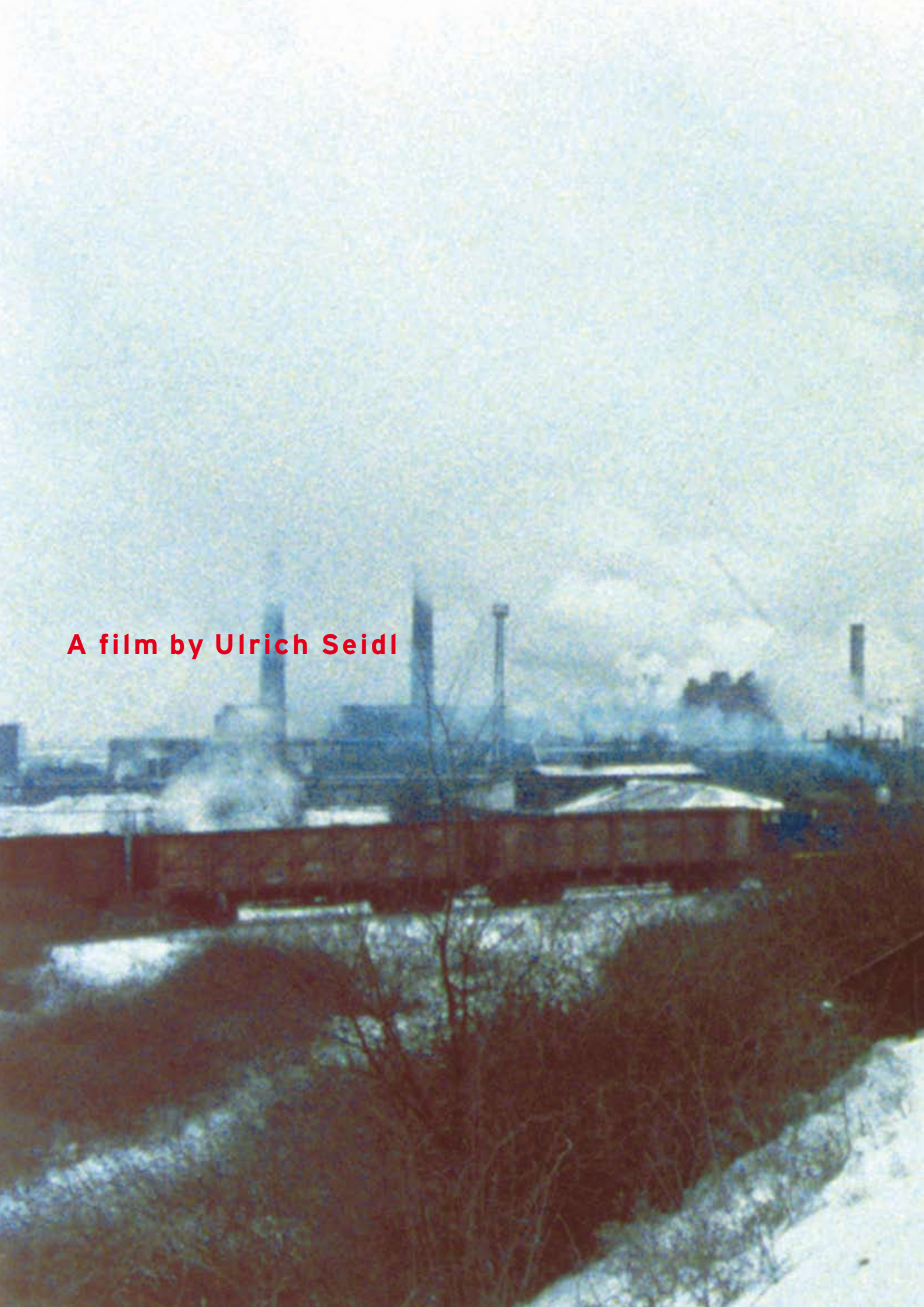




FESTIVAL DE CANNES  
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COMPETITION

# IMPORTEXPORT

**A film by Ulrich Seidl**



## **Synopsis**

**It's cold and gray.** Wintertime. People are freezing. That's how it is here in Austria.

That's how it is there in the Ukraine. Two different worlds that are increasingly coming to resemble each other. The East looks like the West, the West like the East.

**In this atmosphere** two stories take place that at first glance appear unrelated.

One is an import story. It begins in the Ukraine and leads to Austria. The other is an export story; it begins in Austria and ends in the Ukraine.

