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The Paradise Trilogy: Love, Faith, Hope

Abstract

This is a film review of the trilogy *Paradise: Love*, *Paradise: Faith* and *Paradise: Hope* (2012-2013), directed by Ulrich Seidl.

Keywords

Paradise: Love, Paradise: Faith, Paradise: Hope, Ulrich Seidl

Author Notes

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Faith, hope and love – the traditional Christian virtues – have switched places in the Austrian director Ulrich Seidl’s trilogy: it starts with love, continues with faith and concludes on hope – quite fitting for a series of films in which all circles around love, but hope is all that remains of the protagonists’ aspirations to find (their) paradise. Seidl’s exploration of love, faith and hope follows the lives of three women in different situations and stages of their lives: in *Paradise: Love* (2012), he tells the story of Teresa, a middle-aged, divorced Austrian woman, who takes a holiday in Kenya where she avails herself of the sexual services of young African men. Slightly uncomfortable in this situation, Teresa nevertheless indulges in the feeling of being desired in spite of her weight, body shape and age, although this desire, even pretence at love, is a narrative sustained both by the beachboys and their sugarmamas in order to cover up the fact that it is bought love. The film combines the colonial dimensions of this set-up with an interesting reversal of (typical) gender roles in prostitution, and although critical of its protagonist’s implication in these processes, it does not judge her, but seems to empathize with her desire for love, impossible to satisfy under the circumstances.

Paradise: Faith (2012) is about Teresa’s sister Anna Maria, a devout Catholic of the extremely conservative, even fundamentalist variant: working as a medical assistant, she uses her holidays to re-missionarize Austria, visiting Vienna’s less picturesque suburbs and offering a “Wandermuttergottes,” a small

statue of the Virgin Mary, as a temporary guest and object of veneration to people. When Anna's handicapped Muslim husband moves back into her flat, personal incompatibilities, marital disagreements and religious intolerance mix and become ever more explosive up to the point that Anna Maria begins to doubt her unconditional love for Christ.

Paradise: Hope (2013) focuses on Teresa's daughter, Melanie, a typical teenager more interested in texting with her friends than talking to her mother or aunt. While her mother is in Kenya, she stays at a weight-loss camp for young people run with a military discipline that occasionally slips into slight sadism, but can't subdue the love for life of the young people, who raid the kitchen for midnight snacks or have parties in their rooms. Here, Melanie encounters her first love, the medical doctor supervising the weight-loss program, whose apparent reciprocation of the young woman's interest culminates in a scene when he sniffs her sleeping body in the woods, until he forbids her to approach him ever again.

Originally, Seidl had planned to make just one film in which the three stories of Teresa, Anna Maria and Melanie intersect, but the amount of material and the complexity of the stories finally convinced him to give each story its own space. As usual, Seidl did not use a classical script, but worked with improvisation on the basis of an elaborated, detailed narrative, allowing his films to develop a dynamic of their own during the shooting and in the interaction with the actors

(both lay and professional). The connection between the three films is now established through the kinship of the three women and Anna Maria's house that provides a common point of departure for all three stories, which then develop more or less simultaneously in different localities.

Ulrich Seidl, whose films are regularly shown in competition at international festivals and deservedly win awards (Special Jury Prize for *Paradise: Faith* at Venice, nomination for *Paradise: Love* at Cannes, nomination for *Paradise: Hope* at Berlin), is well-known for taking a close, often disturbing, always critical but unprejudiced look at society, as in *Dog Days* (2001) or *Import/Export* (2007). But he is also known for his interest in religious issues in contemporary, supposedly secular, society, as in his documentary *Jesus You Know* (2003) about how six Catholics live their relationship with Jesus. In the *Paradise* trilogy, religious references appear in different ways and on several levels. The background is obviously established by Austrian culture, which is still shaped by Catholicism in many and decisive ways, although there as elsewhere, religious practice is declining or taking on different forms. Certainly a woman like Anna Maria, whose faith is explicit, practiced in traditional forms including self-mortification and extreme to the point of intolerance towards other ways of life, religious or not, is in the minority in this society. Her fundamentalist views (she has no trouble judging an unmarried couple she encounters in her missionary wanderings as living in sin and therefore condemned) as well as her ascetic

practices such as self-flagellation and her passionate love for Jesus (in one scene, she embraces a cross, pushes it under her bed cover and seems to masturbate with it, associating the erotic-mystical experiences of medieval women) is quite disturbing to viewers who are less familiar with religious practices past and present and might lead to question the value of religion in contemporary society when tolerance is certainly more called for than religious fundamentalism.

Furthermore, all three films refer to the common religious theme of paradise and explore the question of what paradise might mean for each of the protagonists and how they might achieve it. The holidays that each of the women takes represents a kind of attempt at realizing what they hope and desire for themselves, an occasion to find their paradise. Although only one film is called *Love*, for all three, love appears to be central to their ideas of paradise: in the form of sexual desire and fulfillment for Teresa, as a loving, even erotic relationship with Jesus for Anna Maria, or as first love, curious and innocent, for Melanie. Yet their paradise remains unrealized, and out of all the three, probably only the youngest, Melanie, retains the hope that it ever may come true.

The trilogy is not easy viewing for its audience, but worth making the effort: the long, static, often symmetrical images with very little camera movement as well as the disturbing characters and their problematic stories make it difficult to identify with the protagonists and to become involved in the narrative. And yet, they manage to catch our attention and compel us to look

closely, because what Seidl shows and tells is certainly in many ways strange and disturbing (sex tourism, religious intolerance, physical and psychological violence), and yet so familiar (the desire to be desired, first love and its disappointment). The complexity with which the characters are represented makes it impossible to judge them even if one would like to: one might criticize Teresa's colonial exploitation of the young black men, but one can also empathize with her pleasure in not having to comply with (western) beauty ideals and feeling sexually attractive and powerful. And while Anna Maria's missionary zeal and ascetic excesses might seem repulsive, her firm belief and her courage in facing rejection, even violence on her wanderings with her statues also demand a certain respect. The distance that the films establish is therefore not absolute but allows for empathy with the desires, hopes and disappointments of the three women, and thus enables viewers to question and explore, with and through the films, images of paradise, the value of the traditional virtues of love, faith and hope, and the expressions they might find in today's world.