



## JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN: THE FILMS OF WERNER HERZOG

# Signs of Life (Lebenszeichen)

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Director: Werner Herzog

Production Company:

Werner Herzog Filmproduktion

Producer: Werner Herzog

Production Manager: Nikos Triandafyllidis

Collaborators: Florian Fricke, Thomas Hartwig,

Bettina von Waldthausen, Ina Fritsche,

Tasos Karabelas, Mike Piller, Friederike Pezold,

Martje Grohmann

Screenplay: Werner Herzog

Based on a Story by: Achim von Arnim

Director of Photography: Thomas Mauch

Assistant Camera: Dietrich Lohmann

Editors: Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus,

Maximiliane Mainka

Music: Stavros Xarchakos

Sound: Herbert Prasch

Cast:

Peter Brogle (*Stroszek*)

Wolfgang Reichmann (*Meinhard*)

Julio Pinheiro (*gypsy*)

Athina Zacharopoulou (*Nora*)

Wolfgang von Ungern-Sternberg (*Becker*)

Wolfgang Stumpf (*captain*)

Henry van Lyck (*lieutenant*)

Florian Fricke (*pianist*)

Dr Heinz Usener (*doctor*)

Achmed Hafiz (*Greek resident*)

Jannakis Frasakis, Katerinaki, Werner Herzog

West Germany 1968

87 mins

Digital

Herzog's highly atmospheric first feature centres on three German soldiers posted, towards the end of WW2, far from military action at a munitions base on the Greek island of Kos. Eventually inertia, boredom and frustration take their toll... The writer-director's sense of the powerful influence of landscape and his ability to vividly evoke the strangeness of the world are already impressive.

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**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

In protracted long shot, *Lebenszeichen* opens with an army truck meandering like a befuddled insect (flies and cockroaches are soon repeating the motions) over scrubby Mediterranean countryside, bearing the wounded Stroszek away to his convalescent duties. And rather like an entomologist who looks up from the microscope to take in the scene through a telescope, Herzog turns the perspective inside out in the film's final shot: a subjective view from the back of a truck, with the landscape receding through billowing clouds of dust as the hero, now absorbed by his madness, is removed for good and a narrator delivers his epitaph, '... they could do nothing to him, for he had found his calling.'

The reversal is a chart to the progress Stroszek makes through his 'illness' – from an arbitrary and solitary speck of life to a crusader who takes on 'the cause of man' and commits self-immolation attempting to uncover what may lie beneath all the arbitrary signs of life. It is also a key to the method by which Herzog jolts images free of the narrative and leaves actions as detached and stranded by the irrational as the wreckage in the desert in *Fata Morgana*. Where later films have located the history of man in a terrain and on a time scale all their own (the terminal ward of *Even Dwarfs Started Small*, the desert myths of *Fata Morgana*), *Lebenszeichen*, Herzog's first feature, extracts a similar meditation from a specific historical situation and a not unfamiliar plot format.

Wounded in Crete during the Second World War, good soldier Stroszek is removed from the fighting and left to heal in the sultry, dulling climate of a non-combat zone. In the 'time out of war' situation, his physical wound becomes an opening on the frightening illogic of his situation, the absurdity of not just the war but of all the artefacts of human existence which stand petrified around him. Herzog gives peculiar weight to the initial 'accident' of the wounding of Stroszek: 'It occurred during a lull in the fighting, in a village held by the Germans,' the narrator comments, and a long, swooping camera track through deserted, sun-baked streets makes an abrupt turn and comes upon two uniformed bodies, flicking away instantly to stare idly down another empty street, before returning briefly to the evidence of this glancing intrusion of death.

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## **JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN: THE FILMS OF WERNER HERZOG**

### **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 Vampyre**

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

Having been brought so close, and so inappropriately, to extinction, Stroszek's convalescence is clouded by a growing, oppressive sense that existence itself may be no more than an absurd accident; the signs of life are drenched with associations – all the family possessions which Stroszek finds so touching in the house where he and Nora have been billeted; the pieces of ancient statuary used by later generations to patch up the walls of the fortress – but like the inscriptions over which Becker patiently toils, they are now devoid of meaning.

In the brief histories it gives of the three guardians of a useless treasure, *Lebenszeichen* provides a catalogue of casual dislocations: all three are peculiarly unsuited to their present profession, and to most of the activities they have engaged in all their lives (Meinhard has turned from being a bar-keeper to a crane operator with no particular motive; the ailing Becker was passed fit for service while stronger men were refused; and Stroszek, as the narrator relates, 'had tried several jobs without success'). Desperately trying to disguise the erosion of all sense of purpose, Stroszek volunteers to take the night duty, so that he can stand before the lights of the village, 'in order to show the world that he is functional'. Eventually collapsing in terror in the face of the tiny circlings of existence (the routine of the pointless duty; the colony of flies that are bottled within the gypsy's tiny wooden owl in order to produce its minute, puzzling movements; the forest of windmills that finally provoke a breakdown), Stroszek struggles to launch a grandly romantic rebellion, which Herzog films lyrically as if it were the last gasp of an individual no longer able to live as a man and unable to become a god.

In a lushly mesmerising atmosphere of suffocating heat and chattering insects, where all history might be drying up at the roots, Herzog's first film is a limpidly clear meditation on life shrivelling under a self-imposed oppression; and in its championing of a failed rebellion, an anticipation of the darker scenes of *Aguirre, Wrath of God*.

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1974