

in the same series

WOODY ALLEN ON WOODY ALLEN
edited by Stig Björkman

ALMODÓVAR ON ALMODÓVAR
edited by Frédéric Strauss

BURTON ON BURTON
edited by Mark Salisbury

CASSAVETES ON CASSAVETES
edited by Ray Carney

CRONENBERG ON CRONENBERG
edited by Chris Rodley

DE TOTH ON DE TOTH
edited by Anthony Slide

FELLINI ON FELLINI
edited by Costanzo Costantini

HAWKS ON HAWKS
edited by Joseph McBride

HITCHCOCK ON HITCHCOCK
edited by Sidney Gottlieb

KIEŚLOWSKI ON KIEŚLOWSKI
edited by Danusia Stok

LEVINSON ON LEVINSON
edited by David Thompson

LOACH ON LOACH
edited by Graham Fuller

LYNCH ON LYNCH
edited by Chris Rodley

MALLE ON MALLE
edited by Philip French

POTTER ON POTTER
edited by Graham Fuller

SAYLES ON SAYLES
edited by Gavin Smith

SCHRADER ON SCHRADER
edited by Kevin Jackson

SCORESE ON SCORESE
edited by David Thompson and Ian Christie

SIRK ON SIRK
conversations with Jon Halliday

Herzog on Herzog

edited by Paul Cronin

ff

faber and faber

First published in 2002
by Faber and Faber Limited
3 Queen Square London WC1N 3AU

Published in the United States by Faber and Faber Inc.
an affiliate of Farrar, Straus and Giroux LLC, New York

Photaset by Faber and Faber Ltd
Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved

© Werner Herzog, 2002
Commentary and Introduction © Paul Cronin, 2002

The right of Werner Herzog and Paul Cronin to be identified as authors of
this work has been asserted in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988

*This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of
trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without
the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than
that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser*

A CIP record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-571-20708-1

Contents

| | page vii |
|---|----------|
| Introduction | |
| 1 The Shower Curtain (<i>Herakles, Game in the Sand, The Unprecedented Defence of the Fortress Deutschkreuz</i>) | 1 |
| 2 Blasphemy and Mirages (<i>Signs of Life, Last Words, Precautions Against Fanatics, The Flying Doctors of East Africa, Even Dwarfs Started Small, Fata Morgana</i>) | 32 |
| 3 Adequate Imagery (<i>Handicapped Future, Land of Silence and Darkness, Aguirre, the Wrath of God, The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner, No One Will Play with Me</i>) | 65 |
| 4 Athletics and Aesthetics (<i>The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser, Heart of Glass</i>) | 101 |
| 5 Legitimacy (<i>How Much Wood Would a Woodchuck Chuck, Stroszek, La Soufrière, Nosferatu the Vampire, Woyzeck</i>) | 135 |
| 6 Defying Gravity (<i>God's Angry Man, Hue's Sermon, Fitzcarraldo, Ballad of the Little Soldier, The Dark Glow of the Mountains</i>) | 166 |

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Fact and Truth

In Hollywood there's a strong emphasis on 'story structure' and how each 'act' of the film fits into a structure. Do you have any time for things like that?

Not at all. I am just a storyteller who knows if a good story is working or is not, and who writes so fast he cannot afford to think about the structure of the writing. There is such an urgency of telling the tale that inevitably it creates its own structure. Hollywood films might have 'structure' to them, but they have scripts that press the right buttons at the right time, which is essentially filmmaking by numbers. There is a great production and distribution system in Hollywood, something we in Europe should be envious of, a great star system and special effects facilities too. But you hardly ever find a really good story any more, a deficit that is known to most of the people who work out there. I see the role of the film director as being akin to that of a storyteller at the market in Marrakech who has a crowd standing around him. This is who I am.

What was the starting point of your Minnesota Declaration?

The Minnesota Declaration¹ is somewhat tongue-in-cheek and designed to provoke, but the ideas it deals with are those that my mind has been engaged with over many years, from my earliest 'documentaries' onwards. After wrestling with these issues – certainly since *Land of Silence and Darkness* – the question has become much more intense than ever in the last ten years with films like *Bells from the Deep*, *Death for Five Voices* and *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*. The word 'documentary' should be handled

with care because we seem to have a very precise definition of what the word means. Yet this is only due to our need to easily categorize films and the lack of a more appropriate concept for a whole range of cinema. Even though they are usually labelled as such, I would say that it is misleading to call films like *Bells from the Deep* and *Death for Five Voices* 'documentaries'. They merely come under the guise of 'documentaries'.

