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Watershed June 2013 Podcast

In 2008 we held a retrospective of the Austrian director Ulrich Seidl to tie in with the release of his latest film *Import/Export* – which is still, for me, one of the key films of the last decade. This interest in Seidl – who is back this month with not one, but three new films - came about through two routes.

The first was in conversation with artist filmmaker and friend John Smith in early 2007, when he mentioned that he had seen some incredible documentaries at the Oberhausen Film Festival that were of a different order and magnitude than anything he had seen for while. That praise coming from someone of the calibre of John etched the name Ulrich Seidl in my curatorial brain as someone to watch out for.

The second was at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival where I was overwhelmed on seeing a film called *Import/Export* screening in competition. As is the case at a festival like Cannes you can see films with no reviews, no context - beyond the fact it is in the festival - or indeed attention to who directed it. This was the case for me with *Import/Export*. Following that visceral response to the intensity of the film I recognised the director's name and realised that John Smith was right.

I researched Seidl's back catalogue and discovered documentaries like *Models*, where he depicts the harsh realities of the modelling industry, positing the women's quest for love and beauty and their destructive patterns as symptomatic of wider contemporary experience. In *Jesus, You Know*, Seidl employed the intimacy of prayer as an entry point into revealing the everyday complaints and deepest secrets of six figures as they beseech Jesus as a best friend, therapist and fortune teller.

The director's style presents an unflinching view of his subject, of their eccentricities and foibles but this is not cold, dispassionate or even, it could be argued, critical, but rather a style which reveals loneliness, compassion and warmth and ultimately a profound humanity. The criticism when it comes, I would argue, is of the wider conditions in society that become manifest through these individual obsessions.

I also discovered that Seidl studied art and photography and his films are brilliantly framed, exquisitely constructed formal exercises in filmmaking. Paradoxical, you might think, for a documentary filmmaker but when you remember that John Grierson, the founding father of the documentary movement, defined the genre as "the creative treatment of reality" you realise that Seidl is pushing the boundaries of creative treatment.

Audience response to Seidl's films can be quite extreme sometimes even hostile - if you watch 2008's onstage interview with the director at Watershed (<http://www.watershed.co.uk/dshed/ulrich-seidl>) you can hear that at one point an audience member feels that Ulrich is trying to trick us all.

He describes his own relation to audiences this way:

"I don't seek to entertain people with my films, but to touch them, perhaps even disturb them. My films are critical not of individual people but of society... I want the people in the theatre to be confronted with themselves."

On his website Ulrichseidl.com the words director, scriptwriter, producer, voyeur, misanthrope, cynic, social pornographer, blackguard, provocateur, pessimist, humanist appear rapidly beneath his name. I would add "artist". He is to filmmaking what Goya is to painting: fearlessly depicting the contemporary reality that surrounds him, bringing us face to face with the uncomfortable truths, frailties and imperfections of the human condition that in effect mark out our very humanity.

And so to Paradise, a trilogy of films that was born of a single film idea - something he discusses in the Watershed interview. The starting point in [Paradise: Love](#) was the global phenomenon of modern day sex tourism, where middle aged white European women holiday to Africa to have sex with locals. This single idea exploring modern love has been expanded to take in [Faith](#) and [Hope](#).

I titled our season on the director in 2008 Between Heaven and Hell: the films of Ulrich Seidl. This still feels apposite for Seidl's work and could now be added to Between Heaven and Hell: Paradise.

[Paradise: Love](#) opens for two weeks at Watershed on Fri 14 June with an opportunity to see the complete trilogy on Sun 16 June before [Paradise: Faith](#) and [Paradise: Hope](#) open in July. You can see all three films on Sun 16 June for the special price of £15.00 full / £12.00 concessions.

Joss Whedon is without doubt Hollywood's renaissance man. Have a look at his Wikipedia listing and you see a career which charts the recent successful history of mainstream film and television from Buffy the Vampire Slayer to The Avengers - which grossed a quite ridiculous amount of money within two weeks of its release in 2012. He has done script work on a host of Hollywood feature films from Toy Story to Alien Resurrection. He draws heavily on comic book influences, style, techniques and adaptation but is equally adept at re-energising stale genres as he did recently with horror in The Cabin In The Woods.

Why then is Watershed screening such a mainstream figures' film? After all isn't our approach to promote the unknown, the alternatives to the Mainstream? Recently I found myself describing my attitude to Watershed's film programming policy in these terms: Take a figure like Quentin Tarantino, everyone now knows who he is and his films are screened in every cinema. I remember a time when no-one had heard of this young guy with his first feature film Reservoir Dogs. A film which the UK distributor at the time was going to put out straight to video as they viewed it as nasty and brutish. We in independent exhibition loved the film and wanted to screen it on our cinemas, the distributor agreed and the response was phenomenal.

Now, Tarantino is a commercially successful director who does not need our support, Django Unchained played in every screen in Bristol unlike when Reservoir Dogs opened. This contrasts with a director like David Lynch who almost made the commercial big time with Blue Velvet and Wild at Heart but whose vision is ultimately too esoteric, idiosyncratic for mainstream tastes, so a cinema like Watershed will be there for him: Inland Empire is presented as case for the defence!

The example of Whedon's [Much Ado About Nothing](#) is like a reverse example of Tarantino. What does the energetic go-to-guy for finger-on-pulse pop culture do when has a spare week between finishing shooting and starting to edit The Avengers do? He does a small scale improvised DIY version of Shakespeare with his friends, naturally! It was a film not intended in the Hollywood blockbuster scale or aimed at the billion dollar international market. I suspect Whedon wasn't even thinking about it getting a release but really being a creative downtime exercise between blockbuster duties.

Something from such a prodigious popular creative force has value culturally and that is where we come in and so pop culture's renaissance man brings Shakespeare to Watershed. How much of the commercial mainstream it brings is to be determined - as well as analysing the reworking of Shakespeare - I will be hoping that the Whedon midas touch will also make the leap from the mainstream to the arthouse!

[Much Ado About Nothing](#) opens on Fri 14 June for at least 2 weeks.

To accompany Shakespeare's reappearance on screen we are screening five different cinematic takes on the playwright for [June's Bard Sunday Brunches](#), from directors as varied as Roman Polanski, Akira Kurosawa, Baz Luhrmann and Laurence Olivier.