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A Trapped Life: Herzog's Circle in *Stroszek*

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Abstract

Herzog's film Stroszek is about how Bruno pursues his dream of freedom but inevitably fails and ends in dying within the trapped circle. Bruno's journey to freedom can be categorized into three parts, and the invisible life circle impedes his every step during the journey, thus leading to his final despair. This paper aims to analyze and expose the true while cruel life circle reflected intensively in this film.

Keywords

freedom, life circle, Stroszek

Stroszek is a 1977 film made by German director Werner Herzog. Most of the lead roles are played by non-actors. The man who played the role of Bruno Stroszek is Bruno Schleinstein, son of a prostitute. He suffered continuous beat during his childhood, and he doesn't grow well with low reaction. The actor Bruno Schleinstein and the role Bruno Stroszek depicted in the film are hard to differentiate in some ways. In this film, Herzog uses the means of casting, trying a different way to practice the effects of de-familiarization effect. No wonder that the audiences are wondering whether the man they are watching is being himself in the scene or simply acting on the script. As Dickertar mentions that Herzog in his film career has consistently "saddled documentary and fiction forms", *Stroszek* unites plot and documentary in style by depicting the real life of human beings and revealing the inevitable trap and circles in which they are bothered and frustrated constantly (Dickera, 2012, p. 33).

The film is about how Bruno, a single lonely soul, pursues his dream of freedom but inevitably he fails and ends in dying within the trapped circle. Bruno's journey to freedom can be categorized into three parts, and the invisible life circle impedes his every step during the journey, thus leading to his final despair. This paper aims to analyze and expose the true while cruel life circle reflected intensively in this film.

1. "The Smallest Ship": Returning to Physical Freedom

As a Berlin street performer and an artist, Bruno is released from prison at the beginning of the film, and he is warned to stop drinking. The script goes like “Bruno is going to send a signal”, and he blows his bulge horn to show that has regained freedom. At this moment the camera gazes for a long moment through a clear glass vase in the prison window, thus in Mouton’s words, “rendering the outside world in dreamlike distortion, and offering the viewers a richly suggestive visual contrast to the closed and rigid prison world” (Mouton, 1987, p. 101). The dreamlike reality seems to be contained in the vase, unreachable.

Bruno says goodbye to his prison friends. One of them made several paper ships on the desk. At that time, there is a special close shot focusing on the paper ships, and among them, the smallest ship is turned down by a straw constantly. The straw implies all kinds of hardships and challenges that will hinder and disturb Bruno, while Bruno is like the smallest ship in the world, and he is easily to be ignored and lose his direction and confidence in the ensuing course of life.

When Bruno goes out of the prison, he is seen going farther and farther, with only his lonely background dissolving into the center of the frame. Both sides of roads and the parked car are covered with snow, suggesting the harsh reality Bruno will face soon. He immediately goes to a familiar bar where he comforts Eva, a prostitute who is deserted. He told her that he has been on vocation and is starting a new life anyway. In this sense, he acts as a hero who just acquired his rebirth. He lets Eva stay with him at the apartment that his landlord kept for him. Bruno tells his “Good Boy Beo” that he is living with Eva. The occasion performs as a passage of ritual, celebrating their being together and being ready to live a whole new life. However, pains and insults are soon approaching. They are then harried and beaten by Eva’s former pimps. The bullies pull Bruno’s accordion apart and humiliate him by making him kneel on his grand piano with bells balanced on his back. He was forced to do everything and as Huser said, “the magic circle at Stroszek’s home is thrown out of balance through the intrusion and sadistic acts of the pimps” (Huser, 2012, p. 450).

Moreover, Bruno experiences the unexpected indifference and loneliness in his own country. The yard where Bruno plays the accordion is surrounded by buildings intensely, just like a hole. There are only two children listening to his music. As the music flows, the surrounding buildings spins, and the shot formed a circle, with Bruno being surrounded in it. As the camera angles down on his shabbily dressed form, “frowning as he concentrates on his music, we recognize him as lonely misfit that he is”. (Mouton, 1987, p. 101) The following reverse angle shot of Bruno as he pulls his accordion down the street on its cart further emphasizes his isolation and loneliness. The street presents a cold and alienating atmosphere without vitality. People are engaged in their own affairs and almost pay no attention to the music.

