

# Werner Herzog and the Aesthetics of the Grotesque

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## ***EVEN DWARFS STARTED SMALL: WERNER HERZOG AND THE AESTHETICS OF THE GROTESQUE***

### **Introduction**

Rarely in modern cinema has a film fully engaged with the ribald grotesquery and carnival aesthetics of bygone theatre and literature. Perhaps, as was the case in the grotesque theatre, audiences are reluctant to identify with characters and plots wrought with fundamental contradictions and mythical intellectuality. It seems that to explore the grotesque in the "modern" cinema, the director must stand outside of mainstream national and ideological consciousness. It is fitting then, that Werner Herzog would fully engage with the grotesque aesthetic and the mystical history it entails. Herzog, the "dreamer of new dreams, teller of new truths, and seeker of new images," working both within and outside of the auspices of the New German Cinema movement, visualizes for his audiences a complex amalgam of history, mythology, and ideology.<sup>(1)</sup> He, in creating what is best described as a cinema fully conscious of the demands of the present while engaging the brutalities and histories (including art, theatre, mythology, and national/political events) of the past, creates not new images of new events, but rather images that represent the ambiguous realities of past and present life in an unambiguous context. His images are violent and passive; simple and complex; rational and mystical; and above all, grotesque and real.

*Auch Zwerge haben klein angefangen* (*Even Dwarfs Started Small*, Werner Herzog, 1970) is an intellectual's nightmare; it is a film deeply wrapped in the ambiguous context of Rabelais' grotesque, while presenting a reality that comments on the impossibility of an escape from the jaded non-experience of modern life. While Herzog has consistently deplored and derided attempts to interpret his films, repeatedly asking his audiences for a purely corporeal, anti-intellectual approach to his films, it is clear that this film is tied to multiple intellectual, historical and mythical contexts that require decoding.<sup>(2)</sup> These contexts transcend any purely corporeal experience with the film. For the engaged viewer (one that is clearly outside of mainstream consciousness) this film offers a rare treat: giving oneself over to the complex tapestries of the real and the surreal presented within the diegesis, the ideal spectator becomes embroiled in Herzog's world where identification between the isolated outsiders of his films, the filmmaker himself, and the willing audience merge. Herzog has said, "Film is not the art of scholars but of illiterates. And film culture is not analysis, it is agitation of the mind. Movies come from the country fair and circus, not from art and academicism."<sup>(3)</sup> That said, it is clear that any inquiry into Herzog's films must begin by moving beyond the filmmaker's notion of the ideal spectator. To decode the layers of meaning in *Even Dwarfs Started Small* suggests that there is meaning beyond the ephemeral; situating the film within larger philosophical, aesthetic, and historical contexts reveals a deeper engagement with the grotesque and tragicomic traditions of theatre and art than Herzog would have us believe.

An ad caveat is necessary here: Herzog has, since his filmmaking career began in 1962 with the short film *Herakles*, resisted the critical mainstream's attempts to legitimize his filmmaking by seeking meaning outside of subconscious experiential reality. Perhaps as a result, critics have continuously been baffled by Herzog's opus, citing the illusory impression of meaning and the unattainable and unexplainable nature of his images that resist rational analysis. However, it will become clear through this analysis that Herzog's mystics are clearly and inextricably linked to historical and modern German consciousness. This film engages with a now defunct and obscure artistic tradition: the grotesque and the tragicomic. Here is the crux of the problem: how can one contextualize a film that is on some level made out of its context? If, as Herzog has repeatedly maintained, he is a director entrenched in a late medieval mindset, both in sensibility and his sense of film-as-craft, than we should not negate this context by citing his contemporary historical consciousness and position within the New German Cinema.<sup>(4)</sup> He is, it will become clear, a director firmly and indelibly linked to the medieval grotesque, working within the most modernist and vibrant art of the twentieth century. This contradiction is one that has escaped critical attention, and while there will be some discussion of the

contextual influence of New German (post-War) consciousness in relation to *Even Dwarfs Started Small* and the implicit allegorical commentary on present reality, it will by no means subsume the intellectual and mystical depiction of medieval grotesquery.

