Film Review: 'Safari'

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SEPTEMBER 2, 2016 | 04:04PM PT COURTESY OF VENICE FILM FESTIVAL

Ulrich Seidl continues to amaze and unnerve in this brilliantly composed, deeply upsetting portrait of tourist hunters in Africa.

The best films of deadpan Austrian provocateur Ulrich Seidl pull off a tricky paradox: They're almost entirely passionless in their perspective, yet are engineered to elicit raging, sometimes conflicting, torrents of feeling. Save perhaps for the "conflicting" part, that has rarely been more true than in the case of "Safari," an unremittingly horrible but altogether extraordinary portrait of European hunting tourists in Africa that affords them a platform to defend their sport — yet won't make any converts from the justly appalled. With its already queasy subject matter

and graphic extended sequences of animal killing and carving, this hard-to-shake doc — apparently less "performed" than some of Seidl's hybrid works, but still composed with exquisite formal precision — is commercially thorny even by his prickly-pear standards, though courageous distributors will highlight "Safari's" topicality in the wake of 2015's international "Cecil the lion" outrage.

There's an elite handful of directors whose films can be identified as theirs in the space of a single shot, and Seidl is one of them: Wittily deferring the expectations set up by its title, "Safari" opens on a capacious wide shot in a grey-skied European forest, with a man in Bavarian-style hunting gear solemnly sounding a hunting bugle. The composition is painstakingly symmetrical, as is Seidl's wont, with the human subject placed front, center and low in the frame; quite aside from his daft attire, he's dwarfed — arguably even made to look absurd — by the scale of his surroundings. Seidl's filmmaking may refrain from overt commentary on what it captures, but it's far from oblivious to the critical possibilities of the camera.

It's a framing style Seidl and regular cinematographer Wolfgang Thaler return to repeatedly in the African-set talking-head sequences of "Safari," which frequently isolate the hunters against a surrounding sea of mounted, lifelessly staring animal busts, the preserved majesty of which can only make these khaki-clad intruders look puny by comparison. Ulrich acolytes will recall this shot, in its various permutations, from a memorable vignette in the director's 2014 feature "In the Basement," a semi-documentary study of secret cellar-level human obsessions, which also introduced us to two of "Safari's" interviewees: middle-aged hunting enthusiasts Manfred and Inge Ellinger, who routinely travel to Africa to collect more fauna-based trophies for their suburban Austrian home. One wouldn't necessarily expect people to submit twice to the silent but tacitly unforgiving gaze of Seidl's camera; their compliance is proof positive of how flexibly his films' point of view can be shaded by one's own.

The Ellingers are a mere sideshow in "Safari," however — their holidaying rituals the closest this fearsomely austere film comes to overt comic relief. Instead, the focus is principally on a clean-cut quartet of family friends — Gerald, Eva and their respective teenage children Manuel and Tina — on a joint vacations to Namibian hunting resort Leopard Lodge, who speak sunnily of their killing expeditions as occasions for personal growth and bonding. Away from the more contrived setup of the interview scenes, Seidl and his crew follow them on a series of hunts, observing with detail-oriented detachment as they mark their prey, take the shot and, as a ghoulish act of victory, rearrange the slain animal for optimum photo-op potential. These stomach-knotting sequences, filmed with stealthy fluidity, will provide hunting opponents with all the ammunition the need regarding the vanity and barbarism of the process; advocates, on the other hand, will find the skilled methodology of their hobby painstakingly showcased.

Notwithstanding the uncertainty of what is prompted or directed off-camera, Seidl appears to take the same hands-off approach to interviewing his subjects, offering no visible or audible response to defensive statements that many viewers will find confoundingly irrational or hypocritical. Expect scornful laughter to ripple through many theaters when Leopard Lodge proprietor Volker Neemann, for example, opines that humans are under obligation to "act responsible to our environment and the animal kingdom," that "if we disappeared, the world would be better off for it." Other opinions offered are more naive, though hardly less dubious: When two beaming adolescents suggest that hunting helps animals to propagate and benefits the economy of developing nations, one is left to wonder how many generations deep this inheritance of misinformation goes.

Pointedly not granted a say in or on the proceedings, meanwhile, are the local black workers whose livelihood is enabling these privileged outsiders to realize their destructive fantasies. Once the kills have been completed and the smarmy "hunting hails" have been exchanged, it's these laborers who are lumped with the dirtiest work: loading the beasts' corpses into trucks and taking them back to the ranch to be skinned and

dismembered. (Faint-hearted viewers who have read this far should be forewarned of the film’s most galling and formally stunning set piece, in which a giraffe is disemboweled, chainsaw-sectioned and drained of a veritable paddling-pool of blood — naturally out of sight of the animal’s proud vanquishers. If abattoir tours can turn some carnivores vegetarian, perhaps such footage could give certain leisure hunters pause.)

Seidl photographs these locals in attentive, richly lit detail, often permitting them more potency and agency in the frame than his European subjects receive — yet none is given a moment to speak. (Mr. Neemann and his wife, meanwhile, veer from the subject of hunting to lambaste Namibia’s black political administration: “If you point out the differences, you’re immediately branded a racist,” they conclude after a listing a host of us-versus-them grievances.) This representational imbalance could be said to reflect an ongoing system of cultural oppression and neo-colonial hierarchy in Africa, making “Safari” an unlikely companion piece of sorts to “Paradise: Love,” Seidl’s fictional trilogy-starter of 2012, which offered a merciless view into Kenyan sex tourism. Detractors could just as compellingly argue that “Safari” assists that social disparity by denying its black subjects a voice; as with multiple aspects of this exhilaratingly uncomfortable film, Seidl knowingly treads a machete’s edge between observation and complicity.

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Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (noncompeting), Sept. 2, 2016. (Also in Toronto Film Festival — Masters.) Running time: **91 MIN.**

Production

(Austria) An Ulrich Seidl Film Produktion production. (International sales: Coproduction Office, Paris.) Produced by Ulrich Seidl. Executive producers, Eva Mulvad, Pernille Rose Gonkjaer, Mikaela Krogh, Sigrid Jonsson Dyekjaer. Co-producer, Dyekjaer.

Crew

Directed by Ulrich Seidl. Camera (color), Wolfgang Thaler; editor, Christof Schertenleib.

With

Gerald Eichinger, Eva Hofmann, Manuel Eichinger, Tina Hofmann, Manfred and Inge Ellinger, Marita and Volker Neemann, Markolf Schmidt, Eric Müller.

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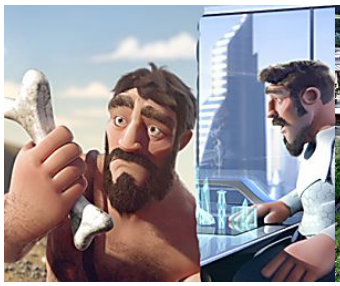

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