

From Soviet Hairstyles to Contemporary Gender Politics

An Interview with Jekaterina Oertel, Head of Make-up and Hair Design, Participant, Co-Director, and Editor on the DAU Project

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abstract: This article is a transcript of a two-hour interview with Jekaterina Oertel, who worked on the DAU project from 2008 to 2018 in a range of key roles, including as the head of make-up and hair design; a participant, or actor; a co-screenwriter; and the editor and co-director (with Ilya Khrzhanovskiy) of seven DAU films and two DAU series. The questions seek to elicit Oertel's perspective on various aspects of four broad topics: the shooting process in Kharkiv between 2008 and 2011; the editing and co-directing process, conducted in London between 2012 and 2018; the films that Oertel co-directed, with particular focus on *DAU. Katya Tanya*; and the aims and outcomes of the DAU project as a whole.

keywords: Jekaterina Oertel; Ilya Khrzhanovskiy; Denis Shibanov; Ekaterina Uspina; Radmila Schegoleva; Tatiana Polozhy; make-up and hair design; costume design; set design; authenticity; sex; gender politics; humour; Russian women's cinema; lesbian cinema; *DAU. Katya Tanya*; *DAU. Natasha*; DAU's reception.

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Introduction

While researching an article on *DAU. Katya Tanya*, which also appears in this issue of *Apparatus* (Morley 2022), I read numerous interviews with the project's director, Ilya Khrzhanovskiy, watched recordings of press conferences held after the screening of *DAU. Natasha* (Khrzhanovskiy and Oertel, 2020, Germany, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Russia) at the 2020 Berlinale, at which Khrzhanovskiy took the lead in answering journalists' questions, and attended several online events where he was an invited speaker.¹ As he is the director of the project as a whole, or – as he often refers to himself – its “manager”, it is to be expected that Khrzhanovskiy would act as its main face and its leading voice. However, given that the fourteen DAU films were all co-directed, I became curious about what Khrzhanovskiy's co-directors might have to say about their work on the project. A recent online conference panel placed Ilya Permyakov, the co-director of three DAU films, on a panel with the scholars Mark Lipovetsky, Alexandre Zaezjev, and Eugénie Zvonkine (Lipovetsky et al. 2021).² But I was

¹ I transliterate Russian-language materials using the Library of Congress system, except when an alternate spelling of names is either commonly used or preferred; therefore, when referring to people attached to the DAU project, I adopt the spelling used on [the DAU cinema platform](#).

² Permyakov co-directed *DAU. Novyi chelovek / DAU. New Man* (2020, Germany, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Russia), *DAU. Degeneratsiia / DAU. Degeneration* (2020, Germany, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Russia) and *DAU. Regeneratsiia / DAU. Regeneration* (2020, Germany, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Russia).

unable to find similar in-depth material about the perspectives of the project's only woman co-director, Jekaterina Oertel, who worked on the DAU project from 2008, for over ten years, in a range of key roles, including as the head of make-up and hair design; a participant – she appears as the wife of Anatoly Krupitsa, the Director of the Institute, in *DAU. Imperiiia / DAU. The Empire* (Khrzhanovskiy and Vasiliev, 2020, Germany, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Russia) and, most memorably, as his widow in *DAU. Teoriia strun / DAU. String Theory* (Khrzhanovskiy and Slusarchuk, 2020, Germany, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Russia); the co-screenwriter (with Khrzhanovskiy) of *DAU. Natasha*; and the editor and co-director (again with Khrzhanovskiy) of seven of the fourteen DAU films and two of the six DAU series.³ Oertel was also the only co-director to have been on set with Khrzhanovskiy throughout the entire three years of filming (Zvonkine 2022). With the exception of the brief interview conducted by Philippe Bober (2020) for the film's Berlinale press kit and some parts of the Berlinale Talents (2020) roundtable, the few sources (both written and recorded) that I did locate included only brief comments and responses from Oertel.⁴ Irina Schulzki, one of the editors of this special issue on DAU, suggested that it would be interesting to interview Oertel about her work on the DAU project for this issue, and I agreed.

Oertel accepted my invitation and we spoke via Zoom on 22 December 2021. Our conversation lasted just over two hours and was held in English. My questions – which I sent to her a week before the interview – sought to elicit Oertel's perspective on various aspects of four broad topics: the shooting process in Kharkiv between 2008 and 2011; the editing and co-directing process, conducted in London between 2012 and 2018; the films that Oertel co-directed, with particular focus on *DAU. Katya Tanya*; and the aims and outcomes of the DAU project as a whole. Our conversation at times went beyond the planned questions and I have retained the natural flow of our discussion in this transcript. It has, however, been slightly abridged to remove repetition and copy-edited to ensure clarity of expression. Where necessary, I provide contextual information in footnotes and brief, initialled, clarifying notes in square brackets in the text itself.

³ Oertel co-directed the following films (all produced in Germany, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and Russia): *DAU. Nora mama / DAU. Nora Mother* (2020); *DAU. Katya Tanya* (2020); *DAU. Tri dnia / DAU. Three Days* (2020); *DAU. Sasha Valera* (2020); *DAU. Nikita Tanya* (2020); *DAU. Nora syn / DAU. Nora Son* (2020); *DAU. Natasha* (2020) and the series, *DAU. Nora* (2020, Germany, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Russia) and *DAU. Menu / DAU. Menu* (2020, Germany, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Russia).

⁴ The press kit also includes interviews with Jürgen Jürges and Natasha Berezhnaya; the Berlinale Talents (2020) roundtable, features Khrzhanovskiy, Oertel, Jürges, and Ilya Permyakov, with Khrzhanovskiy taking the lead in answering most questions.



caption: Jekaterina Oertel. Photograph: Valya Korabelnikova. Courtesy of Phenomen Berlin Filmproduktions GmbH.

Joining the DAU Project

Rachel Morley (RM): When did you start working on DAU? Were you involved in the project from the outset, when it was envisaged more as a conventional biopic about Lev Landau? Or did you join after it had already developed into the large-scale project that it became?

Jekaterina Oertel (JO): I started actually in 2008. At the beginning there was a small filming block in St Petersburg that they shot the year before. I was not there, but as soon as it started in Kharkiv I was there, so right from the beginning of that phase. Initially, I had a normal five-month contract, for a movie, as a make-up artist, and I had a script. I have a DAU script lying around here somewhere... And we shot... you know, I can't really remember... probably for the first six months, we shot like normal: there were cuts, there were sets, there was normal preparation, there were rehearsals, there was a dolly. It was like normal film shooting.

RM: And when did it change and become this huge experimental project?

JO: When we built the institute that was kind of a huge thing. I think that as soon as the Institute took shape, Ilya understood that it was not possible to shoot in the normal way and achieve what he wanted.⁵ I think it was never planned, it was just how it evolved. Because everyone of

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, all uses of the name Ilya refer to Khrzhanovskiy.

course said, “No, it’s not possible to do it like this, it’s a nightmare,” and no one wanted to change before going into the Institute, and it was questioned over and over again. But it ended up like this and I think that it was a great thing to do; it was the only way it could have been done.

RM: So, your five-month contract was gradually extended.

JO: Yes! I worked for over ten years on this project.

RM: And you did some filming in Kharkiv before the Institute was completed, I think?

JO: Yes. We shot quite a lot of outdoor scenes that are really beautiful. We built a whole aeroplane, and stuff like this. These are really incredible images and incredible locations. Hopefully they will be part of the big DAU movie.⁶

RM: What was it that attracted you to work on this project? How did you come to be involved in it?

JO: Well, this is just how you make decisions about projects. I knew the camera operator, Jürgen Jürges, from some work I had done before. I think he was the one who recommended me, because he knows I speak Russian. And I always wanted to shoot in Russia or in Ukraine. I’d never had the opportunity. These are the simple things you consider. As a make-up artist it was also quite a challenge and I like that. You know, moving from the end of the 1930s to the end of the 1960s, which was a great time. And this is why I started. I remember I spoke with Ilya for the first time on the phone while I was doing another shoot somewhere, standing on a highway, walking in a parking lot, up and down, and he talked for... I think he talked for one and a half hours without pause. I said maybe 10 words, he filled all the one and a half hours, and I was kind of hooked.... He just has this energy and he has this vision, and it is so great to work with someone who burns for something. Really, in a way, like burning. And that was really exciting and I wanted to be part of that, so that was my reason to start. And I was quite convinced that I would be back home in half a year!

Make-up, Hair, and Costume Design: the Role of Authenticity, or “Being Yourself in a Different Place”

RM: I’ve read that the participants’ hair and make-up could take several hours to complete. How long did it generally take you to prepare the participants for filming? How many assistants did you have in your team?

