

SAFARI (2016), by Ulrich Seidl ¹

Ulrich Seidl's latest film could well go under the radar, branded a documentary and only screened (in Italy and Spain) in a handful of minor cinemas.

But it is well worth a watch. *Safari* (2016) focuses on German and Austrian tourists who spend their holidays in African territory (on the border region between Namibia and South Africa), hunting antelopes, goats, wildebeest, giraffes, elephants, and other wild creatures. Once shot down, the animals are photographed alongside the hunter, weapon, and dog who have made the killing possible.

The film packs a strong emotional punch despite (or perhaps owing to) its clear-cut, geometric surety and the rigorous, incisive precision of its visuals. Seidl dissects both characters and situations with an icy, scientific exactness, exposing a gruesome, ruthless reality beneath the outward normality and ordinariness.

The fiction retains a documentary tone, featuring real footage and interviews in which the interviewer is neither seen nor heard. This is the neutral, phlegmatic eye of the camera, placed squarely head-on, in front of the respondents. Just as the African fauna is patiently stalked, shot down and photographed when hunting, the camera now “shoots” at *human* fauna. A “specimen” comes thick and fast: a couple sunbathing in swimming costumes. It's a neat synecdoche, a clear epic epithet and leitmotiv of the “average Western citizen” – in Seidl's words, the real

¹ SAFARI. Director: Ulrich Seidl • Script: Ulrich Seidl, Veronika Franz • Photography: Wolfgang Thaler, Jerzy Palacz • Production Company: Ulrich Seidl Film Produktion, Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF), ARTE Deutschland, Danish Documentary Production, WDR Westdeutscher Rundfunk • Country: Austria, Denmark, Germany • Year: 2016 • Running Time: 90'. Latest film by Austrian director Ulrich Seidl, submitted for preview at the 73rd Venice Film Festival (not entered). I would like to express my gratitude to the distributor Lab80, based in Bergamo, for enabling me to re-watch the film and explore some of the critical material written on it. This article is published in the Spanish online magazine “mientras tanto”, no. 163, December 2017 (mistakenly dated 11/2016).

subject of the film. In one splendid, wordless scene, a group of giraffes look on, undaunted yet powerless, as one of their kind thrashes about in agony. The astonishing image creates a poignant antithesis between animal fauna – endowed with grace, majesty, elegance, and even dignity – and human fauna, debased by the obesity, apathy, tedium, and physical and mental idleness that characterise opulent societies, and sufficiently well-heeled to afford to travel to defenceless corners of the world in search of stimulation, pleasure, and entertainment.

The film is bookended by the keen, mighty blast of a hunting horn before the opening titles, and the blare of four hunters at the final credits. These triumphant tones hark back to the hunting tradition so venerated by the European aristocratic classes, with whom the interviewees share a high social status, a love of leisure, and the exploitation of inferior social groups. This “new money” typically strive to emulate the aristocratic behaviour of those who, just like them, colonised the world with the declared aim of development and civilisation, but the very real aim of domination and exploitation.

The film features no other music through a narration that opts for silence, half-whispered dialogue, the swoosh of the wind, the crunch of footsteps, or an SUV over stony ground. There is also the chatter of rifle-fire that, with mathematical accuracy, mows down its prey with aptly warlike, cutting-edge, highly-developed contraptions that shoot with greater precision and from greater distances. The marksman lies in wait in a hunter’s cabin, invisible to the chosen target. Killing at a distance, keeping one’s face hidden and one’s hands clean, is the typical practice of armies that colonise in the present day, dropping drones onto “marked” targets that, invariably, fall upon innocent, helpless victims. See but go unseen: that’s the key to Power, from Calderón’s Basilio to Bentham’s Panopticon.²

A prime example is the gun barrel at the start of the film that,

² This is a reference to Calderón de la Barca’s *La vida es sueño* (1635); see my ‘*La vida es sueño*’, o la apología de la Monarquía cristiana, in Loreto Busquets, *Pensamiento social y político en la literatura española. Desde el Renacimiento hasta el siglo XX*, Madrid, Editorial Verbum, 2014, pp. 72-100.

soundlessly and menacingly, creeps out from a slit in the hunter's cabin and points directly at the viewer. Surprised by the sudden gunshot, one can't help but jerk back, just as the audience at Louis Lumière's famous *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* (1896) are supposed to have done, fearing that the train was coming right at them. The "safari" of the title operates on multiple levels, as I will now demonstrate. Firstly, it is worth drawing attention to the style of this extraordinary film, set in an almost abstract space, and engulfed in a perennial zenithal light. The effect is enhanced by the geometric symmetry of the "portraits", where the protagonists remain motionless before an invisible camera that, in turn, records their insignificant yet revealing words. A further geometric parallelism emerges between the photographs with which these artless explorers immortalise their exploits and spoils and the relentless, objective, and unflinching shots of Seidl's camera, which highlight the mentality, ignorance, false guilty conscience, and even pathology that underlie and define the actions of those who do not know the real reasons for their own behaviour.

