Joachim Herz's Holländer (1964) on DVD by Hilan Warshaw

[Joachim Herz visited New York for a screening of this film on December 14, 2000—co-presented by WSNY and the Goethe Institut—and gave a talk about the film and his philosophy.—Ed.]

One of the year's essential DVD releases is Joachim Herz's film version of *Der fliegende Holländer* (1964). The first complete Wagner opera ever produced as a feature film, and among the very finest cinematic adaptations of an opera, Herz's film has been exceedingly difficult to come by until now. The reasons for this are apparent: as an East German film produced at the height of the Cold War, it was never commercially released in the West. With this handsomely produced disk from the DEFA Film Library at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, a much wider audience can now consider and enjoy Herz's landmark achievement.

Herz, who died last year [in 2013], adapted the film from stage productions of *Holländer* that he directed in Berlin, Leipzig, and Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre. The film's most immediately noticeable feature is its impressively high level of cinematic craft; the camera is always an active partner in the storytelling, delineating conflict, subtext, and atmosphere with thrilling variety. Indeed, Herz (a first-time film director) was emphatic that this *Holländer* was a film first and foremost, as opposed to what he termed a "filmed opera." In this, he was doubtless aided by his seasoned production team as well as the practice, common in opera films from Soviet bloc countries, of using separate acting and singing casts: the photogenic actors lip-synch the voice parts while remaining unobstructed by the physical effort of singing.

The film's ambition is also reflected in Herz's decision to produce the soundtrack in 4-track magnetic sound. Each vocal part and orchestral section was recorded separately, allowing the sound mix to mimic the movement onscreen: when a character moves from screen left to right, his or her voice part does likewise. At its best, this effect prefigures the "three-dimensional" sound systems of today's blockbuster cinema. (Much to Herz's chagrin, however, the state-run DEFA studio originally released the film in single-channel prints.)

The film places Senta (acted by Anna Prucnal, sung by Gerda Hannemann) at the center of the tale; her interactions with the Dutchman (acted by Fred Düren, sung by Rainer Lüdecke) are depicted as figments of her imagination, an approach echoed by Harry Kupfer in his later production for Bayreuth. But where Kupfer's Senta is an obsessive and suicidal type, Herz envisions her as a life-loving young woman whose fantasy of the Dutchman emboldens her to seize the day and reject her oppressive surroundings. Always attuned to the politically revolutionary aspects of Wagner's oeuvre, Herz brings out the opera's undertones of social critique: the household of Daland (Gerd Ehlers/Hans Krämer) is depicted as a materialistic Biedermeier prison which Senta longs to escape. Her expanding consciousness is indicated by the film's innovative use of multiple aspect ratios (image sizes): scenes set in the real world appear in a smaller size, while fantasy scenes involving the Dutchman are presented in a widescreen 35mm format. Traditionally minded viewers may take issue with Herz's occasional cuts and reordering of scenes, particularly noticeable in the beginning of the film. But in other ways, the cinematic medium allows Herz to be uncommonly faithful to Wagner's intent. The way in which he films the overture largely visualizes Wagner's own illustrative program notes for the overture: "A ray divides the gloom of night; like a lightning flash it pierces through his tortured soul… the seaman stoutly steers through waves and billows toward it."(1) As Herz noted in an interview about the film (included as a text file among the DVD's extra features), "We want to discover images within the music that then appear as if they inspired the music… We have the great advantage… that we can show the origins of the music." Deeds of music made visible: Wagner could not put it better himself.

Most films of operas have tended to follow one of two approaches. The first and more common is to present a traditional production of the work, amplified by the expanded visual capacities of cinema; examples of this range from Thomas Edison's 1904 *Parsifal* to Franco Zeffirelli's opulent Verdi adaptations. The second is to present the opera through the prism of the filmmaker's personal (and often idiosyncratic) interpretation, a prime example being Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's 1982 *Parsifal*. Herz's film proposes a third option, something quite rare in film history: an earnest attempt to popularize opera to a wide public by presenting the work in the visual language of a commercial genre—in this case the horror film.

For Herz's *Fliegende Holländer* is, as much as it is anything else, a monster movie. The villagers' encounter with the Dutchman's crew in Act III is rendered as a nightmarish and genuinely frightening piece of horror filmmaking. The spectacle of the Dutchman's ghoulish cohort springing to life and advancing towards the unsuspecting revelers summons a cinematic vernacular that would be instantly recognizable to viewers of *Pirates of the Caribbean* or *Night of the Living Dead*. Earlier in the film, Senta's first meeting with the Dutchman is rendered with eerie Expressionist lighting and visual details that explicitly recall the defining classic of vampire cinema, F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922).

In her article "Wagner in East Germany: Joachim Herz's *The Flying Dutchman*"(also included on the DVD), musicologist Joy Calico persuasively demonstrates that stylistic nods to Nosferatu pervade the film. The success of this gambit reveals Herz's fluency with Wagner's sources: the Flying Dutchman and the vampire are, after all, two variations of the archetype of the doomed, deathless wanderer that so fascinated Romantic writers. But there is an even more immediate link between Murnau's *Nosferatu* and *Der fliegende Holländer*, which Calico does not discuss. Just before he directed *Nosferatu*, Murnau had in fact been planning his own film adaptation of the opera.(2) The project was never realized, but Murnau seems to have redirected ideas about the Flying Dutchman into his new project. Many central aspects of Nosferatu's plot—such as the self-sacrificing heroine and the vampire's curse, which can only be alleviated by the love of a faithful woman—are suspiciously redolent of Wagner's opera, whereas they do not appear in the film's stated source material, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Whether or not Herz was aware of this detail from Murnau's career, his visual references to *Nosferatu* were therefore quite intuitive.

A highly innovative and politically minded director, Herz was nonetheless no supporter of the staging approach known as Regietheater, whose practitioners he dismissed in a 2000 speech as suffering from "the neurotic desire to be noticed." Fittingly, the inventive aspects of his *Holländer* feel less like directorial impositions than illuminations. Rather than merely dress up Wagner's opera in the garb of a popular genre (here, the horror film), Herz's achievement is to strip away the outer surface of that genre, until its historical roots are revealed as what they are: Romantic and Wagnerian.

Speaking of his film in 1963, Herz said, "It is not yet clear whether we will be successful in creating—or at least helping to create—an aesthetic artistic genre, or whether the project will solely serve to get people who don't like opera interested in the art form." If any opera film can do it, this one can. Fifty years after it was produced, Herz's masterwork can now finally get the chance it deserves.

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(1) Richard Wagner, trans. W. A. Ellis. *Judaism in Music and Other Essays* (repr. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 229.

(2) For a more detailed mention of this project, see Lotte H. Eisner, *Murnau* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1973), 142.