Failed Bodies: On Ulrich Seidl's Films

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"*I am no wedding photographer*"[1] is how Ulrich Seidl once described himself. Because of its laconic character, this statement is unusually suitable for the description of Seidl's films: both documentary and fiction ones, which in wide shots listen to and stare at people as they, among other things, explain about their enthusiasm for Hitler or their sex toys, shoot animals on a safari and cuddle their pets. Because Seidl's (both fiction and documentary) film characters often come across as grotesque, which is the exact opposite of the impression they would like to make, the filmmaker has been subject to numerous critiques that have characterised his films as voyeuristic and a "*social pornography*"[2] intended for the upper classes of film festival goers. Just as loud, however, is the opposite side that considers the representation of humanity as grotesque to be the proof of Seidl's Brechtian attempt at pushing his audience out of their usual attitude and showing them that they too partake in that grotesqueness.[3]

1 Prager, Brad. 2019: "Trophy Hunter: Ulrich Seidl's Portraits and *Safari*". *New German Critique*, vol. 46, p. 3, electronic source.

2 Erk, Corina. 2020: "Faction, Tableaus, Voyeurismus: Die Filme Ulrich Seidls – eine Werksichtung". In: Erk, Corina and Prager, Brad, eds. *FILM-KONZEPTE 59 – Ulrich Seidl*. München: edition text + kritik, pp. 12–13.

3 *Ibid*.

We do not want to reduce Seidl's films to the question of ethics, which is why, in the first part of the paper, we will focus on the formal ways in which the filmmaker shows his subjects as grotesque and bizarre creatures. The crucial reference here is portrait photography, especially the work of Diane Arbus, which is very significant for Seidl. If there is a divide between how people *want to show themselves* and how they actually *appear*, then it is important to understand what prevents one's complete control over self-presentation in front of the camera. How is a portrait or a shot that shows or says something different or perhaps even diametrically opposed to what the portrayed person would like to say and show even created?

In the second part of the text, we will focus on the role of the body in Seidl's films. Seidl claims that the division between documentary and fiction films is artificial.[4] What the people featured in fiction and documentary films bring from reality is their body. The body as a vehicle of meaning that emerges beyond the diegetic narrative and is brought into it from reality. The second part of the text will try to show that, for Seidl, body is one of the most interesting sites of human grotesqueness because it enables him, even if only for a moment, to relate reality and fiction.

A failed self-presentation

A middle-aged man is sitting on a couch in the middle of a symmetric shot. He is facing the camera; on each side of the couch stand life-sized mannequins dressed in a Nazi uniform. Above the couch hangs a framed collection of military decorations. The man – almost as if explaining it straight into the camera – says that that room is the most comfy and cosy in the house. That is where he and his friends from the brass band meet at least once a week; that is where they talk, drink and play.

This image from Seidl's documentary *In the Basement* (Im Keller, 2014) is bizarre because the feelings it arouses in the viewer are clearly contrary to the feelings felt and described by the man. How can one feel so cosy surrounded by Nazi memorabilia? And how come the man is prepared to say all that so freely in front of the camera or rather to the camera itself? How can a space be cosy when it is filmed with such symmetry and so statically as if the edges of the shot constrained the space and the people in it?

Or the numerous scarcely dressed bodies that throughout Seidl's first fiction film *Dog Days* (*Hundstage*, 2001) repeatedly assume the same position: a lying body in underpants is placed in the middle of a static symmetric shot. But instead of the feeling of comfort and peacefulness that the sunbathing bodies are supposed to emanate, the light is scorchingly white, while, in their desire for a bronzed beautified tan, the bodies appear immobile. The desire for a beautiful tan and a beautiful body is covered by bellies, by oversized and burgeoning bodies. Due to the desperate chase after the *beautiful*, the bodies mostly appear quite the opposite – grotesque.

4 Mundhenke, Florian. 2011: "Authenticity vs. Artifice: The Hybrid Cinematic Approach of Ulrich Seidl". *Austrian Studies*, vol. 19, p. 117.

