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German Masters: Riefenstahl, Herzog and Fassbinder

During its long, tumultuous history, Germany has managed to maintain its status as a strong creative force. In the realm of visual arts, German painters such as Albrecht Dürer, Casper David Friedrich, and Gerhard Richter have given their native country a spot on the global stage (Anirudh 1) Musically speaking, Germany has produced several classical music icons, namely Johann Sebastian Bach and Ludwig van Beethoven. Although these aforementioned mediums have a strong place in German history, it could be argued that the country's most successful artistic output of the past century is film. Germany has been a global leader in the medium since its inception and has tangibly altered the course of film history. This creative feat is all the more impressive when put into proper historical context. For a large majority of the silent film era, Germany was caught in the bindings of the First World War, yet they continued to produce groundbreaking work. By the time that "Talkie" era had begun in the late 1920's and early 1930's, Germany was laying the groundwork for World War II and quickly developed strong opposition. After six years of near constant bloodshed and ruin, Germany seemed to be permanently excommunicated from the global discussion in all capacities. However, despite the country's fragmented state and financial burden, it quickly rose from the ashes and flourished once again, particularly in regard to film. In

order to fully appreciate Germany's outstanding and unlikely success in film, it is important to understand the country's biggest filmmakers. By gaining an appreciation for these men and women and their work, one can gain an acute appreciation for this mysterious country and the timeless art it produces. Although there are many noteworthy filmmakers that could be studied with this focus, three of the biggest names include Leni Riefenstahl, Werner Herzog and Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

LENI RIEFENSTAHL

Despite the controversy surrounding her name, Leni Riefenstahl is arguably the biggest name in documentary filmmaking to come out of Germany. The fact that Riefenstahl's short career is as celebrated as it is in the cinematic community is a testament to her exceptional talent given her unfortunate connection to the Nazi party. The fact that her name is so closely aligned with history's most infamous group of supervillains is damning to say the least. Yet, her work lives on as a fascinating document and strong artistic effort. In fact, films such as *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia* are among the most famous in the genre's history. Both films are staples in film schools around the world and are heavily analyzed by film professionals. What makes these films special, apart from their historical significance, is Riefenstahl's ability to capture the emotional gravity of the events contained within.

The contemporary viewing experience of *Triumph of the Will* for example is full of conflicting emotions and reluctant empathy. On one hand, contemporary viewers are aware of the horrors committed by the Nazi party and the almost inconceivable level of

pain they inflicted. These egregious crimes against humanity are totally unforgivable and serve as an undeniable low point in human history. However, it becomes increasingly difficult to equate the horrific actions of the government with the actions of the somewhat innocent civilians. Although it is true that the German people championed this villainous regime at one time, their support is somewhat understandable when put into proper perspective. These were people at their most vulnerable and desperate after a devastating defeat in World War I and felt they were in need of strong leadership. They were frustrated with their current political situation and felt that this radical new party was a way out. Although this humanization does not absolve them of their gross misconduct, it does add a new, human layer to the historical narrative on Nazi Germany. The fact that Riefenstahl is able to humanize Germany during its darkest hour to contemporary audiences is proof of her undeniable talent for evoking emotion from her audience.

In *Triumph of the Will* specifically, Riefenstahl utilizes close zooms and quick cuts in order to accurately capture the excitement of Nazi parades in detail. This attention to detail allows viewers to process the visual stimuli in the same way that the people who lived it did. This unique approach to documentary filmmaking is groundbreaking in the sense that it documents more than just the events themselves, but the subjective implications of said events. The end result is a more complete documentation of the event itself and the experience of the people who felt it firsthand. Additionally, the subjective perspective in her films is fascinating in the sense that it is fixed in time. The perspectives shown in her films reflect that of a very specific time in a very specific

place that can be returned to as adequate portrayal of the past. Therefore, it is evident that Riefenstahl's acclaim as a German filmmaker is a result of her talent for documenting reality in its most comprehensive form.