The background to the 'Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Filmmaking' is a very simple one. I had flown from Europe to San Francisco and back again in a very short space of time and had ended up in Italy, where I was directing an opera. Jet-lagged as I was, I could not sleep and turned on the television at midnight to be confronted by a very stupid, uninspiring documentary, something excruciatingly boring about animals somewhere out there in the Serengeti, all very cute and fluffy. At 2 a.m. I turned the television on again and watched something equally bad, the same kind of crap you find on television wherever you go. But then at 4 a.m. I found some hard-core porno, and I sat up and said to myself, 'My God, finally something straightforward, something real, even if it is purely physical.' For me the porno had real naked truth. For some time I had wanted to write some kind of manifesto, my thoughts about fact and truth in filmmaking – and ecstatic truth – a rant against *cinéma vérité*.² That same night I wrote the twelve points in a few minutes. They contain, in a very condensed form, everything that has angered and moved me over the years.

Your conclusion about so-called cinéma vérité documentaries is that they don't penetrate into the deeper truth of the situations that they portray. This form of cinema is, in your words, merely 'the accountant's truth'.

Cinema, like poetry, is inherently able to present a number of dimensions much deeper than the level of the so-called truth that we find in *cinéma vérité* and even reality itself, and it is these dimensions that are the most fertile areas for filmmakers. I truly hope to be one of those who finally bury *cinéma vérité* for good. Thankfully, there seem to be more and more filmmakers – and audience members – who understand this. Chris Marker³ and

Errol Morris are two names that spring to mind. *Cinéma vérité* is the accountant's truth; it merely skirts the surface of what constitutes a deeper form of truth in cinema.

When you have an idea for a story, do you immediately know whether it is going to be a feature or a 'documentary'?

I do not sit and ponder whether I should articulate the story in one way or another. The next few films I will make are all features. Why? I do not know, this is just how it is. I do know the media have never picked up on the 'documentaries' as much as the other films, but I could not care less. I just do the things that are urgent to me. So for me, the boundary between fiction and 'documentary' simply does not exist; they are all just films. Both take 'facts', characters, stories and play with them in the same kind of way. I actually consider *Fitzcarraldo* my best 'documentary'. So I fight against *cinéma vérité* because it reaches only the most banal level of understanding of everything around us. I know that by making a clear distinction between 'fact' and 'truth' in my films, I am able to penetrate into a deeper stratum of truth most films do not even notice. The deep inner truth inherent in cinema can be discovered only by not being bureaucratically, politically and mathematically correct. In other words, I start to invent and play with the 'facts' as we know them. Through invention, through imagination, through fabrication, I become more truthful than the little bureaucrats. This is an idea that will become clearer when we discuss some of the later films like *Bells from the Deep* and *Lessons of Darkness*.

Land of Silence and Darkness seems an important film in this respect because it marks the start of your 'investigations' into 'truth' and 'fact' in cinema.

Yes, though I suspect at the time it was probably not so conscious but more a kind of instinctive attitude I had. The line that is quoted at the end of that film – 'If a world war were to break out now, I would not even notice it' – is not something that Fini ever said. This is something I wrote that I felt encapsulated, in only a few words, how someone like her might experience the world. And the lines at the start of the film when Fini speaks about the ecstatic

faces of the ski-flyers whom she says she used to watch as a child are also written by me. It is all pure invention. She had actually never even seen a ski-jumper, and I just asked her to say the lines that I wrote. Why? Because I felt that the solitude and ecstasy of the ski-jumpers as they flew through the air was a great image to represent Fini's own inner state of mind and solitude. Of course, when making the film no scenes were shot contrary to Fini's wishes and she did not mind speaking the lines that I had written for her. The wonderful thing about her was that she never argued about it; she immediately understood and squeezed my hand. Sometimes she would say that she understood in a very strange way, almost like an Egyptian priest: 'I... have... understood... you.'

