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FEBRUARY 10, 2017 6:39PM PT

Rotterdam Film Review: ‘Ugly’

Ulrich Seidl protégé Juri Rechinsky offers a perversely downbeat feature about characters whose lives revolve around suffering.

By [JAY WEISSBERG](#) 



With: Angela Gregovic, Maria Hofstätter, Dmitriy Bogdan, Raimund Wallisch, Larisa Rusnak, Vlad Troisky, Valery Bassel. (German, English, Ukrainian dialogue)

Official Site: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt6233012/reference>

Perhaps the description on the Facebook page for Juri Rechinsky's feature debut, "Ugly," doesn't quite capture the full-on "life is a nightmare" vibe of this story about a woman in a car accident and the people around her: "Reanimation. Pain attack. Sex scene. Suicide. Family dinner. Morgue. Fire. Dementia. Birth." The only things one really needs to know are the name of Rechinsky's previous film, the colorfully monikered documentary "Sickfuckpeople," and the fact that controversial Austrian filmmaker Ulrich Seidl co-produces here. Seidl's attachment to the project will be enough to get programmers to take a look, though it'll be a tough sell marketing this handsomely made but ultra-downbeat title to audiences.

The opening shot sees a bruised Hanna (Angela Gregovic) in a bath, showered with freezing water and crying from the cold. A quick montage of her being resuscitated at a hospital, and then a car crash, gives the immediate sequence of events in reverse order. She was with her partner Jura (Dmitriy Bogdan) when the accident happened, and while she nearly died, he was able to crawl out, engendering major feelings of guilt. In a medical center somewhere in desolate Ukraine, her intense screams shatter the deadened spaces of the hospital corridors.

Rechinsky interlaces this central story with family scenes of both Hanna and Jura, to ensure audiences realize just how horrible life can get. Hanna's mother Martha (Maria Hofstätter, from Seidl's "Paradise" trilogy) is in the early stages of Alzheimer's. At a party she throws in her ultra-white home in Vienna, she makes hay before the coming oblivion, while Hanna wanders glumly through the crowd, troubled and alone. Later that evening, Martha and her husband, Josef (Raimund Wallisch), drunkenly stagger up to bed, flopping naked on the mattress before she vomits. Later still, she's seen floating in a rowboat among the reeds of Lake Neusiedl, presumably conveying the sense of her mind's dementia-plagued aimlessness.

Lest anyone think Jura has it easy, he's seen at home berating his mother (Larisa Rusnak) and grandfather (Valeriy Bassel) with a nihilistic screed in which he contemptuously tells them, "We're just living corpses." Then his father has a heart attack. Jura goes on a wild boar hunt, and the camera focuses on the bloodied beast being dragged through the underbrush.

The action shuttles between Austria and the Ukraine, and the differences between the two locations are pronounced: The Austrians live in cold bourgeois comfort, indulging in excesses and having sex; the Ukrainians live like peasants and are starved for affection, though the love they demand feels controlling and selfish. Contentment lives in neither place, although at least in Vienna there's a thin veneer of pleasure.

Rechinsky borrows Seidl's d.p., Wolfgang Thaler, together with Thaler's son, Sebastian, and visually, "Ugly" belies its title with strikingly evocative images filmed in largely fixed shots: Dried wheat stalks bow down to the wind; Martha's red jacket contrasts with the pale surroundings of the lake; interiors are always bare walls painted either stark white, sickly green, or cool blue-gray. Each sequence is designed to conjure a mood in keeping with an overall sensation of futility, making the film an arresting yet pigheadedly depressing experience that goes as far out of its way as possible to ensure the viewer appreciates the misery of everyday life.

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Reviewed at Rotterdam Film Festival (Bright Future), September 29, 2017. Running time: 90 MIN.

PRODUCTION: (Austria – Ukraine) A Thim Film release (in Austria) of a Novotny & Novotny Filmproduktion, Pronto Film, Ulrich Seidl Filmproduktion production. (International sales: Novotny & Novotny, Vienna.) Produced by Franz Novotny, Alexander Glehr. Coproducers, Maxim Asadchiy, Ulrich Seidl. Executive producer, Klaus Pridnig.

CREW: Directed by Juri Rechinsky. Screenplay by Rechinsky, Klaus Pridnig. Camera (color, widescreen), Wolfgang Thaler, Sebastian Thaler. Editor, Roland Stöttinger.

WITH: Angela Gregovic, Maria Hofstätter, Dmitriy Bogdan, Raimund Wallisch, Larisa Rusnak, Vlad Troisky, Valery Bassel. (German, English, Ukrainian dialogue)




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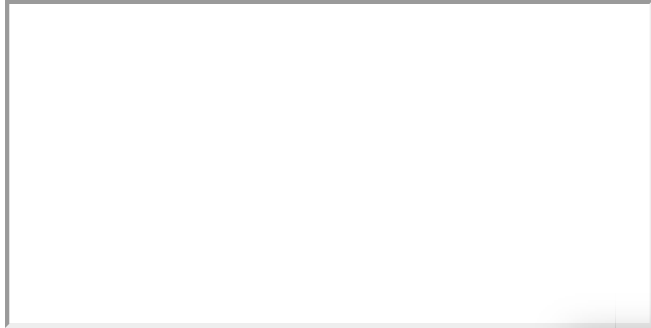


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