

Sight & Sound

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WHO NEEDS CRITICS?

'Film is a phenomenon whose resemblance to death has been ignored for too long.'

Norman Mailer

'Orson Welles made films with his right hand and films with his left hand. In the right-handed films there is always snow, and in the left-handed ones there are always gunshots.'

François Truffaut

EVERY NEW
FILM
REVIEWED

'As heady as any nitrate and as compulsive as stamping on insects' Tony Rayns

PLUS Alexander Sokurov on **Alexandra** | **Import Export** and the new European extremism
| Eric Rohmer interview | Wong Kar-Wai's **Ashes of Time Redux** | **Brideshead Revisited**



Europa Europa

The world of Ulrich Seidl is a dark, unpleasant place, yet as the director tells **Catherine Wheatley**, there is also inherent optimism

"Provocation isn't the goal of my film-making," says Ulrich Seidl. From a director whose subject material has spanned bestiality, pornography, and religious and political hypocrisy, and whose previous UK release *Dog Days* (*Hundstage*, 2001) came to a stomach-churning climax with the rape of a mentally disabled young woman, such a comment seems disingenuous. Yet the austere Austrian is adamant that life, not he, is the source of this provocation: "If you choose to show reality precisely, that will be the inevitable outcome."

If aggravation is not the director's primary aim, it's certainly a prominent (and arguably profitable) feature of his work. After a 20-year career making films for television, his first cinematic release *Dog Days* premiered at Venice in 2001 to the kind of critical uproar that has become a stock feature of the festival circuit. Despite its detractors the film was awarded that year's Grand Prix. A bemused Seidl reports that the rewards went beyond mere garlands: "Since then, I haven't had any serious problems with financing. I had to wait seven years for that first one. Now, in effect, I could make any film that I want to."

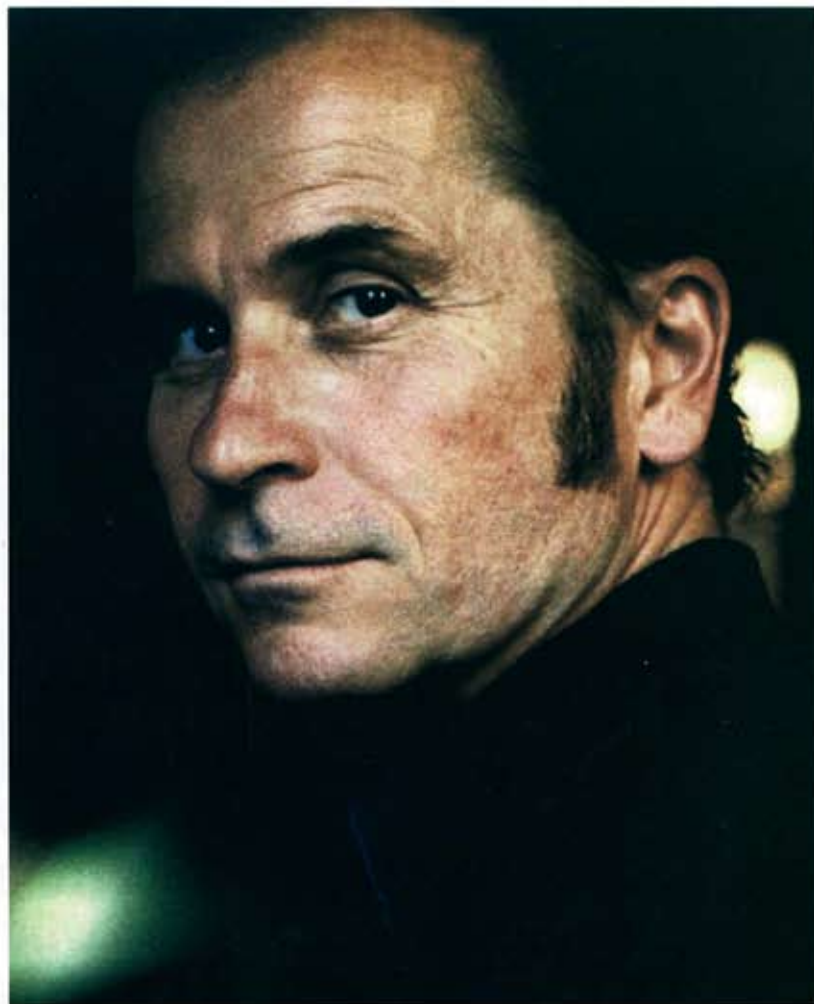
Comparisons with practitioners of what has been dubbed 'New European Extremism' – Catherine Breillat, Gaspar Noé, Bruno Dumont – seem obvious, yet fall short of capturing what is so