Such a static shot with a symmetric composition (and perhaps with a person staring into the camera in the middle) is often described as the most basic means of expression in Ulrich Seidl's films.[5] The deliberately artful image is interpreted as a shot that with its edges traces the limits of possible movement and closes people in as if in a cell;[6] as an eye raised above a person – god's eye, which people in front of the camera confide in;[7] or a stylised composition in linear perspective, which draws especially on the altar paintings of catholic churches.[8] The broadest interpretation of Seidl's tableau, however, is opened by the comparison with photography, especially Diane Arbus's photographic work, which Seidl claims first aroused his interest in visual art.[9]

Diane Arbus became famous with her portraits of oddities and people from the social margins: with photos of midgets, giants, grotesquely thin children, identical twins etc. They are placed directly in front of the camera, facing their viewers. Seidl's static and symmetric tableaux are similar to Arbus's, partly in their visual characteristics, but above all in the effect they have on the viewer. So it is not strange that Arbus and Seidl are subject to similar critiques and that the critiques of Arbus can be easily applied to Seidl's work.

Arbus once described the basic supposition that she explored in her work as the "*gap between intention and effect*":[10]

> Everybody has that thing where they need to look one way but they come out looking another way and that's what people observe. /.../ Our whole guise is like giving a sign to the world to think of us in a certain way but there's a point between *what you want people to know* about you and *what you can't help people knowing* about you. And that has to do with what I've always called the gap between intention and effect.[11]

People are placed directly in front of the camera and, facing it, give off the awareness that they are being photographed – they pose. But precisely the posing, the fact that

5 *Ibid*, p. 119, Erk 2020, pp. 10–14, Naqvi, Fatima. 2020: "Zum Fremdschämen: Ulrich Seidls Filmgrammatik". In: Erk, Corina and Prager, Brad, eds. *FILM-KONZEPTE 59 – Ulrich Seidl*. München: edition text + kritik, pp. 51–52.

6 Prager, Brad. 2020: "Real oder realistisch?: Inszenierung und Bildkomposition in Ulrich Seidls PARADIES: LIEBE". In: Erk, Corina and Prager, Brad, eds. *FILM-KONZEPTE 59 – Ulrich Seidl*. München: edition text + kritik, p. 68.

7 Naqvi 2020, p. 52

8 *Ibid*., p. 55.

9 This comparison is elaborated in Prager 2019; for an overview of the similarities between Seidl and especially fashion photography (in the context of *Models*, 1998), see Glasenapp, Jörg. 2020: "Die Welt der Mode ist nich schön: Ulrich Seidls Models". In: Erk, Corina and Prager, Brad, eds. *FILM-KONZEPTE 59 – Ulrich Seidl*. München: edition text + kritik, pp. 39–42.

10 Fried, Michael. 2008: *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 208.

11 *Ibid*., author's emphases.

they try to look *better* is how they lay themselves bare even more – what is on view is not their imagined image, but the very lack, the untrodden path to their idealised image.

That is why, in her famous critique of Arbus, Susan Sontag describes her photography as anti-humanistic: "*A large part of the mystery of Arbus's photographs lies in what they suggest about how her subjects felt after consenting to be photographed. Do they see themselves, the viewer wonders, like that? Do they know how grotesque they are? It seems as if they don't.*"[12] There is something kindred between the question "Do they see themselves *like that*?" and the feeling we get watching Seidl's films. Is the man in the film not aware that he is describing as cosy a room full of Nazi decorations and memorabilia? Is he not aware that his bloated bulging belly is in the centre of the shot, that his body lying in the sun is grotesque?

Sontag interestingly reflects on the figures that face the camera in portraits: "*In the normal rhetoric of the photographic portrait, facing the camera signifies solemnity, frankness, the disclosure of the subject's essence. That is why frontality seems right for ceremonial pictures (like weddings, graduations).*"[13] When it comes to wedding photography, people want to show themselves in the best light, show the camera their best self. And that is precisely what the people featured in Seidl and Arbus's work fail at: what becomes noticeable is their posing for the camera, their self-stylisation; and it becomes noticeable precisely because it fails. Two Austrian tourists talking about black people (who can apparently easily run faster than white people – but only if they want to!) does not intrigue the viewer or provide new surprising information, but repeats the well-known racist stereotypes.[14] "Kissing" a dog on a bed probably does not give the viewers an impression of loving cuteness, but rather points to something distinctly pathological.[15]

12 Sontag, Susan. 2005: *On Photography*. New York: Rosetta Books, p. 28.

13 *Ibid*., p. 30.

