

# The Dog Day Afternoon

## A long, lazy chat with Austrian filmmaker Ulrich Seidl

by Jan Kedves/photography Jork Weismann



Ulrich Seidl's production office is located on the second floor of an elegant town house near the banks of the picturesque Danube canal in Vienna. The Austrian director's office is cozily furnished, with creaky wooden floorboards and kitschy Catholic icons. "This is our peripatetic Virgin, a prop for a new project I'm working on," explains Seidl, pointing to a pastel-colored Mother of God. "The rest is just irony."

Seidl started producing his series of highly original documentaries in the late 1970s. Combining fact and fiction, they were shown in both cinemas and on television. His home country of Austria was often the main subject of his scathing wit. But it wasn't until the success of his 2001 film, *Hundstage* (*Dog Days*) at international festivals that Seidl finally found international acclaim. *Import Export*, which followed in 2007, was another global success. This story about migration portrays an expanded Europe of open borders and uprooted lives. I spoke to the filmmaker about prostitution, feel-good terrorism, black-and-white photography, antidepressants, and Austria's seeming obsession with cellars.

**Jan Kedves: Mr. Seidl, you are known for your die-hard perfectionism and unrelenting self-criticism. When was the last time you felt satisfied?**

Ulrich Seidl: I can't remember, to be honest. I'm a very restless, dissatisfied sort of person. Of course, I admit that's got a lot to do with being a perfectionist, which doesn't make being a filmmaker any easier. My staff knows I can be very trying during a shoot.

**JK: But would you also say that your greatest successes so far—films like *Hundstage* (*Dog Days*), which won the Grand Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival in 2001, and *Import Export*, which was shown in competition at Cannes—fall short of the mark?**

US: No, I wouldn't go that far. When I finish working on a film, there is usually a moment after which I am pleased with the result because I know that I have done my best. You can't do more than that. So I should probably say, yes I am happy with these films. At any rate, I wasn't able to make them any better.

**JK: You started making films at the end of the 70s. Were you ever a punk?**

US: No. Punk never appealed to me at all.

**JK: But you're no stranger to provocation...**

US: My life simply went in a completely different direction. With the exception of alcohol, for example, I never really had any interest in drugs—which are usually part of the punk lifestyle after all. But I didn't belong to Generation

68 either—I was too young for that. In 1968 I was at a Catholic boarding school for boys. Of course, news of the student riots got through to us there and I was very interested in what was going on. But my opportunities to protest or rebel at school were rather limited. Going back to what you said though, I should perhaps ask what you mean by provocation in the first place.

**JK: Have 30 years of making films which have repeatedly outraged the public—films about pets, models, prostitution—not given you an answer to that question?**

US: Good point. I've noticed that the things people usually find provocative are things that make them feel awkward, catch them red-handed, confront them with things that relate to their everyday lives in some way but which they refuse to accept. They usually get aggressive quite quickly, which is when I see that I've hit a sore point.

**JK: Is it a question of denial?**

US: Of course. Let me give you an example: The scenes we shot in the geriatric ward of a Vienna hospital for *Import Export* with the lonely old inmates sparked huge protest. Olga, the main character of the film, is a cleaner on this ward. We spent about half a year preparing these scenes on location. We spoke to all the people there, we asked them about their past, or often just held their hands. We were very welcome visitors on that ward! But then the critics said that the scenes we shot there were an unacceptable intrusion into the lives of these senior citizens. A very strange opinion in my view, for if you take these critics seriously, what they actually mean is that old people are so ugly, so repugnant that we should not be allowed to portray them at all.

**JK: In other words, the critics' views say far more about them than what they are allegedly concerned about.**

US: Precisely. In our societies, subjects like old age, fragility and death are taboo. And perhaps some people feel bad when they see scenes shot in a geriatric ward because they put their mother in a similar sort of institution. Speaking for myself, I have always found it very enriching when a work of art draws my attention to things I vaguely know about, but that I have never spent, or never wanted to spend, much time thinking about.

