

Safari review: Ulrich Seidl turns horror lens on real-life African tourist hunters

This brutal, illuminating change of direction from the Austrian dramatist of the grotesque is a semi-staged documentary provoking legitimate revulsion



'The social order is tactlessly made clear and the butchery is a deeply horrible sight' ... Safari

Peter Bradshaw

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Once you become accustomed to the icily grotesque world summoned up by the Austrian film-maker Ulrich Seidl, it is rare to feel anything other than a kind of jaded, subdued horror. But I felt something real in the course of this documentary about Austrian big-game tourists at a Namibian hunting lodge: unselfconscious rage and disgust. The sheer smugness and chilling lack of imagination of these people playing the Great White Hunter is mind boggling as they slay Impala and zebras with deafeningly loud and powerful hunting rifles - in controlled conditions which effectively disguise the fish-in-a-barrel nature of the experience they're buying.

But as a meat eater, I also had to recognise that the implications of what Seidl is showing us are not so far from a lot of people's lives, far from this obviously exotic arena. However: the hunters' conceited theatrical rituals, the get-up and the vocab are especially infuriating.

An ordinary Austrian family is shown being tutored in stalking and handling the weapon and how to approach the quarry once hit - carefully, because it might not be dead. They are interviewed and express enthusiastic love of the hunt. Some of the lodge owners are interviewed and unburden themselves of their robust political views and complain they can't express them without being accused of racism.

Then we see some horrible kills: for some reasons, sentimental and irrational reasons perhaps, the bringing down of a giraffe is particularly gruesome. Then the animal's dead body is bizarrely posed for the trophy photo. The giraffe actually has leaves pushed into its mouth for added drama. The hunters pompously congratulate each other with the phrase: "Hunter's hail!" To which the solemn reply is: "Hunter's thanks!"

Then the dirty work begins - the animals must be skinned and dismembered in preparation for the head getting mounted on the wall. This is a job for the black assistants who work at the lodge, well away from the tourists. The social order is tactlessly made clear and the butchery is a deeply horrible sight. It is all too probable that the hunter-tourists have never seen it.

This is a staged documentary with people posing for staged shots like portrait photos, standing still just long enough to look uncomfortable. (It's a cliché and I wish the director could do without it.) There are some of Seidl's familiar images: very fat middleaged people in swimming costumes are shown sunbathing - an activity which I suspect licenses the showing of, well, very fat ugly naked people. The contrived images here are not so different from the docu-realism of his fictional work, using non-professionals.

I'm not sure that Seidl is simply campaigning against hunt-tourism, just as he wasn't simply campaigning against sex tourism in his "Paradise" movies. His procedure is more about creating a grotesque world, or isolating the grotesque elements of the world he sees, and then shining a cold, clear light on it. It's very uncomfortable but legitimate film-making.

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