

Helmut Berger, actor

a film by Andreas Horvath



*** Best Motion Picture of 2015 ***

- John Waters (ARTFORUM)

Credits

direction	Andreas Horvath
concept	Andreas Horvath
camera	Andreas Horvath
editing	Andreas Horvath
sound	Andreas Horvath
music	Andreas Horvath
sound consulting	Mischa Rainer
mastering	Ulrich Grimm, AV Design
with	Helmut Berger, Viola Techt, Andreas Horvath and others
supported by	Bundeskanzleramt Land Salzburg Stadt Salzburg

Info

original title	Helmut Berger, Actor
genre	documentary feature (creative documentary, point of view, portrait, celebrity, film history)
length	90 minutes
shooting format	Full HD, color
exhibition formats	DCP
aspect ratio	1:1,78
sound	5.1 / 24 bit
shooting time	2013 (December) — 2015 (April)
completion	August 2015
world premiere	Venice Film Festival (Venice Classics), 09. September 2015
spoken languages	German, English, Italian, French
subtitles	English, Italian, German
production	Andreas Horvath
shooting locations	Salzburg, Austria St. Tropez, France Padova, Italy

Synopsis

38 words

An intimate portrait of the legendary actor and former Luchino Visconti "muse" Helmut Berger, who – after decades of movie stardom and jet set extravaganza – has settled for a more secluded and modest lifestyle in his hometown Salzburg, Austria.

125 words

A relentless, yet intimate portrait of the legendary actor and former Luchino Visconti "muse" Helmut Berger. At the height of his stardom and handsomeness Berger epitomized the exuberant jet set lifestyle of the 70s. In recent years he has settled for a more secluded and modest lifestyle. The man who embodied King Ludwig II so hauntingly in Visconti's same-titled film now reigns in a run down two-room apartment at the outskirts of his hometown Salzburg, Austria. In this small hideaway kingdom time seems to have stopped. Helmut Berger's mood swings and sudden outbursts of aggression are reminiscent of actor Klaus Kinski's tirades. But the film exposes the brusqueness of his character for what it really is: a cry for attention, closeness and intimacy.

200 words

At the age of 18 Helmut Berger fled from the claustrophobic 1960s atmosphere of his hometown Salzburg. His horizon has always been larger, more colorful and more mysterious than that of his fellow citizens. A lot of good luck, but also talent and, yes, hard work transported him right into Luchino Visconti's open arms. At the height of his stardom and handsomeness Helmut Berger epitomized the exuberant jet set lifestyle of the 70s. With St. Tropez as their unlikely headquarters the jet set regularly fed the tabloid press with frivolous and scandalous stories and Helmut Berger was one of their main proponents. When Luchino Visconti died in 1976, Berger not only lost his most devoted and caring director, but also a teacher, a lover and a father figure. The fall was inevitable. The film is an intimate portrait of the aged Helmut Berger, exposing the brusqueness of his character for what it really is: a cry for attention, closeness and intimacy. The radicality and ruthlessness with which he lays bare his emotions and exhibits his body bear resemblance to the Viennese Actionism movement. And much like the Actionists Berger uses performance art as a means of articulating his discomfort.

Director's Statement

Violence and Passion: the official German title of the 1974 Visconti film *Gruppo di famiglia in un interno* (Conversation Piece) in which the young actor Berger plays the hot-headed revolutionary Konrad who brings chaos into an old professor's life, seems almost like a motto for Helmut Berger's world view. Dealing with Helmut Berger means being caught up between extremes: arrogance and humility, grandeur and ridiculousness, closeness and distance, and yes, violence and passion. It's not that I hadn't been warned. And yet I wanted to enter Helmut Berger's world. Being mindfucked by this charming imposter, this winking, yet deeply sincere non-acting actor.



Selected reviews

Maybe the best motion picture of the year is also the worst? One-time dreamboat movie star and lover of Visconti, Helmut Berger, now seventy-one and sometimes looking like Marguerite Duras, rants and raves in his ramshackle apartment while the maid dishes the dirt about his sad life. The rules of documentary access are permanently fractured here when our featured attraction takes off all his clothes on camera, masturbates, and actually ejaculates. The Damned, indeed.

– ARTFORUM, John Waters

The term “exhibitionism“ is almost too weak to describe what happens in this film.

– PROFIL, Stefan Grissemann

The great masturbation scene at the end is a classic *HOLLYWOOD BABYLON* of European and Viscontian cinema ... One of the best films in Venice this year.

