

## Notes on the production of the film *Pharos of Chaos*

Even in my 76<sup>th</sup> year it is a bit painful to answer your questions. Memories come up from this muddy pool called *the repressed*. But as I am the only living eye witness, it has to be done.

To begin with, I shall give you an overview about how the production took place. I wrote it a few weeks ago, when you contacted me for the first time. I had the impression that it was too long and too boring. But as you have more than just a couple of questions, it may be useful as a reference.

Bühler and me were about to finish the script of a feature film which a couple of years later became *Der Havarist* and was based on Sterling Hayden's book *Wanderer*. Bühler then got the information that Hayden was actually to be found on his barge not far from Besançon / France; it was the summer of 1981. We decided to go to see him right away. I took a Super-8 camera with me. We (Bühler, me and our colleague from the *Filmkritik* magazine and a friend of Bühler's for long years Felix Hofmann; Hayden and his son Dana) spent three days together at the basin under the Besançon citadel with Hayden talking to us night and day. What a pity that with our small semi-professional camera we could record no sound, all of us stated. So we together took the decision to come back some days later. I looked for a camera operator, a professional 16mm equipment and got into contact with my friend Werner Dütsch from the film department of the Cologne TV station WDR who gave me his word to buy the TV rights of the footage to be shot with Sterling Hayden for a TV show written and directed by Bühler and me (it was broadcast in 1982: *Vor Anker, Land unter. Ein Film mit Sterling Hayden*). Bühler ordered the necessary raw film. As an experienced sound recordist, I worked on the *Nagra*, at the same time directing Bernd Fiedler, our camera operator, and discussing with Bühler and Felix the way to interview Hayden. The shooting on the barge, officially called *Pharos of Islandia*, but nicknamed *Pharos of Chaos* by Hayden, lasted for seven days and nights. Hayden handed over to us one reel of 16mm color and b/w – a silent home movie called *Windjammer* showing scenes from crusades he had made on his own schooner. Back in Munich, with the footage in our hands, worked out by the Geyer lab chosen by me, I began to prepare the raw cut for the 45 minutes TV film. We found out that it could not take in all the exciting and moving moments of our footage. We decided to realize another, longer version, too, as a documentary to be shown in cinema theaters. I worked out an application for film support, at the same time editing the Super-8 footage I had shot during our first trip to Besançon. We added it to our application as a kind of teaser. The support was granted, but the teaser was lost in the depth of the supporting institution. When, at the end, we sensed the need to have some of the footage in the prologue part of *Pharos*, we had to take rests. The TV version had to be finished at first, according to our agreements with Werner and the TV station. The most polite way to characterize what Bühler stated on the post production of this version (January and/or February 1982 in Cologne) in an interview with the radio station *Deutschlandfunk Kultur* in 2018, when he was given a life achievement award at the Locarno film festival, is to call it a result of poor memory. The TV version came first, so it is not at all a cut-down version of the 2-hours-movie. And there was no pressure on us, neither by Werner nor his superiors – we could make it the way we intended to at that time. More than forty years later I have to admit that *Pharos* is a much better film. This is due to the program slot the TV film was made for – back then the WDR film department used to have 45 minute documentations in addition to the feature film program they composed. But the documentations were focused on movie subjects. So we decided to begin with *Johnny Guitar* though we knew that Hayden did not appreciate his movie performances. And it is due to the fact that by then we did not yet know our own footage by heart. So we agreed to have a new start with the footage when the TV version was finished. It took about 6 months to give form to *Pharos of Chaos*.

In the middle of the summer we took our negative to Italy, to have made the answer print and three theater copies at the Cinecittà lab in Rome, one of the English version and two German ones which should be given to a Lucerne lab for the subtitles. We had to be economic. Our production was, in German terms, a low budget one, in terms of Switzerland, France, Great Britain or even the States a no budget one. In Italy we finally could talk about the things to come, waiting for the copies and, at the same time, searching for locations in Sardinia – for the sailing sequences in *Der Havarist*. As a result, we broke. Our friendship ended. I have always been and still I am a cooperation addict – from the students' theater to the film school films, to the 2 films and one script with Bühler, 3 films with Harun Farocki and 40 years with my wife Merlyn Solakhan. I was not content that that time it ended in such a disaster. I had to renounce on directing *Der*

*Havarist* which ought to be the first feature film after my film school time when I had directed no single documentary, but several feature films, short and rather long ones.

