

Hyper-, Retro- or Counter-

European Cinema as Third Cinema between Hollywood and Art Cinema

Flashback to the Sixties

Fifty years after the Russian Revolution, the American cinema dominates everywhere in the world. There is not much to be added to this fact. Nonetheless we should, each according to his abilities, start two or three Vietnams at the heart of the immense Hollywood-Mosfilm-Cinecitta-Pine-wood Empire. Economically and aesthetically, on two fronts, we must fight for national cinemas, free, brotherly, comradely and joined in friendship.

Jean-Luc Godard 1967

Even before Jean-Luc Godard urged filmmakers in 1967 not to make political films but to make films politically, the question of an “alternative cinema” was on the agenda of European directors. While some filmmakers were looking to formal, experimental, non-narrative traditions, Godard’s notion was that of a counter-cinema, implying a film-politics that would challenge the economic supremacy of Hollywood, its monopolistic distribution and exhibition system in the countries of Europe, but also in the Third World.

The moment for a radical break was opportune: renewed interest in avant-garde filmmaking during the 1960s and 1970s coincided with a period of stagnation and structural changes in Hollywood which led to large-scale mergers, takeover bids and board-room struggles for the control of the industry’s assets, acquired by multi-national companies like Gulf and Western or the Kinney Corporation, whose main interests were in oil, canned food or real estate.

Not least because of a general decline in the cinema as a form of mass entertainment, but due also to lighter and cheaper filmmaking equipment, post-war Europe had seen the emergence of a number of “new” national cinemas with an art cinema orientation: Italian neo-realism, the French *Nouvelle Vague*, the New German Cinema, for instance. By the mid-1960s, the moment was also propitious to another kind of cinema in Latin America, partly modeled on European

auteurism, but partly also poised to be a political cinema, influenced by Marxist or Maoist perspectives such as those voiced by Godard. As so often in the history of post-colonialism and the liberation struggles, a European-educated intellectual and artistic vanguard sought to forge links with indigenous sources, often a combination of folk culture and the classic 19th-century European novel.

For this independent cinema after 1968, as well as for the political avant-gardes, the relation between Hollywood and Europe, between Hollywood and Latin American cinema tended to be conceived as radically and absolutely antagonistic in both theory and practice. Filmmakers borrowed their metaphors from the vocabulary of oppression and exploitation, and occasionally, as in the case of Godard, from the class-war. In Europe, the revival of political and formalist avant-gardes corresponded to a desire to abandon the notion of a “national” cinema in favor of an international(ist) radical modernism. But in the case of Glauber Rocha and the Cinema Novo in Brazil, or the Peronist cinema of Argentina, anti-Hollywood could also mean self-consciously nationalist cinema echoed in Godard’s anti-imperialist appeal.

From Anti-Illusionism to Hyper-Realism

But Hollywood, art cinema and Third World cinema are communicating vessels. By the mid-1970s, most of the initiatives – to join forces with political movements on the ground, as in the case of Glauber Rocha in Brazil; to break out of the isolated cottage-and craft manufacturing that is typical of the avant-garde filmmaker, as Godard had tried when he co-founded the Dziga Vertov Group; or to win a cinema-going audience to an alternative practice, as with the New German Cinema – had all suffered setbacks with the remarkable recovery of commercial Hollywood. Indeed, the self-consciously national cinemas of Latin America saw themselves courted mostly at international festivals, where they became part of a European radical chic. Much the same happened to the New German Cinema: a modestly successful export item on the art cinema circuit, it was massively supported by government funds and government agencies, but showed no signs of rallying domestic audiences to its own films. It was American movies, the package deal and post-industrial production methods which became more than ever the dominant model on both European and world markets. The new independent cinemas, whether national, politically internationalist or author-based, gradually found themselves forced into coexistence on the Americans’ own terms, or vanish altogether.

Insofar as spectators returned to the cinema (in most Western countries the mid 1970s registered an upward trend in box office receipts), it was to watch

Hollywood blockbusters. With enormous profits for the industry came capital investments in new technologies, notably computerization, special effects, and the improved sound reproduction made possible with the Dolby system. Such technical innovations were themselves the consequence of new promotion and marketing strategies. By borrowing from related entertainment industries like



CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

the music business, Hollywood was able to attract a different generation of spectators, whose pleasures derived from the thrill of film technology itself: these were better served by hyper-realism and simulation than by “Brechtian” anti-illusionism or distancing. Special effects, displayed in horror movies and sci-fi epics like *STAR WARS*, *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS*, *ALIENS*, or *BLADE RUNNER*, to a certain extent “deconstruct” classical narrative cinema by shifting the pleasure of representation from verisimilitude and realism to fantasy and the self-referential play of illusionist codes, while eight-track stereo or Dolby are not innovations that create

a greater realism for the ear, and instead, they advertise the presence of a separate sound space dedicated to creating a highly charged, imaginary sound experience. It wasn't a counter-cinema that superseded Hollywood, but a New Hollywood whose development was neither governed by the modernist telos of the medium's self-realization through self-reflexivity, nor by the political logic of opposition and confrontation. Instead, it followed the capitalist logic, which demanded the penetration of new markets in the wake of the activity generated by the interplay between technological innovation, media advertising, and mass-produced, cheap consumer electronics. In this strategy, even avant-garde techniques could find profitable uses, and as a consequence, one critical dimension of film theory – reflexivity – was thrown into crisis, overtaken by the dynamic of transformation and change that realized the agenda of self-reflexivity, but devoid of radical political potential, and with sometimes immense popular success.