14 An interesting discussion on the feeling of embarrassment *for the people in front of the camera* can be found in Naqvi 2020, where the author shows how Seidl's viewers sway between condemning the shown and the awareness of their own involvement.

15 An idea that is parallel to our thinking and concerns the voice and the opportunity to speak in Seidl's film is interestingly developed by Brad Prager. He writes about why the Africans who appear in *Safari* in symmetrical tableaux just like the Austrian tourists never speak as opposed to the latter. As he writes, the opportunity to speak in Seidl's films more than anything else resembles a rope that the speakers put around their neck and hang themselves with. So there is an opposite, unintentional effect similar to the visual one also when it comes to narration (Prager 2019, electronic source).

What is the camera interested in?

The static symmetrical composition with a human figure in the middle is not the only device with which Seidl directs the viewer's feelings in another – perhaps even the opposite – direction from that of the feelings of the people in his films. It is interesting that, by themselves, Seidl's topics are not particularly surprising: tourists shooting animals in Namibia; Nazi memorabilia and sex toys that fill basements; pathological or sexual relations between animals and their owners; open racism etc. The viewers of Seidl's films are probably already aware of the existence of all these social phenomena before they see the films. That is why some of the filmmaker's documentaries are more surprising due to the nonchalance with which people are prepared to share their opinions and practices. What is surprising is not necessarily the *events* in front of the camera, but rather the very fact *that they are in front of the camera*.[16]

It is significant that, in his documentary films, Seidl never surprises his subjects with the camera. When asked if, as a director, he considers himself to be similar to a hunter on a safari, he answers that if he were, he would have to surprise his characters with the camera, which he never does. In line with this, it is interesting to look at Anna Granatowska's thesis that, of the six modes of documentary film,[17] Seidl doubtlessly rejects the expository mode, in which great importance is given to the creator's commentary.[18] And, indeed, Seidl never uses a voiceover to explain the life stories of his subjects or place them in the broader social context. Most of his films do not contain conventional narrative expositions presenting the characters to the viewers and naming them. Even the names of the people in his films (also the documentary ones) often appear only in the end credits. Seidl does not try to explain anything, he only wants to show it. That is why – as Jörg Glasenapp[19] notes about *Models* (1999) – the structure of his films is often paratactic; as if individual sequences were related by the conjunction 'and' and not an inevitable causal chain. Most of Seidl's documentaries focus on a larger number of protagonists, which inevitably means that Seidl does not show any of them in a comprehensive manner. Even *The*

16 That is why Seidl is sometimes reproached with cynicism: with only confirming the clichés that the viewers already know before watching his films. The most elaborate form of this point was developed by Glasenapp 2020.
We should also mention here Michael Fried, who says that in Diane Arbus's work the question of the (un)ethicalness of the gaze is important, but that it should not lead us to reducing her entire oeuvre to an ethical conundrum (Fried 2008, p. 210). We agree that the same holds for Seidl: we do not deal with these implications in the text and focus in more detail on the techniques with which Seidl creates images with specific effects.

17 This is a reference to the six modes of documentary film according to Nichols, Bill. 2001: *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

18 Granatowska, Anna. 2014: "Between Documentary and Fiction: Authenticity and Voyeurism in the Cinema of Ulrich Seidl". *Images*, vol. 15, no. 24, p. 64.

19 Glasenapp 2020, p. 43.

Bosom Friend (Der Busenfreund, 1997), which focuses exclusively on the eccentric René Rupnik, leaves many questions wholly unanswered. How did he develop such a relationship with his mother? Why does he fill his apartment with found magazines even though he can hardly move around it? More than whole individuals, Seidl's films show us individual eccentricities.

