

THE INSPIRATION OF WERNER HERZOG

by James Fry

After completing my short film, House of Cards, I was gratified to discover a message on my answering machine stating that the film had been selected for screening at Local Heroes International Screen Festival in Edmonton. The festival would also pay my return airfare and four days accommodations. This was some good news for a change and came at a time when my usual optimistic disposition was somewhat worse for wear.

As an independent filmmaker with “several projects in development,” rejection becomes a way of life. We are used to being ignored and belittled. Abandonment and betrayal are our constant companions. Having our faces stomped in the mud is like a tiptoe through the tulips.

But every few years, the accumulative effect of being treated like a leper on the streets of Calcutta begins to take its toll and Macdonalds begins to look like a viable career alternative. This is when a little inspiration is required. Mine came in the form of Werner Herzog.

The day before leaving to attend the festival I was faxed a list of delegates and to my surprise and delight, Herzog’s name appeared on the list. I had been a fan of his films for many years and was thrilled at the prospect of meeting him in person.

On the drive downtown from the airport I asked our driver where I could find the enigmatic Mr. Herzog. He informed me that I had missed his talk that morning and that he would be leaving for Vancouver the next day. I had no time to lose. On arrival at the hotel, I made a bee line for the front desk. The clerk told me that he was still in the hotel but could not divulge his room number.

Before leaving for the festival, I had decided that I would meet this man by any means necessary. Herzog himself is legendary for his persistence and determination. To achieve his ends he has walked hundreds of miles, forged government documents, stolen and lied, picked locks, thrown himself on to a cactus patch, dragged a 340 ton steamship over a mountain in the Amazon jungle, and even eaten his own shoe.

I would follow his example. If necessary, I would knock on the doors of every one of the four hundred rooms. I was prepared to camp out in the lobby, eat amphetamines to stay alert, and ambush him at the check-out desk. I would question the guests at gun point as to his whereabouts and yes, if need be, I would even eat my Birkenstocks.

Luckily, I ran into him at the hospitality suite ten minutes later.

It took me a moment to recognize him without his mustache but as soon as we made eye contact there was no mistaking that intense and enigmatic Bavarian stare. He was in high spirits having just returned from the West Edmonton Mall where he was completely captivated by a novelty hotel with fantasy suites. He liked the truck stop room the best. I told him I was showing a film at the festival and was disappointed to learn that he would be leaving before my screening the next day. But, despite his busy schedule, he agreed to meet me in the lobby of the hotel that evening. Armed with a tape recorder and a camera, I arrived fifteen minutes early.

Werner Herzog was born in a remote Bavarian village and made his first phone call at the age of seventeen. He claims that an old Fu Manchu movie inspired him to become a filmmaker and in the last thirty-five years he has made over forty feature films and documentaries. Through his films, Herzog looks at the world with an uncompromising, penetrating gaze, which elevates the subject matter from mere cinematic story telling to a unique form of subconscious film poetry. The end result achieves a hypnotic effect which seems to transcend the medium of film altogether, transporting us to an unknown world of mad beauty where we are no longer just looking *at* things, but into the heart of things.

Whether set in the Amazon jungle (Aguirre, Wrath of God, Fitzcarraldo), darkest Africa (Cobra Verde, Herdsman of the Sun), the Australian outback (Where the Green Ants Dream), or the oil fields of Kuwait (Lessons of Darkness), Herzog's stories remain distinctly German. But even here, the cultural influences are forged with a fierce individualistic vision which transcends cultural boundaries, resulting in a strange and beautiful fusion of personal vision and universal perspective. Few filmmakers have achieved this elusive quality on film and for this reason Werner Herzog is one of the greatest visionary film artists of our time.

When he finally arrived for our interview, he was still full of stories about the West Edmonton Mall. Speaking precise but accented English, he went on about the fleet of submarines, the performing dolphins, a full size replica of the Santa Maria and sculptures of huskies in the igloo room. He said that unlike Las Vegas or Disneyland, the mall had an authenticity he found fascinating. Authenticity is essential to Herzog and his quests to achieve it are the stuff of legends. As a child, he remembers seeing an educational film showing Eskimos building an igloo, "You could see that they didn't really know how to build an igloo, you could see it was fake. With my films I wanted people to be able to trust their eyes. In Fitzcarraldo, when you see a steamship being dragged over the mountain, you can see that it's no joke. It's happening for real and you can just sit back and trust your eyes."

Herzog's films are the antithesis of Hollywood fare. They speak a different cinematic language. The chasm that exists between the personal vision of creative cinema and the formulaic crowd pleasing fluff of Hollywood is growing wider. Even the so called no budget/low budget independent hits of today, where filmmakers have complete editorial control, are rife with the hallmarks of commercial Hollywood movies.

The problem lies in the fact that filmmaking is by far the most expensive art form on the planet. Even low budget productions cost a fortune. To make this money back, you must sell tickets, and to sell tickets you have to appeal to an audience. The more money you spend, the more people you have to appeal to. And filmmaking is becoming more expensive every day.

