

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **Stroszek** <sup>1977</sup> Werner Herzog, 1942-

### OVERVIEW

Like *Aguirre*, and other of his best films, Herzog wrote the screen play for *Stroszek* in a short time, four days; presumably because, once he grasped his main theme, he knew just where to go. Of central importance, in orienting him, was the readymade presence of great real life actors. He took them fresh off the street, as in the case of the Kaspar of *Kaspar Hauser*, the long time mental patient, and star of the eponymous film *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974); the same natural actor, this time a Bruno, whom Herzog can place back on the streets of Berlin or Plainfield Wisconsin. Knowing where he is going is Herzog's whole secret. Whether in Berlin or on the street in Plainfield, Wisconsin, U.S.A., where Herzog's car ran out of gas, and where he was heading, in order to visit the gravesite of Ed Gein, the serial killer who gave birth to the movie *Psycho* (1960). Herzog knew just where he was going, but no one else, except the actors, could have imagined that this idiosyncratic film, which opens as a prisoner is released from a Berlin jail, would end with the same guy going deliciously nuts in an amusement park in Wisconsin.

### STORY

**The unpredictable.** The story of *Stroszek* intimates about itself, from the get-go, the sense that anything can happen with the main character, who has just been released from prison, who has a well known alcoholic background, and who seems a maximum risk to 're offend.' The character is question is the street musician who acted the main role in *Kaspar Hauser*; here, as Bruno, he is as difficult to interpret as he was in *Kaspar Hauser*; seemingly fixated on the world, with little expression, with unpredictable behavior jolts, with a kindly attitude to all, and of course supremely vulnerable. His first step is into a familiar bar, where he gets a beer, then finds himself entangled with an attractive prostitute, Eva, whose two nasty pimps are in process of beating her up—she has brought in little cash. One thing leads to another, *Stroszek* gives shelter to the girl in his flat, the pimps intervene now and then to terrorize the girl or *Stroszek*, and it becomes clear to the couple—for now they are sleeping together—that they need to get out of town, ideally out of Germany.

**Escape.** As it happens *Stroszek's* neighbor, the kindly old crank who has kept *Stroszek's* flat for him, while he was in prison, is just making plans to travel to America, at the invitation of his nephew, who has a garage in a small town in Wisconsin. The trio decide to go together to the town of Railroad Flats, Wisconsin; Eva goes to the streets to screw her head off and make a ton of money in a short time, to finance the trip. And they are off!

**U.S.A.** In Railroad Flats, *Stroszek*, Eva, and Mr. Scheitz, the quiet eccentric neighbor, who has kept *Stroszek's* mynah bird for its owner, and who is the ultimate in quirky gentle, fit their ways into the community. Eva works as a waitress in the local coffee shop. *Stroszek* helps out as a mechanic, while Mr Scheitz peruses the local region, making his unique experiments in animal magnetism. Matters proceed tolerably well until Eva, tired of the group's efforts to make a home in their brand new trailer, runs off to Vancouver with a couple of truckers, and leaves the two men alone together. She is wise to be gone, because just at this point the local bank, which the group borrowed from for their house, is complaining that monthly payments are in arrears. *Stroszek* and Mr. Scheitz have no financial plan, and have to sit by as their house is sold, and they find themselves out on the street.

**Robbery.** Having decided that the bank is participating in a plot against them, the two men get in their beat up pick-up truck, head to the bank with a shotgun, and steal thirty two dollars. They run across the street with the money, and are purchasing some household supplies when the cops arrive. The cops spot

Mr. Scheitz and arrest him, but miss Stroszek, who gets back in the pick-up and drives off as soon as the coast is clear.

**Finale.** Stroszek drives down the road til his vehicle starts to run out of gas, and to spin in circles. He jumps out, takes his gun, and heads for the amusement center next door. There he puts some money in the slot, sets a dancing chicken into perpetual motion, finds the electrical switch that activates a perpetually rotating ski lift, hops into a lift chair, and is seen for the last time disappearing into the distance.

## CHARACTERS

**Stroszek.** Stroszek is a mildly dysfunctional, but observant and subtle, victim of the German penal system. He is just being released as the film opens. He returns to drinking, gets beat up by his girlfriend's pimps, and eventually gets out of harm's way by going to Wisconsin, where even more fascinating challenges await him.

**Eva.** Eva is the prostitute whom Stroszek befriends after his release from prison. She shares his flat, they become lovers for a while, and finally she goes to Wisconsin with Stroszek and Mr. Scheitz, to escape the abuse that the two younger people are suffering in their own country.