profoundly unsettling about Seidl's work. His keen eye for monstrous tableaux has led to comparisons with Diane Arbus, although a proclivity for the squalid side of life brings Corinne Day equally to mind. Errol Morris may possess the most similar sensibility to Seidl: for both, reality is a serious business. And like Morris, Seidl has long experimented with the fusion of documentary and fictional elements to tell his audiences some important 'truths' about contemporary society. He has built a reputation as the most important Austrian documentarian of recent years, yet has refused to acknowledge this, claiming that "all my films have documentary and fictional elements". A fractal portrait of Austria's aggressive underbelly set in the sweltering summer heat, *Dog Days* was Seidl's first officially fictional film but, the inclusion of a few professional actors in the cast aside, the division seems a nominal (or a financial) one. Seidl's work forces one to query the accuracy with which either term can be used, as the director suggests: "The only line that divides documentary from fiction is that [in fiction] there is a script to begin with and people playing roles." It is, he says, "a thin line".

It's unsurprising that his latest feature film *Import Export* raises questions about the nature of the real. Reiterating many

of the director's signature themes, the film follows the journey of two characters as they cross the border between Austria and the Ukraine. Paediatric nurse Olga (Ekateryna Rak) leaves her young daughter to head west in search of a better life, only to find herself back in a hospital, this time cleaning floors. Meanwhile Paul (Paul Hofmann), an unemployed young man under pressure from money lenders, accompanies his bellicose stepfather setting up video gambling machines in the Ukraine, where drinking and whoring are the order of the day. The action takes place in real locations: the online sex agency where Olga spends a brief stint; the Ukrainian bar at which Paul and his stepfather pick up a hooker; and most hauntingly, a geriatric ward complete with real inpatients. The events themselves are mostly predetermined, although many scenes are improvised. Likewise, the impressive cast comprises a mixture of the professional and amateur actors, some of whom seem to be playing themselves – like his namesake, lead actor Paul Hofmann has been homeless, jobless, and in and out of prison. His press description lists his interests as “fighting and dog fighting” and finishes “he believes in true love and is waiting for it”.

Neither Rak nor Hofmann (chosen from more than 1,500 non-professionals who auditioned) had left their homelands prior to shooting and credit is due to both for performances that more than equal those by professionals Michael Thomas (as Paul's vile stepfather), and two actors familiar from *Dog Days*, Georg Friedrich and Maria Hofstätter. One can't help but wonder, however, what fate holds for the lost souls Seidl discovers. Assistant director Klaus Pridnig recounts one story about an elderly resident of the geriatric ward. As soon as anyone entered her room she would pray to St Anthony to take her home to her parents; by the end of shooting she was praying to “Mister Ulrich”. What's the responsibility of the film-maker to these people whose lives he has invaded and upended? It's a question that applies



LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE
His films are full of darkness, but Ulrich Seidl's eye for humanity's strength when at its most tested rings a positive note

RAW TALENT
At the centre of 'Import Export' are amateur actors – above left Ekateryna Rak heads west as Olga, and below, real patients of the geriatric ward used as a location

most urgently to his 'documentaries', such as *Models* (1999), *Animal Love* (*Tierische Liebe*, 1996), and *The Bosom Friend* (*Der Busenfreund*, 1997), in which Seidl coaxes an extraordinary level of self-exposure out of his subjects to less-than-flattering effect. There's almost something of talkshow host Jeremy Kyle in his approach. His work seems both a product of and a comment on contemporary reality-television culture, in which the voyeuristic camera has been supplanted by the exhibitionist subject, willing to go ever-further for their 15 minutes of fame. Seidl's works, not least *Import Export*, are often almost unbearable to watch, made worse by the sense that we are watching someone humiliate themselves voluntarily (though the films can also be horrendously funny). The director denies that his work is malicious or violent – but he does cite Pasolini and von Stroheim as influences, directors whose films André Bazin would claim constitute a 'cinema of cruelty'.

