

This is for you, Dad

Controversial German photographer Juergen Teller uses football to express his feelings for his dead father. As for his home movies...

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A man's face fills the screen, distorted by rage and frustration. Dialogue is confined to an occasional, guttural 'Nein!' or 'Fuck!' A raw scream rings out - what can have occasioned such primal emotion? The camera pulls back to reveal a fortysomething man on a modish pink sofa, surrounded by the detritus of family life, watching football.

I'm standing in the white-walled gallery at Milton Keynes, watching the new film by the award-winning photographer Juergen Teller. *Germany 0: Brazil 2* is an extraordinary portrait of volatile masculinity. During last year's World Cup final, Teller trained a video camera on himself to record some ugly home truths. 'It is the most disturbing thing I have ever seen,' he confesses. He's not wrong. As a football fan, Teller is boorish, inadequate, pathetic. Worse still, he is turning into his father.

It's a mystery how one angry man in his living-room - sweating, spilling beer - can be so riveting for 94 minutes. This is car-crash cinema, except no one is exploiting Teller but himself. Because we never actually see footage of the match, all we are left with is Teller's teary machismo. It's a brilliantly alienating device.

Of course, with Teller one wonders how much is staged. Could he really have forgotten the camera for a full hour and a half? But then this is the master of anti-image. In the early 1990s, Teller pioneered dirty realism with his grungy fashion photography - faces stripped of make-up, gritty backdrops of cafés, kitchens and park benches. Supermodels queued up to be roughed up by him - Kirsten McMenamy, scarred and menstruating, Kate Moss in her underwear.

A decade on, Teller still pays the rent with the occasional glossy ad for Marc Jacobs, but increasingly devotes his time to more personal, art-based work. And now he's turned the camera on himself: naked, scruffy, drunk, blissed-out - nothing escapes his unflinching self-scrutiny. For a man who's spent a decade objectifying women's bodies, it's a brave move.

At first glance, the new show appears quite slight. Alongside the film, there are 10 glossy portraits themed around football - of Teller, his German relatives, plus the obligatory celeb friends (Charlotte Rampling, Pelé, Posh and Becks). But Teller is investigating some pretty major taboos. For a start, the show is shot through with images of absent, dysfunctional or fantasy fathers (two touching portraits of his football hero, Pelé, make clear the search for a male surrogate). Teller's own father, an aggressive alcoholic, committed suicide at the age of 47 when they were no longer speaking. But now Teller is insisting on communication beyond the grave.

Father and Son, a huge black-and-white digital print, shows Teller naked on his father's grave at midnight. It is provocative, profane even - with Teller using all the weapons at his disposal: cock, cigarette, beer bottle, football (his father hated football). And yet it is a very beautiful, classical image. It could be straight off the frieze of a Greek urn; the vessel at Teller's lips - a bugle or a horn; the football - a reference to the coins placed on the eyes of the dead as they're rowed over to Hades. In the very act of excoriating his father's image, Teller constructs a dazzling memorial.

It's easy to say that when it's not your own family, of course. Teller's mother, Irene, admits she has serious reservations about her son exhibiting this picture and, in a companion piece, Mother and Father, we see her standing defiantly in front of the grave, arms outstretched. Whether she is protecting her ex-husband or her son remains enigmatic.

The other major taboo in the show is male nudity (already local Milton Keynes councillors have made their displeasure felt and gallery staff are bound to warn visitors of the show's content). Teller claims to be mystified - 'Nudity is no big deal as a German. It's all rather normal and boring' - but I'd argue he knows exactly what he's doing with his nude self-portraits. For the average straight man, images of limp cocks draped over footballs or fag packets ('smoking can cause impotence') are pretty incendiary. As a woman, I find it very refreshing to find someone else's body on the slab.

Certainly the disturbingly surreal nude, Arschlock (Arsehole) reading Kicker, is a masterly reworking of the traditional female money shot. Lolling in the sauna, head hidden behind a German football mag, Teller displays his lower torso as an orifice for hire. It may be pornographic, but this is emotional pornography. How many other male artists can be so frank about self-disgust ('But I am an arsehole,' Teller insists)?

One of the most interesting things about Teller's career is how German he is becoming. When he first arrived in London in 1986 to shoot for the Face and I-D, he assimilated as

fast as possible. But, since the birth of his daughter, he has felt a nostalgia for the landscape, the food and the smells of his homeland. It's a mixed inheritance.

'My childhood was very beautiful in some ways, and very disturbing in others,' he admits. Certainly the images shot on the football pitch at Bubenruth are arid, desolate, full of small-town claustrophobia, however beautifully Teller frames the vertical lines of the goal posts with the horizontals of the land and sky.

This is a remarkable show. While liberating us with his slightly grubby Teutonic nudity, Teller offers up his own psychological neuroses for us to pick over. At 40, he's nearing the age at which his own father died. There's guilt about relationships (having split from his long-time partner, stylist Venetia Scott) and fear that he may not be a good enough parent. Certainly *Germany 0: Brazil 2* is a disturbing portrait of an angry, bored father whose attention you can never get. Does any man really want to look like that?

But Teller has another fantasy, this time maternal. On opposite walls of the gallery he runs the twin images of his mother and Charlotte Rampling, arms outstretched, in front of football goals. It's a hugely pretentious gesture (how many of us can call on an arthouse queen to make up for bad parenting?), but actually it works. With her weird androgynous beauty and oddly mannish hands, Rampling serves as a reminder that men are not the only goalkeepers.

· Juergen Teller: Don't Suffer Too Much. Milton Keynes Gallery until 26 October