



Beyond the Limits

Werner Herzog's metaphysical realism: 40 years of boldly going where no documentary has gone before

by Paul Arthur

At the height of New German Cinema's international cachet in the late Seventies, the suggestion that Werner Herzog's ultimate legacy would reside not in his fictional narratives but in his documentaries would have been met with incredulity—the same response accorded a bit of skewed wisdom from wild-child Kaspar in *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*: “Every man is a wolf to me.” Today the wolves, along with plenty of other undomesticated creatures, have come home to roost. As his recent fiction features arrive with dull thuds, and even his so-called visionary classics drift into irrelevance, Herzog's position in the first rank of nonfiction directors continues to solidify. Strange but true: in a relentless 50-film career, doc titles account for more than half the total (although many are sub-feature length, financed by, and first shown on, European television), and among the director's genuine milestones, docs and fictions can claim equal billing. Since the early Nineties, for reasons at once aesthetic and economic—lower production costs, ease of completion, the expanding market for nonfiction—documentary has become Herzog's dominant mode. The theatrical release of *Grizzly Man*, with broadcast rights held by co-funder Discovery Channel, provides a dazzling platform from which to celebrate a woefully underappreciated body of work.

The hero of his latest adventure derives, at least superficially, from a long line of (invariably male) outcasts and iconoclasts, fictive as well as real, who reject quotidian “human society”—which for Herzog's neoromantic sensibility entails a spiritually bankrupt regime of consumerism and bureaucratic oppression—in favor of a marginalized existence redeemed by primal contact with nature. Here the isolated subject is former beach bum Timothy Treadwell, an autodidactic bear enthusiast and would-be preservationist, encamped on the Alaskan peninsula. Like other Herzogian misfits, Treadwell is plagued by inner demons which he attempts to exorcise through incredibly risky behavior, rehearsing a pattern of vulnerability countered by physical bravado that has repeatedly drawn the director's attention, like a moth to a flame. Katmai National Park's rugged mountainous terrain is studded with crystalline lakes and shrouded by occasional fog—familiar features in Herzog's personal topography, whose prime coordinates also include parched desert and febrile jungle locales. By this measure, *Grizzly* is rather typical in character, theme, and setting. Indeed, the single most frequent, exemplary images in Herzog's nonfiction are aerial views of uninhabited landscapes,

of which *Grizzly* contains its fair share. Place and personhood are often indivisible, yoked by connotations of being on the edge, of frontiers not yet settled. In addition, Treadwell is a dogged self-dramatizer with a thirst for abject camera exposure, a trait reminding Herzog of old collaborator and nemesis Klaus Kinski, with echoes from earlier performances by assorted mountain climbers, pilots, and preachers.

Although as thematically wide-ranging and geographically diverse as nonpareil Joris Ivens—like Ivens, Herzog has worked on every continent and in more than 15 countries—his docs fall predominantly into two genres: portraits and travelogues, with a hardy subset merging aspects of each. As Herzog is wont to declare in signature voiceovers—with Godard, he's among the most distinctive vocal presences in cinema—the terrain inhabited by his subjects can express inner struggles, a symbolic function performed in *Grizzly* by the craggy, foreboding outlines of a glacier. Picasso once remarked that portraiture is essentially a double exercise, a rendering that inscribes both sitter and artist. In Herzog's films, this dynamic is constantly hauled into the foreground: first, because his familiar visage occupies so much screen time (turning the camera on himself as early as 1973, in *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner*, he anticipated by more than a decade the current vogue for first-person appearances); second, because many of the figures he records think of themselves, or are seen by Herzog, as crypto-artists, people with an excess of imagination directed at activities—from mechanical engineering to auctioneering—not normally counted among the formal arts.

Obsessed with eccentric private beliefs, he is relatively indifferent to groupings or collectivities, or precisely those elements of social context and history galvanizing the bulk of documentary's global canon. Still, assorted films, ranging from *Herdsmen of the Sun* (89) to *Bells from the Deep: Faith and Superstition in*



Ready for his close-up: *Grizzly Man* Timothy Treadwell oblivious to the approaching disaster

Hot Spots

HIGHLIGHTS FROM WERNER HERZOG'S DOCUMENTARY WORK

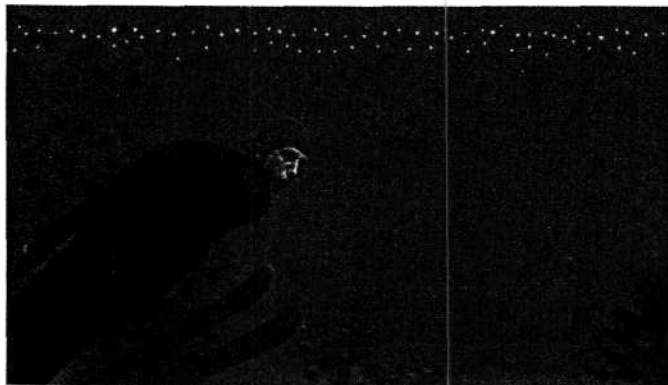
Herakles (62): Herzog's earliest film and his only montage-based effort is an experimental short juxtaposing bodybuilders, ironic bearers of Greek ideals of manliness and heroism, against footage of human suffering and political brutality. A first strike against industrial society as a form of collective madness.