**JK: Are Austrians good at denial?**

US: Oh absolutely! Austrians are perpetually in denial, as I never tire of pointing out. The country's Nazi past is a case in point. When I was a kid at school, I was still taught that the Austrians were victims of National Socialism. The opposite is true: we were every bit as criminal as the Germans! But Austria never made a confession of guilt after the war, not a word of it. Austria just carried on as usual and swept the dirt under the carpet. We like to see ourselves as a

jolly little nation with a nice clean slate!

**JK: Does that make someone like Ulrich Seidl, who likes to look under the carpet, a pessimist, a person obsessed by the dark side of things?**

US: I have always been accused of pessimism. But that in itself is no worse than being an optimist, whose take on reality is equally skewed, or un-objective. Optimists desperately want to see things differently than they really are. And besides, there is a vision behind my pessimism, a vision of greater dignity, of greater individual freedom; a vision of change.

**JK: In a book which the well-known Austrian critic Stefan Grisseemann once wrote about you, *Sündenfall—Die Grenzüberschreitungen des Filmemachers Ulrich Seidl* (*Fall from Grace: The transgressions of filmmaker Ulrich Seidl*), he accuses you of trying to arouse emotions in viewers, while simultaneously negating that cinema can do anything to change society or change the world. That is a contradiction.**

US: I accept that contradiction. I think every one of us has to live with certain contradictions.

**JK: But aren't all the emotions, the dismay and outrage that your films provoke among cinema audiences intended to provoke change?**

US: I think the most you can aspire to in cinema is to influence public awareness, to provoke debates and discussions of certain issues. As I keep repeating, I could never content myself with making films for pure entertainment. The main challenge I set myself is to make films that do more than entertain and make people feel good. My worst nightmare is to hear people come out of an Ulrich Seidl film saying, "Well, that was quite nice..."

**JK: But humor is also a key element of your films...**

US: True, but this humor has quite a different source than in comedy, for example. Humor is usually precision-engineered through written dialogues, clever staging and orchestrated pauses between key sentences. But in my films, it's an unspoken combination of images and plot that suddenly seem comic. But that's quite difficult to plan or foresee.

**JK: So you wouldn't mind your films being a bit more comedic sometimes?**

US: Not at all. I know my films can be hard-going, so a bit of humor is quite welcome. I really love these moments in the cinema when some people in the audience laugh while others don't find it funny at all, and are even upset that other people are laughing. I think moments like that are especially interesting—moments of awkwardness and pain but which you can laugh about as well.

**JK: Moments where the laughter sort of sticks in your throat, like the scene in *Dog Days* where the hitchhiker is kidnapped and abused?**

US: Exactly. Those are the best moments.

**JK: Is it true that you originally wanted to be a photographer before you discovered film?**

US: I did.

**JK: Was it the camera itself that attracted you?**

US: No, I've never been dazzled by technology. To me, the magic of photography was always the power it gives you to make images of the world, to portray life the way you see it. Just like films, of course. It's about combining reality with a very precise design, a game of exaggeration and reduction: that's how I see my job as director.

**JK: Were you influenced by any photographers in particular?**

US: Yes, early black-and-white photography. Cartier-Bresson for example. And Diane Arbus.

**JK: So the tableaux, which you use so regularly in your films, with the actors looking straight at the camera, could almost be called a relic of your childhood?**

US: Intuitively speaking, I suppose these tableaux really do have their origins in photography, although I may not always be fully aware of that. When I first started out in photography, I took lots of shots of people looking into the camera—members of my family, people I worked with. In a film context, these tableaux essentially fulfill the same purpose: the film is rolling, but the people are not moving. That gives the picture its special poignancy, its peculiar magic. Actors and audience are looking at each other, eye to eye. It's an irritating moment, in which the audience is suddenly made to feel like voyeurs.