**Mr. Scheitz.** Mr. Scheitz is the neighbor of Stroszek, who keeps his flat for him while Stroszek is in prison, and who helps Stroszek and Eva, and himself, get away from Germany and go to Wisconsin.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### STROSZEK

**Character** Stroszek is the main character. When we first see him he is being released from a Berlin prison, with an injunction to stay away from alcohol. When we last see him he is riding off into the distance on a ski lift in Wisconsin, and in between he is more or less whimsically submitting to the dictates of fate, take it or leave it. He takes in a prostitute and lives with her, Eva, before going (with Eva) to the United States, where he feels he can escape the harassment he is getting in Germany. In Wisconsin he is just starting to settle, shakily to be sure, when his mobile home is repossessed and sold, and his girl runs away with a trucker. The end comes down to an ineffectual bank robbery, a visit to an amusement center, and disappearance into the blue on an electronic ski lift.

*Released.* As the film opens, the Berlin police inspector is telling Stroszek how frightful the penalties will be, if Stroszek returns to drinking, on the outside. Stroszek turns his face away, sharply not listening.

*Harassed.* The pimps of Eva break into the flat Stroszek is sharing with Eva, and destroy his property, meanwhile humiliating him outrageously. In his fashion, he survives this all, and the next thing we know, he has taken the right decision, to get out of the country.

*Blindsided.* Having started to settle in Wisconsin, Stroszek fails to realize that he has provided no stable existence for Eva, and one night he discovers that she has run off to Vancouver with a couple of truckers. He is abandoned.

*Antic.* Having escaped the notice of the police, at the time of his bank robbery, Stroszek drives down the road, sets his pick up on fire, and goes into a roadside amusement center, where he fixates on a mechanical dancing chicken.

### EVA

**Character** Eva is the prostitute whom Stroszek befriends when he gets out of prison. She is being badly beat up by her two nasty pimps, and goes back to the streets to make enough cash to get her and Stroszek and Mr. Scheitz tickets to America. There she survives for a while, on the money she makes

from waitressing. But she gets sick of the insecurity, noting that her mobile home is about to be repossessed, and she says her final good bye from a truck, where she is heading for Vancouver.

*Harassed.* When we first meet Eva, she is being badly manhandled by two pimps, in the restaurant which Stroszek enters. She flees to Stroszek for help, and he invites her to overnight in his flat, to which he is just returning.

*Mauled.* When Eva fails to bring in enough cash flow, her pimps return to Stroszek's flat, seize her, and drag her up the stairs. By the end of the experience, which leaves her badly bruised, Eva is ready to leave Germany.

*Domestic.* For a limited time, after her arrival in Wisconsin, Eva enjoys both a housewife role, fixing up their mobile home, and a service role, in the coffee shop attached to the garage where Stroszek is working.

*Overstressed.* In the end, following the drift of her original profession, and sick of the craziness at Railroad Flats, Eva takes off with a couple of truckers heading for Vancouver.

## SCHEITZ

**Character** Mr. Scheitz is the small, frail, eccentric, and loyal neighbor of Stroszek, who minds his flat for him while he is in prison. Scheitz' favorite companion is a mynah bird, who converses with him, and with Stroszek. Scheitz is the one who takes up an invitation from America, which moves the trio to Wisconsin. The last we see of the man, is in the hands of the police, who are taking him down to the Station, to book him for bank robbery.

*Thoughtful.* When Stroszek returns from prison he finds his flat well preserved. Mr. Scheitz has maintained the place for his neighbor.

*Daring.* Though distinctly a senior citizen, and rather frail, Mr. Scheitz has long wanted to visit the United States, so grasps the opportunity to accept the invitation from his relative in Railroad Flats.

*Engaged.* Upon getting to know the area and people of Railroad Flats, Mr. Scheitz circumambulates the whole region, carrying out his experiments in animal magnetism.

*Bold.* It is Scheitz who is convinced that the bank is in conspiracy to take away the trio's mobile home. He is the one who promotes the idea of robbing the bank.

## THEMES

**Cruelty.** Eva's pimps, who batter her and torture Stroszek, are into vandalism, theft, and sadism. They destroy Stroszek's flat, and make him perform for them in humiliating positions. Like Kaspar Hauser (whom he is) Bruno is a natural target for bullies.

**Humor.** Comedy, of a low keyed and quirky sort, abounds in this film. There is the quiet humor of the Mynah bird's repetitions of conversation between Mr. Scheitz and Stroszek. There is the bizarre humor of the trio walking near the port of arrival in New York City. There is the crazy humor of Stroszek's fascination with the dancing chicken in the amusement arcade.

**Tolerance.** Stroszek, like Kaspar Hauser before him, puts up with a world that misunderstands him, which is easy to do. Kaspar Hauser was the nightmare of the bureaucrats who initially interrogated him—where are you from? Who were your parents?—and Stroszek is the despair of the police inspector who gives him final advice upon release from prison. Stroszek simply puts up, tolerantly, with all the advice and questions, and leaves the square minded frustrated.

**Survival.** Stroszek has certain survival skills, as had Kaspar Hauser; both men live inside their own heads, do not understand or analyze others, and tend to keep on going, even when circumstances seem powerfully against them. Kaspar makes his own way, in his own fashion, quite well—until anonymous attacks fell him. Stroszek is not seriously derailed, in his meandering course through life, even by the brutality exercised on him by Eva's pimps.