

# **Import and Export: Ulrich Seidl's Indiscreet Anthropology of Migration**

**Martin Brady, London**

**Helen Hughes, University of Surrey**

## **Abstract**

Austrian director Ulrich Seidl's documentary and fiction films have received international recognition, and aroused considerable controversy, for their extreme subject matter (xenophobia, deprivation, physical and sexual violence) and for their inimitable style (obsessive symmetry and static tableaux). As a 'Berufs-Oppositionskünstler' who refuses to offer straightforward political solutions he has been compared to German directors Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Christoph Schlingensiefel and his compatriot Michael Haneke. This article examines three films by Seidl, spanning his career to date, which have the theme of migration as their subject: *Good News* (1990), a study of migrant newspaper vendors in Vienna, *Mit Verlust ist zu rechnen* (1992), a post-Wende documentary on a failed courtship across the Austrian-Czech border, and the feature film *Import Export* (2007), which tells the story of bi-directional migration between Austria and the Ukraine. Seidl's 'anthropology of migration' is examined in the context of Jean Rouch's *cinéma-vérité*, and his hyper-stylization is demonstrated to offer a unique way of looking both at contemporary migration and at migrants themselves. Shifts in the portrayal of borders since unification are examined, and Seidl's unflinching camera is shown not only to 'voyeurise the voyeurs', but also to gaze severely yet democratically on transnational movements in the 'new Europe'.

## **Good news, bad news: 'der Poet des Trostlosen'**

Ulrich Seidl has been described, quite accurately, as 'ein Poet des Trostlosen' (Griseemann 2007: 112). His films constitute an inimitable and instantly recognizable anthology of loneliness, deprivation, voyeurism and cruelty. Renowned and often reviled for their extreme subject matter – pet fondling (*Tierische Liebe*, 1995), infantilism (*Spaß ohne Grenzen*, 1998), rape (*Hundstage*, 2001), xenophobia (*Zur Lage*, 2002), religious fanaticism (*Jesus, du weisst*, 2003), internet sex (*Import Export*, 2007) – and their inscrutable hyper-stylization – obsessive symmetry and static full-frontal tableaux – his documentaries and fiction films have been the object of impassioned debate in his home country Austria and abroad since his first film for cinema, the ironically titled *Good News*, was released in Vienna in 1992. As a 'Berufs-Oppositionskünstler' Seidl has been compared to German directors Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Christoph Schlingensiefel; a list of his 25 favourite films, drawn up in 2004, included works by such provocateurs as Pasolini, Buñuel, Herzog and von Trier (see Griseemann 2007: 289).

A methodical, self-critical and measured director, Seidl has made only two feature films and five documentaries for the cinema in twenty years (together with a handful of television films and shorts). Of these seven films, three have the theme of migration, or projected migration, as their subject: *Good News* (1990), a study of Bangladeshi, Egyptian and Pakistani newspaper vendors in Vienna; *Mit Verlust ist zu rechnen* (1992), the story of the attempt by an aged Austrian widower to court a Czech woman across the Austrian-Czech border; and *Import Export* (2007), a fictional tale of a young Ukrainian woman who moves west to Vienna as a migrant worker and a young Austrian man who, together with his stepfather, travels east to seek his fortune in Slovakia and the Ukraine.

Despite the astonishing stylistic consistency across Seidl's work, these three films also demonstrate a series of historically and geographically determined shifts in their study of migration, from a distanced (and distancing) inquisitiveness in *Good News*, through incursions into the intimate, emotional sphere of isolated lives on either side of a visible border in *Mit Verlust ist zu rechnen*, to an exploration of shared impoverishment and cultural difference in *Import Export*. Significant in themselves as works of one of the most striking voices in contemporary European auteurist cinema, these three films also chart shifts in perspective (literal and metaphorical) on post-Cold War Europe, East and West. In particular they chronicle a shift from borders marked by political and historical (physical) boundaries to internalized, social separation determined by such factors as economic inequality and cultural mistrust.

These shifts will be examined in what follows, both in terms of the representation of migration from east to west and from west to east and in the way these movements are encrypted cinematically. Seidl's eccentric framing and unconventional cinematography emphasize the physical and meta-physical spaces of migration and shed light on the unfamiliar whilst simultaneously estranging the familiar.

Seidl's gaze is unflinchingly 'indiskret' (Grisseemann 2007: 88), but it is not voyeuristic. In its premeditated use of the camera as a tool for provocation, Seidl's method is in fact close to that of the early pioneers of *cinéma-vérité* in France around 1960. The *ciné-ethnographer* Jean Rouch, in particular, believed that the value of cinema as an anthropological tool lay in the ability of the cinematic apparatus to provoke extreme reactions. To cite one of the most famous examples: in his landmark study of life in Paris during the Algerian war, *Chronique d'un été* (1961), Rouch and co-director Edgar

Morin provoked one of the participants in their anthropological study of the Parisian 'tribe' (Rouch 2003: 167) to recount her experience of returning to France after losing her father in a concentration camp. The result, according to Rouch, was 'the creation of something that goes beyond the tragic: an intolerable mis-en-scène [sic], like some spontaneous sacrilege that pushed us to do what we had never done before' (Rouch 2003: 153). This 'sacrilege', which Rouch later termed 'the staging of "real life"' (Rouch 2003: 33), also occurs in a scene in which the same young Jewish woman, Marceline, shows the number tattooed onto her arm to a group of young Africans who initially don't understand its significance:

That was a provocation. [...] They had thought the tattoo was an adornment of some kind. All of us were deeply affected. The cameraman, one of the best documentary people around, was so disturbed that the end of the sequence is out of focus. I stopped filming to give everyone a chance to recover. Now, is this a 'truthful' moment or a 'staged' moment? Does it matter? (Rouch, 2003: 212f.)

