



## JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN: THE FILMS OF WERNER HERZOG

# Into the Abyss A Tale of Death, a Tale of Life

### Into the Abyss A Tale of Death, a Tale of Life

Directed by: Werner Herzog

©: Creative Differences Productions Inc., Skellig Rock Productions Inc.

Production Companies:

Creative Differences, Skellig Rock

For: Investigation Discovery

In association with: Spring Films Ltd.,

Werner Herzog Film GmbH, More 4

Presented by: Sundance Select,

Investigation Discovery

Executive Producers: Dave Harding,

Amy Briamonte

Executive Producers for Investigation Discovery:

Henry Schlieff, Sara Kozak,

André Singer, Lucki Stipetic

Produced by: Erik Nelson

Supervising Producer, Post-production:

Randall Boyd

Written by: Werner Herzog

Director of Photography: Peter Zeitlinger

Picture and Music Editor: Joe Bini

Music Composed by: Mark Degli Antoni

Production Sound: Eric Spitzer, Jeff Duncan,

Randy Foster, Michael Lile, Al McGuire,

Steve Osmon

Narrated by: Werner Herzog

USA-UK-Austria 2011©

107 mins

Digital

Werner Herzog makes an unlikely American. Of all the 'New German Cinema' directors who surged in European film culture in the 1970s, Wim Wenders seemed the one most likely to cross the pond. Wenders droned on about 'the Americans colonising our subconscious', but you could tell from his infatuation with Edward Hopper-style Americana, his yearning for Hawksian camaraderie and his vaguely misogynistic Puritanism that he was well cut out for Hollywood. So it was no surprise that it was Wenders who signed with American Zoetrope to make *Hammett* (1982) while Herzog went looking for close encounters with erupting volcanoes and shot films in the Sahara and up the Amazon.

Of course, *Hammett* turned out to be a cautionary experience for Wenders (see *The State of Things* for details) and he has ended up as much a Euro-film bureaucrat as a director, with *Pina* consolidating a late penchant for making performance documents. Herzog has meanwhile become one of the most prolific filmmakers of his generation, using a base in Los Angeles to produce a steady stream of oddball features (*The Bad Lieutenant* *Port of Call: New Orleans*, *Rescue Dawn*) and idiosyncratic documentaries, the latter generally financed by US cable channels. The new documentary *Into the Abyss* has the same place in his filmography that *Paris, Texas* has in Wenders's.

*Paris, Texas*, dominated by Ry Cooder's dolorous slide-guitar solos, was all about reuniting the emotionally damaged members of a broken family. *Into the Abyss*, strongly coloured by Mark Degli Antoni's score featuring plangent guitar picking from David Byrne and Sebastian Steinberg, is formally dedicated to the families of victims of violent crime; it deals with the decade-long fallout from three killings in 2001. Both films see small-town Texas as a nexus of white-trash social problems: alcoholism, drug addiction, tawdry bars, illiteracy and inarticulacy, mental and physical prisons. In short, trailer-park lives.

Less inclined than Herzog to Germanic romanticism, Wenders (and his scriptwriter Sam Shepard) never get into metaphors of 'the abyss' – but they are no less fixated than Herzog on the nihilism and incipient madness bred by empty lives, not to mention the DNA spirals of despair and hope in dead-end towns. In the face-off between fiction and documentary, though, Herzog wins. His real-life interviewees ultimately say more than the characters created by Shepard and Wenders, and the glimpses we're given of their lives are a whole lot more poignant.

*Into the Abyss* is not an investigative documentary in the usual sense. Structured in a prologue and six chapters (each section features two or more interviewees), it uses a police account to set out the facts of the case.

In Conroe, Texas, in 2001, two dooper teenagers, Michael Perry and Jason Burkett, shot dead middle-class housewife Sandra Stotler while she was baking cookies at home. Their motive was to steal her car, but they found themselves unable to drive out of the gated community where she lived. So they called up Stotler's adopted son, their acquaintance Adam Stotler, who arrived with his friend Jeremy Richardson. These two boys were subsequently murdered for the electronic device which opened the community's gates, enabling Perry and Burkett to complete their theft of the car; Perry also stole Adam Stotler's driving licence and pretended to be him when first challenged by the police for show-off driving in the car, which he claimed to have bought with a lottery win.

Perry and Burkett were arrested in a shootout less than three days after the murders. Perry confessed on the spot and gave evidence which led police to the corpses of the two boys; he was sentenced to death. Burkett was also convicted, but given a life sentence after the jury heard testimony from his father, also a long-term jailbird, about the boy's sickly and deprived childhood. Facing execution eight

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## **JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN: THE FILMS OF WERNER HERZOG**

**Signs of Life** Lebenszeichen

Mon 1 Jan 12:30; Sat 13 Jan 15:00

**Fata Morgana + The Great Ecstasy of**

**Woodcarver Steiner** Die große Ekstase des  
Bildschnitzers Steiner

Mon 1 Jan 18:00; Wed 17 Jan 20:30

**Even Dwarfs Started Small**

Auch Zwerge haben klein angefangen

Tue 2 Jan 18:15; Mon 15 Jan 20:45

**La Soufrière** Warten auf eine Unausweichliche

Katastrophe + **Lessons of Darkness**

Lektionen in Finsternis

Wed 3 Jan 18:20; Tue 16 Jan 20:40 (+ intro by  
writer Ian Haydn Smith)