Fata Morgana (70): Documentary urges pierce the skin of his fiction films, and vice versa. This unclassifiable hybrid rehearses the (malign) march of civilization in a desert setting, opening with seven languid telephoto shots of airplanes landing. An extended, fictionalized myth of origins embodying the Herzogian axiom of creation through despoliation.



Land of Silence and Darkness (71): Incredibly moving from start to finish, this film is often linked with *Kaspar Hauser* as an alternate allegory on enigmas of human consciousness, but don't overlook the reflexive undertow: cinema's "blind spot" in evoking sensations of touch, smell, and taste. Like many of his films, this one begins on a note of hopeful stability amidst dire circumstances and builds toward chaos and the void.

The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner (73): One of numerous studies of human flight, this doc focuses on a cranky champion ski jumper (Herzog's favorite sport as a kid) who does abstract woodcarving as a hobby. Way pre-Michael Moore, scenes of technical breakdown and indecision about whether to continue filming make the process of production a paradoxical theme in the quest for transcendent visuality, for an experience beyond language. Super-slo-mo shots of Steiner's jumps exactly mirror the plane landings in *Fata Morgana*.



How Much Wood Would a Woodchuck Chuck? (76): An expedition into Amish country—a typical Herzogian recoil from modernity—to observe a livestock auctioneering competition, where he discovers a perfect form of speech: musical, incomprehensible to tribal outsiders, a "last poetry" of capitalistic exchange, "very frightening and very beautiful." Only Herzog could detect a whiff of the sublime in a claustrophobic cattle pen.



La Soufrière (77): Dogs run free in the deserted streets of Guadeloupe on the eve of a volcanic eruption that never happens. Herzog drags his crew up a steaming mountain to interview a crazed old man who refuses to evacuate. Perhaps the first indication that pervasive use of Wagner, Rachmaninov, etc., as musical accompaniment might not be totally, Teutonically sincere—à la Brahms in Buñuel's *Land Without Bread*.

God's Angry Man (80): Weirdly jaundiced portrait of a sideburned TV minister who never utters a word about faith or spirituality but instead reads long lists of monetary pledges and berates his viewers for not meeting his arbitrary goals. Gene Scott is more a faith-based entrepreneur than religious prophet. Herzog's unconventional interview questions include "Do you cry?" and "What do you dream about?" Imagine Travis Bickle with his own late-night talk show.



The Dark Glow of the Mountains (84): In which the director cultivates yet another blood brother in German mountaineer Reinhold Messner, who not only climbs purely for the existential hell of it but carries a Super-8 camera, making this one of five Herzog docs shadowed by an ancillary cameraman. Herzog promises to deal not with technique but "what's inside" the climber. In the end the two miraculously share the same dream involving endless travel, without purpose or precise destination.

Lessons of Darkness (92): Like a sequel to *Fata Morgana* (they're bundled together on the same DVD), this pseudo-sci-fi parable of mind-boggling—and shockingly gorgeous—environmental devastation in Kuwait following Desert Storm is the best case for what critic Gertrude Koch calls “neo-romantic regression,” a desire to resacralize aesthetic tasks. Briefly references *Night and Fog* as an echo of human apocalypse. The rift in Herzog’s visual language between straightforward observation and expressivity—the basis of his link to “classical” German cinema—has never been more illuminating: long, sensuous tracking shots transform the material aftermath of war. You will never forget scenes of American wildcatters outfitted like astronauts, or Teutonic knights, struggling to cap blazing oil wells. The fire this time.



Ten Thousand Years Older (02): Herzog’s 10-minute contribution to Nicolas McClintock’s omnibus production, *Ten Minutes Older: The Trumpet*, borrows footage of a 1982 Brazilian anthropological encounter with a “lost Amazonian tribe,” a meeting that in essence collapsed 10 millennia of history. Predictably, the upshot is that a majority of the natives soon die of modern diseases. Herzog returns to the scene of the crime to interview aging warrior Tari, a wonderful subject who has made peace with modernity by sleeping with white women, taking an airplane trip, and staring for hours at the face of an alarm clock!