### The Grotesque Dwarfs

Werner Herzog has posited, "*Even Dwarfs Started Small* is perhaps the best or the strongest [film I've made], in which there is the most power of all my films."<sup>(5)</sup> The power of the film lies in the links to the grotesque traditions of Rabelais, and the medieval carnival atmosphere that begets intellectual meaning. Bakhtin, in his discussion of Rabelais' interpreters, discusses the displeasure involved for the viewer in the impossible nature of images.<sup>(6)</sup> The dwarfs of Herzog's film represent this very incongruity; they are the point of reality's exaggeration, a negative phenomenon that "should not exist." However, Herzog realizes this and revels in the very reality of the dwarfs; they are repeatedly criticized not for being dwarfs, but for being human. Their extreme, fantastic character is not a result of their dwarf status, but rather a direct corollary to the oppressive nature of contemporary social order. Herzog's satire is here a link to Rabelais; the critique is simultaneously ambivalent and pointed, negating the "entire order of life (including the prevailing truth)," promising a rebirth that will not occur.<sup>(7)</sup> Herzog's dwarfs are the lynchpin for the grotesque, and it is only through a close examination of their ties to Rabelais that the true complexity of their meaning becomes apparent.

*Even Dwarfs Started Small* begins with an interrogation of a dwarf involved in a rebellion that has recently ensued at an institution meant to house these "societal misfits." The structure of this interrogation is quite simple; as the dwarf is asked to name the participants of the rebellion (to which he refuses, as Herzog refuses to name all but three of the characters of the film), he is asked to hold up a placard with a serial number for the mug shots being taken. The camera, incidentally, is never seen and is assumed to be the filmic camera, insinuating the interrogative nature of the events to follow. Herzog in this very brief opening sequence calls attention to the apparatus of the film, filmmaking itself (through direct address), and insinuates that this film, told in what amounts to an hour and a half flashback, will be a complex investigation of life as a serial number and social outsider. Herzog's dwarfs stand as symbols of the nature of the filmmaking process for the German director in post-War contexts, the specific filmmaker, the audience as outsider, and negates their intellectual positions by insinuating a historical link to the lower stratum. Bakhtin, in his discussion of Rabelais' gargantuan, discusses the pilgrims in relation to their mythic captor as "tiny, pitiful figures, which can be swallowed down unnoticed in salad and almost drowned in urine."<sup>(8)</sup>

The pilgrims are linked indelibly to the lower stratum of the gargantuan; they are "dwarfed" by the disproportionate phallus and tidal ebbs and flows of urine. Herzog associates the dwarf to these pilgrims, undeniably linked to the lower stratum (as we will see), but more explicitly to the satirical critique that we are all his dwarfs who are tiny, pitiful figures. Rabelais' pilgrims are proportionately tiny within the gargantuan, and it is clear that the dwarfs in the film are equally disproportionate simply due to their exaggerated surroundings: the chair, the bed, the doorknob, all become horrific and daunting objects, unattainable and unusable in conventional ways by the characters throughout the film. Herzog furthers the association with the giant by casting dwarfs for every part in the film, simply linking dwarfs to the historical association with the giants of carnivals and fairs.<sup>(9)</sup> These dwarfs (historically) represent the most typical of grotesque figures. The historical context then, is clear: Herzog's dwarfs are ambiguous representatives of humanity (in all of its cruelty), while simultaneously linked to Pantagruel's pygmies, born of the flatus, and tied to the lower stratum.

