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Beate Presser (Hg.): Werner Herzog

2003

<https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2003.3/4.1949>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ascárate, Richard John: Beate Presser (Hg.): Werner Herzog. In: *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews*, Jg. 20 (2003), Nr. 3-4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2003.3/4.1949>.

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Beat Presser (Hg.): Werner Herzog

Berlin: Jovis Verlag 2002, 128 S., ISBN 3-936314-31-4, € 32,-

German director Werner Herzog is probably best known for his works with the mesmerizing and splenetic Klaus Kinski in the 70s and 80s. Images from films such as *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (*Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, 1972), in which the late blond, blue-eyed actor plays a Spanish (!) conquistador penetrating the Amazon jungle, lurching throughout like some robotic gondolier, or *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), wherein Kinski as the eponymous protagonist blares Caruso from his on board ship Victrola, a veritable cultural cannon, against the howls and drumbeats of invisible cannibals, haunt the memory for years. Since 1962, Herzog has directed forty-four feature, documentary, short, and experimental films. In recent decades, however, the director's commercial appeal has waned. His latest full-length feature, *Unbesiegt* (*Invincible*, 2002), opened in a single theater in San Francisco and played for just a week. This is unfortunate, for in an industry enamored of computer-generated visuals and characters, Herzog's tireless pursuit of pure, resonant images deserves wider recognition.

Perhaps to this end, but ostensibly to celebrate Werner Herzog's 60th birthday (September 2002), Swiss photographer Beat Presser has assembled photographs and personal reminiscences from a selection of the director's various projects and companions over the years. More a set of photographic essays by Presser and anecdotes delivered in the idiosyncratic style of each contributor, the book cannot strictly be described as biography, nor do the films cited receive analytical treatment. If the book does contain an overarching theme this may be expressed by Herzog's opening quote („Film muss physisch sein./Film has to be physical.“)

and the image opposite, a full-page photograph of the sweating director, beard unshaven and hair unkempt. Such images, of a shirtless Herzog directing canoes on a Peruvian river, of him simulating a strongman breaking chains in a theatrical show, or holding a wine barrel overhead, or leading barefoot an African tribe, or standing knee-deep in the Atlantic near Cartagena, all of these interspersed with occasional movie stills of poised actors, underscore the director's own physical devotion to his craft. They also make more explicable, for example, the aforementioned legendary gesture of hauling an iron ship, rather than a wooden model, over a mountain. As friend and fellow director Volker Schlöndorff observes: "How is the ship supposed to creak in the ropes if they aren't taut to the point of snapping? How are the viewers' nerves supposed to be taut to the point of snapping if the foolhardiness of this venture isn't communicated to them?" (p.31). Paradoxically, the scene of the massive ship inching slowly along in the mud, smoke puffing gently from the stacks, generates as much visceral tension as that of the more prevalent adrenaline-soaked pyrotechnic car chases in today's films.

Nor are the players themselves, be they man or beast, exempt from the same physical exertions and sacrifices of comfort to which Herzog subjects himself. Actor Peter Berling relates in an expository style redolent of nineteenth century explorer Sir Richard Francis Burton's the filming of the opening scene in *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes*, the descent from Machu Picchu. The difficulty of the terrain and the number of extras involved (about 1500 South American Indians in addition to the thirty actors playing the Spanish party), as well as the vagaries of natural light and mist, allowed for only one take. Berling recalls making his way carefully with hundreds of others along the foot-wide mountain track, his face distorted with fear as some of the equipment-bearing pack mules toppled into the ravine. Claudia Cardinale, who plays Kinski's love interest, Molly, in *Fitzcarraldo*, offers a few whimsical anecdotes on the making of that film. While she credits Herzog with helping her to realize a childhood dream, that of becoming an explorer, one detects a certain irony in her account of Jason Robards' departure from the original cast. Did he suffer an acute attack of dysentery, as maintained in Les Blank's documentary of the making of the film, *Burden of Dreams* (1982), or did he, as Cardinale claims, climb a tree and refuse to come down, eventually returning to New York to eat steak? Her tone suggests a sense of physical triumph in having endured: „I was the only one who survived the first casting“ (p.40).

Presser's contributors also include Werner Herzog himself and his wife, Lena, director Herbert Achternbusch, and film scholar Hans Helmut Prinzler. Ultimately, though, as with Herzog's films, the images prevail over the text. One turns page after page to find lush, candid photographs from both before and behind the film camera. Those who have seen the films already will be reminded of the director's gift (along with that of his frequent director of photography, Thomas Mauch) for creating stunning visual tableaux. A still from *Fitzcarraldo* (p.14/5) of the natives in their canoes just as they are about to board the Molly Aida recalls in color

and arrangement Van Gogh's oils and watercolors of boats on the banks of the Arles, thus bringing the Brazilian Indians into European culture, slyly reasserting Fitzcarraldo's own mission. In another image, the natives stare into the camera, seemingly out of the page at the viewer. Though open to the ethnographic gaze, they remain distant and enigmatic. Herzog deploys this technique, a silent, frontal view of the subject, reminiscent of what Tom Gunning has called the „cinema of attractions“ in several films, interrupting the narrative flow to confront the viewer with traditionally marginalized characters. One thinks of *Fata Morgana* (1971), for example, and its array of otherworldly subjects: a young Saharan boy dangling his desert dog by the neck, a blind, decorated African man speaking an untranslated (hence, effectively silent) message into the camera, a legless Tunisian man, dusted with fine powder, beating rocks into gravel to the strains of Leonard Cohen. Presser's book references this film (along with *Herz aus Glas/Heart of Glass*, 1976, and *Nosferatu, the Vampyre*, 1978) in a series of montage tableaux by artist Kristina Jaspers (p.66, 114/5) that are visually stimulating in themselves, certainly faithful to the director's chromatic palette, but which cannot adequately convey an impression of the original works.

Indeed, one of the drawbacks to any book about film remains the suspension of the illusion of motion and continuity as well as the absence of sound. Presser's book contains only a handful of photographs of Herzog's work in opera and a one-page résumé of such productions since the mid-80s, but does not otherwise treat the director's astounding familiarity with both classical and pop music (rivaling that of the late Stanley Kubrick) and his uncanny ability to choose just the piece to complement his well-crafted visuals. Who else would have thought to elicit the virginal/erotic qualities of Saharan sand dunes with Mozart's *Coronation Mass*? Or the diabolical grandeur of Kuwait's burning oil fields with Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*? (Herzog's 1992 quasi-documentary of the first Persian Gulf War, *Lektionen der Finsternis/Lessons of Darkness*, from which the latter scene is taken, attains renewed topicality in light of recent events.) But such unavoidable shortcomings should serve as motivation for a first viewing, or a repeated viewing, of the director's underappreciated films. To paraphrase Peter Berling, Herzog has burned images in his spectator's brains that will never leave them, at least not in this life.

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