JO: The make-up times really varied, from ten minutes up to several hours. It took longer when the participants in the Institute got older, because then it’s just a bigger job; you have to do additional things to get them ready. That was, I think, the range. I couldn’t have done this alone, of course not. We had about five to ten make-up people, hair stylists, assistants, and this also includes, actually, the people who were working inside the Institute, because we built a barbershop over time inside the Institute. They were my people as well.

RM: So, when we see the barbershop in some of the films, the people working there are crew members who were getting other participants ready for filming?

JO: Yes, partly. Because that was the idea. Building the barbershop inside like this fits in with the philosophy of this Institute as a whole, to ensure that people didn’t go outside the borders of the Institute. And we therefore had to look for hairdressers who knew how to use the old hairdressing techniques.

RM: Yes, one often emphasised aspect of DAU is the importance of the historical authenticity of the participants’ costumes and their appearances. How did you approach making their hair

⁶ Sequences likely to feature in the DAU movie, which Khrzhanovskiy is apparently still editing, include St Petersburg street scenes, shots of the aeroplane that Oertel mentions, and other previously unseen footage. A short trailer for the film can be viewed on the [DAU Cinema platform](#).

and make-up look authentically Soviet, in styles from the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s? Did you research this? If so, what type of sources did you consult?

JO: You know, the thing about the authenticity of DAU is really funny because, to be honest, our biggest research source were actually albums from our families, from our grandmothers, and really private pictures. We were searching in Kharkiv for old photos and old pictures, and we bought a huge amount of random photographs. But the authenticity is like... When you look at the pictures, 80% of the people either have hats on or, especially the women, they often wear headscarves. But we took the decision not to use them at all, so none of our participants wear them. They sometimes wear tiny hats, but never the Russian scarf. So, I think the “realness” is more that we tried to stay as close as possible to the person who was involved in the project. By this I mean that for every actor, or every participant, that was the challenge: to find a look that they really could have had in this past time. That means, for example, that someone who doesn’t care what he looks like in the modern world would never have a fancy haircut or costume in these times, because this would just not be right for him. He never would have done this. It doesn’t matter what kind of style was right for the time. And I think that was the biggest thing: to find a way to be as real and as close as possible to the person who sits in your make-up chair.

RM: That’s interesting, because that’s another way in which the project stresses the connection, or the crossover, between the person that the participants are meant to be in the past, or in the Institute, and them as ‘real’ people in the present.

JO: Yes, absolutely. What we did, and what is different from any other approach that I’ve ever taken before, is that we really used the old techniques and the old tools to achieve a hairstyle. So, we used old Soviet metal rollers. They are not comfortable at all, but they give the look. We did a huge amount of research about what women used as beauty products in these periods, because of course you can do everything now – you have so many setting lotions and so many other products – but none of this existed at the time we were “living in” [gestures that she is putting inverted commas round these words]. So that means our research was more about what you could do if you had nothing to use. And these are the old recipes that every grandmother knows. You know, how to get rouge on your face, how to prepare masks out of fresh cheese and honey to get glowing skin. How to use beer, or even your own saliva, to set a hair style, using it like a setting lotion. All these old things, these old approaches, these are what we used. And this makes, I think, the difference and ensures that their hair doesn’t look modern. Anyway, this is what we tried and it sometimes worked better than other times.

RM: Where did you find all the old equipment?

JO: In Germany and in the UK, I went over eBay, up and down, and bought a lot of stuff, especially for the hair salon, because everything that you see inside the barbershop in the Institute was real and was bought mostly from Germany or from the UK. And then, our electricians fixed the devices, so that they would work.

RM: In terms of the project’s aims, why was it important that the participants looked authentically Soviet? You’ve suggested that it’s about more than just the way they looked and the appearance of the films. What do you think the insistence on historical details achieved? What impact did this have on the way the participants behaved, or how they felt about the place, both during filming and when filming wasn’t taking place, but they remained living in the Institute?

JO: It was definitely about more than just the way it looked. I mean... when you wear a costume, you kind of... you feel differently, because it’s not something you’re used to. So that gives you a kind of armour, in a way. And if the costume is made right and if the hair is done right, then you use that as an anchor to be yourself in a different place. And I think that worked really well over time, because our physicists lived inside the Institute, and they often didn’t even change their clothes when they went out of the Institute to go into town (because of course

they could do that). But they always said, “Oh no, I don’t bother. I just go in this outfit. I don’t change my hair. Why should I?” And we always found this a huge compliment, that they took this on as something that belongs to them. This is what I mean about the realness, or the authenticity, or the truth: it is really about staying as true as possible to the person. I mean, there are rules, and they have to follow the rules, of course, but the aim was to give them as much freedom to stay themselves as we possibly could.

RM: So, the concept of authenticity is less about being faithful to the past and more about being faithful to the actual person, or participant, in the present?

JO: This was my approach and I know it was the approach of the costume designers, as well. Of course..., I mean, we haven’t been faithful to the past, to be honest. This world never existed; this is something we built up in our minds. The costumes are not real clothes, you know. The costumes were made in difficult shapes. At times the costumes were bigger than the people. There are so many things that are not exactly of this time; there are bits and pieces out of this time to give you the feeling of that time. But the furniture that is in the Institute is something that came out of the head of Denis [Shibanov – RM], our designer. Something like this could have existed, but it never did. So that’s why the authenticity is... the truth is... you make things, and then they become truth. And the environment as a whole setting worked; there were bits and pieces that were out of this time, of course, but the overall look worked.⁷ No one spoke like people would have spoken then. We had so many exceptions from this rule, but when you watch the films and you still have the feeling that this is real, I think that’s the greatest thing you can achieve.

RM: You mentioned the costumes. Ekaterina Uspina [Katya in the film *DAU. Katya Tanya* – RM], has spoken at length about her costume and how very uncomfortable she found it. She also said that Khrzhanovskiy deliberately chose for her a costume that would make her look and feel “страшненькая” [ugly], telling the wardrobe mistresses: “сделайте из нее чемодан” [make her into a suitcase], and that she didn’t like wearing it (Melikova 2020a). Why did you want to give participants this extra physical challenge? And did you give the challenge of a difficult costume to all participants, or only to specific participants?

JO: Let’s say... it is quite a challenge to run with high heels over gravel fifteen times a day. It was quite a challenge to sit on the benches; they’re not made for sitting on, definitely not for a long time. These costumes Katya talks about... she entered the Institute in the time that our costume designers decided was “the stone look” [gestures that she is putting these words in inverted commas], this period in the 1950s was “the stone period” [gestures again]. That meant that all the coats we had were made in a shape that made you, as an individual person, disappear. You know, we didn’t have necks, we had shoulders like this [gestures to show how wide the shoulders were]; it was huge, really, like big boulders. So, you see these people going through the Institute... nothing moves, because everything is made of quite harsh and very heavy fabric. It was not comfortable. I do understand her so well. It was not a funny thing to wear. But, you know, you could either freeze or you could put on your coat, so...

RM: And the description of this time as “the stone period”; that was because of the nature of the historical period: the era of high Stalinism in the early 1950s?

JO: Yes, yes. That was one of the glimpses we used... one of the links to the political moment, yes.⁸

⁷ For analysis of Shibanov’s palimpsestic approach to both the exterior and interior design of the Institute, in which he systematically layers architectural features and furniture of different styles and historical epochs, see Makarova (2022) and Murawski (2022a, 2022b).

⁸ For further discussion of the approach to costume design in *DAU* and interviews with six of the costume designers who worked on the project at different times, see Mingazitinova and Plungian (2022).

RM: When you were working on hair and make-up during the filming process, were you in costume, or did you wear your normal clothes? Did you live in the Institute during the filming process?

JO: Oh, yes, yes, in costume, of course, of course [laughs]. I never lived inside the Institute. This was just a decision that was made; because of timing, I couldn't. I had to be outside to make it work, you know, to be able to get all the participants ready, so no.

RM: Your workshop was outside the Institute?

JO: Yes. We had our make-up department right outside. I mean, in the building next to it, through which you accessed the Institute.

RM: What impact did being dressed in this way have on you?

JO: I think it was a really interesting experience. Of course we hated it – it's not comfortable. Luckily, I was based in the place where my clothes were made, so I made a deal with the costume designers to give me as many pockets as they possibly could, so I could work without problems. I need pockets. So, I had different clothes, like working clothes, and others so that I could still walk freely through the Institute in my position of Krupitsa's wife, but not fancy, just grey like everyone else. And then I had some costumes that were made specially for special occasions when I participated in the shooting itself.

RM: Where are all these costumes now? There must be hundreds of them. Where are they kept?

JO: Hundreds, thousands of them! They are kept in storage in Kharkiv. And some were brought to Paris when we had the installations there.⁹ Some of them were shown there on the mannequins.

RM: They would make an interesting exhibition. Are there plans to do anything like that?

JO: I'm so looking forward to that... I think that as soon COVID passes there will be plans so that DAU gets another launch into the world.