In my 'documentaries' I have constantly explored the intensified truths of the situations that I have found myself in and of the characters I have met, whether it be abused people who lose their speech in *Lessons of Darkness* or the chain-smoking African chimp of *Echoes from a Sombre Empire*. It is permissible to stylize certain parts of a film only if the subject is co-operative, and so with my film about my work with Kinski, *My Best Friend*, I felt that such an approach would not be healthy. Not being around to defend himself, the facts about Kinski had to be presented as coherently as possible and a very clear concept had to be maintained, even though, the film was undeniably from my own perspective.

And now you seem to be doing this by playing with the facts surrounding a real-life character in your latest feature film.

What I did with *Invincible* is a good example of how I used these ideas and applied them to a feature film. I looked at the facts about the life of the Polish blacksmith Zishe Breitbart in the 1920s and realized – though there was clearly a story there – much of it did not interest me. I knew I had to reinvent Zishe for the film and transplant the character to the early 1930s because everything that is fascinating about the relationship between Germans and Jews was exacerbated in that era and, of course, turned into the most monstrous crime and tragedy afterwards. The 'truth' about Zishe's life is brought much more to life when we are able to see his story through the lens of 1930s Germany.

But this isn't an approach that you use for every single one of your 'documentaries', is it? And even when you do, it is done with extreme subtlety.

Even in a film like *Ballad of the Little Soldier*, perhaps my most political film, you can see signs of these ideas. I could have made a straightforward study of the political situation down there and called it *The Children's War Against the Sandinistas*. But I called it *Ballad of the Little Soldier* for a reason: for a long time I have wanted to make a musical. I have hours of footage of the villagers and the soldiers singing and maybe one day will edit it together to produce a real oratorio. The existing film is my compromise, as I very much wanted to tell the story of the child soldiers who were dying in Nicaragua every day.

But the stylizations of truth in the 'documentary' films are generally very subtle indeed. You probably would not know about most of them unless you were paying close attention to the films, and even then you might need to have some background to the subject matter. A good example is the last scene of *Echoes from a Sombre Empire*. In the decrepit zoo we found one of the saddest things I have ever seen: a monkey addicted to cigarettes thanks to the drunken soldiers who had taught it to smoke. Michael Goldsmith looks at the ape and says something like, 'I can't take this any longer' and tells me I should turn the camera off. I answer back from behind the camera, 'Michael, I think this is one of the shots I should hold.' He replies, 'Only if you promise this will be the last shot in the film.' While this dialogue and my use of the animal was a completely scripted invention, the nicotine-addicted monkey itself was not. There was something momentous and mysterious about the creature, and filming it in the way I did brought the film to a deeper level of truth, even if I did not stick entirely to the facts. To call *Echoes from a Sombre Empire* a 'documentary' is like saying that Warhol's painting of Campbell's soup cans is a document about tomato soup.

I would like to point out also the opening quote from Blaise Pascal at the start of *Lessons of Darkness*. 'The collapse of the stellar universe will occur – like creation – in grandiose splendour.' Well, it may sound like Pascal, but actually it is all invented. I enjoy doing things like this because I am a storyteller, plain and simple,

not a traditional 'documentary' filmmaker. In *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* I open the film with a quote from Revelation – 'And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it, and death shall flee from them' – and then show a regular guy walking into a downtown tattoo parlour. With this quote you are immediately prepared for something almost otherworldly when the film starts. You just do not expect to see a kind of seedy tattoo parlour after the Bible has just been quoted to you.

What the Pascalian pseudo-quote does is lift you from the first minute of the film to a level that prepares you for something quite momentous. We are immediately in the realm of poetry – whether or not the audience knows the quote is a fake – which inevitably strikes a more profound chord than mere reportage. With Pascal you are immersed in the cosmic even before the first picture appears on the screen, and *Lessons of Darkness* never lets you down until its last frame. It holds you up there without shame, something I do with real pride and with the confidence that I am not manipulating the audience in any way. Pascal himself could not have written it better! After the quote the film continues with the voice-over talking of 'Wide mountain ranges, the valleys enshrouded in mist.' What I actually filmed were little heaps of dust and soil created by the tires of trucks. These 'mountain ranges' were no more than a foot high.

I keep telling young people who always ask with hesitation in their voice about history and concoction and invention that *this* is what cinema is about.

Lessons of Darkness was made very soon after the Gulf War. How did audiences react to seeing in cinemas the images of the oil fires that they'd been watching on television for months?