**The first** is about Olga, a young nurse and mother. Olga wants more from life.

She wants to get out of the city, out of the country. She decides to go to Austria, which she does. In this foreign country in the West, she finds work and then loses it.

She starts as a housekeeper and ends up a cleaning lady in a geriatric hospital.

***T w o i n d i v i d u a l f a t e s , t w o o p p o s i t e d i r e c t i o n s .***

**The other** story is about Paul, a young Austrian. He finally lands a job as a security guard but gets fired almost immediately. He finds himself back at the Employment Office.

He has debts and borrows more money, from friends, strangers and his stepfather, who takes him along on a job in the Ukraine setting up video gambling machines.

**Olga and Paul.** Both are looking for work, a new beginning, an existence, life:

Olga, who comes from the Eastern part of Europe, where unremitting poverty is the order of the day. Paul, who comes from the Western part, where unemployment means not hunger, but a crisis of meaning and sense of uselessness.

**Both are struggling** to believe in themselves, to find a meaning in life. In both the West and East. Both travel to a new country, and thus into its depths. IMPORT EXPORT deals with sex and death, living and dying, winners and losers, power and helplessness, and how to give the teeth of a stuffed fox a professional cleaning job.

## **Interview with Ulrich Seidl**

**IMPORT EXPORT** was a strenuous project: In the Ukraine you shot at -30° C (-22° F), in Austria, among the dying. Did this push you to your physical and psychological limits, or were those normal conditions?

**Ulrich Seidl:** Every film has its own laws, and none of them come easily to me. But extreme conditions rarely deter me. I believe that intense and extreme scenes and images can be created only under intense and extreme conditions.

Your film deals with labour migration between East and West. Which struck you first, the import or export?

**Ulrich Seidl:** Export. The idea for this film came while I was working on another film. While I was researching a group documentary titled, "Zur Lage" [State of the Nation], I became acquainted with an extended working-class family in which everyone was unemployed. Ever since, I often thought about using them as the basis for a fiction film. As for the Import side, for years I've wanted to make a film in Eastern Europe because I feel very close to the people there. So I began writing stories that move from East to West and West to East.

Are the actors in the two lead roles professionals or again non-professionals, like in your last film "Hundstage" [Dog Days]?

**Ulrich Seidl:** Neither of the leading actors had ever appeared before a camera before. In real life, Paul Hofmann, the Austrian, is very close to the role he plays. He is also unemployed, hangs out, seeking love and brawls. Ekateryna Rak, the Ukrainian, used to be a nurse and plays one in the film. Before this role she had never been to the West, and she doesn't plan to live here now.

In the story the two main characters don't meet. Why not?

**Ulrich Seidl:** In fact they were going to meet each other, without speaking, at the border. That's what was in the script, and I think that's what would be in every script. But as the shoot came closer, I decided I didn't want there to be any physical borders in the film, since in any case they are coming down. Contrary to borders within society, which remain.

You shot the film over two winters. You spent two years editing the film, and a year casting it. Why does it take you so long to make your films?

**Ulrich Seidl:** Because I'm a bit slow at everything (laughs). No, seriously: My scripts are only outlines for what to shoot. At some point the film begins, and my crew and I start on a journey. The journey has a destination but nobody knows the route it'll take to get there. It's a process that develops, and there are frequent interruptions because I simply don't know what to do next.

**IMPORT EXPORT** is a feature drama shot in a way that sometimes makes it look very much like a documentary...

**Ulrich Seidl:** In that sense **IMPORT EXPORT** is more documentary than "Dog Days", since to a large degree it was shot in real, hence documentary, existing locations and worlds. That is, in two real hospitals, real Employment Offices, real internet sex parlours and geriatric hospitals.

*Speaking of geriatric hospitals: Here, too, you mingled actors with real patients. Was it difficult to shoot with the dying?*

**Ulrich Seidl:** The only difficulties came from officials and staff, who tried everything to interfere with my project, no doubt because of the many scandals involving Austrian geriatric institutes and the subsequent damage to their reputations. Months before the start of shooting we began spending time with the patients. To prepare, actress Maria Hofstätter, for instance, worked for several months in a geriatric ward twice a week on both night and day shifts. For the patients, or at least those who were aware of it, the shooting offered a welcome change from their prison-like routine.