⁹ The DAU installations were launched in Paris on 24 January 2019 and ran until 17 February 2019. For assessments of them, see especially Beumers (2019), Bird (2019), Desjardins (2019), Donadio (2019), Pronchenko (2019), and Zvonkine (2019).



caption: Jekaterina Oertel, in costume on the DAU set. Photograph: Olympia Orlova. Courtesy of Phenomen Berlin Filmproduktions GmbH.

The Institute: “the Grinding of Sand”, Female Bodies, Sexual Energy, and Male Power

RM: Khrzhanovskiy (Zvokine 2022) and the art director Denis Shibanov (Murawski 2022b) have both spoken of their desire to create a space that would have a very powerful, discomfoting, or unsettling effect on the participants. One thing that particularly interested me about what Ekaterina Uspina says about the Institute in her interview is how she remembers the place through a sound: “[с]крежет песка по плитке [(t)he grinding of sand on tiles] (Melikova 2020a). When you think of the Institute, how do you remember it? Do you have physical, or aural, memories of this place, like those described by Uspina?

JO: I’ll never forget the first time I entered the Institute. That was breath-taking. It was not yet completed, so it was really a construction site, and I think over the years this place changed its energy a lot. Sometimes you’d go in and... To be honest, I actually often used it just as a quiet place, because around the Institute, especially on long shooting days, it was a beehive. Everything was busy... It’s a film production, a huge one. Everyone’s running around, everyone wants something from you. And entering the Institute and to be not reachable, not to

have a phone, you know... We often used the canteen inside just to be able to sit down for half an hour and have a proper meal, because you knew if something happened they knew that you were there, so they could call the phone in the canteen [laughs], and say “Oh, I need your advice”, or “Just come and look at this scene.” So, in the Institute you just disappear out of the world, so I actually always liked the silence inside the Institute.

But it is, of course, completely different when you are living inside there and you are cut off from every distraction you are normally used to. You don’t have a TV, you don’t have a radio – well, you have the radio that was transmitting for everyone inside the Institute, but not... – you don’t have a computer, you don’t have a phone... The only thing you can do is talk to people in there, you know, if you don’t want to think. I think that things come up in this kind of environment. It was not a cosy place to be. I mean, there were cosy parts, but it’s quite a harsh place; of course, it is a harsh place. And especially when you’re sensitive, it works on you completely differently than it ever worked on me, because I was... I mean, I would just turn around and leave, because I had a lot of things to do outside. But Katya was supposed to stay inside, so as not to get out of this bubble. Probably these things worked completely differently for her.

RM: I think it’s interesting that one of the recurrent visual and aural images that you use in the film *DAU*. *Katya Tanya* is that of the sand being raked on the walkways by the guards and the janitors. This is the sound that Uspina describes. Did you know that she had this memory of the place, of the sound, before you made the film?

JO: Yeah, yeah. I read her interview, I think. It is one of the sounds that is really present. It’s the raking, or the footsteps over the ground, as well as your own footsteps. It was quite loud because there was nothing else. Maks [Maksym Demydenko, the head of the sound department on *DAU* – RM] didn’t do a sound system, so there was nothing else.

RM: Let’s talk a bit more about the set. Can we call it a set?

JO: I mean, yes, it is. It is a set.

RM: The Institute has been described as a “terrain of toxic masculinity” (Murawski 2022a), that has misogyny built into its set design (Murawski 2022b) through the inclusion of objectified parts of the female body and female sexual organs. Shibarov has said of the Institute’s exterior walls, for example, that one was unofficially named “вагина” [vagina] and another was named “соски” [nipples] and he has described the hammer-and-sickle door handles as mimicking the form of “a really nice ass” (Murawski 2022b). How do you feel about this use of the female body in the design of the Institute, both as an artist involved in the project and as a woman? Is this something you were aware of during the filming process?

JO: [Long pause]. I know these things. I know these things. I was quite close with Denis Shibarov. Yes, we laughed about the nipples, or the penises; someone called them nipples, someone called them penises. Vaginas, this is something. I think this kind of architecture is so... so... Stalinistic [sic]. These enormous, huge buildings that make you feel like a worm, like a nobody, with these walls that have no warmth at all. I mean, if you walk through Moscow, if you walk through Berlin – we have this here as well – this kind of architecture is supposed to make you, you know... [pause], to put you in your place and make you remember that you’re insignificant. And this is exactly what the Institute did and I think this is genius. And this talk about female bodies... There is a lot of sexual energy in this Institute. There always was. And this is quite intentional, because this is what drives the world a lot. Without sexual energy it would be quite boring to live in this world, to be honest. And all these discussions are coming up now that were never really a discussion fifteen years ago, because things have changed very much in terms of gender politics. And it’s good that they have changed, but you can’t judge.

You have to consider that it was a different time and it is a different country. This is not good or bad, it was just different.¹⁰

RM: To be honest, I'm not sure that I would have seen these features of the set as visual references to female anatomy if I hadn't read what Shibanov said. That may be because the films I've seen don't focus on them much, as they're mainly set indoors, but even so. What stands out for me are the three huge arms and also the wall with the smaller pairs of arms, which all seem masculine to me; I read them as men's arms, I mean. Through these references to Stalinist statues, the sense of male power – both physical and political – is really strong in the set.

JO: Of course. I have this, as well. That's why I'm saying it was never something that bothered me at the time. Maybe I'm not politically correct enough. I can laugh about the vaginas when they are on the walls. I think there are much more important things in life than being bothered by something that could look like a vagina. If the guys have fun seeing female sexual organs in something that looks like a potato to me, of course – please do.

Provocation, or Humour?

RM: This design could be read as a deliberate provocation – Shibanov (Murawski 2022) has said that he is “absolutely not a feminist”. But could it also have been intended as an attempt, albeit misplaced, at humour, perhaps? One thing that's not talked about much with regard to DAU is that there are moments of humour in the films. Lots of moments of humour, actually. And often it's the men who are its targets, in fact. So in this context it's interesting that you said that some people on the set referred to the small protuberances not as “nipples” but as “penises”. For example, there's one moment I really like in *DAU. Katya Tanya*, when Dau asks Katya if she'd like to spend the night with him and Nora, and she says yes. But he isn't expecting her to say yes; in fact, he's made a bet with Nora that she will say no. So, when she accepts, he reacts in a way that's quite comical. He looks completely panicked and he has to ask his wife, “What do I do now?” For me it's a wonderful moment, because you finally see this powerful, patriarchal, misogynistic man, this usually confident, controlling womaniser backtracking and out of his depth because of a woman's bold decision. It's a refreshing change to see him in this position and it's funny... for me at least.

JO: Yes! Of course, of course!

Co-directing during Filming: the Role of the Make-up Chair

RM: You joined the project as head of hair and make-up, but during the three years of filming your role developed and grew. Khrzhanovskiy has talked about his understanding of how and why your role evolved (Zvonkine 2022), but I'd like to hear your perspective on this. How did your role shift during the filming? How did you develop from being head of hair and make-up to becoming a co-director?

JO: I think I would describe it in this way: Ilya is one of the first directors I worked with who actually actively recognised that being a make-up artist is more than 80% psychology and 20% practice, really. You know, you can learn how to do hair or how to apply make-up. This is something that's not... you know, you can be talented at it, but this is not particularly difficult. I don't want to minimise the make-up artist's role, but to be a good make-up artist you have to be able to work with people, so you need to have a psychological approach to them, in a way. Because they want to be touched differently: someone likes to feel how you do something, someone doesn't want to be disturbed at all... this kind of thing. And this is Ilya's big talent,

¹⁰ For discussion of how the decade-long gap between the filming in the late 2000s and the release of the DAU films in 2019 and 2020 – a decade which saw many significant socio-cultural and political changes across the world, including the rise of the #MeToo movement – has resulted in there being certain “проблемные пункты, т.е. слепые пятна” [problematic points, i.e. blind spots] in DAU, see Schulzki (2022).

that he saw that this is something that I'm able to do: to make that connection and also, in a way, to decide in what mood they're going to go onto the set.

RM: So, you feel that you, as the make-up artist, had some control over the mood the participants were in when they arrived on set?

JO: Yes, of course. This is what you do automatically as a make-up artist: you prepare the actors to go on set, not only by doing their hair. You prepare them mentally. You know, you wouldn't chat about a puppy when you know they're going to have a big scene in the next hour, so you kind of support whatever they need to be able to perform. This is what you do normally out of... just because you do. But Ilya was the first director who saw that and who then decided to use this. And we had an agreement. I said, "Yes, I'm happy to do that. I do it anyway," and the only agreement we had was that whatever was said in the make-up room, I would decide whether I was going to tell him this or not. There were things that were said and done in the make-up room that he never knew about, and he should not know, and he will never know. And this was our agreement. So I said, "Yes, of course. I'll help however I can, or with whatever I can, but how I do this has nothing to do with you. I'm not going to tell you what we are talking about in the make-up chair."