– DAGOSPIA, Marco Giusti

Horvath creates a portrait ... which can hardly be exceeded in tragedy and comedy.

– WIENER ZEITUNG, Matthias Greuling

This film might go down in the history of cinema ... A hall of mirrors, a horror show. But: what a film! ... In the already legendary final scene — one that puts this movie in the gallery of the greatest horror films and among the most disturbing evidences that cinema has given of itself — Helmut Berger summons Horvath, invokes the contact, while masturbating and ending in an exhausting orgasm under the unblinking eye of the camera ...

– Nuovo Cinema Locatelli

Screams and name-calling in multiple languages, vulgarism and obscenities, aggressiveness towards the director — a star of the movies and a bygone era, locked in a world of madness. Horvath’s film oscillates between a candid camera masterpiece and a pornography of pain, and puts a tombstone on stardom.

– VANITY FAIR, Paola Jacobbi

This film is beautiful and Helmut Berger's ruins have the gloomy and solemn splendor of Piranesi.

– **LA STAMPA, Alberto Mattioli**

... an amazing documentary ...

– **CLOSE UP, Antonio Pezzuto**

A portrait about a pair like Werner Herzog and Klaus Kinski.

– **PUBLICO, Vasco Camara**

You have managed the almost impossible task of shaping, with incredible delicacy and poetic strength, a character whose greatness reminds me of a tragic Greek heroine like Hecuba or Clytemnestra, and at the same time has become the living incarnation of *Sunset Boulevard's* Norma Desmond, but in real life and not in a fiction. You have made the portrait of the last diva of a dead century — and maybe Helmut Berger is the only diva that has ever existed. I can't stop thinking about it: it made me laugh and cry in turns, it shocked me, moved me, it got me thrilled and depressed, and of course it has also triggered deep reflections on the morbid love/desire/sex/sadomasochistic relationship that develops between every director and his actors.

– **Davide Tortorella (writer, translator)**



Interview with AUSTRIAN FILMS

The lampshade on Helmut Berger's bedside table is a globe of the world. Does the image of the big wide world in the microcosm of a lonely man who moved in urbane circles in his youth sum up the spirit of your portrait?

ANDREAS HORVATH: *Naturally this arrangement is not devoid of a certain irony. And on top of that there is a photographic panorama which fills the wall, a series with Brigitte Bardot. When I spent time with Helmut Berger I was repeatedly reminded of the old night porter in Kieslowski's film Night Porter's Point of View: I did a film portrait of the man in 2005. He would sit in front of a huge picture on the wall, a kitsch South Sea landscape, while he mourned the passing of communism.*

His housekeeper, Viola, describes Helmut Berger as increasingly withdrawn. How did you manage to get your camera into the four walls of his apartment?

ANDREAS HORVATH: *Helmut Berger is very intuitive in that respect, I think. Somebody who strikes him initially as unlikeable for some reason would stand very little chance of gaining admission. And I'm sure it was important that I work alone, so it really was just the two of us sitting there together most of the time.*

What was your impression the first time you went to his apartment?

ANDREAS HORVATH: *Ludwig II, The Damned and The Garden of the Finzi-Continis mean a very great deal to me. But I was also fascinated at a very early stage by the other, darker side of his character: the excesses, his indifference to public opinion. When I was 20 I had a plan to make a photo book about Helmut Berger. So it was quite a sublime moment the first time I stood facing him in his apartment. Actually, that moment was just the beginning of a rollercoaster ride lasting a year and a half. But I had been warned.*

If you set yourself the challenge of making a portrait of a difficult personality like Helmut Berger, how can you dictate in advance the direction you want it to take? Was it the kind of work where you primarily react rather than being able to follow your own plan or concept?

ANDREAS HORVATH: *Yes, it was a constant attempt to strike a balance, to smooth over difficulties, to perform damage limitation. The plans changed constantly; for weeks on end*

I was on standby, but if I had to go away on business of my own for a couple of days, that was a huge problem. However, in my films I generally only have a very vague plan anyway, and I'm happy to let things take me along. That does require patience and stamina, but it has the advantage that you can be more flexible, and you don't have to force somebody into a prearranged concept.

If I understand correctly, you had planned to head towards Italy after St Tropez. And there is also talk about interviews that finally supposed to be conducted ...