Lessons of Darkness was very well received in America. It was interesting to see the reaction to the film there because the whole country – and the whole world in fact – had repeatedly watched the same kind of images of the burning oil wells in Kuwait on CNN during and after the war. But these images saturated the public's consciousness only via news broadcasts and made very little impact because of their tabloid style. We have all watched so many horrific things on the news that we have become totally –

and dangerously – inured to them. When it came to these spectacular fields of burning oil, everyone seemed to forget them the very next day. Yet to look at the surface of pitch-black oil is to see what looks like a vast serene lake reflecting the blue sky and the clouds. It is very strange, and I knew I was watching something momentous that had to be recorded for the memory of mankind.

The stylization of the horror in *Lessons of Darkness* means that the images penetrate deeper than the CNN footage ever could, something that bothered audiences in Germany a great deal. When *Lessons of Darkness* was shown at the Berlin Film Festival, with one voice nearly 2,000 people rose up in an angry roar against me. They accused me of ‘aestheticizing’ the horror and hated the film so much that when I walked down the aisle of the cinema I was spat at. They said the film was dangerously authoritarian, so I decided to be authoritarian at my very best. I stood before them and said, ‘Mr Dante did the same in his inferno and Mr Goya did it in his paintings, and Brueghel and Bosch too.’ You should have heard the uproar. The German critics took the film as if it were a dangerous attack on everyone’s decency. Everyone else liked the film very much and it received tremendous reviews around the world. Sitting here now ten years later I would dare an assumption: if I showed the film today to an audience at the Berlin Film Festival they would probably like it.

Was it a particular conceptual decision you made to use the scenes of the burning oil wells with the abused Kuwaitis?

I made contact with various organizations who were documenting torture victims and through them got in touch with the people I filmed. They had lost their ability to speak because of the atrocities they had witnessed. I feel that there is actually a slight imbalance to the film because there were some other people I wanted to film, but the Kuwaiti government basically expelled me. The authorities were constantly scrutinizing what I was doing there. From the start they hoped I would make a film that would show the positive, optimistic reconstruction of everything with the cleaning up of the oil wells and an apparently heroic fresh new start. They had objections against me going into the deepest wounds that the war had created for some of the people. One afternoon I was handed a

Lessons of Darkness

letter by the Ministry of Information which quite simply stated I was wished a pleasant flight out of the country tomorrow morning at 7 a.m. It was clear this was an expulsion order. If I had insisted on continuing filming they would have confiscated my footage, so I was prudent enough to wrap up my things and go instantly. It seemed the world the Kuwaitis wanted to portray on film consisted only of the fires and the heroic firemen, not the scarred victims. I wish I had been able to put more human beings in *Lessons of Darkness*, yet it still has something very humane about it. Not only where you see human beings; you see it everywhere. Every single shot somehow.

Did the bureaucrats criticize you for not identifying Kuwait?

They did indeed, but of course I did that on purpose. There was just no need to name Saddam Hussein and the country he attacked. And you know, even if people are watching *Lessons of Darkness* in 300 years' time, it still would not be important for them to know the historical facts behind this film. *Lessons of Darkness* transcends the topical and the particular. This could be any war and any country. The criticisms of the film in Germany come down to this: if you do not make a black-and-white political statement you are on the side of the devils, a point of view that is clearly overly simplistic and stupid. But at the end of the day all this good and bad dissipates into thin air, and thankfully only the films remain. Films have their own lives and their own ways to travel straight to the hearts of audiences. Anyway, everyone knew that it was Kuwait because, as you said, the war was still in people's minds.

I should stress that *Lessons of Darkness* is as much a film by Paul Berriff as it is mine. It was a very fortunate collaboration. There was the danger of two cooks preparing one meal, but in this case Paul was a man of such calibre that our collaboration worked very well. The result is something very special, and ultimately I owe this film to him. I knew after watching CNN that I wanted to go out to Kuwait and luckily I found Paul Berriff by searching for someone – anyone – with a shooting permit for Kuwait. The oil fires were being extinguished unexpectedly fast so I had to hurry.