According to Steven Feld, in his introduction to *Ciné-Ethnography* (Rouch 2003), Rouch's films demonstrate 'that film and anthropology share the same essential concerns with the nature of intersubjectivity' (Rouch 2003: 14). This is also the case with the three films of Seidl discussed in this essay. What is more, Rouch's famous contention that for the visual ethnographer 'fiction is the only way to penetrate reality' (Rouch 2003: 6) is also shared by Seidl, who has repeatedly claimed that his documentaries always contain fictional elements, whilst his fiction films have their roots in documentary practice. As Rouch put it:

For me, as an ethnographer and filmmaker, there is almost no boundary between documentary film and films of fiction. The cinema, the art of the double, is already the transition from the real world to the imaginary world, and ethnography, the science of the thought systems of others, is a permanent crossing point from one conceptual universe to another; acrobatic gymnastics, where losing one's footing is the least of the risks. (Rouch 2003: 185)

Seidl's films are 'difficult' films: the two documentaries are drawn-out, at times enigmatic and eschew commentary and exegesis; the feature film is violent, harrowing and sexually explicit. Whilst they may not, on the face of it, appear suitable for teaching, they all contain stand-alone scenes that are lighter in tone, comic even. In their exploration of contemporary issues – migration, the aging population, unemployment – these three films offer material for the exploration of social and economic integration in the 'New Europe' and the representation of migration in the media that is engaging, distinctive in style and humorous.<sup>1</sup>

## Gazing at others

Stefan Grisseemann's recent and comprehensive monograph on Seidl, which covers his work up to and including *Import Export*, attempts to define 'das System Seidl'. This expression in itself is an indication that Seidl's cinema appears to involve a severe and unyielding approach to its own cinematic language. A key part of the Seidl system is the choice of subject matter, placing his films in a tradition of Austrian writers, filmmakers and artists – including such dissenting voices as Thomas Bernhard, a favourite of Seidl,<sup>2</sup> and Michael Haneke – who have responded with ferocity to the culture of this relatively small, predominantly Catholic country with its remnants of an Imperial past.

Thomas Bernhard hat sehr viel Humor, obwohl er beängstigende Dinge beschreibt, und das sehe ich bei meinen Filmen auch ein wenig so' (Seidl 2002). Grisseemann opens with the assertion that the director has a special affinity with outsiders and minorities that is rooted in his own cultural make-up:

Seidl bricht in seinen Filmen ungeniert Scham- und Geschmackskonventionen, um die faszinierende Farce, für die er das Leben hält, darzustellen. [...] Tatsächlich aber erstattet Seidl den Menschen und Ereignissen die er zeigt, durch seine rücksichtslose Bildsprache ihren Platz im Leben zurück: als wolle er das Unterdrückte, das Verdrängte unserer Gesellschaft und die Wut, die Irritation seiner Protagonisten für die Wirklichkeit retten. [...]

Eine 'emotionale Nähe zu Minderheiten, die abseits der bürgerlichen Normalität stehen' habe er stets gehabt, gesteht Seidl, weil er sich 'auch selbst immer als Außenseiter gefühlt' habe. Er führt sein Interesse an Sozialverlierern und Exzentrikern auf die eigene katholische Erziehung zurück, in der er sich nie zurecht gefunden habe. Bloß 'engagierte' Arbeiten lehnt er für sich selbst kategorisch ab. Er halte, meint er, dem Zuschauer vielmehr 'einen Spiegel vor'. Das Unbehagen, das verlässlich ausgelöst werde, wenn man sich darin wieder erkenne, führe eben zum simplen Vorwurf der 'Entstellung' des Wirklichen. (Grisseemann 2007: 8-10)

The accusation, which has accompanied all of his films to date, is that his gaze on others – be they dog-owners kissing their pets (*Tierische Liebe*), Viennese racists calling for the annihilation of Islam (*Zur Lage*), nude men masturbating to Mozart (*Brüder, lasst uns lustig sein*, 2006) or demented geriatrics (*Import Export*) – is intrusive, voyeuristic, exploitative and cynical; Seidl's considered response is that his aim is 'Betroffenheit auszulösen' (Grisseemann 2007: 33). Although his protagonists habitually perform humiliating, ostensibly ludicrous acts for the camera – unsurprisingly the striptease is a Seidlerian leitmotif – their exhibitionism is often framed by long-held, photograph-like tableaux in which the 'performers' stare back at

the camera and thus, in the cinema, return the gaze of the audience. At times the extreme nature of this exchange reminds one not only of the participatory tradition in Austrian performance art – of the Wiener Aktionisten in general and Hermann Nitsch in particular – but also of that cerebral, self-reflexive genre of European, essayistic filmmaking which has its roots in the French New Wave.

### **Voyeurising the voyeurs<sup>3</sup>**

*Staring Back* is the title of a 2007 book by the veteran French documentary filmmaker Chris Marker, in which he collects images from more than half a century of his films that demonstrate a reciprocity, a democracy even, of gazes (Marker 2007). Perhaps the most famous of these is the transnational encounter at a market place in Praia, Cape Verde in *Sans Soleil* (1984). A film ostensibly about a westerner's encounter with Japan, *Sans Soleil* tackles themes as diverse as the legacy of Portuguese colonialism and the functioning of memory. The camera's gaze is that of a fictional male narrator, Sandor Krasna (a pseudonym for Marker himself), whose epistolary musings are narrated by an off-screen female voice (in Marker's English language version the voice belongs to Alexandra Stewart who is also pictured 'staring back' in the book of the same name, Marker 2007: 78). One of his preoccupations is catching the eyes of local women:

It was in the market places of Bissau and Cape Verde that I could stare at them again with equality: I see her, she saw me, she knows that I see her, she drops me her glance, but just at an angle where it is still possible to act as though it was not addressed to me, and at the end, the real glance, straightforward, that lasted a twenty-fourth of a second, the length of a film frame. All women have a built in grain of indestructibility, and men's task has always been to make them realize it as late as possible. African men are just as good at this task as others, but after a close look at African women, I wouldn't necessarily bet on the men.<sup>4</sup>

It is this twenty-fourth of a second that is reproduced in *Staring Back* (Marker 2007: 67), alongside images from across the globe, many of them capturing frozen moments of revolt, revolution and protest (including demonstrations against the Vietnam War, against the French state in 1968 and, more recently, against Jean-Marie Le Pen). In this volume of photographs and brief epigrammes, moving images become photographs; in Seidl's case, conversely but analogously, movement is frozen quasi-photographically. As Marker writes in his book, introducing a sequence of images that includes the African woman in Praia: 'In this malignant, undefinable world, the speed of the shutter stopped the rarest moment, a moment of certainty' (Marker 2007: 64).