The dwarfs are categorized through two locales: inside the institution, and outside in the compound. The interior dwarfs consist of Pepe, the dwarf tied to a chair and held captive, and the instructor. The exterior dwarfs are a group of men and women who alternate between yelling at the instructor and making attempts to free Pepe, and partaking in activities clearly linked to the carnival grotesque (including teasing and harassing two blind dwarfs). Pepe is the link to the exterior aesthetic; he says nothing throughout the film, only laughing at the instructor while leaning back in his chair with his mouth agape. In reference to Pantagruel and Gargantua, Bakhtin relates the open mouth with the banquet and the grotesque; "All these feats are related to sucking, devouring, swallowing, tearing to pieces. We see the gaping mouth, the protruding tongue, the teeth, the gullet, the udder, and the stomach."<sup>(10)</sup> The laughing dwarf finds its echo on the outside in the person of Hombre, the smallest of the dwarfs, who finds everything immensely

funny. Bakhtin: "The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss."<sup>(11)</sup> The grotesque aesthetic here associates the laugh with madness and the dismembered body, and as the instructor continually makes bodily threats against Pepe, this relationship is secured.

The exterior dwarfs find an immense pleasure in their debauch behaviour. They are consistently attracted to actions and events that will create any form of amusement, not only linking them to the carnival, but to the filmic audience. "The comic performers of the marketplace were an important source of the grotesque image of the body."<sup>(12)</sup> To wit: it is clear that the laughing dwarfs create an ambiguous link to the traditions of grotesque carnival, while encouraging (on some level) an equivalent reaction from the audience. Interestingly, it seems that when the dwarfs are themselves laughing, especially in Hombre's case, the events unfolding are more tragic than humorous; conversely, if the dwarfs are not laughing, the actions connote an at times extremely humorous situation. This inversion creates juxtapositions threatening the comfortable bounds of audience engagement. For example, shortly after the opening interrogation sequence, the flashback begins with a long shot and pan of the landscape followed by an extended sequence whereby Territory (the largest of the dwarfs) is riding a motorcycle and chasing another dwarf. While the remaining dwarfs dart out of the way, they laugh continually. This sequence asks the audience to challenge the assumption that the dwarf community is homogenous and agreeable; it is discriminating and cruel, much like larger society. In a scene shortly thereafter, a woman dwarf is knocking on the door to the institution, asking for her shoe back. The scene plays out in an undeniably funny manner; as she continues to knock, there is no response, and no peripheral laughter, and she complains softly that her shoe is inside and she would like it back. Rabelais' wisdom-madness ambivalence is played out through this dynamic, and the audience is thrown headlong into the resulting grotesque.<sup>(13)</sup>

The lower stratum is made explicit by the portrayal of Herzog's dwarfs. There are, by my count, six separate references in the film to shit, and the act of soiling oneself. Beyond this rather obvious play with the grotesque, there is considerable attention paid to sex acts and sexuality. The first example comes as the instructor (on the roof top - clearly separate from the "lower" dwarfs) pleads for the end of the revolution, and a sensible resolution to the problems. He threatens to call the police (authority) while beginning his series of threats to Pepe (voiced to the his comrades). The exterior dwarfs laugh uproariously at the threats, claiming that they went into the institution, and also into a whorehouse. Later in the film, as Territory is looking at a picture of a woman, he says, "Let's get some women" two times. The group decides that it would be better to make Hombre "marry" the shoeless woman dwarf (with "marry" a clear colloquialism for sexual intercourse). The two are forced into an instructor's bedroom, with the remaining group outside the door. The woman climbs up on the bed; after several attempts to escape, Hombre makes several half-hearted tries at getting on the bed. Again, there is no laughter from outside sources, while this extremely humorous material unfolds onscreen. Intermittently, the remaining dwarfs crack the door, peak in, and giggle at the lack of events in the bedroom. It is clear that these instances are separate from Hombre's actions, and can be read as ambiguous (humorous and disconcerting). The dwarfs are stacked in a classical "peeping" totem position, and as they laugh, we are encouraged to laugh at them, while understanding the pointlessness of Hombre's attempts at sexual activity. It seems that the promise of sex, its discussion, and obsession with nude photos, must replace the actual act in this filmic world. If the bed is the absurd, out of proportion prop it seems, than the grotesque link to the lower stratum must be assumed in the wishful connotations of the dwarfs' attempts to fulfill it.