The camera tails the characters with the same obstinacy that they demonstrate when stalking and pursuing their victims, and then dissects them with a keen scalpel, just as the native butchers skin and dismember the fallen prey with sharp knives. Seidl examined such human fauna with similar cruelty and skill in his brilliant *Dog Days* (2001)³, which he references here from the outset through the aforementioned sunbathing couple, who slather themselves in suntan lotion in line with the consumerist standards of our time. This emblematic figure – obese, dripping in sweat, eyes shut or covered with a newspaper to symbolise an unconscious, comfortable blindness – acquires a grotesque pathos when, aged and powerless, he too joins in the hunting "adventure". Needing the help of a ladder to reach the cabin, he lounges around half-asleep, swigging beer, snoring, and burping faintly. He is no better or

³ The film was awarded the Grand Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival. His other titles include *Animal Love* (1996), the *Paradise trilogy: Paradise: Love* (2012), *Paradise: Faith* (2012), *Paradise: Hope* (2013), followed by *In the Basement* (2014) and *Goodnight Mommy* (2014).

worse than the young, comely explorers that the handheld camera follows with tireless tracking shots throughout the hunt. In place of world-famous painters of yore who would celebrate the bloodsport in portraits of aristocratic privilege and leisure, all of them carry binoculars and cameras in order to immortalise their exploits with a modern-day selfie.

During the course of the film, two personalities clash without clashing: the tourists from the North and the natives from the South – occupants and occupied, victors and vanquished. The sharp editing – a curt juxtaposition of antithetical scenes – and the skilful use of both light and colour reveal the irrevocable insanable dichotomy of a country colonised time and time again. Against the radiant brilliance of the landscape, the setting for the hunt, and the off-white, opalescent gleam that illuminates the huts of the “white” tourists, Seidl pits the half-light, the semi-darkness, and the cold hues of the restricted, peripheral spaces to which they actively consign the indigenous population. The camera moves slowly, resting and delaying on static scenes in both locations. Through the abrupt editing, which alternates back and forth between the two locations, they clarify and comment on one another. The result is a paralysis of cinematic dynamism, converting the flow of the action into a frame – that is, into a testimonial document.

The film is built around dichotomy and opposition. Whites voice almost all the lines and take up almost all the stage (in the theatrical sense, too); blacks are relegated to the invisible space of the wings, out of the way, where no-one even bothers to translate their conversation. The voices of those in charge are juxtaposed with the silence of their vassals, and the whites profit from their services without ever stooping to speak to them, as though they did not exist. They shut their eyes to what follows in the slaughterhouse, where they tear the cattle to pieces and take their heads to build a “picture” of their prize. In an exotic flourish, they include a random native, placed on the very same level as the “wild” fauna, fixed, nailed to the wall like butterflies that some obsessive collector had mercilessly stabbed with pins. They pay no mind to the fact that these men feed off the waste from this useless killing, that they live miserably and peripherally in dwellings that the camera approaches obliquely and

indirectly. The walls and tin sheds are barely lit by an opaque, greeny-violet glow, which contrasts with the neutral white of the scenes dominated by the white oppressors, always shown head-on.

This is not just – or even primarily – a matter of condemning the practice of hunting. Seidl casts his ruthless light on the new historical subject of our times: the consumer lacking in intellect, logic, and critical conscience, who comfortably wallows in the irresponsible conformism of the majority. The fresh, handsome explorers of *Safari* are like the rich old that Seidl had treated just as harshly in *Dog Days*. These wealthy believers in the consumerist myth of youth can afford to live out the fantasy of an eternal springtime of life. They embody that modern figure that reduces the world to something procurable, reifying life itself, whether through majestic animals mowed down for pleasure or human beings coerced into selling their services and land resources to those higher up. The figure that Seidl “depicts” throughout his (albeit fictitious) documentary is the Great Northern Consumer that Vázquez Montalbán speaks of in his *Panfleto desde el planeta de los simios* (*Pamphlet from the planet of the apes*) – that is, the supreme god of neoliberal theology⁴. This figure not only refuses to accept as colonialism his alleged exports of freedom and democracy to all corners of the world, but assumes the brutality of this ostensibly innocuous colonialism as something normal and ordinary, thus scaling down the wickedness of his actions into the pure banality of Evil. The reference to the “planet of the apes” is not arbitrary, and Seidl sarcastically lampoons this image with the same bluntness as in *Dog Days*, to which he often alludes here. For the “civilised” hunters in *Safari*, the natives are nothing more than apes. They even force a girl to stand amongst the trophies and carry the head of a monkey, shot dead the moment its mouth opened in a heartbreaking, feverish scream.

