

## Werner Herzog Documentary Retrospective

Dallas Museum of Art, Sunday May 15, 2011

### **Fata Morgana** (will screen at 1:30 pm)

Director: Werner Herzog, color, 79 min., 1970

A poetic journey through Africa, as lyrical and surreal as a dream, fragmentary in its lack of story, yet driven by an inner coherence. Herzog places myths of creation against images of destruction. After the opening credits we see an airplane landing, seven times from almost exactly the same camera angle. A reference to the creation according to Genesis? ... Herzog divides his film into three chapters: Creation, Paradise and the Golden Age. Images of death accompany the soundtrack bearing the myth of creation. Animal carcasses, the immense loneliness of the Sahara, where the dunes exude a nearly erotic aura, ghostly villages, apocalyptic scenes of scattered, half-mad people wandering about, lost, and reciting raving monologues, sometimes augmented with bursts of scornful laughter. We are told tales of paradise where "the landscape is devoid of a deeper meaning" and where "people are born dead". Towards the end, the landscape becomes an abstract pattern; it once again becomes evident that it is the film only that lends the chapters their own existence and coalesces them into a single, independent cosmos where the difference in the film locations – Kenya, Tanzania, the Algerian Sahara, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, the Ivory Coast, Lanzarote – becomes unintelligible. "FATA MORGANA is the visual coagulation of Herzog's anger over what he referred to in an interview as the absurdity of the universe... In this landscape, a beguiling stranger hovering between personal vision and objective reality, the future of humanity is already buried." (Jürgen Theobaldy) This vision of a world devoid of all meaning is as fascinating as it is terrifying, yet it is also a startlingly beautiful illusion perfectly reflected in Herzog's ideal of never-before seen images. This film draws its strength from the juxtaposition of the destruction Herzog sought out and his own act of creation.

### **Herakles** (will screen at 3:00 pm)

Director: Werner Herzog, b/w, 10 min., 1962

In his debut film, Herzog was already striving to subtly transgress the documentary genre and hints at what will become a central theme of his work – the absurdity of grandiose revolt. Herakles, the mythical hero has been reduced to a body builder. He slaves away on all manner of fitness machines, but his efforts result only in ludicrously inflated muscles: A show of senseless, useless strength and egotistical poses. Herzog strips this trivial, muscle-bound showiness of any mythical dimension, while juxtaposing it with the legendary trials of a hero which the down-and-out fighter is no longer capable of vanquishing...."Will he slay the Lernean hydra?" Cut to an endless row of cars stuck in a traffic jam. "Will he defeat the mares of Diomedes?" Cut to archive footage of the notorious 24-hour Le Mans race of 1955, scene of a catastrophic crash which killed 80 people. "Will he defeat the giants?" Herzog cuts to an earthquake. "Will he ward off the Stymphalian birds?" Herzog answers the question with archive footage of U.S. air force offensives. Herzog invariably breaks up these horrific scenes with images of the bodybuilder letting his muscles play – an almost perverse game since he does nothing to change the world, and worse than that, he does not even care about it. ... This is just a lump of muscle exercising on screen, entirely disconnected from the world. The connection only comes when Herzog references the many disasters.

**Bells from the Deep: Faith and Superstition in Russia** (will screen at 3:15 pm)

Director: Werner Herzog, color, 60 min., 1993

Werner Herzog travels to Siberia to observe miracle healers, self-proclaimed saviors who profess to be Christ's successors, and people performing strange, almost incomprehensible rituals near far-off Svetloyar lake. ... As in most of his ostensibly documentary works, Herzog dispenses with verbal explanations; he simply records what fascinates him. ... Around the upper reaches of the Yenisey River Herzog finds a few humble cabins; a group of people sit inside, all of them silent. One man is carrying out a ritual with fire, smoke and water. The shaman is here to exorcize the evil spirits – and to set these nomadic people off on the right path. The whole ritual is accompanied by the exotic sounds of Siberian throat singers. A woman proclaims that the savior has come and calls on all to follow him. And the “savior” himself – a mixture of Rasputin, Nazarene painting and Oberammergau dress – explains unflinchingly, “I can only say that I am the word of God.” ... Women on stage break down into – feigned or authentic, it is impossible to tell – hysterical fits. They wail and moan, beseeching the magician to heal them. ... A woman tells of a demon she claims to have seen, of a pig that went mad, of bells that she heard from the deep. In the background men crawl over the thin ice on the lake, upon something that still does not seem truly solid. ... A man in a monastery plays a glockenspiel. He says he wants to make people happy with his “art”. He used to work as a film projectionist. He explains that he is an orphan and knows nothing of his parents. We learn that he was born in 1944. Herzog refrains from alluding to the backdrop of the Second World War, to the horrors of that time. Viewers must themselves find the relationship between the past, the present and a deep-rooted desire, be it rational or irrational, for redemption. The juxtaposition between close-ups and long shots stretching off into the endless distance where people seem small and utterly lost is also revealing (Herzog used this aesthetic in his 1974 feature film, EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF AND GOD AGAINST ALL. This story of the founding Kaspar Hauser also tells of a single soul lost in the vastness of the world.)

**Discussion**

(will begin at 4:15 pm)

*Dr. Scott Churchill of the University of Dallas will lead a discussion of these films immediately following the screenings. Members and Friends of the Dallas Goethe Center admitted free to the museum after 1:00 pm.*

DMA Partners:

*Dallas Goethe Center and the University of Dallas*

*\*licensed copies of the films on DVD made available by the Boston Goethe Institute*