WERNER HERZOG

Werner Herzog is another famous German documentary filmmaker but he has a strong background in fictional or narrative-driven dramas. Films such as *Aguirre: the Wrath of God* and *Woyzeck* have propelled his career with the likes of Klaus Kinski aboard his so-called cinematic ship. Herzog's fruitful yet tumultuous professional relationship with Kinski was famous for its stellar creative output and rocky personal implications. Regardless of the filmmaker's personal life, however, he has persevered and continues to be an active filmmaker in 2019. Although his filmography contains a fair amount of stylistic diversity in its several decade long development, Herzog's films are primarily known for certain characteristics. Namely, the director seems to like placing eccentric characters in extraneous situations and inserting visceral social commentary throughout the runtime of his films.

Herzog's famous 1972 work *Aguirre: the Wrath of God* is no exception to these trends as it contains the aforementioned characteristics in abundance. Although there are several eccentric characters in the film, the film's namesake Aguirre is the most outlandish character of them all. Aguirre, portrayed by the confrontational method actor Klaus Kinski, displays a consistently unhinged, cutthroat desire for wealth and power. Many equate this reckless, absolutist approach to leadership with that of fascist leaders

like Adolf Hitler. This is a particularly fascinating comparison given Herzog's German nationality and his well-known progressive stance in regard to politics. Although it may not have been a conscious goal, films like *Aguirre* that express criticism for the Nazi party help the public to separate the beliefs of Nazi Germany from post-war Germany. This is an important distinction to make in order to give contemporary Germany a chance to thrive in the global sphere without the harsh criticism and prejudice from the past.

With that being said, it is quite clear the film's pointed social commentary is primarily directed towards Spanish colonialism. This is evident in that the film's plot is based loosely upon a real Spanish expedition led by a man named Aguirre. In fact, in Patricio Boyer's article entitled "Fantasy and Imperial Discourse in Herzog's *Aguirre: The Wrath of God*," he argues "that *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* offers a vision of the conqueror that is a crucial signpost for contemporary understandings of sixteenth-century imperial praxis." (Boyer 2) He goes on to say that

"Rather than seeing the filmic text as wholly disconnected from the sixteenth-century events, I stress how film form captures the theoretical exigencies of Spanish coloniality as a modern critical and theoretical category, particularly insofar as its contemporary interpreters understand it." (Boyer 2)

Therefore, the film's connection to the past is critical, not only to the potency of Herzog's arguments about the flaws of man but of the viewers' collective understanding about the sixteenth century. With this in mind, Herzog becomes a unique sort of "documentary" filmmaker of sorts who carries the burden of past events with the liberty to insert fictional elements. This unique blend of realistic fiction and history creates a meaningful,

impactful brand of social commentary that is inevitably unique to Herzog in its expression.

In his revealing interview series with Peter Schumann, *Werner Herzog: Interviews*, Herzog reveals that the themes in *Aguirre: the Wrath of God* are not limited to criticisms of the time however, but are universal human criticisms. Here, he says,

“Highly political films, just like *Aguirre*, although it takes place around 1560. And yet, as a theme, this horde of imperialistic adventures performing a great historical failure, this failure of imperialism, of the conquerors, the theme is really quite modern. The method by which history was then made is actually still felt today in many American countries. History there is staged as theater, with theatrical coups...What’s fascinating is that their theater tricks made world history.” (South 5)

Herzog’s comparison between the past and the present, and reality and theater is striking, particularly as it relates to this film. By stating that strong political statements are universal and untethered by time, Herzog makes a specified snapshot of time such as *Aguirre* reflect omnipresent social and political ills. This universal accessibility allows people of all cultures and backgrounds to relate to the themes that are addressed in the film in a tangible way. Herzog’s ability to make a narrow-focused picture into a universal tale is one of his many strengths as a filmmaker. Strengths such as this one help set him apart from other political and documentary filmmakers, namely Leni Riefenstahl.