**JK: Cinema works on the same principles as prostitution. Do you agree?**

US: Not at all, if the comparison is alluding to the fact that actors are paid to undress in front of the camera. I think comparisons like that are plain stupid, even if I hear them again and again in public debates, like in France last year, where I went for the launch of *Import Export*. Exploiting actors in front of the camera was the main accusation. As far as my work is concerned, I repeat that the basis of cooperation between me and my actors is not financial interest, but the intention of making a film together. Of course my actors get paid. But using money as the primary motivation would be completely self-defeating, in my opinion. Imagine I tell an actor: "I'll give you double money if you do this and that in front of the camera." He might do it, but I'm sure it wouldn't look convincing. The audience would feel it. I only ask my actors to do what they feel okay with. This means that if they take their

clothes off on my set, I know that it isn't anything extraordinary for them—that they would do that kind of thing without the camera too.

**JK: Working like that must be very taxing, emotionally. You seldom work with professional actors, but usually prefer non-professionals, which you find in extensive casting processes. You need to get to know all these people in the run-up stages to the shoot, explain everything to them, deal with their issues...**

US: It can be a very taxing experience, yes. You practically live with the actors and the film crew during the shoot; you make friends, you pull together in the same direction, towards a common goal. I have to prepare myself very thoroughly for these situations: I deliberately subject myself to this process, but when it comes to shooting, reason has to rule. I can't let myself get caught up in emotions; I have to keep a cool head. It does feel very weird when it's all over. When the shoot wraps up, the actors sometimes fall into a big black hole, like I do too.

**JK: When you have downs like that, does your experience as a "human guinea pig" in medical experiments come in useful? As a young man you volunteered to test anti-depressants under medical supervision, right?**

US: Yes, but it's not an experience I'd recommend to anyone. Physically, anti-depressants make you feel absolutely awful. They lame everything, especially the metabolism. You get constipation etc. Very unpleasant indeed. There's not really much more to say about it than that.

