

Document Citation

Title	Werner Herzog
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Source	<i>National Film Theatre (London, England)</i>
Date	1975 Dec 11
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	8-10
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	Herzog, Werner (1942), Munich, Germany
Film Subjects	Land des schweigens und der dunkelheit (Land of silence and darkness), Herzog, Werner, 1971 Lebenszeichen (Signs of life), Herzog, Werner, 1968 Auch zwerge haben klein angefangen (Even dwarfs started small), Herzog, Werner, 1970 Aguirre, der zorn Gottes (Aguirre, the wrath of God), Herzog, Werner, 1972 Fata Morgana, Herzog, Werner, 1971 Die große ekstase des bildschnitzers Steiner (The great ecstasy of the sculptor Steiner), Herzog, Werner, 1974

Natl Film Theatre, London, Dec/Jan '75-'76,
pp. 8-10.



Given Werner Herzog's passionate interest in extremes, it's not inappropriate that he should have a distinctly tangential position in the German film 'renaissance' of the last decade. He is, in fact, a loner, a dedicated independent who produces (and thus retains full control of) all his own films, whether they're made for the cinema or for TV. He has little in common with his contemporaries in the German cinema, just as his films make various radical departures from the cultural mainstream.

A lot of this is clarified by his unusual biography. Born Werner H. Stipetic in 1942, he wrote his first script at the age of 15 and tried to make his first film (on penal reform) at 17. After graduating in 1961 he spent some time in Pittsburgh studying literature, working nights in a steel mill to support himself. His taste for travelling to the odder corners of the globe was well established by his late adolescence: he was in Sudan at the time of the Congo crisis, when he was 18.

Herzog hates being compared with Buñuel, but insofar as comparisons are useful at all,

Buñuel remains an obvious point of reference. Both directors are fascinated by human madness and obsession, both use 'dream' imagery and surrealist shocks to lead their audience towards new perceptions, both ground their movies in 'documentaries' of extraordinary realities. And both insist on seeing man as he actually is, however 'small' 'handicapped'; their visions are neither optimistic (because there's little to be optimistic about) nor disenchanted (because they never were enchanted), but merely sane.

This season is as comprehensive as possible, including several of the shorts hitherto unseen outside West Germany. It helps reveal the falseness of conventional distinctions between fiction and documentary, in that Herzog remains true to himself in both idioms: but the lucidity of the films doesn't in any way depend upon their starting-points. As much as any major director before him, Herzog reinvents the cinema in his own idiosyncratic terms.—Tony Rayns.

Thu 11 Dec 6.30. 8.45

Signs of Life

Time out of war: three ill-suited German soldiers are assigned to guard a useless Greek ammunition dump . . . until one of them flips and threatens to explode the fortress. Herzog describes the lush, cloying atmosphere with his usual precision, but also maintains his characteristic detachment; his aim is understanding, not indulgence. *W. Germany 1967/With Peter Brogle, Wolfgang Reichmann.*



Wed 10 Dec 6.15. 8.45

Fata Morgana

This most extraordinary of all Herzog's films dispenses with narrative as such and offers instead a mock-heroic 'celebration' of the desert as a terminal beach, littered with civilisation's debris, the vestigial signs of life fading fast. The mirages include the ghosts of colonialism and the gods of ancient myth, but the film is basically (and alarmingly) a documentary. *W. Germany 1970.* Plus Herzog's 1969 documentary (shot at the same time) *The Flying Doctors of East Africa.*

Tue 9 Dec 6.30. 8.45

Even Dwarfs Started Small

Herzog's blackly comic account of insurrection in an isolated prison is presented as a case history of a failed revolution: to emphasise the sheer pettiness of jailers and prisoners alike, Herzog hit on the uniquely direct notion of casting all the roles as dwarfs. The lack of moralising and spurious 'compassion' makes the expressionist vision all the more disturbing. *W. Germany 1969/With Helmut Doring, Gerd Gickel.* Plus Herzog's 1967 short, *Last Words.*





Wed 17 Dec 6.30. 8.45

The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner/Shorts

An example of Herzog's idiosyncratic way with "conventional" documentary *Woodcarver Steiner* is a bizarre study of what makes a champion ski-jumper tick: once again Herzog chooses a subject that strains against human limitations. His own appearance as a "commentator" on the action sets the tone, a kind of awed intensity. *W. Germany 1974*. Plus *Taris*, Vigo's extraordinary 1931 short about the champion French swimmer, (recently reissued by Contemporary). And Herzog's 1969 short *Measures Against Fanatics*. Plus, we expect, one or two more unusual short films. (Illustration: Werner Herzog directing his first feature film.)

Thu 18 Dec 6.30. 8.45

Land of Silence and Darkness

Fini Straubinger went blind at fifteen and deaf at eighteen, and then took to her bed for thirty years; now in her mid-fifties, she organizes help and outings for similarly handicapped people in Bavaria. Herzog simply films her going about her work with her charges, clearly feeling that the extraordinariness of what he sees requires no comment. *W. Germany 1971*. Plus Herzog's 1966 short *The Unprecedented Defence of the Fortress 'Deutschkreutz'*.



Mon 29 Dec 6.30. 8.45

Aguirre, Wrath of God



Herzog's first 'commercial' film turned out to be entirely consistent with his earlier work: a characteristic subject (the Spanish search for El Dorado, a quest doomed by its own fanaticism) given a characteristic treatment. But the relatively lavish budget allows Herzog to realise his haunting images on a grander scale than before: heaven and hell have never seemed such tangible abstractions. *W. Germany 1972/With Klaus Kinski, Helena Rojo, Ruy Guerra*.