It is debatable that filmmakers like Riefenstahl take great pleasure in her subjectivity. Their work is strictly a representation of their experience and the people around them. Individuals like Herzog, however, appear to provide evidence for subjective opinions about man through indisputable historical events. It’s as if these events are included for both surface analysis about the subject matter and to address

some greater purpose. Although no approach is objectively superior, both styles are unique and add to Germany's reputation as a creatively-inclined nation. Herzog's approach in particular seems to have had ripple effects on the documentary and realistic fiction film community and has informed the way that many filmmakers choose to tackle social commentary.

RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER

Much like the aforementioned directors, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's approach to filmmaking serves as a significant contrast to that of his peers while touching upon common subjects and themes. These common themes range from commentary about sex, death, and alienation and are often employed with the use of circular plots, particularly in *The Marriage of Maria Braun* and *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. According to Joe Fusco's insightful article about this famous director, Fassbinder squeezed 50 feature films, three short films and two impactful television series into his amazingly short career. (Fusco 4) Although Fassbinder is most known for his work in cinema, he started working in theater. Fusco argues that the two years he spent in Munich, Germany studying acting had a profound effect on the way he made films. In his article, Fusco argues that "It was this stage play aesthetic that separated Fassbinder from other auteurs of the New German Cinema, such as Werner Herzog and Wim Wenders, whose influences were mostly limited to the medium of film." (Fusco 4) He goes on to state that this theatrical influence can primarily be seen in his first ten films which he says "were said to be an extension of his work on the stage." (Fusco 4) Although the beginning

phase of his career played an important role in his development as a filmmaker, Fassbinder truly came into his own and created his most seminal works in the later portion of his career.

Fassbinder's 1979 work, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, was released only a few years before his death but has become one of his most celebrated films. Typical to Fassbinder's style, the characters are often maddeningly flippant or hypocritical in their words and actions. The character Maria Braun for example contradicts herself quite a bit when it comes to her stance on her husband, Hermann. Hermann's absence seems to have stirred many conflicting emotions in Maria and has driven her to extremes such as heartbreaking loyalty and lustful adultery. Although this emotional tension is understandable to an extent after such a prolonged absence, Maria's contradictions devolve into absurdity as the film goes on. For example, when the couple finally reunites at the very end of the film, the two yell and argue before stripping and embracing each other in bed. Maria's treatment of Oswald in the film is also inconsistent at best as she flips between admiration and cold manipulation. In Roger Ebert's review of the film, he says that Maria "calls him up when she wants sex, humiliates him, says she is fond of him and then treats him distantly. Yet all the time, she is an ideal employee, quickly rising from 'personal assistant' to the company's key decision-maker." (Ebert 3) This inconsistent, somewhat confusing aspect of Maria's character makes her more intriguing, yet makes it harder for the audience to relate to her. This technique, which is often referred to as alienation, is a very common trope in Fassbinder's work which helps set him apart from his peers. Despite his notoriously sour conclusions,

Fassbinder's affinity for absurdity, opposition to reality and his untimely death make him a romantic hero of sorts in the history of German cinema.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, several German filmmakers have had a profound impact on the world of cinema, but few have reached the astronomical heights of directors like Leni Riefenstahl, Werner Herzog and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Riefenstahl's ability to stylishly and accurately document a moment in time is breathtaking and worthy of study, despite her questionable allegiance to the Nazi party. Herzog's profound passion for social commentary shines brightly in his work which often strives to depict universal truths within specified moments in time. Fassbinder, unlike his aforementioned German peers, was drawn to alienation and absurdism and used contradiction to create complicated portraits of his characters, and in doing so, society as a whole.

The fact that mid-late 20th century directors were able to bring pride to their country is no small feat given that for much of the century's second half, Germany was the black sheep of the globe. Despite this setback, these filmmakers were able to not only create a name for their country but for the artform of filmmaking as a whole. One could argue that these artists are just as culturally, historically and socially relevant as artists in more traditional creative mediums and helped establish cinema as the unofficial artform of the century.

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