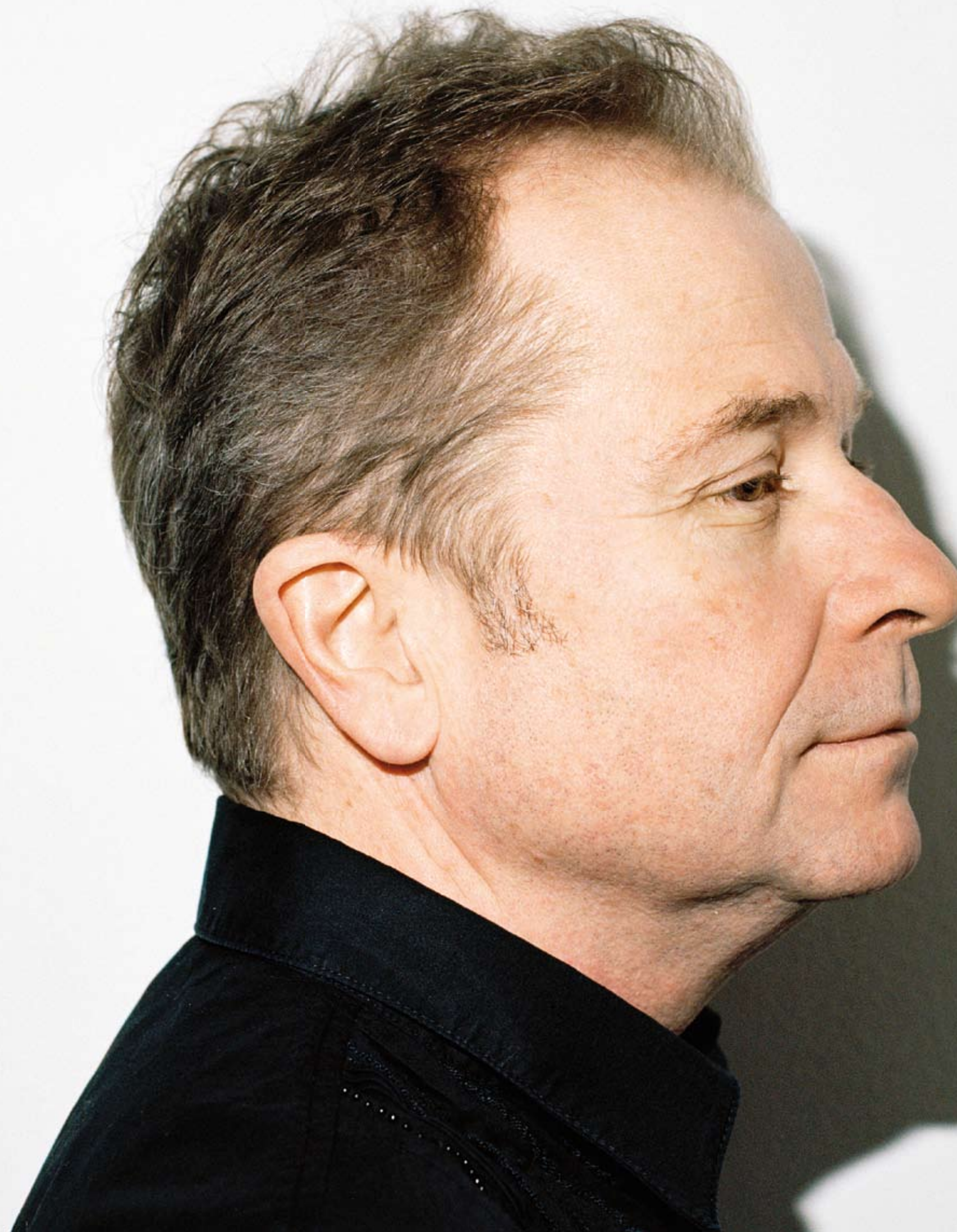
**JK: You were young and needed cash?**

US: Yes. I never stopped to think of the health hazards such experiments could entail. I just swallowed the pills and pocketed the cash. But I should add that I was a pretty heavy drinker in those days too.

**JK: One of the film projects you are working on at the moment is about alcohol, isn't it?**

US: Yes. I want to make a film about excess, a film that is only about alcohol. The basic idea is to film people who are in a state of inebriation. A similar sort of idea to the film I made in '95, *Tierische Liebe* (*Animal Love*), which revolved around the idea of exclusively filming people with their pets. There are very few films about pets, although people often have very close relationships or even quasi-partnerships with them. There are equally few about alcohol, although our society is full of people in such a state of intoxication.

**JK: Why just alcohol and not other drugs? After all, you live in Vienna, where Sigmund Freud took cocaine and Falco sang the praises of heroin: "Ganz Wien is heut' auf Heroin / Wien is so herrlich hi-hi-hin..."**





US: The main reason is that I can relate more to alcohol than other drugs. But I think alcohol is actually more interesting than other drugs because its use is far more widespread and generally accepted than heroin or cocaine.

**JK: Alcohol is a legal social drug: It's relatively cheap, loosens the tongue and makes people feel less self-conscious.**

US: Yes, and when people are drunk, they say things they might not otherwise have the guts to say. There are people who get home in the middle of the night, completely out of their heads and start phoning people and trying to talk to them—their girlfriends, ex-wives, their kids or parents.

**JK: The subject of alcohol also has a religious dimension to it. The Latin word for alcohol is spiritus, and in Christian liturgy, wine becomes blood...**

US: Yes. Faith, isolation, confession, bar crawling, binge drinking, death drives—there are all sorts of facets to the subject.

**JK: Another of your new projects is called *Im Keller* (In the Cellar). In association with Austria, this immediately makes me think of stories like the kidnapping of Natascha Kampusch and the Amstetten incest drama...**

US: The film is about the cellars of Austria. But I don't intend to make any direct references to the Kampusch or the Fritzl story. Of course, those stories will be in the minds of the audience, but I will not address them directly. I thought of this film when the Fritzl story was all over the papers. A couple of international media wanted to interview me about it. They wanted my take on the subject. I thought that was pretty weird. What the hell did they expect me to say? I turned them all down, but the thought of doing a film that was somehow related to the subject stayed in my mind.