The exterior dwarfs are also inextricably linked to the grotesque carnival banquet through food. There is an extended banquet sequence towards the end of the film, as a truck (which has been hot-wired by Territory) circles in the foreground. A woman dwarf sits along a wall with a carton of eggs, breaking them aimlessly on the ground. Another group of dwarfs prepare the banquet at a table in the courtyard, complaining about the lack of food offered during their normal lives (pre-revolution). As the noodles are placed on the table, the group instantaneously grabs at them and begins hurling them at various targets. While this scene ensues, others break pottery; still others break dinner plates, tossing them at the still circling truck in the courtyard. Territory has found a tube of something (possibly paint, or icing?), and is holding it at crotch level, squeezing it repeatedly. The result is a comic display so linked to overt grotesquery that to read it otherwise would be foolhardy. However, due to the multiple associations with the grotesque (both urine and semen), it more

specifically stands as the unambiguous signifier of the carnival aesthetic created here by Herzog.

The grotesquery continues with the depiction and harassment of the two blind dwarfs. Bakhtin clearly (and correctly) links the cosmic forces of nature to the depiction of the grotesque body, and states that the nose and mouth play the most important facial function in its portrayal. He argues that the eyes have no part in the cosmic images, expressing self-sufficient individuality outside the realm of the grotesque. However, the grotesque is interested explicitly in the bulging, protruding eyes and their desire to transgress the limits of the body.<sup>(14)</sup> Herzog's two blind dwarfs are clearly linked to this aesthetic. Their goggles, covering their functionless eyes, bulge forth from their heads, linking them to Rabelais and the grotesque. Furthermore, Bakhtin points out that the context in which Rabelais writes links the grotesque to the actual occurrences of mockery taking place in society. The theme of abuse, he argues, is "almost entirely bodily and grotesque."<sup>(15)</sup> Herzog's blind dwarfs are constantly harassed and berated by their fellow inmates. They are initially shown following a rope line via use of a walking/defence stick, in search of water (the thematic significance of the water will be discussed in the following section). Shortly thereafter, the blind are again associated with water, as they fill their jugs and begin playing a ball game in the courtyard. Other dwarfs sneak up, quietly so as not to be noticed, and steal the ball from the blind dwarfs. Reacting to the ruse, the blind pair swing their sticks wildly, barely out of range of their tormentors as well as (precariously) each other. Two further incidents include the harassment of the blind. One of the blind is separated from his brethren, without his walking/defence stick. The other dwarfs spot him along a wall, and immediately run over and begin pummeling him senselessly. The final harassment finds the two blind dwarfs together again, in their nook of the compound as the truck circles aimlessly just off screen. They are preparing what looks to be a meal; the other dwarfs again sneak up on them, distracting them long enough to steal their pet monkey. Clearly, the blind are the liminal case of Herzog's grotesque; their eye goggles connote fluidity with their surroundings, insinuating a more definitive (than their enemies) link to the cosmic universal discussed by Bakhtin. Their torment is physical and located securely within the grotesque.

### Landscapes and Animals

Herzog's presentation of this filmic world is by no means reflective of a classical continuity style. He constantly challenges the viewer to question their level of identification with the dwarfs, obfuscating sympathetic engagement through an ambiguous mixture of wide-angle long shots of the treacherous volcanic terrain and long takes of animal behaviour. The terrain, we will see, is even more explicitly tied to Rabelais' grotesque and the stories of the Gargantua than are the dwarfs. Nature is Herzog's greatest ally; he utilizes pans, long shots, and long takes to linger on its cosmic beauty, letting the viewer become comfortable with the image and then challenging that comfort level through the duration of the shot. This instability within the image of the landscape is parlayed into, and mirrored by, a continuous shifting of viewer identification with the dwarfs. We simply cannot avoid the fact that they are representatively human, with all the traits therein, but we also cannot dismiss the physical oddity of their personages and the grotesquery of their actions. We can align ourselves with them, but it is a tenuous identification, due to their context within a nightmarish reality. This reality is tied explicitly to the forbidding landscape of lava beds, mountains, pits, and cacti. The dwarfs are joined in this dream world by equally horrific animals, and are aligned in a classically Rabelaisian sense to them.