Yet for all its obscene grotesquery, *Import Export* has moments of quiet redemption, such as the indelible image of Olga dancing a shuffling waltz with a dying patient in the yellow-green light of the hospital basement, or the immaculate shot of her slumped against the mortuary wall, a crucifix suspended mournfully over her head.

Seidl's religious background may have a bearing here. As he told one reviewer, despite having relinquished his childhood dream of becoming a priest, “A certain very basic Christian attitude has stayed with me.” If that's so, it may be fair to say that the divine is in the detail, the small flickers of humanity that offer a brief respite from the tawdry, dank misery that Seidl's films posit as the basic condition of human existence. The film offers a consistent challenge not to look away and the rewards it offers don't come easily. The struggle is, more often than not, worthwhile.

Catherine Wheatley: Could you tell me about the film's genesis?

Ulrich Seidl: When I was making *State of the Nation* (*Zur Lage*, 2001) there was half an hour I shot about an unemployed family that I didn't use. This became the basis of Paul's story in *Import Export* – that's how it often works. It would have been unsatisfactory and insufficient to make a film just on the basis of that one story, so I went looking for others. There were seven to start with and they all involved people moving from the east to the west, or from the west to the east. And then I decided to reduce it to only two stories.

I worked for about four years on the film. I didn't spend so long on the script – I see the screenplay as a basis for the



◀ film. The financing happened quite quickly, but it took me almost a year to cast the film because I wanted non-professional actors for the two protagonists. Finding the right person to play Olga was a particularly long process because I knew that if one of the two main characters was badly cast the whole film would go awry. Parallel to the casting and the location scouting I made several trips to the east and initially I didn't know which country I would focus on... the Ukraine or perhaps Romania. Eventually, I decided to concentrate on the Ukraine. And as a footnote to that, we shot eight hours of film, so the editing process also took a long time!

CW: The story of Natalia Epureanu, the actress who plays Olga's friend in Austria, was very similar to that of the central character. Was that a coincidence?

US: It was a pure coincidence! There was a cleaner in our film company in Vienna. I got talking to her one day and she told me her story – it was almost exactly the same as that of the protagonist. Initially Natalia was a possibility to play the lead, but instead I chose Ekateryna Rak and Natalia played her friend who has already made the move to the west. I picked Ekateryna because she had never been to the west before – Austria or anywhere like it – and I wanted to exploit that newness.

CW: Ekateryna didn't speak German before she made the film. Did you encounter any linguistic difficulties?

US: I don't speak Ukrainian at all, so for a lot of the time I used interpreters, although not when we were actually shooting, because I believe you can understand without interpreters in that context. Ekateryna went to a German teacher in the Ukraine before coming over, which meant that when she arrived she spoke German rather too well! I wanted her to speak the way a cleaning woman in that situation would: individual words rather than complete sentences.

CW: Since there's no script, how do you maintain spontaneity when shooting multiple takes?

US: I know exactly what I want when I start shooting, but I also want to keep it open for a degree of spontaneity. So I don't set boundaries for the actors.



In the hotel, she is a prostitute playing a prostitute. It was arranged in advance how far we could go, what should have and what mustn't have happened

SEX SELLS
Paul and his stepfather visit a prostitute in 'Import Export' – both the lead actor (right in picture) and the actress are amateurs

I give them a goal so they know where they're going and I see how things develop. Sometimes I say to one of them what they should be doing in a particular scene, but they don't know the whole picture.

CW: It reminds me of Ken Loach's method of working – do you feel any affinity with him?

