



Land of Silence and Darkness
(Land des Schweigens und der Dunkelheit)

Director: Werner Herzog

Production Company:

Werner Herzog Filmproduktion

Producer: Werner Herzog

Photography: Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein

Editor: Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus

Music: Johann Sebastian Bach, Antonio Vivaldi

Narrator: Rolf Illig

With:

Fini Straubinger

Miss Juliet

Mr. Mittermeier

Else Fährer

Ursula Riedneier

Joseph Riedneier

Harald

Michael

Vladimir Kokol

Heinrich Fleischmann

West Germany 1971

85 mins

Digital

JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN: THE FILMS OF WERNER HERZOG

Land of Silence and Darkness

The screening on Wednesday 17 January will include a + BSL intro by deaf filmmaker Sam Arnold. Following this screening there will be an opportunity for deaf networking.

In an article devoted to *Land of Silence and Darkness* in the *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* (Spring 1980), William F. Van Wert puts the case for Herzog the documentarist versus the fantasist. 'The film is no less stylised than other Herzog films, but here more than in any of his other films, his style derives from his subject, and the result is a breakthrough: the supposedly abnormal becomes normal, disability flip-flops and is transformed into ability, and the whole film is a head-and-heart experience, a sharing rather than a looking-at... No exotic tricks, no magic or forced mesmerism, no kinky hallucinations or traumas that lead inevitably to madness or suicide, as in his fiction films.' The formulation is a tempting one, both because it suggests in general that Herzog's fascination with the extreme and the deviant poses communication problems that are solvable in the 'real' world, and because *Land of Silence and Darkness* in particular does have a positive drift that is unique in Herzog's work.

Reversing the plunge of most of his protagonists, he traces Fini Straubinger's journey from her interior world to an exterior one, from poetic descriptions of the state of being deaf-blind to her actual travelling about Bavaria on behalf of those to whom she feels akin 'in destiny'. The reversal begins with statements from Fini which qualify Herzog's own title: 'People think deafness means silence, but that's wrong... It isn't total darkness – you often see all kinds of colours'. As she then moves from case to case, from those with a greater disability (children who have been deaf-blind from birth) to those who have not been able to overcome their handicap (older people in homes, without family or whom no one has 'tried to awaken'), she combines ministering angel with brisk social worker. 'Poor dear, no contact with the world', she comments of one old woman who has withdrawn totally into herself, chides another individual to hold himself straighter, and declares of the most extremely retarded case, 22-year-old Vladimir Kokol, 'We can still get something out of him'. Pragmatic nursing also combines with political effort as she attends congresses and listens to speeches: 'A society which doesn't respect old people as a part of itself is condemning itself.'

So far, so helpful – but Herzog is less interested in education than in perception, less in mobilising society than in charting the vagaries of human experience. Which leads straight to the contradiction, or several contradictions, of *Land of Silence and Darkness*. That it is a 'land' to begin with is revealing: a special place whose inhabitants remain inaccessible except through a guide like Fini – who is both of their world and ours – or through the various technologies which teach them to simulate our language. Herzog seems to regard the latter as he does the medical enterprise of *Flying Doctors*, with a perfectly neutral scientific progressivism. But what they mainly reveal is what we can never know: the instructor of two deaf-blind boys comments on the difficulty of imparting abstract ideas, and during a session in which they are taught speech by a mechanical vibration method, the commentator (a pseudonymous Herzog?) observes, 'What they understand as "proud",

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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

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“happy”, etc., will always be a mystery to us.’ Beyond this, the socialising of these exotic creatures contains an implicit irony which *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* will take up as an explicit attack on bourgeois society. The land of silence and darkness is a state of nature, and it is in Nature that the people here seem most fulfilled (playing with animals at the zoo, similarly caressing and testing out plants) rather than in their partial adaptation to normal human society. Vladimir Kokol, the most extremely disadvantaged, has been adapted to the most incongruous extreme: neatly dressed in jumper and tie, he sits on the floor blowing raspberries and striking himself with a ball, while a clock discreetly chimes off. Walking into a garden with her last case, Heinrich Fleischmann, Fini sits talking with two other women while a hand-held camera delightedly follows Heinrich, who wanders off to hug one of the trees. He is eventually led back indoors, but the camera remains in the garden, watching the dwindling figures.

Herzog does not suggest that his subjects would be better left to their own devices than being socialised to some degree. But human society and its agents are so quickly diminished in his transcendental view of things that it is not hard to see the blandness of the balance here moving towards the spiritual bleakness of *Kaspar Hauser*. Herzog’s account of Fini Straubinger’s career is not really a movement from the subjective to the objective, but a merging of her subjectivity with his in a kind of detached meditation, blind vision meeting visionary blindness. (The play of ironies between seeing and not seeing culminates in the episode where Fini is taken up for the first time in an aeroplane, a favourite Herzog image for the sublimity and terror of life.) Likewise, the titles that break up the film suggest comments of Fini’s ‘objectified’ by Herzog: ‘When you let go of my hand, it is as if we were a thousand miles apart’; ‘If a world-wide war would break out now, I wouldn’t even notice it.’ One of her few sighted memories, anticipating *Woodcarver Steiner*, is of a ski-jumper. The fascination of *Land of Silence and Darkness* is not that it ‘grounds’ Herzog’s later fictions but that it leads directly to them, from fantasised documentaries to documented fantasies.

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, June 1983