

Diversions

Magma, Monkeys & Madmen: The films of Werner Herzog By Charles Lieurance



"In the morning I had reached the edge of Paris, but it was still a half day to the Champs Elysees; I walked there on feet so tired that I had no more consciousness left. A man wanted to walk through the forest and never appeared again. A man went for a solitary stroll on a broad beach with his big dog. He had a heart attack, and since the leash was wrapped around his wrist, he was forced to walk on and on as the dog was very rash and wanted to run. A man had a live duck in his shopping bag. A blind beggar played the accordion, his legs covered with a zebra-striped blanket below the knee. The woman beside him was holding the aluminum cup for the money. Next to them they also had a shopping bag, out of which peered a sick dog. A sick dog attracts more money. . . . We were close to what they call the breath of danger."

— Werner Herzog, "Of Walking in Ice"

Werner Herzog creates violent meditations. His films embark on voyages of quiescence, travelers armed with only intensity, eyes set on something that cannot be com-

municated except as movement, and a mad dance, a catatonic pilgrimage. Because there is no chance of verbalization, many times the journey appears absurd, the pilgrimage is only holy on a deeply personal level, the motion is fragile or grotesque.

A revealing cross section of films by Herzog will be shown starting tonight and ending Saturday at the Sheldon Film Theatre.

Herzog, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, now deceased, and Wim Wenders comprise the most popular and exciting of the German New Wave filmmakers, a triumvirate marked by obsession, intellectual indulgence and, in Fassbinder and Herzog's case at least, a psychotic, self-destructive devotion to cinema.

In Germany, literature is always more than a book or a poem, music is more than the transference of the natural musings of the mind to paper and to instrument and the film is more than celluloid entertainment.

Literature is of epic proportion, must be all-inclusive, mystical in attention to detail and must, in Goethe's words, "feed the soul." Music, as Wagner saw it, was a madness from God, epic, comprehensive, mystical.

And Germany produced "Triumph of the Will," Leni Riefenstahl's deification of Hitler, a film that came as close to changing the

world as any film in history.

Germany's new wave of filmmakers live with a dark responsibility, a knowledge of film's power, a visionary's grasp of art.

Herzog produced his first short film with a stolen 35mm camera. He had the cast of "Heart of Glass" hypnotized in order to make them appear mad. For "Aguirre, Wrath of God" Herzog hauled his cast and crew of 500 into the heart of a Peruvian jungle. To make the star of the film, Klaus Kinski, stay on the shooting site, Herzog held him at gunpoint. In 1974, when Herzog heard that Lotte Eisner, the conscience of German cinema, was dying, he walked, in the dead of winter, from Munich to her bedside in Paris. Herzog adopted German profligate, ex-mental patient, orphan, restroom attendant, Bruno S., to play the lead in "Every Man for Himself and God Against All" and "Stroszek" (both will be shown in the Sheldon retrospective).

Most indicative of Herzog's obsessions is the short film "La Soufriere," in which Herzog makes a pilgrimage to the island of Guadeloupe, where a volcano is reportedly near the point of eruption. Perhaps the fact that the volcano did not erupt makes the film even more evocative of Herzog's mythic temperament. That the volcano yet rumbles without

spewing out its very soul is the perfect metaphor for the director's work.

Herzog's characters, for the most part, snap internally, explode under the surface of the film. They and whole scenes explode under the weight of life, under sorrow and the injustice of God. In "Even Dwarfs Started Small" the volcanic image again appears, as the core of the island where a penal institution full of dwarfs begins a rebellion that becomes more surreal and more violent as the film progresses, or digresses. The dwarfs begin to wallow in their savage revolt, crucifying a fellow inmate's pet monkey, setting foliage afire and smashing pottery. There is some political message here, but mostly the themes are in the images and cannot be separated from them. The themes are the essential grotesqueness of man, the twisted helixes of aggression and cruelty that supplement our DNA.

It is a pity that Herzog was forced to cancel his visit to Lincoln as some other obsession got the best of him. His presence would have been a creative spark in a barren winter, but there are still his films, foreboding and relentless.

See **FILM SCHEDULE** on 8