US: No, absolutely not. When I began making films there were people who influenced me, not by their method but by how their films looked: Erich von Stroheim; Pasolini; Rouch; Cassavetes; Buñuel; Jean Vigo perhaps; Jean Eustache; Werner Herzog – documentary film-makers and fiction film-makers.

CW: Yet the topics 'Import Export' raises echo those of a number of recent Austrian films by directors such as Michael Haneke and Barbara Albert. Do you feel it's appropriate to speak of a 'New Austrian Cinema' of which you are perhaps part?

US: We're all lone warriors. It's not a movement in any way and I don't feel my films have anything in common with either Haneke or Albert. Haneke I got to know only recently. He has become a model for young film-makers. But you also see copycat film-makers around mimicking the style of the Seidl film. We're just a group of individuals fighting our own battles.

Obviously my films are deeply Austrian because they're set there, they

have an Austrian atmosphere, mentality and language. But there must be a universal relevance. So the theme of loneliness for example, that's something that might apply to the entire western world. What I don't want is for people to look at the film and say, "That's the Austrians for you." The only film I've made that specifically deals with a particular political situation at a particular moment is *State of the Nation*. Otherwise my films generally deal with what you might describe as 'everyday fascism'. It's something that is always there and is always going to survive in sexism, racism and xenophobia. My films are political, but not a priori. Rather, they are a mirror of the times.

CW: A lot of Austrian film-makers are concerned first and foremost with the bourgeoisie, whereas your films represent a greater cross-section of society.

US: When I started making films, my interest was particularly in those on the edges of society. I felt close to them... they are in some ways truer. People who are more educated aren't true to themselves – they're performing, presenting an image. On the other hand, my films aren't about these individuals, they're about society as a whole. I'm trying to get a cross-section in there. It's certainly not the same middle-class milieu that Haneke's films inhabit.



Four of Seidl's films will be showing as part of the 28th Cambridge Film Festival, which runs from 18-28 September.

'Import Export' will be followed by a Q&A with the director and is presented in association with 'Sight & Sound'. For more info visit www.cambridgefilmfestival.org.uk

CW: This idea of performance is significant in the context of your documentaries. Normally, when one turns a camera on someone they alter their behaviour. How do you draw such natural behaviour from your subjects?

US: That's how I encounter people. There's no method that you could appropriate or learn. It's how I am. With the fictions, on the one hand you have the characters as written, but on the other you have the cast themselves. For example, in the case of Paul in *Import Export* much of what he says, much of what he feels in the film is actually him [Paul Hofmann]. So you have a mixture of what you put in there and what that person actually is.

CW: In terms of the acts that the people in your films perform – particularly the violent and sexual acts – do you feel that you can push these further in fiction films than in documentaries?

US: Obviously you can do much more in fiction than you can in a documentary – you can let people die, you can let them fight, things that in a documentary film would be impossible. When I began making films I found great freedom in documentary thanks to the lack of controls, in many ways due to the smaller budgets – you could still make a feature-length film, but without a screenplay that you had to present to a committee. But gradually I got to a point where I couldn't go any further with it and I was, in a sense, forced into fiction.

Import Export has both [documentary and fiction aspects]. Take the scene at the beginning, where Olga is in the hospital with the baby. In many ways that is quintessential of my method. The actress is playing the nurse, but she's placed in a real situation. So the way the baby is treated, the way it screams and so on, that's documentary – but the actress is there as well. And that's something that you simply couldn't do in a film that was entirely fictional.

CW: The scenes in the geriatric ward are very difficult to watch. Was it hard to film them?

US: Filming wasn't hard, because we'd spent such a long time preparing. I got to know all the patients, their lives, how they would react, what they could do, what they couldn't do. We were close to them, so it wasn't a big leap to make the film. And the team was very small and flexible – we didn't use much extra light, to keep the number of people on set as small as possible and maintain the sense of reality. The difficulty was getting permission from the doctors, from the authorities and so on. But the actual shoot wasn't difficult.

