



JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN: THE FILMS OF WERNER HERZOG

Even Dwarfs Started Small

Even Dwarfs Started Small

(Auch Zwerge haben klein angefangen)

Director: Werner Herzog

Production Company:

Werner Herzog Filmproduktion

Producer: Werner Herzog

Production Manager: Francisco Ariza

Screenplay: Werner Herzog

Director of Photography: Thomas Mauch

Editor: Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus

Music Arranger: Werner Herzog

Sound: Herbert Prasch

Cast:

Helmut Döring (*Hombre*)

Gerd Gickel (*Pepe*)

Paul Glauer (*Deputy*)

Erna Gschwendtner (*Azucar*)

Gisela Hartwig (*Pobrecita*)

Gerhard Marz (*Territory*)

Hertel Minkner (*Chicklets*)

Alfredo Piccini (*Anselmo*)

Gertraud Piccini (*Piccini*)

Brigitte Saar (*Cochina*)

Marianne Saar (*Theresa*)

Erna Smolarz (*Schweppes*)

Lajos Zsarnoczay (*Chaparro*)

West Germany 1970

96 mins

Digital

Jean Cocteau said often that he valued highest those films that were documentaries of unreal events; Werner Herzog's second feature *Even Dwarfs Started Small* extends the principle to its logical conclusion by presenting itself from the start as a case history. Lights come up on prisoner No. 1300761 perched on a stool, awaiting interrogation. The credits are printed over slow pans across a flat, desolate landscape, establishing the locale for the action. A hen is glimpsed scratching and pecking at another's corpse. We are shown a still photograph of an unimposing cluster of buildings, each helpfully identified by a caption. Then back to 1300761, a male named Hombre who has at last managed to get the card bearing his number the right way up, now posing for photos for the files.

The interrogation begins, and Herzog moves into the flashback that occupies the remainder of the film – a meticulous stage by stage analysis of a tiny revolution, when the inmates of a remote institution break free during the director's absence. The deputy director barricades himself in the office with Pepe, the ringleader, as hostage; meanwhile the inmates' aimlessly destructive violence gradually escalates, fatally dissipating their energies in malicious games rather than concerted action. Their behaviour nonetheless drives the deputy to insanity. As the others scatter, Hombre is left roaring with laughter till he chokes, watching a camel that apparently cannot get up off its knees.

In that they at least do something, Herzog's feeble revolutionaries are perhaps one rung up from those of *L'Age d'or*, who could barely stir from the filth they squatted in, let alone fight a cause. But their action is limited to rudimentary reprisals (destruction of the director's favourite palm tree, wrecking the institution van), and Herzog carefully emphasises that their awareness of their grievances is as numb-skulled as their retaliatory tactics (they complain of getting powdered milk, of being given gardening as work). This bunch are low on redeeming social merit. They are mean, petty, vulgar, selfish and destructive, just like Buñuel's recurrent beggars; men and women as confused and undirected as most of the world, trapped in the thought if not the manners of the society that has rejected them as criminals and deviants.

These inmates get as far as impeccably laying a table for dinner before realising that this is yet another social ritual they don't need to act out, and they don't think twice about giving directions to a haute bourgeoisie in her limousine on a nearby road. But Herzog isn't interested in passing moral judgments on them, any more than he's interested in making patronising 'statements' on man's capacity for inhumanity (in the manner of, say, *Lord of the Flies*, to which the film has shamefully been compared). Rather, to emphasise the sheer pettiness of these prisoners and their revolt, he has hit on the shatteringly direct notion of casting all the roles as dwarfs.

