Interviewed by
Jonathan Thomas

Jonathan Thomas: Is it true that you were kicked out of film school?

Ulrich Seidl: Yes it’s true. Of the second film that I made, The Prom (1982), I heard that the film school in Vienna felt that the film had hurt its reputation and for that reason they withdrew the print and said that it wouldn’t be shown any more. However, the legal situation in Austria is such that the director of the film holds the copyright and for that reason I was able to obtain the negative and at my own cost distribute the film. But of course as a result of that experience I hadn’t taken away any desire to continue studying at the school.

I started film school quite a bit older than most of the other students (I was 26 when I started) and in my view a film or an art school should be there to nurture the individual talents of its students, it should adapt itself to the students as opposed to forcing the students to fit in with the curriculum as they see it. And that too, that perspective, is one of the reasons I had no interest in continuing to attend the school. Have you seen the film?

Thomas: I have, and I thought it was interesting how it opens with the Mayor talking about setting aside a room for a private meeting. This troubled quest for happiness is announced right at the beginning of your work, and recurs painfully often throughout the films that follow, up to the Paradise trilogy. But as I was watching The Prom I was wondering what it was about the film that disturbed the administration to such a degree...

Seidl: I was criticized for different things with that film. First of all, as you know, it deals with notables in a small town, the Mayor, the School Principle, Lawyers, City Councilmen, and when the film was then shown in Vienna the audience simply laughed at what they were seeing. I was criticized because it was felt, for moral and ethical reasons, that I seemed to be mocking the life in this small town. But I was also criticized for formal reasons. People said the film hadn’t been edited. For example, when I had interviews with people, I wouldn’t start simply with when they started speaking; I would start recording long before, then when people were trying to prepare for the interview.

Thomas: I noticed that the film was dedicated to Jean Eustache, who had died the year before, in 1981. I don’t know why but his films were never accessible here in the US, there hasn’t been the distribution, except for The Mother and The Whore, which made it to VHS. But I’m wondering what it was about Eustache or his work that had impacted you?

Seidl: When I was attending the film school I was interested in his work. At that time the Film Museum in Vienna organized a retrospective of Jean Eustache’s work, and that interested me a great deal. Not as much, in fact, The Mother and the Whore, but rather his documentary films.

I had in mind a formal concept for The Prom that I think I derived from Eustache, or at least that he inspired me to. I decided that I was going to have seven very specific ways of filming the space in the ballrooms. I would have seven specific camera locations and shoot only from each of those. So I set up the camera in the first location and started filming whatever took place in front of the camera. After a certain point I stopped, set up the camera in the second position, and again started shooting whatever took place in front of the camera.

However, the concept, of course, didn’t work at all. I had to abandon it because of what was taking place in front of the camera. I couldn’t respect my original concept.

Thomas: Since you mention space and camera position, I wanted to ask about your approach to form. You have a very distinct visual style that unifies your work. One of the first things to notice is the way you represent space within the image, or the way you construct the space of the image. You often set up your shots in what appears to be a space of architectural enclosure. There’s a flat wall behind the characters, who are often centered in the composition. But sometimes you see the walls on the left and right, so that there’s this shallow space, anchored on one end by the frontality of the camera position. It’s a space of enclosure and it appears throughout your films. What is it about that type of space that interests you? What does it produce for you as a filmmaker?

Seidl: It’s always been my way of showing people in a space. It’s the way I see space. I’m very interested in examining space and in examining how people are in that space, and for that reason it’s the way that I film, since my very first film. You can interpret that, I’m not going to interpret it myself, as seeing people lost in their wide spaces or getting lost in that space but again I don’t interpret it that way. I leave it up to others. I’m not conscious of the decision, if you say that frequently the walls seem to be closing in or coming together into a perspective. That’s possible but it’s not something I’m aware of. However, I am certainly aware that I like a central perspective. Often I place the camera in the middle of what I’m showing.

Thomas: In terms of time, your shots are usually long-take / sequence shots. I can’t think of you setting up a space and then cutting into it to alternate perspectives.

Seidl: Yes, there are different formal means that determine my film production. The films I make are, on the one hand, as you say, often shot from a static camera position, without cuts; they are images of people speaking; it’s single shot for a single scene. That probably comes from my documentary work. But on the other hand, there are also scenes involving a handheld camera, with editing. I mix both of those approaches.

