

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Heart of Glass***. 1976

Werner Herzog. 1942-

### OVERVIEW

**Apocalyptic.** *Heart of Glass* is an apocalyptic film set in a German village in 1810. It is introduced by a shepherd, who will recount the conflicts and struggles of that village, adding to his commentary on the village his own view of world history and the dreadful events ahead for mankind. What transpires in the village, an endless struggle for control of the secret of ruby glass blowing, brings out the fathomless greed, hostility, and scorn that haunts people in a situation of conflict, a situation which in this case predictably leads to its own disaster, the burning down of the glass factory itself.

**Cinematography.** Herzog himself, always inventive, is the dominant figure behind the camera—an old camera which he stole from his film study program when he was in school, and the theft of which, interestingly, he is glad to defend as done in the name of art. What he wishes to achieve, counterpointing visions of a Bavarian village, from high up in the mountains, or even floating in the sky, with a squalid, underdeveloped factory town—time frame 1810—posed a major cinematographic challenge. In particular the handling of the natural world in which Hlas the visionary was plunged—vast mountain vistas, zooming banks of clouds, vertiginous bird flights—required innovative techniques with which Herzog was opening new filmic territory. (To remember, we are still, at the time of filming, in the era which preceded computer graphic imaging; which meant, in one recorded case, that Herzog had to spend twelve days coordinating the images of passing clouds with the figure of Hlas on an upland mountain side. Herzog is also innovating in the relatively new possibilities of time-lapse photography, which enables the impression that clouds are rushing by Hlas on his mountaintop.)

**Hypnotism.** The half lit scenes in the village, which prioritize now that cheek, now this fist, now this macabre dance, require the subtlest of shadings of color and light. The nuances of lifelessness, which stud the passing village visages, are enhanced by the extreme recourse Herzog took, to guarantee that the deterioration of the village, on all levels, will be emphasized: Herzog hypnotized all the village actors—Hlas excluded—prior to filming; hence the lifeless faces, the zombie like processions through the streets, as though we were observing a procession of dead men walking.

**Nature.** The final impression, from this work, is that it touches themes deep in Herzog's mind: the vastness of nature; the small and embedded place that history and the human community play in the vastness of time. We are being pushed toward the extremities of our sense of the human condition, a Herzogian position-taking which is expounded in Les Blank's brilliant documentary, *The Burden of Dreams* (1982), which was concerned with the filming of Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*.

**Risk.** What, asks Blank, drives Herzog to make films that test his sanity and risk his life and those of his associates? (This was truer of *Fitzcarraldo*, which involved the life-reckless dragging of a huge steamer over a mountain top.) Stanley Kauffmann, in *theNew Republic*, argued that, for Herzog, the purpose of film is to risk death, and each of his films is in some way a challenge hurled at the odds. Herzog has made films on the slopes of active volcanoes, has filmed in the jungle and in the middle of the Sahara, and has made films about characters who live at the edges of human achievement. *Heart of Glass* gives us a figure, Hlas, who moves in consciousness out over the furthest implications of being here, as well as down into the depths of human life as rude primitive existence.

### STORY

**Story?** Is story even the word? Or is moods organized by color and shape closer to the point? The longer you spend with the single-issue quest, that constitutes a narrative here, the more deeply it seems embedded in the visionary climate with which Hlas introduces and finalizes the presentation of the film.

**Quest.** There *isa* story of course. In the village, which is dependent for its livelihood, on the creation of a certain gorgeous ruby glass, the founder of the glass blowing industry has died without leaving behind him the secret of the production of this precious commodity. The villagers are desperately seeking to recover this secret of their prosperity, and as their own production capacity dwindles, the search for the (finally undiscoverable) secret surges, as people dig up land and hunt in corners, looking for the formula. Particularly distressed is the baron, the heir to the glass blowing lineage, who has a slightly wider optic onto the threats of a new post-industrial world, where the old techniques will anyway become obsolete.

**Vignettes.** Within the rabid quest theme which is consuming the drama on the ground, what take on highlights are vignette events, like the housemaid half consciously emerging into your face as she startles up out of trance, the baron's butler, dropping a tray, and in his hypnotized condition starting up violently at the surprise of the noise, or, with more symbolical richness, the two inebriates abusing one another across a table, until at last, in their mutual stupors, they fall from a balcony onto the stone floor below, against which one of them is crushed to death, while the other cushions on top of him.

