“Filming is a process, and I don’t cling to what is in the script.” The director, screenplay author, and producer Ulrich Seidl, in an interview with journalist Thomas Hummitzsch, on his new trilogy of films, Liebe, Glaube, Hoffnung (Love, Faith, Hope).

Mr. Seidl, the second part of your film trilogy ends with the Bach chorale “Ach wie flüchtig, ach wie nichtig, ist der Menschen Leben” (oh, how fleeting, how insubstantial, is man’s life). If life is so insubstantial, why make a trilogy about it?
The one doesn’t exclude the other. A bit of wisdom is hidden in the lines of that song: life is very short. Many things people do in life seem senseless, due to the brevity and insubstantiality of life. Nevertheless, one is always struggling—at least I am—to examine these truths, as a theme. I do this with my films, too. I want to explore these truths as a theme within the context of change. In the process I am also always trying to talk about the dignity or the loneliness of the individual.

All three films are narratively independent and do not determine each other. Do you think it’s right to call them a trilogy?
Of course; that was my decision, after all. The trilogy’s effect becomes obvious when you watch them all together in one block. (Note: that was first possible at this year’s Berlinale.) Then you see a larger complexity that is not yet apparent in the individual films. Even though each film stands on its own, when you watch them one after another, other emotions arise in the audience. You become aware of more connections among the women and their stories, and this creates a different cinematic experience.

Making large photographs out of the films’ 16mm frames has been a dream of yours for a long time. Are you satisfied with Liebe, Glaube, Hoffnung as a book of photographs?
Yes; in the last few months I’ve been working intensively on the book and am pleased that the exhibition at the C|O Galerie and the book are successful.
Was this your first experience with transforming your film material into photography?

No, there’s a history leading up to the photo book. Last year, for instance, I made a poster for the Wiener Festwochen from a 16mm frame. And the posters for each film have always been copied from film frames. I’ve never used film stills in the classic sense, but have always copied press photos straight from the film.

Looking at the photo book, the clear structure of the “Seidl tableaux” becomes far more obvious than it is when watching the films. Everything is either in the center, or arranged around it. Are you trying to present a system?

No, not that. This structure corresponds to my view of the world. The space and the relationship of the people to the space, where a human being is trivial and small, are very important. However, even though I use central perspective quite often, I never plan it, in the sense of a theory or a certain intention. It’s just simply arisen over the course of my work. It corresponds to the view that I have, which will have come from somewhere. Some say that this view comes from Christian iconography, from altar paintings. Very possibly.

So your protagonists are in a visible space, because man does not exist in isolation?

The space is important, because it always adds something. Every room in which a person lives says something more about this person.

You only write scenarios for your screenplays; you work out the dialogue with the actors during the process. During this work process, how do you reconcile the necessity for improvisation—especially with amateur actors—with the fact that they are entitled to allow their characters to be active within a clearly structured framework?

The structure has nothing to do with amateur actors. I work with amateurs and professionals alike, and there is a reason why I do that. Amateurs are at least as good as professionals; there is no difference in the staging. I’ve always tried to frame and set up images precisely, to set things straight, in a way. Nevertheless, it is still possible to let actors—professional or not—act in them. If, for example, you have images in which two or four women are talking with each other, as in Paradies: Liebe (Paradise: Love), for instance, then the scene is set up exactly. The ladies are free to talk within the framework of this arranged image. Each supplements the each other, and the scene, despite its artificial quality, takes on a documentary character, because the women themselves are acting naturally, and speaking a natural kind of language.

The mixture of staging and documentary is what gives the Seidl films their magical allure. What is the ratio of staging to documentary?

Everything is staged, even the purest of documentary films. As soon as you hold a camera in your hand and turn it on, you decide what and how much the camera will take in, and when you’ll turn it off again. Shooting a film is a continual process of making decisions about things. But I don’t regard documentary films as if I were not present ; instead, I reinforce my means. Despite the documentary aspect, I consciously try to create visuals.
When you’re filming, do you adhere strictly to the script, or do you allow yourself to flow with the process?

The script is, for me, like a guideline that I can change any time I want to. And after I’ve assembled the film material and the scenes into chronological order, I can take the results and move things around here and there. Or I can take things that I’ve thought out beforehand and throw them out. And every set gives me new ideas. Filming is a process, and I don’t cling to what’s in the script.

In your trio Liebe, Glaube, Hoffnung we hear a psalm of love, the triptych brings to mind altarpieces, and with the three characters, the trinity is not far behind. What role did your religious upbringing have when you were writing the screenplay?

None, at first. Making a film about faith, love, and hope was not the basic idea. I wanted to make a film about three women, with Paradise—that was the original title—as a place that was longed for. Three women, each searching for her own paradise, with very different stories and paths. And it wasn’t until I realized that it wasn’t one film, but three, that the questions started arising. First: in what order do you watch the films? And second: what are they going to be called? One day the title, Liebe, Glaube, Hoffnung, was simply there. I liked it right away, because these concepts are deeply anchored in our Christian culture. When it comes to Austria specifically, you can add that there is a play of the same name by Ödön von Horváth. Also, you can transpose the concepts, because where there is love, there is also hope and faith.

