirm the status quo, rather he seeks to challenge people's perceptions of what reality is, and indeed ought to be. Glimpses of tenderness, love and humour surface in all of his films not least in *DOG DAYS* and *IMPORT/EXPORT*, for without these elements, they would become unbearable to watch.

Seidl gives a few examples of how he works. The idea for *LOSSES*, for instance, came to him because of his acquaintance with the main female character of the film, Paula. Only the premise of the film was initially known to Seidl, and so with regards to plot progression, he merely let the camera and the characters lead the way. For *JESUS, YOU KNOW*, he brought people together he did not know beforehand and slowly built up the trust between them and himself in order for them to be able to pray authentically in front of the camera. And after an initial awkwardness they became convinced that Jesus wanted them to be part of this project.

Seidl is currently in the initial stages of his next project with the working title *PARADISE*. This is intended as a film about three women whose lives become linked together, and it will partly be set in Kenya. This is a great departure, with Seidl's usual focus being on Middle Europe. It will be interesting to see if it has any bearings on his visual style and storytelling. It will also be the first of Seidl's films that is not exclusively funded by Austria.



GRASSROOTS FILM-MAKING IN TOGO

THE DANCING FOREST

BY BECKY HAWKETTS

Brice Lainé's debut documentary, *THE DANCING FOREST*, boasts beauty and integrity that many filmmakers strive for years to achieve. And as I found out, he completed this project almost entirely by himself.

The documentary follows The Centre International pour le Developement Agro-Pastoral (CIDAP) in the small village of Baga in Togo, founded by a local man. CIDAP provides men and women with paid agricultural work, technical skills and essential knowledge to integrate modern practical and entrepreneurial skills with traditional customs. Fundamentally, the home-grown project has enabled many villagers to get harvests from land they once believed was incapable of sustaining them.

Brice first discovered CIDAP at the age of eleven when he was living in Togo but it was years later, after taking a break from waiting tables in London to go backpacking across Africa, when he decided to make his film.

After taking a film course in London he returned to Baga for three months to follow the project

and film the people involved. Ever modest, it takes me time to prise details from Brice over the difficulties he had to overcome to film in Togo (a political dictatorship). He does admit though that "it could have been dangerous" for him. "I mean, it's not like Iraq or anything, but I had to smuggle my cameras and equipment across the border because I couldn't get the permission to film there."

Laughing the smuggling aside as a "fun" experience, these restrictions, along with the film's limited budget meant that Brice was producing the whole film largely by himself, only with some help from his sister, an anthropologist in Africa, and two local men he trained and paid to operate sound equipment.

CIDAP and its founders have faced opposition for years, from locals of different ethnic groups and the central government. It was therefore essential that Brice did not draw any unwanted

attention to himself or the villagers involved with the project. "CIDAP is far more important than my film and I didn't want it to suffer at the hands of its opponents just because of my presence. It's very important for filmmakers in this situation to be respectful." Reflecting the aims of CIDAP itself, the finished film bears an organic, grassroots quality. Even the soundtrack is partly comprised of specially recorded songs from a talented Togolese singer, with the rest produced by Brice in improvised recording sessions with French and Senegalese musicians.

The result is outstanding. The film is visually stunning and the soundtrack provides a gentle rhythm and warmth that is rarely found in documentaries of this nature. As Brice reminds me at the end of the interview though, it's still the CIDAP project and its achievements that he hopes are most inspiring, "All over Africa, big NGOs and the World Bank arrive to set up development projects, but in Africa no single development structure can fit everyone. You can't just impose things on the people, even with millions of dollars. I've seen it a lot, it just doesn't work."

