

Being-there: an Existentialism Point of View in Egon Schiele's Self-portraits

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Abstract

Self-portrait is a peculiar theme in painting. It is not only an artwork but also reflect inner-side of the painter. The twofold meaning contains in a self-portrait which reveal true character of the painter and a construction of how to reveal true me -- personal comprehension and living expectation. The article chooses Egon Schiele to figure out how he deconstructs his courage and hospitality to reflect his existentialism on painting.

Keywords: Existentialism, Egon Schiele, Self-portrait

1. Introduction

Self-portrait is a special painting art from the perspective of

painting types. It is not only art works, but also a reflection of the author himself. As a result, self-portrait is double meaning for artists. Not only does it express the emotional perspective of the artist, but also expresses the personality of the artist. During the creation of art, the artist increases the understanding and expectation of his works, so the self-portrait is the best reflection of its author's attitude and his characters.

Austrian painter Egon Schiele has left more than 100 self-portraits during his 28 years of life. His works embody his strong character and emotion, which also appears in his books. Egon Schiele grew up at a most unstable period before the First World War when Austro-Hungarian Empire was deteriorating. Existentialism forms at the same period. What on earth is the meaning of life and existence? This is a question that puzzles many philosophers. So many philosophers such as Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche deduced their ideas at this time. For example, Nietzsche acclaimed that nothing but the truth ego is real, overman is not restricted and man is something which ought to be overcome. In short, existence precedes essence and a human being's existence precedes and is more fundamental than any meaning which may be ascribed to human life. Since every person's existence is unique, his self-portrait must reflect this uniqueness which is exactly what this paper wants to explore.

2. Literature Review

This paper studies the motivation of Egon Schiele's creation from a variety source of historic books, essays and so on. Then, it translates the character of Egon Schiele by his letters, conversation record and other literatures. It also includes a study of historical background analysis of that time's great ideas such as Martin Heidegger and Jean – Paul Sartre. They all made great contribution to explore the nature of human being and ego, and all these are helpful in exploring Egon Schiele's creation.

2.1. Egon Schiele's upbringing

Egon Schiele was born at the small town of Tulln in Vienna on June 2, 1890. The Habsburg Empire or Austro-Hungarian Empire was the biggest empire in the world at that time with a history of 700 years. Egon Schiele witnessed the fall of Austro-Hungarian Empire. Crisis impended upon the empire when people protest and parade for freedom and liberty. In the summer of 1914, Prince Franz Ferdinand was assassinated by Sarajevo nationalist, unveiling the First World War. Schiele witnessed the change of times, the horror of war, death and fear, thus affecting his creation of art.

From the perspective of Sociology of Art, Aesthetic and art are the results of social development, so it reflects the social background either it is art, religion, cultural development. Their authors underwent changes of emotion according to their background and real life. Schiele's works attained its greatness through the explosion of spiritual distortion and social corruption. During his life, he created more than 100 self-portraits. His works is different from that of Rembrandt van Rijn, Albrecht Dürer and Vincent van Gogh. His works often distorted himself which made him hard to recognize.

2.2. Schiele's character

Schiele was close to his father since his childhood, however, his father died when he was 15. Beaten by losing his father, Schiele was much affected. As he has said that death played a great role in shaping his works. The death of his father made him lonely and the relationship with his mother got worse, which we can see from Arthur Roessler's account: (Steiner, 1993:62-64)

I cannot grasp why on earth my mother should treat me so very differently from the way I think I might expect and indeed demand! If it were only someone else! but one's own mother, of all people! It is unutterably sad!... Often she behaves to me as one stranger behaves to another. It hurts me very much.

Losing his father, and frustrated by his mother, young Schiele reduced his sorrow through painting between 1905 and 1907. In his letter to his mother, he said: (Steiner, 1993:64-65)

Without doubt I shall be the greatest, finest, costliest, purest, and most valuable fruit—in me, thank to my independent will, all that is beautiful

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and noble is united—for the simple reason that I am a man—I shall be the fruit which, once it has rotted, leaves an infinite number of living creatures behind it—how great, then, must your joy be—to have given birth to me?

Schiele healed his sorrow through narcissism and this also appears in his later works. From this period of life, we can see the transformation of Schiele and his creation

2.3. Existentialism

Existentialism believes that all the early philosophy made the mistake of talking about the nature of world without talking the existence first. In the course of over two thousand years of history, philosophy has attended to all the beings that can be found in the world (including the “world” itself), but has forgotten to ask what “Being” itself is. So, Existentialism claimed the only thing that needs studying on the earth was existence itself. A man must live then talks about other things. So, existentialism emphasized the experience of oneself. The existence of everyone is unique and there are no same existences at all. Individual human beings have full responsibility for creating the meanings of their own lives.

