

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

## **Woyzeck** 1979 Werner Herzog

### OVERVIEW

Behind Herzog's film, *Woyzeck*, lies an incomplete play by Georg Büchner (1836) and an opera by Albin Berg (1925), both of which plumb the surprising depths of what might seem a conventional love/jealousy/murder theme. (Actually, in real life, the backstory to all these works in art, is the true story of one Johann Christian Woyzeck, a barber-soldier beheaded in Leipzig for murdering his mistress, in 1821.) In order to find his way to those depths, Herzog must once more resort to his 'best fiend,' Klaus Kinski, the mercurial and ferocious actor central to the director's most acclaimed films: *Aguirre: The Wrath of God*(1972), *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), and *Cobra Verde*(1987). What is needed, in *Woyzeck*, is what only Kinski seems to have been able to provide, a German Gomer Pyle—cf. The American television show(1962-1991) featuring a willing but bumpkinish recruit who is the despair of his commanding officer-- a born subordinate in a hurry to make up for his lateness in life, a dedicated lover who has loser written all over him, and finally a jealous invert who is not the kind of man you walk hand in hand with, after you have fantasized sleeping with a certain robust horse guards major.

Kinski—remember that face as Count Dracula in *Nosferatu*--makes a perfect loser murderer, and knows just how to wander off into the waters to his own annihilation, as he had vanished into the Atlantic at the end of *Cobra Verde*. The cinema gossip maintains that Kinski was in just the right mindset for playing this self-destructive role; he (and the whole crew) were just off of filming *Nosferatu*, and Kinski was exhausted—ready for the full manic in him. What's more, the present film was shot in eighteen days, therefore under pressure.

### STORY

**Obsessed.** The story Herzog makes, of the history and art behind his own reworking, is on the telling rather soap-opera-ish, a tale of love, loss, jealousy, and murder. (The newspapers, in a country like Nigeria, teem with daily accounts of just this scenario.) It is not easy to define the twist Herzog gives to this opera, and without seeing Kinski in action, here, we easily miss the nuances. For example the beginning of the film.

**Compliant.** What do we see at the beginning but a prone Woyzeck, in an enlisted man's outfit, inching himself forward thrust by thrust, his chin a couple of inches off the pavement, toward a waiting officer, who has clearly just issued the private orders to perform the callisthenic in question. To describe this enlisted man as a loser little man is to miss the point: he is a figure of exaggerated over compliance, of demonic effort to catch up with a world which is made up of challenges and orders which keep piling up on one another. As if to reinforce this point, the film segues promptly into another display of Woyzeck's compensatory zeal for catching up. This time he is acting as company barber—the occupation of the original Johann Christian Woyzeck, who was beheaded for murdering his mistress. He is hair-cutting and shaving his commanding officer, and doing so at break neck speed, smooth and clean as a flash of lightning. The one command he cannot satisfy is his commanding officer's command to take it easy. Woyzeck doesn't know how not to over-obey a command. It can be no coincidence that this is the same Woyzeck for whom in one remark he observes that 'nature is running out,' and who sees 'white fire over the city.'

**Relaxed.** It is not true that Woyzeck does not know how to take it easy. (He knows how to relax, but the yellow monster of jealousy knows how to twist and destroy him.) After our introduction to the soldier's overzealous military compliance, to his frenzied barbering, we see him with his girlfriend, and their baby, enjoying the atmosphere of a village Sunday market. It is a beautiful day, the villagers are wandering

through the displays of produce and handiwork, and soldiers from the military encampment are strolling back and forth. Among them, Woyzeck and his girl seem an easy going enlisted couple. The baby giggles, the couple holds hands, and all seems well. It is in the midst of this idyll, however, that an unimportant seeming scenario intrudes, to redirect the film.

**Show** At various booths, the locals, and some of the men from the military barracks, present displays. Woyzeck and his girl are particularly captivated by the showing of a fine stallion, who is being put through its tricks by a robust and well muscled captain of horse guards. (The trick is that as the captain calls out the numbers from one to five, the stallion will shuffle his right front hoof the appropriate number of times.) The baby is amused by the show, and Woyzeck's girl is equally impressed, but by the physique of the horseman, as we soon realize. In the absence of Woyzeck, one day later in the couple's flat, the horseman appears to Marie and makes out with her. (A dream mode conveys this event, and in the end we are not certain whether the event was fantasy or actuality; but we do know that, shortly afterwards, Marie and the captain are dancing their hearts out at the ball, when Woyzeck fatefully spies them and goes mad with fury.) Woyzeck subsequently confronts the dashing cavalier, but is humiliatingly beaten up.

**Experiment.** Prior to the show just referenced, Woyzeck has given us ample insights into his character set; has helped us to realize how a seemingly compliant individual can suddenly spring off the rails into the kind of violence that his jealousy can unleash. On a day to day basis, as an orderly to his commanding officer, he does whatever odd jobs the boss requires, and in addition takes on an assignment to assist a local medical doctor with a favorite experiment, to see how the human body reacts to a diet restricted to peas. We get several snapshots of Woyzeck being weighed and measured, and taste to the full the semi-comic self-presentation of this subaltern who is ultimately dangerous.

