



JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN: THE FILMS OF WERNER HERZOG

Woyzeck

Woyzeck

Director: Werner Herzog
Production Companies:
Werner Herzog Filmproduktion,
Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen
Producer: Werner Herzog
Co-producer: Evzen Kolar
Production Manager: Walter Saxer
Czechoslovakia Production manager:
Rudolf Wolf
Assistant Director: Mirko Tichacek
Screenplay: Werner Herzog
Based on the Play by: Georg Büchner
Director of Photography:
Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein
Lighting: Martin Gerbl
Camera Operator: Michael Gast
Editor: Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus
Art Director: Henning von Gierke
Costumes: Gisela Storch
Music: Fiedelquartett Telc, Antonio Vivaldi,
Benedetto Marcello
Sound Recording: Harald Maury,
Jean Fontaine
English Subtitles: John Gabriel
Cast:
Klaus Kinski (*Woyzeck*)
Eva Mattes (*Marie*)
Wolfgang Reichmann (*Captain*)
Willy Semmelrogge (*Doctor*)
Josef Bierbichler (*Drum Major*)
Paul Burian (*Andres*)
Volker Prechtel (*journeyman*)
Dieter Augustin (*market person*)
Irm Hermann (*Margret*)
Wolfgang Bächler (*Jew*)
Rosy-Rosy Heinikel (*Kathe*)
Herbert Fux (*Subaltern*)
Thomas Mettke (*innkeeper*)
Maria Mettke (*innkeeper's wife*)
West Germany 1979
81 mins
Digital

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Werner Herzog on 'Woyzeck'

'*Woyzeck* has a long history. The project goes back to the days when we made *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*. I had a strong feeling that I should do another film with Bruno S. I felt that one had to continue the contact, the friendship that had carefully and strangely started to blossom. So a year later I called Bruno and said "Bruno, I would really like to do another film with you: *Woyzeck*." And he agreed. We discussed the whole thing – he took vacations from the factory where he works and everything was settled.

'Then, all of a sudden, I don't know why, I had some afterthoughts. My feeling became stronger and stronger that Bruno was not *Woyzeck*. But I still wanted to do something with him, so I wrote a screenplay for him with a similar title and similar basic feeling, and that's exactly how *Stroszek* came to be made. Later, when I was planning *Nosferatu* with Kinski, I said to him: "Klaus, I have an idea: we're gonna make two films. You will be *Woyzeck*." And he agreed, though he was afraid of the part.

'The role is so demanding, so very difficult. But I think he has never been nearly as good in anything else as he is in *Woyzeck*. His performance in *Aguirre* is like a cricket game in comparison. From the first day of shooting we knew that something exceptional was taking place. There's now a very strange relationship between the two of us. After all the well-known trouble on *Aguirre*, we both have understood and accepted a necessity that is far beyond the two of us, a force that is beyond our private feelings. And, I must say, Kinski now likes me with the same fanatical intensity as he used to hate me...

'For me, though, one thing is now clear: he is the only genius of male actors. The only genius at this moment. The same calibre, let's say, as the young Orson Welles or the young Marlon Brando. You can't compare these people easily, but there is one quality that is with all of them, something in genius that is beyond verbal description. You just have to see and you will feel it and sense it.'

It's a theme that recurs constantly in Herzog's conversation: 'genius', 'calibre' (and the first person singular) are used incessantly. He sees the world as a place of extreme triumphs and extreme failures; they are always personal, often tinged with megalomaniac desperation. Held with disarming frankness, this position explains, at least partly, his affection for Büchner, the original author of *Woyzeck*.

Georg Büchner was a Romantic visionary, an atheist, and a revolutionary, who had written only three plays by the time he died, aged 23, in 1837. He died too young to see 1848 and the Year of Revolutions, but *Woyzeck*, though still only in draft version when he died, seems, in its 20-odd scenes, to anticipate and explain the spirit of revolution. *Woyzeck*, a Private in the army, is tormented in private by visions of apocalypse, in public by the weight of social and sexual oppression under which he labours. His frustrations finally burst through in the brutal murder of his mistress, Marie, the only person to bring him warmth, sanity, and respite from the treadmill of his life (both in the army and as a hired guinea-pig for the local doctor).