ANDREAS HORVATH: *Well, this is also a film about making a film. About the impossibility of really getting to know somebody, the question of what methods you can use to move towards an individual's core. I'm not completely sure that interviews are the best method. And when somebody adopts an attitude of resistance, that also says a great deal about him. Incidentally, we did head to Italy afterwards, but at some point everything went flat. The conversations, which he had fundamentally more or less refused to get involved in anyway, became more and more laboured, and just before we got to Volterra, where Berger met Visconti for the first time, we just looked at each other and decided to go home. Actually, I've come to see his refusal to conduct interviews as a conscious decision to exert a crucial influence on the film, to steer the emphasis in the film towards essential or elementary things. Helmut Berger is still a thoroughly sensitive and incredibly intelligent person.*

There are plenty of talk shows in German-speaking countries where Helmut Berger is invited very clearly because of his provocative potential, and he is asked in a very direct and speculative way about his sexual life, his experience with drugs and his breaking of taboos in order to feed the sense of malice about the fallen star. To what extent did you want to combat this in your film portrait, and how far were you able to succeed in doing so?

ANDREAS HORVATH: *I wasn't trying to combat it at all. The way they treat all that in talk shows is a different question, but narcissism, ageing, the passing of time, the question of whether traces of the way we've lived our lives are visible within us – they're interesting subjects that have always fascinated people, from classical times up to the present day. From Adonis, Narcissus and Dorian Gray to the interchangeable stars being produced constantly in modern times. And we shouldn't forget that Helmut Berger has always been provocative in the way he breaks taboos. Even when he wasn't what some might call a "fallen star". He has always been very ruthless about using his own body as part of the game. It seems to me that despite his efforts to be regarded as a citizen of the world,*

deep down in his heart Helmut Berger has actually remained a typical Austrian. The ruthlessness and the indifference in the way he uses his body as a space for projection reminds me of Viennese Actionism, his love-hate relationship with Austria is reminiscent of Oskar Werner or Helmut Qualtinger, his endless tirades recall Thomas Bernhard, his exaggerated mode of expression, scattered with faecal analogies, is like that of Werner Schwab, etc.

The apartment is shabby, colorful and crazy all at the same time. You contrast these interior images with shots of Salzburg in the rain, the desolate housing estate and – with slowly mounting intensity – the nearby Giasberg Mountain, looking increasingly inhospitable and jagged. How did you come up with these "counterpoints"?

ANDREAS HORVATH: I wanted to visualize Helmut Berger's mental world. In that sense the film adopts a very subjective, almost expressionist stance. It occurred to me that the contempt in Helmut Berger's voice when he talks about Salzburg might be rooted in unresolved fears. That's why the mountains around Salzburg become more and more threatening. After all, the Alps are what separate him from his beloved Italy and southern France. And being stuck helplessly in provincial Austria, or at least feeling as though he's stuck and helpless, is another way Berger almost seems like a Thomas Bernhard character.

The images of the external world are very closely linked to music that is full of agitation. How did the music to the film develop, and what was your aim there?

ANDREAS HORVATH: I started off with a short composition by Richard Wagner which was also used in Visconti's *Ludwig II*. The piece is often called *Elegy* or simply *Theme in A Flat*, and it only exists in a piano version. It was at the time of *Tristan*, and since Wagner returned to it towards the end of his life and played it repeatedly, it is believed that he might have wanted to use it as a prelude to his planned opera with a Buddhist background, *Die Sieger*. But Wagner wasn't able to devote his attention to the opera. I arranged this piece in various ways. There's even a jazz version. The reference to *Ludwig II* was important to me. In many respects Helmut Berger reminded me of the character in Visconti's film. Alongside that there are other compositions that illustrate state of fear and paranoia, the dark, irrational sides of a character, and they serve to make the ever-present mountain backdrop even more menacing.

In addition to the music, the sound of the film plays an important role as always – especially because a lot of messages on the answering machine make an appearance in the film.

ANDREAS HORVATH: Like many famous personalities, Berger mainly uses the telephone at night to communicate with people around the world. It wasn't unusual for him to make up to 10 phone calls in one night. He would go on like that until morning. I soon realized that they were very intimate and honest moments, when the true Helmut Berger shined through. I often sat opposite him for hours on end without him saying anything of real significance, but then suddenly there was a huge amount of emotion and honesty crammed into one phone call in the middle of the night.

Despite all the difficulties he creates for someone trying to talk to him, does his ability to fascinate still come across?

ANDREAS HORVATH: Absolutely. He lies and deceives, he can be brutal and inconsiderate, he hides himself behind masks and he's an actor through and through – but in the end, despite all these role-plays and games of hide and seek, you glimpse repeatedly the rogue who's using these games in order to communicate with us. A quite ordinary person in search of attention and human contact.