Despite the numerous texts that deal with Seidl's symmetrical compositions and figures facing the camera, we should stress that his films by no means consist only of such shots. With his regular co-worker, the director of photography Wolfgang Thaler, who filmed most of his films, they often also use a hand-held camera like many filmmakers who want to create a sense of realism. We can understand the hand-held camera primarily as "*pragmatic realism*",[20] so as a device that is not as special and significant as Seidl's static tableaux. Seidl's static shots, however, are not necessarily only symmetrical compositions with figures at the centre à la Arbus, but something else too, for Seidl creates the effect of bizarreness also with his subtle understanding of the forces of interest and concentration in space. The meaning discerned by the audience is again opposite to the meaning discerned by the characters in diegetic space.

The paradigmatic example of an attentive positioning of the camera can be found in Seidl's documentaries *In the Basement* and *Safari* (2016). In a scene of *In the Basement*, three men shoot at targets at a firing range; they are observed by the owner of the firing range, who stands behind them, protected by glass. They are all absorbed in their actions: the shooters try to aim at the targets as best they can, while the owner attentively observes their progress. The concentration of all four people in the space intensely converges on the targets. In view of such an orientation of the forces of interest in space, it would make more sense to shoot the scene with the shot/countershot technique. The shot would show the shooter shooting, while the countershot would be established along the main line of attention: it would include the shooter at the edge of the shot and the target within the shot.[21] Such framing would align the viewer's interest with the shooter's interest – if we turned up at the firing range, that is what we would probably be interested in – how and where the shooters are shooting. That is why we would be interested in the gaze from the shooter to their target. Seidl, however, frames the scene so that the targets are left off-screen. The camera focuses on the people shooting and not on what they are actually focused on – the targets. The part of space that in view of the happening automatically attracts interest is left out of the shot. Seidl sets up a wide shot that captures all three shooters and the observer behind them, but not behind their backs, but rather from the side. Because the object that crucially organises the on-screen actions of the figures is not in the shot, the postures of the shooters seem sort of strange, almost bizarre:

20 Mundhenke 2011, pp. 122–3.

21 That is how the scene at the firing range is shot in *Lethal Weapon* (Richard Donner, 1987).

their shoulders are awkwardly pulled up to their head, which strangely hangs above them... This makes Seidl's shot essentially non-empathic: it leaves out the main element in space that attracts the attention of those present in it – and shows merely the people with their full attention directed towards the object that is not in the shot.

The shot that deliberately leaves the object of absorption off-screen is interesting in the context of Michael Fried's thought. Works that show what Fried names absorption have two poles: the subject – a person, the one absorbed in something – and the object or activity – that which the subject is absorbed in. A good example is *The House of Cards* (around 1740), a painting by the French painter Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. In it, a boy is completely absorbed in building a house of cards in front of him. The precondition of the painting being understandable and of us considering absorption as its topic is that, in addition to the boy, the *activity* in which the boy is absorbed is also depicted – that the cards with which he is playing are also present in the painting.[22]

Now we can add a new angle to the understanding of posing as described earlier in the context of Arbus's works: in her and Seidl's works, the figures are absorbed in self-presentation, they are in a way absorbed in the fact that there is a camera in front of them. Their grotesqueness emerges from the fact that their self-image, which is the object of their absorption, differs from the image seen by an external observer. In the firing range scene, however, the grotesqueness has a different origin: there, it emerges from the fact that the image does *not contain both necessary poles of absorption*, rather, the object (target) and the activity (shooting) are left off-screen. The filmmaker thus creates a bizarre image of absorption itself. An image of absorption without the object it refers to. As if one strongly concentrated on reading a book that was not there. Thereby, the gestures that enable the absorbed person to act better (for example, raised, stiff shoulders) seem pointless, like gestures serving no purpose – like lips moving without any voice coming out.

Seidl thus creates a space whose meaning for the viewer is different or opposite to the one for the person in front of the camera. If this is a form of irony or metaphorical meaning – the meaning discerned by the viewer is not the same as the meaning of the words and the gestures of the people in the film – we must ask: where does that meaning come from? What is it that remains and is employed by Seidl to create meaning? The answer is the body. The body is what withstands the filmmaker's stylisation as something that both professional and non-professional actors bring to the film from reality.