The images speak for themselves on the banality of evil, brought to bear on human beings reduced to objects subordinate to self-satisfaction and discretion. Cases in point include the indifference with which they

⁴ Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, *Panfleto desde el planeta de los simios*, Barcelona, Crítica-Grijalbo Mondadori, 1995, p. 71.

handle the injured animal and observe the blood oozing from its wounds, the twig they stick into the giraffe's mouth to make it more photogenic and aesthetically pleasing, and the man who poses next to it⁵, beside the weapon and the dog that made the killing possible. The implied interviewer films dialogue directly from the mouth of his/her respondents, creating a dialectical-interplay between their introjected justifications. It is as if, in their own heads, they were already crossing swords with those who condemn the practice of hunting or deplore the countless forms of present-day racism and colonialism. This is where we see, on the one hand, the psychological mechanisms that give rise to violence (which Seidl calls "human nature"), and, on the other, the mentality and ideology that permeate vast sections of European society, where it is no accident that more or less veiled forms of fascism, believed to have gone forever, are now coming back once more. Inherent in human nature is, according to Seidl, a desire to test one's own ability and strength through the compulsive affirmation of personal ego before oneself and others, to have it certified through approval and applause. Likewise, in *Dog Days*, the humiliation and violence against the weakest and most vulnerable stems from an inferiority complex that seeks to be offset through the fearful submission of those who cannot or do not know how to defend themselves. An analogous issue (variation on the same theme) is sport hunting, here played in groups, in which a human exploits an opportunity to excel and dominate the other by belittling or annihilating it. This drive towards self-affirmation is fuelled by the competitiveness that the modern world places at the heart of human relationships, and which, in Seidl's hands, takes a compulsive, pathological form⁶, as manifested in the repeated exaltation of hunting

⁵ A curious coincidence is the recent case of a squad of firefighters who, as one headline put it, "Run over an Iberian wolf and pose proudly next to it, holding it by the ears" ("Diario Público", 26th November 2017).

⁶ As Ulrich Seidl puts it: "Initially, I made the trip in order to find out and convey what drives so many people to hunting, and how the practice can quickly turn into an obsession. But, as the film developed, it became a commentary on the idea of killing: killing for pleasure whilst in no real danger, killing as a kind of emotional release. I met hunters who killed, but not couples or families who kissed or patted each other on the back after a slaughter. For them, the act of killing is a sexual act."

exploits and the frenzied display of related objects that adorn their houses (even the curtains and seat covers are upholstered in zebra or panther prints).

With blistering, pinpoint accuracy, Seidl's horror lens takes aim – “shoots” – at this “average Western citizen” who not only consumes quantitatively but also builds individual and social relationships based on consumption. To begin with, the Major Tourist Consumer: an industry that never fails (even in times of economic crisis), a product of strong, secure sales among diversified bourgeoisie in the so-called First World. The upper classes perpetuate traditional social divides, preserving luxury tourism as the privilege of a rare few; however, they grow not in the least superior to the intellectual and moral vulgarity of the masses. This tourism shows how opulent Northern societies have acquired – and continue to acquire – wealth by profiting from apparently “unarmed” colonialism, forced upon territories they neither know (nor care to know) anything about, aided by the complicity of media lobbies playing second-fiddle to the interests of the hegemonic classes.

This privileged tourist, a prime paradigm of colonialism that today, as ever, conquers at gunpoint, holds fast to a presumed racial and cultural superiority. In his mind, this affords him a set of rights that are certified by the introjected ideological weaponry of the subculture of consumption, that distorts his worldview and exempts him from having to justify his actions. In confronting this “other” inside himself, when challenged he strives to persuade both himself and others of the essential goodness of dominant doctrines and truths that champion racism, economic racism, the apartheid of North prosperity vs underdeveloped South, and slavery in its multiple forms. “Why should I justify myself? I don't have to justify myself. There's nothing in writing, there's no law against it.” This unthinking acceptance of the status quo appeals to a range of historical edicts, tailored to the interests of established social minorities and their intellectual spokespersons, that are systematically manipulated to seem like natural, eternal laws: “Because human beings are at the top of the pyramid, and we are superfluous”. Superfluous, but convinced that, from the top, mankind can tyrannise and destroy the world: “nature has already disappeared... there's a little bit left, but let's

face facts: it's all gone... there are just too many of us... the very existence of mankind, at current numbers, is taking over from nature... you don't solve the problem by banning practices like hunting". This passive resignation to the status quo in the name of "realism" accuses "naïve" objectors, yet to give up the fight, of being stubbornly opposed to the evidence. The eternal Peter Pans simply refuse to grow up and accept the inevitable, because "there is no alternative": "Whoever doesn't understand this, or blindly stands up for animal protection, achieves absolutely nothing... the real problem is the sheer amount of human beings". This line of argument that fails to tackle the root cause of the problem, implying a historical guilt, ends inconclusively. Seidl's cold and harrowing scene of black workers chewing on the remains of slaughtered cattle, confined to a space lit only through a crack in the wall, powerfully punctures the previous unresolved scene of the hunters' poor reasoning.