*Your first feature, "Dog Days", was awarded the Grand Special Jury Prize in Venice. Has success changed anything? Has it changed your work?*

**Ulrich Seidl:** I don't think so. For me making a film is always a strenuous process and it often involves a lot of suffering. I don't make it easy on myself or my collaborators, and every film is an adventure that you have to fight hard for. I don't have any recipe for success. My next film might be a disaster.

*Ed Lachman, one of the two cameramen with whom you made **IMPORT EXPORT**, described you as a moral filmmaker, but not a moralistic one. Do you agree?*

**Ulrich Seidl:** 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. And I have a vision of a life with dignity. If, beyond giving pleasure, a film is able to create an opening in viewers that has a connection with their own lives, then it has achieved a lot. I want the people in the theatre to be confronted with themselves.

*You don't fit the mould of the classical, socially critical filmmaker. You show, you don't judge.*

**Ulrich Seidl:** I don't possess an ideology for improving the world. It's never about judging the individual. I try to cast an unflinching gaze on life. I believe that reality touches all of us, with all our fears and desires: the fear of death and the desire for love.

*The pessimism in your work has been discussed often. However you also work with the element of humour...*

**Ulrich Seidl:** Humour often makes the horrible, the inevitable, more bearable. And I'm always on the lookout for places where tragedy and comedy overlap. As far as pessimism is concerned, I don't think that optimists are necessarily more constructive than pessimists, so they shouldn't be seen as better. When I look at the world with open eyes, I can't avoid being pessimistic. But like every pessimist I also see things of beauty.

***IMPORT EXPORT** is a film that shocks, but it can also be seen as your most humanistic film to date. Have you grown gentler and wiser?*

**Ulrich Seidl:** Wiser, I hope, but not gentler. But all my films are the product of my humanistic world view - even if they do disturb, provoke or shock.

## **Excerpts from the shooting diary**

*of Klaus Pridnig, assistant director and producer Ukraine*

### **26th shooting day** *Winter 2006, eastern Ukraine, -20° to -30° C (-4 to -22° F)*

I've seen Seidl smiling and happy twice during shooting. Once, when we were surprised by a blizzard while shooting in Košice, and we could barely see our hands in front of our eyes, and the second time in eastern Ukraine, with snowdrifts and -30° weather. Everyone was at the extreme limits of what they could give and take, only one person was happy: Seidl.

### **34th shooting day** *Red Bar in the Hotel Zarkarpatia, Uzhgorod, western Ukraine*

Since Seidl insists that all locations be left as they are in terms of atmosphere and people, we had to shoot in the Red Bar while it was in full swing. Caught between drunken Ukrainian rowdies and corrupt, semi-criminal security guards, we filmed for two nights while people insulted and threatened us. Once we even had to call in the police, who immediately demanded money to get rid of the drunken rowdies terrorizing us. Seidl, concentrating on directing, barely noticed and, like he did during the snowstorm at -30°, smiled happily. For the third time, as it happens.

### **42nd shooting day** *On how Ukrainians never fill up their gas tanks*

Vehicles often ran out of gas because we shot longer than I originally estimated. Once Seidl stamped his feet like Rumpelstiltskin because a motorcycle ran out of gas. He didn't understand that no matter how much money I gave the vehicles manager, the guy would put only a pint or two of gas in the tank and pocket the rest of the money. In the poverty of eastern Ukraine, minimal tanking up (a few drops at a time) is a tradition that can't be overturned by anything. And certainly not simply because an Austrian director wills it so.

### **45th shooting day** *Enakievo steel plant and the mafia*

One of our favourite locations was a steel mill in Enakievo. In order to get permission to shoot there we had to negotiate directly with a branch of the Donetsk mafia. After intense discussions with one of the local bosses during an alcohol-overloaded evening that played havoc with my health, we managed to obtain permission. But, as is so often the case with Seidl, shortly before we were about to shoot, he decided not to use the location after all and simply cancelled our filming there. The boss couldn't believe it. Only when we paid the rent for the (unused) location, throwing in a bottle of fine brandy with it, did he promise not to kill us - as long as we kept out of his sight.

### **47th shooting day** *Turning off the heating at -20°*

In eastern Ukraine we'd chosen an apartment for the character of Olga. Like many other cold apartments in eastern Ukraine, the heating was centrally controlled. That is, the State turned the heating on and off. As luck would have it, the apartment was warmer than usual. But because Seidl wanted to see people's breath, the way he had during his research, we had to wangle the owners' permission to put valves in the pipes so we could turn off the heat. For days they were convinced we were crazy - who turns off the heat at -20°? After heated discussions, they finally agreed to let Seidl freeze.