**Heart of Glass** Herz aus Glas

Thu 4 Jan 18:30; Fri 19 Jan 20:40

**Land of Silence and Darkness**

Land des Schweigens und der Dunkelheit

Thu 4 Jan 20:50; Wed 10 Jan 20:45; Wed 17 Jan  
18:15 (+ BSL intro by deaf filmmaker Sam Arnold)

**Aguirre, Wrath of God** Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes

Sat 6 Jan 15:15; Sun 14 Jan 11:40;

Tue 23 Jan 18:30

**My Best Fiend** Mein liebster Feind – Klaus Kinski

Sat 6 Jan 17:45; Sat 13 Jan 21:00

**Little Dieter Needs to Fly** Flucht aus Laos

Sun 7 Jan 15:20; Thu 18 Jan 20:45

**Fitzcarraldo**

Sun 7 Jan 17:45; Sun 14 Jan 14:20;

Thu 18 Jan 17:50

**Stroszek**

Mon 8 Jan 18:20; Sat 20 Jan 20:40

**Werner Herzog's Tales of Life and Death:**

**An Illustrated Talk**

Wed 10 Jan 18:30

**Nosferatu the Vampyre**

Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht

Fri 12 Jan 18:10; Wed 24 Jan 20:50;

Sat 27 Jan 15:00

**Grizzly Man**

Fri 12 Jan 20:45; Sun 14 Jan 18:15;

Mon 29 Jan 18:15

**Echoes from a Sombre Empire**

Echos aus einem düsteren Reich

Sat 13 Jan 14:10; Tue 30 Jan 20:30

**Woyzeck**

Sat 13 Jan 18:20; Sun 28 Jan 12:30

**The Fire Within: A Requiem for Katia and**

**Maurice Krafft**

Fri 19 Jan 18:30; Wed 31 Jan 20:50

**The White Diamond**

Sun 21 Jan 18:20; Fri 26 Jan 18:30

**Into the Abyss – A Tale of Death, a Tale of Life**

Fri 26 Jan 20:45; Sun 28 Jan 15:10

days after speaking with Herzog, Perry (who calls himself 'a Christian') now denies having murdered anyone. Burkett also denies murder; since being jailed he has married a woman who helped with his appeal, and she is now expecting his child by artificial insemination.

This account leaves dozens of questions about the case unanswered, but there's no dispute about the outcome of the trial – and Herzog anyway isn't conducting an Errol Morris-style inquiry. What interests him, as his title suggests, is defining 'the abyss'. He has two things on his mind.

One is the death penalty itself: he's against it, and he finds an eloquent ally in the person of Fred Allen, former chief of the Death House at Huntsville Prison, who quit his job suffering something like post-traumatic stress after supervising 125 executions. (All those statistics about Texas executing more prisoners than any other state and George W. Bush never commuting a death sentence during his years as governor go unmentioned in the film, but Herzog didn't pick murders in Texas by accident.) Peter Zeitlinger's camera prowls through the execution chamber, examining with appalled fascination the straps used to bind the prisoner to the gurney, but Herzog wisely omits any anti-capital-punishment tub-thumping: a Shoah-like documentation of the bureaucracy of executions is enough.

The other 'abyss' Herzog is venturing into is the raging emptiness that leads screwed-up teenagers from broken homes to commit senseless crimes, and that equally leaves bereaved relatives contemplating suicide. He interviews two of those left behind, Sandra Stotler's daughter and Jeremy Richardson's brother, and asks both of them to hold up portraits of the deceased as their memories choke them up. He also interviews two innocent bystanders about their encounters with the killers; one (an ultra-macho guy) was physically attacked, the other (a seen-it-all woman) was intimidated and scared.

But the catalogue of pain, abuse and social squalor comes into sharpest focus in the three prison interviews Herzog conducts through bullet-proof glass, two with the killers themselves (one shortly before his death) and the third with Jason Burkett's father Delbert, a former junkie/alcoholic who will spend the rest of his life in jail, and who is now piously remorseful about his failure as a parent.

A week before his execution by lethal injection, the toothy, boyish Michael Perry faces his fate with a brash equanimity, looking forward to an afterlife reunion with his late mother. He's in full denial of his crimes and speaks more about his memories of a boyhood trip to the Everglades (gators, monkeys) than about the murders. His big mistake, he says, was in ever trusting the slightly older Jason Burkett to take care of him.

The markedly less excitable Burkett himself, interviewed separately, also denies murder and indicates the five places he was shot during his arrest; he speaks warmly – and surprisingly articulately – about his father, and about the 'Death Row groupie' who has married him in jail. Herzog notes in the presskit that Burkett is apparently an Aryan Supremacist ('though he denies it') and he certainly looks the part, but the most effective challenge to his wounded-innocent front is the testimony from one Jared Talbert that Burkett once held a loaded gun to his head for 45 minutes in a dispute over a girl.

Some of the film's virtues are negative ones. Herzog doesn't appear on screen and spares us his usual voiceover speculations about the protagonists' dreams. (His notes assure us that he wore a formal suit throughout, complementing the politesse of his questions.) The refusal to engage in arguments and recriminations is also admirable, as is the understatement of the film's polemic thrust. The nearest it comes to rhetorical excess is the rather florid chapter titles. For once, Herzog the batty ethnographer is nowhere in evidence; this film is wholly the product of Herzog the romantic pessimist. He stares into the 'abyss' and it stares back with tears and remarkable tenderness: the film ends with extraneous but oddly touching talk of hummingbirds.

Tony Rayns, *Sight and Sound*, April 2012