Existentialism appeared at man’s deepest agony and despair. From the perspective of history, it is necessary. Since the western countries started industrial revolution since the 18th century, the relationship between human beings has changed greatly. Man became smaller as part of this society and his personality was ignored. Such was the background of existentialism. Existentialism appeared formally during the economic crisis after the world war and spread during the Second World War. Disillusion, loss of confidence and so on, people didn’t trust others and their society. While existentialism tried to create a unique philosophy of life. On one hand, it confirms the value of life, and only through that, the inside world of human being attains stability and balance again.

2.4. Ideological system of existentialism

Existentialism objected the traditional method of studying. It

believed that we can ignore all the profound philosophy because everything about us is determined by our existence. So what existentialism explores is simply existence itself, its uniqueness. The system of existentialism includes four parts.

2.4.1. Existence precedes essence

Early western philosophy talks about nature, that is, when decided something, we first give a definition of nature. For instance, when carpenter created a chair, he must have a shape and usage of the chair first. Nature precedes existence. But this way does not automatically apply to human life. Because human beings are not first set with a nature, but attains his nature through future life experience and natural selection. Once he exists, he can decide his nature, that is, existence precedes nature.

Existentialism emphasized the possibility of free choice. Everyone should have the courage of making his choice. However, many people live in pursuant of social culture and others. The vanity of personality and true ego made his existence meaningless. So the key of existence precedes nature, is to grasp one's own life. Or a human being's existence precedes and is more fundamental than any meaning which may be ascribed to human life: humans define their own reality.

2.4.2. Reason as a defense against anxiety

Existentialism emphasized man must have a strong consciousness of self-control. But people in the real world can never exist without others' influence. So no one can go without anxiety, because there are contradictions everywhere in our life. As a result, anxiety appeared.

Our existence and the world are interlinked. If we want to control the world, we are then controlled by the world. We want to grasp it, and it gets away from us. This ambiguity makes anxiety, too.

2.4.3. Real existence is absolute freedom

Existentialism believed that on one hand we must live in a certain environment and on the other hand man can be ambitious enough to exceed all. So man pursues absolute freedom and existentialism believed that only absolute free man can attain real existence.

Because man is constrained by real life, so he can not attain real freedom in the real world. Real freedom can be found in mind only. Being for-itself is free; it does not need to be what it is and can change into what it is not. Consciousness is usually considered

being for-itself. The individual consciousness is responsible for all the choices it makes, regardless of the consequences. Condemned to be free because man's actions and choices are his and his alone, he is condemned to be responsible for his free choices. Such is the freedom believed by existentialism.

2.4.4. The final destiny is death

Many of philosophers give account to existence, but they all believed that man in the real world is restricted by inexistence. Because life is short and temporary, Death can be everywhere and every moment. Man can not choose when to die and where, and also no one can experience how another feel death. As a result, they believe death is the only existence that can be experienced and true understanding of oneself exists in death.

Every one is afraid of death; this makes us slave of life. The feelings of anxiety dread that we feel in the face of our own radical freedom and our awareness of death.

Existentialism returned to ego from outside objects and constructs a world of existence. What for? Those life without thought is not real existence, how we can express our existence in limited life is what we should explore.

3. Research Method

This paper mainly discusses the relationship between self-portrait and existentialism. Schiele lived in the times when existentialism came into being, so his works more or less related and affected by the existentialism. Besides, Schiele and his works were unique in expressing the author's emotion. This paper believes that if we can catch such a theme, we will better understand Schiele's self-portrait.

3.1. Painful self-portrait

Schiele often painted a painful, fearful or worried self through impression and gesture. From the upbringing of the author, we can see how important death affected the author. We can understand the death of his father, bad relationship with his mother and torture in prison all

influenced his works. He had written the following words: (Whitford, 1981:116) "I do not feel punished, rather purified! For my art and my loved ones I shall gladly endure."

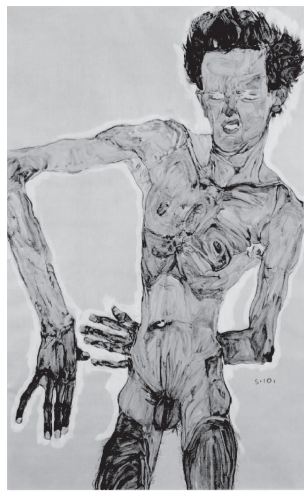
Schiele expressed the most painful impression in his portrait, just as Erwin Mitsch said: (Whitford,1981:112)

The cry of affliction is followed by an exhausted collapse. The picture-frame has become a prison from which there is no escape

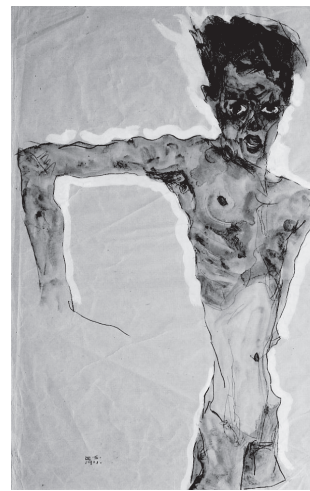
Here by prison, Schiele referred to the loneliness and pain deep in his heart. While we try to find out his ideas from the perspective of existentialism. Existentialism divided anxiety into three classes: Faktizität, Existentiality and Verfallin.



