

he can be close to the local children and try to calm his inclinations towards paedophilia, even if only in his imagination.

Wicked Games Rimini Sparta, therefore, is a complete, monumental work, comprising both films and, at the same time, giving life to a merciless portrait of the world in which we live. A world in which no one is truly innocent, in which everyone is victim and perpetrator at the same time, in which the past finds its sad declination also in the present, in which there is no hope of any redemption.

In order to connect *Rimini* and *Sparta* in a single feature film, therefore, the editing was once again entrusted to Monika Willi (recently nominated for an Oscar for Best Editing for Todd Field's *Tár*) and shows us the vicissitudes of the two brothers (to whom their father acts as a trait d'union) initially in an alternating form (as regards, in particular, the scenes filmed in winter), and then concentrating more and more on Ewald's vicissitudes. And so, in *Wicked Games Rimini Sparta*, we see how the two have much more in common than might initially seem: a difficult childhood, probably ended too soon, together with a desire to run far away to find happiness or, at least, redemption elsewhere.

Ulrich Seidl's meticulous and precise direction shows us their stories in a compassionate, never banal, but also extremely pessimistic and disillusioned way, ensuring that even the locations – often cold, alienating – play a fundamental role. And so, *Wicked Games Rimini Sparta*, through the story of three people, immediately becomes a picture of the era in which we live, of a sick world in which everyone seems to be hopelessly alone, destined never to find the longed-for serenity. A world in which failure means losing oneself forever, in which the past is more alive than ever, in which old songs from dramatic times still resound in the shabby corridors of a retirement home. ♦

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ABOUT THE FILM

Ewald moved to Romania years ago. Now in his 40s, he seeks a fresh start. Leaving his girlfriend, he moves to the hinterland. With young boys from the area, he transforms a decaying school into a fortress. The children enjoy a new, carefree existence. But the distrust of the villagers is soon awoken. And Ewald is forced to confront a truth he has long suppressed. Austrian provocateur Ulrich Seidl's controversial *Sparta* is the brother film to *Rimini*, and the conclusion of the director's diptych about the inescapability of the past and the pain of finding yourself.

TRT: 101 min

Sparta by “Mike Thomas”

The following is an article originally published by Cinema Scope, September 18, 2022

At time of writing, it's not clear whether Ulrich Seidl's *Sparta* will have its planned world premiere at TIFF, with rumours circulating that the film will be pulled from the programme because of a damning exposé, published in the German weekly *Der Spiegel*, that accuses the Austrian provocateur of exploiting and psychologically abusing the non-professional child actors who appear in his film. Seidl rejects the allegations in a statement posted on his website and both the Austrian Film Institute, which partly funded the film, and the authorities in Romania, where it was shot, have opened investigations.

Ever since his student film *The Prom* (1982) caused such a stir at the Vienna Film Academy that he left the university without graduating, controversy has been Seidl's stock-in-trade. It's nevertheless unsurprising that *Sparta* should be particularly explosive, seeing as its subject is paedophilia. Seidl's signature strategy is to elicit empathy for a contemptible character, which in *Sparta* entails playing on the strict etymology of the word “paedophile:” someone who loves children. In the case of the protagonist Ewald (Georg Friedrich), the love is genuine and even reciprocated, but does not extend to sexual contact.

Ewald is the brother of Richie Bravo, the central character in *Rimini*. *Sparta* elaborates on the father thematic of its predecessor—the two films were originally conceived as one and Seidl decided to split them during the edit—by following Ewald as he moves to an impoverished Romanian village and takes over an abandoned school, where he sets up a dojo called Sparta, offering free judo classes for the local children. The chief premise is that the boys who enthusiastically spend their days at Sparta come from abusive homes and that a potential molester provides the nurturing care denied them by their violent, alcoholic fathers.

Although no molestation takes place, numerous scenes of children in their underwear push at the limits of what can be considered appropriate with the intention of making the viewer squirm. Since Seidl is a gifted filmmaker and Friedrich an exceptional actor, they succeed in rendering Ewald a classical tragic hero, thus creating an intense dialectical viewing experience. Undercutting this achievement is the nagging impression of being conned. Of course, this is true of much of Seidl's work, but he typically deals in more original and

thought-provoking propositions. The question of whether a paedophile who doesn't act on their urges is deserving of compassion is a trope, found in films as varied as Lars von Trier's sniggering *Nymphomaniac: Vol. II* (2013) and Nicole Kassel's bleeding-heart *The Woodsman* (2004). It's even the subject of another film premiering at TIFF this year: Carlos Vermut's *Manticore*. Whenever it's employed, it feels like the filmmakers are setting themselves a speculative challenge vis-à-vis the viewer rather than truly probing the darker complexities of the human condition.

Here the sympathy-for-the-devil conceit distracts from an otherwise compelling exploration of themes that stretches across *Sparta* and *Rimini*. Gesturing towards the Austrian legacy of WWII through the character of Ewald and Richie's potentially Nazi father, Seidl presents the two brothers, whose narratives are underpinned by critiques of masculinity and neo-colonialism, as differing personifications of a stunted national psyche. The grim irony of the allegations raised by *Der Spiegel* is that *Sparta* has now gained a meta dimension that casts Ewald as the director's alter ego: a man who travels to Eastern Europe and is attacked for pursuing aims that he deems virtuous through questionable methods. It's doubtful that Seidl intended this less than flattering analogy but he should be glad if the investigations extend it further and reveal him to also have been targeted by a prejudiced and misguided mob.

Wicked Games by Marina Pavido

The following is an article originally published by Cinema Astriaco, March 25, 2023

The feature film *Wicked Games Rimini Sparta*—which had its world premiere at the Rotterdam Film Festival 2023 and subsequently was included in the programme of the Diagonale'23—has a very special genesis. Director Ulrich Seidl started this important project six years ago, initially planning to make a film about the story of three men and as many generations, while telling us how important past mistakes can change people's lives forever. From this initial project (initially titled simply *Wicked Games*), therefore, two films were subsequently born, *Rimini* and *Sparta*, focusing on the story of two brothers who now live far away from their hometown, but who remain inextricably linked to their elderly father (Hans Michael Rehberg, here in his last appearance on screen), now in a retirement home and suffering from dementia.

Rimini—presented as a world premiere in competition at the Berlinale 2022—tells the story of singer Richie Bravo (played by Michael Thomas), who currently lives in Rimini, and who was once very successful, but now only performs for an audience of elderly tourists, forced from time to time to prostitute himself and rent his villa in order to earn a living. He will therefore find himself in great difficulty when his daughter, whom he abandoned when she was a child, visits him to ask for money.

Sparta, on the other hand, focuses on the story of Richie's brother, Ewald (played by Georg Friedrich), and because of the sensitive topics it deals with, it has triggered a lot of controversy. Ewald lives in Romania, where he works as an industrial technician and has a girlfriend. Gradually, however, some of his impulses get the upper hand, to the point that he has to leave his job and his girlfriend and move to the hinterland, where he opens a judo school, so that