RM: So, your contribution at this point in the project, during filming, was already a form of direction, of directing.

JO: Yes, I think this is how it started then. And we had... because the shoot was just so hard, often, every actor had a person who was from the director's department, who was kind of a close person to them, so if anything happened, you knew that you had someone who was responsible for you, who could take everything on and give you advice, or hold you. I was this person for Nora [Dau's wife, played by the Ukrainian actress Radmila Schegoleva – RM], actually, because she was in my chair every day anyway, so it kind of made sense. So, this is how it started. His trust in me doing this, involving me in these kinds of situations was where our cooperation started. That he trusted me to be just more than a make-up person.

RM: So, during the filming process, would he meet with you before you did the make-up and say "OK, this is what is going to happen today," and so on?

JO: Yes, sometimes, yes. Sometimes it was the evening before. We spent a lot of time together during the shoot, behind the scenes, in this case by the monitors. So, this is, I think, how it started.

Telling the Women Participants' Stories

RM: You're credited as co-director on seven of the fourteen DAU films, more than twice as many as the other co-directors, who are all men. You also co-directed two DAU series. How did you go about creating the films from the 700 hours of footage that was shot in Kharkiv? And should we talk about this as directing or as editing? Or was it a mixture of both? How did this work in practice?

JO: I think because this project is so special I find it always quite hard to put a label on it. I'm really honoured with the title of co-director. In the end, my agreement with Ilya was that I am going to tell the stories that I see in the movies. Of course, we spoke about it. All the films I was really happy to make, and was interested in, obviously, were films with a female lead, because this is something I kind of understand and can feel something about. You know, I could never tell a story about men. Because this is not... I don't know how they work, I just don't. That would be pretending to know something that I don't. I think I always felt for the women, of course. I can relate to every single one of them. And to learn that there are no borders between us, really, it doesn't matter how you grew up, it doesn't matter where you come from, it doesn't matter how old you are... there are so many things to understand on a really intimate level inside your soul, let me say that. It's an instinctive understanding of why people react like this; even if I would react completely differently, I do see the possibility in

my mind that this is a way to approach whatever the participant wanted, it's just that it will never be my approach. But I feel, understand that this is the way she goes. And this is something that I was able to extract from the 700 hours of material.

RM: Did you know from the outset that you were going to make seven films?

JO: Oh, no! No! No, no, no, no. We started with one, and it was quite a challenge for all of us. And I think Ilya was questioning his decision [to invite Oertel to co-direct the film] a lot of times [laughs]. And he was right, though, because it was the first time I had tried to do something like that, and I was failing over and over again. It was really hard. And it took, I think, half a year until we had a version where he said for the first time, "OK! I see a way it could work out, [laughs] let's work on that." And then it just went from there.

RM: Which was this film that you had so many problems with?

JO: *Three Days*. And I think that was because during the shoot this was the most emotional story we made. It was something unbelievable, when they... Have you seen this film?

RM: Yes, I have. I understand that the film's participants [Teodor Currentzis, who played Dau, and Maria Nafpliotou, as Maria – RM] had been in a relationship in real life a few years before Currentzis joined the project?

JO: Yes, they had been in a relationship and when they sat there on the second day and talked about their relationship in Greek, we were sitting behind the scenes in front of this tiny monitor. We couldn't understand a word because no one speaks Greek. We were crying, because we understood that there were so many things going on, you know. We were listening to them and we had a Greek translator who would just pop in some words, so we could understand a bit of what was going on. And we were really sitting there and we were crying all together, because that was so emotional and it was so raw and honest. And that was, of course, a film that I really wanted to do.

RM: At what point did Currentzis know that Nafpliotou was going to arrive on the set? Did he know in advance?

JO: He invited her.

RM: So, he invited her to visit the Institute and then the idea for the film's narrative grew out of that?

JO: Yes. He invited her and then the idea grew, and then... And this is how the whole shoot worked, actually. You created, or Ilya created, or the participants created situations and you see how far you can go, how far you can open it up.

RM: And did they know that Nora, Dau's wife, was going to return from her holiday and find them together?

JO: No, no... of course not.

RM: So that was a surprise for both of them?

JO: Yes, definitely a surprise.¹¹

RM: One of the interesting features of DAU is the fact that the films were apparently "directed" during the editing process, as well as during the filming process. There is an interesting comment about this on the @DAUinstitute Facebook page (2020): "монтаж каждого фильма в определенном смысле и был его режиссурой" [to edit each film was, in a certain sense, to direct it]. Please could you talk about the post-shooting directing process. How did you approach making films out of footage that had already been shot? Did you watch as much of the footage as you could and then say, "OK, I want to use this material in my film, which is going to be about these participants..." Is that how it worked?

JO: Yes. We tried really to use only the footage that belonged to the story, you know, so as not to use the footage over and over and over in every film. There is some footage used twice or sometimes three times in different films, but these are really small scenes and normally we

¹¹ To hear Khrzhanovskiy talk about this film, see *Berlinale Talents* (2020: 1:15:38-1:18:26).

tried to separate this so that there wasn't too much overlap. And that would be the first stage, when you think, "OK, this could be a story I'm interested in telling." Then you would watch every scene that, in a way, related to the core of the story. And then you'd think about what is there to tell, what is actually going on.

RM: And about the ideas for the stories: is it correct to say that they had been thought of, or created, before the filming began and then the filming was done with those stories in mind?

JO: [Shaking head] No, they developed like everything else inside the Institute. I do remember when we were shooting in the last months in the Institute, Ilya was talking to me about the fact that Nora would become a huge, huge actress and then he added that we had to make a series about her. But that was only really the last shooting month. It was never planned. It was just because she was so great and she had such an amazing journey over the three years of shooting. She changed so much. She became so mature, she became so self-conscious and so brave, and she outdid herself so many times in these three years.

RM: Yes, she's an amazing actress. She's compelling to watch. You really feel with her and for her.

JO: She is incredible and it's such a shame that no one sees that, because really she is so good.

RM: You think people haven't recognised her in their responses to the films?

JO: I mean DAU is not widely launched in Russia or in Ukraine, you know, so she hasn't got the recognition there. And she deserves it so much.

RM: In an interview, Ekaterina Uspina [Katya in *DAU. Katya Tanya* – RM] talks about *DAU. Katya Tanya* being "staged", more staged than most of the other films (Melikova 2020a). And in another interview, Tatiana Polozhy [who plays Tanya – RM] says that she, and the other participants, understood both that the film was a "художественное произведение" [work of fiction, of art] and that a lot of creative imagination went into telling the story, in particular, on your part (Melikova 2020b). So, although you have the title co-director, Polozhy says that it was you first and foremost, in her opinion, who was responsible for creating the story told in the film. So, were you working on your own on these films for part of the time and did Ilya then come along at the end and say, "OK, I'm happy with that"? How did your directorial partnership work in practice?

JO: No, he was part of the process from the beginning, and it was really important for me. It is his project. I think I'm really honoured to be titled as a co-director, but it is his project. And to have someone who's not so close to the editing process is so helpful, because you lose yourself in tiny bits when you're editing. And it's so great to have someone who you trust one hundred percent who can look at it and say, "No, darling, this is bullshit, this is not gonna work, sorry." [Laughs] And this is the thing that was really..., that was how we did it. We fought about *Katya Tanya* quite a lot, because we had different... he has a different view on women than I do, of course. And, you know, this love story was something that was... [long pause] I wouldn't say it didn't happen, it did happen, but maybe, of course, we emphasised a lot through the editing. And it was these things, her death and stuff like this, that are of course staged. And this is a film that is much more conventionally made, with lots of music, with lots of editing cuts... We avoided this in other movies, for a reason, because that would have weakened them. But I think this was the only way to tell the story in *Katya Tanya* the way we wanted to, because when you shoot as we shot, then you always have the risk that things happen between characters when the camera is not there, so you are not filming and you just lose things. And you can't repeat them. So sometimes things happen in the relationship with two people and you were not there, you haven't seen or shot this on camera. Then that means that you can't cut this together, because there's a big part in between that is missing. And with *Katya Tanya* there were a lot of bits that happened where we just couldn't make it, you know, or film these bits.

RM: Do you mean in terms of the way the relationship developed between Katya and Tanya?

JO: Yes, or the relationships between Katya and other people in this Institute. And then you're confronted with the fact that something has changed and you have to find a way round this. You have to find a cinematic way to tell the viewer about this.

RM: So, this film stands out from all the other films, because it's more constructed and uses more traditional cinematic devices than are used in other films. And this was necessary in order to make up for the bits of the story that the camera missed?