The International Market

Given the extent of Hollywood's revival, it is clear that the balance of forces between Hollywood and European independent, art or avant-garde cinema

could not continue to be represented as pure opposition. If the term “international market” draws attention to the economic realities of film production, in the competition for the world’s spectators, national cinema disguises another term because an auteur cinema will often be more opposed to its own national commercial cinema than it is to Hollywood films. The “*politique des auteurs*” or “*cinophilia*” are based on such preferment. But in other respects, films are commodities like any other. While the Hollywood product dominates most countries’ domestic markets, as well as leading internationally, each national cinema is both national and international, though in different areas of the cultural sphere. Nationally, art cinema participates in the popular or literary culture at large (the New German Cinema’s predilection for filmed literature, the intellectual cult status of French film directors, the acceptance of Fellini, Antonioni, or Francesco Rosi as “artists” and Italy’s sacred monsters). Internationally or transnationally, each national cinema used to have a particular generic function: a French, Swedish or a New German film set different horizons of expectations for audiences, but which are inverse mirrors to the genre expectations suggested by a Hollywood Western, a science fiction film or a comedy, but which are equally essential a prerequisite for name recognition beyond the director: the firmer a national cinema’s generic image, the better (for) the brand.

From the perspective of Hollywood, on the other hand, it makes little difference whether one is talking about the Indian cinema or Argentinian cinema, the French cinema or the German cinema: none of them is a serious competitor for America’s domestic output, but each national cinema is a “market” for American films, with Hollywood practices and norms having major repercussions on the national production sector. In most countries this has led to different forms of protectionism, bringing into play state intervention and government legislation, but usually to very little avail, especially since the different national cinemas, however equal they seem before Hollywood, are of course emphatically unequal among themselves, and locked into yet another form of competition when they enter an international market.

The situation has often been described as a form of cultural and economic colonisation, whose dialectics have been analyzed in Hegelian terms of master and slave (Jean Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, Amilkar Cabral), in terms of a national Imaginary (Anthony Wilden, Benedict Anderson), or as a particular form of miscognition, as in Fredric Jameson’s Lacanian formulation of “the politics of otherness”. It can even be figured as an unsuccessful Oedipal challenge, where identification and antagonism are two sides of the same coin, competition with Hollywood leading to an emulation of the American model, as with Latin films ironically or lovingly quoting mainstream cinema (Hector Babenca’s *KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN*, or Ruy Guerra’s gangster musical, *A OPERA DO MALANDRO*, based on Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera*).

The Vernacular Force of Television

In the debates of the avant-garde around hegemonic Hollywood and a counter-cinema, the oppositional tactics elided another crucial term, namely television, which during the period in question had itself become the dominant cultural form of visual representation, in relation to which both Hollywood as well as the avant-garde had to re-orient themselves. While Hollywood did so, re-emerging within television as a major attraction (the recycling of “movie classics,” of stars and cult figures: in short the start of a whole new film culture), the avant-garde was unable to mount an effective challenge to television. Video art has had to retreat to the museums and galleries in order to find any public space at all. The national cinemas of developing or post-colonial countries – despite theorists and filmmakers successfully giving them a new identity as “Third Cinema” – have had to struggle even on the festival circuits. Insofar as some filmmakers who had been identified with political, avant-garde or independent cinema were able to secure state funding or the co-production of television, they were able to continue to make films, but perhaps at a price. Sharing a segment of the general movie-going audience, at least in Europe, these filmmakers became international “auteurs” which is to say, double agents for a cinema, which knowingly pastiched or cleverly inverted movie mythology. Though under contract to Britain’s Channel Four, Italy’s RAI, France’s Antenne Deux or Germany’s ZDF *Das Kleine Fernsehspiel*, they could upgrade their television co-productions via film festivals to the status of (art) cinema.

The relative failure of the various avant-garde movements to give roots to an “alternative cinema” thus cannot simply be explained in political terms. The demand for a different depiction of reality has, for most people, been fulfilled by television. But the relation of television to the cinema is precisely the one least accepted by the avant-garde, since it is not based on opposition or struggle, not even on competition, but more on co-option and appropriation. Thus, it cannot be seen in categorical terms, but only as shifts, as intertextuality in an expanding, constantly self-differentiating field.

