

17 *Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft* (FSK, Film Industry's Voluntary Self-Censorship) was established in 1949 by Germany's film industry at the behest of the Federal Republic's new government. Though technically 'voluntary', the FSK had a censorship monopoly, i.e. all films released in West Germany had to be given a rating. Were they to flout these recommendations, distributors and exhibitors faced legal and economic pressures from the FSK' (Elsaesser and Wedel, p. 49; see Bibliography).

18 Browning's film *Freaks* is a controversial but recognized classic from 1932. The tagline read: 'Can a full grown woman truly love a midget?'

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Adequate Imagery

Do you have an ideology? Something that drives you beyond mere storytelling?

Well, I would have to say that 'mere' storytelling, as you call it, is good enough for a film. When I sit down to write a script I never attempt to articulate my ideas in abstract terms through the veil of an ideology. My films come to me very much alive, like dreams without logical patterns or academic explanations. I will have a basic idea for a film and then over a period of time, when maybe I am driving or walking, it becomes clearer and clearer to me. I see the film before me, as if I were in a cinema. Soon it is so perfectly transparent that I can sit and write it all down. It is as if I were copying from a movie screen. I like to write fast because it gives the story a certain urgency. I leave out all unnecessary things and just go for it. A story written this way will have, for me at least, much more coherence and drive. And it will also be full of life. For these reasons it has never taken me longer than four or five days to write a script. I just sit in front of the typewriter or computer and pound the keys.

Whether I have an ideology is not something that I have ever given much thought to, though I do understand where the question might come from. People generally sense I am very well-orientated and know where I have come from, where I am standing now and where I am going. But it is not an ideology as most people think of the term. It is just that I understand the world in my own way and am capable of articulating this understanding into stories and images that seem to be coherent to others. Even after watching my films, it bothers some people that they still cannot put their finger

on what my ideology might be. Please, take what I am saying with a pair of pliers, but let me tell you: the ideology is simply the films themselves and my ability to make them. This is what scares those people who try so hard to analyze and criticize me and my work. I do not like to drop names, but what sort of an ideology would you push under the shirt of Conrad or Hemingway or Kafka? Goya or Caspar David Friedrich?

I have often spoken of what I call the inadequate imagery of today's civilization. I have the impression that the images that surround us today are worn out; they are abused and useless and exhausted. They are limping and dragging themselves behind the rest of our cultural evolution. When I look at the postcards in tourist shops and the images and advertisements that surround us in magazines, or I turn on the television, or if I walk into a travel agency and see those huge posters with that same tedious image of the Grand Canyon on them, I truly feel there is something dangerous emerging here. The biggest danger, in my opinion, is television because to a certain degree it ruins our vision and makes us very sad and lonesome. Our grandchildren will blame us for not having tossed hand-grenades into TV stations because of commercials. Television kills our imagination and what we end up with are worn-out images because of the inability of too many people to seek out fresh ones.

As a race we have become aware of certain dangers that surround us. We comprehend, for example, that nuclear power is a real danger for mankind, that over-crowding of the planet is the greatest of all. We have understood that the destruction of the environment is another enormous danger. But I truly believe that the lack of adequate imagery is a danger of the same magnitude. It is as serious a defect as being without memory. What have we done to our images? What have we done to our embarrassed landscapes? I have said this before and will repeat it again as long as I am able to talk: if we do not develop adequate images we will die out like dinosaurs. Look at the depiction of Jesus in our iconography, unchanged since the vanilla ice-cream kitsch of the Nazarene school of painting in the late nineteenth century. These images alone are sufficient proof that Christianity is moribund. We need images in accordance with our civilization and our innermost conditioning, and this is the reason why I like any film that

searches for new images no matter in what direction it moves or what story it tells. One must dig like an archaeologist and search our violated landscapes to find anything new.

And there are few filmmakers who are willing to take the necessary risks.

Perhaps, yes. But I would never complain about how difficult it is to get images that are clear, pure, transparent. I would go absolutely anywhere; down here it is hardly possible any more. I did once seriously consider applying to NASA to be on one of their missions. I would like to be there with a camera. I am certain there really would be very good stuff out there to film. Basically, they send technicians up there who are not very inspired and who do not take advantage of the photographic possibilities of travelling to the Moon. On one of the Apollo missions they left a camera on the Moon which for days slowly panned from left to right, then right to left. They transmitted the images and I remember watching it on German television day and night. My God, I was aching for the chance to get up there and grab the damned thing! So many possibilities up there for fresh images. Space travel is unfinished business for me.

Many critics seem to have found themes running throughout your work over the years. Are you able to pinpoint any of these yourself?

Of course, by now you know that I never consciously think about the 'theme' of a film and how the ideas and story might be related in some way to abstract ideas or previous films. Simply, I do not care about themes, I care about stories. Apparently there are running themes throughout my work and, as you say, some writers seem to have identified them. But please do not ask me to name them. You could read to me all these kinds of ideas until you are blue-in-the face, but I never ask myself specific questions or consciously tackle specific themes when I sit down to write a screenplay. I just write a story. Many of those who write about my films have been trained to think in certain ways, to be able to analyse someone's work and pick out apparent themes, and that is fine. It does not mean they are right, it does not mean they are wrong.

They function in their world and I in mine.

Maybe there are some related ideas in my work, those connecting lines in this tightly woven fabric that is Herzog's body of work. Though I cannot be sure of this, I do know one thing. Let's say you turn on the television and see ten seconds of a film. You would immediately know that this must be one of my films.

Surely you must be able to see some specific connections between at least some of your films?