**Dance** A military dance brings together the cream of the local regiment, dancing with spouses, girlfriends, and locals. Woyzeck, as it happens, is passing by in a corridor, when his glance falls on Marie kicking up her heels in a delightful mazurka with the horse guards captain. They are gazing deeply into one another's eyes. We don't have to be told the horror that wells up on the face of Woyzeck.

**Murder** It is clear that Woyzeck must now explode, which he does. After having assaulted the captain, ineffectively, we see him appear on the lawn behind the barracks, hand in hand with Marie. They stroll toward the river, in what the viewer trembles to interpret. When they have sat down on the grass, near the river, we get our first glimpse of Woyzeck's knife, which slowly moves into stabbing position. To say that the rest is history would be a simplification. As one critic puts it, although we don't see the knife enter flesh, we feel the pain—as perhaps never before. After stabbing to death the thing he loves, Woyzeck wanders out into the river, and disappears under the waters as Cobra Verde had disappeared into the Atlantic in the eponymous film.

## CHARACTERS

**Woyzeck.** Woyzeck is the main character in the film. He is the first person we see, an enlisted man performing nose to the ground calisthenics for his commanding officer, and he is the last figure we see, wading out into the waters to drown himself. Between those terminal points lie snapshots of a stage in a fraught, romantic, and desperate enlisted man's life.

**Marie.** Marie is Woyzeck's girlfriend or mistress, and the mother of his baby. In relation to Woyzeck she is virginally gentle, but we learn that she picked up new vibes from the horse guard captain, whom she and Woyzeck met at the fair. She falls for him, and is in fact deep in dance with him, at the moment when Woyzeck spots her and knows what is going on.

**Commanding officer.** Woyzeck's commanding officer is rather impatient with his overzealous subordinate, though he recognizes how wholeheartedly Woyzeck throws himself into his enlisted man's role. His general message to Woyzeck is to slow it down, take it easy.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

## WOYZECK

**Character** The main character is a humble enlisted man in a provincial army battalion, in a small village. His world revolves around the performance of his daily duty, as an orderly to his commanding officer, and as a loving partner to his beloved Maria, who bore his baby, and with whom he lives in modest enlisted man's quarters. In the midst of this fairly static, and quite livable, scene, comes a captain of horse guards, far more attractive and macho than Woyzeck, and steals her heart. When Woyzeck becomes aware of this problem, he grows desperately jealous, stabs Marie to death and drowns himself.

*Self-abasing* When first we see Woyzeck he is crawling along the ground toward us, performing a rigorous physical training exercise, which is being supervised by his commanding officer. It is this manner of selfless devotion to authority that marks Woyzeck's behavior as a soldier.

*Fond* Woyzeck is endearingly fond of Maria and the baby, as he strolls through the village market, on a holiday for the townspeople and enlisted men.

*Jealous* Woyzeck only gradually realizes that Maria has fallen for the captain. When he sees the two of them dancing intimately together, he is suddenly aware of everything that has happened. He is wild with jealousy. Confronting the captain he is beaten up and humiliated.

*Brutal.* Woyzeck's jealousy overwhelms him, and in him it rapidly converts into the desire for vengeance, both against the captain but especially against his beloved Maria, whom he stabs to death before killing himself.

## MARIA

**Character** Maria is the girlfriend of Woyzeck and the mother of his child. She is gentle and domestic, but enjoys the pleasures of a stroll through the village center, and ultimately, as we find out, is susceptible to the blandishments of a muscular horse guards captain.

*Strolling* Strolling arm in arm with her beloved Woyzeck, she looks like one of the holiday makers, in the country village where her mate is stationed. She holds her baby like a young mom any and everywhere.

*Vulnerable* In dream/fact, in deep infatuation, Marie allows the captain to fondle her and unbutton her blouse. This in-house fantasy overpowers her, and in the military ball which later ensues, she dances the night away with the captain himself.

*Sacrificed* In the end, hand in hand with the jealous Woyzeck, she walks down the lawn to the river's edge, where the father of her child plunges a fatal knife into her flesh.

## THEMES

**Obedience.** From the start of the film, Woyzeck is all duty and obedience, ready to do whatever his commanding officer wishes, ready to comply with the doctor who proposes a medical experiment on him, and daftly ready to serve his mistress and baby. Can you say, perhaps, that he came to a dreadful end because he was excessively obedient?

**Tenderness.** Woyzeck and his girl form a figural pair as they fondle and adore their tiny child. In fact it is the tenderness, the good side of compliance, that charms us in Woyzeck, and, arguably, that makes him so ready and vulnerable when it comes to jealousy, and its provocation, acts which undermine the premises of tenderness.

**Jealousy.** Woyzeck may have been growing jealous, of Marie and the captain, before he sees the two of them dancing together. There are hints of suspicion in his glance, in his speech. On the whole,

however, he grows jealous by build up and explosion—when he sees the pair dancing his inner voice speaks out clearly the suspicion that has been growing in him.

**Anxiety.** Woyzeck is from the outset not only obedient but obedient because he is anxious. He anticipates challenges ahead, and is rarely at a point where he feels he has completed his task. Like most anxious individuals, he conjures up an antagonistic world around him, and predictably builds his grand attack against it.