In the sequence shot it’s up to the spectator to determine what is important, where he or she wants to look, what should be brought out in a scene. Whereas, when working with a handheld camera, I’m much more aware of manipulating the spectator, showing him or her what I want them to see, where he or she should direct their gaze.

Thomas: I came to Good News after seeing some of your later films and there was a moment that really surprised me: it was the handheld wandering shot—a long take without a cut—when the camera and the person holding it meandered through space, from the street outside into a building and up the stairs and into a ballroom where a celebration was taking place, and then there was this pan—the camera rotates to the left, as if it’s a head turning. That embodiment of the camera eye, that subjective turn of the first person perspective, which became forcefully apparent with a simple pan, occurs so rarely that it felt like a shock.

There’s a question I have about a different aspect of the long take. There are these moments that occur in your films again and again, I think you may refer to them as “single images,” when the camera lingers on a subject or a group who poses as if posing for a still photograph. You present them as durational images that approach the condition of photographic stasis. You often use these single images as if they were a form of punctuation, like
a pause, between scenes that have more dynamism. Are you attempting to bring cinema closer to photography in moments like these? Or how are you thinking about these images?

**Seidl:** We call those shots, just as you did, the sequence shots, and as a subjective perspective it’s my gaze. I experimented with that in *Good News*, that was the first time, where as you said I’m filming on the street, I go into a building, walk up the stairs, see a wedding there, turn around and go back out again. I was interested in exploring that; these are sequences that are secondary to the story, that have nothing to do with the main story, secondary locations. I was interested in experimenting.

On the other hand there is the tableau, and to that I should say that what brought me to the cinema was photography and painting. Images that aren’t moving. I think that the tableaux have a magical effect because the people you are filming look directly into the camera, therefore directly at the spectator, they confront the spectator, and that moment, that gaze, is uncomfortable. It unbalances the spectator. They appear to be a photograph, but because they are breathing it has a different intensity and a different effect from that of photography.

The tableaux are also shots that are never planned. They often come to me simply on location. They’re scenes that I shoot as a parenthesis to the story that I’m telling or the scenes that I’m shooting elsewhere. There were any number of shots in *Paradise: Love*, in Africa, tableaux that I shot, and sometimes they are in the film, but many of them are not. Since I incorporate these tableaux in all of my films, and use very few of them, over the years I’ve amassed a huge collection of unused tableau shots.

**Thomas:** I meant to ask you this a moment ago, when you mentioned the Film Museum, but you left the film academy in 1982, which is just on the cusp of the VCR. I wonder what film culture was like then, where you were? I mean for instance, how would you access films by Rossellini or the French New Wave or other moments in film history?

**Seidl:** When I was attending school I was watching films at the Austrian Film Museum, that’s where I saw many retrospectives of great European directors. Not only

![Ulrich Seidl filming *Losses To Be Expected*, 1992](image)
that but also back then you had the opportunity to see films as they were coming out by directors like Werner Herzog, Buñuel, Pasolini, John Cassavettes, those films were still being distributed and seen in normal cinemas. So I would see them either in cinemas or retrospectives. Visconti, Antonioni, Rossellini, they were all present in normal commercial cinemas. Fellini wasn’t important for me, but...

Thomas: Fassbinder also died in 1982. You didn’t mention him, but I sometimes think of his work when I watch your films. In terms of German cinema, Herzog of course comes to mind when you see your choice of eccentric characters. But I’m wondering if Fassbinder was a point of reference or if his films influenced you in any way?

Seidl: It’s interesting because recently John Waters compared me to Fassbinder, and of course I liked him and saw all his films. But personally I don’t have the feeling that he was an inspiration for me, not like other directors. For example Werner Herzog, some of his early films totally fascinated me. But I’m not aware of the relation to Fassbinder.

Thomas: I think of the rigid frontality of his early work, like Katzelmacher, and the moments in a film like Ali: Fear Eats the Soul, where the camera lingers on characters who hold a pose in a tableau shot, as in one of your single images, looking at each other as opposed to at the camera. But there’s also the brutality of interpersonal relationships in Fassbinder’s films...

Seidl: You can’t be aware of all of your influences. There’s cinema that probably influences me without my being aware of it. I liked his films a great deal but I don’t get that sense myself that he influenced me. His films were very artificial whereas for me, from the very beginning, I was interested in making films that were as realistic as possible.

Thomas: You’ve said that you’re fascinated with ugliness, with its normality, and I wonder if you’d want to say something about how, as an artist, you think about the category of the ugly?