JO: Yes, a small way of making up for the bits we missed with the camera, and it is a way... You know, it was for me always a way of telling a story about hopes and a kind of light in this harsh world, when two women... and it's not... I mean... it is a love story, but not particularly a sexual love story. It's about two really vulnerable women who love, who hold and support each other, and this is what makes it so tender for me, you know, the relationship between the two of them. I get so many questions like, "Why did she [Tanya – RM] hang herself?" And this is the most stupid question to ask, because it's not possible to say. You cannot answer this ever. You can never answer this. But Tanya is such a tender flower in this harsh world, someone who's not supposed to survive. She's such a dreamer, her feet don't touch the ground when she walks...

RM: She's associated with romances and *skazki* [fairy tales], isn't she.

JO: Yes, she's all about fairy tales, she is all about poetry, and so she found an escape to something that is not supposed to exist in the Soviet Union in this way, in this time, in this environment. It can't be, with men who behave like they behave... And this is something that I found: a way of editing as a way of supporting this idea a bit more, however you can, because there were so many bits missing to explain.

RM: I think it's not clear in the film whether she killed herself or whether she was murdered by the First Department. There is some ambiguity, I think. But how was the decision made about having Tanya die by hanging? Who made the decision that she should die like this?

JO: Ilya made that decision.

RM: And did you agree? You said you argued quite a lot with him about things in the film. Did you agree with that decision?

JO: That she should die? Because of different... you know, people were leaving us [the project – RM] for different reasons and personal reasons as well. The way she died was spectacular for her. I don't know... did Ilya say something about this?

RM: I don't know. I haven't asked him about this.

JO: I think... [pause] that for the way Tanya is in real life, for her to make this step and kind of play death, you know, as calmly as you can, in a physical experience, that was a huge step for her, because she was scared of death and stuff like this. And for her to do this, that was incredible. For her it was a big challenge and she went for it.

RM: Has she watched it on screen? Because it's a difficult scene to watch.

JO: Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah, she did. I think, if I remember rightly, we showed it actually on the evening when we... This was... I don't know, can I tell you this? Yes, I can. I think that this was the only scene we re-shot. So, her hanging, we had to re-shoot it because the camera was struggling. So, she had to hang there for a second time, and I think we showed her the footage that day or in the evening.

RM: And Ekaterina Uspina didn't know that she was going to find Tanya there when she walked in, did she.

JO: No, she didn't. [Pause] That was the rules of the game and I know she was struggling with that a lot.

RM: Khrzhanovskiy has said that your contribution as co-director was very important, both for him and for the project as a whole. In fact, he has described you not just as his co-director, but also as "my real co-author" (Zvonkine 2022), which suggests the extent of your contribution; it suggests that you have your own style, your own personality and your own

outlook, or world view, and that these are recognisable in your films. Khrzhanovskiy has spoken about what he feels that you brought to the films you made (Zvonkine 2022), but I am wondering what you yourself think you brought to them? What do you see as being your unique contribution, as co-director/co-author, to these seven films? What do you think that Khrzhanovskiy would not have been able to achieve without you? I know it's hard to answer such questions about yourself...

JO: This is really hard to answer. I have to say... I mean, we all know that this whole project is really controversial. It always has been, and it always will be. And I personally think it's a good thing. And I do understand that everyone has a different experience on this journey going through DAU. And I really respect every other... every person who was struggling or who left us. I do understand this. I think my approach may be what makes me work with Ilya... or, what makes working with Ilya easy for me is that I just think that art can't be comfortable. It has to be.... it can't be politically correct and it can't be not provocative and yes, you... you make mistakes. That's the risk. If you do something that is not a normal path to go down, then you probably make mistakes. And of course, we did make mistakes on DAU. Of course we did. But Ilya, one of his biggest talents, I think, is to listen to people... and to accept someone's opinion. Sometimes he uses it, sometimes he doesn't. But whether he does or doesn't is not what it's about. But he is interested in a really deep way about what people are... what's in their heads, what's in their minds, why they find things good or not, why they think this is right and this is wrong. And I just... this is, I think... I just never felt insecure about telling him what I think. And I understand that maybe I could do this because I did not grow up in the Soviet Union. I didn't grow up there. I don't have this authority thing that he's a director and he knows everything, and he is God, he's a Tsar and you can't say anything to him. I never had this. I have huge respect, I have huge love for him, I think he's incredibly talented, but I always felt free to tell him what I think. And sometimes he agreed, and he used it. So, I think that this is from me. So let's say that he allowed me to be sometimes his co-author, or someone who would make suggestions, and sometimes someone who would follow him.

RM: Do you know what Khrzhanovskiy would have said in response to my question?

JO: No.

RM: Well, he spoke about valuing your understanding of, in particular, the women participants, which he described as your "female wisdom" (Zvonkine 2022). You've spoken about this already: how you felt you understood them and that's why you focused on stories with women. In the same way that, as you said, you didn't feel you could have told the men's stories persuasively, I think he felt the same about the women's stories. So, this is what he saw as your contribution. Did you get the sense that, when he agreed to go with your suggestions, they were often connected with how the women were behaving or feeling? Or was it not that clear cut?

JO: We often disagreed about why the women did what they did and yes, I think this is something. He definitely has a different approach to women. And this [Oertel's understanding of the women participants – RM] is, I think, the thing for him.

RM: Which of the films that you co-directed are you most pleased with and why? Which do you think turned out best?

JO: Agh! [Laughs] I think, to be honest, my favourite movie is... it's really hard to say! I love them all... I love the ones I struggled with the most, I think... [long pause] I think the mother-son story [*DAU. Nora Son* – RM] is one that I love, because it's really a difficult film, really difficult... And it was easy to make, weirdly. And with a really incredible editor. And *DAU. Sasha Valera*. These two are my absolute favourites.

RM: Unfortunately, I haven't seen either of these films, because they're not available on the online platform.

JO: No. And the mother-daughter story [*DAU. Nora Mother* – RM]. This is something that is close to me, because I am a daughter, I have a mother. We don't talk like they do, but this is something about being always a daughter, being always a mother and it's so difficult to jump out of your role, to step out of something that holds this whole construct between mother and daughter together.¹² If you don't behave like a daughter anymore then the mother doesn't know how to deal with you and be around you. And this is something that is so universal, and it doesn't matter how they talk to each other. It's the way they depend on each other, how they love each other. And how they hate each other.

RM: Yes, the film brings a lot of the contradictions inherent in such close family relationships to the surface, in quite an extreme way.

JO: Yes, all these feelings and all these insecurities and all these..., you know.... that you hate yourself, because you become like your mother... This is something that every woman goes through. And then at the end of the film, when these two go back to their normal life, like being a daughter and a mother again, then everything falls back into place again and that's how it has to be. And I find that's something that was so close to my experience. I can't emphasise this too much, because my mum would kill me! [Laughs] I love her to death. We have a completely different relationship, and we are quite equal and we really love each other. But... what is going on inside... emotionally... The things about the father, for example. You know, how a daughter has a different perspective on what the father was like, how she loves her father, as we all did. You know, for teenage girls the father is the figure – there is no better man in the world than the father. And there is no better woman than the mother for a time. But then you have to crush this, you know, because life just needs you to crush this.

There are so many things and they're all in this movie, just because of this long talk [between Nora and her mother – RM] and how you go over and over and over the same topic again and again and again. And the film is a short version of the talk. Believe me, the talk was very much longer.

RM: Really? It's a tiring film to watch as it is. It's so intense. In its representation of tortured single motherhood it reminds me a little of Kira Muratova's extraordinary film *Dolgie provody / The Long Farewell* (1971, USSR).

JO: Yes. It drags you down, I think... I had a lot of discussions about this film, especially in London with my British editors. So, first of all, they were all saying, "This is not... I would never, ever talk with my mother like that. It's just not possible, not imaginable to have even a part of this conversation with my mother. Never in my life." And I think this is just a difference between temperaments and how people are brought up. We are lucky that we are able to let our emotions out. And I still feel it's a healthier way, dealing with problems in the moment. It's not about judging, this is right and this is wrong. It's just a different way of being brought up. Do you understand? I know, in Germany, families where the mother and the kids shake hands when they meet. And for me this is something that is just not possible... It's something that would never happen...

RM: Are there any films among the seven that you co-directed that you were not completely pleased with, or that you would have done slightly differently in hindsight? Or are there any that you now dislike for any reason?

JO: I could change some things in every film, but overall no, not really. Because I also worked on films that never became films, because the stories just didn't come together. And there was always this opportunity to say no, this is not working.

¹² In *DAU. Nora Mother*, the participants Nora (Radmila Schegoleva) and her mother (Lydia Shchegoleva) are daughter and mother in real life.

