



JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN: THE FILMS OF WERNER HERZOG

Fata Morgana + The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner

Fata Morgana

Director: Werner Herzog
Production Company: Werner Herzog Filmproduktion
Producer: Werner Herzog
Collaborators: Günther Welpert, Hans Dieter-Sauer, Günther Feyse, Wolfgang Eigendorf
Screenplay: Werner Herzog
Director of Photography: Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein
Editor: Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus
Music: George Frederic Handel, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Blind Faith, François Couperin, Leonard Cohen
Sound: Werner Herzog
Narrator: Lotte Eisner
Cast: Wolfgang von Ungern-Sternberg, James William Gledhill, Eugen des Montagnes
West Germany 1971
79 mins
Digital

The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner (Die große Ekstase des Bildschnitzers Steiner)

Director: Werner Herzog
Production Company: Werner Herzog Filmproduktion
Producer: Werner Herzog
Production Manager: Walter Saxer
Production Assistant: Feli Sommer
Script: Werner Herzog
Director of Photography: Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein,
Second Camera Unit: Francisco Joán, Frederik Hettich, Alfred Chrosziel, Gideon Maron
Editor: Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus
Music: Popol Vuh, Florian Fricke
Sound: Benedikt Kuby
With: Werner Herzog (presenter/narrator), Walter Steiner
West Germany 1973
47 mins
Digital

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SIGHT AND SOUND

Werner Herzog's third feature takes the *reductio ad absurdum* narrative patterns of his other films to their logical conclusion by dispensing with narrative altogether. *Fata Morgana* consists exclusively of static shots, panning shots and travelling shots taken among the deserts, coastlines, oilfields, ancient cities and shantytowns of North Africa. The human presence is initially absent from many of the shots; when people do appear, they are either derelict shanty families, oafish German tourists, or ungainly zoologists absurdly awkward in handling the local fauna. Individually, many of the shots have a great formal beauty; and the visual juxtaposition of elements from both Western and indigenous cultures (huge aircraft touching down and cadavers of animals decaying where they dropped; distant oil flares and decrepit shanty housing) yields frequent surrealist shocks in line with André Breton's most polemic requirements.

Herzog makes no attempt to structure this material through montage; the film has no visual rhythm, and no cut infers any direct meaning. Rather, he adopts a mock-heroic form that divides the film into three sections: The Creation, Paradise, and The Golden Age. Each is accompanied by an occasional voice-over narration, which alters its stance as the film proceeds from aloof omnipotence to bitter engagement. Just as Stroszek in *Lebenszeichen* disappears from the film at the midpoint, his paroxysm visible only through its effects, so here the entire film is 'effects', visual evidence to the aftermath of some previous action.

The first section, composed chiefly of mirage-like stares into the desert void and racing aerial shots of the landscape slipping past, is accompanied by an account of the Creation (supposedly drawn from ancient Persian myth, but probably as spurious as the narrator's log in *Aguirre, Wrath of God*); the described actions of the ancient gods find a bathetic analogue in the telephoto shots through extreme heat-haze of jets coming to earth.

In the second section, introducing the tourists along with the natives eking out their horrifyingly deprived lives, another narrator offers bizarre, nihilistic axioms: 'In Paradise, you call hello without ever seeing anyone ... you quarrel to avoid having friends ... man is born dead.'

And in the final section, where Herzog's surrealist sensibility blooms full in images of an ageing duo performing antique popular songs on piano and drums while other humans lapse into mania, obsession or simple oblivion, a third narrator turns to outright gallows sarcasm: 'In the Golden Age, man and wife live in harmony ... now, for example, they appear before the camera lens, death in their eyes, a smile on their lips.'

Herzog concludes his film where he began, facing the desert squarely. His mirage, the *fata morgana*, is a vision entirely consistent with his other work but seen *in extremis* because abstracted from conventional perception. The desert becomes a terminal beach, littered with civilisation's debris, its vestigial signs of life rapidly fading. The few survivors are those who were always outcasts, left clinging to the debris to make their mark on the desert, and those who once produced the debris, now reduced to self-conscious aberrations and the most