22 Fried 2008, pp. 39–40.

What does the body mean?

A frequent motif in Seidl's films is the motif of cleaning. Wiping the stairs, the floor, dusting paintings; so, on the one hand, cleaning is a quite unequivocal motif. The tackily furnished rooms of petit bourgeois homes, where Seidl sets many of his films, are a great pride of their petit bourgeois owners. The first association thus probably relates such scenes with the stuffy and bossy petit bourgeois mentality, which demands that a cleaner carefully scrubs the teeth of the stuffed animal heads hanging on the wall; you have to hold them cautiously – no, firmly – and only then scrub them so that they do not fall down...

The motifs of cleaning open another, perhaps even more interesting reflection. There is a broader filmic meaning that can be ascribed to the motif of cleaning or its anti-pole, which demands cleaning – a mess. In his article about haptic visuality in Lynne Ramsay's films, David Trotter introduces the concept of a mess. He describes the introductory scene of her short film *Gasman* (1997), which Ramsay made before her feature debut *Ratcatcher* (1999). In this scene, little Steven pours sugar into the cockpit of his toy car while his family prepares to leave the house. This scene – distinctly similar to the introductory scenes in *Ratcatcher* – is shot exclusively in close-ups, isolating body parts and pieces of furniture and clothes. The shallow depth of focus isolates into discernibility only one layer of the image. "*We take this world in one piece at a time. We never see it as a whole. Nothing is established. Texture prevails over perspective.*"[23] For Trotter, the crucial thing here is the idea of a "mess":

> A mess is an excess of matter. It is matter out of place: matter revealed as matter by an abrupt confounding of the basic categories which enable us to tell one thing apart from another, and so make sense of experience. Sugar in a jar is a substance on tap: ready to be made useful, ready to release its sweetness as and when required. Sugar dumped on the kitchen counter is so much grit. /.../ Mess is always already in close-up. By the time we've noticed it /.../, it's too late to gain any perspective on it.[24]

A mess thus robs things of meaning and emphasises their materiality. Sugar scattered on the counter no longer comes across as a *sweetener*, but as a heap of scattered grains. Trotter's elaboration of the concept of a mess enables the connection with Laura U. Marks's works, specifically, her ideas about optical and haptic visuality:

> Haptic visuality is distinguished from optical visuality, which sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space: in other words, how we usually conceive of vision. Optical visuality depends on a separation between the viewing

23 Trotter, David. 2008: "Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher*: Towards a Theory of Haptic Narrative". *Paragraph*, vol. 31, no. 2, p. 138.

24 *Ibid*., p. 139.

> subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze.[25]

What Trotter names a mess is by itself in close-up because a mess precisely causes the loss of meaning on account of gaining materiality. "*While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image.*"[26] Insofar as a *thing* becomes *matter*, it must lose its visually recognisable objectness, which is replaced by texture. The distance establishing optical visuality must disappear and haptic visuality must emerge so that matter is truly seen as matter and no longer as meaning.

This theoretical context sheds new light on the motif of obsessive cleaning in Seidl's work. Cleaning – the supreme petit bourgeois chore – can now present itself anew: as a fear of things appearing to be crudely material and no longer meaningful; a fear of the stuffed heads no longer being a status symbol or a reflection of hunting mastery, but merely severed and stuffed animal heads. But it is not only obsessive cleaning in Seidl's *narratives* that is the safeguard against the materiality threatening to infest meaning with a mess. Seidl's most basic visual device – the static wide shot mentioned above – is exceptionally meaningful in the framework of the division between the haptic and the optical gaze.

Optical (or, according to Marks and Trotter, "ordinary") visuality is characterised by seeing things from "*enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space*".[27] In these shots, distance is not only substantive or "personal" – in the sense emphasised above where the interests of the camera intentionally do not coincide with the interests of the people in front of the camera. A static camera that is sufficiently distanced from its object thereby gains an unusual character of disembodiment; a gaze that sees so insufferably sharply precisely because it is not involved in what it is looking at; because it is entrenched in its place and therefore cannot cross the distance that creates the noticeable distinction: I – here – am the subject; that – there – is the object. There is no physical contact between us, but only a directed gaze.[28]

25 Marks, Laura U. 2000: *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham: Duke University, p. 162.

26 *Ibid*., p. 163.