Whilst scrutinising the thoughtlessness and philistinism of this "type", so representative of today's mass society, Seidl makes use of all possible registers, even the pathetic and the grotesque. Pathetic, for instance, are the words of the married couple who speak of the "friendliness" – read: subservience – of the blacks, congratulating themselves on their understanding and kind rapport with them, and even self-righteously comparing their politeness with the mistreatment shown by their compatriots: "I never complain, I have a good relationship with them... they're human beings like us... some people treat them very badly... it's not their fault they're black or have dark skin...". We immediately cut to the still of a black girl carrying the monkey's head, right in the middle of a wall covered with trophies.

This false, guilty conscience dresses itself up in legal and historical justifications that seek to legitimise market fundamentalism, as Susan Sontag calls it – that is, the fate of the success of the North or of the rich man, tied to entrepreneurial freedom and the ultimate failure of the social loser, unable to escape the spiral of underdevelopment: "if hunting is carried out in controlled conditions, it is legitimate... it brings money into underdeveloped countries...". Exploitation becomes charity, killing becomes ecology: "hunting is not the same as killing animals... for

older, diseased or injured beasts, it is a release... in truth it helps species to survive and reproduce...”. The pure and simple hypocrisy of their reasoning underlines a naïve, disarming stupidity (bear in mind that these words are taken verbatim from the interviewees): “I don’t use the word kill, I say ‘take out’. It sounds better than kill... ‘kill’ makes you think of mass killings... for me, killing is what they do in the slaughterhouse...”.

“Mass killings”, “help species to survive and reproduce” by wiping out diseases that impede the ideal development of the species. These are not the only references to Nazi ideology entrenched in the mindset of those who export democracy and progress. There are many others, too, including the nationality of the explorers (German and Austrian), as well as their good manners, following the indifferent brutality of their actions, and the unusual tenderness they show towards their dogs, the only “animals” (for the native people are also considered sub-human) that deserve loving strokes and hugs and are worthy of “posing” beside their masters. The dog takes pride of place in the final shot, with two medieval suits of armour standing either side of a central door. This symmetry characterises all scenes starring the “tourists”, indicating the established Order that they represent.⁷ These images point to that “aristocratic”, predatory and classist culture that characterises Northern countries, and to an inextinguishable historical fascism that, as Montalbán says, is neither created nor destroyed, but simply transformed.⁸

The opening sequence is hugely significant for its unmistakable impact: the gunshot aimed at the viewer by an invisible hunter. The possible target of this extermination ordered for undisclosed economic interests, is all of us who live on this earth, even though we may seem to bear no responsibility (directly or indirectly) for what does not affect us, occurring beyond our individual, social, and national borders. On that note, Subcomandante Marcos’ words from 1994 come to my mind:

⁷ Another leitmotif is the obsessive care that the characters take over their gardens, complete with neatly-arranged flowerbeds and plants.

⁸ Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-76

Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristobal, a Jew in Germany, a Gypsy in Poland, a Mohawk in Quebec, a pacifist in Bosnia, a single woman on the Metro at 10 p.m., a peasant without land, a gang member in the slums, an unemployed worker, an unhappy student and, of course, a Zapatista in the mountains.⁹

Sooner or later, we all can become victims of the safari, ignorant of – or indifferent to – the violence perpetrated on the “others”. Safely untroubled in formal democracies, we take for granted that all relationships are free, fair, and just, admitting no criticism. Furthermore, given that “there are too many of us”, the human race would be enhanced by eliminating all “unhealthy” individuals and anyone who stubbornly refuses to grow up and adapt to the system, and who thereby hampers the proper operation of the constituted Order.

In an interview, Seidl noted that *Safari* is about “many things”. Perhaps I have indicated some of these here.

⁹ Robert Collier, *Commander Marcos Identifies With All*, “San Francisco Chronicle”, 13th June 1994, in Naomi Klein, *Farewell to ‘The end of History’: organization and vision in anti-corporate movements*, “Socialist Register”, 2002, p. 3.