‘Staring back’, as opposed to the unidirectional, unequal and potentially violent act of ‘staring’, acquires, in Marker’s films and his book of stills from them, a quasi-metaphysical dimension, a transcendence which has also been identified, by a number of commentators, in Seidl’s most recent film (Grissemann 2007: 225; Huber 2008: 26). Not only is the voyeur’s invasive gaze reflected back, but also translated, potentially at least, into communication. Moreover, as unambiguous signals of cinematic self-reflexivity, these reciprocal gazes, mediated by the camera apparatus and editing hand, reflect obsessively on ‘remembering and forgetting [...] and on the relation that the filmic image bears to these processes’ thereby charting ‘the limits of access to other people and other cultures through images’ (Cooper 2006: 49).<sup>5</sup>

As we shall see, it is an anthropology of indiscreet, yet often also discrete, gazes – of eye contact – that also connects Seidl’s films, and their view of foreigners in particular, with Rouch.

### **How to look at foreigners**

The encounters, and gazes, in *Good News* are noticeably more tentative, fleeting, unresolved and distant than in the other films of Seidl to be discussed here. Indeed it can be asserted, perhaps rather sweepingly, that the camera adopts a point-of-view more recognizably inquisitive and subjective than in either *Mit Verlust ist zu rechnen* or *Import Export*. In its scope the film is ambitious, perhaps overly so, as its somewhat arch subtitle suggests: *Von Kolporteuren, Toten Hunden und anderen Wienern*.<sup>6</sup> Alongside the newspaper vendors, we are shown – by way of contrast – petty bourgeois white Austrians at home, in their allotments, at the vet (an ‘Ort der pervertierten Fürsorge’, Grissemann 2007: 47) and in various states of inebriation in Viennese bars.

The migrant workers themselves are shown primarily on the streets selling the (*Neue*) *Kronen Zeitung* and *Kurier*. The training sessions designed to teach them the basic German expressions and body language required to sell the newspapers (‘Keep Smiling Keep Selling’) are conducted bilingually, as are the tense encounters with the management on payday. The migrants are also shown at home with their families (often in cramped, dingy, run-down accommodation), praying in the mosque and celebrating at a wedding. Just as the migrants and indigenous population are shown to inhabit mutually exclusive spaces, so the camera captures their activities differently. This is particularly apparent in the recording of interior spaces. The indigenous Viennese families are framed, in typical Seidl fashion, symmetrically and full-frontally, usually

with a static camera, occasionally with a mechanically precise pan. These rigid, highly constructed, tableau compositions remind one, as Seidl himself has hinted, of Catholic altarpieces:

Es ist der Moment des Innehaltens, des Stillstehens im Film, ohne dass er angehalten wird. Die Personen posieren wie für einen Fotografen, und ihr Blick in die Kamera trifft sich mit dem Blick des Zuschauers. Das ist für mich ein magischer Moment, der mich berührt oder verstört. Dabei ist der Raum wichtig. Ich gebe den Menschen viel Raum, darum wirken sie oft sehr klein darin. Hier werden meine Bilder zu Altären. (Schmid 2003: 55)<sup>7</sup>

The rigidity of these tableaux is, superficially at least, reminiscent of the poses struck by the migrant street vendors in their surreal red and orange uniforms on the wintery streets of Vienna. However, it soon becomes apparent that their immobility is neither photographic nor quasi-ecclesiastical, but obligatory: they are expected, as a condition of their employment, to stay at their designated vending locations for the best part of thirteen hours a day. Their immobility is economically determined, rather than socially or culturally inherited (as appears to be implied, in the case of the indigenous population, by Seidl's tableaux of Heimatbilder and religious iconography). To underscore this distinction, Seidl follows a supervisor driving at night through the streets of Vienna to record even the most minor deviation on the part of the vendors from the company guidelines – not occupying precisely the allocated pitch, failing to smile or present the papers correctly. Whilst Seidl has induced his fellow countrymen to take up their rigid poses for the camera, the migrants have been obliged to pose by their employers.<sup>8</sup> Seidl also appears to be showing how the migrant body requires forcing into a space, in this instance a cityscape, already inhabited by a schooled population (one which may itself appear alien to the outsider and which Seidl's cinematography certainly estranges).

It has been pointed out, as a criticism of *Good News*, that Seidl does not confer on the migrant workers the right to speak, or at least be understood, whilst the white Austrians are nothing short of garrulous. On the few occasions the audience does hear the vendors speak in their own languages there are no subtitles. According to Lars Henrik Gass this voicelessness, coupled with the straight-jacket of Seidl's trademark static framing, imprisons the vendors within the diegesis:

[...] it becomes apparent that nothing can take place in the image which Seidl has not planned. That is exactly what I would call him to task for; it becomes utterly boring and one begins to hope that at least one person will break out of Seidl's filmic concept and say he is fed up. In this film, for example, the Pakistanis who are being depicted never have a chance to speak. (Danquart et al. 1996: 35)

What Gass appears not to have registered is the subtle disparity between the way the film captures the home-life of the indigenous Austrians and the way it chronicles the milieu in which the migrants move. And it is precisely movement, freedom of movement even, which is the issue here.

### **Ich-liebe-Österreich-Kleber**

Perhaps the most striking sequences in *Good News* cinematographically are those in which the camera enters the spaces in which the migrants' communal activities of worship and celebration take place. These spaces, part-public part-private, are shown to be vibrant, colourful but 'hidden' spaces behind the facades of Vienna, both literally and metaphorically. The sequences repeatedly begin and close with a tilting pan up to the sky, revealing that the meeting halls are located in courtyards set back from the main thoroughfares (indeed the camera never locates them in relation to any recognizable Viennese landmarks); these are places that are explicitly marginal and concealed.<sup>9</sup> Stefan Grisseemann, on the other hand, suggests that the camera's unblinking eye, the absence of cuts within these sequences, serves to embed these enclaves into the structure of the city:

Die zuweilen rätselhaft anmutende Kultur der Migranten liegt gleich hinter Wiens Häuserfronten. Ein direkter Weg führt ohne Schnitt in die Fremde. Von grauen Straßen aus bewegt sich der Blick der Kamera durch Treppenhäuser und Vorräume in die verborgenen Zentren islamischer Kultur in Wien. (Grisseemann 2007: 88)

These episodes are, however, visually more ambiguous than Grisseemann suggests – the camera never actually quite makes it back to the street; instead the sequences either end before the connection with communal space is fully established, or the gaze shifts upwards to the heavens (which is only shared space in a conceptual or metaphysical sense).