Herzog's opening to *Even Dwarfs Started Small* initiates the importance of the mystic landscape. Intercut with the opening interrogation is a long take of the surrounding terrain. The camera holds on the daunting mountains and black pocked earth of the volcanic fields before panning to include the entire enormity of the surroundings in a 360-degree perspective. The shot instantly connotes a pensive and investigative stance taken by the filmmaker towards the landscape, and because it is so completely linked to the surrounding shots (of the interrogation and of a chicken cannibalistically pecking at a dead bird), it seems also explicitly linked to the grotesque. However, the collusion does not stop there. The grotesque landscape permeates throughout the film, in an almost didactic manner; the next sequence of landscape shots begins with a long shot of open vistas, followed by a pan that includes a tree looming in the foreground, essentially closing the space and creating a claustrophobic mise-en-scene. The enormity of the landscape in these sequences is undercut by this technique, and is echoed by the very enormity of the images in conjunction with the minutia of the dwarfs' physicality. To wit: the next shot of the surrounding mountains composes the institution in the centre of the frame in an extreme long shot; the buildings, along with their inhabitants are "dwarfed."

In the aforementioned scene with Territory and the motorcycle chase, the victim of the attack seeks shelter in the volcanic fields. While they hardly provide a comfortable respite from the onslaught, this sequence initiates the grotesque link to the natural world.<sup>(16)</sup> In the first confrontation between the dwarfs and the "instructor," the dwarfs complain about their daily tasks; because they are "the caretakers of nature" they seem to control its destiny. Throughout the film, there will be numerous references to this intricate relationship; the dwarfs are cosmic, comic, tragic, and universal. They are continually linked to earth, water, fire, and air, as we shall see.<sup>(17)</sup> The first instance of the interconnectivity between dwarf and the cosmos is the resulting attack on the principle's favourite palm tree. The tree sits atop a nearby hill, and the dwarfs commence knocking it down by lighting a fire at its base, and pulling in unison to topple the sign of their oppression. The blind dwarfs, meanwhile, are associated explicitly with the water sign, as their activities seem consistently linked to obtaining water from the compound well.

The earth is a major thematic motif throughout the film, as the imposing landscape looms in the near distance. However, there are two specific instances that relate directly to Rabelais; the first involves the truck. As it aimlessly circles the compound, its tires wear down the earth into a circular pattern. The dwarfs, led by Territory, engage in a game of taunt and play; they hook a rug to the back door of the truck, riding the rug along the ground in a comical display of carnival antics. The second sequence takes place shortly after the rug scene, and due to their proximity within the narrative order, they seem linked. The group has decided to explore their freedom by traversing into the lava fields, with various members strewn between the foreground (Hombre) and the background (the shoeless dwarf, and subject of the "marriage" encounter). Depicted via a long shot, the characters are again "dwarfed" by a landscape of black lava rock.

In discussing the qualities of the landscape in relation to the grotesque body, Bakhtin interprets Rabelais and posits that the landscape is the extension of the bodily plane; a surface that is permeable, consisting of holes, depths and convexities relate directly to the body's penetrable orifices and therefore to the quintessential grotesque. However, Herzog's natural world is simply not as pure and accessible as the medieval landscape for the body - while the dwarfs are able to explore its possibilities, they are held in by the aforementioned imposing and claustrophobic nature of the immensity, unable to see hope in escape to a land without destinations outside the purview of their myopic vision. Simply, they can merge with the natural phenomena in their vicinity, but are unable to experience the universal connectivity of the entire natural world order. It should also be noted the links to Rabelais' Gargantua story present in this mystical landscape. The mountains, volcanic and imposing, seem indelibly tied to the creation myths in Rabelais' story, with the volcanic fields a result of the gastrointestinal maladies endured and expelled by the giant. The links go further to include an enormous, seemingly bottomless pit utilized by the group to dispose of their hot-wired truck. The dwarfs simply push the truck into the cavernous hole, and as it completely disappears, one cannot help but intuit the sacrificial nature of the images. The dwarfs have expelled their modern waste into a pre-modern natural hole.

