



Interview: 'Endzeit' Director Carolina Hellsgård On Exploring Guilt Through Zombies



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Carolina Hellsgård's second feature film, *Endzeit* (*Ever After*), follows two women as they journey out into a zombie infested landscape in hope of finding a brighter future.

Close-up Culture's James Prestridge caught up with the Swedish director to talk about the usefulness of the zombie genre, working with Gro Swantje Kohlhof and Maja Lehrer, drawing influence from Andrei Tarkovsky, and much more.

Q: What was your initial reaction after reading Olivia Vieweg's screenplay for 'Endzeit' ('Ever After')?

A: I loved that it was a mash-up of several different genres – horror, road trip, fairytale, buddy and zombie film. Another aspect I really liked was the character constellation – two very different young women develop an unlikely friendship.

I was intrigued by the fact that Vivi could be described as a weak character; she is needy and sometimes a bit annoying and although she develops throughout the film, she stays true to herself, and doesn't suddenly turn into a superhero.

Eve, on the other hand, is outwardly strong but flawed in other ways, and has her own inner demons to come to terms with. I really liked that both women are complex characters and that they don't fall into the trap of being one-dimensional "strong women".

Endzeit also has an ecological subtext that appealed to me and which can be interpreted as feminist. Nature strikes back against a failing patriarchal system, and thereby sets two young women free. The virus is presented not only as a curse but also a blessing. Even though it is an apocalyptic film, I find it optimistic and empowering, it gives a glimpse of an alternate way of survival, perhaps even a feminist utopia.

Q: What is your relationship to the zombie genre?

A: A zombie is rarely just a zombie but usually a manifestation of human emotions. In the case of Vivi and Eve in *Endzeit*, it is about guilt – a topic which I was very fascinated with by the time I started making *Endzeit*. It's about all the bad stuff we have done and all the good things we have not done. I personally feel guilty about a lot of things, and in a way believe it's a good thing. We should question how we live, how we treat each other and the environment.

A zombie film is a great tool for questioning our own moral choices and our existence, it prompts self-reflection.

Like in Romero's films it can also be a vehicle to comment on socio-political issues. While making *Endzeit* I saw the zombie genre as a great opportunity to say something about how we live without being too didactic.

My absolute favourite zombie films are *28 Days Later* and *The Girl With All The Gifts*. I love it when the zombies are fast, and not too slow.



Vivi (Gro Swantje Kohlhof) and Eva (Maja Lehrer) – photo by Anke Neugebauer/Grown Up Films/ZDF

Q: Similar to your last feature 'Wanja', this is the story of two isolated women forming an unlikely relationship. How do you see Vivi and Eve?

A: Vivi and Eve are two very different young women – Vivi suffers from horror visions and lives in a mental ward, whereas Eve is a very apt soldier and quite integrated in society. They relate to each other through the aspect of guilt, which I mentioned before. Both harbour secrets, which they eventually share with each other as they grow closer.

It was important that *Endzeit* would not only be about guilt, but also about emancipation.

Vivi and Eve leave a controlling society and venture into an apocalyptic world. In the end, they decide not to return to civilization, but to choose nature and ultimately freedom. They prefer chaos to order, freedom instead of control, love instead of fear. Vivi and Eve embody the future and a new form of coexistence; this new symbiosis with nature is an exciting possibility for humanity. It is not the end, but the beginning, like Vivi says in the film.

Q: What was your collaboration like with Gro Swantje Kohlhof and Maja Lehrer? How did you help them connect and tap into their characters?

A: We casted for quite a long time. I had seen Gro in Katrin Gebbe's *Tore Tanzt*, and always wanted to work with her. She is a great actress, who embodies complex characters and anti-heroines, without making them seem tragic. I "discovered" Maja when the German co-producer ZDF recommended her to us. She has a special physical presence and charisma, which I found very suitable for Eve.

Together we rehearsed for several weeks, and Gro and Maja became very good friends, something which I believe is noticeable in the film. Between rehearsals they also went off on their own, getting lost in the forest outside Berlin, while pretending to be the characters in the film.

Q: From the trailer, the film seems to have lighter and more fantastical visuals than most post-apocalyptic zombie horrors. What was your approach to the creating the atmosphere for this film with DP Leah Striker and the rest of the team?

A: Leah and I saw a great opportunity to create a visually captivating world. Instead of showing the desaturated and bleak landscape which are usually present in apocalyptic films, we wanted the nature to be magical and lush.

Regarding the film style, we were open to *Endzeit* being a mash-up of different genres and conventions. The film consists of action moments true to the genre, as well as calmer and almost lyrical moments, where we follow the characters as they move through the lush and apocalyptic landscape.

We deliberately chose a non-realistic and slightly elevated visual style. Naturally, the work by set designer Jenny Roesler, as well as costume designer Theresa Grosser, influenced the imagery. Together, we've created a special look that I can best describe as a baroque, almost romantic, horror film style.

The score – by composer Franziska Henke – also underlines the romantic elements in the film. The soundtrack is melancholic and at the same time captivating, and reflects nature as a powerful and invasive component.



Yuho Yamashita (*Brautzombie*), Leah Striker (camera) – photo by Anke Neugebauer/Grown Up Films/ZDF

Q: Did you use any zombie films or any other films as a reference for the visuals of 'Endzeit'?

A: Since *Endzeit* revolves around depicting nature, I went to the old national gallery in Berlin and looked at Caspar David Friedrich paintings. Leah and I also talked a lot about the film *Stalker*, and Tarkovsky's use of nature in a dramaturgical sense. Regarding the action scenes, we watched *World War Z*.

Q: I imagine choreographing scenes with a hoard of zombies is not the easiest task. What challenges did this film throw at you?

A: The zombie hoards were quite a challenge, and luckily I had a coordinator for that.

We didn't have an art director so another challenge was to coordinate different art department components – such as the elaborate zombie make-up, costume and scene design – in order to create a uniform look and style for the film. It required a lot of time and energy.

Q: I believe you are in post-production for your next feature, 'Sunburned'. Can you reveal anything about that project yet?

A: *Sunburned* is a Herzblut project of mine. It took many years to finance since it's an international co-production and also involves two very young main protagonists.

It is the story of Claire, a young girl (18) who feels neglected by her mother and sister during their vacation in Spain. At the beach she befriends an African beach vendor called Amram (15), and promises to help him. In the end however, she ends up making his desolate situation even worse. It's about an ambivalent friendship in an unequal world.

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