



TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Encounters at the End of the World

Werner Herzog on 'Encounters at the End of the World'

Always the most intrepid of filmmakers, Werner Herzog visits Antarctica in his documentary *Encounters at the End of the World*. At the start of the film, Herzog vows that it won't be a documentary about penguins, but it is not a promise that he entirely keeps. Penguins do feature. In one tragicomic sequence, we see a reckless lone penguin with a touch of *Fitzcarraldo* or *Aguirre* about it embarking on a typically Herzogian journey inland that will lead to its certain death.

The real focus of his fascination, though, is the close-knit community of eccentric scientists who inhabit the McMurdo research centre: zoologists, volcanologists, computer experts, students of icebergs – 'PhDs in a land with no language,' as Herzog memorably puts it. They have come to Antarctica because, one interviewee tells Herzog: 'If you take everyone who is not tied down, they fall to the bottom of the planet.' If you're a dreamer or a drifter, this is where you end up.

The film evokes the forbidding continent's past – in poignant scenes, we see Herzog gazing at the cans of uneaten Irish stew in the hut where Shackleton set up base during his ill-fated expedition. He also looks at the continent's changing climate, its eerie landscapes and underwater life, which the divers describe so colourfully that they make the documentary at times seem like a sci-fi movie.

You say at the beginning of the film, 'Don't expect penguins' – and yet you show them.

In a way I did not keep my promise. There is one short sequence in the film, about five minutes long, and it is mostly about the man who has observed penguins for 20 years or so and is not so much into discourse with human beings any more. My questions are very unusual – I ask about things like insanity in penguins. And I try to film a penguin that is literally deranged and walks to his death in the interior of the continent. And the continent is vast – it is 5,000 kilometres ahead of him. It's a strange, moving tragedy going on there. It's not in the line of films like *March of the Penguins*.

Given your remark about cinéma vérité being the 'accountant's truth', I wondered if there was anything you staged in this documentary?

Staging is something everyone in documentary should do. So-called *cinéma vérité* is the answer of the 1960s. Since then we have had a massive onslaught on our sense of reality through an unprecedented explosion of new tools – digital effects, Photoshop. This translates also in cultural forms like reality TV, which is all staged, and even *Wrestlemania*, which I like to watch because it is a totally invented form of reality of so-called fights. We have this onslaught on our sense of reality, and in filmmaking we have to find an answer to it. *Cinéma vérité* is not the answer any more. I've always disliked it profoundly because of the lack of stylistic intensity. You have to do something beyond just recording and presenting.

Do you feel a strong identification with the people who appear in the documentary?

I only filmed the people I really liked. There is a forklift driver, a Bulgarian, who is a philosopher and has studied comparative literature. There is the man who is a

journeyman plumber who believes he is an Aztec prince. Everyone in the film I truly liked. You can sense the warmth. I liked to be around them – have dinner and a good beer, and laugh.

Given that they are restless people who are trying to go to the extremes, do you think they have found what they were looking for in Antarctica?

They are all driven by science – the cutting edge of science. The cutting edge of climatology, for example – you will find the answers in Antarctica. The same goes for the detection of neutrinos and subatomic particles. You need a field of observation which covers thousands and thousands of square miles, where there are no electrical impulses. When you switch on a light switch, it would register on these hypersensitive detection instruments 2,000 kilometres away. It's cutting-edge science that ultimately will determine the future of the human race on this planet.

When did you first encounter cinema?

The first time I encountered cinema was when I was 11 in a little country school. A travelling projectionist showed two films – one about Eskimos building an igloo and the other about Pygmies in the Cameroon building a bridge. The Eskimo film I didn't like at all – it was really lousy how they built the igloos. I immediately sensed it was all pretence and fake. The commentary made you believe that all Eskimos live in igloos, but you could tell they didn't even know how to build one! They did a bad job. Even as a child, I could see it because I grew up in the snow and the mountains.

You sometimes discuss an idea of 'ecstatic truth'. Do you see yourself as following in a German romantic tradition epitomised by, say, the 19th-century landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich?

No. Romantic culture has always been foreign to me – something I really did not like that much. Of course, Caspar David Friedrich is the one who shows landscapes as if they were a quality of human beings. The jungle in *Fitzcarraldo* is a fever dream, as if it were a human quality. In that respect, I feel close to Caspar David Friedrich. But that is about the only connection I could construct between me and romantic culture. My influences are from other corners of culture, such as baroque poets like Andreas Gryphius or – from the time of romantic culture – the writers who are not romantic, like Büchner, Hölderlin and Kleist.

How would you define 'ecstatic truth'?