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Signs of Life Lebenszeichen

Mon 1 Jan 12:30; Sat 13 Jan 15:00

Fata Morgana + The Great Ecstasy of

Woodcarver Steiner Die große Ekstase des
Bildschnitzers Steiner

Mon 1 Jan 18:00; Wed 17 Jan 20:30

Even Dwarfs Started Small

Auch Zwerge haben klein angefangen

Tue 2 Jan 18:15; Mon 15 Jan 20:45

La Soufrière Warten auf eine Unausweichliche

Katastrophe + **Lessons of Darkness**

Lektionen in Finsternis

Wed 3 Jan 18:20; Tue 16 Jan 20:40 (+ intro by
writer Ian Haydn Smith)

Heart of Glass Herz aus Glas

Thu 4 Jan 18:30; Fri 19 Jan 20:40

Land of Silence and Darkness

Land des Schweigens und der Dunkelheit

Thu 4 Jan 20:50; Wed 10 Jan 20:45; Wed 17 Jan
18:15 (+ BSL intro by deaf filmmaker Sam Arnold)

Aguirre, Wrath of God Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes

Sat 6 Jan 15:15; Sun 14 Jan 11:40;

Tue 23 Jan 18:30

My Best Fiend Mein liebster Feind – Klaus Kinski

Sat 6 Jan 17:45; Sat 13 Jan 21:00

Little Dieter Needs to Fly Flucht aus Laos

Sun 7 Jan 15:20; Thu 18 Jan 20:45

Fitzcarraldo

Sun 7 Jan 17:45; Sun 14 Jan 14:20;

Thu 18 Jan 17:50

Stroszek

Mon 8 Jan 18:20; Sat 20 Jan 20:40

Werner Herzog's Tales of Life and Death:

An Illustrated Talk

Wed 10 Jan 18:30

Nosferatu the Vampire

Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht

Fri 12 Jan 18:10; Wed 24 Jan 20:50;

Sat 27 Jan 15:00

Grizzly Man

Fri 12 Jan 20:45; Sun 14 Jan 18:15;

Mon 29 Jan 18:15

Echoes from a Sombre Empire

Echos aus einem düsteren Reich

Sat 13 Jan 14:10; Tue 30 Jan 20:30

Woyzeck

Sat 13 Jan 18:20; Sun 28 Jan 12:30

The Fire Within: A Requiem for Katia and

Maurice Krafft

Fri 19 Jan 18:30; Wed 31 Jan 20:50

The White Diamond

Sun 21 Jan 18:20; Fri 26 Jan 18:30

Into the Abyss – A Tale of Death, a Tale of Life

Fri 26 Jan 20:45; Sun 28 Jan 15:10

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vacuous of rituals. They, of course, are the only gods in the film, and though fleeting moments suggest that they were once savage or dark gods, Herzog really sees them only as failures, fascinating for their ludicrousness and the precariousness of their existence. His vision, as ever, is clear and true, free of compassion, regret and dogma alike; his recourse in the face of the horror and enormity is again to humour, neither cruel nor indulgent, but merely sane.

Tony Rayns, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1974

The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner

Walter Steiner is a wood carver who explores the shapes, knots, grain and forces in a piece of wood and sculpts it in a way to release the hidden tensions and energy. He also happens to be one of the leading championship ski-jumpers in Switzerland if not the whole world.

Ski-flying has reached the point where it presents a real danger as speeds are now reached at which skis can go out of control. The slightest wind or patch of bad snow can make a jump really dangerous. Steiner gives us some idea of the nervous tension that exists just before starting a ski-jump; the heart hammering away in a fear that is different from that felt before a car crash, for example. Now skiers are reaching the limits of perfection. He says, 'It's the thrill of flying so far that gives me such a kick as long as nothing happens to me.'

The concept of this film for Herzog began in the autumn of 1973 when the Swiss team was training at Bad Aussee in Austria. He saw Steiner jump at Obersdorf: a jump of 179 metres – ten metres short of the flat which would have meant certain death – a point at which ski-flying becomes inhuman. The jump beat the world record by ten metres but didn't count because he had jumped too far! Herzog filmed the Four Ramps Competition and uses video tapes from the television transmissions of the Schattenberg Ramps jumps.

The major part of the film studies Steiner as he prepared for the Championships at Planica, Yugoslavia. The giant ramp at Planica is one of the four or five in the world that is big enough for ski-flying. Herzog has two high-speed cameras set up which can slow down the action by ten to twenty times.

The high-speed shots in the film give a great feeling of costume flapping in the breeze – hurtling, head forward like a bird of prey. It is a demonstration of something achieved against a background of a possible disastrous end. Fly or get killed; alternatives which reveal Steiner's secret.

Contemporary Films production notes