In this field, Hollywood cinema retains its pre-eminent position because of the totalizing effect which Hollywood has had on national as well as international cultural production – be it in the field of information, art or entertainment. It is either a world language because it dominates trade in both film and television, or it is a “universal language” in its period of decline (like Latin during the Middle Ages), of which television represents the vernaculars: feeding off the classical, but also treating it as merely one more specialized language among many others. Such a role is particularly striking in developing countries. US, Italian or Brazilian soap operas watched in the slums of Rio de Janeiro or

Bogota by people who have neither jobs nor homes, can give the illusion of unity, of belonging, cohesion and participation to a social body that in any other sense is utterly dysfunctional, antagonistically divided and segregated where media spectacles become political, by their very negation of the political, while the political becomes a mere variant of televisual forms of participation (game shows, talk shows, quizzes, phone-ins).

One of the consequences might therefore be that the relation of national cinemas to Hollywood, of television to national cinema, and of national cinema to counter-cinema should be thought of as a series of palimpsests, a sequence of texts, each rewriting other cinematic and pre-cinematic spectacles in the form of intertextual narratives, each restaging the "primal scenes" of specularity and self-alienation itself. I want to explore this a little further around what seem to me two exemplary encounters of the European art cinema with Latin America, an encounter across which a whole history of the image as political may be reconstructed. Francesco Rosi's film *CHRONICLE OF A DEATH FORETOLD*, after a Gabriel Garcia Marquez story, and Werner Herzog's *COBRA VERDE* (after a novel by Bruce Chatwin) seem to me to illuminate this particularly complex relation quite concisely.

Francesco Rosi and the Death of a Hero

CHRONICLE OF A DEATH FORETOLD, the story of a vendetta killing, is, according to Rosi, "about a crime that is atrocious and unacceptable. Not because of destiny, but because a whole town abdicated the responsibility to prevent it." On the face of it, this is a good description of the genre Rosi has made his own: political thrillers from *SALVATORE GIULIANO* and *HANDS OVER THE CITY* to *LUCKY LUCIANO* and *EXQUISITE CORPSES*, inexorably revealing beneath the individual case the conspiracy of silence, the cover-up of crimes and corruption by state bureaucracies or even whole communities. But by the same token, it is an odd summary of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's short novel, and even more so of Rosi's own film based on it because there is no sense of moral outrage towards the characters, and no enlightened distance separates the camera's view from the social mores that make their behavior possible. On the contrary, the code of honor which demands an eye for an eye, and a life for a hymen, becomes, in the course of the film, the language of a deeper wisdom, not so long ago regarded as politically reactionary: the necessity to preserve a tragic sense of life.

The twin supports of Latin culture, in Marquez as in Rosi, are male machismo and the power of mothers. Both are in secret collusion with each other, energizing a field of force that, whatever its cruelty and barbarism, appears ennobling

because it raises the stakes in the battle of the sexes to the point of giving the illusion of the two being evenly matched. This is the case in Rosi's *CARMEN* (where the heroine shouts at her suitor: "I tell you, once I love you, José, you're a dead man") and in *CHRONICLE*, where the fiancée of one of the unwilling avengers declares: "If you fail in your duty as a man, I shall never marry you." Such a predilection for the double-binds of (hetero)sexuality make one wonder whether Rosi's earlier social commitment has mellowed into melodrama? *CHRIST STOPPED AT EBOLI* and *THREE BROTHERS* were investigations in which a sense of history emphatically endowed the tales of private passion unfulfilled, of personal memory and inner struggles, with a political place as well as a geography. In *CHRONICLE*, by contrast, the investigation into the murder (which could have opened up to history and politics) soon peters out, even if auspiciously inaugurated by the heavy-lidded Gian Maria Volonte scanning the faded colonial follies lining the embankment under a gray-blue sky.

There is firstly the fact that Volonte's presence fades before the flashbacks, the reminiscences and images crowding in on the witnesses still willing to talk such as the old housekeeper, the priest, or the retired mayor rescuing the court records after a flood and hanging the pages on a clothes-line to dry. Secondly, the luxuriant vegetation with strange birds breaking cover as a boat drifts past their nesting places seem to turn the characters themselves into exotic creatures whose present is a time of auguries and premonitions, their past the timelessness of myth or the fatality of an ancestral curse. What is enigmatic about the chief protagonists Nasar, Angela, or Bayardo is not some secret they harbor, but their beauty, which makes them mere surface, deflecting any mystery of motive or intent into pure being, at once out of time and doomed, as the clichés about youth, love and death – to which they owe their existence – have it.

