



JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN: THE FILMS OF WERNER HERZOG

Stroszek

Stroszek

A Film by: Werner Herzog

Production Companies:

Werner Herzog Filmproduktion,

Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen

Production Manager: Walter Saxer

Production Assistant: Anja Schmidt-Züringer

Collaborators: Cornelius Siegel,

Henning von Gierke, Peter Holz, Angelika Dreis

Assistant Director: Ed Lachman

Director of Photography: Thomas Mauch

2nd Unit Director of Photography: Ed Lachman

Berlin Assistant Photographer: Wolfgang Knigge

USA Assistant Photographer: Stefano Guidi

Lighting: Dieter Bähr

Editor: Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus

Sound Recording: Haymo Henry Heyder,

Peter van Anft

Special Thanks to: Errol Morris,

Lutz Eisholz, Les Blank

uncredited

Producer: Werner Herzog

Associate Producer: Willi Segler

Screenplay: Werner Herzog

Stills Photography: Gunther Freyse

Cast:

Bruno S. (Bruno Stroszek)

Eva Mattes (Eva)

Clemens Scheitz (Scheitz)

Wilhelm von Homburg, Burkhard Driest (pimps)

Clayton Szalpinski (Scheitz's nephew, mechanic)

Ely Rodriguez (Ely, assistant mechanic)

Alfred Edel (prison governor)

Scott McKain (bank employee)

Ralph Wade (auctioneer)

Michael Gahr (Hoss, prisoner)

Dr Vaclav Vojta (doctor)

Yütsel Topçugürler (Turk, prisoner)

Pitt Bedewitz (pimp)

Bob Evans

Der Brave Beo (bird of starling family from Borneo)

West Germany 1977

108 mins

Digital

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Herzog's second film with lead actor Bruno S. (following *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*) was written specifically as a vehicle for the unusual performer's rough-edged naivety. Having reneged on a promise to cast Bruno in the film *Woyzeck* (for which he was replaced by Klaus Kinski), Herzog wrote *Stroszek* in just four days, taking aspects of the mysterious actor's biography for inspiration.

The film follows the fortunes of street performer Bruno Stroszek as he leaves Berlin for an adventurous journey to America. But once there he finds it barely the land of opportunity, and has to eke out a meagre existence on the barren trailer parks of Wisconsin. Herzog's first film in America portrays the territory with the same alien, barren inhabitability as his films in the Amazon and Sahara. Taking inspiration from contemporaneous documentary filmmakers Les Blank and Errol Morris, Herzog also presents an unflinching portrait of rural American deprivation, which would in turn inspire the works of later filmmakers Harmony Korine and David Gordon Greene. *Stroszek* achieved further cult notoriety for supposedly being the film Ian Curtis, singer of Joy Division, watched before committing suicide in 1980, a not entirely verifiable fact depicted in the films *24 Hour Party People* (2002) and *Control* (2007).

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

Filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer on 'Stroszek'

What other filmmaker would have two men, intent on robbing a bank but finding it closed, make the best of the situation by stealing a turkey from the grocery store next door, smuggling the bird out under their coats. This is one of the most important works about alienation and greed in America, the loneliness that is inevitable when 'every man for himself' is the national creed, the brutality of which is masked by Yankee good manners. Recall the soft-spoken bank manager who politely forecloses on all of Stroszek's possessions, one by one, starting with that sign of arrival: the colour TV. Once Stroszek loses that, we know he must lose everything else. And only Werner would realise that his home must be auctioned off by a cattle auctioneer.

And *Stroszek* has the greatest ending in the history of cinema: a chicken dances on an electrified metal plate, intercut with a car without a driver going in circles around a parking lot, gradually catching fire, and being consumed by the flames. Intercut with a shot of Stroszek in the distance, the sole passenger on an absurdly short chairlift, riding up and down, never disembarking, clutching his shotgun with determination. A sign on the backrest of each chair reads, in sunny lettering, 'I can't believe this is really me!'. As Stroszek recedes into the distance and up the hill, back to the camera, he blows his head off. The chicken reaches the apex of electric ecstasy.

bfi.org.uk, 22 August 2014

Cinematographer Ed Lachman on 'Stroszek'

I did camera on the American sequences of *Stroszek*, and it was shot like a documentary. Werner was primarily interested in getting a certain kind of performance from Bruno S. Although Bruno had lines, they were more or less improvised. And there were many non-actors and many times we didn't have locations marked down. We would put the actors into situations that everyone

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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 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

experienced for the first time. *Stroszek* was a true road movie. For instance, the scene in the diner: while we were having breakfast, we got permission to shoot there. We told everybody we'd pay for their breakfast. I used a handheld Arri BL. After we shot the sequence, someone asked what newspaper we were working for. They didn't even realise we were shooting a film.

What kind of camera directions do you get from Herzog?

It's interesting to me that people are so taken by his images, because Werner never talks about an image as an image. He's always looking for interesting landscapes, like the place he found in Cherokee, North Carolina, in *Stroszek*, with the dancing rabbits and chickens. But his reasons are never symbolic. He might say, 'There are some incredible dancing chickens there.'

Also, there are never cross-references to other films. What is strongest is the content of the images, not a formalistic attitude about what an image is. Things are much more intuitive and personal. He says, 'I hate sunsets,' and he'll never put one in his films because they're visual clichés. He'll never shoot coverage in the classic Hollywood way – close-up, medium, long shot. I said once, 'We don't have matching action, Werner.' He looked at me and said, 'What's matching action?'

What is the star of Kaspar Hauser and Stroszek, Bruno S., really like?

He's like a wolf child. He was abused as a child and put in an institution for the mentally retarded. His mother was a prostitute, and he didn't talk until he was twelve. But now he works in a steel factory in West Berlin. He plays the piano. He paints. He has incredible talents but he started so late in life that he's stunted. For *Stroszek*, I picked him up at the airport and he was totally astonished by New York City. He would always sleep by the door so he could be ready and warn others of imminent danger. He literally lived in the clothes he had on the whole time of shooting. He didn't eat from his plate in the hotel. He was very embarrassed by his table manners. The first week he'd only eat from my plate what I'd ordered for myself.

I saw *Stroszek* sitting with him at the Berlin Film Festival. He smiled a few times watching but there was no overt emotion. Afterwards, he asked if he could have a poster. There was a picture of him with a scarf and a cowboy hat. After the screening, I said I'd like to take him for a beer. If you are a friend, he'll always take your hand and walk with you. He took me to a supermarket and we bought four beers. Instead of inviting me to his house, Bruno sat down on the stoop outside and we had our beers there. Then he said, 'Goodbye.'

Interview by Gerald Peary, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1984