27 *Ibid*., p. 162.

28 "Rather than engendering immediacy and making the characters' bodies overwhelm the screen through the use of detailed and organically moving shots, the cinematography tends to be cautious, impassive and distanced, even in moments in which a hand-held camera is used and the shots are relatively close. Rather than attempting to overwhelm the screen with the materiality of the bodies, Seidl tends to emphasize the spacing between film and viewer." (Hilpert, Stephan. 2012: "Mutual intrusions: Ulrich Seidl's Import/Export through Jean-Luc

This leads to an interesting paradox: the camera does not cross the distance that makes the representation visually discernible and meaningful, while the most important motif of its gaze is usually the human body. But that is precisely why the relationship between haptic and optical visuality is not that easily resolvable in favour of one pole. In *Import/Export*, one of the elderly residents of the care home throws away a dirty diaper on the hallway floor. The body is the one that – despite the distant and bodiless camera – still makes a "mess", the body produces it. Olga, the film's protagonist, who works at the care home as a cleaner, must throw the diaper in the garbage – she has to clear it away. Her gesture of clearing it away, the way she picks up the discarded diaper, nevertheless includes an effect of a certain hapticity; when Olga picks up the diaper with her gloved hands, it seems as if we can smell the stink that the diaper gives off. It is interesting that that is by no means the only moment in Seidl's films in which smell plays a crucial role in the scene. *Paradise: Love*, a film about Austrian female sex tourists in Kenya, focuses on a middle-aged woman called Teresa. In the scene of her sitting at a bar counter with her friend in Seidl's typical static wide shot, her friend tells her with quiet enthusiasm about her theretofore experiences with the locals: "You have to smell the black men's skin... It's unforgettable. It smells of coconut... I could bite and lick it forever, it's incredible."

Here, we again have to do with the somewhat complicated relation between the haptic and the optical; when Marks thinks about mimetic and symbolic signs, she says that hearing and sight are more often symbolic: "*Visual and sound images call up, to different degrees, a shared cultural symbolic.*"[29] That is why written and spoken languages exist and the language of smell, for example, does not. Smell is harder to make symbolically meaningful, it is harder to make it capable of communication, it is something singular, embodied: "*Smell is rich in the logic of sense because it resists idealization and instead fosters a dialectic between the present moment, in which we smell, and the embodied memories that the smell evokes.*"[30] The complex relation between the haptic and the optical is established by the content of the *disembodied* gaze in Seidl's work often being the one which is itself necessarily *embodied*. The object of the symbolising gaze is a material, unique feeling.

But the conflictiveness does not end there: when we listen to Teresa's friend describing the smell of black people's skin, racism and exoticisation are unmistakeably evident. Even though it is a feeling and a cluster of associations that she relates to a specific smell, the associations are simultaneously pervaded with racist prejudices. So not only is the gaze not completely separated from the physicality of what it sees,

Nancy". *Studies in European Cinema*, vol. 9, no. 1, p. 61). This is how Stephan Hilpert describes Seidl's *Import/Export*.

29 Marks, Laura. 2002: *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 118.

30 *Ibid*., p. 123.

but the smell is also not completely free of the prejudices it has picked up. Thus, the gaze can lose abstract meaningfulness and see the unique body in front of it, while smell can lose its singularity and become meaningful. It is interesting that it is precisely smell that is a frequent motif in Seidl's work – if we think of deodorants and perfumes, which conceal and embellish the smell of the body, and toothpastes, which turn a wet bad breath into fresh menthol, it seems that all these objects function especially as a means to cover the original smell of the body (and the fluids it excretes). Bodily smell is something we try to cover up again and again, but the body keeps producing it relentlessly, regardless of or against our will. In Seidl's work, the body is an object of the gaze rather than the touch, but it nevertheless has a paradoxical role because the very physicality of the body does not disappear, but is only emphasised. Seidl sees the body as something that tirelessly makes a mess and produces all kinds of bodily products, but that is precisely why he does not avert his gaze from them.