Berriff is English and has made a lot of very physically daring films, like sea rescues by helicopter with him dangling from a cable and things like that. A courageous man, very physical in his methods of seeing and creating images. He has a really physical curiosity. Paul already had an expert helicopter pilot he wanted to work with, and for a project like this a good pilot is as important as a cinematographer. He had to understand the terrain and air flows around the burning oil wells and establish a pattern of flight to facilitate a sequence of travelling shots. I was never actually in the helicopter; the footage was shot two days before I arrived in the country. The cameraman, an expert in aerial photography, knew what I wanted: as many unbroken travelling shots of the landscape as possible. But I would not have been able to plan every single one of the shots even if I had been up there. The pilot would not have been able to just follow my directions all the time because if he had flown into an area where the heat might be suddenly blown towards it, the helicopter would immediately explode. Up there the temperatures reached over a 1,000 °C. So in flying into a burning oil field the pilot has to make his own choices for safety reasons. He did an outstanding job and allowed the cameramen to hold the shots for as long as he possibly could.

Who are the firefighters on the ground? Is that Red Adair and his crew?

No, Red Adair had already quit at that point. Initially, I was advised to make a film about him and his efforts to put out the fires, but his working methods involved the heaviest imaginable machinery with every precaution in the book. He predicted it would take four or five years to put out these fires, which it certainly would have done if Adair had gone his own way. As I said, it was actually done within about six months, though the crews who did extinguish the fires were running much higher risks of course. The men in the film are, I think, an American or Canadian team. There were also Iranians, Hungarians, teams from all over the world. The Iranians were the most impressive because they did not have much equipment and they fought the fires almost with bare hands. Everyone who worked with these men spoke of them with great respect.

What kind of cameras did you use?

We used regular cameras, and the crew had only nomex suits for protection, the kind of suits Formula One race drivers wear. What was not well protected were hands and shoes, and our sofas would melt away quite quickly if we were not careful. One time Paul Berriff jumped from behind our barricade to get a shot and immediately I could see that the half of his face not protected by the camera was reddening and getting burnt. I held my two hands with thick leather gloves on to try to protect his face, and within ten seconds my gloves were burning. We were recording all the sound live and one of the boom microphones just melted away. In fact, to really appreciate the film you have to see it in the cinema with Dolby stereo because for me the sound was actually the most impressive thing. These geysers of fire shooting 300 feet up into the sky with such pressure sounds like four jumbo jets taking off simultaneously. It really was quite something.

One of the reasons my collaboration with Paul worked so well was because of this understanding of hearts we had, something that became obvious when we both decided we did not want to use long zoom lenses when filming on the ground. This meant that if something interested us we decided to go as far in as possible and were right there with the firefighters themselves. Paul did the camerawork, though there was a second cameraman sometimes, and we shot it all on film, nothing was on video. Sometimes this was a problem because raw stock has to be acclimatized to wherever you are shooting, and it was exceptionally hot in Kuwait that summer. So we could not just take the film out of the refrigerator and then expose it in the camera, and when it came to the shots of the oil wells we had to protect the film with aluminium foil and take it out of the camera as soon as we had finished the roll to get it away from the heat. Thankfully we never lost any of the footage.

You've said that Lessons of Darkness, like Fata Morgana, is a science-fiction film. What do you mean by this?

Calling *Lessons of Darkness* a science-fiction film is a way of explaining that the film has not a single frame that can be recognized as our planet, and yet we know it must have been shot here. I spoke earlier of our 'embarrassed landscapes'. Well, the land-

scape you see in *Lessons of Darkness* is not just embarrassed, it is completely mutilated. The film plays out as if the entire planet is burning away, and because there is music throughout the film, I call it 'a requiem for an uninhabitable planet'. Unlike *La Soufriere*, which tries to document a natural catastrophe, *Lessons of Darkness* is a requiem for a planet that we ourselves have destroyed. The film progresses as if aliens have landed on an unnamed planet where the landscape has lost every single trace of its dignity, and - just like in *Fata Morgana* with the debris-strewn desert landscapes - these aliens see human beings for the first time. There is a line I speak in the voice-over when one of the firemen signals something: 'The first creature we encountered tried to communicate something to us.'

You become quite explicit about this idea when showing the shot of the firefighter lighting up a plume of gushing oil.

The voice-over says something like, 'Seized by madness, they reignite the flames because they cannot imagine a life without fire, and now there is something to extinguish they are happy again.' There was actually a practical reason for igniting the flame because in this case the gush of oil had created a lake which was approaching other burning fires, and had the oil been ignited by other fires there would have been an even bigger problem. I asked them to let me know when they were going to reignite the flame so I could be there with a camera. I am a storyteller, and I used the voice-over to place the film - and the audience - in a darkened planet somewhere in our solar system.