Sex as Emotional Act

RM: Could we talk about sex in DAU, because this is a topic that has generated a lot of discussion and the films that you co-directed contain a number of sex scenes. There is rape in *DAU. Natasha* and *DAU. Katya Tanya* – I see the sequence with Trifonov as rape, even though Katya is a willing participant initially, if not the initiator of the encounter – and what is often termed ‘non-normative’ sexual activity, for example gay male sex in *DAU. Sasha Valera* and lesbian sex in *DAU. Katya Tanya*. And there is incest in *DAU. Nora Son*. Of course, there are films that feature more sex than DAU and sex that is more shocking and more violent – the New French Extremity films, for example.¹³ So, I think the reason that sex in DAU has attracted so much attention is probably mainly to do with the fact that the participants are taking part as ‘real’ people, that is as themselves, rather than as professional actors; and as real people who had often been drinking excessively before the sex scenes. Commentators have also argued that sex in DAU is filmed in a pornographic way. What’s the function and significance of sex in your films? Are they pornographic, in your view?

JO: I mean... pornographic? Honestly? If you think about the sex scene in *Katya Tanya*, when the girls in the library kiss each other...? This is one of the most tender sex scenes...

RM: The second scene between them? For me the focus of this sequence is on how they hold each other’s hands and look at each other...

JO: Yes. It is not about putting a penis in a vagina, it’s about something different. And I think, when we talk about sex, if we can separate sex from the act of penetrating a woman, then we’re talking about sex as being like an emotional act. These emotional acts can sometimes be violent, or harsh, or self-harming, being used to silence an emotion inside yourself. For me, the scene between Katya and Trifonov is not about him breaking her; this is her punishing herself. This is how I read it.

RM: What’s she punishing herself for? For having slept with Dau and Nora?

JO: Yes, of course. For ruining her dreams about the innocence of true love. And she feels that it was she herself who ruined it for herself. And yes, if you have done this, you can go on to do other things, and maybe find that you like them even, or maybe not. This is what I mean. This is something that women do, and it is so easy to say that he abused her vulnerability and raped her, but that’s kind of a male approach to this theme, I feel. Because women are so much more complicated than we give them credit for. And then we are used to seeing this in films: it’s being a victim. But you can be a victim without losing something... to silence something in yourself. I think most women have done this in their lives, maybe not that extreme but in another way. I think we have all had sexual encounters or something that is related to an emotional process and then you think, “Oh, so maybe that was not the right way to do it.” I think that sex is not sugar-coated [in DAU – RM] because it’s just part of life, so like everything else it is not sugar-coated. Like when people scream at each other [in the DAU films – RM], then they do really scream, because they hate each other in this moment. And as long as you stay as close as you can to the rule that everything that happens is truth, then this happens. And I think that this is behind the magic of the DAU movies, that you see something that is true. It’s not about being the truth of the universe; it’s not about this. It’s about how in the moment people are saying something or recounting something that is emotional and that goes not through their brains, but through their hearts and through their souls. And yes, even if they’re

¹³ New French Extremity (also New French Extremism and New French Extreme) is a term coined by film critic James Quandt (2004) to refer collectively (and pejoratively) to the “wilfully transgressive” work produced by numerous French filmmakers at end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. Directors to whom Quandt applies the term include Alexandre Aja, Bertrand Bonello, Catherine Breillat, Jean-Claude Brisseau, Leos Carax, Patrice Chéreau, Marina de Van, Claire Denis, Virginie Despentes, Bruno Dumont, Philippe Grandrieux, Gaspar Noé, Jacques Nolot, François Ozon, and Coralie Trinh Thi.

drunk, this for them, in this moment, is the absolute truth, and this is what they did. And sex is part of this.

And, you know, it would be not fair to someone who agrees to have sex in front of the camera to look away, because that would be disrespectful to these people, in my opinion. And it is an edit, so we are using... I never would use something that would hurt a participant, in my humble opinion, or undermine their trust in us or in me as a director in this moment when I'm editing the film. I never would... of course. There is material that will never come out, because it's not... it's just not right, because it happened in a moment when a person opened themselves up like this. And your responsibility as a director, or if you are editing the films, is to say "No, it is not OK to use this, because it does not belong to me, it belongs to the inner life of this participant and I can't use this."

RM: So that's similar to the approach you were describing at the start of our conversation, when we were talking about how you insisted that your conversations with the participants when they were in your make-up chair, before they went on set, must stay secret; you kept them confidential. So, you adopted a similar approach to the visual material when editing the films?

JO: Yes, yes, of course, because... what they have done in front of the camera, I would never be so brave. I never would give myself permission to do this. That's why I honour this so much that they... You know, you can talk about this and say "Well, you can forget that the cameras are there." But you don't forget this. I mean, you've three people and equipment, big cameras...¹⁴ And you can see them. It's not Big Brother, it's not something that gives you an illusion that you are alone. You're never alone in the room when you have sex. You know that there is someone with a camera, you know.

RM: You mentioned earlier, I think, that the relationship between Katya and Tanya didn't really happen? Is that right? And they've both spoken about this, too.

JO: No, no, it did. The relationship happened, but it was not a sexual lesbian relationship. This is what I mean. Sex is just a way to explain feelings when you can't find words for this. And they're... how do I say it... We all have different approaches about how open we are with sex. And there are people.... it's easier for them to sleep with someone else than to really have a conversation. And this is not good or bad, this is just how people try to show themselves. And this is why I don't have any problems with the sex in the DAU films.

RM: I don't always, but I haven't seen all the films. I haven't been able to see *DAU. Natasha* or *DAU. Degeneration*, for example, because they're not on the online platform. I do think, though, that in the films I have seen the sex scenes are often necessary, part of the cinematic language.¹⁵ In *DAU. Katya Tanya*, for example, I think they definitely are. I see four sex scenes in this film: the one between Katya, Dau, and Nora, which is really interesting – unusual and unique, in the context of DAU – because you don't actually see them having sex...

JO: I think that, too!

RM: ... because it's all seen through her eyes and her memories and her feelings of guilt, or shame, I think. Then there's the scene with Trifonov, which we mentioned earlier. And then the two scenes between the two women, which I think... Well, you can read what I have written about this when it's published, if you want to. I think they're all very interesting and they're all very different. I also think that when what we might see as, or could call, pornographic angles or devices are used, it's for a reason and they're used knowingly; they're not used to

¹⁴ The director of photography, Jürgen Jürges, was supported by two additional camera operators – Manuel Alberto Claro and Lol Crawley – when shooting in the Institute. They used large 35mm cameras. For a photograph of Jürges and his crew on the DAU set, see Zaezjev (2020: 73).

¹⁵ The films I had seen at the time of the interview were *DAU. Nora Mother*, *DAU. Three Days*, *DAU. Katya Tanya*, *DAU. Brave People*, *DAU. Nikita Tanya* and *DAU. String Theory*.

create viewing pleasure, or to arouse; they're used to tell the story, or to say something about the participants that can't be easily conveyed in other ways.¹⁶

JO: Yes.

DAU. Katya Tanya

RM: In my reading, *DAU. Katya Tanya* has a sort of prologue, that's the first bit of the film that's set in 1942. And in that first nine minutes or so, where the scene is being set and the love story between Katya and Efimov is being told, I can see a lot of references to earlier Soviet films. I wondered whether these references are there deliberately? Or is it just the way you are telling the story? Do you think that you have been influenced by the work of any particular directors or filmmakers, or by any particular films, whether Soviet or international?

JO: No. I think it is really just the way I'm telling the story, and it is the way I grew up with these kinds of films.

RM: Soviet war films?

JO: Yes. I mean my grandmother was really young during the war and she told me a lot of stories. And, you know, living in the Soviet Union or even studying there – I studied in Moscow –, you watch all these movies.

RM: The prologue for me has echoes of *Letiat zhuravli / The Cranes Are Flying* (1957), the film by Mikhail Kalatozov and Sergei Urusevskii.

JO: Of course. This is a beautiful film.

RM: Yes, and an important and unusual film, because it focuses on a woman protagonist and is interested in her subjectivity, beyond her just being a woman who should wait for her fiancé to return from the war. It shows the difficult feelings that this uncertainty, this waiting engenders in Veronika [the film's protagonist – RM]. So, from your perspective these references are not deliberate or conscious, but just part of you, you would say?

JO: Yes. Part of my heritage, of course.

RM: On the question of whether *DAU. Katya Tanya* can be described as a lesbian film, I did something very unscientific and asked a lesbian friend to watch the film because I thought it would be interesting to discuss it with her. She really enjoyed it and she said that in her view it was a lesbian film. She felt that she was seeing something in the relationship between Katya and Tanya that you don't always get in cinematic representations of lesbian relationships. She described the first sex scene as "messy but authentic".¹⁷ And I can see that, too, in some ways. For example, we were talking about humour earlier and for me this is also a scene that contains some humour, which is part of what gives it an authentic feel. You know, Tanya bangs her head on the wall in the heat of the moment, at one point, and they both laugh. And yet you've said that it wasn't intended to be a film about a lesbian relationship. Is that right? In that case, what does the lesbian relationship add to the film, in your view?