**Mood?** Story? Plot? Or rather elements of mood? Not to forget that Hlas is omnipresent, dreaming, predicting, meditating, so that at all times the narrative on the ground is co-opted (that is contextualized, reconfigured) by the reflections taking place on the mountain top. The composite story, we might say, is written by time and nature, as they flow onward, including even Hlas in the narrative he wishes to interpret below in the valley.

## THEMES

**Greed.** The villagers are consumed with greed; that is, lust to recover the glass blowing secret which is the key to their financial health. Ancient processes of production are slipping from their hands, and with them go the very existence of the village as a commercial unit.

**Time.** Hlas' vision sees into the flow of cloudbanks, the steady streaming of time, as it gathers up and redistributes, and arguably wipes out any vestige of a present we may seem to stand still in. Historical time, meanwhile, is replacing the pre industrial world in which artifacts of high beauty are still hand crafted, and ancient secrets are well preserved.

**Nature.** As we know it, through the optic and vatic pronouncements of Hlas, nature is vast, onflowing, restless, and indifferent to the details of human existence. This is the viewpoint brilliantly spoken out by Herzog, in interviews—themselves carried out in the vast Amazon jungle—that appear in Les Blank's *Burden of Dreams*.

**Optimism.** On the face of it, Hlas and his visions seem to offer little solace to squalid communities like that of the glass blowers in the present film. (His dark prognostications can make us think of Bertrand Russell's essay, 'A Free Man's Worship,' 1903, Ernest Bloch's *Man on his Own*, 1970, or Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Modern Temper*, 1929, all of which texts tap into a fashionable expression of twentieth century cynicism.) The Herzogian tweak, to this position, is the notion that the progress, in the nature of things, will result precisely from the elimination of mankind, and the return of what-is to nature.

## CHARACTERS

**Hlas** is the prophetic figure who dominates the beginning and end of *Heart of Glass*, and whose personal intervention appears throughout the film, close up and visionary. He is a predictor of doom, the end of time, and encompasses in his purview man and all his works.

**The Baron** is the heir to the glass blowing factory business, and as such is particularly desperate at the loss of the secret of the archaic glass blowing tradition.

**The antagonists.** The antagonists are two guys drinking beer across a table. Ritually, expressionlessly, they start to abuse one another, until they reach drunken saturation, fall off a balcony; the one who landed underneath dies.

## HLAS

**Character** The main character is the shepherd, Hlas, who intervenes regularly in the plot, both to explain developments and to set the small village's story in world historical terms. He proclaims his prophecies of doom after a dark and often accurate tradition leading back to ancient times, and does so from the mountain tops or hillsides around the glass blowing community. He is a voice of doom, while at the same time he seems to welcome the daring passage, of a small boatload of pioneers, into the far and unprotected ocean.

### Illustrative moments.

**Connected.** Hlas belongs in an ancient line of prophets and visionaries: Theoclymenos, the seer in Homer's *Odyssey*, who foresees disaster for Odysseus and his men; Teiresias, the bisexual prophet in Sophocles' *Oedipus*, who prophesies that Oedipus will find the guilty man in himself; The Old Testament prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah—who unremittingly reminded the Jewish people that their bad behavior was leading to their destruction; Nostradamus (1503-1560), the French soothsayer and predictor of national destinies, in the Renaissance; the everyday prophet who springs from the bosom of any number of evangelical churches in southern Nigeria.

**Dooming.** In one of his voices, from the high hilltop pastures above the village, Hlas predicts the downfall of mankind. He reads the fate of the glass-blowing village as that of mankind in general, trapped in greed, and without understanding.

**Optimistic.** As we said earlier, Hlas expresses a distinctive Herzogian optimism. He feels a visionary confidence in the world of unfettered nature, which will prevail after humanity has vanished.

**Enigmatic.** Hlas also expresses an enigmatic optimism about mankind's destiny. In the final frames we watch, with Hlas, as a small boatload of men rows out into the huge ocean, toward a couple of islands and beyond, accompanied by seagulls, who seem to be leading the way for them.