

Watershed October 2008 Podcast

The retrospective of Ulrich Seidl is now travelling across the UK and Ireland. The director was here for a week doing press and pr and we got him to do some onstage question and answer sessions after preview screenings of **Import/Export**. What was exciting and somewhat nerve-wracking for me about this was that having been raving on about the film for the past year and half, this is when it goes in front of a general audience and they tell us what they think, you can begin to gauge their response. One of the aims of my job here at Watershed is to put on work that is new, distinctive contributions to the art of film. This can mean they are out of the majority of audiences' comfort zones. So it was pleasing and rewarding that such a thought-provoking film, as **Import/Export** should be received with positive admiration.

The audience at Cambridge dived straight in after the screening to find out more about the film. There was no need for the questions I had prepared. At the ICA in London the Q&A went on for an hour and half – and that was after a 2hr film.

Here in Bristol the majority of people stayed for the discussion, those that left, passing the director at the back of the auditorium praised him for the film. The word masterpiece was mentioned and I off course would agree with that. The interview was recorded and can be viewed at www.dshed.net.

What pleased me about the audience response to **Import/Export** is in direct proportion to the disbelief at the response of some professionals in the film business. Apparently the film is too tough for some cinemas audiences – imagine the Tate saying that Francis Bacon was too tough for their audience? Some press would not interview the director saying he is not well enough known. This is a director whose earlier film **Dog Days** won at Venice and whose current film played in competition at Cannes. The upshot of all this is that the film will only open on 7 prints – which will be a self-fulfilling argument to the “he is unknown” criticism. Let's hope some of the film journalists get it and back it. But it opens on the same day as **Brideshead** Revisited and I suspect that is the kind of safe cultural choice the various editors will get behind. Lets see on Fri 3 Oct when **Import/export** opens.

I referenced Russian director Alexander Sokurov in trying to find a parallel for Ulrich Seidl. Sokurov's new film **Alexandra** opens this month. It is a quite beautiful lyrical meditation following a grandmother who visits the military base in Chechnya where her grandson is stationed. Her maternal and female presence shows up the machismo posturing of war and poignantly reminds you of the simple but powerful ties that bind.

In a recent interview the director said that art prepares us for acceptance of our mortality. I've got a hunch he may well be right and will explore that further in future programmes and podcasts. He also said quite forthrightly and I paraphrase:

Cinema has the aggressive ability to help people adapt to the fact that they can kill others – some director's aestheticise this – Sokurov continues – a filmmaker who shows a person killed on screen commits a public crime and he believes it should be banned.

It is a thought and debate that goes to the heart of cinema as entertainment. When you think of some of the images that are offered up to us as entertaining or thrilling. It is a complicated one – is that Peckinpah and Eisenstein damned with the same criticism as Tarantino? The counter argument is that it is only a film or that we are intelligent enough to distinguish between real life and fantasy but interestingly Sokurov says 'help adapt' I'm sure this is a debate that will rumble on.

Alexandra opens Fri 24 Oct

Italy is reasserting itself on the feature film stage after an erratic absence. Two films open this month. The first **Gomorra** – which I suspect Sokurov might not approve – is about the mafia. Most mafia films I have seen are by Americans and invariably romanticise and indeed aestheticise both the mafia and Italy. Gomorra directed by Matteo Garrone defiantly defies the romanticisation to tell a terrifyingly real story.

Quiet Chaos tells indeed a quieter but no less profound and thoughtful story. Starring Nanni Moretti it has a remarkably dramatic opening and consequently revolves around a businessman who once he has dropped his daughter off stays in the park opposite her school to wait for her to finish. Through this he rediscovers

the importance of relationships in the minutiae and milieu around him. In effect the whole world is in the park.

It is uplifting, warm and wonderful cinema. As Sokurov says about **Alexandra** – we should all hug our grandmothers so you leave Quiet Chaos wanting to hug Nanni Moretti. I looked back on my Berlin Film Festival blog to see what I first wrote about Quiet Chaos and I still agree with what I wrote then – See it before its American remake.

Gomorrah opens on Fri 10 Oct

Quiet Chaos opens Fri 24 Oct