***Interview: Karin Schiefer
August 2015***



Filmography – Andreas Horvath

2013 EARTH'S GOLDEN PLAYGROUND | doc. (106 minutes)

tagline: a few individual miners compete in this modern day gold rush tale set in the legendary mining town of Dawson City, Yukon

award: • BEST DOCUMENTARY • Max Ophüls Preis 2014

reviews: « The Moby Dick of the Klondike Goldfields » (*Locarno Film Festival*)
« In the documentary genre you could hardly wish for a better cinematic experience » (*Max Ophüls Preis, Jury Statement*)
« it is through the long takes of nature accompanied by the music that the film obtains a mystical quality » (*NISIMASA*)

2011 POSTCARD FROM SOMOVA, ROMANIA | doc. (20 minutes)

tagline: a moving postcard from eastern Romania captures the slow pace of live in Somova

premiere: • INTL. COMPETITION • Rotterdam International Film Festival

reviews: « a gorgeous study of landscape and light » (*Colgate University, NY*)
« proves that observational cinema can be engaging » (*Celluloid Liberation Front*)
« a snapshot with enduring beauty » (*Michael Pekler, Sixpack Film*)

2010 ARAB ATTRACTION | doc. (118 minutes)

tagline: a former feminist and atheist marries a 20 years younger Yemenite and converts to Islam

premiere: • INTL. COMPETITION • IDFA 2010, Amsterdam

reviews: « a remarkable portrait of a special woman » (*IDFA catalogue*)
« a fascinating and intimate portrait of the Muslim faith ... » (*Salem Film Fest*)
« watch this film, and your jaw may drop – if you can stop laughing ... » (*The National*)

2006 VIEWS OF A RETIRED NIGHT PORTER | doc. (38 minutes)

tagline: the protagonist of a legendary Kieslowski film revisited 30 years later

award: • BEST DOCUMENTARY • Karlovy Vary IFF

reviews: « urgent recommendation! » (*Film Kolik*)
« touching, evocative and humanistic » (*Hot Docs*)
« a disturbing film that asks moral questions » (*RIDM, Montreal*)

2004 THIS AIN'T NO HEARTLAND | documentary (105 minutes)

tagline: a portrait of the insulated American midwest and its peculiar inhabitants at the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003

awards: • GRAND PRIX • *Chicago Documentary Festival*
• BEST DOCUMENTARY • *L'Alternativa, Barcelona*

reviews: « the FARGO of documentaries » (*Minn. City Pages*)
« disturbing » (*J. Rosenbaum, Chicago Reader*)
« grimly funny » (*NY Times*)
« the most urgent and alarming wake-up call » (*David Sterrit, CSM*)

2002 THE SILENCE OF GREEN | documentary (48 minutes)

tagline: a poetic essay on the effects of the 2001 Foot-and-Mouth disease on the North Yorkshire countryside, filmed on Super-8

awards: • SPECIAL MENTION • *Visions du Reel*
• SECOND PRIZE • *Black Maria Festival*
• SPECIAL MENTION • *Cine Eco, Portugal*

reviews: « very masterful » (*Cahiers du Cinema*)
« a veritable liturgy » (*Visions du Reel*)
« rare mixture of visual beauty and militant cinema » (*Les Inrockuptibles*)

1999 POROEROTUS – THE REINDEER SELECTION | doc. (45 min.)

tagline: the autumnal reindeer selection in northern Finland, presenting both, the animals' point of view and that of a distant observer

reviews: « a reflection about the complex relations between humans and animals and life and death » (*Markus Vorauer, öö. Nachrichten*)

1998 CLEARANCE | short film (17 minutes)

tagline: a grim parody on violent ego-shooter computer games, has been dubbed politically incorrect and sexist

awards: • FIRST PRIZE • *Banale 07*

reviews: « perfect editing, superb rhythm » (*Josef Dabernig*)

Biography – Andreas Horvath



Andreas Horvath was born in Salzburg, Austria in 1968. He studied photography in Vienna and multimedia-art in Salzburg. As a freelance photographer and filmmaker he publishes photo books and creates independent films. Horvath's documentaries have received awards at international film festivals, such as the Chicago International Documentary Film Festival, the Karlovy Vary IFF or the Max Ophüls Prize Festival. As a photographer Andreas Horvath published black and white photo albums about Yakutia, Siberia and rural America. In 2013 Horvath received the *Outstanding Artist Award* from the Austrian Ministry of Art and Culture.

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