**51st shooting day** *Casting lay actors in the geriatric ward*

Despite my conviction that the shoot could not possibly be any more difficult, Seidl insisted on having a dog at the side of Andi, the nursing assistant. And as Seidl almost never casts professional actors, of course the dog also had to be an amateur actor - a trained canine was out of the question. We combed the hospital grounds looking for nurses, doctors and support staff who owned a dog. We organized what could be called a doggy casting call. The dog we finally chose added to our stress level more than anything else because it only appears in only two scenes in the final film.

**57th shooting day** *Mardi gras in the geriatric hospital*

The most difficult aspect of the entire shoot in the geriatric hospital was the mardi gras party. Bringing all the elderly patients from the different wards to the location, getting them dressed and made up, coordinating our shooting schedule with their meal schedule, convincing the staff to cooperate or at least calming them down - all of this with Strauss's "Wiener Blut" waltz playing hour after hour - it was a Sisyphean labour. Of all our shooting days at the Lainz clinic, this was the most strenuous, the most difficult, the most complicated in terms of organisation, and the most sensitive with respect to obtaining authorizations. Seldom were we as happy to have completed a day's shooting... What's more, seldom were we as happy to have gotten it in the can at all! This sort of thing doesn't impress Seidl. Months later, we shot the same scene all over again because Seidl wasn't happy with his material. I know him. I could have predicted it.

**62nd shooting day** *Mister Koller and the roast pork*

One difficult patient, Mister Koller, was only willing to cooperate when his television was playing. For hours he lay, leaning on his side in bed, his nose an inch from the screen, because he was almost blind, with the volume cranked up, because his hearing was bad. If ever we asked him to turn off the television or to turn down the sound, our answer was a screaming fit of the highest order. Mister Koller yelled, Mister Koller shouted. It was unbearable. Then Seidl appeared. He talked with him and promised to bring him roast pork the next time. From that moment on Mister Koller didn't stop asking about Mister Seidl, if perhaps he'd brought more roast pork. The television was no longer a problem. The roast pork he ate at night, when everyone else was asleep.

**68th shooting day** *Dear Saint Mister Ulrich*

As soon as anyone entered her room, Frau Schlamm, ancient and bed-ridden, began to pray. "St Anthony," she would implore, "please, please bring me to my parents' garden. Please, bring me to the bus stop so I can at least take the bus there. Please, dear St Anthony. My parents will pay you back with lots of fruit for you." After we'd shot there for two days she now prayed, "Dear Mister Ulrich, please bring me to the bus stop so I can take the bus to my parents. Please, please dear Mister Ulrich..."

## **A Talk with Ed Lachman**

*The American Ed Lachman is one of contemporary cinema's most versatile cameramen. His early career coincided with the heyday of the New German Cinema of the 70s. He worked with Werner Herzog ("Stroszek"), Wim Wenders and Volker Schlöndorff. Later he served as DOP on such US blockbusters as Steven Soderbergh's "Erin Brockovich" with Julia Roberts. He has also stood behind the camera for some of the most successful US indie movies, such as Sofia Coppola's "The Virgin Suicides", Todd Haynes's "I'm Not There" and Robert Altman's last film, "A Prairie Home Companion", and he both shot and co-directed Larry Clarks "Ken Park". Ed Lachman's opus encompasses 62 documentary and fiction features.*

*Ulrich Seidl is known to be a perfectionist. At the same time, he is open to creative input from people who know what they're doing. Were you prepared to help shape the film's content?*

**Ed Lachman:** Well, Ulrich is very good at telling stories visually. He creates tableaux that allow the audience to enter a world from the outside, almost like someone entering a room and looking around, or walking down a street. In some ways he lets the viewer be the camera, and then he uses a hand-held camera to get even closer to his protagonists so that the audience is even more involved.

*Did you have to improvise a lot, in terms of your work as cameraman?*

**Ed Lachman:** Yes, there was a certain amount of improvisation, and I think that's where the strength of his images comes from. They're not overstylized, glossy pictures, they're images that he wants us to believe. There is no contradiction between what you see and what you feel for the protagonists. It's all organic. I think that Ulrich's films capture some of the fragility of human experience, and that the camera must also capture it.

*Seidl's images are often provocative. Was it easy for you to enter this bizarre universe, or did you have problems?*

**Ed Lachman:** No, not at all. I think that people don't always realize that these images are metaphors. That's one of the strengths of cinema, how you're able to tell a story with visual metaphors. And how images convey ideas and go beyond what you are seeing.