[ill.1]
Self-Portrait as prisoner, 1912
Pencil and watercolor 31.7×
48.7cm Graphische Sammlung
Albertina, Vienna



[ill.2]
Self-Portrait Standing, 1910
Gouache, watercolour and
pencil 55.8× 36.9cm Graphische
Sammlung Albertina, Vienna



[ill.3]
Nude self-portrait, 1911 Pencil
and watercolor 55.8×36.9 cm
Private collection

3.2. being and selbstsein

Existentialism believed that being must be in certain environment. So it is affected by others, and is an untrue existence. When one begins to think about his being and is enlightened, then he will feel his being, the double existence.

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Look at Schiele's works, he created "The self-seers and the Prophet" in 1911, through which we can see the method of double meaning. Frank Whitford (1981:109) once said:

The self-seers, of which there are three versions, is a double self-portrait and ,as such, relates to the theme of the *Dopplgänger*, so popular in German Romantic literature...These paintings clearly allude to such symbolic confrontations with the self, as they do to those self-portraits, also common in the nineteenth century

Schiele was quite affected by current literature and existentialism. His self-portrait expressed a certain double self to show the separation between ego and spirit. In 1915, he painted another famous works named double self-portrait. In this painting, two egos gazed at the same place; we can see the shift from conflict to harmony in the author's heart.



[ill. 4]
The self-seers, 1911 Oil on
canvas 80.5x80cm Private
collection



[ill.5]
The prophet, 1911
Oil on canvas 110.3
x50.3cm Private
collection



[ill.6]
Double self-portrait, 1915 Gouache, watercolour
and pencil 42.5x49.4cm Private collection

3.3. being and Mitsein — portrait with others

We can see from his portrait with other people and find how Schiele felt about his relationship with others. Existentialism believed that as long as man lived in the world he had to be related with other people. But man will gradually lose his independent thought

and character. But if we try to isolate ourselves from others, we will suffer the loneliness. So Gabriel Marcel has said that there is but one suffering, that is loneliness. So we are always struggle against the choice between self-being and mutual-being.

In 1915, Schiele's *Death and the Maiden* wanted to express the pain when he separated from his girlfriend Wally Neuzil. He separated with Wally Neuzil in 1915 and then got married with Edith Harms. This also is reflected in his works *Embrace*. Both the works expresses the subtle relationship between persons.



[ill. 7]
Death and the Maiden, 1915
Oil on canvas 150.5×180cm
Österreichische Galerie, Vienna



[ill. 8]
Embrace, 1915 Gouache and
pencil
52×41.1cm Graphische
Sammlung Albertina, Vienna



[ill. 9]
The family, 1918 Oil on canvas 152.5×
162.5cm Österreichische Galerie, Vienna

3.4. Narcissism portrait

Schiele has a strong tendency of narcissism, he is careful about his looks, always looking at himself in the mirror. We can see this even through his signature. He is always keeping a mark on everything he made. Some of his letters also revealed so: (Steiner, 1993:41)

Artists will live forever.-I always believe that the greatest painters painted the human figure...-I paint the light that emanates from bodies.-Erotic works of art ate sacred too!...-A single 'living' work of art will suffice to make an artist immoral.-My pictures must be placed in buildings like temples.

From the living experience of Schiele, his arts tended to express death, agony and other negative themes. No doubt these were much different from narcissism, so Schiele was much tortured

by the contradiction. Just as his friend Heinrich Benesch has said:
(Whitford, 1981:66)

The basic trait of [Schiele's] character was seriousness!not the bleak, melancholy seriousness which hangs its head, but the quiet seriousness of a person dominated by a spiritual mission. Everyday matters could not affect him. He always looked beyond them towards the elevated goal of his ambition.

Schiele also said the following words: (Steiner, 1993:27-28)

The new artist is and must at all costs be himself he must be a creator he must build the foundation himself without reference to the past to tradition. The he is a new artist.