When, back in Munich, our negotiations took place, by letters and telephone calls, about the financial consequences of the end of our friendship, one day in late summer Bühler called me and urged me to go all at once to the Holland harbor of Dordrecht. I went there with Susanne, my partner at that time; Bühler came in a separate car, accompanied by Hella Kothmann, who had been with us during the Besançon shooting. Hayden was in Europe again. His barge anchored at a quay not far from the Rhine estuary. Bühler wanted to show the film to him. I had accepted to come, too, because for me it went without saying. The situation was quite different from how Bühler later described it in interviews and texts. Hayden was in good condition, dry. He had been in a hospital for several weeks to overcome his alcoholism, as we already knew. He was very polite, he was an excellent host. But the relations kept cool. We looked at the film in the afternoon in a Dordrecht cinema he had rented for one session, together with a couple of young friends of his from Holland. He invited all of us to a restaurant. Back on the barge again on a sunny late afternoon he stated that the character we had shown in the film was *a chlochard de luxe*. It was not him, not Sterling Hayden, as we could realize right now, he said. He tried to convince us to shoot him once again in Sausalito, New York, Beverly Hills. Propositions he had already sent to Bühler in his telegrams during our post production. *That would be another film*, we had answered in the good-bye sequence of *Pharos*. We talked and talked, but there was no consent. The good-bye this time was a bitter one. We were right, but I felt like a god damned asshole. Hayden was right, too, but what he suggested was an illusion. A bit like Dix Handley's way home in John Huston's *Asphalt Jungle*.

## Your questions

*For research purposes, we are interested in knowing from you how the collaboration on *Pharos of Chaos* was managed between you, and for which aspects of the film each co-author was responsible.*

As you know, the initial credits say: a film by Manfred Blank and Wolf-Eckart Bühler. That is to say, in the old *filmmaker* way: both of us hold an equal part in directing and writing the movie. But this is what by German law is called *Persönlichkeitsrechte* (personal rights). As for the copyright, that is to say the commercial rights, the situation is a bit different.

When in the summer of 1982 we had finished the film, Bühler insisted that all the commercial rights belonged to him. As up to then I had always thought that we were friends, we had never talked about contracts, nor written nor oral ones. I had provided the necessary money for the 45 min TV version as well as the 2 hours cinema version – by talking to my friend Werner Dütsch, producer at the Cologne TV station *West 3*, and by applying for support at the BMI department for cultural film support. So the financing of the film was completed. The only thing Bühler provided was a small sum of cash money to pay the raw stock and the first paying to the lab. I talked to some lawyers who gave me very little hope in receiving my half of the commercial rights. So, being cheated, I had to break the friendship with Bühler. He had to pay me out for all the jobs I had made on the film: co-director, co-writer, sound recordist, editor, executive producer. He began, in interviews and talks to journalists, to make disappear all of my work on the film, like the rulers in the communist era, who used to retouch people having lost their grace from the official photographs. By now, he seems to have succeeded in doing so. But, as the old Romans already stated: *You should not talk about the dead but in praise*. So let it be with Bühler.

See the front page and the last page of the DVD edition of *Pharos of Chaos* and *Der Havarist*. The latter was written by Bühler and me. When we had finished the script, the idea came up to go to see Hayden which resulted in the *Pharos* film. When Bühler finished the *Havarist* feature film, he cut out my name from the credits.

*We are aware of your broader work as a documentary filmmaker, as well as your work as a sound technician on several films by Straub/Huillet (who happen to be Aaron's favorite filmmakers). We also understand that you worked for a time with Filmkritik (including, again, several instances of writing about Straub/Huillet's films). We'd like to understand better what your own interests were as a critic, including because we unfortunately do not speak German. Did you write much about American cinema and/or Leftist American artists, like Wolf-Eckart Bühler did, or were your interests as a critic different?*

As a film critic I have been focused on French cinema, especially the film authors of the so-called *Nouvelle Vague*. So I ended up as a kind of expert in that domain. You perhaps know that in the late 80s, together with Harun Farocki, I made a film about Paris as a cinema place. But you cannot study French *politique des auteurs* without a deep knowledge and enthusiasm of/for the American movies. All of us, critics working for *Filmkritik* in the 70s and the 80s, were crime / gangster movie and Western lovers.

As a film school graduate, I helped Bühler in the shooting and post production of his first films, about Hurwitz and Polonsky, and his booklet about Irving Lerner. But left-wing US film making did not form my prime interest.

*What drew you most to the figure of Sterling Hayden in particular? What did you find to be most compelling about him, and what did you hope to capture about him in *Pharos of Chaos* – from a creative perspective, in addition to from a technical one?*

I did always share Truffaut's admiration for *Johnny Guitar* and Hayden's performance in this movie. So he became one of my favorite actors and I tried to look at as many of his appearances as possible. As a member of Munich students' theater I learned about McCarthy and his committee. So it was not at all an alien subject to me, when Bühler asked me to work with him on the script of a feature film based on

Hayden's book *Wanderer*. He asked me hoping I would bring in a kind of a Brecht-Straub touch. We both agreed that I should direct this movie later on. In his first novel, Hayden tries to work out how he became a friendly witness, an informer in his later opinion, and how much he was ashamed by that. When we had the chance to meet him personally – which resulted in the shooting of *Pharos of Chaos* – I was mainly interested in getting to know more about the sailor-actor-writer as the only man ever to openly express his hate against his own friendly appearance in front of the committee.