**JK: In *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, the arts critic and psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek asserts that in many films, like Hitchcock's *Psycho*, for example, houses are**

**built to represent the human psyche: the subconscious in the cellar, the ego on the ground floor and the superego on the first floor.**

US: Cellars really are a very fascinating subject. In many cases, people go there to do what they really want to do. In detached houses, the cellar is often far larger and has more going on in it than the actual living area. The clean and pretty living rooms are simply kept up for appearances, while real life happens underground, covertly. The men sit round the bar in the hobby cellar, or the women do the ironing down in the cellar. Many people practically lead double lives in their cellars. The Fritzl story is a very extreme example of this. But the cellar also has a strong sub-conscious dimension to it: fear of the cellar, of going down to the cellar; kids who are told they'll be locked up in the cellar if they're naughty etc.

**JK: Like many of your films, *Im Keller* seems to address specifically Austrian sensibilities.**

**Since making *Import Export*, however, you seem to have decided to widen your scope beyond the borders of Austria...**

US: Yes, *Import Export* was a film about Europe, about Eastern and Western Europe to be precise. It was about migration, work and the improvised lives of people between East and West. I intend to go one step further in that direction with my next big project, *Paradise*, which is about mass tourism, a global subject. One of the three episodes of the film is set in Kenya and deals with sex tourism between the West and the so-called Third World.

**JK: That reminds me of a film Laurent Cantet made with Charlotte Rampling in 2005: *Vers le sud*. That was also about sex tourism, set on Haiti...**

US: The film does have a similar subject, that's right. But *Vers le sud* is set in the 70s. It's about a Haitian man who offers sex to Western tourists in a tourist resort and loses his identity in the process, an effect which can be applied to tourism in general. For contrary to popular belief, tourism doesn't bring people from different countries and cultures any closer, or increase mutual understanding. In fact I believe it has the opposite effect.

**JK: How do you mean?**

US: Tourism is a destructive force, in many ways. On the one side you have people who can afford to fly anywhere they want on holiday, but are often unable to say why they prefer one particular place to another. These people often don't want to discover anything special about the place they have chosen—they just want to do what they do at home. Then on the other side, you have the people who are made to depend on tourism and lose their identity as a result of it. But really, it would be true to say that both sides lose their identity. In Kenya, for example, where I am planning to shoot, the situation is absolutely awful. If you go to any beach, there are hundreds of beach boys on the ready, waiting to perform any number of services, far more than just sex. They are like beggars. Of course, it's understandable that they want to benefit from tourism, but the awful thing is that they are made to humiliate themselves because the competition is so tough. These people in Kenya have been robbed of their dignity.

**JK: What's it like in Austria? Do people there have dignity?**

US: What do you mean, exactly?

**JK: Well, beggars for example. Nowadays, public announcements are made in Vienna's subways saying, "Ladies and Gentlemen: please note that begging and soliciting are prohibited in this station and on the trains."**

US: I see. Well, you could make a whole film about begging in Austria really. When I think back to my childhood, beggars were part of

everyday life. In the 50s, beggars would ring the doorbell and ask for money. That was immediately after the war. But then the beggars seemed to disappear from the streets for a while; I suppose it was a time of prosperity in Austria: people were reasonably well-off, and there simply weren't any. But now beggars are back, since the 90s I'd say, since the opening of the former Eastern-bloc countries. That throws up a whole lot of problems, of course. For what do you do with beggars you don't want to see?

If you'd much rather pretend that everyone in Austria was fine?

**JK: You ban begging?**

US: That would be the easiest solution. Begging is a humiliating thing to do, so it should be banned.

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