

PRIESTS OF THE CONDEMNED

film reviews

Oliver Herbrich is one of the few German directors who manages to regularly realizing projects. Without appealing to a broad audience, without significant financial support, the thirty-one year old from Munich has made such committed, personal films as *Wodzeck* or *Bikini – mon amour*. These films are a pleasant contrast to American – and of course, German – commercial movies. In his most recent work, the documentary *Priests of the Condemned*, Herbrich portrays life in the leper colonies in the shadow of the Himalayas. Meanwhile, the filmmaker is particularly interested in the thin borderline separating the "normal" from the "outcast".

(Gebhard Hölzl, Münchner Stadtmagazin)

Oliver Herbrich unsparingly shows the terrible face of leprosy: People with rotten limbs and scabby skin; the misery in the Khokhana Leper Colony, which gave the film its title; the beggars on the streets. But the horror evoked by these images does not dead-end in short-lived compassion. Behind the exterior of the damaged body, Herbrich discovers the lovable and respect-worthy human being. "This is a good life," says a patient who contracted leprosy as a teenager already and was ostracized. For her, the Sewa Kendra has become her village community. Broadcast on Nepalese television too, Herbrich's film was able to contribute to local educational efforts about the disease.

(Heike Kruschinski, Ruhr Nachrichten)

For nine weeks in 1991, he and his small team toured hard-to-reach part of the Hindu Kingdom of Nepal. Here, lepers are still expelled from their village community for fear of infection and due to religious dogma. Even after healing, they are not allowed to return and are permanently ostracized with their children from their caste. Despite many sad impressions, Herbrich's film is no spotlight on misery. An unobtrusive camera allows people their dignity; the unusually open narratives grant them personal names, faces, and stories. His subdued

images accompany the outcasts to the leper station Sewa Kendra on the outskirts of Kathmandu. He shows how the uprooted beggars become living human beings again, within the almost village-like community. This joie de vivre in the face of disability is what makes the film a convincing demonstration of this form of helping people to help themselves.

(Peter Wille, Dortmunder Zeitung)

Herbrich lets the "untouchables" tell the story of their lives with leprosy – as one does not die of the disease. An immune deficiency is the requirement for infection and two to fifteen years can pass until it breaks out. Then the nerve cells lose their sensitivity, and the victims injure themselves without noticing. This leads to infections and the tissue dies. Finally, the leper rots alive. In the two sole medical centers in Nepal, set up by two Germans, the film director follows the invalids going about their lives: How they work, eat, laugh, how they hope, with all their deformities, to at least be cured. For leprosy, considered incurable 20 years ago, can now be cured. In the state-run leprosy camp at the end of the Kathmandu Valley there is no such hope. Here the lepers are abandoned to themselves and their illness. (...)

"Priests of the Condemned" is a bulletin from a vale of tears that can be found in almost every Third World country. The images are not easy to erase. They affect us as they are, without instrumentalizing the horror. Oliver Herbrich focuses – as in his last two documentaries – on the people; he seeks to analyse their Genesis and their environment. In the film it is evident that, this time, an odd uncertainty has gripped him. He deals with this topic seriously, but with a pleasant absence of routine. Thus, despite the distance, a closeness evolves that is the first approach to dealing with a taboo.

(Heiko Küftner, Süddeutsche Zeitung)