Now, clearly Herzog is no reactionary, and neither does he expect his audience to spend 90-odd frustrating minutes contemplating how small man can be when the time and circumstances are right for so much more. *Even Dwarfs Started Small* has several positive functions. First, exorcism. Herzog himself speaks of the film as the realisation of a dream, and its prime impact is certainly as an expressionist vision of a *ne plus ultra* of internecine squabbling within the left. Second, strategy. Herzog uses the 'case history' format in order to document as accurately as possible just how and why this attempt at revolution is crippled from within; the film is a catalogue of potential threats to successful revolution. Third, humour. Much of the film is grotesquely funny, whether it's the deputy director pleading liberal motives in an effort to justify himself, or Hombre wilfully failing to climb on to a large bed to avoid having to perform coitus for the entertainment of the others. Herzog recognises that laughter is the only sane response in the face of such incompetence on both sides. Fourth, revolutionary

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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

potential. There are lots of throwaway suggestions that the dwarfs are especially favourably placed for real revolution; like Tod Browning's *Freaks*, they have a quasi-mystical communion with each other which implies that, given thought and direction, they could operate as a great team.

For a man with a keen eye for paradise (as his subsequent *Fata Morgana* makes plain), Herzog is prepared to expend a good deal of energy on sorting out man's present ills. *Dwarfs* is staged and shot with diagrammatic clarity, and if his flow of images doesn't quite coalesce into a visual syntax, then at least he has arrived at an admirable balance of content, form and implication in individual shots. He confines his music track to two pieces, one a raucous gypsy-style song which seems to express the dwarfs' anarchic drive, and the other a chorale (it sounds like a primitive mass) that equally relates to the moments when the dwarfs do unite and play together. But for all the inner coherence of his film, Herzog's strength is his avoidance of dogma, prejudice and all the spurious liberal qualities like compassion. Like Buñuel alone, he is prepared to see man as man, however small.

Tony Rayns, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1972-73

Entirely enacted by a cast of dwarfs in Kafka-esque settings designed for normal-sized people, Werner Herzog's extraordinary second film is, whether consciously or not, a direct echo of Swift's virulent satire on political man in *Gulliver's Travels*. 'I cannot but conclude,' the King of Brobdingnag told Gulliver after the latter had given him a rundown on his country's educational, judicial, political and social systems, 'the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth.' The same comment could be applied word for word to the heroes of *Even Dwarfs Started Small* as they indulge their aimless, bickering malice, perfectly summed up by Herzog in the image of a white chicken absently cannibalising the corpse of a dead comrade.

In view of the widespread fluttering and cries of 'Reaction!' which have greeted the film, it is perhaps worth stressing that Herzog is not attacking revolution or revolutionaries as such through this parody in microcosm. Indeed, he goes out of his way to show that the dwarfs' revolt is wholly justified: first by implication, in the fact that everything in this house of correction is built to normal size and is therefore grotesquely unsuited to the needs of the inmates it is designed to help; and, more explicitly, in the Deputy Director's fatuous attempt at self-justification by explaining how he overcame a new inmate's refusal to wash. (Realising that he was ashamed of his greasy cuffs, he provided a clean shirt: 'That's what makes my job worth doing'.)

But if the rebellion is justified, the rebels are not, and Herzog makes a cruel analysis by analogy of the essential lack of purpose and misguided conduct of all those damp-squib contemporary revolutions. His mocking images are a viciously accurate parody of impotence and misdirected energy – the tiniest dwarf unable to clamber up on to the bed now that he is free to make love in school; the car which was to take the inmates to freedom endlessly circling the courtyard; the flower-pots blazing harmlessly in the courtyard as surrogates for the institution they dare not attack – and they end with a stunningly, cynically exact metaphor for the transience of most revolutions. Everyone discreetly vanishes, leaving Hombre, the onlooker, the common man of the revolt, to laugh delightedly at the sight of dignity (absurd, graceless and patiently uncomprehending as a camel) brought to its knees and uncertainly wondering whether it dare get up again yet, while he himself, breathless and coughing now, finds it harder and harder to laugh and begins to wonder ... Grotesquely, obscenely funny, and confirming the extraordinary visual flair that Herzog revealed in *Lebenszeichen*, *Even Dwarfs Started Small* is a true parable for our times.

Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, November 1972