JO: It's just a film about love. Or, no, a film about longing for love. Everyone in this movie is longing for love. Dau does, extremely; Nora does, extremely. And everyone is willing to do whatever they can to reach that. Trifonov does too in a weird, different way. That's human nature, that you try to find something...

¹⁶ Uspina (Melikova 2020a) relates that she received a letter from a lesbian viewer who commented that she agreed with Khrzhanovskiy's assessment that "секс в этой картине недожат" [sex in this film is understated], on the grounds that "ее секс не возбудил" [she was not aroused by the sex]. As Uspina puts it, "мне кажется, секс на «Дау» — это не про «Порнхаб». Этот секс в принципе не должен возбуждать. Если не возбудилась, значит, снято хорошо" [it seems to me that sex in *DAU* is not 'PornHub'. This sex shouldn't be a turn-on at all. If she wasn't turned on, this means that it was shot well].

¹⁷ Teresa Elwes, in an email to the author, October 17, 2021.

RM: There are so few films that openly depict lesbian, or bisexual, relationships in Russian cinema. Whether you intended it as a lesbian film or not, it can still be received as that by viewers.

JO: Of course! We had one rule editing this whole film. That's why I struggle a little bit sometimes with this term "co-author" [gestures to show she is putting inverted commas round this word]. I tried to put as little of me as possible in these movies. It's not my opinion – I mean, it is my opinion in one sense, because I chose the story and I chose the scenes, and I chose the way it's told – but I never tried to judge or to state that this is right and this wrong, or this has to be seen like this. Whenever I could I tried to take my own opinion away and that was a big part of the editing process. Normally, you'd edit a scene and then you'd look at it, normally the next day, and you'd say "Aha... I can see my relationship to this character in this scene; this is not good. I'm not going to use this. And then you'd find a way of editing where you try not to include your own judgement. That of course happens, you know, when you see something. Of course, I have an opinion. Of course I do. But what's really interesting is how easily it is changed during the editing process, because you discover things and looks and something people do that is not on the surface. You notice when you watch the material over and over again, because it's not played [acted? – RM], it's lived through, you all of a sudden understand, "No, this is what she says, but she actually feels completely different, because you can see this here or there, or you see the build-up to why she says it at the end like this, because she is struggling here a lot. You know, like the process of... the psychological process of an outburst or something. The moment of the outburst is not the interesting part. The interesting part is how you build up inside to go there, or to be able to do this. And when you do this kind of editing, then you are not able to judge anymore, then you can't say "Oh, this is good and that's bad." For example, in *DAU. Nikita Tanya* – it's the story of a couple and it's one of the films when they actually only talk – it's so easy to judge and say, "Oh, he's an asshole. He wants to have a girlfriend, or he wants to have an affair, poor woman." But then, you see how these things are evolving through their life and you hopefully reconsider your opinion, and this is actually what a big part of this editing process was: to try to take myself out.

RM: That must be difficult, because it requires a level of awareness of your own perspective that must be hard to achieve?

JO: This is really the weird thing: in this material you see that [your own perspective – RM], you do. So I had my version of the film and then normally I worked with a lot of editors who worked on different films, at the same time. And whenever I had a version of one of the movies or series episodes, we'd say, "Okay, let's sit together and watch it." And then you'd sit in a room, together with other people watching the film – you sit at the back always – and then I'd see that this is me telling the story. And when I see this in these kinds of moments, then I understand this is wrong, or when people say, "I see you like them," or "I see you don't like them," or "You're right, he's an asshole!" then you go "Ah...! This [the way she has constructed this part of the film] is wrong... OK."

RM: How long did you work on the editing for? Did it take a long time?

JO: Yes. I think *Oedipus* [*DAU. Nora Son* – RM] took the shortest time. I think we worked on that for half a year, about six months. *DAU. Three Days* took, I think, at least 10 months. *DAU. Nora Mother* was a long process. *DAU. Katya Tanya* was at least, I think, a year.

RM: And was all the editing done in London?

JO: Yes, all in London. And together with the series. But that was the luxury of this whole production that you could say, "Okay, I need a break from this. I'll concentrate on something else and then go back to it." Or I'd call Ilya and say, "You need you to watch this. I can't see anything anymore."

RM: So, we've talked about Tanya's death a little. You told me that Ilya made that decision. And that you agreed with it? Is that right? Did you agree? Or, at least, that you understood why he wanted her to die?

JO: I understood why, and I was really worried, like everyone was. Ilya was worried as well. That was a really tense scene and that was one of the situations where you say, "OK, is that too far? Are we going too far, or not?" And we were really happy, as it was clear that she [Tatiana Polozhy – RM] was so happy that she had done this, and she was so thankful to get through this experience in the end. So, we were like, "Okay, thank God!" That's the risk you have to take.

RM: And what about the impact the scene had on Ekaterina Uspina? She says in an interview that she decided to leave the project after that morning's filming. And, also, what impact does this scene have on the film as a whole? On its meaning and what it's trying to say?

JO: The question about the impact on the meaning of the film is easier for me to answer than the impact of this on Katya. This is something only she can answer. I wouldn't want to speak for her. Regarding the film... this is reality: that the dreams we have are crushed much of the time. None of the DAU films are really happy films, unfortunately. It's just a glimpse out of her life and she will try again. And she will succeed, as she did in real life. I mean, this is something we never forget, you know, because it's all related to each other. In real life she's a happy mother now, in a loving relationship. Everything that she couldn't dream of when she was with us.

RM: Katya is also in *DAU. String Theory* (as are you). And the action in that film takes place a bit later in 1953 than in *DAU. Katya Tanya*. So, I suppose, if we watch more of the films, we do see that she's picked herself up and moved on, though she doesn't fare much better with the man she becomes involved with in that film, does she...

JO: Yeah. It's not going to be a happy relationship either, but still...

RM: Yes, far from happy. The man she's with in that film is Nikita, who you were just talking about, right?

JO: Yes.

RM: This is one of the things that I like about the DAU films: the fact that you meet characters in one film and they're in the background, on the periphery of events, and then in other films they're in the foreground, or at the heart of the story, and you see different things about them.

JO: Absolutely.

RM: Do you think you will work as a director again?

JO: I have no idea, to be honest. I don't know yet. It's really difficult to imagine something else like this, and this kind of opportunity was really a gift I was given and I'm really grateful that I had the opportunity to do this. It changed my life, a lot, and it will have consequences, maybe not right now, but it will.

Production Methods and DAU's Reception

RM: This is a question that has to be asked, I think. Early responses to DAU questioned the ethics of the project's production methods, and you know very well that when *DAU. Natasha* was shown in Berlin, the overwhelming response was that it was unethical and the production methods were unethical, and that it was humiliating and traumatising for the film's women participants – for Natasha [Natalia Berezhnaya, the eponymous protagonist of *DAU. Natasha* – RM] in particular, who is not a professional actress. At press conferences and in interviews (Belikov 2020), the women participants have repeatedly said that they didn't feel humiliated and that they weren't traumatised, that they knew what they were doing and had chosen to do it. But the response to their statements has often included further speculation, for example that they must have felt obliged to say this, because as women and as non-professionals they had

no power within the project and felt obliged to say the same as Khrzhanovskiy, because he was there with them, and so on.

A few recent commentators have taken a different approach: Carmen Gray (2020), a film journalist, has suggested that it's "patronising" to dismiss what the women participants say about their own experiences and has argued that we should take their words at face value. Amanda Barbour (2020), the artistic director of Fem&ist Films in the UK, argues that it is "reductive and paternalistic" to represent the women participants as victims and nothing more. The academic Eugénie Zvonkine (2020) has also cautioned that scholars should be wary of using "the concept of ethics as a tool to judge films and their creators".¹⁸ I know that in interviews, and at the 2020 Berlin press conferences, you and Khrzhanovskiy both responded to criticisms about the film's ethics and the treatment of the women participants by stressing that they always had a choice about what to do and not do, and that they were free to stop or to leave at any time. Indeed, you've spoken about this earlier in this interview. But I wonder if you have a different response to these criticisms now, in the light of #MeToo and given that it's almost two years since the film was shown in Berlin?

JO: No, I don't think I have a different approach to this, because I find that it makes me speechless when you, you know, when you think you can judge something and you weren't there, and you don't even listen to the participants talking about this. You just don't listen. You think you know how it is and then you write about this and talk about this, and this is your opinion. And you can absolutely have whatever opinion you want, of course. But not even considering that maybe what we are telling you is the truth, that they were not humiliated, that it was an agreement, that everyone knew that they were going to have sex and it was always clear, and it was always asked, and it was always the case that everyone knew there was a way out, if they really didn't want to go ahead. And there were scenes when people left because they didn't want to go through with them and they changed their minds. And it's free and you can watch this and we never hid this.