The ideas of 'fact and truth' you started exploring in Land of Silence and Darkness have of late been taken to the reductio ad absurdum with films like Death for Five Voices and Bells from the Deep: Faith and Superstition in Russia. How did you hear about this array of bizarre characters out there in Siberia?

Oh, I find them. I engaged some Russian collaborators and told them to scour Siberia for the best Jesus Christ they could find and eventually they came up with Vissarion. He is an ex-policeman who all of a sudden realized that he was, in fact, Jesus. There were about a 110 competing Jesus figures roaming Siberia at that time,

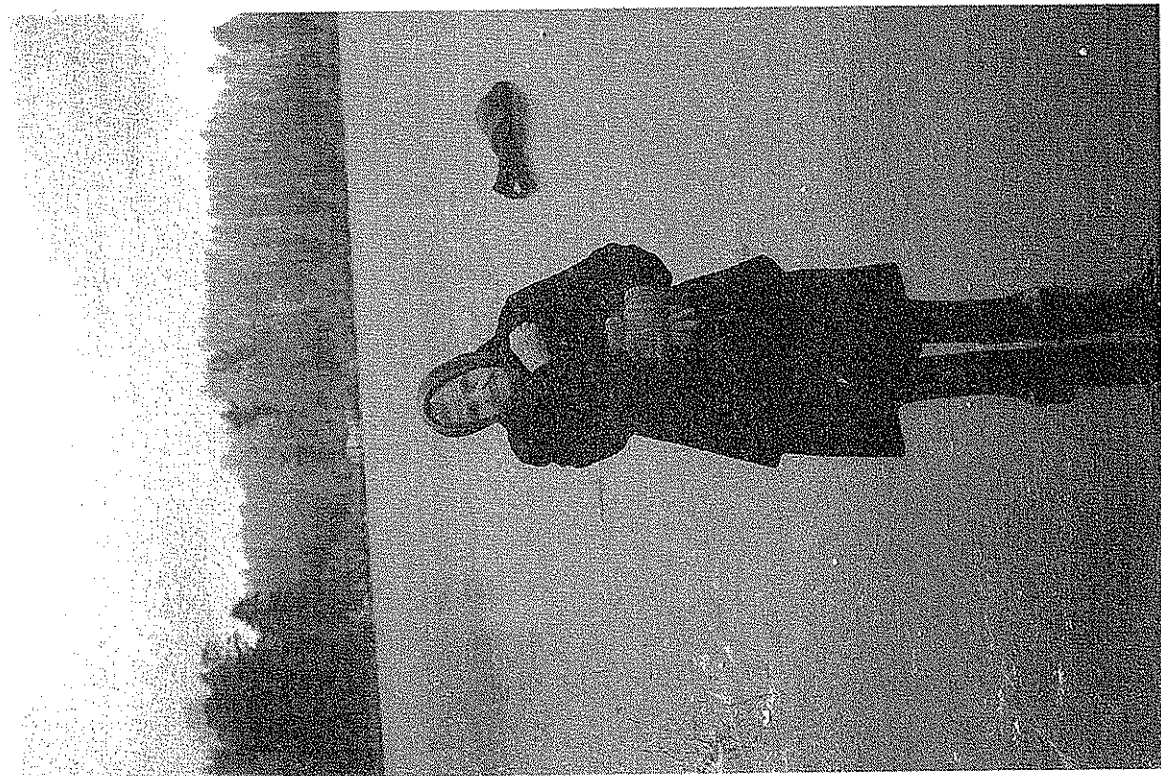
and Vissarion actually had an agent in Moscow. But this did not turn me away from him because I had the feeling that he truly was someone very special with great depth, and he lived a very ascetic life in a tiny apartment in Krasnojarsk in Siberia. The faith healer in the film, Alan Chumack, used to be a very well-known media figure on Russian television where he would re-enact alien abductions and things like that. One day, after discovering he was so popular with mass audiences, he decided he had psychic powers himself, something which has made him ten times more money than his television work.

What about Yuri Yurevitch Yuriieff, the orphaned bell ringer who used to be a cinema projectionist?