Schiele finally surpassed the past painful experience and confirmed his value and arts, which we can see from his paintings



[ill. 10]
Self-portrait, 1912 Oil on
canvas 42.2 × 33.7cm Private
collection



[ill. 11]
The prophet, 1911 Oil on
canvas 80.5 × 80cm Private
collection



[ill. 12]
Self-portrait with black clay vase, 1911
Oil on wooden panel 27.5 × 34cm
Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien

4. Results and Conclusions

The Origin of the Work of Art has pointed out that Works of art are not merely representations of the way things are, but actually produce a community's shared understanding. The nature of art must be revealing the true existence. It is emphasized again and again that each time a new artwork is added to any culture, the meaning of what it is to exist is inherently changed. The artwork and the artist, he explains, exist in a dynamic where each appears a provider of the other—"Neither

is without the other. Neither is the sole support of the other.” Art, a concept separate from both work and creator, thus exists as the source for them both. Because this is a real world, where we all live in.

We can feel strongly from Schiele’s works, such as death, want, despair and loneliness. Comments of his times said: (Whitford, 1981: 181) .

Schiele lives in a clouded world with his terrifyingly distorted figures filled with fear, horror, fright and despair...As a portraitist Schiele has a frightening ability to penetrate the personalities of his sitters. He is a discoverer who knows souls, a revealer of the most hidden secrets.

From his works, we can feel the unhelpfulness and fear at that time and the worry about uncertainty and death, which is an eternal theme of human beings since the beginning. Schiele tried to explore such a part of our minds. His self-portrait discloses the ideas of the whole generation, their worry, fear and so on. Through his works, we can understand their existence.

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Appendix

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Egon Schiele 1890–1918: A Chronology

1890	Egon Schiele is born on 12 June at Tulln, a small town near Vienna, the third of four children of Adolf Eugen Schiele (1851–1905), a stationmaster on the Austro-Hungarian Imperial Railways, and his wife Marie née Soukoup (1862–1935). His three sisters are Elvira (1883–1893), Melanie (1886–1974) and Gerti (1894–1981).
1896	Primary school in Tulln.
1902	Grammar school in Krems.
1902	Moves to Klosterneuburg. Grammar school there.
1905	Father, pensioned off for mental instability in 1902, dies on 1 January. Schiele paints a large number of works, including his first self-portraits.
1906	Against the wish of his guardian Leopold Czihaczek he joins Christian Griepenkerl's classes at the Vienna Academy. As at school, Schiele's performance is unremarkable.
1907	Influenced by the style of Klimt and the Vienna Secession.
1908	Exhibits work for the first time in Klosterneuburg.
1909	Exhibits in the second Art Show Kunstschau in Vienna. Leaves the Academy and founds the Neukunstgruppe (New Art Group) with friends. Meets critic Arthur Roessler and through him collectors Carl Reininghaus and Oskar Reichel. First New Art Group exhibition at Pisko Gallery.
1910	Evolves his own style. Painting at Krumau with Erwin Osen, an eccentric stage set painter, and produces numerous expressive nudes. First poems. Meets Heinrich Benesch.
1911	Obliged to leave Krumau because he is living with model Wally Neuzil. Finds a new place to live at Neulengbach. Associated with Munich art dealer Hans Goltz. Joins Sema art association in Munich. First publications on Schiele by Albert P. Gütersloh and Arthur Roessler.
1912	Various exhibitions, including Vienna, Munich, Cologne. From 13 April he is in custody for three weeks at Neulengbach. Erotic drawings confiscated. At the trial in St. Pölten he is sent down for three days in gaol for disseminating immoral drawings. Charge of sexually abusing children is dropped. In prison he does a number of drawings recording his experience of detention. Moves into new studio in Vienna.
1913	Schiele joins Bund Österreichischer Künstler (Federation of Austrian Artists). Exhibits in shows in Budapest, Cologne, Dresden, Munich, Paris and Rome. First work for Franz Pfemfert's Berlin periodical Die Aktion.
1914	Schiele meets the Harms sisters. Takes tuition in etching technique. Unsuccessfully competes in the Reininghaus Competition. Exhibits in Rome, Brussels, Paris. A number of photographs are taken of him. August: First World War begins.

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1915	Schiele breaks with Wally Neuzil after four years and marries Ddith Harms on 17 June. Soldier in Prague, then Vienna. In the next two years he paints very little.
1916	Exhibits widely, including the Wiener Kunstschau (Vienna Art Show) . Die Aktion does a Schiele issue. He is transferred to a clerk's post at Mühling in Lower Austria.
1917	Transferred back to Vienna. Travels Plans an artist's association. Bookseller Richard Lányi publishes a portfolio of 12 collotype reproductions of Schiele drawings. Exhibits in shows of Austrian art.
1918	6 February : death of Gustav Klimt. Schiele transferred to Army Museum in Vienna. Scores a great success at the Vienna Secession Exhibition in March, for which Schiele also designs the poster. Most of Schiele's fifty works in the show are sold. Exhibits in Zürich, Prague and Dresden. 28 October : death of Edith. Shortly after, on 31 October, Egon Schiele dies of Spanish influenza.