

Document Citation

Title	Land of silence and darkness
Author(s)	Richard Roud
Source	<i>Sight and Sound</i>
Date	1972
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Land des schweigens und der dunkelheit (Land of silence and darkness), Herzog, Werner, 1971

/ Land of Silence and Darkness is Werner Herzog's latest film, and when one adds that it is about a German Helen Keller, the automatic response must be, 'Oh no!' But as so often, this response would be wrong. It is nothing like Herzog's *Dwarfs* film; in fact, it is like nothing else at all. On the surface, it is the straightest of documentaries: we are introduced to 56-year-old Fini Straubinger as she makes her way around Bavaria trying to help others who are deaf and blind. ('*Wir sind Schicksalskameraden*'—'We are comrades in our destiny'—is her invariable opening line.) She herself went blind at fifteen and deaf at eighteen, and thereafter took to her bed for thirty years. How she came back from the land of silence and darkness Herzog—curiously—does not tell us. Or perhaps he does, in the sense that as we see Fini helping others, so someone must have helped her. There are some upsetting moments in the film. How could it be otherwise when the subject matter is, as always with Herzog, at the limits of the human experience, on the shadow-line, as it were? But it is often exalting, too. In spite of their infirmities, these are still human beings, and on occasion delightful ones. We see Fini

taking a group on their first airplane ride, and a little old lady—deaf and blind, remember—claps her hands with glee, a look of indescribable pleasure on her face. We watch a group at the Botanical Gardens, coming to terms with a cactus; we see them at the zoo, handling the animals, touching an elephant's trunk with a wild surmise.

As perhaps befits the subject-matter, technique is minimal, with only the occasional lyrical outburst, as when a blind woman evokes her last memory from the days when she could see, and Herzog intercuts a ski jump, with the skiers gliding through the air. The poignancy is intense because it is not underlined. *Variety*, I note, has summed it up as 'a strictly non-commercial film'. I wonder. It's being broadcast on German television this month; maybe the BBC ought to take a look at it.

Richard Rovo

Summer 1972

'Sight & Sound'