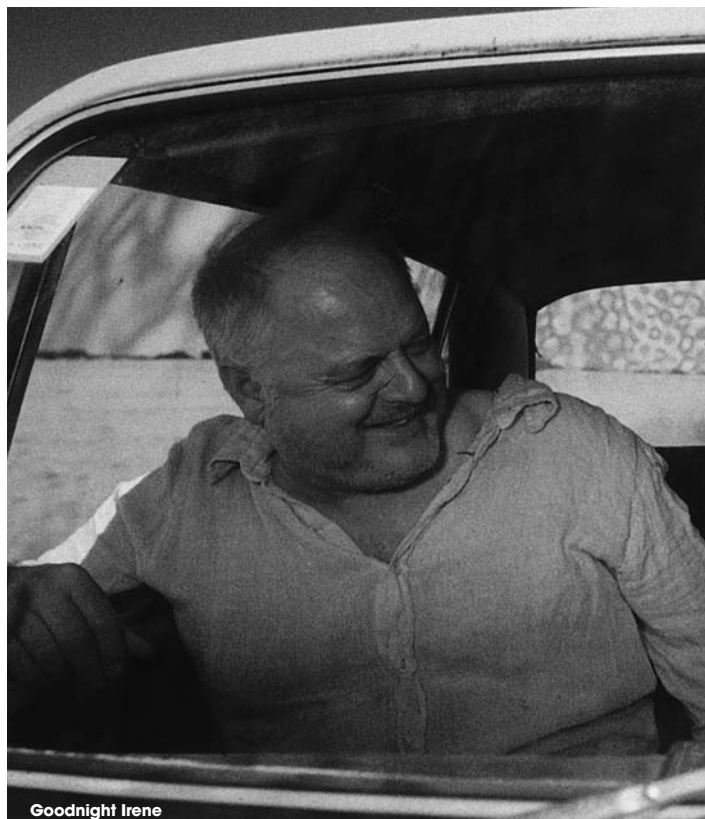
THE DANCING FOREST is screened on Tuesday 23 September at 3.00pm.

YOU CAN'T JUST IMPOSE THINGS ON THE PEOPLE



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Goodnight Irene

GOODNIGHT IRENE PAOLO MARINOU-BLANCO

PUTS ONE IN MIND OF A FAIRYTALE

ALEXANDRA ALEXSANDR SOKUROV

An elderly woman travels by train and military convoy to an army base in Chechnya to visit her grandson. She quickly tires of the novelty of life in camp and takes a trip into war-torn Grozny. Here a local woman befriends her and they chat in her bombed-out home: a simple humanistic act in a time of barbarity. So is Sokurov serving up a standard 'War is Bad' polemic?

On the contrary, this luminous and poetic film is anchored in the reality of the conflict in Chechnya (the cast and crew filmed on location at no little risk to themselves) but transcends mere docu-realism.

The colours are muted and washed-out, as though the dust and summer heat had seeped into the very film stock itself. There is also a striking sound design that brings in the whir of machine noise, chatter and snatches of

orchestral music. Opera singer Galina Vishnevskaya gives an affecting performance in the main role. There are no big emotional scenes: she bickers and argues with Dennis but they also share moments of great affection, such as where he tenderly braids her hair. Sokurov saves the most powerful emotion for her jaunt to the market and close encounter with the locals.

The son of a general in the Red Army, Sokurov had first-hand knowledge of the tedium and rituals of military life. With recent events in the region making the film even more prescient, this strange and haunting masterpiece deserves to be seen by a wider audience.

JON MITCHELL

ALEXANDRA is screened on Tuesday 23 September at 8.30pm.

GOODNIGHT IRENE by Paolo Marinou-Blanco is an often touching story of the friendship that develops between Alex (Robert Pugh) and Bruno (Nuno Lopes) who appear to have nothing in common apart from their friendship with Irene (Rita Loureiro), a sometimes painter who disappears without a trace one night.

On the surface, Alex is a volatile, grumpy voice-over actor with a drinking problem fuelled by the prescription tablets he takes for an undisclosed ailment. Bruno is a locksmith who creatively documents the lives of his neighbours in Lisbon. Although Irene is relatively likeable in a somewhat clichéd artsy whimsical manner, it is difficult to understand why these two men are quite so taken with her.

Waiting for Godot is referenced a few times and these are among the film's most endearing scenes.

The cinematography is excellent with some beautifully lit shots that put one in mind of a fairy tale such is their exquisite nature. Light plays a significant role insinuating either fantasy or reality into the story world. Marinou-Blanco regularly returns to static shots of perfectly composed backdrops in front of which his characters walk, always alone. Beautiful and symbolic, these shots are theatrical and underscore Alex's, and presumably, Marinou-Blanco's, love of the stage.

Pugh's performance wavers inexplicably at times as though he can't quite summon up a frame of reference for Alex's behaviour. The pace of the film drags slightly in a few places, but its conclusion is picturesque, simple, and exactly what it should be.

JENNIFER OEY

GOODNIGHT IRENE is screened on Tuesday 23 September at 6.00pm.

RUNNING THE SAHARA JAMES MOLL

Directed by James Moll and narrated and executive-produced by Matt Damon, **RUNNING THE SAHARA** is an uplifting and socially aware documentary chronicling the 111-day coast to coast run across the Sahara Desert completed by a team of three experienced runners.