An incredible man, yes. When he was found as a child and was asked what his name was – first name, middle name and family name – all he would say was ‘Yuri’. For me the man is a true musician; the way he has strung up all the ropes in the bell tower is incredible. The sound he gets from tolling the bells has such depth to it. I actually planned to start the film at a monastery with one single monk playing one single bell and wanted to show bigger and bigger bell-ringing orgies throughout, and Yuri would have been somewhere in the middle. I also spent some time looking for a hermit. Of course, it is not very productive advertising for hermits but I did eventually find one. Actually, he was not a textbook hermit, rather someone condemned to life in prison for murder in a huge prison colony near St Petersburg. Within the huge compound next to the soccer field, he had built himself a small monastery and lived a monastic life. I looked so hard for a genuine hermit and had so many knowledgeable people engaged in this search that I do not believe there are any left. Very few anyway, and very well hidden at that.

So what part of the film is made up? Are some of the characters actors?

When it comes to ‘fact and truth’, I admit that the best of the film is ‘fabricated’. The film begins in the Tuvinian Autonomous Republic, just north-west of Mongolia. An old man is throat singing about the beauty of a mountain. Later in the film there are



Bells from the Deep

two young kids – one is twelve, the other is fourteen – and they sing a love song. What does that have to do with a film about faith, you might ask? And yet it does belong; just by dint of declaration this becomes a religious hymn. Later on we see what seems to be people deep in prayer. We were *en route* to one of the locations when I stopped the bus because I saw a frozen lake in the distance with hundreds of people on it who had drilled holes in the ice and were fishing. As it was so cold they were all crouching down with their backs against the wind, all facing the same direction as if they were all in deep meditation. So the film somehow declares them all pilgrims in prayer.

When you look at a film like *Bells from the Deep* you are not watching a film that in any way strives to report facts about Russia, like an explicitly ethnographic documentary might do. This sounds like someone who reads a poem by Hölderlin where he describes a storm in the alps claiming, 'Ah, here we have a weather report back in 1802.'

Is the legend of the Lost City of Kitezh real or a figment of your imagination?

I heard of the myth while I was out there. It is a very real belief these people have. The legend goes that the city was systematically ransacked and demolished by hundreds of years of Tartar and Hun invasions. The inhabitants called on God to redeem them and He sent an archangel, who tossed the city into a bottomless lake where the people live in bliss, chanting their hymns and tolling the bells. During the summer you find pilgrims on their knees crawling around the lake saying their prayers, though I was there in winter when there was a very thin layer of ice covering the lake. I wanted to get shots of pilgrims crawling around on the ice trying to catch a glimpse of the lost city, but as there were no pilgrims around I hired two drunks from the next town and put them on the ice. One of them has his face right on the ice and looks like he is in very deep meditation. The accountant's truth: he was completely drunk and fell asleep, and we had to wake him at the end of the take.

What do you say to those who feel this kind of filmmaking is cheating?

It might seem like cheating, but it is not. *Bells from the Deep* is one of the most pronounced examples of what I mean when I say that only through invention and fabrication and staging can you reach a more intense level of truth that cannot otherwise be found. I took a 'fact' – that for many people this lake was the final resting place of this lost city – and played with the 'truth' of the situation to reach a more poetic understanding. We react with much stronger fervour and passion to poetry than mere television reportage, and that is the reason why *Lessons of Darkness* struck such a chord. We have known for a long time the poet is able to articulate a deep, inherent, mysterious truth better than anyone else. But for some reason filmmakers – particularly those who deal in the accountant's truth – are unaware of this as they continue trading their out-of-date wares.

Is what we see in Bells from the Deep in any way representative of the general attitudes and feelings in Russia today?

There is something very profound about Russians. I am married to a Russian from Siberia and many of these people have truly ecstatic depths to them when it comes to beliefs and superstitions. I feel the borderline between faith and superstition is very blurred for them. The question is: how do you depict the soul of an entire nation in an hour-long film? In a way, the scene of the drunken city-seekers is the deepest truth you can have about Russia because the soul of the entire country is somehow secretly in search of the lost city of Kitezh. I think the scene explains the fate and soul of Russia more than anything else, and those who know about Russia best, Russians themselves, think this sequence is the best one in the whole film. Even when I tell them it was not real pilgrims out there on the ice, it was people whom I hired, they still love it, and understand the scene has captured some kind of ecstatic truth.

Let's talk about your career as an opera director. Around this time you made your film at the Bayreuth Wagner Festival, The Transformation of the World into Music. You'd been directing opera around the world for some time before you made the film. Was it an attempt to summarize on film your ideas about this side-profession you've found for yourself?