

# Dieter Berner: "The more the artist uses his own feelings, the more interesting his art is"

This week, the "Austrian Film Week" – a film festival, where four fresh Austrian films and a selection of works from the festival of multimedia arts will be screened – was launched in the Ukrainian capital. The Festival will run until May 1 in five cities of Ukraine.

The opening film was the biopic "Egon Schiele: Death and the Maiden" by the Austrian director, actor and screenwriter Dieter Berner. As an actor, he starred in two films by Michael Haneke – "The Seventh Continent" and "The Piano Teacher", and directed seven films, including the biopic about Schiele. The movie is based on the novel of the same name by Hilde Berger, writer, actress, the wife of the director and co-author of the script for the film.

Dieter Berner arrived in Kyiv to present his film to the audience, and told LB.ua that "Death and the Maiden" is not exactly about Egon Schiele, how his way of working with actors is different from the manner of Michael Haneke, and why the human body was so important for the Austrian expressionists.



Dieter Berner

**Tell us, please, what was the starting point for creating a film about Egon Schiele, what attracts you most of all in him and in his work?**

The film is based on the novel of my wife, Hilde Berger and her original intention was to tell the story of Wally (*Valerie Neuzil – Schiele's model and muse, who is depicted in the famous painting of 1912 – author's note*). It seems that there are only two works on which Schiele poses with her. Hilda found out that Wally was a teacher's daughter and came to Vienna not to work at the factory, but to become a part of the art scene of this city. This has something in common with my wife's biography: she also came to Vienna – however, this was in the era of the hippies – to become a part of the artistic environment.

**So the novel is more about Wally and not about Egon?**

And so is the movie, too. The novel tells about five models that sat for Schiele at different times. Hilde's goal was not to paint a portrait of an idol, but to talk about it through the perception of women who sat for him. My wife believes – and I fully agree with her – that the contribution of the models to the works that the artists created is quite considerable.

Schiele's sister Gerti was his first model. A year after their father died of syphilis, they went to Trieste and settled in the hotel where their parents had their honeymoon. He was 16, she was 12, and since the father had worked on the railway, they could travel for free. My wife and I think that there was a sexual relationship between Egon and Gerti. He loved his sister all his life and did not even allow her to marry.

His second muse was Moa, a Variety dancer in the Viennese Prater, where young students of the Art Academy came to look for models. Schiele became interested in Moa and learned a lot from her in terms of physicality and sexuality.

The third model was Wally, relations with her were of great importance for Schiele. The decision to leave her was a real catastrophe.

The fourth and fifth models were two sisters, Agatha and Edith. Schiele had romance with both of them and Edith became his wife (*she died shortly before Schiele's death from the Spanish flu – author's note*). He had many affairs - at that time it was considered normal that a young man had relations with women, who he could not or did not want to marry.



Performer of the role of Schiele on the film set

**So, your film is about women in the life of Schiele. Where do you think lies the boundary between objectification and art?**

I think there is a huge difference between these things. The goal of pornography, or objectification, is to bring viewers into a state of excitement. And for expressionists, for example, the naked body served as an expression of the inner world. Schiele was the first artist to show his own very vulnerable body.

The bodies of women are also shown like this. Schiele's women are not just erotic objects, they take an active part in the process; you can see it in their eyes. Their eyes and naked bodies are the combination that shows eroticism as Schiele's existential art.

**I also got the impression that you, as a director, were very interested in Gerti, Egon's sister. You start and end the movie with her. Didn't you want to make her the main character?**

She is the main character in a way. She embodies not only the sexual relationship that Schiele had with women, but also friendship. By the way, Wally also was a friend of Egon – she did his bookkeeping, went to the agents who bought the paintings, and took the money earned from the sale of works.



It seems to me that this is the reason why Schiele's art looks so modern: he saw women not as objects, but as personalities with whom he was connected not only through sex.



Still from the film "Egon Schiele: Death and the Maiden"

I am often asked why I did not show more of Schiele's work in the film. I always reply that I did not want to do an exhibition of his art, but I wanted to make a film about him and tell about one painting with a deep background. "Death and the Maiden" was created in the disastrous moment of Schiele's life when he leaves Wally. When we look at this painting we feel something precisely because the artist also had strong feelings.

I wanted to show that art is about feeling and love. The more the artist uses his own feelings, the more interesting his art is.