Thus disarmed, the investigation shifts to the chronicle, with its different temporality and different causality, and no presiding consciousness pretends to put the events into an orderly procession. So why, even though only a *fait divers*, does the story assume an epic sweep? Thanks to a very complicated chronology, an interweaving of fragments, tableau-like scenes and oneiric set pieces (like Bayardo's overgrown house with his sports car rusted down to the wheel base, where Angela and Bedoia finally meet face to face), *CHRONICLE OF A DEATH FORETOLD* becomes a Faulknerian "tale told by an idiot," almost a sort of *CITIZEN KANE* or *RASHOMON* set in the swamps of Colombia. A dense forest of symbols linking white birds, white pages, and dead letters, a repetition of motifs around the arrival of a stranger, the return of a prodigal son, and the blessings of a bishop, create the impression of messages only half-deciphered and allegorical depths never quite plumbed. Equally plausible, though, is the realization that the complex narrative may have craftily constructed an echo chamber for a single note: that passion has to be utterly spent before it becomes livable, that

youth and beauty have to be sacrificed before they become a thing of value, and that the present has to be the past before its sound and fury become significant.

In some respects, this means that *CHRONICLE* is an old man's film, its moral anger appeased, its traditional truths and fundamentally tragic stance legitimized by the simplicity of its lyricism, and the naturalness and generality of its symbolic conflicts. But the starkness of the folk epic is also deceptive: if, on the one hand, the film depicts the power of honor (archaic, implacable, senseless and therefore impervious to either enlightenment or religion) and, on the other, the power of women (represented as confined to the cunning of biology and reproduction, and therefore strong because capable of crushing both conscience and individuality), the real threat to this world is the power of money, especially new money.

As embodied in the figure of Bayardo, money kills, not so much because it brings corruption, violence and greed to a community, and therefore upsets what one might call the ecological (or feudal) balance between servitude and security in "primitive" economies (a favorite theme of the Spaghetti Western), but because it devalues everything it touches: the lottery and its prize, the rituals of courtship and love, the old man's house and his memories. With this, a deliberate displacement of the political seems to have occurred in Rosi's film. Colonialism and its moral economy are an issue not because an alternative (political) economy can be their judge, but because a First World metaphysics of value implicitly proposes a kind of ironic counter-ecology to the economics of post-colonialism. How else is one to make a film about virginity in Colombia, a country notorious for its export of cocaine, the white substance from the Third World that dominates the Second and First World's black economies?

From Neo-Realism to Magic Realism

One of the more puzzling things about *CHRONICLE OF A DEATH FORETOLD* is no doubt the presence of Rupert Everett. As a character in a fictional story, he is barely present. Even by the end, we don't know who he is, where he is from, or what he wants. With so passive a part, it is difficult to accept him as the star of a major international production. But as a screen icon, he is almost too present, his image telescoping several generations of Hollywood masculinity. He wears his Stetson and lounges in his rocker like Henry Fonda in *MY DARLING CLEMENTINE*, the camera lingers on his figure as it does on James Dean in *GIANT*, or it frames him with the obsessive symmetry reserved for Alan Ladd in *SHANE*. At times he contemplates his doomed splendor as if he were the Great Gatsby himself. The role dissolves into poses, narcissistic and non-functional in the narra-

tive. Is this a flaw in the acting, the consequence of a production with an eye to the market, using up a face while it's still in the news, or is it a sign of a mutation in the concept of the European anti-hero who has become the clone-hero of jeans ads and beer commercials? In other words, are we watching a European art film, a Hollywood movie, or a Third Cinema poster-modernist co-production? In either case, Rupert Everett is an interference, the element that troubles the codes, which is of course what, in a sense, Rosi's film is all about.

For even though Rosi is not Wim Wenders indulging in cinephile citations, or Martin Scorsese exorcising the ghost of Jerry Lewis or *THE HUSTLER* by an elaborate mirror game of fictional projections and Oedipal moves (as in films like *KING OF COMEDY* and *THE COLOR OF MONEY*), there is a sense in which the older generation of European directors like Resnais or Rosi, look into the same mirror of movie myths, but from the other side, through nostalgia rather than cinephilia,

with the myths affirmed because they are irrecoverable, where the younger directors reanimate them by clever pastiche, by ironies and cross-references. When Rosi ends his film with the dead man spread-eagled on the ground in the exact the pose made familiar in his own *SALVATORE GIULIANO* he seems neither ironic nor playful, merely advertising that a certain language of cinema, as a commitment to, say, critical or investigative realism, has definitively entered into myth. Opting for the "magic realism" of Marquez thus becomes for a European director of Rosi's generation neither a commitment to



SALVATORE GIULIANO

a political counter-cinema nor a Latin-American director's pastiche of folk-elements, European modernism and Hollywood kitsch, but a complex displacement: revisiting his own (European, Italian) belief in realism and the structure of investigation, he encounters a Latin American mythology across which he hopes to reconcile the fact that the Left in Europe since 1945 has been nostalgic for a past that the Conservative Right had already dismantled. Not unlike Visconti in *THE LEOPARD* more than two decades earlier, and Bertolucci in *NOVECENTO*, Rosi, like them a man of the Left, discovered that he understood the values of feudalism regionalism better than those of a national bourgeoisie making common cause with international capital.

Werner Herzog: Tarzan or Parzifal of the Art Cinema?