Wheel of Time (03): Often accused of dismissing politics and psychology as conventional trappings of modern decadence—or, worse, of harboring a reactionary mysticism—Herzog frequently makes oblique gestures of social concern: denouncing poverty in *La Soufrière* and *Huie’s Sermon* (80) and defending the rights of Miskito Indians against brutal Sandinista incursions in *Ballad of the Little Soldier* (84). Here he blends coverage of two massive Buddhist rituals with pleas for Tibetan freedom. A charming and witty Dalai Lama gets treated like a run-of-the-mill Herzogian misfit.



Russia (93) and the recent *Wheel of Time* (03), are constructed as surveys or catalogues of particular “tribal” customs. Put another way, while religious rituals are a fairly common motif, emphasis is nearly always on the physical or vocal oddities of individual participants rather than an event’s historical or communal meaning. Critics have taken Herzog’s visual framing and extended shot durations as a distancing “ethnographic gaze,” yet while he clearly loves to visit obscure places, taking special interest in small enclaves retaining a semblance of mystical or pre-modern resistance, his filmic radar is attuned less to anthropology than epistemology. Lurking behind what could be mistaken for an exploitative, or merely truculent—albeit defiantly non-Eurocentric—appreciation of cultural Otherness is a fascination with how people make sense of the world, a receptivity toward what they think they know, and what we can never know about their frameworks of cognition. Occasionally, as in the surreal artist’s bio of 16th-century Italian composer Carlo Gesualdo, *Death for Five Voices* (95), society’s exculpatory judgment of “creative madness” intersects with Herzog’s quest for inimitable outsiders. Generally, however, Herzog marches to his own arrhythmic beat.

Despite family resemblances, Timothy Treadwell defies Herzog’s standard roster of outcasts. He grazed at the borders of media celebrity, an arena to which the director would seem spiritually immune. With the exceptions of Kinski in *My Best Fiend* (99) and TV evangelist Gene Scott in *God’s Angry Man* (80), his social actors seem oblivious to the spotlight. Moreover, as distinct from Kinski and Scott, whose dark ambivalence forms the very heart of their portraits, Treadwell was eager to join the entertainment circus. As we learn late in the film, he headed for Hollywood at 19, found an agent and slogged through casting calls, earned a brief spot on *The Love Connection*, and allegedly came in second behind Woody Harrelson for the bartender role on *Cheers*. Discouraged, he fell into a life of drugs and SoCal surf culture, inventing a new identity as an orphaned Australian before finding his true calling-of-the-wild as an “educator, preservationist, a friend of all species and great steward of this planet”—or so states the website for the organization he founded, Grizzly People.

Over the final five of 13 summer excursions, he compiled 100 hours of video, consisting of alternately mawkish, self-aggrandizing, and enraged monologues addressed directly to the camera (think *David Holzman’s Diary* with claws). Coincidentally or not, the start of his video journal in 1999 roughly parallels the rise of first-person nature shows on Animal Planet and Discovery. Anyone who has logged an episode of Jeff Corwin, Steve Irwin, or Austin Stevens will recognize in Treadwell’s demeanor and intimate bear antics a deranged version of their ingratiating shtick. Judging from the footage Herzog selects, Treadwell has little interest in conveying concrete information; there is hardly a whiff of animal biology or environmental science in the entire film. There are admittedly

several spectacular scenes, including a wild WrestleMania smackdown between a pair of thousand-pound beasts, but it's still a decidedly one-man show: Timmy the "kind warrior," who weeps at what he thinks is a dead bee (it isn't) but also screams "Fuck you, motherfucking Park Service" until he's blue in the face. Bemoaning his constant loneliness, he fails to mention live-in companion Amie Huguenard, who is visible in only a few seconds of footage. To his credit, Herzog refuses to erase her identity but in the end must concede she's a "complete mystery."

Grizzly cuts against the Herzogian grain in another crucial sense: nearly half the footage is borrowed rather than original. He has used found materials before in small doses but never this extensively. It also marks an unprecedented face-off with a fellow filmmaker—although Herzog himself is the subject of two films by Les Blank, not to mention a quasi-fictional turn in Zak Penn's *Incident at Loch Ness* (04)—and he is at pains to praise what he sees as Treadwell's "methodical" film style and daringly therapeutic use of direct address, strengths he might also claim for himself. Hence an issue entirely foreign to the director's ethos, that of divided or decentered authorship, slips in like a postmodern visitor. Vehemently rejecting the principles of *cinéma vérité* neutrality and objectivity, Herzog exerts a demonstrable and unabashedly subjective authorial control over his docs; he tends to caption

individual segments with evocative titles and resorts to personally overdubbing English translations of interviewees in a handful of films. In this instance, however, careful shaping of what must have been a haphazard heap of material does not totally blunt Treadwell's invidious TV-sideshow pitch. Nor does a scene of endlessly repeated takes of a botched monologue, bracketed as further evidence of mental breakdown, complement Herzog's ideal mixture of spontaneity and fabrication.