CW: You have been accused of exploiting your subjects. The scene in *'Import Export'* in which Michael and Paul pick up the prostitute, for example, seems open to this sort of criticism.

US: Of course I'm responsible for the people who appear in front of the camera, and my responsibility is to be honest with them and to maintain their dignity. As long as that's the case then we should be able to show them in these situations. These criticisms come from people who don't see where the scandal actually is in society: that people accept other people being kept in a geriatric hospital of this kind – isolated, alone, simply left to die. Of course it's unpleasant to see certain things, but you know, reality is unpleasant.

In the case of the prostitute in the hotel it's rather different, because there you've got actors who are paid to do it. She is a prostitute playing a prostitute. It was arranged in advance what was possible, how far we could go, what should have and what mustn't have happened.

CW: Herzog has been quoted as saying your films are the closest thing to a vision of hell he's seen, but they also have moments of tenderness and consolation, such as the scene in which Olga dances with an elderly patient. Do you feel there is room for hope or redemption within the universe your films depict?

US: The film does have a lot of tender moments, and that's one of them. Herzog made that particular comment

in relation to *Animal Love* and yes, if hell is people's private lives and private obsessions, then when you look at intimate lives there is hell. But I wouldn't go through with it if there was no vision, if I didn't have an idea of a different life for the individual where there might be freedom or more dignity for them. It would be entirely hopeless to simply reproduce the status quo as it is. I don't think it's a question of optimism or pessimism: it's about truth. Things are dark like that because that's how things are. Obviously the protagonists in *Import Export* want a better life. They're faced with a society that has no place for them, but they're out there looking. The idea that they're actually seeking something better is in and of itself optimistic, as long as they keep doing it. You could say that I'm the deliverer of bad news, but I'm not the one who actually makes it bad.

■ *'Import Export'* is released on 3 October and is reviewed on page 68. *'Between Heaven and Hell: The Films of Ulrich Seidl'*, organised by Watershed Media Centre, will be touring independent cinemas across the UK this autumn. For more information see www.watershed.co.uk/seidl

VISIONS OF HELL Below, (clockwise from top left): 'Animal Love', 'Dog Days', 'Jesus, You Know' and 'Models' put audiences through the mill



Import Export

Austria/France 2007

Director: Ulrich Seidl

With Ekateryna Rak, Paul Hofmann, Michael Thomas, Natalija Baranova
Certificate 18 141m 15s

The opening shot of Ulrich Seidl's powerful second fiction feature shows a man trying to kick-start a motorbike in front of a block of flats during a harsh Ukrainian winter. It's a regular routine, with no sign of frustration, just a constant pulse as the engine keeps failing to spring into life. Similarly monotonous rhythms underpin much of what follows: a baby's breathing, martial arts exercises, cleaners pushing trolleys, a geriatric patient repeatedly chanting 'Death!'. Truly, all human life is here, regarded with the same dispassionate eye that made Seidl's earlier *Dog Days* (2002) simultaneously compulsive and repellent.

As the title implies, *Import Export* revolves around cross-border journeys, as Ukrainian nurse Olga (Ekateryna Rak) and unemployed Austrian security guard Paul (Paul Hofmann) effectively swap countries. This isn't planned: they never meet, and only a cut from one to the other across a Vienna station Tannoy announcement suggests that they were ever in the same place at the same time. They're both looking for a better life, but Seidl doesn't see any essential difference between Vienna, Snicne or Ushgorod (the film's main locations): the first may be materially wealthier, but they're all fuelled by cynical exploitation of their human resources.

In a more congenial environment, Olga would be a role model: she works hard, and takes her faith seriously (an unabashedly beautiful shot frames her praying on her makeshift bed in her employer's laundry room). She's initially employed as a nurse, but when her wages are arbitrarily docked by 70 percent (the rest due "next month", like Lewis Carroll's perpetually promised jam) she moonlights as an online sex worker. Small wonder she's attracted by Europe's lure, even though the depraved suggestions she fields in her second job hint that it might not be an improvement.

