

Warped Reflections: The Cinematic Identity of Helmut Berger

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NECSUS 5 (1), Spring 2016: 301–304

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/warped-reflections>

Keywords: audiovisual essay, Helmut Berger, identity



Last year the International Film Festival Rotterdam hosted the second edition of the renewed Critics' Choice program, in which film critics were invited to introduce a film of the program with a video essay. Films reflecting on film, in front of a live audience that could ask questions to the video essayist instead of the filmmaker, is the idea. Since the critics who participated in the first edition encountered some problems along the way in terms of availability and licensing of audiovisual materials, a theme was chosen for this edition: 'Whose Cinema?'. This theme opened up the possibility to raise many more important questions in the flourishing field of the audiovisual essay: who is allowed to use copyright materials for what reasons?; is every film downloadable/remixable/mashupable/supercutable?;

what films will be lost in the inevitable shift from the analogue to the digital? Essentially the main question raised was: who owns film?

When I was suggested which film to introduce with a video essay I was also confronted with this question, but on a different level. Andreas Horvath's *Helmut Berger, Actor* (2015) is a startling portrait of an aged actor once known for his beauty, his extravaganza, and his roles in films by Luchino Visconti and Vittorio De Sica. Horvath portrays his subject mercilessly, as a vile, mean, and ill-spirited old man who is desperately seeking out the attention of the filmmaker. It is true that Helmut Berger is an asshole – he insults, intimidates, and annoys Horvath without showing any interest in collaborating on the documentary. He is actually at his most expressive when he leaves Horvath unnerving voice messages on his phone at night. When he is on camera he suddenly snaps and shouts at the filmmaker without any clear reason. Horvath cranks up this tension by incorporating a creepy, angry, and abstract soundtrack that he composed himself. In a sense he has not only made a documentary but also a horror film. *Helmut Berger, Actor* is a portrait of a monster created by the cinema as Dr Frankenstein.

Horvath takes cinematic revenge on his tormentor; he captures Berger in some of his nastiest moments. When we are introduced to the Austrian actor he is mindlessly sitting in a chair in his cramped and messy apartment, pants down with his hands on his private parts. One of the final scenes of the film is among the most uncomfortable and sexually-explicit scenes I have ever seen in a documentary film. Here, Berger is stripped of all the dignity that he had left, if he still had any. This also raises a question: can a filmmaker capture this material and screen it in front of an audience? Berger's outrageous behaviour can be interpreted as a scream for attention, a desperate way to finally get the cameras rolling again. He has always been ready for his close-up – the picture just is not so pretty anymore.

If we go back to the main theme of the Critics' Choice program and we ask whose cinema it is, the answer could be either Berger's or Horvath's. This documentary portrays a struggle between object and subject, between creator and creation, between art and real life. It got me wondering about the relationship Helmut Berger has had with the camera in other films throughout his career. To my surprise I found out I had only seen him play a small and forgettable part in *The Godfather: Part III* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1995). My proper introduction to Helmut Berger has thus been a very strange one.

With Berger's vanity displayed in the documentary in mind, I watched as many of his films as I could possibly find (and believe me, many could be considered lost). This search has led me to Italian classics (ranging from Visconti's *The Damned* [1969] to De Sica's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* [1970]), European trash (A French/Spanish softcore porn film called *Femmes* [Tana Kaleya, 1983], the agreeable Jesús Franco horror film *Faceless* [1987], among others) and a huge amount of films in which Helmut Berger played a Nazi. If I can make a quick side note here and reflect on the issues raised by the Whose Cinema? program: some of these films were so obscure that I could only find them on dedicated torrent sites. A case can be made here that peer-to-peer file sharing can result in a more complete archive than the official ones owned by studios and television stations. Piracy can save some films from digital oblivion.

Back to the films. One thing that all of them had in common was an almost obscene fascination with the image of Helmut Berger, as if all his films were ultimately concerned with Helmut Berger and not with the characters he played. This obsession with Berger as an icon is visualised in a lot his films through shots of images of Berger's images: windows, mirrors, drawings, paintings, photographs, and other films. They all provide warped reflections of Helmut Berger within his films. I set out to use these shots of Berger's images in my audiovisual essay to ask myself questions: what does this hall of cinematic mirrors say about the man I saw in Horvath's documentary?; can I understand this documentary better through Berger's fiction work?; is every film with Helmut Berger ultimately a film about Helmut Berger?

I think the answer to that final question is a resounding yes, and I am guilty of this phenomenon myself. I have set out to make a critical enquiry of the nature of Berger's cinema and by doing so I have been seduced to collect as many of his images as possible to put them in a sequence. I have made an analysis of Berger's images, but I accidentally also made a celebration of those same images. Just like Horvath and all the other filmmakers who have worked with Berger, I have discovered that when you set out to make something with Helmut Berger in it he is going to take over. Frankenstein discovered that he made a creature with a life of its own. The same can be said about the imagery of Helmut Berger.

Author

Hugo Emmerzael is a film critic from the Netherlands. He is a member of the editorial team of *de Filmkrant* and a music critic for *Gonzo* (circus). He also works as a programmer for Pluk de Nacht, hosts a monthly screening in the art cinema 't Hoogt in Utrecht, and will launch the radio show Stranded Cinema in 2016.