Werner Herzog is one of those filmmakers who with rather fewer films than Rosi has created exemplary heroes, even icons, not least because here, too, there is a blurring of the boundaries between actor and role in his films, though apparently quite different from the Calvin Klein pin-up Rupert Everett. Klaus Kinski, an old professional and a trained actor, and Bruno S. the “natural,” have both become permanently identified with the parts they play in Herzog’s films, a fact that suggests that there is a deeper bond between the meaning of their archetypes. At first sight worlds apart as the eternal underdog and eternal over-reacher, Bruno S. and Klaus Kinski are brothers underneath the blundering and blustering egos: they are the two sides of Kaspar Hauser: one, the child abandoned by the father, the other the child abandoning the father to pre-empt being abandoned. Where Rosi pastiches machismo and matriarchy, Herzog focuses on two complementary aspects of the same crisis of patriarchal values: the failed submission to, but also the failed rebellion against the symbolic order. Whether supermen or victims, however, Herzog’s protagonists are always extreme, marginal, and outside, in relation to the center, which is the social world, the world of history, that of ordinary beings. Thus, the existential dimension of his characters seems to take precedence over any social ill against which they might revolt or from which they might suffer.

Behind Herzog’s heroes stands the figure of Hercules, doing other people’s dirty work, as well as Prometheus, who tried to steal fire from the Gods, bringing fire down from the heavens to the benefit of mankind. The role of scapegoats, of self-tormented egomaniacs can thus easily be related to the basic Western myths and their derivations. One of his first films, a ten-minute short called, characteristically, *Herakles* (Hercules) sums up this ambivalence succinctly. A body-building contest is inter-cut with scenes from a scrap metal yard where a huge machine is crushing automobile wrecks into handy parcels. Around this surreal collage, Herzog has packed the basic configuration of practically all his subsequent films: heroic effort and endeavor in a mockingly futile situation. This asymmetry is also what attracts Herzog to Latin American locations and figures, for behind the image of the superman fighting a losing battle with a world dominated by technology is the very possibility or impossibility of revolution, where the choice often seems to be between degeneration into anarchic revolt, or operatic self-display and exhibitionism.

Pauline Kael, aiming her poisoned arrow well, once called Herzog a “metaphysical Tarzan.” Yet if the figure refers to Herzog, it is not the man but the manner of his filmmaking that is targeted. Although he never stated it as openly as Rainer W. Fassbinder, Herzog always wanted to be an international director.

Yet at a time when the cost of the average Hollywood movie reaches figures that equal the entire film production volume of most other countries, an independent director shoulders with each film the burden of reinventing not as Herzog is fond of saying, film history but the film industry. His seriousness makes up his capital, and his naiveté is his key production value. The poet Erich Fried, seeing Herzog in action at a New German directors' press conference, once called him "a Parzifal among the Tuis" (Brecht's word for mandarin intellectuals). But also a Siegfried: the preparations for a Herzog film resemble a military campaign, and for them he casts himself as both victor and vanquished.

Thus, it is the very real anachronism of independent filmmaking in the age of global Media Wars that is one of the buried themes of Herzog's work: not the least of the many ironies of championing individuals or groups who eke out their existence on the margins of the capitalist world is that the symbolic opposition between the weak and the strong, the underdogs and the over-reachers splits Herzog himself. The filmmaker has a foot in either camp, and often David is difficult to tell from Goliath.

Two of his increasingly rare feature films from the 1980s are no exception: behind the Aborigines' resistance to the Mining Company determined to drill for minerals in *WHERE THE GREEN ANTS DREAM* (1982) stood Herzog's determination to make a film about this resistance. And in *COBRA VERDE* (1987), Kinski's ambiguous pact with Brazilian slave traders and a mad African monarch is like Herzog's wily but also

nervous deals with major American studios. Herzog, in a sense, is doing battle on his characters' backs, and they are inevitably also the foot soldiers thanks to whom the machinery of his own filmmaking can fight it out with the juggernauts of the commercial Hollywood industry.

The extent to which Herzog's filmmaking is both an act of allegorizing and of literalizing a particular situa-

tion could already be seen in *FITZCARRALDO* (1981). The film, it will be recalled, tells the story of an Irish rubber planter in South America, whose enthusiasm for Caruso makes him want to build an opera house in the jungle, if necessary by hauling a boat across a mountain and opening up a waterway that will generate the cash needed to finance such a scheme. Herzog has frequently talked about this project in interviews, ever since he completed *KASPAR HAUSER* in 1974. Clearly the film existed as a recognizably typical Herzog story well before production was underway. The idea of pulling a full-size river boat across a



FITZCARRALDO

jungle mountain was entirely in keeping with the absurd and excessive bravado acts associated with Herzog's public persona. FITZCARRALDO furthermore created expectations that this would be a return for Herzog to the thematic terrain and exotic location of earlier Herzog films, such as *SIGNS OF LIFE* and *AGUIRRE*. The film could inscribe itself into a pattern of continuity and alternation that had already made the Herzog oeuvre into a coherent and unified project.

