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Herzog oversteps limits, but reaches for greatness

Werner Herzog, arguably the greatest director of his generation, seems to thrive on risks, artistic and personal. *Heart of Glass*, showing through Tuesday at Cinema 7, may be his most ambitious, stylized, and explicitly allegorical film to date.

Herzog has a genius's full quota of excesses and, occasionally, inevitably, he miscalculates, overstepping his limitations without expanding or transcending them. *Heart of Glass*, a seriously flawed film, even, in conventional terms, probably a failure, still reaches close to greatness.

Herzog's direction is so instinctive that the detached language of criticism is not always equal to suggesting the power and resonance of his most memorable sequences. The opening of *Heart of Glass* may be the best work Herzog has yet done; its images — cows grazing in early morning mist while a nearby man sits lost in thought — water cascading over a falls (shown through a gauze filter) — fuse poetically into an overwhelming — and indescribable — visionary experience. This sequence has the same kind of lyrical intensity that characterizes the greatest moments in the cinema.

Heart's ending (complete with another of Herzog's homages to Huston, a shot of oarsmen reminiscent of *Moby Dick*), almost as evocative, somehow lacks the emotional power of the opening.

One of the oddities of the film is the way these sequences seem curiously unconnected, aesthetically or narratively, to the story they surround. Somewhere in *Heart of Glass* there is a story, but its logic is so murky that it's almost impossible to find.

Herzog's characters are often, as here, questing for something. Usually, though, the metaphysical dimensions of their quests are suggested in mundane activities.

As a dwarf tries to climb onto a bed where an eager woman awaits him (*Even Dwarfs Started Small*), or a trio of Germans tries to find a home in Wisconsin

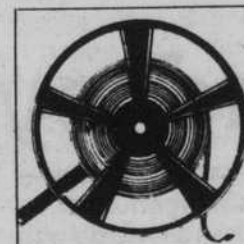
(*Stroszek*), their frustrations and failures gradually come to seem universal; the "meaning" emerges from the material.

In *Heart*, though, the characters are trying to recover a lost formula for making beautiful glass, and their efforts are presented in such symbolic terms that it's obvious what they're really after is something big, like "the meaning of life." In case anyone misses this, a "prophet" wanders through the film uttering profundities and even, in one ponderous scene, predicting World War One and the rise of Hitler in heavily-handedly symbolic terms. If he were wearing pancake make-up and black robes and carrying a chess board, he might easily be

all the acting to a monotone, like the film's brooding colors. Thus there is very little of the glorious, occasionally sublime nuttiness that makes the best of Herzog's oddball characters so vivid and unforgettable.

Where there is no room for spontaneous craziness, there can also be few traces of Herzog's marvelous sense of humor; here, only a scene where a woman, a dog, a pitchfork and two dead men interact hilariously, and later, a surreal moment of "bear rassling" hint at how funny Herzog can be.

None of this is quite as damning as it sounds. *Heart of Glass* effectively establishes a gloomy mood that accelerates into desperation. But there is something



By DAVID COURSEN

Hearts of Glass

mistaken for a refugee from *The Seventh Seal*.

In virtually all of his previous films, Herzog has shown a profound grasp of the limitations of verbal communication. Here, though, aside from a hauntingly beautiful glass-blowing sequence, there are words — usually of the symbolically "meaningful" variety — inflating the pretensions of nearly every scene. An unfortunate by-product of this is that Herzog's wonderful ear for selecting soundtrack music is here shamefully underutilized.

Equally perplexing is the film's wooden, stilted, mechanical acting style. Herzog reportedly placed the entire cast under hypnosis during the filming, and nearly all the action seems to be in slow motion. This kind of manipulation, so far removed from the naturalness of Herzog's handling of his documentary subjects, drains the characters of their vitality and spontaneity and reduces

perverse and almost self-destructive in Herzog's choosing to make such a film so far removed from many of the things he does best.

In fact, his extraordinary landscapes, and his explicit revulsion at what human actions often do to mar their natural beauty (c.f. *Fata Morgana*, *Stroszek*, et al) suggest a sensibility that might have ethical reservations about the manipulative methods used in making *Heart*. In any case, in attempting to construct, rather than discover, images and meaning, Herzog has seriously overreached himself.

La Soufriere, a short film about a volcanic explosion that never occurred, wherein Herzog and friends risk their lives to make a film, is an appropriate co-feature for *Heart of Glass*. The two films together suggest a mania for the death-defying and the self-destructive that is latent in the rest of the director's work. It is also significant that, with *La Soufriere*, Herzog's instincts were right and out of his adventures came a film of strange, eerily beautiful shots of a deserted city and a smoking volcano together awaiting the non-arrival of an apocalypse.

Herzog is a youthful artist, restless, probing, experimenting, and above all, unafraid to take chances. *Heart of Glass* dares so much that there is something heroic even in its relative failure.

Hear and Now is edited by Eric Maloney and Jerril Nilson. All contributions are welcome, but should be submitted one week prior to the event or on the Monday prior to expected publication. All contributions to Out and About MUST be submitted the Friday before publication.

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