The meaning and the effect of bodies in Seidl's films is also discussed in the work of Catherine Wheatley, who writes about Seidl in the context of European extreme cinema.[31] Wheatley begins with the idea that in human death – the annihilation of the human body – film representation interested in extreme states reaches the limit it must not and cannot cross by any means. As a replacement, some of the new European extreme films often use the death of animals. Animals in front of the camera arouse different reactions than people: "*The animal is caught in an uncertain space between the natural and the contrived.*"[32] "*Animals, on film, can 'act' – in that they can follow instructions and perform gestures (one need only think here of Lassie, or to choose a more pertinent example perhaps, Robert Bresson's Balthazar) /…/; but they cannot 'feign'. Or, more precisely, they cannot feign suffering.*"[33] Wheatley thus thinks that an actor as such can feign, but their body, their flesh, cannot. This is exceptionally significant for Seidl.[34]

In this context, Brad Prager characterises the opening sequence of *Paradise: Love* (Paradies: Liebe, 2012) as paradigmatic. In Seidl's typical static tableau, a group of children with Down syndrome are facing the camera: "*Down syndrome is as a rule something that an actor could not perform convincingly.*"[35] Or to put it in Wheatley's terms – Down syndrome cannot be feigned. On the other hand: it is a characteristic

31 Wheatley, Catherine. 2011: "Naked Women, Slaughtered Animals: Ulrich Seidl and the Limits of the Real". In: Horeck, Tanya and Kendall, Tina, eds. *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

32 Wheatley 2011, p. 97.

33 *Ibid*.

34 We of course do not deny the complex symbolic and behavioural systems of animal species. What is crucial is that the interaction between an animal and the director is different to the one between the director and a human actor. Precisely because the symbolic systems in which animals function are different from the human ones, it is often precisely their body that they perform with in films.

35 Prager 2020, p. 67. My emphases.

that a person has in both the diegetic and the real world. It seems that the body as meaning, the body as a message is crucial in many of Seidl's films. The character is the same as their body – and the body is what they bring from the real world. Prager gives an interesting description of Teresa, the protagonist of *Paradise: Love*: it is "*women with aging bodies*"[36] that travel to Kenya. An aging body – that is the key characteristic that defines her as a film character. The body is also what Teresa's conversations with her friends revolve around: they talk about their sagging breasts and their fatness and, on other occasions, about the locals' dark skin, its scent and so on. So, on the one hand, the body is that which does not feign, but, on the other, it is also the bearer of narrative plots: Teresa "teaches" all her lovers how to touch her breasts. Not like animals, but tenderly, she says, with clearly unconscious racism.[37]

This issue is finally heightened in the final scene of the film when, for her birthday, Teresa's friends bring her a black stripper with a pink bow on his penis. When the man is naked, the friends compete in which will be the first to arouse him to erection. In this scene, the character of the stripper – and the man playing him – is reduced exclusively to his penis and its (in)capability of erection. We could say that this scene is about women encountering their aging bodies, a man with a young black body and a penis. A similar question emerges in the case of the care home scenes in *Import/Export*. Seidl filmed real bedridden and demented patients. Their role thus consisted of immobility and old age – the real characteristics of their bodies.[38]

Paradoxically, the meaning *in the narrative* is thus created by something that necessarily originates in reality *beyond the narrative*. As Justin Vicari writes about *Dog Days*: "*Seidl's subject is the limits of the human – the human becoming all-body, becoming animal.*"[39]

The characters in Seidl's films are thus often characterised especially by their bodies. The body defines them and that is precisely why Seidl's documentary and fiction films prove to be so difficult to distinguish: because bodies do not feign their immobility and dementia; bodies do not feign Down's syndrome; bodies do not feign fat and cellulite and sagging breasts; they do not feign a flaccid penis and dark skin.

36 *Ibid*., p. 73

37 These motifs appear throughout Seidl's oeuvre: *Paradise: Hope* (Paradies: Hoffnung, 2013) is thematically focused on a camp for overweight children and youth. The basic characteristic that defines real people and their characters is precisely their weight. Similarly, the key topic in *Models* is again bodies – breast size, penis size, skin colour etc. Both films feature non-professional actors.