The actual filming was accompanied by an unusual amount of pre-publicity, although in the context of Herzog's habitual self-promotion, it was perhaps to be expected. No less than two films were in fact made about Herzog making FITZCARRALDO. The circumstances of the production itself provided ample copy for the newspapers: there was Hollywood type show-business gossip about difficulties with the leading actors, the replacement of Mick Jagger by Jason Robards, and of Jason Robards by – inevitably – Klaus Kinski. This made the film crystallize around Kinski and Herzog's obviously privileged but problematic relationship with this preferred actor, since he had already used him in *AGUIRRE*, *NOSFERATU*, and *WOYZECK* to portray the Herzog persona par excellence. However, more publicity was generated when Herzog came face to face with global concerns about rainforests, land politics and genocide. FITZCARRALDO was political news because it started a minor civil war in Peru, in a scenario only half-written by Herzog himself, touching issues about the debt crisis, the situation of the Amazon Indians, all of which exposed the dilemma of European liberalism when faced with the problems of population explosion, and the extinction of tribal cultures for the sake of "modernization" and economic development in Latin America. When FITZCARRALDO was eventually released, much of this publicity did seem to have an adverse effect, making it difficult to see the film without the accretions it had already accumulated. Some critics thought that one of the documentaries made on location about the film, Les Blank's *BURDEN OF DREAMS* was actually the more interesting product of the exercise, while the more spectacular scenes of Herzog's film had already been anticipated by the pre-publicity. That the production and its difficulties somehow became the real event, of which the film, when it finally appeared seemed merely the documentation is also par for the course when the cinema becomes infatuated with the reality of its own making of make-believe.

While FITZCARRALDO was thus the object of considerable controversy, Herzog himself seemed to think of it as a German *Heimatfilm* transposed to the jungle, a film about his own homeland Bavaria in other words, with a figure not unlike Mad King Ludwig who had built fantasy castles and had funded lavishly extravagant productions of Wagner's operas. Certainly Fitzcarraldo can be seen as an anti-hero, who, frustrated in his desire for social progress, turns to art and music, on a scale symmetrically inverse to his social standing and professional failure.

But this underlines the ambiguity of Herzog's recourse to Latin American locations: metaphoric constructions of a cultural "other" in order to say something about the "self" cannot be easily distinguished from a genuine concern and sympathy for the world's victims of the West. Meanwhile, beneath it all, there is always an allegory of the director himself. Having hundreds of Amazon Indians move a tugboat over a mountain is not only Herzog's idea of a perfect image for his own filmmaking, but maybe even of cinema in general: an obsolete technology with a (sweaty) human face. The slaver is always also a slave.

FITZCARRALDO was not the only film where Herzog's pre-production (like any Hollywood blockbuster) made headlines and was good copy, not only on the arts pages. The fact that the director had taken a camera crew to Guadeloupe in order to film the outbreak of a volcano was reported with bated breath. Although La Soufrière failed to blow, Herzog did deliver. Jan Dawson in a review of the film, wrote about Herzog that "gratuitousness [is] the single value he consistently celebrates" referring to the director's admiration for those who remained on the island threatened by a volcano, because rescue to them would only have meant another cycle of the exploitation that made up their lives. But if one can call gratuitous those acts of stubbornness and resistance that attract Herzog, one has to see them as a kind of blocking of the all-too-ready transparency of sense-making and sympathy which especially the television discourse bring to news, disasters and to current events.

In many of Herzog's films the poorest of the poor, the most deprived of Western civilization, possess strength of resistance directly proportional to the degree to which they are dispossessed. Is the spiritual freedom that Herzog seems to grant them a mere consolation prize for material rights that no one is prepared to concede, perhaps not even Herzog himself, who moves the Aborigines in *WHERE THE GREEN ANTS DREAM* before his camera in much the same way the mining company has them moved by the police?

Documenting a Fiction or Fictionalizing a Documentary?

Herzog has been called a visionary filmmaker, mainly because he contrives so often to suggest the possibility of a radically non-communicating, *stupid* relation between people and between things. Sometimes it is the encounter of a solitary character and an object or a scenery that touches off the pathos inherent in a "land of silence and darkness" even under a blazing sun: Aguirre and the jungle, for instance, Kaspar Hauser in the market square, or the woodcarver Steiner alone at the bottom of his ski slope. *COBRA VERDE* resumes many of these moments from other films, not least because Kinski is so evidently the amalgam

of the underdog and the over-reacher, even more so than he had been in *NOSFERATU* or *WOYZECK*. One doesn't really need the hunchback in the bar confirming that he and the bandit are alike in their contempt for the normal and their capacity to dream the extraordinary, or the cripple on the beach shadowing Kinski's futile efforts to launch his boat, in order to recognize in *Cobra Verde* all the Hegelian twists of master and slave, and the clown of power in a colonized imagination's magic realism. Because there can be no development in these nightmares of real exploitation and imagined identification, the heroes Herzog has created are usually more enduring than the stories they appear in. But what would Herzog be without Kinski, who is always Kinski, which is to say, the living embodiment of the contradictions and collusions between Spaghetti Westerns, Cinema Nôvo, and New German Cinema?