Seidl: I’m not interested in looking for things that are ugly or repulsive, that’s not what interests me. On the contrary, I’m looking for things that are normal, that are everyday, that seem conventional, and that’s what I seek to show in my films. However, for that reason, this ugliness is really up to the spectator to determine. The people I show naked on screen, that’s how people really look when they’re naked. The apartments I show in my films, that’s how people really decorate their apartments. I’m not judging them.

What I try to do is to look behind the beautified surface and to go into a private space, and that’s often uncomfortable and may look different than what people would like to look like. That’s perhaps why spectators consider it to be ugly.

Thomas: I’m also interested in how this becomes a mode of social critique. I think of your films as very socially oriented films. You may go into personal, private spaces but often in order to raise questions about problems that are common to everyone and that you experienced. This was manifest in the omnibus film that you organized, State of the Nation: Austria in Six Chapters, but it’s all over, from Good News to Dog Days. Many of your films raise questions about the nation, which I suppose would have to be read against the background of the EU, which Austria joined in 1995 and which expanded in 2004. I wonder how you think about your relation to the nation state and national identity as a filmmaker?

Seidl: In all of my films I’m dealing with a whole, the totality, and even though I’m dealing with very specific individuals in my stories, for me they are exemplary of an entire society, an entire country, a totality, something much larger, and in that sense the films can be seen in a theatrical way. At the same time I have to point out that even though the films are located in Austria and can be seen as political statements about that, they aren’t limited to Austria. What I’m showing deals with the entire Western world. My depiction of everyday life can be seen politically: I am giving examples of the loneliness and isolation that marks Western society. And in that sense, the political and the social relationships intertwine.

In films like Good News, it isn’t only about minorities, only about immigrants, it’s not only about exploitation. Of course it deals with those, but if I were to make a film about that, a typical documentary film, then I’d depict their living conditions, their working conditions, how they’re exploited. But for me that would not be enough. It’s not rich enough; it’s how a documentary film would normally approach the subject, but it doesn’t go far enough. In my films I’m seeking to involve the spectator, to implicate the spectator in the condition and to say these are people you live with, these people aren’t being exploited by other people, these are your neighbors, and this is part of your life too, you’re involved in their condition as well, and you’re partly responsible for the system that leads to their exploitation.

Good News was my first theatrical feature and for it I obtained funding from federal agencies and television as well, and when investors saw the rough cut they were so appalled that they predicted that I would never obtain funding in Austria again to make a film, in fact that I’d never make another feature film. And from that reaction you can see that they weren’t watching the film simply as an image of a minority, but felt themselves attacked.

Thomas: A lot of your films have very long production periods, sometimes a year and a half years and more. In the 1980s, before Good News but after The Prom, were you involved in film or television, or was it a long production process for Good News?

Seidl: No that was the worst part of my life. I left film school and I wanted to make films independently, on my own, but I wasn’t able to obtain funding for them. That’s why for a period of seven years I was unable to shoot. During that period I made one film on my own that only remained fragmentary, it was never completed, and it was called Look 84. It dealt with themes of models and advertising, which I would take up later. When making Good News it took me a year-and-a-half to complete financing.

That said, the films that I make take a great deal of time for production because of the parameters of my working method. I like to research in detail and that takes a long time, it takes me a long time to do location scouting, and also casting’s a very long process, so that I can get to know people and they can get to know me, so that I wind up making the right choices for my protagonists. When I film, I try not to film in a single block. I build interruptions into the shooting period so that I can think about what I’ve shot, I can make corrections, I can reorient my work. It’s never simply a matter of executing the work but of always constantly rethinking it and making adjustments, and for that reason I try to shoot, usually, over the period of a year, again with interruptions built in. Then I have to rethink the film, and when I end up in the editing room with Paradise or with Import Export (2007), then I’m facing 80 or 90 hours of film. Again, there I’m not interested in simply recreating what I’ve written, but rather in rethinking the film, restructuring it, and obtaining the best results given what I’ve obtained on film.

Thomas: Do you rehearse very much with your actors? I know you like to work with improvisational dialogue, and with both professional and non-professional performers. I wonder how you handle rehearsals?