In an extended sequence of bravura hand-held camerawork the film explores the Anadolu Camii mosque, entering and leaving the space through a series of corridors, stairs and doors. The labyrinthine invasion of the 'foreign' space is cinematographically reminiscent of the work of Carl Theodor Dreyer (especially in *Vampyr*, 1932), another filmmaker on Seidl's list of favourites. The camera passes a grocery shop and hairdresser before entering the mosque itself and observing the praying Moslems from behind. It does not linger on any of these 'exotic' sights and ignores the inquisitive gazes of those it passes – it moves through the space, registering its contours but



without engaging with it or those who inhabit it. As if to highlight the ‘otherness’ of the mosque, the sequence is unexpectedly – and arguably rather crassly – interrupted by an elderly white Austrian woman, framed statically and full-frontally, reading from a newspaper article on the dangers of an increasing global population. The woman’s immobility (despite the underground train she is seated in) is in stark contrast to the vibrant life in the mosque. Seven times during the film the focus is shifted in this way from the newspaper sellers to the newspaper consumers. The articles are read by symmetrically posed readers in various environments, both public and private: by a railway line, in the underground, in hospital, at home on a sofa, on a dark street, in the pub. These readings open the film to contemporary political debates in a quasi-Brechtian way. However, the articles of the *Kronen Zeitung* do not provide statistics à la Kuhle Wampe (in that instance to support the arguments of the workers’ movement), but rather point to the alien and contradictory environment in which the migrants are attempting to build a life: there is a request for nominations of model Austrians, articles on the need to have pride in old age, on a film written by an animal psychologist, on a young man who shakes his baby to death, a lonely hearts advert, and – at the end of the film – an explanatory note accompanying a free ‘Ich liebe Österreich!’ sticker.

It is in the more straightforward juxtapositions that Seidl’s partisanship perhaps breaks through his rigid geometry (although here too understanding is expressed in terms of movement in space): ‘In GOOD NEWS etwa schaue ich den Kolporteurern nicht nur zu, sondern ich fühle mit ihnen und in ihre Existenz hinein’ (Grissemann 2007: 94). Seidl describes his empathy in structural terms – rather than rigidly staring (*zuschauen*), he makes a move towards the vendors emotionally (*hineinfühlen*); in Seidl’s ‘system’, empathy and solidarity are expressed geometrically.

Whilst the film’s gaze on the migrant workers, certainly in their own social environment, tends to be characterized by distanced (and distancing) inquisitiveness, there are a handful of encounters that suggest tentative stabs at cross-cultural communication. These advances tend to involve older Austrian woman – pre-figuring the liaisons of *Mit Verlust ist zu rechnen* – and are themselves not devoid of the condescension that Fassbinder caricatured in his portrayal of Emmi in *Angst essen Seele auf*. One woman, for example, appears to believe that her local newspaper vendor will only understand her if she speaks to him in clipped, ungrammatical German; she also takes it upon herself to explain to the vendor that Austrian citizens receive less government support when ill and out of work than foreign workers. These encounters –

which include a scene with a vendor who has married an Austrian (and in which we learn her name, Renate, but not his) – and the rapid-fire sequence of white Austrians describing an average day remind one forcefully of the transnational encounters in Rouch's and Morin's *Chronique d'un été*. The stilted artificiality of certain scenes in that film, including the discussion between a white Renault worker (Angelo) and a black student (Landry), pre-figure the 'staging of reality' in Seidl's film.

Film historian Erik Barnouw has commented on Rouch's notion of the filmmaker-as-provocateur in the following terms:

The direct cinema documentarist took his camera to a situation of tension and waited hopefully for a crisis; the Rouch version of *cinéma-vérité* tried to precipitate one. [...] *Cinéma-vérité* was committed to a paradox: that artificial circumstances could bring hidden truth to the surface. (Barnouw 1993: 254f.)

As Rouch himself put it:

We contract time, we extend it, we choose an angle for the shot, we deform the people we're shooting, we speed things up and follow one movement. So there is a whole work of lies. But for me and Edgar Morin at the time we made that film, this lie was more real than the truth. [...]

It's a sort of catalyst which allows us to reveal, with doubts, a certain fictional part of us, but which for me is the most real part of an individual. (Eaton 1979: 51)

These remarks are strikingly similar to Seidl's comments regarding his staging of reality to generate greater authenticity:

Ich denke, meine Filme sind sehr artifiziell, weil sie durch meine Bildsprache stark geprägt sind. Ich nehme die Dinge die passieren, also die Wirklichkeit, auf und bringe sie in einen Rahmen. Gleichzeitig versuche ich als Regisseur auch, die Dinge in Bewegung zu halten. [...]

Es interessiert mich nicht, nur die Realität abzubilden, obwohl ich großen Wert auf Wirklichkeitsnähe und Authentizität lege. (Grissemann 2007: 23)<sup>10</sup>

In one of the final scenes of *Good News* Seidl introduces, somewhat unexpectedly, a precise contemporary political context for his film, as a man reads a passage from the *Kurier* informing its readers that the aforementioned complimentary 'Ich liebe Österreich!' sticker is intended to signal support for 'die demokratischen Werte in Österreich' in the face of current upheavals in east and west. It is these upheavals which form the context for the proposed, but ultimately unrealised, migration from east to west in Seidl's next film, *Mit Verlust ist zu rechnen*.