38 There is an interesting predicament that the description of such film scenes finds itself in. We are used to describing stories in the present tense, probably because, as a film story, it comes alive every time we see the film. But if we talk about the real gestures and bodies of real people, it seems they are bound exclusively to the moment in which they happen. So should we talk about the film body in Seidl's works in the present or the past tense? Perhaps this is precisely the essence of the interesting predicament that Seidl confronts his audience with.

39 Vicari, Justin. 2006: "Dog Days (Hundstage)". *Film Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 1, p. 40.

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The discussion on the "shaping" of bodies when it comes to Hollywood actors often shifts from the diegetic to the real. When actors who have gained or lost a lot of weight for their role are considered, the reflection moves beyond the diegetic world. In *The Machinist* (Brad Anderson, 2004), for example, we do not watch the protagonist quite neutrally – we watch him as a horrifically emaciated Christian Bale. It seems this involves primarily a bizarre form of celebrating the actors' will and commitment to their role: for their role, actors are prepared to reshape even their body – the body the actors inevitably carry with them and live with in their normal life.

Seidl's bodies are quite different from the bodies of Hollywood actors, who in an unusual way embody the discourse about the American dream – about how anything is possible if only there is enough will – even the body is malleable. Seidl's characters, on the other hand, are captured, thrown into their body without the actual possibility of changing it. Their body is inevitable in that it creates meaning beyond what the actors can create with their acting and behaviour. The body in Seidl's films is thus not something malleable that can be adapted according to one's will and work – rather the body too comes across as more Arbusian. The body is also what is distinguished from the acting just as effect is distinguished from intention; the acting contains an intention, but there is always a body underneath it, body as an effect from reality.

Seidl's films are thus based on a quite unusual dialectic of the body, meaning and the gaze. A character can be identified with their body, which is always brought in from reality. The body is that which cannot feign, it retains something irreducibly real. The filmed body functions differently for the film's viewer than for the one who *is* that body. Seidl does not treat the bodies with haptic visuality, which would transform them into textures that the viewer can "touch with their eyes". Seidl gazes at the bodies from afar, but that does not make the bodies any less real.

Conclusion

It seems that the dialectic of the looking gaze and the touching gaze is at the centre of Seidl's latest and so far the most controversial[40] film *Sparta* (2022). Georg, a middle-aged man, buys a house in the Romanian countryside, in which he organises a judo school for children from the nearby village. Throughout the film, Georg battles his sexual attraction to children – to children's bodies, which are not only the bodies

40 An article in *Der Spiegel* claimed that the Romanian children featured in the film were exposed to nudity and violence during the film shooting. In a statement denying the accusations, Seidl claimed that the shooting was carried out with great attention to the psychical and physical well-being of underage participants.

in the story, but at the same time of course also the bodies of the actual children. In numerous scenes, Georg attentively observes the photos that he took of the children in their underwear, with the children being the characters in the film that appear exclusively with their bodies. And it is precisely the childishness of the body that Georg is sexually attracted to. Because he is aware that his lust is unacceptable, he is limited to photographing the bodies, to their visual recording and *optical* observing. There is a paradoxical moment in the film when Georg enlarges the already close shot of the back of one of the children. His skin fills the screen; Georg glides across the skin with his gaze, which must not actually touch it. Seidl's film obtains its distinctly uncomfortable character precisely with the presence of the actual body, that which comes into fiction from the real unchanged.

The figure in front of the camera thus cannot be quite free – it cannot present itself the way it tries to. Instead of the ideal image in its mind, its effect on the observer goes its own way, perhaps even in a direction opposite to the imagined ideal image. In Ulrich Seidl's films, it is often the body that creates the conflict between one's self-image and the image that appears on the outside. That is why, in its pure material sense, it is precisely the body that can be the transition between documentary and fiction films. Due to this role of the body, we can understand why Seidl is loath to talk about the distinction between documentary and fiction: as he says, both involve a certain *shaping*.[41] This is often a filmic shaping of the *body* – the body that cannot shape itself either in documentary of fiction films; nor in pure reality.

41 Mundhenke 2011, p. 118.

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