Paul's journey is also motivated by economic necessity, though in his case

he's paying off debts to the boorish Michael (Michael Thomas) by helping him deliver clapped-out videogames and gumball machines to Slovakia and Ukraine. Paul detests Michael, who uses the trip as an excuse to sample the local female talent, regardless of the fact that he's nominally Paul's mother's boyfriend. Besides being a misogynist, he's also a xenophobe ("This language is a throat disease!") and a preening narcissist.

Seidl's non-fiction background is constantly evident, from the documentary-style staging of the various training schemes undertaken by Olga and Paul to the milieu in which they find themselves. Many of these were genuine, including the geriatric ward and the rubbish strewn Roma apartment block. Casual cruelty abounds: Paul loses his security-guard job after a gang strips and humiliates him, Olga's nursing qualifications mean nothing in Austria, while prostitutes and geriatric patients alike are defined in terms of lower bodily functions.

Seidl's visual approach is best described as a series of long hard stares, the focal point usually dead centre of the frame. Sometimes this is amusing, as with the inscrutable grin of a mounted fox's head that Olga is being taught to clean, but more often it's confrontational, fixating on a sex worker's nether regions for longer than narratively necessary. Like *Dog Days*, the film is explicit to a degree that might have caused BBFC classification problems until relatively recently, but no one sane would use either for masturbation material. Michael's inability to get aroused by the teenage prostitute that he's been verbally degrading sums up the film's depiction of the dehumanisation and mechanisation of sex.

But what prevents the film from being terminally despairing are the occasional but unmistakable signs of human warmth. In the geriatric ward, Olga flirts with a nurse before beginning a tentative relationship with the elderly Erich – she initially seems to be pondering the idea of a "paper husband" (a marriage of convenience granting her legal status in Austria), but the affection seems genuine. Paul, by contrast, is happier on his own (he tells an unimpressed Michael that he's seeking harmony with his surroundings), never more so than when dancing in the ghastly

■ **SYNOPSIS** Snicne, Ukraine, the present. Olga lives with her mother, baby son and much younger brother, and works as a nurse.

Vienna, Austria. Paul lives with his mother and her boyfriend Michael. He splits up with his girlfriend Christina after challenging her dog phobia. Olga takes on an extra job as an online sex worker, but doesn't understand her first client's instructions. While working as a shopping centre security guard, Paul is humiliated by five youths. Olga catches a train to Vienna.

Paul has several creditors, including Michael, and accosts strangers for money. Olga gets a job cleaning toilets before being taken on as a housekeeper, but is sacked soon afterwards. She finds a job cleaning a geriatric ward. One of the nurses, Maria, belittles her Ukrainian nursing experience. Olga makes friends with Andi, a male nurse.

To settle his debts, Paul accompanies Michael as he delivers gumball machines and videogames to eastern Europe. In Kosice, Slovakia, Michael asks Paul to translate his boorish chat-up lines. Olga makes friends with Erich, one of the patients. Attempting a delivery to flats with a largely Roma population, Paul and Michael are forced to flee. Erich proposes to Olga, and they dance in the basement. In Ushgorod, Ukraine, Paul returns to their hotel room to find Michael with a young prostitute. He leaves in disgust. Erich dies. Paul tries to find work in a local market. A Mardi Gras party leads to a fight between Olga and Maria. Paul tries to hitch-hike elsewhere.

Intourist disco, bathed in oddly cleansing blue light.

The performances are outstanding, the casting mixing non-professionals (including the two leads) with faces familiar from Seidl's earlier work – especially Maria Hofstätter, *Dog Days'* demented hitch-hiker, now a malevolent nurse. Cinematographers Ed Lachman and Wolfgang Thaler work wonders with natural light, especially in the wintry Ukrainian industrial landscape that Olga traverses to and from work. But it's Seidl's bleak comparison of 'old' and 'new' Europe that ultimately lodges in the mind: if he makes no overt political points, that's because he scarcely needs to.