As everything gets worse, life in his own country becomes tougher and Bruno begins to envision his future. Faced with the prospect of further harassment, he gradually recognized that the condition becomes intolerable. Eva, obviously reminds us of Eve, is a symbol of the seductress of sin. The American dream is like the appealing apple and the pimps like Satan. Bruno and Eva decide to leave

Germany and accompany Bruno's elderly neighbor Scheitz, who was planning to move to Wisconsin to live with his American nephew Clayton. He firmly believes that the new environment embraces greater opportunities and they can pursue American dream there. Bruno wants to be actively involved in the world as human being and artist.

2. Unexpected Illusion: Alienated Wanderer with Invisible Pain

When Bruno arrives with Eva and Scheitz in the New York harbor on a beautiful sunny day, he celebrates the remarkable scene with another blast on his "freedom horn". In the U.S., with the major exceptions of the long shot of New York metropolis and the drive process from New York to Wisconsin, the film shots are almost exclusively horizontal. Mouton marks that "Herzog's films have always made eloquent use of landscapes and cityscapes, showing direct and intense relationships between the characters and their surroundings." (Mouton, 1987, p. 101) For example, they stand at the top of the Empire State Building, where metal wires are connected to prevent tourists from falling down. From the audience's view, they are confused whether the New York City is caught in the cage, or the three immigrants are enclosed in the huge wire-entwined cage. The extreme inhospitality of the city setting in which Bruno finds himself implies that he has not gotten far from the confinements of prison. He is still not free. The dream landscape seen through the glass of Empire State building is as remote from these city streets and apartment as it is from the prison.

After sightseeing in New York City, they buy a used car and set off to the town. When they arrived, people hug and greet them. Bruno and a dog stand aside, keeping separate from the greeting groups. They gradually go out of the crowd. When Claymen, Scheitz and Eva take a photo together, only the three people are involved in the frame except Bruno, which shows his isolation. At the outset, Bruno told Eva that America would be different, and they could get rich quick. There he works as a mechanic, Eva as a waitress at a truck stop and Scheitz pursues his interest in animal magnetism. In order to have a place to live in the new land, they bought a trailer in credit. The trailer is also a cage. They enclose themselves within the cage, and certainly they have to pay the cost of the trailer. When they move into the trailer, Eva happily dances first with Claymen, who looks much more natural and relaxed, while dancing with Bruno, he appears to be uneasy, which implies his sense of insecurity of the current situation.

As bills mount, the trailer is at risk of being repossessed; their house would be taken back. When the trailer first appears on the screen, it moves horizontally across the screen from left, and completely blocks the view of the landscape. After the auction, the trailer is pulled horizontally again from right, signifying that "Bruno's belongings literally dissolve in front of his eyes", (Sinka, 1988, p. 36) It again forms a dynamic and complete circle, and it is closed now. Everything in the circle is over. Partly because of the financial pressure, partly because of the loneliness and alienation she suffered as an outsider in the new land, Eva falls back into prostitution to supplement her wages, but it is not enough to meet the payments. She gradually feels tired of Bruno's drunken ramblings and deserts him by

leaving with a couple of truck drivers bound for Vancouver. Eva's decision also suggests her returning to her previous circle and giving up of the struggling for breakthrough.

On Eva's leave, a man from the bank visits Bruno and asks him to sign off on the repossession. Faced with all kinds of unexpected difficulties, Bruno responds with no resistance. He signs off the contract immediately, silently, and politely. He employs a passive resistance "through what is not done rather than what is done". (Hobby, 2009, p. 126) Actually, he holds such stance of passiveness and silent acceptance of pain all the time. In Germany, he accepts the insult of the pimps silently. In America, when the truck driver openly teases Bruno and tells him the details about their interaction with Eva, Bruno just leaves them without saying a word.

When Eva gradually separates him physically and spiritually, Bruno is reflective enough to recognize his psychological state. He knows clearly that he "lacks a stable core" for he never feels completely accepted in his adopted culture. He was not certain where he belongs to—in America or in Germany, his suffers identity crisis. His journey tests his skills and enables him to fulfill his destiny, which is determined by his heroism, adaptability and character. In the film, both parts are developed in linear order but the sense of hopelessness becomes far more highlighted and intensified in this part. Sinka regards that Bruno's life in the U.S. comes to "represent a vast, invisible prison far more cruel than the actual prison he knows in Berlin" (Sinka, 1988, p. 28). He staggers in the trapped circle in American dream in vain.