The play's emotional frenzy, its attack on the philosophical and political establishment, its fusion of pathos and tragedy, place it somewhere between Beckett and Brecht, with a protagonist who is, really, a proletarian King Lear. Unknown in the 19th century, *Woyzeck* has become a minor cause célèbre in the 20th: Alban Berg's opera, *Wozzeck*, is based upon it, and it has been frequently revived (Ingmar Bergman, curiously enough, directed it for the stage in Stockholm, in 1969). In a rather obvious sense, it seems like ideal material for a 'Herzog film', though Herzog himself is furious at this sort of tagging.

'People always try to pin me down to Kaspar David Friedrich and the Romantic epoch, only, I think, because they were recent discoveries in some countries, like France. My real links in German culture are Martin Luther, Hölderlin, Kleist, and Büchner.'

This community of genius that Herzog sees, this web of solitary kindred spirits spanning time and geography, and presumably including Herzog himself, is a notion

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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

bordering on Romantic cliché. So too is Herzog's reluctance to talk about 'ideas' (as opposed to 'images'). On these grounds alone, his work is open to criticism – the absence of a political dimension or commitment, the fossilisation of history in period pieces and art. It's a criticism all the more relevant to *Woyzeck* because of the anarchistic dimension of the play – an aspect that could easily have been brought into a 20th century context. Herzog's response is articulate and surprisingly complete:

'For me, films like *Kaspar* and *Aguirre* are not historical films. They are films about ourselves, our dreams, our fears, our society. By updating *Woyzeck* you could get some sort of easy applause. It's my feeling that *Woyzeck* set in its time gives you more insight about our time, our structures of bourgeois life – things that are still there, still virulently there, but more blurred now. You get easier access to what is going on for ourselves at that very historical moment, when you take the perspective of that time. Because you have to start to think, to think yourself into that position somehow...'

There is considerable sarcasm in the answer, and as I ask the next question he hooks up the sleeve of his T-shirt to reveal a recent tattoo on his shoulder: a large black skull jabbering into a ZDF microphone (ZDF is Germany's equivalent of BBC2). 'I get the feeling more and more that I don't count that much, that things like this (pointing at the tattoo and in my direction) don't count. Interviews make very little sense. They are not helpful, either to the audience or to myself. I prefer audiences that take a very straight, clear, open look at what they see on the screen.'

That sounds like a reason for changing the films you make, an argument for making mass cinema. 'No! Mass audiences want to be entertained. They become uneasy and unfriendly when you do not produce the kinds of narration and construction that they expect. If you go even a little beyond their experiences it becomes very difficult. But I do not think there is a boundary between art and entertainment cinema. I think of all my films as films for large audiences. I even see proof of that now, because my early films – *Even Dwarfs Started Small*, *Heart of Glass* – are making steady progress. A steady curve upward. I hope that in 50 years time maybe as many people might have seen those films as have seen *The Godfather*. But maybe it's a ridiculous hope, some sort of a fantasy for my own survival.'

Herzog sees the problem not so much in the audience as in an industry which crushes diversity and ignores talent. And indeed *Woyzeck* neatly illustrates the real difficulties of low-cost film-making: the budget was just under £120,000; so it had to be shot in just 18 days. Comparisons with *Nosferatu* are dizzying: ten weeks of shooting, and a budget approaching £1m. The disparity in budgets is not just a question of scale, the whole process is so different, it can hardly be called the same industry. But then Herzog's own craft is as varied as the industry in which he works: from the surrealism of *Even Dwarfs* and the private, assertive documentaries like *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner*, to the production values of *Nosferatu*.

Woyzeck's greatest virtue is, simply, its simplicity. Büchner's original text remains virtually unchanged; Kinski's performance is a model of smouldering intensity, the design and camerawork, for a director who has often tended toward the baroque, are completely restrained.

'It was an extremely simply made film. I have always wanted to do a film with utmost discipline, to step behind the film. So we decided to shoot most of the sequences in one take, which I found extremely difficult.'

The result is a remarkable opening-out of the play, a film whose severity perfectly articulates the script: *Woyzeck*, his humiliation, and cuckoldry, emerge in a series of tableaux, used consecutively like building blocks. His violence is contained and denied, dramatised by the very stillness of the camera. It's an effect – of dispassionate and deliberate formality – that some people may find hard to accept.

'Sometimes you have one scene running for five minutes without a single cut. The tension builds up to such a degree that you can barely breathe any more. It's probably a film of an economy in its means that I will never achieve again.'

Interview with Werner Herzog and article by Chris Auty, *Time Out*, 26 September 1979