Animals play a central role in the grotesque in *Even Dwarfs Started Small*. As Bakhtin points out in his discussion of Schneegans in relation to Rabelais, "the combination of human and animal traits is, as we know, one of the most ancient grotesque forms."<sup>(18)</sup> Chickens are the horrific signifier of the grotesque in Herzog's world, at once cannibalistic and natural, symbolizing humanity as their activities are interspersed with the activities of the dwarfs. Werner Herzog has what might best be called a phobia and fascination with chickens. He has explored them throughout his opus (most notably here and in *Stroszek*, 1977, and *Signs of Life*, 1967). Herzog takes an extremely formalistic approach to these sequences; he combines shots of the dwarfs, the chickens, and the landscapes in this order three times during the film. This structure allows a simple juxtaposition of images to create a larger meaning, aligning the human (dwarfs) with the animal (the chickens) along with the landscape. The physical boundaries blur, leaving a fluid liminal ambiguity reminiscent of the grotesque. Chickens appear not only in this formulaic structure, however; they seem to invade the narrative at all points of conflict and demonstrate Herzog's fascination cum obsession. An attacking chicken, pecking at a lame bird attempting an escape, is followed by a third chicken that seems equally cannibalistic. The fowl continue to display the grotesque; another chicken prances around the courtyard with a dead mouse in its beak, avoiding the other birds' attempts to steal the prize. The dwarfs further the association between human and animal, becoming involved with the "chicken motif" through a cockfight held just prior to the mock religious ceremony. It becomes apparent that Herzog is obsessed

not only with the chickens, and their horrifying behaviour, but also with the worst qualities of humanity mirrored in the animal kingdom.

The pig is the next link to the grotesque in the film. The dwarfs, in the first confrontation with the "instructor" on the roof, claim the instructor is a pig, and that they are calves. While this statement invokes the quickly blurring line between humanity and animality, it will be expounded upon throughout the film. The pig is present in the courtyard in physical form, representing the physical link to life and death so prevalent in the grotesque of Rabelais. The large sow has recently had piglets, and they continue to suckle throughout most of the film (invoking birth, and life), until the mother pig is killed by two dwarfs in an off screen incident. The remaining dwarfs run to see the results of the murder, and nowhere in a film of any era is the link to the grotesque more apparent: the piglets continue to suckle at the teats of their dead mother. The circle of life and death is obvious, disturbing, and of course grotesque (even the dwarfs who have gathered around are silent at this horrific scene). Ad caveat: the pig is undoubtedly the animal most linked to the lower stratum; it wallows in its own fecal matter, eats with relentless aggression, and is the culmination of Herzog's grotesque aesthetic.

Briefly, let us consider the role of the monkey and bugs in Herzog's animal kingdom. The monkey, as was noted above, is the pet of the two blind dwarfs, stolen for some unknown purpose by their tormentors. Herzog's commentary on the links between the human and animal becomes its most explicit in this sequence. The dwarfs have stolen the monkey in order to crucify him! They place the monkey on a makeshift cross, and parade him through the courtyard under the haze of smoke billowing from the recently afire potted plants. The religious symbolism is rampant and somewhat troubling in this scene, as Territory struts proudly with his victim. Insects also play a prominent role in the link between humanity and animal worlds. One of the dwarfs has a collection of insects, which she keeps in a box. The insects are dressed in tiny outfits, giving them human characteristics. The disparate bugs are made up to compose a wedding party, complete with bride and groom (and "reserves"). There is a brief discussion between Hombre and the woman regarding the status of the beetle, and its awareness of a heaven. Herzog here is manipulating the insects into human characteristics, just as the humans are implicitly linked to animal brutality and the grotesque. The animal world, it seems, is complete in its assimilation of humanity, down to the most sacred religious and ceremonial elements.