The crux of "fabrication" in *Grizzly*, as in other films, concerns manipulation of chronology for purposes of dramatic structure. We know from the beginning that Treadwell and Huguenard were killed by a bear in 2003. Herzog approaches, then retreats from, the moment of their deaths along a spiraling narrative pathway, filtering in new information and subtly shifting our sympathies. He uncharacteristically relies on talking heads, including an Alaskan museum administrator who argues that Treadwell's crossing of the ancient line between human and bear was a disgrace and a pilot who says Treadwell got what he deserved. Two-thirds of the way into the story, the director stages a brilliant coup: Treadwell's video camera was running during the fatal mauling, and although the lens cap was on, the audio survived. Herzog shoots himself listening through headphones alongside Treadwell's former girlfriend Jewel Palovak. Afterward he tells her: "You must never listen to this . . . I think you should destroy it." As in parallel scenes

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of suppressed information in *The White Diamond* (04), *The Dark Glow of the Mountains* (84), and *God's Angry Man*, withholding image or sound creates a profound absence that repositions the film's thematic core. That is, a passion for letting it all hang out, which includes Herzog's willingness to play the on-camera fool, is ballasted by a canny fostering of revelatory lacuna.

A self-professed intermediary between opposing worlds—modern/pre-modern, prosaic/mythic, accessible/recondite—Herzog's strongest moments revolve around what can't be shown, what exceeds or beggars representation. In other words, that which testifies to his own inadequacy and, by extension, that of cinema's meager communicative tools. We feel this abnegation acutely in the masterful *Land of Silence and Darkness* (71) when Herzog turns his attention from deaf-blind activist Fini Straubinger, whose perseverance and alternative language skills subdue her handicaps, to a pair of figures so removed from human interchange that the camera can do little more than register the impossibility of translating, much less entering, their subjective realms.

Something slightly different occurs in *Grizzly Man*. At first Treadwell comes off as a glamorously wacky rebel, another alter-ego figure for the director. Following the dead-air "last words" scene, Herzog brings in footage even crazier than that which we've already witnessed (the chronology of these scenes is uncertain). As Treadwell's pathology hardens, Herzog's terms of identification collapse. He disagrees with his protagonist about nature's benign face, stating that "the common denominator of the universe is chaos, hostility, and murder." In the film's last gasp he goes even further: "To me there is no such thing as the secret world of the bear"—a brave, maybe even therapeutic admission in light of previous flights of fancy. It doesn't mean there are no secret worlds or that we should stop beating the bush for alternatives to our materialistic abyss. But to acknowledge no limits on the depiction of social outsiders, on creative acts of going "beyond"—beyond civic language, beyond conscious understanding, beyond visible evidence—is an unhelpful delusion.

The myth that Herzog's undertaking has always been *sui generis*, with few roots and fewer followers (okay, there's Errol Morris), also has its limits. Several critics have suggested that documentary work serves as a convenient outlet for his fictional excesses, a sort of "reality principle" with which to fend off creative lunacy. The growing complexity and genuine achievement of his nonfiction enterprise make this stance untenable. On the contrary, as his fictions sink into mannered repetition of signature tropes, actuality provides an inexhaustible supply of new locations and unsounded ideas.

Without pinning him too neatly to the map of film history, we should remember that, as Thomas Elsaesser notes, postwar German cinema "renewed itself primarily by its rediscovery of documentary," and nearly all of the movement's revered figures—save Fassbinder—operated in the gaps between fiction and doc. While practitioners of the dominant, essayistic branch of New German Cinema mined a legacy of Brechtian cultural politics—everyone from Jean-Marie Straub and Alexander Kluge to Harun Farocki, Peter Cohen, and Hartmut Bitomsky—Herzog evinces stronger affinities with the poeticized European tradition of Buñuel, Franju, and Marker. As for contemporary resonance, Herzog's explorations of first-person address, as well as his recruitment of fictional techniques—reenactment, foreshadowing, invented quotations, and tribal myths—look downright prescient next to today's crop of earnest hybridizers. In sum, his docs are personal without relying on autobiographical hooks, self-dramatizing without the undertow of media hype, self-conscious without the coating of hip irony, multicultural without the onus of lock-step politics. "Perhaps I seek certain utopian things," he proclaims, "space for human horror and respect and dreamed landscapes." These aren't necessarily components of a traditional utopia, but then neither are the restive figures populating his elaborate dreams of reality. □

Paul Arthur's book *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film Since 1965*, published by the University of Minnesota Press, is in bookstores now.

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