*From an editor's perspective, how did you find the form and structure of Pharos of Chaos? How would you characterize the shape that you found for containing Sterling Hayden's story?*

In the end of the winter of 1982, the TV version being finished and the extra money being granted to make a cinema version of what we had shot, we agreed to turn to a new access to our footage. In a way we went back to that summer days six months ago then and wished to tell the story how we met Sterling Hayden. One week with him aboard a barge anchored in a basin directly beneath the Besançon citadel. One week he was at the same time drinking hard and eager to tell us about his life and how he felt. The form and structure we developed was a kind of diary. Each of the days we spent with him dedicated to a definite subject: the barge, the sea, alcohol, the river / the city, the committee, Hollywood. More or less this came to an end we could be content of. Right in the middle of this diary an intermezzo: the meaning of the term *Pharos of Chaos* – nickname he gave to his barge, working title of a new book we was about to write, metaphor for his actual state of mind. The initial sequence (exposition of the place and the character) and the epilogue (our good-bye to him and vice versa) forming a frame to this cinematographic painting. We tried to be true to the way we had shot the footage. This way of shooting was very near to that which, about ten years later, Dominique Païni, at that time director of the *Cinémaèque Française*, characterized as the Straub attitude: *L'insistance du regard* – let it be translated with: looking insistently (in my short key word film, introduction to a Straub evening at ARTE TV station).

*How did you and Bühler believe that the voice over would function in Pharos of Chaos? What perspective would it represent, and how did the two of you imagine the film's narration to contain critical and personal dimensions, in addition to expository ones? How would it complement or contrast with Hayden's own voice?*

As the term *voice over* in German media language means “a translation mixed to a foreign language speaker” I should prefer to talk about off narration. I do not like off narration. We had it in the TV version. I was not content with it. But it works in TV which is, in 19<sup>th</sup> century language, an illegitimate child of cinema and radio with much more family resemblance to the radio. My first intention was to avoid it in the cinema version. But we had to realize that without narration the film would have been much more difficult in terms of accessibility for the public. There would have been a great risk to frustrate our lookers-on. I had a hard time to cut out adulation as well as the tendency Bühler's texts have now and then – to be drenched with testosterone. For weeks I searched for an acceptable modulation. I am convinced we finally found it. The narration reflects our hopes, our feelings we had during that week, when we were Hayden's guests. We did interfere very little during the shooting. Most of the films where someone does are quite embarrassing. So the only thing that we could add to Hayden's honesty was to talk about our own feelings, hoping that in this way a kind of dialogue would result.

*You made reference before to the shorter Hayden film (At Anchor / Land Under: A Film with Sterling Hayden). We have seen this film and are aware of some fundamental differences between it and Pharos of Chaos (for example, the opening discussion of Johnny Guitar that does not appear at all in Pharos). How did you decide that the films would be made differently from a structural and thematic perspective, beyond simple questions of length?*

The TV version came first, so it is not at all a cut-down version of the 2-hours-movie. And there was no pressure on us, neither by Werner nor his superiors – we could make it the way we intended to at that time. More than forty years later I have to admit that *Pharos* is a much better film. This is due to the program slot

the TV film was made for – back then the WDR film department used to have 45 minute documentations in addition to the feature film program they selected. But the documentations were focused on movie subjects. So we decided to begin with Johnny Guitar though we knew that Hayden did not appreciate his movie performances. And it is due to the fact that by then we did not yet know our own footage by heart. So we agreed to have a new start with the footage when the TV version was finished.

*We would be interested in knowing if you participated at all in the restoration process of Pharos of Chaos, and if so, then what you think about the restored version of the film in relation to its original release version.*

I was not involved in the restoration of *Pharos of Chaos*. After I had completely moved to Berlin in 1985 for my job as a teacher at the West Berlin Film Academy (dfffb), there was no more contact to Bühler. The version of *Filmmuseum München* seems to me quite good. I have got the impression that Bühler cut out about 5 – 6 minutes (as far as I remember from the sequences *Die Stadt / Der Fluss* and *Epilogue*). The 16mm original was 119 minutes long. But that is of minor importance. The DVD was obviously taken from the DCP which was made at the same time. The original format (3:4) has not been changed and – above all – the negative has been cleaned thoroughly before being digitized. The version Bühler had made a couple of years earlier by an Australian company (Shock DVD) is a shit. It was taken from a filthy old positive print, the format has been changed to 16:9. I am sorry that they still sell it on Amazon.

One more note

You are completely free to take whatever you like to present *Pharos of Chaos* and *Johnny Guitar*. I should only like to inform you that Bühler's interview you wrote about is not an interview at all, but a dialogue totally written by him. The interviewer's name is an inside joke, it consists of Alf (Mayer), who at that time seems to have become a dedicated follower of Bühler's, and (Felix) Hofmann. I mentioned earlier that he was a long-time friend of Bühler's and had come to Besançon with us. In the so called interview, written 1984 for the opening of *Der Havarist*, there are several inaccuracies, to be polite again. Alf Mayer has copied them for his text and out of different other versions he had compiled for it the DVD edition of *Pharos of Chaos* in 2018. In this way, *alternative truth* is handed down from generation to generation.

I add another text by the same Alf Mayer, written in 1983, when he used to be editor in chief of a magazine called *medium* and obviously liked the film. In my opinion it is not only an original, but a much more better text, too.