Seidl: I’ll try to answer this briefly. The script contains precisely described scenes, but no dialogue. Dialogue is always the result of improvisation on set with actors, whether professional or not. But also, the fact is that I try to shoot as far as possible chronologically. That allows me to determine the day that I’m going to shoot...
what I’m going to do. I can decide what I’m going to do on the basis of the material I’ve obtained prior to that. That allows me to always be making adjustments, to see, to not simply to execute a script, something I’ve written and conceived, but rather to see it as a process and to see where the project is going.

In general, actors never see a complete script of what I’m going to do. The preparations, then, with actors, whether they be professional or non-professional, is not a question of rehearsing specific scenes, but rather of talking so they get a feeling of who I am, the kinds of films I make, what I’m interested in doing with this film, and what I expect from their character. It gives them a chance to feel at home in the films. When preparing a scene, as mentioned, I often make decisions beforehand about what we’re going to shoot or what a scene will be, just prior to shooting. I never speak with all the actors together about a scene that I’m going to film. I just discuss with each of them separately what I expect of them, what I want to happen in the scene, what the intentions are, but there aren’t any rehearsals per se. And then when I start to shoot a scene I see what the results are, and we may do it again, I may ask them to do something differently on the basis of what I’ve obtained so far.

Thomas: You avoid using non-diegetic music, or score music added to images to bring in emotion from the outside. Rather, music in your films tends to emerge from within the image. What I want to ask you about is the special place you give to the performance of songs in your films. You often have people sing for the camera, and you record these performances from a fixed camera position. Sometimes people recite poetry in the same way. I’m curious about your interest in this sort of theatricality, which is, then, a question about the role of music in your films but also about these moments where performance is set off from the more rigid framework of your visual aesthetic, through song.

Seidl: You’re right about the way music is used. But I make a distinction between the way it’s used in fiction films and documentary films. Usually in the documentary films, someone is describing themselves by performing, by offering themselves to the camera in a very different way. On the other hand, in Paradise: Faith (2012), when music is used you see the people singing but also Anna Maria sits at the organ with her back to the camera and is playing music for god. So music is used in different ways.

Thomas: Earlier you were talking about how your goal is to confront the spectator and to implicate him or her in the world you depict, to awaken something like a sense of responsibility. You’ve also made a distinction in response to your critics, which is to say that we should not confuse your depiction of a problem in the world with the social mechanisms that are producing the conditions and allowing such a problem to exist as a subject for representation in the first place.

I’m tempted to think of your films in terms of their negativity, in the sense that you confront the spectator with a negative image, call it ugly if you want, so as to produce a space for reflection. But I wonder if, in doing so, given the occasional brutality of your films—I mean at times they can be difficult to watch with their extended scenes of humiliation—I wonder if what you produce in effect is a masochist viewing position?

Seidl: I understand and agree with everything you’ve said except for the question of negativity. It’s true that it hurts to see the truth that I’m confronting people with, and yes I’m calling for their responsibility by fact that I’m engaging them in this. It can be uncomfortable for the audience; they may feel provoked. But I don’t see that as being negative, showing them dark truths. If it means that you think about things on your own, or if the process is more social in that you talk about things you’ve seen with other people, then I see that as being very positive.

Thomas: There’s something positive to be found in your negative images. On the other hand, consider the final lines of dialogue in some of your films, like Dog Days: “People are cruel.” Or Import Export: “Death, death, death, death…” Do you consider yourself a pessimistic filmmaker?

Seidl: It’s true that the films are pessimistic. But what I have to say about that is that pessimism isn’t in and of itself any worse than optimism; I don’t think that optimism is often presented as something we should be striving for, something better. That’s not the case for me. It’s simply that pessimism comes from observing how humans live together, the reality of how we live together. It’s hard when considering that to be optimistic. But nonetheless I think that there’s a process involved and that examining and being confronted with these truths allows us to sense the possibility of something better, something that offers humans a worthier existence.

Thomas: This socially critical dimension of your films has always been characterized by the relationship they have to the present moment, to the now. All of your films are set in the world we are living in today. So my last question is: is it true that you are, for the first time, working on a film set in the historical past—a period piece?

Seidl: Yes, but first of all I never know what’s going to come out of it. The film that I’m planning talks a great deal about the contemporary world, it presents a different perspective on the contemporary world; it deals with death and love and relationships of power. It applies just as much to today as it did back then. It’s not going to be a situation where the spectator comes out of the cinema thinking that’s how things were back then. These are still questions that apply and will provoke viewers today.

* Special thanks to Robert Gray for assisting with German to English translation.