Paradise brings to mind the Fall. All of your films are also more or less about “forbidden” sex. Is sexuality today still actually a sin?

No, and that’s not the way I meant it, either. On the contrary. It’s my opinion that sexuality plays an important role, and it very often determines a person’s fate or path. You can also see that in my films. Teresa in Paradies: Liebe is looking for sexuality. And she looks for it in Kenya, because she obviously no longer finds the kind of sexuality she would like here. Anna Maria in Paradies: Glaube (Paradise: Faith) searches for sexuality in a way that makes her fall so deeply in love with Jesus that this love becomes physical. So here, too, it’s about physicality. Last, but not least, sexuality also always plays a role in my work, because it determines the power relations between the sexes.

In Paradies: Liebe you not only tell the story of a sex tourist, Teresa (and turn our notion of who exercises power over whom upside-down), but you also tell a parable about global economic and power relations, similar to what you do in your film Import/Export.

That’s exactly right. That’s why I wanted to film in Africa, because there, in the common history shared by Europe and Africa, I found precisely what adds this additional level. After all, colonial history still goes on, just in a different form, as the film also shows.
To what extent was it a challenge to re-stage this post-colonial reality—which is, at the same time, still colonial—with the African actors?

As a result of this work over the past several years I’ve spent a lot of time with black people, gotten to know many black people. Now, whenever I go to Kenya, they’re all standing there, wanting money from me. They assume that the white guy who’s there has money. They are also of the opinion that, due to their past, Europe and the Europeans are to blame for their fate—which is also not entirely wrong. But you also can’t escape whatever role you’re in. As a white person, wherever you go in Africa, you’re always one of the people whose money someone else would like to have.

Your second film, Paradies: Glaube, created a scandal at the Venice Film Festival among Catholic hardliners who considered it blasphemous. Do you feel misunderstood?

I didn’t feel misunderstood, but of course I immediately replied that the film is not blasphemous. Blasphemy is when someone is deliberately profane or ridicules believers. But that’s not what I’m doing. I am showing a situation in a narrative film which is completely correct, as far as this character and the narrative are concerned. And even if certain Christians don’t want to acknowledge it, what I’m showing is a truth.

The most fragile, vulnerable character in all three films is the adolescent Melanie in Paradies: Hoffnung (Paradise: Hope). Unlike the other two lead actors, Margarethe Tiesel and Maria Hofstätter, Melanie Lenz is not a professional actor. What was it like, working with her?

When you’re working with a 13-year-old girl, you have to be aware that you can’t get as much out of this girl as you can when you’re working with an adult. You don’t get very much; not much comes out of the person herself. So I used what she was able to offer, which also just happened to be there, anyway. Then you talk about the first kiss, about early sexual experiences, and such things. And of course the work was conducted more carefully, in order to protect her. After all, she is still a child. It was clear to me from the start that I had to take another tack. But the work on the set, the process, was no different with Melanie Lenz than it was with Margarethe Tiesel or Maria Hofstätter.

You set up a real weight-loss camp for the film. What was that like?

We organized the children as if they were at camp. There were teachers and coaches who took care of the children. There was diet cuisine, a regular daily routine, dorm rooms for the children. It was organized day in and day out. Filming took place on site, and if necessary we could get the children when the others were busy.

The Paradise trilogy also shakes up our common ideas of beauty. What does the conformist image of beauty have to say about our societies?

This image is a prescribed image that has to be questioned, and we cannot accept its media-related dictates. Women who don’t conform to this image are under enormous pressure and compulsions. They have a problem. The question for us, as a society, is: "Why do we allow
this?" Of course, images of beauty are always changing, and are culturally defined. In Africa Margarethe Tiesel is a beautiful woman; here, she’s fat. If you look at images of women from recent decades, then you realize that they have changed enormously. The thinness craze developed sometime in the 1970s. Before that, women looked differently.

I think the thinness craze is linked to the criteria of the capitalist market. It’s about being able to sell yourself, about the attractiveness of the product known as the body. Being thin doesn’t automatically mean being attractive; it just means conforming to the prescribed notion of beauty. I always wonder why something like that even exists, or why we can’t escape it. This notion of beauty naturally creates isolation in turn, because people who don’t conform are thought to have a problem.

Within the period of a year, you were invited to show the three films from your trilogy at the three largest film festivals in Europe: Cannes, Venice, and Berlin. What does this success mean to you?

It’s great to see how you can achieve a broader effect and draw more media attention with that. It also helps you to get as many viewers as possible into cinemas all over Europe. Success is also always an affirmation of the work and the long path my collaborators, actors, and I have walked for these "Paradises."

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