The sad fact is, in this climate of commercial realities, the true film artist is a dying breed. If the current trends continue, we may never see another Orson Welles or Fellini or Godard, or Herzog.

I am curious to know if Herzog ever gets calls from Hollywood. "They send me a lot of screenplays but I haven't found a good story yet. I think I'm better off writing my own screenplays. I am currently working on a film about the conquest of Mexico and Francis Ford Coppola is involved. But I am not making a Hollywood film. Somehow it will still be a Bavarian film. I have nothing against what they do in Hollywood. It doesn't bother me. Let them do it."

Because of budget limitations, working quickly with small crews has become a standard approach for Herzog and I am interested to learn about his approach to filmmaking. "I shoot only from one angle and don't save my ass by doing a lot of coverage and I don't know how I will shoot a scene until I have the actors and crew on location."

I remember the three most important rules of filmmaking I learned at film school; Pre-Production, Pre-Production and Pre-Production.

"But you must be well prepared before you get to the set with a shot list or storyboards," I say.

"I have never used a storyboard. Storyboards are the tool of those who lack imagination. To be a film director, you have to be a lion tamer of the unexpected."

"Then it's all pure inspiration. Right" I suggest.

"On the set you don't have the luxury of waiting for inspiration; you just have to do something. You have to find a way to advance and everything will fall into place in your wake."

"You must work intensively with the actors," I say, "A lot of talk about motivation and long rehearsals."

Wrong again.

"I've always flatly refused to discuss motivation and all that bullshit with actors. I can tell them what to do and guide them into the feelings but I'm not prepared to discuss it endlessly in abstract terms. I have always managed to get good

performances. It doesn't necessarily make for a better performance if you talk about motivation for two hours."

Of course, now I have it. Everything must be in the screenplay. I hazard a guess that he spends a lot of time on the script, constantly re-writing until everything's just right. Right?

"My screenplays are written as prose texts without dialogue or camera directions. The longest time I ever spent writing a screenplay was nine days. Normally it would be just four or five days. I see the film so clearly in my mind that I just have to write it down. I just describe what I see."

So, how does a maverick film artist like Herzog get the money he needs to make films? I start with a preamble about how hard it is to find money, how the involvement of financial partners, distributors and broadcasters ends up compromising the film, how hard it is to get those muddy boot prints out of my clothes. He cuts me off, "I don't like the culture of complaint. It's difficult to make films everywhere but if you have a project of substance that you believe in, it will create its own dynamic and money will ultimately follow you through the streets like a common cur with its tail between its legs."

As with all true artists there is no concrete method at work, no rule book. Herzog could no more tell us how to finance a feature film than Bob Dylan could tell us how to influence the music of a generation. Original thinking cannot be learned. It is a rare combination of passion and determination, vision and magic that makes great art.

In *Lessons of Darkness*, a one hour film on the burning oil fields of Kuwait, Herzog paints a dark, poetic vision of hell. The narrative has a transcendental, religious quality and I ask if this was intentional. He takes a moment to search for the right words. "Ultimately, yes, though not as a scripted program. There is a distant echo deep inside me from a religious past. I grew up in a family of militant atheists and almost broke the family apart when I became a Catholic at the age of fourteen. I do not belong to any church now but I have had more dramatic religious experiences than anyone I know."

I had heard that Herzog, during the morning seminar, had said he could never make a comedy because he had no sense of humour. He was quick to correct me. "This is how things get distorted, I didn't say that I had no sense of humour, I said that I had a defect of communication because I don't know what irony is. I have a problem talking to French intellectuals because I take everything literally. But I do have a sense of humour and I do understand jokes."

I am reminded of a scene from *Heart of Glass*, a film in which Herzog hypnotized his actors and directed them while in a trance state. Two villagers are staring drunkenly at each other across a wooden table in a bar. We are left to wonder what they will do next and the anticipation builds to a quiet crescendo. Then,

without breaking eye contact, one of the men reaches across the table and picks up a bottle of beer. He wields it like a club and very slowly raises it above the other man's head. For a second he pauses and then, with an uncommitted tap, brings it down, breaking the bottle and soaking his companions head. Herzog giggles like a child at the memory, "It's a Bavarian ritual," he says.

As our meeting winds down, I am struck with the feeling that even without his international reputation, if Herzog were setting out in today's harsh economic environment to make his first feature film, he would likely succeed. He would find a way to make a film on his own terms and would not succumb to the, "Culture of Complaint." He would succeed for the same reasons that great artists have succeeded against all odds throughout history. Ultimately, their talent and passion will create momentum that will overcome any obstacles that mediocre men may place in their way.

In many of Herzog's films people strive to rise above their impossible circumstances. Sometimes they succeed and sometimes they go mad trying. In a world of compromises, Herzog asks us to believe that anything is possible, that no matter how big we dream, if we have the courage and passion of our convictions and can inspire enough people around us, we will create a climate where the impossible becomes feasible. Where thought forms and dreams are made manifest, and where 340 ton steamships can be dragged over mountains by manpower alone.