### **Tragicomedy and Historical Contexts**

It is apparent from the above discussion that Herzog is firmly entrenched within a medieval exploration of the grotesque. However, there is also a complex amalgam of genres and historical contexts being laid bare by *Even Dwarfs Started Small*. The film blends tragicomedy in relation to seventeenth-century European theatre with Herzog's modern historical context as a New German director par excellence. While it is again a tenuous project to relate a "modern" filmmaker (notwithstanding the prior argument) to a historical theatrical movement, it is apparent that Herzog has a clear understanding of the generic conventions of the seventeenth century. He consistently plays with a challenging tapestry of references that belie his "anti-intellectual" aesthetic. For an intellectually astute audience, Herzog's cinema is a veritable game of referents and signifiers. To discuss the "modern" tragicomic (as opposed to its historical placement in antiquity) in relation to this film is to focus on the tenets of the theatrical play engaged by Herzog. It should also be noted that while the arguments being made in relation to the tragicomic and the grotesque would seem to preclude an assimilation of New German concerns with the recent (twentieth century) history of Germany, this is not the case. Herzog is not a director outside of his historical context; rather, he is able to draw upon movements and traditions of the past to create a contemporary commentary (albeit in allegorical form) on the status of filmmaking and life in a post-Holocaust Germany.

The tragicomedy tradition reached its peak in the seventeenth century. Combining aspects of the romantic comedy and the melodrama, its narrative often takes the audience to faraway foreign territories, taxing identification by juxtaposing a romantic interest with far-fetched happenings ranging from the absurd to the serious. The plot is invariably complex, sometimes non-linear, and its most obvious feature is the manipulation of the happy ending. To wit: tension builds for the entire duration of the story, only to be undercut by a reversal of fortune at the end, suggesting an inversion of expectations and a reversal of classical story arcs. This tradition became commonplace to the extent that the audience came to expect the ending, troubling their level of identification with the preceding material (everything would be potentially

tragic). Essentially, the tragicomedy takes the aspects of tragedy that connote danger, verisimilar plots, and pleasure without sadness. Conversely, the tragicomedy draws upon comedy for a restrained laughter, "feigned difficulty," and the comic ordering of social power. This social power, or accepted norm, is in conflict with the protagonist of the tragicomic, as he is with comedy and tragedy. What makes him/her unique however, is the status as an outsider, a social misfit completely incongruous with his context, his destiny, and the universal order of the cosmos. What separates the tragicomic from its roots then, is the hopelessness and meaninglessness of the possibility of success and release from oppression; heroes die unsung deaths, unheralded, standing as reproaches and challenges to society and to the spectator's comfortable position within it. The form of this challenge invariably shifts throughout the story from the tragic to the comic and back again, blurring the lines of distinction in order to punctuate the critique. The modern tragicomedy is therefore firmly within the realm of metaphysical commentary, dealing with social and religious relics, challenged through an amalgamation of styles and resulting in the complexity of an ambiguous "happy" ending. <sup>(19)</sup>

Herzog's *Even Dwarfs Started Small* seems to fit rather nicely within each of these generic traditions. His story takes place in a far-off land of volcanoes and mystical dwarfs, and includes a failed romantic encounter. The tone constantly shifts from the absurd to the serious, from laughter to shock and dismay. The "instructor" running through the compound, into an open field and confronting a tree branch, insisting that it lower its arm, is followed closely by Hombre laughing at a camel unable to rise or sit from a kneeling position. The laughing Hombre concludes the film, and again we are challenged by the events to read the scene as tragic (as I argue is valid), or comedic (since after all Hombre finds the camel amazingly humorous). Herzog's characters are not sympathetic to the extent that we can completely identify with them, or mourn their insanity at film's end. Our restrained laughter is present throughout the film, while we grapple with not only the continually grotesque protagonists, but also the fact that their ambiguity as humans and dwarfs places them (and us) outside of social norms. Herzog is obviously challenging the comfort level of the audience in *Even Dwarfs Started Small*, presenting a larger social critique that is at once contemporary, metaphysical, and timeless.