## Shared anthropology

Rouch coined the term 'shared anthropology' (Eaton 1979: 45) to describe his collaborative, participatory staging of reality through fiction, an attempt to synthesize the methods of two of the pioneers of documentary film, Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov (see Stoller 1992: 99-103):

It is [the] permanent 'ciné-dialogue' that seems to me one of the interesting angles of current ethnographic progress: knowledge is no longer a stolen letter, later to be consumed in the Western temples of knowledge. It is the result of an endless quest where ethnographers and ethnographees meet on a path that some of us are already calling 'shared anthropology.' (Rouch 2003: 185)

Of Seidl's films *Mit Verlust ist zu rechnen* is the one with which this notion sits most comfortably, not least given that the idea for the film came from the central character. There is also an attendant shift from the distanced, inquisitive gaze of *Good News* to what might be termed a 'participant camera' (Eaton 1979: 45). Although this may be explained, in part at least, by Seidl's employment of a different cameraman, Peter Zeitlinger (who also works for Herzog), it is also inseparable from the genesis of the film: whilst Seidl was scouting locations along the Austrian-Czech border for a long-cherished historical costume drama on the life of the nineteenth century bandit Johann Georg Grasel he was approached in Safov by a local Czech woman of German descent, Paula Hutterová, who wanted to know what he and his colleagues were up to; it was talking to her that gave Seidl the idea of shooting a documentary about 'das Leben zwischen Ost und West' (Grisseemann 2007: 108).

At the outset, it appears that *Mit Verlust ist zu rechnen* will indeed be a film about migration. Paula is a widow, and she has met a recently widowed Austrian pensioner, Sepp Paur, who lives across the border in the Austrian village of Langau (with a population of 700, making it a little more than three times the size of Safov) and is searching for a new partner to keep his life (and house) in order. In a classic Seidl composition we see Sepp literally on the lookout for a new companion, standing by an unmanned border crossing with a pair of binoculars trained on the tiny hamlet in the distance.

Seidl's film is unmistakably partisan. Whilst both protagonists are warm-hearted and endearing characters, it is the Czech way of life, for all its shabbiness and deprivation, and its post-communist weirdness, that Zeitlinger's roving camera captures with

palpable empathy. This is something that will emerge again, more than a decade later, in Import Export. As Seidl admitted:

Der Osten hat mich immer interessiert. Ich finde dort viel Interessantes und Gutes und Tolles. Ich fühle mich dort wohl und kann in den Chor derer, die die 'Rückständigkeit' des Ostens verteufeln, nicht einstimmen.

Indem ich den westlichen Wohlstand der anderen Seite mit seinen Einbauküchen und Tiefkühltruhen in Frage stelle, ergreife ich ja für den Osten Partei. (Grissemann 2007: 115f.)

Unsurprisingly, this empathy manifests itself formally in the cinematography. Whilst the camera that follows Paula about her everyday chores (collecting her meals on wheels, washing, clumsily killing a chicken with an axe) is fluid and, at least by Seidl's standards, even relaxed, the petty-bourgeois Austrians across the border are exposed to the full force of Seidlerian stylization, most strikingly in a droll, rapid-fire sequence of Austrian housewives demonstrating their kitchen appliances (just as their male counterparts had shown off their electric lawnmowers in *Good News*). This is not to say that the film generally resorts to drawing crass distinctions between east and west – indeed one of the most striking features of *Mit Verlust ist zu rechnen* is the fact that, despite the supercilious pronouncements of some of the Austrians on their Czech neighbours, it is actually quite difficult to distinguish between life on either side of the border:

[...] es ist symptomatisch, dass Seidl die Beziehungen zwischen dem postkommunistischen Osten und dem kapitalistischen Westen – ein Thema, das er Jahre später in *IMPORT EXPORT* wieder aufnehmen wird – anhand zweier Dörfer untersucht, die in mancherlei Hinsicht fast ununterscheidbar, gewissermaßen zwei Seiten einer Medaille sind und einander in jedem Sinn nahe stehen. (Grissemann 2007: 115)

## **Grenzländer**

It is in this unexpected twist to Seidl's portrait of provincial life across the newly-porous east-west border that his film differs from those east German documentaries of the same period with which it appears, initially, to have so much in common. *Mit Verlust ist zu rechnen* is, for example, in many of its details strikingly similar to Andreas Voigt's *Grenzland: Eine Reise*, also of 1992. Voigt's film charts a journey north along the German-Polish border, interviewing locals either side of the cold war demarcation line. In its programmatic gaze eastwards – turning its back, so-to-speak, on the advancing West – Voigt's film is also a partisan expression of solidarity with eastern neighbours. Here too we see predatory Westerners looking over the border,

binoculars in hand; here too we see the consumer durables of an affluent capitalist society juxtaposed with privation just across the border. The languorous, relaxed tone of Voigt's film, verging at times on the comical, is, however, very different from Seidl's 'dunkle [...] Poetisierung von Landschaft und Lebenszusammenhängen' (Grisseemann 2007: 107). Seidl's film may indeed articulate a certain fondness for the candour of the east, but it is entirely free from the optimistic generosity which allows Grenzland to prize the quietly inebriated and philosophical mind-set of the Poles as an antidote to the rampant consumerism of post-unification Germany (Hughes 1999). In Seidl's own words his film is an essay on loss which transcends the vagaries of shifting political boundaries: 'Anfangen vom Verlust der Heimat, über den Verlust der Jugend, den Verlust der Liebe, den Verlust des Ehepartners, den Verlust der Sexualität, den Verlust des Geldes bis hin zum Verlust des Lebens' (Grisseemann 2007: 119).

Voigt concludes his film with an emotive symbolic image – the camera passes out from the mouth of the Oder into the open waters of the Baltic to new horizons, accompanied by a catchy, if moody jazz soundtrack. Seidl's story of the potential migration of Paula to the West, prefigured by a series of more-or-less surreal forays across the border (to Sepp's house, the Prater, a sex shop and a department store), ends with a terse intertitle informing us simply that: 'Paula ging nicht zum Sepp hinüber. Sie zieht es vor, auch weiterhin ihr Essen von der Genossenschaftsküche zu beziehen. Sepp hingegen ist noch immer auf der Suche nach einer geeigneten Frau'.<sup>11</sup>

This is, one could argue, a piece of 'good news' within the diegesis. Migrating from Safov to Langau has been shown to be a small move geographically, but a very large one culturally. Paula resists the lure of well-stocked supermarket shelves, Austrian toiletries and modern kitchen appliances not only because of her age, but also because the economic benefits are outweighed by an anticipated loss of personal freedom. The ironic twist is, of course, that this very freedom is secured, in part at least, by the remnants of a despotic system (the state which provides the meals on wheels is portrayed in the film as a faceless source of Kafkaesque edicts and eerie piped music which fills the winter streets of Safov). The landscapes are also important here: in no other Seidl film do they play such a prominent role, with the result that *Mit Verlust ist zu rechnen* has the feel of a post-Wende Heimatfilm. Many austere beautiful shots of the landscape do not feature human beings at all, and when they do – in a series of extraordinary static tableaux of farmers and villagers silently facing the camera like figures in some nineteenth century genre painting or Richard Oelze's *Erwartung* – the locals both east and west of the border seem (literally) rooted in the ground.