To answer that, let me say I have always felt my characters all along belong to the same family, whether they be fictional or non-fictional. They have no shadows, they are without pasts, they all emerge from the darkness. I have always thought of my films as really being one big work that I have been concentrating on for forty years. The characters in this huge story are all desperate and solitary rebels with no language with which to communicate. Inevitably they suffer because of this. They know their rebellion is doomed to failure, but they continue without respite, wounded, struggling on their own without assistance.

People often tell me that all my leading characters are so-called marginals and outsiders, but I always felt that a figure like Kaspar Hauser was not an outsider. *He* is at the centre; he manages to retain his unblemished human dignity while everyone around him seems to be so hideously conditioned. These people, transformed as they are into domesticated pigs or members of bourgeois society, are the bizarre ones, not Kaspar. People often say I am a marginal and eccentric filmmaker. When you look at my films you see there is absolutely nothing eccentric about them. When you sit three feet away from me do you see anything eccentric, do you?

No, Werner, absolutely not.

I am dead centre. In comparison to me, all the rest are eccentric. Aguirre, Fini Straubinger, both Stroszek and Kaspar Hauser, they all fit into this pattern. So do Walter Steiner, Hias in *Heart of Glass*, Woyzeck, Fitzcarraldo, the aborigines of *Where the Green Ants Dream* and the people we found in the desert who appear in *Fata Morgana*. Even figures like Reinhold Messner, Jean-Bede Bokassa, Nosferatu and even Kinski himself, or the 'minor' char-

acters like Vladimir Kokol in *Land of Silence and Darkness*, who can connect with the world only by bouncing a ball off his head and clutching a radio to his chest, much like Kaspar Hauser, who plays with his wooden horse when he is imprisoned in his cellar. Whether they be hallucinating soldiers or the deaf and dumb or dwarfs they are not freaks. These people are not pathologically mad; it is society that is mad. It is the situations they find themselves in and the people who surround them who are mad. It is difficult to put my finger on exactly what binds this family of characters together, but if a member of this family were walking about town, you would intuitively recognize them at once. I cannot really explain it any further, other than to say that all my films appear to be similar in their feeling about life and as such in one way or another form a single whole. They are all close to each other like the parts of a huge body; looked at together, they are a single film with many different dimensions rather than simply a chain of films.

How close do you feel to the characters in your films?

I am sure you can tell that I have a great deal of sympathy for these people to the point where Schmidt-Reitwein used to joke that I should play all the characters in my films myself. I do actually function pretty well as an actor and in many of my films I could have played the leading character if need be. This is something that might answer the question that crops up very often about why there are so few women in central roles in my films. I think one reason is simply because I could not have played these parts myself. I could never make a film about someone - whether I am making features or 'documentaries' - I do not have some sympathetic curiosity for. In fact, when it comes to Fini Straubinger in *Land of Silence and Darkness*, Bruno in *Kaspar Hauser* and Dieter Dengler, these people are points of reference not just for my work, but for my life. I learned so much from my time with them and I think the radical dignity they radiate is clearly visible in the films. There is certainly something of what constitutes them inside In Steiner's case, it is some kind of ecstasy and solitude and being, while in Fini's case, something about her difficulty with communication.

Allow me to say once again: I am not one of those intellectuals who possess a philosophy or a social structure in their mind that from the start guides a film. I have never set out to imbue my films with literary or philosophical references. Film should be looked at straight on, it is not the art of scholars but of illiterates. You could even argue that I am illiterate. I have never read a lot or thought about philosophical themes that I could then shoot through these stories I tell. For me it is much more about real life than about philosophy. All my films have been made without this kind of contemplation. Contemplation always comes after the film.

Land of Silence and Darkness, your film about the deaf and blind fifty-six-year-old Fini Straubinger, is one of my favourites of all your films. Whenever I have presented it to audiences, it has always made a tremendous impact. Why do you think the film strikes such a chord?

In contrast to a film like *Even Dwarfs Started Small*, there is a great deal of softness in *Land of Silence and Darkness*. People generally respond so positively to it because it is a film about solitude, about the terrifying difficulties of being understood by others, something we have to deal with every single day of our lives. In the film one finds the most radical and absolute human dignity, human suffering stripped bare.

Land of Silence and Darkness is a film particularly close to my heart. If I had not have made it there would be a great gap in my existence. Fini Straubinger, a fifty-six-year-old deaf and blind woman, caused me to think about loneliness to an extent that I never had before. In her case, loneliness is taken to unimaginable limits, and I have the distinct impression that anyone seeing the film asks, 'Good God, what would be left of my life if I were blind and deaf? How could I live, overcome loneliness, make myself understood?' And the question of how we learn concepts, learn languages, learn communication is also there. It is a theme that also comes out very strongly in *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* and I always felt the two films fit together. Fini is one of those cases where I believe happiness or unhappiness never played a role in her existence. She knew that her life had meaning because she was such a support for so many people, travelling around and



Land of Silence and Darkness

spending time with other deaf and blind people. Of course, she must have experienced unhappiness being bedridden for thirty years, unable to see and hear and being so isolated, so dependent on morphine, but there were things that were just far more important to her.

What's quite inspirational about the film is that basically it was made by three people, wasn't it?

That is right, and the ratio of footage shot to what you see in the final film is probably two to one. The film is an hour and a half, and I think we shot about three hours of footage in total. Not only that, but the film cost only \$30,000. It was just me, Schmidt-Reitwein on camera and Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus who edited the film. We had absolutely nothing, yet came up with a film that is still watched thirty years later. This should be a lesson to filmmakers today, especially with the cheaper digital cameras and editing equipment at their disposal. You need only guts to make films,