This time was really difficult for DAU, because I am an absolute supporter of the #MeToo movement. And this [refusal to believe the participants – RM] is something that hurt DAU a lot and that's why it's so hard to say... [long pause]. It is a discussion that I think has to take place, but the only thing I think is that if you raise it, just be fair and listen to the people who were there. You know, when the DoP [Director of Photography, Jürgen Jürges – RM] is saying something, when Ilya is saying something, when I am saying something, when Natasha is saying something, and when Olga [Olga Shkabarnya, the film's other female lead – RM] is saying something... and then you read, you know, that we are all lying and they can't say anything because Ilya is there? What kind of journalism is this? Or what kind of approach is this? I totally agree that it makes the women smaller than they are, because they are able to decide whether they want to show their body in front of the camera or not, do they want to go as far, or not.

You know, you see in *DAU. Natasha* this scene where she's crying and she is smashing up the Institute. Of course, yes, in this scene she's tired and she's angry with us and she's angry with Ilya and she wants to go home and she is completely drunk. This is something that is true. In this moment, she hated us really as much as she could, and she hated herself, and she hated her life, and she talks about this. This is something that is not in the film because it belongs to her real life; she punished herself for something that she has done. In this scene, when she gets so drunk, this is how life works, this is how it is: and you do things and you like yourself and you maybe regret them and this is part of this whole journey.

RM: I wonder whether you feel that Michael Idov's *GQ* article (2011), which basically introduced the project to the outside world, set the tone for the way in which DAU has been

¹⁸ For examples of Russian critical responses to DAU, see Sukhaguzov et al. (2019).

received, by journalists in particular? Because of the violent language he used when describing the project – statements like “he invaded a Ukrainian city” and that he made Radmila Schegoleva spend a year working in a factory so as “to beat the actress out of her” – and the way he described the project’s structure as a sort of “cult”, “a totalitarian society”, over which Khrzhanovskiy presided like an “unhinged [...] madman” or a “tyrannical genius”, in full awareness of his power over the project’s participants?

JO: Really! And this is the problem. This, for me, is a really male approach to say that the women were humiliated and the woman couldn’t say anything, and that’s not fair and so on. Of course Ilya has a sense of his own power; and he is using it, yes. Because he is a director and these are his decisions and this is his project. And this is how it has to be: you have to have someone who makes decisions on set. It’s not democratic, you know, it’s not a republic. In society, you have to follow rules, and some agree with these rules and some don’t; and some changed their minds and, yes, there were situations when we said, “That could have been handled differently, it would have been better if...”, of course. And we never hid these kinds of things. But overall, we are all grown-up people. If things were really as bad as people (who didn’t know what was going on) were saying they were, I wouldn’t have participated in this kind of shooting. Jürgen wouldn’t have participated in this kind of shooting. We had grown-up, really earnest people there. What do you think? That we are not able to judge? Yes, you understand, yes, things are different, and yes, the borders are maybe a little bit fluid, but this is part of the game. But if something had gone against the moral code I would not do it. But I think it is important to talk about this. To talk about it, to stay open-minded definitely. But to stay open-minded on both sides. This is something I demand. I really don’t talk with people anymore who haven’t even seen the films and who think they can offer an opinion. I say, “Why should I listen to this?”

“Waiting in a Corner [...] to Have Another Life”: What is DAU?

RM: How much has COVID changed what DAU is, in your view? Was the online cinema platform on which several of the films have now been released planned from the outset, or were the films only released like this because of COVID?

JO: Of course that was because of COVID. We all agreed that this was not the best way to launch DAU. But it was just a way to get it out. We had to get it out there.

RM: But what is interesting is the way in which this style of release might change its reception.¹⁹ Because we are viewing the films at home, as we would any traditional film on a pay-as-you-go streaming platform, viewers probably react to them more conventionally, as they would to any film?

JO: Yeah, I know.

RM: My final question is one that I have also asked Khrzhanovskiy. And it’s one of the questions that is always posed at academic seminars on DAU, namely: what is DAU? How would you answer this question? And has your answer to this question changed over time? Would you have answered this question differently at the start of your work on the project from how you answer it now?

JO: [Very long pause] I think... Yes, definitely I would. I would have said differently eight years ago when I was editing... [long pause].

RM: Maybe this question can’t be answered?

JO: I don’t think it can be answered. And I’m sure that Ilya Khrzhanovskiy and Ilya Permyakov – and all these really eloquent people, who know how to use their own language or even a foreign language much, much better – they will find a way to describe this. I think, for me, it was just, or it still is, it is something extraordinary. I am absolutely convinced that it will stay

¹⁹ For an academic discussion of this question, see Zaezjev (2020).

through time. It will never get old, because these topics are so universal and the time is so out of time and place that you can watch it in twenty years and it will be the same. I think the discussions will be the same as they are now. And it never gets old and never gets boring. I think, as it evolved from a normal film to something that we try to find words for, I think it's still... it's still just waiting in a corner, to be something else, to have another life. I do believe that this project will have another life.

I think Ilya will never do this kind of project again, because this was a one-time thing to do. Let's wait until it's finished up, because this is something he still has to do. He has to edit the main film, the DAU film. And I think this is something he has to do before he would even think about doing anything else.

RM: I think you've said something similar to what Khrzhanovskiy said, really. He said, "DAU is a process." (Zvonkine 2022) And that's what you're describing, I think? My view of DAU is that it's something different for everybody and it's also different depending on your background, the angle you approach it from, and how and where you encounter it. So, you can say DAU is a collection of films, if you encounter it through the cinema platform, or DAU is an installation, if you went to Paris. Or DAU is an anthropological experiment, if you focus on the participants' immersion in the Institute, or it's "a multi-disciplinary anthropological art-cinema project" (which I think is Ilya's term for it), if you try to think about all the different facets of it at the same time, and so on. But it's all of these things and more. What it is depends on the way that you encounter DAU and the way that you approach it.

JO: This is what I mean. It has to do with the person who's watching it. And I think that as it has influenced us, you know, the ones who worked there, I think it will influence every person who will get to this material in any way. There are still stories to tell, I think, in the 700 hours. I know Ilya had the idea once to make the unedited material public, so that anyone can edit the stories they think are in the material. That was the plan, but it didn't make sense at the time, you'd have to have a big release.²⁰ We have a lot of experiences to show to people. You can get the most intense discussions after the movies that you can ever imagine. We have people crying because of it, people being so angry, people leaving the audience and walking out. And from this what you learn, so strongly, is this: all the reactions have only to do with the person and never with the movie. There is always something that hits you right somewhere where it really hurts, because of your experience in life. But the films themselves, they don't hit and they don't hurt.

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²⁰ According to the LinkedIn page of [Maksym Demydenko](#), who designed and developed an interactive online platform where viewers can access the 700 hours of DAU footage, the platform will be launched in 2022, but without this feature.

LEVERHULME TRUST

Bio

Jekaterina Oertel was born in St. Petersburg (Leningrad) in 1966, before moving to the GDR in 1970. In 1987 she graduated from the Moscow Film and Theatre School. The same year, Oertel began her career as a make-up artist, working as an assistant at the Defa-Studio in the GDR. From 1990, Oertel headed up make-up and hair departments on more than 50 national and international film and television productions. She has worked with directors including Tom Tykwer, Bille August, Matthias Glasner, and Roland Emmerich. In 2013, she received an Emmy nomination for Outstanding Make-up for a Single-Camera Series. Jekaterina Oertel has been working on DAU since 2008. During filming, she was the Head of Make-up and Hair Design, pivoting to an editing and co-direction role during the post-production. Since 2015, Oertel has led the development and artistic direction at the DAU SFX workshop, creating life-size silicone figures of all the DAU participants. Six of the seven DAU films that Oertel co-directed can be viewed on the [DAU cinema online platform](#).

Rachel Morley is Associate Professor of Russian Cinema and Culture at University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies (UCL SSEES) and Co-Chair (with Philip Cavendish) of the [UCL SSEES Russian Cinema Research Group](#). Rachel's teaching and research interests span the entire history of Russian cinema, from the 1890s to the present, with particular focus on issues connected with gender, sexuality, and identity and their expression through cinematic form. She is the author of *Performing Femininity: Woman as Performer in Early Russian Cinema* (Bloomsbury, 2017), forthcoming in Russian from Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie (NLO) in 2023. Other recent publications include a chapter (co-written with Serian Carlyle) on the representation of abortion in Soviet cinema; an article on the construction of Sakha identity and culture in Siuzanna Oorzhak's 2011 film *Pokidaia blagoukhaiushchuiu gavan' / Leaving Hong Kong* (KinoKultura Special Issue 19, *Sakha Cinema*, 2022); and a long-form article on DAU. *Katya Tanya*, which also appears in this issue of *Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe*. Rachel's current research project – of which this interview is part – examines the representation of female subjectivity in contemporary Russian women's cinema and is funded by a two-year Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship (2020-2022).

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