*How do you deal with Ulrich Seidl's curiosity for bringing to light the most intimate secrets of his protagonists?*

**Ed Lachman:** To me, Seidl reveals private moments of people that you don't necessarily want to see, moments that you may experience yourself. I think that's what makes his storytelling so effective. For me, in fact, he's a very moral director. His storytelling is very moral, without being moralistic. I think that's something very difficult, and I don't think there's been a director since Kieslowski who's done that. He shows things with his own personal kind of morality, without preaching to the viewer. Seidl allows viewers to use their own intelligence to choose how they view it.

*What's involved for you in following Seidl as he walks the very thin line between documentary and narrative fiction film?*

**Ed Lachman:** Strangely I think all films are documentaries. Because even in a narrative film, where you set up the camera and arrange the lighting, and the actors say the same lines, no two takes or movements are ever identical.

*Seidl is known to be a director who's not very talkative on set. What is it like working with intuitive, "quiet" directors like him?*

**Ed Lachman:** It's a question of mutual understanding. You can talk till the cows come home and still not understand each other. You don't communicate only through words. What I find interesting about his work is that he explores the boundaries of film. Traditionally we think of film as conveying the illusion of reality. But what is the reality of the illusion? I think that he questions what the reality of the illusion is. Or is reality the illusion? Maybe he's much more interested in that: Is reality the illusion?

*That's one of the paradoxes of Seidl's work. What you're saying sounds very theoretical. But on the other hand there's the sheer carnal energy of his films...*

**Ed Lachman:** True, and I think that's what so many people find so disturbing. They're unsure: Is it supposed to document a kind of reality, or is it a narrative element? But I think that if you want to tell a story you have to explore both sides. And, as I said earlier, he holds up this mirror to us in which we can each see ourself. That's the strength of his work, and what makes his work so unique.

## **A Talk with Wolfgang Thaler**

*Wolfgang Thaler has often filmed as cameraman in extreme situations; his images are some of the most unusual to be seen in contemporary European cinema. Alongside his collaboration of many years with Ulrich Seidl on films such as "Dog Days", "Jesus, du weißt" [Jesus, You Know] and "Spaß ohne Grenzen" [Fun Without Limits], he also shot Michael Glawogger's radical travel films "Megacities" and "Workingman's Death", Andrea Maria Dusl's East Block road movie "Blue Moon" as well as Pepe Danquart's mountain-climbing film "Am Limit" [To the Limit]. A certified beekeeper, Thaler is also a successful director in his own right, having made films about bees, ants and salt.*

*You are known as the creator of magnificent, powerful images. How is it for a cameraman like you to encounter a director who has his own powerful images in his head?*

**Wolfgang Thaler:** It's not the job of a cameraman to translate his own ideas into pictures, but rather those of the director. But sometimes I did attempt to "de-Seidl" Ulrich Seidl's images slightly, to infuse them with slightly more soul, such as when I filmed with a hand-held camera. Ulrich isn't as strict as he was when we first started working together. He lets himself be convinced by other images when he feels that they're good. Ulrich Seidl is someone who knows precisely what he doesn't want, but who remains open to everything else.

*Do you see yourself as a specialist for extreme situations that most people would walk away from?*

**Wolfgang Thaler:** Not at all. For me extreme situations were simply the only chance to establish myself as a cameraman. It began with an offer to travel to Tibet and, for four months, to carry my camera on my back over 5000-metre passes. That was my ticket into the film world. But it certainly wasn't my intention. And, thank God, I also make easier films.

*IMPORT EXPORT was a strenuous project. It was shot over three years, in the Ukraine at -30° and in Austria among the dying. Is that the limit of what can be endured?*

**Wolfgang Thaler:** Yes, but for me that's normal.

## Biographies

**Ekateryna Rak** appears on camera for the first time in IMPORT EXPORT. She was found during a long casting process in the Ukraine. Originally a nurse, she plays one in the film. The 28-year-old now acts on stage in Nikolaev (eastern Ukraine) in such roles as Snow White. Before IMPORT EXPORT Ekateryna Rak had never visited Western Europe, and she only learned German for her part.



**Paul Hofmann** loves fighting and fighting dogs. The native of Vienna left his parents' home at 14 and has led a turbulent life ever since. He does not have a fixed address, he often changes phone numbers, and he once served a jail sentence for minor offences. He believes in true love and is waiting for it.