Werner Herzog is a director firmly entrenched within the historic traditions discussed above and the mythical appropriation of their styles. Critics have continually presented the argument that he stands outside of his own history, linked only by his nationality to the New German movement and its historical affiliation with the German filmic past. This is clearly not the case. Herzog, like Rabelais, is completely aware of his contemporary historical context; while Rabelais constructs the grotesque conception of the body in a tapestry of cosmic proportions with the aim of presenting a utopian dream of cultural renewal, Herzog constructs the same grotesque construction as a result of cultural desecration. Herzog, like all of the New German directors, is fully cognizant of the atrocities of the Holocaust and the resulting destruction of the cultural legacy of the Germanic people. Rabelais' giants become Herzog's dwarfs, crushed by the historical reality of genocide. The intellectuality of his material engagement of the past enables a biting social and cultural critique to go unnoticed, an inherent exoticism present that has traditionally been admired from afar.<sup>(20)</sup> Ironically, Herzog composes his films for the largest possible audience, often shooting in German and in English, in hopes of reaching the international market, specifically America.<sup>(21)</sup> Thomas Elsaesser has gone to the extreme position of claiming that *Even Dwarfs Started Small* is a way for Herzog to present his isolation from the New German Cinema following the 1968 Oberhausen Festival.<sup>(22)</sup> While Elsaesser correctly mentions the challenge to the German Left by combining political revolutionary material with radical subjectivity, he distorts the historical gravity of this film through this argument. Herzog repeatedly has told of his relationship with Lotte Eisner, and her importance to Germany's cinematic tradition. He calls the New German directors "orphans without fathers, only grandfathers" (Lang, Murnau, Pabst, et al.).<sup>(23)</sup> The point here is simply that, like Rabelais, Herzog was completely aware of the historical implications of his art, challenging his past by presenting a present that is at once difficult, universal, and grotesque.

## Conclusion

Bakhtin writes:

We must take into consideration the importance of cosmic terror, the fear of the immeasurable, the infinitely powerful. The starry sky, the gigantic material masses of the mountains, the sea, the cosmic upheavals, elemental catastrophes—these constitute the terror that pervades ancient mythologies, philosophies, the systems of image, and language itself with its semantics.<sup>(24)</sup>

Werner Herzog's film *Even Dwarfs Started Small* is at once a biting critique of contemporary existence and an adaptation of historical genres. Revelling in the grotesque of Rabelais and the tragicomic of the seventeenth century, he creates a film that has escaped close analysis until now. Herzog is a director who encourages this lack of critical attention through his distancing devices and ambiguous commentary, challenging the intellect of his viewers through presentation of tropes long forgotten by the masses. The dwarfs of his film present grotesque links to the recent and distant past, while commenting on the effects of historical reality on the cosmic conscience. The Herzogian humour is never more apparent than in this complex film. Challenging assumptions of good taste, intellectual homogeneity, and simple solutions to cosmic problems, the film is an example of the potentiality of film in the modern era. Decoded and examined, it is apparent that Herzog stands alone as the sole director capable of recreating Rabelais in the modern world.

## Notes

1. Franklin, pg. 110.
2. See any number of Herzog interviews, specifically Lawrence O'Toole's article- interview "The Great Ecstasy of the Filmmaker Herzog," *Film Comment*, Nov-Dec 1979.
3. Franklin, p. 112.
4. Ibid., p. 112.
5. Ibid., p. 114.
6. Bakhtin, p. 305.
7. Ibid., p. 307.
8. Ibid., p. 312.
9. Ibid., p. 343.
10. Ibid., p. 317.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p. 352.
13. Ibid., p. 361.
14. Ibid., p. 316.
15. Ibid., p. 319.
16. Ibid., p. 318.
17. Ibid., pp. 318-323.
18. Ibid., p. 316.
19. See Guthke, pp. 1-120.
20. See Corrigan's *New German Film The Displaced Image*. p. 172.
21. See Corrigan's *The Films of Werner Herzog*, p. 137.
22. See Elsaesser, p. 157.
23. See Rentschler, p. 97.
24. Bakhtin, p. 335.



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