KLAUS KINSKI

Insofar as his films are often associated with landscapes, Herzog does not always escape the charge of celluloid tourism. Many of his early documentaries came out of his own experiences of travel which he, as much a child of the 1960s as other more self-conscious German filmmakers who took to the road, undertook to have a vantage point on his own country and its history: Germany being the subject he has conspicuously avoided to treat head-on. He has traveled to the Sudan and West Africa, to Greece and the United States, to Ireland and the Canary Islands, and more recently, to Latin America and Australia. There is, thus, in Herzog's choice locations, a curious and altogether typical mixture of uncivilized, primitive places, and some of the by now traditional holiday spots of affluent Europeans. His landscapes are of an ambiguous other(worldli)ness, most offensive to "political" tourists, but probably Herzog is no different from other filmmakers scouring the continents for natural production values at unnaturally low production costs.

Cinema of Pain and Toil, or a New Theatre of Cruelty

In a *Guardian* lecture promoting *COBRA VERDE* at London's National Film Theatre (7 April, 1988), Herzog confessed to a new passion for opera, hinting that he

might follow the track beaten by other German directors to Bayreuth and Bologna, putting on *Lohengrin* for Wolfgang Wagner and Bussoni's *Faust*. He also told his audience that he makes no distinction between a jungle or desert setting for his films and the stage of an opera house. Both oblige a director to think big, and both allow the spectator to step out of reality. COBRA VERDE – being more deadly serious than Fitzcarraldo's rather harmless obsession with Caruso and an opera house in the jungle – provides a rationale for Herzog's startling assertion, insofar as the effort, enthusiasm, and resistance of the early heroes has become a theatre of cruelty and humiliation. The court rituals on the Brazilian haciendas, the military regime in the Fort, the customs and rites of the Royal House in Dahomey: so many ways of taking account of politics as spectacle, and the spectacle as politics. Opera perhaps allows for the self-display of subjectivity, even when the stakes are thus raised.

In an effort to close off one kind of transparency (that which classical narrative gives), a structure of meaning imposes itself on Herzog's images that can



COBRA VERDE

only be called Manichean, because if the level on which his films are meant to work is cosmic, then the issues he chooses are too politically urgent, and the cases too specific for the metaphysical fiction to become convincing. If on the other hand, Herzog documents in COBRA VERDE, even in reconstructed form, an actual case, then the fantastic anthropology of the African kingdom seems an unnecessary and irritating intrusion. The reverse side of Herzog's attempt to subvert the narrative cinema's inherent discursiveness by recourse to a

documentary style becomes itself a form of discursiveness, an accumulation of assertions about his material, chief among which is that his characters are unknowable.

Herzog surrounds himself with people, primitive, innocent, or slightly mad, so long as their behavior, their use of language, their reactions and gestures communicate, unconsciously or by default a certain kind of reification, and on whom the pressure of a deformed life becomes visible. Through them he can represent in action the states of alienation, dehumanization and exclusion that are imposed by society. But what is this society? Sometimes it seems that for the sake of his films, Herzog turns himself into the instrument of this society, puts on the mask of ogre or clown, in order to simulate the conditions he sets out to document. There is, in other words, a poetry even of social anomie and aliena-

tion which Herzog's cinema cannot but recognize as an aesthetic value and with which it seduces the viewer.

Against a background of temporal decay, Herzog's view of history has always been tragic: he sees the flawed nature of his characters' rebellion, the radical innocence of their deformation, the resilience and perseverance they oppose to their situation. Perhaps it is this complex which attracts him to Latin American themes and settings, allowing him to displace a more personal and national experience, typical of his generation. For it is not difficult to diagnose in this double vision of heroes and victims, rebels and saints the trace of an Oedipal configuration to which Herzog incidentally alludes regularly in interviews. What emerges as its foil and subtext is the Kaspar Hauser complex: that of the fantasy of being abandoned, fatherless or having to survive between a good father and a bad father. The complex was prominent in the 19th century, after Rousseau and the French Revolution, when the "wild child" was a European-wide phenomenon, and it became a motif again after WW II, when many young men were forced to grow up without fathers. There is François Truffaut's gently autobiographical *L'Enfant sauvage*, but among West Germans it became something of a cliché, thanks also to Alexander Mitcherlich's *The Fatherless Society*, a Freudian socio-portrait of those born during or just after the war. Herzog's work shows a profusion of these kinds of good and bad fathers, as it also shows protagonists that embody the two aspects of the Hauser complex, the active and the passive one, or rather, the pre-emptive and the abject one. In Herzog, Kaspar Hauser is the mirror of Aguirre: one the active embodiment who abandons himself by an act of defiance from both God and his country, while the other finds himself abandoned, and draws from his condition the strength of having nothing to lose.