◆◆ **Michael Brooke**

CREDITS

Director
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Ulrich Seidl
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Directors of Photography
Ed Lachman
Wolfgang Thaler
Editor
Christof Schertzenlieb
Art Directors
Andreas Donnhauer
Renate Martin
Music
Marcus Davy

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Tenseh(ab)kommen), Arte

France Cinéma,

ZDF/arte, Conwert

Immobilien

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(Ukrainian Unit) y Profto

Film, (Slovakian Unit)

Protos Productions s.r.o.

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Maxim Asadchyy

Slovakian Unit:

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Bogdan Dragulescu

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Set Decorator

Slovakia/Ukraine

Hannes Salat

Properties

Hubert Klausner

Construction Manager

Thomas Gampfer

Costumes

Silva Pernegger

Wardrobe

Ukrainian Unit:

Natalia Kalchenko

Make-up

Silva Pernegger

Title Design

Kornelius Tarrmann

Judith Ratatz

Soundtrack

"Serdno" – Piotr

Leschenko, "Tinke

Liebchen" by Johann

Strauss, Franz Friedrich

Richard Genée – Gerhard

Fuchs, "Dunkelrote

Rosen" by Karl Millöcker,

Franz Friedrich Richard

Genée, Friedrich Zell –

Gerhard Fuchs; "Seidl

Boogie" – Marcus Davy,

"Ne Daosich" – Alexander

Scriabin

Sound Design

Natzi Müller

Erik Mechtyew

Sound

Eikehart Baumung

Re-recording Mixer

Hans Kunat

CAST

Import cast

Ekateryna Rak

Olga

Lidiya Oleksandrivna

Savka

Olga's mother

Olesana Ivanivna

Skyarenko

Olga's baby

Dmytro Andriyovich

Gachkov

Olga's brother

Natalija Baranova

Christina, Olga's friend in

the Ukraine

Miloslava Kubkova

web sex co-ordinator

Katka Ackermannová

Lucie Radlová

Zdenka Tothová

web sex girls

Domink Castell

Mischa Domov

Martin Loos

voices of web sex clients

Natalia Epureanu

Natalashka, Olga's friend

in Austria

Gerhard Komarek

job instructor

Herta Wonesch

woman with stuffed fox

Petra Morzál

mother in family home

Johannes Nussbaum

son in family home

Lisa Hubbauer

daughter in family home

Ronald Volny

geriatric ward cleaning

supervisor

Maria Hofstätter

Sister Maria

Georg Friedrich

Nurse Andi

Erich Finsches

Erich Schläger

Gerhard Fuchs

geriatric ward entertainer

Margarete Schlamm

Sissy Nöster

Katharina Riedinger

Olga Macho

Magdalena Vorlauffer

Waltraute Bartel

Christine Exel

Karoline Friedrich

Herta Szemsky

Gertrude Strommer

Hans Budbaum

Josef Haller

Erich Koller

Walter Neukirch

Karl Schandl

Rudolf Schneider

Nikolaus Tscholitsch

Alexander Kato

geriatric ward patients

export cast

Paul Hofmann

Paul

Peter Lindziska

security instructor

Roman Kettner

Marco Dobner

Serdar Caliskan

Thomas Nash

Harald Huschka

Lukas Prusa

Gerald Uwira

Michael Komzak

security team

Christina York

Christina, Paul's girlfriend

Michael Thomas

Michael, Paul's stalker

Brigitte Kren

Paul's mother

Ramazan Akpinar

Cemikan Akbulut

Sinan Sandogan

Akin Öztürk

Okday Günes

Turkish gang

Martin Fiedler

debtor

Alexander Sykora

debt collector

Dirk Stermann

job centre adviser

Miliza Jovic

woman in job centre

Christofer Fucher

welding machine

operator

Marta Totova

woman in club

Alexander Wroc

Ján Horváth

Dezider Hricko

Josef Balog

Romanes

Mária Mroková

Nicola Mroková

Romany girls

Diana

woman in disco

Anastasia Sergejeva

hotel room prostitute

Dolby Digital

In Colour

[L66.1]

Subtitles

Distributor

Trinity Filmed

Entertainment

12,713 ft +3 frames



Crossing the border: Ekateryna Rak