**Michael Thomas** The son of cabaret artist Fred Weis and actress Tilla Hohenfels, in his youth he worked as a sailor and bouncer. For 18 years he has played the part of Old Shatterhand, and is thus the dean of German-speaking actors. He's an all-round talent as actor, singer, author and runner-up state boxing champion.



**Maria Hofstätter** After her award-winning performance as a hitchhiker in Seidl's first feature "Dog Days", she donned a nurse's uniform and worked day and night shifts in a geriatric ward to prepare for her role in IMPORT EXPORT. She changed diapers and false teeth and was soon affectionately known to staff and patients as Sister Maria.



**Georg Friedrich** is someone I want in all my films, says Ulrich Seidl. Since "Dog Days" Friedrich has appeared on screen in some twenty films. In IMPORT EXPORT, the Vienna native plays a nursing assistant. He found the model for his role in a real hospital worker with a real dog in a Vienna geriatric ward, and he found his way into his part by changing diapers.



**Natalija Baranova** a native of Latvia from Riga has already appeared in several films, including Andrei Chernykh's "Avstriyskoe Pole" and Barbara Gräffner's "Mein Russland" [My Russia]. She plays Olga's Ukrainian friend in the Internet sex agency. Baranova, who studied German in Vienna, is currently working as a waitress.



**Natalia Epureanu** Olga's friend in Vienna was a gym teacher in her native Moldavia. In Vienna she worked as a cleaning lady and a zoo keeper. Her story is similar to Olga's: she left her child behind in Moldavia, lived in Austria illegally, sent for her daughter to join her years later and now has made a life for herself.



**Erich Finsches** has been many things in his life: self-service restaurant owner, market salesman, taxi driver, drink manufacturer, and actor in "Dog Days". Today he receives a disability pension and owns an apartment building. For IMPORT EXPORT he took his place in bed among the patients in a geriatric hospital and was the first person to die in an Ulrich Seidl film.



## Filmography

**Ulrich Seidl** born 1952, lives in Vienna, Austria

Ulrich Seidl is the director of numerous award-winning documentaries such as "Jesus, du weißt" [Jesus, You Know], "Models" [Models] and "Tierische Liebe" [Animal Love]. His work methods, achieving the greatest possible authenticity and showing people in the most solitary and personal moments, has aroused intense debate. His first fiction feature, "Hundstage" [Dog Days], won the Grand Jury Special Prize at the 2001 Venice Film Festival. IMPORT EXPORT is the first film that Seidl has also produced.

**Theatrical Films** 1990 Good News - *Von Kolporteuren, toten Hunden und anderen Wienern* [Good News - On Newspaper Vendors, Dead Dogs and other Viennese] | 1992 Mit Verlust ist zu rechnen [Losses to Be Expected] | 1995 Tierische Liebe [Animal Love] | 1998 Models [Models] | 2001 Hundstage [Dog Days] | 2001 Zur Lage [State of the Nation] | 2003 Jesus, du weißt [Jesus, You Know]

## Credits

Austria 2007, 135 min., German/Russian/Slovakian

Director: Ulrich Seidl | Script: Ulrich Seidl, Veronika Franz | Camera: Ed Lachman asc, Wolfgang Thaler | Sound: Ekkehart Baumung | Set Design: Andreas Donhauser, Renate Martin | Editor: Christof Schertenleib | Cast: Ekateryna Rak, Paul Hofmann, Michael Thomas, Maria Hofstätter, Georg Friedrich, Natalija Baranova, Natalia Epureanu, Petra Morzė, Dirk Stermann, Erich Finsches

Production: Ulrich Seidl Film Produktion GmbH | Co-financed by: Coproduction Office

With the support of: Österreichisches Filminstitut, Filmfonds Wien, Land Niederösterreich  
In collaboration with: ORF (Film/Fernsehabskommen), ARTE FRANCE CINÉMA, ZDF/arte, Conwert Immobilien

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Produced by: Ulrich Seidl Film Produktion GmbH | Wasserburgergasse 5/7 | 1090 Vienna, Austria  
Coordination: Tommy Pridnig | Editors: Veronika Franz, Andrea Maria Dusl | Translation: Robert Gray/Kinograph, Marcel Saché |  
Images: frame enlargements © Ulrich Seidl Film Produktion | Set photographs: Attila Boa, Mario Hopfgartner |  
Graphic Concept & Design: Kornelius Tarmann, Vienna | Printer: AgensKetterl Druckerei GmbH, Austria