### **Why do you think he changed the name of the painting?**

I see a whole story in this name change. Initially, the work was called "Man and the Maiden" – Schiele himself was this man, until he realized that he really is the death of this girl. He is responsible for her death (*as a Red Cross nurse, Wally died of scarlet fever at the time of the First World War – author's note*). In all Schiele's paintings it is clear that for him eroticism is connected with life and death and that it is just as important.

This painting is a good example, on which one could show what ideas this very young man had. So my idea was to find a young man of approximately the same age for the role of Egon in order to convey the feeling to the viewer of what it's like when you are so young and you have accomplished so much at your age and yet you die at 28. After searching for a year and a half, I found

the actor who had the necessary depth and the childlike behavior that is inherent in all artists.



“Death and the Maiden” Egon Schiele. 1915

**Please tell us about your work with actors. I know that you starred in the films of Michael Haneke and everyone knows that he is a strict director. How does your work with actors differ from how Haneke worked with you?**

Juliette Binoche once said that it's very easy to work with Haneke, because he never asks the actor to do something he cannot do. Young directors often think that the actor will bring something into their film that is not in the script. But the actors are not all-powerful. And Haneke knows that.

It was also easy for me to work with him, because he only used what I had. I think that this is also characteristic of me as a director. I understand that when you act the camera is so close to you that you cannot lie to it all the time – you have to combine fiction and reality. When I laugh, the camera sees if I really laugh or just act.



In Haneke's films, the actors look very natural – for me it's also very important.

But there are some differences. I was trained as an actor and I can work with young people like Noah Saavedra (*performer of the role of the artist Egon Schiele in the film – author's note*), who did not know anything about acting until we began to prepare for the shooting. For a whole year we met every Sunday and worked for five hours to make an actor out of him. Acting is a matter of experience that you must live through. And I can help the actor do it.

Haneke is a very strict director, and I respect him for that. He does not like when something happens off his script, be it at the rehearsals or on the set.

And I'm very interested to see what happens if we move away from my script. Moreover, for Haneke it is very important to be consistent. When I appeared in his first film (*"The Seventh Continent", 1989 – author's note*), Michael had a conflict with the director of photography. The latter felt insulted by the fact that Haneke tried to control everything: he placed the camera where he thought fit, he checked everything through the viewfinder. The director of photography was infuriated. But Haneke will not allow anyone to make decisions on the set instead of him.



On the set of the film "Egon Schiele: Death and the Maiden"

**And how did you work with the director of photography on the film about Schiele? It seems that the colors in the film do not just show the artist's works, but also recreate the environment from which his works were born. How did you achieve this effect?**

I had worked with a famous cameraman Michael Ballhaus (*he was the director of photography of seven Martin Scorsese films and nine Rainer Werner Fassbinder films; died April 12, 2017 – author's note*), and learned a lot from him. Before starting to work with Carsten Thiele (director of photography of the film "Egon Schiele: Death and the Maiden"), I watched several films that he had made and noted that he has an amazing sense of movement.

We came up with all the scenes and discussed them long before the filming began. Our goal was to make sure that the footage from the film did not look like the work of Schiele, so that the visual part of the film was different from the artist's works. We wanted to achieve a realistic image, so we used few colors. In general, a color development can be traced in the film: in the beginning, when the characters use candles for lighting, they exist in a warmer color scheme, but then the gamma becomes colder. The sequence in Schiele's studio, when the artist dies, is almost black and white. This aesthetics was to illustrate the transition to an industrial society in the early twentieth century.

**Despite the fact that your film is about women in the life of Schiele, it is still considered a biopic about this artist. In your opinion, what should an ideal biopic be like and what films in this genre do you consider the most successful?**

"Andrei Rublev" (*laughs*).

**This is the perfect answer.**



For me, as an actor, the characters interest me the most in films. I like when the movie tells about people in a very special way. That's why I love biopics, but not the ones that enthusiastically describe about their heroes. I love movies that show the complexity of the character development. That's why I remembered "Andrei Rublev" – this is one of my favorite films, and this is a great film.

I think that "Amadeus" is a wonderful biopic, but its idea is that the main character is not Amadeus himself, but the person who wants to find out who Amadeus really was. And we understand that he cannot do this.

With our film, we wanted to achieve the same effect: until the end we do not know who Egon Schiele was. We only know some fragments. As in real life – you never really know who you're talking to now.