In these ‘stagings’ of life – which Birgit Schmid (2003: 48) terms ‘inszenierte Wirklichkeit’ – Seidl transgresses the boundary between fact and fiction, between documentary and Spiel-Film, more consistently (and hermetically) than in *Good News*: ‘Ich wusste nicht wie sehr ich dabei die Grenze vom Dokumentarfilm zum Spielfilm überschreiten würde’ (Grissemann 2007: 109). Although the film had no predictable outcome, at least insofar as the migration story was concerned, there is a uniformity to the imagery which is unsettling; as Schmid (2003: 46) puts it, Seidl is ‘ein besessener Stilist, ja geradezu ein Geometer am Visuellen, der seine Bilder ausmisst’.

In this film, however, the rigidity is inextricable from the diegesis – the story of a migration that never materializes – and it is this that prevents the film becoming simply formalist or excessively mannered. Moreover, there is subtlety to the film’s choreography – which includes the more informal tracking shots following Paula around Safov referred to above – which gives it a range and rhythm that pre-figure *Import Export*, the film which, in Grissemann’s (2007: 222) view, introduces into Seidl’s oeuvre ‘offenere, “humanistische” Züge’.

### **Moralist oder Sozialpornograph?**

Seidl has pointed out in numerous interviews that in his most recent film, *Import Export*, ‘keine äußere Grenze vorkommt. Äußere Grenzen fallen ja, aber innere Grenzen bleiben. Und die zeige ich’ (Grissemann 2007: 217). This alone makes the film highly contemporary as a film about migration. Although it shifts from east to west and back again some 21 times – in a complex rhythm that gains momentum towards the end – the three protagonists are never shown crossing borders (although Seidl had originally envisaged this in his treatment). On four occasions intertitles provide geographical information: in the second and fourth episodes we are informed that we are in the Ukrainian town of Snizhne and Vienna respectively, and as Paul and his stepfather Michael head east we are told that they stop off in Košice in Slovakia on their way to Uzhhorod (formerly Uzhgorod) in the Ukraine. Of the unidentified locations, not all are immediately recognisable geographically – the opening shot of a man attempting thirteen times to start a motorcycle is one such, another is the extraordinary scene shot (as Seidl has explained in interview) against the backdrop of the run-down Roma housing estate Luník IX outside Košice.<sup>12</sup> As Christoph Huber (2007: 46) has noted: ‘Tellingly, national borders play no role in the film (the belatedly identified Ukrainian

opening shot might just as well show Austria). Rather, social and existential borders take on weight'.<sup>13</sup>

Import Export charts two journeys which intersect once (in a Viennese railway station), but without the main characters ever meeting. Olga (Ekateryna Rak), a young nurse from Snizhne, leaves her mother and child behind in the Ukraine to search for work in Vienna, where she arrives a third of the way into the film. Paul (Paul Hofmann) and Michael (Michael Thomas) set off from Vienna at the mid-point of the film to deliver chewing gum dispensers to Slovakia and a fruit machine to the Ukraine. Following a sordid and degrading encounter between his stepfather and a local prostitute, Paul walks out of the Uzhhorod Intourist hotel they have been staying in and, failing to find work in the city, is last seen attempting to flag a lift, although it is not clear in which direction he is intending to travel. His stepfather is left behind in the Ukrainian hotel and, in the film's final episode, Olga is shown laughing with her fellow migrant workers in the Viennese geriatric hospital where she works as a cleaner. Her future remains uncertain as without a husband she has no prospect of a permanent right of abode. The film's trajectory is thus very different to that of *Mit Verlust ist zu rechnen*, in which the protagonists are shown moving energetically across borders, only to stay on where they have lived all their lives. By the end of *Import Export* none of the three central characters has any immediate prospect of staying put.

As schematic as the film sounds from this skeletal synopsis, it in fact confounds expectations on a number of levels, not least as a film of migration. For example, despite encountering demeaning treatment at the hand of her employers and superiors – she is suddenly fired as an au-pair ('so ist es bei uns' her employer claims) and is bullied by a hospital nurse (who informs her that she may have been a nurse in the Ukraine, but 'bei uns san' S' Putzfrau') – Olga is in fact able to rely on support from a Ukrainian friend in Vienna and is neither isolated nor systematically abused. In the case of Paul, Seidl is equally determined to avoid stereotypes: 'Im Porträt seines männlichen Hauptdarstellers spielt Seidl von Anfang an mit den Signalen rechtsradikaler Kultur. Aber die Fährte führt ins Leere; Paul ist kein Rechtsextremer, weder Ausländerhasser noch Neonazi' (Grissemann 2007: 214).

According to Grissemann (2007: 222) it is not the maltreatment of migrant workers themselves that is the issue here, but rather the 'Härte europäischer Arbeitswelten', a theme it thus shares with Christian Petzold's *Yella*, another feature film that combines a

fictional narrative with documentary authenticity (in Petzold's case inspired by documentarist Harun Farocki's *Nicht ohne Risiko* of 2004). The most recognizably Seidlerian set-pieces are reserved for the training sessions that both Paul and Olga have to endure in their search for work – in self-defence and interview techniques in Paul's case, and in the correct procedure for cleaning the teeth of taxidermic specimens and hospital toilets in Olga's. All of these sequences are tempered with considerable humour, however. It is in his portrayal of groups at the mercy of invisible social and economic forces that Seidl is at his most uncompromising and shocking.

The appalling living conditions in Luník IX and the degrading institutionalisation of the dementia patients in the geriatric hospital where Olga works provide, along with Seidl's trademark scenes of sexual degradation, some of the most shocking scenes in the film; they are also the scenes in which the documentary mode takes precedence over the fictional narrative. It is also the documentary scenes, in particular those with demented hospital patients, that have reawakened claims from Seidl's critics that he is a 'Sozialpornograph'<sup>14</sup> or, as one critic has put it, a salesman of 'Elendspornographie' to healthy, young educated middle-class cinemagoers (Heine 2007). His apologists, for their part, have reiterated the point made by Birgit Schmid (2003: 49) that he is 'ein Moralist, ein bisschen vom Schlage eines Michel Houellebecq'.

