

American dream poses narrative form

Werner Herzog's newest film, *Stroszek*, is the third West German film to open in Eugene in the past two weeks. As a result of this influx, local filmgoers find themselves in the unaccustomed position of seeing foreign films while they are still current. The chance to see what Herzog is doing in the present, rather than what he has done in the recent past, is particularly interesting since his filmmaking style is apparently undergoing a transition.

Herzog's previous work has reflected a far greater interest in documentary than narrative forms. The sublime *Fata Morgana*, the wonderfully perverse *Even Dwarfs Started Small*, and several Herzog shorts have clearly come from the documentary tradition. Even more recent, ostensibly narrative films like *Aguirre* and *Kasper Hauser* have had a kind of documentary feel to them (c.f. the only half-mocking "case history" conclusion of *Kasper*).

Stroszek is a decisive move to-

ward the so-called narrative mainstream: German ex-con Bruno Stroszek — played by a schizophrenic actor named Bruno S. (who also played Kasper Hauser) joins with two friends and goes to Wisconsin to pursue the American dream. The group gradually disintegrates, Bruno's mobile home is repossessed, and he takes to the road.

That story may not sound interesting or original, but Herzog's treatment of it is fresh and inventive. Despite the change in cinematic form, Herzog remains primarily concerned with how mankind can best confront a universe that is indifferent or actively hostile to human aspirations. From the opening shot of *Stroszek*, of the bars of a prison, the objects that express that hostility are frequently man-made. The final image, of the cosmic stupidity of a dancing chicken, tightly framed by a window and bathed in the same orange light used in the early prison sequence, suggests that futility is, however, universal.

Stroszek is consistently conscious of its context in the contemporary cinema, borrowing from Fassbinder, (a courtyard sequence from *The Merchant of Four Seasons*) and Godard. *Stroszek*'s shots of cafe life, and its sense that the dreams society

of cosmic indifference, Herzog is more interested in the shape and nature of that indifference. Huston's best characters are so vivid that they tend to overwhelm, at least in emotional weight, the director's landscapes. In Herzog, however, images are invariably

foreclosing banker are at once bitter and funny; the man's willingness to continue talking English to Bruno, who speaks only German, is more revealing. Herzog consistently uses various forms of non-communication to tell his story (*Kasper Hauser*'s narrator refers to "the terrible screaming that men call silence"). Bruno is mute through much of the final third of *Stroszek*, and language consistently isolates him, and his elderly friend, from their surroundings, particularly after the more practical Eva, their translator/mediator, abandons them.

The film's sense of futility becomes almost palpable after Bruno's house and television are sold at an auction. Even when he and his friend go to rob a bank, they find it closed. They shift their attentions to a nearby barber shop, and there, at least, the old man's gun surmounts the language barrier. Bruno's "getaway," particularly a brilliant series of shots of his truck moving down a highway or into a fog bank, as if in a quest for a place in the landscape, is equally futile. Finally, his truck malfunctions and Bruno, in resignation, orchestrates a series of kinetic monuments to futility. If a character like Bruno cannot prevail, he can, at least, have the last laugh.



By DAVID COURSEN

offers its members are unworthy of the human spirit, are clearly indebted to Godard.

Herzog's closest kinship, however, is to the great John Huston, with whom he shares a continuing awareness of human folly. With *Stroszek*, the connection becomes explicit with a pair of shots of Bruno entering a bar that directly refers to a comparable sequence in Huston's *Fat City*. Further, *Stroszek*'s basic story, of a group of people pursuing a common quest that goes sour, could easily be applied to any of two dozen Huston films.

A key difference between the two, however, is that, while Huston focuses on how people accommodate themselves to the fact

more expressive than characters. If I have a quibble with *Stroszek*, it is for the way it stays so remote from its characters, particularly Eva, Bruno's sometime roommate.

Herzog's sense of character and narration may be fallible, but his gift for finding or creating expressive images is one of the delights of the contemporary cinema. The installation of a mobile home on a piece of vacant land is wryly humorous; the subsequent departure of the home, leaving *Stroszek* standing alone to contemplate his solitude, summarizes the emotional content of the entire film. The simultaneously owlish and angular features and the television-pitchman voice of a

HARMONIES

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"But I don't listen to the lyrics in music like that. In barber shop singing, I do. They tell a story. They're simple. You can always hear what they are."

But in the final analysis, it's the harmonies that Knight likes, those moments when the four voices take off from the stage and ricochet off the back wall.

contest sometime when the whole audience consists of barber shop quartet members, and they have an audience sing-a-long that everybody knows. One thousand people. Boy, it gives you enough goose bumps to knock your shirt off."

As he talks, his voice becomes excited and a spark catches in the corners of his eyes.

It lasts for only a moment. But it's long enough to tell. In slacks and a windbreaker, he's as much a barber shop singer as Bob Hodge on stage in his best.

The man shakes hands, then turns and goes back into the dressing room. A last chord floats by before the hallway is quiet again.

By Eric Maloney

Cover drawing by Deborah Shane



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