It's like the mystic transport of late-medieval mystics like Jakob Böhme. My cultural references would be much more the late Middle Ages than romanticism. For me, a quest for truth is hard to articulate. It has very little to do with facts. Otherwise, the phone directory of Manhattan with four million entries would be the book of books – four million correct and truthful statements in the telephone directory. But it doesn't illuminate you at all. How do you approach such an elusive, strange thing as truth? I believe it is in poetry and music – you sense it immediately when you come across it.

Article and interview by Geoffrey Macnab, *Sight & Sound*, June 2008

A Short Film about Ice

A multiple award-winning film-poem documenting the journey of a cinematographer through the fragile landscapes of the Arctic.

ENCOUNTERS AT THE END OF THE WORLD

Directed by: Werner Herzog
©/For: Discovery Channel
Produced by: Creative Differences Productions
Presented by: Discovery Films
This project was supported by: The National Science Foundation
Executive Producer: Erik Nelson
Co-executive Producers: Dave Harding, Phil Fairclough
Produced by: Henry Kaiser
Associate Producer: Tree Leyburn
For Discovery Channel (Executive Producer, Discovery Films: Andrea Meditch; *Executive Producer:* Julian P. Hobbs; *Executive in Charge of Production:* Jane Root)
Business Affairs: Cynthia Shapiro
Production Co-ordinators: Jane Pfeister, Lola Mitchell
Production Manager: Jessica DeJong
Location Manager: Patricia Jackson, Raytheon Polar Services
Supervising Producer, Post-production: Randall Boyd
Post-production Co-ordinator: Colin Hatton
Written by: Werner Herzog
Director of Photography: Peter Zeitlinger
Underwater Photography: Henry Kaiser
Motion Graphics: Douglas Martin
Edited by: Joe Bini
On-line Editor: Danica Barnes, Alphadogs, Inc.
Original Artwork 'Chimp Riding Goat': Bruce McCall
Colourist: Brian Hutchings, Alphadogs, Inc.
Music Composed by: Henry Kaiser, David Lindley
Musicians: David Lindley, Henry Kaiser, Danielle DeGruttola, Jen Baker, Cheryl Leonard, Damon Smith, William Winant
Sound Design: Douglas Quin, D.D. Stenehjem
Production Sound: Werner Herzog
Post-production Mixers: Michael Klinger, Douglas Quin
For: Roger Ebert

With

David Ainley (*marine ecologist*)
Samuel S. Bowser (*cell biologist*)
Regina Eisert (*physiologist*)
Kevin Emery (*survival school instructor*)
Ashrita Furman (*multiple world record holder*)
William Jirsa (*linguist, computer expert*)
Karen Joyce (*traveller, computer expert*)
Douglas MacAyeal (*glaciologist*)
William McIntosh (*volcanologist, geochronologist*)
Olav T. Oftedal (*nutritional ecologist*)
Clive Oppenheimer (*volcanologist*)
David R. Pacheco Jr (*journeyman plumber*)
Stefan Pashov (*philosopher, forklift driver*)
Jan Pawlowski (*zoologist*)
Scott Rowland (*transportation department*)
Libor Zicha (*utility mechanic*)
Werner Herzog (*narrator*)

USA/Canada 2007©

101 mins

A SHORT FILM ABOUT ICE

Director: Adam Laity
UK 2020
28 mins

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Scott of the Antarctic

Sun 2 Jan 12:30, Mon 24 Jan 18:00

The Conquest of Everest

Mon 3 Jan 16:10, Wed 12 Jan 20:40 (+ intro by explorer Mark Wood)

The Great White Silence

Mon 3 Jan 18:20, Sun 23 Jan 12:10

Touching the Void

Wed 5 Jan 20:30, Sun 23 Jan 18:30

The Fight for the Matterhorn

(Der Kampf ums Matterhorn)

Thu 6 Jan 18:00 (+ intro by BFI curator Bryony Dixon), Sun 23 Jan 15:20

The Red Tent (Krasnaya Palatka)

Tue 11 Jan 18:00 (+ intro by BFI curator Simon McCallum),
Sun 30 Jan 18:00

YES & NO Salon: Exploration Now

Wed 12 Jan 18:30

Encounters at the End of the World

Sat 15 Jan 15:00, Tue 25 Jan 20:30

Talk: Silent Cinema: Intrepid Women

Sun 16 Jan 15:30

To the Ends of the Earth: The Transglobe Expedition

+ Q&A with Ranulph Fiennes

Tue 18 Jan 17:45

Antarctic Crossings: Postwar shorts + intro by

BFI curator Patrick Russell

Tue 25 Jan 18:00

The Epic of Everest + live score by Simon Fisher Turner

Sat 29 Jan 19:00

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