## **Guter Wille**

What is remarkable about *Import Export*, in the context of such polarised critical reactions, is that both of Seidl's protagonists are unexpectedly peaceable, chaste even. Paul censures his stepfather for cheating on his mother in Slovakia, claims that his goal in life is 'Harmonie', rejects the cut-price sex offers of the Roma pimps in Luník IX and refuses to participate in his father's brutal exploitation of the young Ukrainian prostitute in Uzhhorod. Olga chooses to migrate to Austria rather than join her girlfriend in Snizhne working in the internet sex trade. In Vienna she rejects the advances of both a young male nurse and an old patient at the hospital. In their incorruptibility and passivity – they are invariably victims of physical and psychological abuse rather than perpetrators of it – they remind one of the migrant protagonist of Kafka's *Der Verschollene*, Karl Roßmann, whose flight from Germany to America (as reported by the narrator in the Heizer episode) is precipitated by a sexual misdemeanour forced on him by a maid. There is, moreover, a striking similarity between the unwholesome



sexual encounters in *Import Export* and those in Kafka's novel:

Dann legte sie sich zu ihm und wollte irgendwelche Geheimnisse von ihm erfahren, aber er konnte ihr keine sagen, und sie ärgerte sich im Scherz oder Ernst, schüttelte ihn, horchte sein Herz ab, bot ihre Brust zum gleichen Abhorchen hin, wozu sie Karl aber nicht bringen konnte, drückte ihren nackten Bauch an seinen Leib, suchte mit der Hand, so widerlich, daß Karl Kopf und Hals aus den Kissen herausschüttelte, zwischen seinen Beinen, stieß dann den Bauch einige Male gegen ihn – ihm war, als sei sie ein Teil seiner Selbst, und vielleicht aus diesem Grunde hatte ihn eine entsetzliche Hilfsbedürftigkeit ergriffen. (Kafka 2002: 42f.)

In his responses to the punishment of forced migration, Karl's stoicism borders on resignation: "Na", sagte Karl, "es wird nicht so schlimm werden", nach allem was er gehört hatte, glaubte er an keinem guten Ausgang mehr (Kafka 2002: 220).

It is significant that in the case of both Paul and Olga this resignation does not translate into the defeatism that has consumed Roßmann's companion Robinson, who self-deprecatingly acknowledges that 'wenn man immerfort als Hund behandelt wird, denkt man schließlich man ist wirklich' (Kafka 2002: 298). However, Roßmann's conclusion when faced with the allegations thrown at him by the tyrannical Oberkellner of the Hotel Occidental – 'Es ist unmöglich sich zu verteidigen, wenn nicht guter Wille da ist' (Kafka 2002: 245) – certainly has a powerful resonance for Seidl's film; as in *Good News* the migrants may well retain an 'aufrechter Gang', but this does not, evidently, guarantee fair and just treatment. Whether, like Karl Roßmann and the protagonists of Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf*, Olga and Paul fail to defend themselves adequately, is not a question that *Import Export* attempts to answer. In this it is true to its director's repeated claim that he is not offering any political solutions to the problems he shows: 'Man muss den Zuschauer fordern, sich selbst eine Meinung zu bilden. Es ist nicht meine Aufgabe zu sagen, was Gut und was Böse ist. Das Bild an sich ist moralisch, seine Aussage' (Schmid 2003: 46).

The audience's response to the most shocking scenes, and to the central characters themselves, is rendered more complex by the recognition that so much of the film's *mise-en-scène* is non-fictional; the demented patients, the Slovakian Roma, and – to a certain extent – Ekateryna Rak and Paul Hofmann are revealing themselves to the camera. Whilst Hofmann was known to Seidl from an earlier project (he and his working-class family had been interviewed for *Zur Lage*) Seidl chose to do a casting call in the Ukraine for the part of Olga. This elicited several hundred responses and Rak herself was chosen as someone who did not speak German and had never been to

Austria.<sup>15</sup> In drawing on the life-experience of his actors, and allowing himself to be inspired by locations – very much in the manner of Werner Herzog or American documentarist Errol Morris<sup>16</sup> – Seidl remains close to the ‘shared anthropology’ programme of cinéma-vérité. Whilst he does not engage in post-shoot debriefings or other democratic gestures of the kind made famous by Rouch and Morin in *Chronique d’un été*, his films remain, for all their stylistic formality, improvisational and spontaneous in their dialogue and dramaturgy.

According to Grisseemann, *Good News* was ‘ein Film des indiskreten Blicks: Ulrich Seidl will im Kino Uneinsehbares enthüllen’ (Grisseemann 2007: 88). It is the fine balance of implacable visual stylization and ‘inszenatorische Freiheit’ that distinguishes Seidl’s docu-fictional anthropology (Grisseemann 2007: 19). In the case of the three films discussed here, Seidl’s systematic anthropology is certainly indiscreet in its relentless framing of ‘Selbstdarstellungsakte’, but also compassionate in the democracy of its gaze (Grisseemann 2007: 110). Moreover, there are moments in *Import Export* – for example when Olga unexpectedly fixes the camera with an intense long-held gaze amidst the ‘Vorhölle der Geriatrie’ (Grisseemann 2007: 225) – when one is reminded of Karl Roßmann’s simple conclusion that ‘Jetzt ist aber genug’ (Kafka 2002: 266). However, whilst Karl only makes this remark to himself, Olga’s gaze is fixed firmly on the audience.