What the evidence of such an Oedipal configuration might clarify is the peculiar tension between the documentary attention to detail and exhibitionist spectacle that Herzog has contributed to contemporary cinema, although the tension is a fragile one and the sensibility it manifests is not in fashion. He substitutes the play of insufficiency and over-explicitness between image and commentary in his early films like *FATA MORGANA* with the many incongruities and incompatibilities between the natives and their sympathetic exploiter Cobra Verde. At times, *COBRA VERDE* appears to want to say something about Idi Amin or the Khmer Rouge, about the madness of regional politics under the pressure of the super-powers' global strategies. But Herzog might also pursue his own counter-strategy, detecting in the Third World Politics of the European Left an abused and vulgarized fascination with the imaginary "Other" at too little cost to its own comfort and moral security. As an expert in cultural and social "Others," Herzog has always insisted on the risks involved, and so he is more interested in dramatizing the act of self-representation as one which escapes the speaking

subject's control, than in passing judgement. What is politically intriguingly ambiguous about the figure of Cobra Verde besides the peacock strutting of ceremonial power is the extent to which Herzog is prepared to read as a resistance to the regime of signs and thus as a resistance to social deformation, precisely those signs that speak most clearly of the hold that Western civilization has even on the bodies of those it marginalizes and rejects. The chorus of young women at the end of *COBRA VERDE*, functioning as a carnevalesque mockery of the male world of both Kinski and his real or imagined adversaries, and as such a very new element in Herzog's world, are they not performing for a camera still hungry for exotic spectacle? Yet in Herzog's documentaries from the 1960s and early 70s, the distrust of signification was always a matter of refusing to have the handicapped, the blind, or the sick be subsumed under the discourses of institutionalized medicine, charitable religion, or the welfare worker. Instead he intended them to have the chance to appear first and foremost as human beings. Herzog rejected the pieties of liberal politics in the name of human dignity, viewed beyond sentimentality or pathos with an almost Bunuelian, surrealist cruelty. But when his heroes play devil's advocates and instruments of power politics, this perception of dignity without histrionics is difficult to maintain, and Herzog's cinema appears increasingly to freeze the image, to create a kind of frame which makes cult icons of Europe's cultural others.

The Spider's Stratagem or the Kiss of the Spider Woman?

How did Italian critical realism or New German Cinema come to this apparent impasse between the academic and metaphysical, cultivating the hero as icon, escaping into myth, music and opera? The flashback to the 1960's with which I started, where Europe saw its "new" national cinemas giving rise to auteurs, each creating an individual oeuvre but sustained by the nation's popular and political culture must be considered as one answer because as Hollywood languished, the art cinema flourished, some of it by playing off the Hollywood of the 1940s and 50s against the Hollywood of the 1960s. But while a Wenders or Fassbinder tried to cast a cinephile and necrophilic eye on the maverick Hollywood of Sam Fuller, Douglas Sirk or Nicholas Ray, filmmakers like Rosi and Herzog in their own very different ways, did not look backwards, but sideways, to the Latin traditions of literature and folk mythology, to the travelers' tales, the bad conscience of a Conrad about white colonialism mitigated by their own principled dissent from the political orthodoxies of their countries. The Latin settings and subjects become the subtext not only for their non-antagonistic relation to Hollywood (which distinguishes them from Godard or Glauber Ro-

cha), but they also prevent too easy a play with Hollywood's own icons (as in Fassbinder, Wenders and others): displacing but also re-focusing through a non-binary schema their own "coming to terms" not with the old Hollywood of the 1950s, but the new Hollywood of the 1970s.

For it seems that the literature (and, in a wider sense, the visual imagination) of Latin American authors seems to have become increasingly attractive to European filmmakers, wherever they felt they were competing with America over the truth of the image on the one hand, and on the other, where filmmakers – independent or auteurs – could no longer envisage a terrain not already colonized by television. One can see it also in Latin American filmmakers working in Europe, such as Ruy Guerra's adaptation of a Marquez story, *ERENDIRA*, for a French production company, or Raoul Ruiz, the Chilean director, making films in Lisbon and Rotterdam when not working in Paris. One of the reasons may be the fact that here is a literary culture, which has always been closer to spectacle and carnival as part of radical politics. It has a precise historical experience of "colonization," but also of appropriating the colonial legacy in a vernacular idiom. Rosí's adaptation of Marquez may be a collage of clichés, yet they are hardly folkloristic: if the clichés are having a ball, it is because they are accompanied by strong feelings, clear outlines, bold colors, simple motifs, archaic spaces. The distance is not created by critical irony, or by political allegory, but through a literalism that offers distance. This, as in the case of Herzog, may leave the sophisticated spectator with the task of trying to become naive. It is not the romantic, heroic, or sentimental cliché that speaks the truth, but its repetition: obstinate, desperate, utopian.

(1988/1992)