3. Imaginative Freedom: Belief in Future Freedom

Having traveled to a new world to avoid the villains who had been mistreating him, Bruno comes to realize that this new world is even harsher. He confesses to Eva that at first he thought they would reach their goal, but actually he is getting pushed aside as if he didn't exist. He is disappointed with the unsure future. Compared with the clear and recognizable obstacles in home country, the evil in the new situation, in Mouton's words, "is impossible to tell just what has gone wrong, or exactly where the evil lies. (Mouton, 1987, p. 104) The freedom Bruno has been seeking is not to be found. Indeed, his interactions with the outside world are deliberately put before or after all kinds of "closed doors", which suggests "his inability to free himself from his life's restrictions or to move forward into a new life". (Mouton, 1987, p. 104)

Since home is auctioned, Bruno and Scheitz, who is convinced that the world is conspiring against him, set off to confront the "conspiracy". This time instead of a signal horn announcing freedom, he takes with him a rifle and a large frozen turkey, and returns to the garage where he works, loads the truck with beer, and drives along a highway into the mountains. The frozen turkey is deliberate "a bleak response to a chaotic world". (Mouton, 1987, p. 104) The frozen turkey instead of a fresh one suggests the indifference and coldness Bruno has experienced here. Turkey is a celebration of harvest, showing a kind of gratitude, while he gets bleak, cruel and bare reality and received nothing but loss of hope and breaking of his American dream, it has now become an illusion. In this scene, the vehicle, the

landscape, and the music on the soundtrack all "express a somber mood which contrasts with the hopeful tone of the earlier trip to Wisconsin". (Mouton, 1987, p. 104)

Upon entering a small town, the truck breaks down; Bruno pulls over to a restaurant, where he tells his story to a German-speaking businessman. He sets the car on fire, lets the car whirl automatically, and so a ring of fire marks the movement until it explodes. He jumps out of the moving car, then moves to another circle: the rotating ski lift in the theme park. Sinka remarks that since Bruno has been deprived of all feelings of connectedness, the fact that he dissolves into the empty space from the ski lift in Cherokee becomes far better motivated. (Sinka, 1988, p. 27) At the end of the film, Bruno switches the button that control the ski lift, with the incessantly rotating ski lift, the crucial circle occurs. Bruno struggles to escape the circle of harsh reality, which faces another circle. For the common circular scene, Boyer raised that "the circularity implies both stasis and moribundity" and "Herzog suggests that the journey as a whole ends as it began". (Boyer, 2011, p. 271) These circles are like the "great wheel of life force", anyone who falls in it can hardly run out of it, or for those who escape successfully, another circle simply waits for him. People can only take efforts to change the shape of the circle and delay its rolling pace. After Bruno disappears from view, a single shot rings out. The sound of the shot implies that Bruno "will never return from the circle and will be trapped in it forever." (Huser, 2012, p. 452)

Bruno is like a diaspora in the foreign country and it is really difficult for him to settle into the society. He is forced to stand in the marginal shadow of the mainstream culture, without a sense of belonging. Poor, alone and homeless, Bruno must undertake the journey alone. His route is long and difficult, but he finally reaches his destination, makes decision, and sets off on his journey forward. His spirit remains undefeated even as he faces the hopelessness of his situation.

The film ends with an absurd scene: a chicken is playing a piano and a rabbit is riding a toy fire truck. Finding that those chicken and other animals are also trapped in the sealed box, Bruno seems to realize the uselessness of life's struggling, so he opens the switch and let the chicken and other animals dance to the full of their life; the animals' repeated dances also falls into an incessant flow that doesn't come to stop. Bruno expresses his deep resignation of intoxicating repercussions of the repetitive cycle of abuse.

We are conscious of the fact that the world, as Vogel remarks, "is the kind of place that makes people mad, dangling before one's eyes promises of ecstatic release that recede like rainbows the closer one comes to realizing them." (Vogel, 1988, p. 11) After the experiences and reflection on his journey, Bruno finally finds himself in a world not made for them, a world that inevitably frustrates his future plans, desires, and even his conficence. So has no alternate but to jump into another circle, though trapped, he will not be forced to struggle against it.

The universe is not always harmonious and beautiful as we expect to be. It is dangerous and hostile. Hoffman points out that human race is inherently curious about the principles of the world and life we live in. (Hoffman, 2011, p. 30) Herzog's purpose of portraying such a role of Bruno and his story is not

only to make the role impressive enough, but by portraying such a tragic role trapped in several invisible circles, calmly to show us a real world and its cruel law.

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