## **Filmography**

### **Good News**

Austria 1990, 130 mins, colour

Direction and Screenplay: Ulrich Seidl; Production: Hans Selikovsky, Selikovsky-Film;  
Photography: Hans Selikovsky; Editor: Peter Zeitlinger, Klaudia Ecker; Sound:  
Ekkehart Baumung; with Salah Abdel Gabil, Mustafa Mohamed, Mohamed Kajal  
Islam, Aloisia Hofbauer

### **Mit Verlust ist zu rechnen**

Austria 1992, 118 mins, colour

Direction: Ulrich Seidl; Concept and Screenplay: Ulrich Seidl, Michael Glawogger;  
Production: Erich Lackner, Lotus-Film; Photography: Peter Zeitlinger, Michael  
Glawogger; Editor: Christof Schertenleib; Sound: Ekkehart Baumung; with Paula  
Hutterová, Sepp Paur, Stepánká Srámková, Rusena Machalová, Miroslav Sedlar,  
Alois Paur, Vladimír Kunderát

## **Import Export**

Austria 2007, 125 mins, colour

Direction: Ulrich Seidl; Screenplay: Ulrich Seidl, Veronika Franz; Production: Ulrich Seidl; Photography: Ed Lachman, Wolfgang Thaler; Editor: Christof Schertenleib; Art Design: Andreas Donhauser, Renate Martin; Sound: Ekkehart Baumung; Cast: Ekateryna Rak, Paul Hofmann, Michael Thomas, Maria Hofstätter, Georg Friedrich, Natalija Baranova, Natalia Epureanu, Petra Morzéz, Dirk Stermann, Erich Finsches

Good News and Mit Verlust ist zu rechnen are available on DVD with English subtitles as numbers 29 and 57 in the 'Edition Der Standard' collection of Austrian films.

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> For example, a recurrent theme in *Good News* and *Import Export* concerns the training received by migrant workers and unemployed youth. In these sequences the assumptions of the employment culture are made explicit, sometimes comically so. The training given by employing firms is designed as much to motivate the worker to identify with and represent the firm as to develop the skills to carry out tasks. In the case of migrant workers these sequences represent mini studies in the processes of acculturation in the context of the work place. *Import Export*, in its parallel narrative about a young unemployed Austrian man and a young migrant woman, offers a comparison through which to discuss what unskilled workers – or migrant workers whose skills are not officially accepted – have in common, as well as the particular difficulties confronting those attempting to assimilate to a foreign culture. In *Good News* a trainer at Media Print welcomes the new Kolporteure and explains that the firm distributes the two newspapers with the largest circulation in Austria (the (Neue) Kronen Zeitung and Kurier). The trainees are shown a video on good and bad sales practice, taught to repeat words of greeting ('Guten Tag! Guten Tag! Guten Morgen! Guten Morgen! Guten Abend! Guten Abend! Danke! Danke! Bitte! Bitte! Aufwiedersehen! Aufwiedersehen!'), shown how to dress smartly in the company uniform and how to present the papers for sale. In a series of comic training episodes in *Import Export*, unemployed youths are taught to memorize the interview mantra 'LMMA' – 'Lächle mehr als andere!' – and newly recruited Eastern European cleaners are shown how to distinguish between red sponges for cleaning toilets and urinals and yellow ones for washbasins. In their fine balance of documentary authenticity and satirical humour these scenes are ideally suited to linguistic analysis, discussions of Austrian humour and role-play work in the classroom both at school and university.

<sup>2</sup> In an interview in 2002, following the release of *Hundstage*, the affinity with Bernhard was put to Seidl: 'Sie haben einmal gesagt: "Wenn ich mich jemandem nahe fühle in Österreich, dann ist das Thomas Bernhard." Worin fühlen Sie sich ihm nahe?'. To which Seidl responded: 'In seiner Beschreibung des Österreichischen, seiner Authentizität, vor allem in seinem Humor.

<sup>3</sup> This phrase appears in the commentary of Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*.

<sup>4</sup> Text transcribed from the film.

<sup>5</sup> Cooper is here referring to *Sans Soleil*.

<sup>6</sup> Werner Herzog, who described *Good News* as 'einer der besten Dokumentarfilme aller Zeiten', also noted that in his opinion the subtitle was 'ungeschickt gewählt, eher irreführend'. In his brief laudatio (which appears on the inside cover of the 'Edition Der Standard' DVD) he describes the film in terms that are close to Seidl's own: 'Mit solcher Konsequenz, mit solchem Stilwillen hat noch selten jemand im Film die furchtbare Regelmäßigkeit des Alltags, den Wahnsinn der Normalität gezeigt'. Herzog's text, provided at Seidl's request, was originally published in *Der Standard* on 13 March 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Seidl in interview with Birgit Schmid. This interview and accompanying article are an excellent source of information on Seidl and his films up to and including *Hundstage*.

<sup>8</sup> This juxtaposition of economic and painterly poses can be seen to extend the investigations carried out into the politics and legislation of the body by such experimental artists as the Austrian filmmaker and performance artist Valie Export, who explored the disciplining of the female body within the rigid lines of the Viennese cityscape. Her most famous film, *Invisible Adversaries* (1976), is also – at least on a metaphorical level – a film of migration, although in this instance the immigrants are extra-terrestrials

<sup>9</sup> Brecht uses the camera to similar effect at the beginning of *Kuhle Wampe oder Wem gehört die Welt?* After a brief shot of the Brandenburg Gate there is a cross-fade to a working-class quarter with smoke-filled tenement blocks. From the courtyards to these blocks the camera points upwards to show how little natural light the inhabitants can afford.

<sup>10</sup> Seidl acknowledges the affinity with the photography of Diane Arbus, which has been noted by numerous commentators (Grissemann 2007: 24)

<sup>11</sup> *Mit Verlust ist zu rechnen* was released in 2007 as part of the Standard edition of Austrian documentaries. Unlike *Good News* it also has English subtitles

<sup>12</sup> In interview with Christoph Huber (2008: 27), Seidl remarked ‘What I show in the movie is pretty much what happened to me: I was offered girls, to buy, to take away if I wanted’.

<sup>13</sup> This review is of interest in the context of migration because it contrasts the film with Fatih Akin’s *Auf der anderen Seite* (released in Britain as *The Edge of Heaven*), which Huber (2007:47) dismisses as a ‘German-Turkish mix-and-match of buzzwords [...], heavy-handedly constructed connections [...], and sensationally stupid symbolism’

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Buß (2007), in which this accusation is addressed

<sup>15</sup> It subsequently also transpired that she also had no intention of migrating there.

<sup>16</sup> Grissemann (2007: 121) notes the parallel between Seidl and Morris. It is not surprising that both have received fervent support from Werner Herzog