Initiated by Ray simply because no human being has ever done it before, the three agree to undertake this challenge together. Each has their own character and motivation, but they accomplish the expedition collectively. This film details the journey's physical and emotional impact on the runners. It is about team spirit, challenge, discovery, and most importantly believing and materialising one's dream.

The group's incredible voyage, which covers six countries, is met with various problems. Yet their strenuous experience is not without

joyous and touching moments such as the arrival of their family, encouragement from friends, and the village children's greeting and running along with them.

This character-driven film provides a complex picture of culturally vibrant Africa – its mysteriously beautiful but extremely merciless desert, and its acute water problems (evidenced through the seven-year-old boy left alone in the wilderness to wait for the return of his water-searching parents, and the primitive well-digging method). With the charitable H₂O Africa campaigning for clean water being a component of the expedition, it is for sure that to ease the water crisis in the Continent will no longer remain an unfulfilled mission impossible.

PEI-YIN LIN

RUNNING THE SAHARA is screened on Tuesday 23 September at 8.00pm.

FESTIVAL AUDIENCE FEATURE

OF CHILDREN AND ANIMALS

The familiar showbiz adage "Never work with children or animals" has never been more clearly disproved than by some magnificent new films at the 2008 Cambridge Film Festival.

Seemingly every young boy in Matteo Garrone's GOMORRAH (a pun on the Neapolitan Camorra-led underworld) is pulled inextricably into thieving, drug abuse and gun wars.

The youngest of four brothers in LINHA DA PASSE by Walter Salles reveals poise and inner strength beyond his years as he learns to drive a bus and eventually drives it on to Sao Paulo's violent streets.

A confident young rascal troubles the dignified old lady Aniela in her Polish manor house providing the setting for PORA

UMIERAC (TIME TO DIE) by Dorota Kedzierzawska, in which joint star billing should go to her loyal dog Philadelphia.

Another magisterial Polish movie, Lukasz Palkowski's REZERWAT (PRESERVE), pairs an adult photographer with a juvenile delinquent who both inhabit the run-down Praga district of Warsaw, and again shows how a young lad can transform a film already expertly contrived.

Then there is the half-Mexican, half-American Tom, a kid coupled in many scenes with Tilda Swinton in Erick Zonca's gripping JULIA, who has to shift emotional modes from terror and bewilderment to a kind of acceptance and dawning understanding, as the action

switches from the U.S.A. to Mexico.

Brunel's quirky use of ostriches in and out of a bedroom (not to mention Kusturcia's trademark geese) have alerted directors to the parts that animals and birds can play without the need for melodramatic Hitchcockisms, and children are after all in a continuum of growth to adulthood. It is good to appreciate that directors now cast their nets both wider and younger.

PHILIP WARD

Delivered to the Festival Daily by hand (or possibly carrier pigeon), delightfully typed up the old fashioned way on a typewriter. Just to show that you don't have to have a computer to let us know your views...



Our Team

Chloe Chennells-Milton
Festival Intern

You say outside, I think:

Standing on a riverbank, waiting for my ship to come in, or rather, waiting for 12 punts to come in at the end of the RIVERSIDE screenings!

First outdoor film:

Bizarre anime, subtitled in Swedish (I think) at a music festival on an island in Hungary.

Fantasy outdoor film:

DELIVERANCE, in a forest somewhere, preferably accompanied by a banjo-playing toothless yokel.

FAINTHEART VITO ROCCO

A thoroughly enjoyable film. It's funny, it's tender, and it's very, very sharp. At times I laughed so

much it hurt: the characters were so like people I know, but with that marvellous wry twist which is the

hallmark of the very best of British comedy. Well worth seeing.

MATT KELLAND

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Top Ten: the people's favourite film award 2008

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------|
| 1. PRESERVE (REZERWAT) | 6. FAINTHEART |
| 2. 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY | 7. KATYN |
| 3. WAR REQUIEM | 8. TIME TO DIE (PORA UMIERAC) |
| 4. THE UNDERSTUDY | 9. JULIA |
| 5. LOVE LETTERS AND LIVE WIRES: HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE GPO FILM UNIT | 10. UK SHORTS 1 |

Whether you loved or hated the film you've just seen, make your opinion count by visiting the Festival website and clicking on the 'Rate a Film' option. The most popular Festival film will be garlanded the People's Favourite!

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