

From One Q&A to the Next
Werner Herzog, Walking Contradiction

Werner Herzog: Interviews

Edited by Eric Ames

from the *Conversations with Filmmakers Series*, edited by Gerald Peary

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By Cynthia Close

“Will the real Werner Herzog please stand up?” Surely, the panelists would have been fooled if Werner Herzog had been a contestant on the 1950s TV game show *To Tell the Truth*. It is ironic that one of greatest enigmas in the art world of the 21st century is also one of its most prolific, discussed, revered and occasionally dismissed filmmakers. While many have attempted to get at the “truth” of the man through analysis of his films, they have only gone on to be thwarted by the filmmaker's own denials of any single, correct interpretation of his work.

Perhaps the best chance we have of knowing who Herzog is and what he thinks about life and film and art is through a reading of the collected interviews he has given over the course of his career. We are offered just such an opportunity in *Werner Herzog: Interviews*, edited by Eric Ames, an associate professor of German and a member of the cinema studies faculty at the University of Washington. He is also the author of *Ferocious Reality: Documentary According to Werner Herzog*, which I reviewed with great pleasure for *Documentary* not so long ago.

Can we have too much Herzog? He has made over 60 films and given more than 800 interviews, the best of which were selected for this volume; some appear here in English translation for the first time. Most of the featured interviews focus on his major films, and are chronological, starting with the 1968 reprint from *Filmkritik 3: Tribune des Jungen Deutschen Films: Werner Herzog* and ending with *Out of the Darkness: Werner Herzog's Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, a discussion with Samuel Wigley of the filmmaker's 2010 experiment in 3D. In between are 23 conversations with Herzog, spanning his entire career. Will we finally discover the “real” Werner Herzog, the man behind the camera, by reading this book? Probably not. There are moments when questions are asked directly and answers are equally direct, only to be contradicted in interviews years later.

This is not to suggest that Herzog is a willful liar, although there are certainly times when his answers provoked an eyeball-roll from me, and other times when I nearly burst out laughing. In those moments, he seemed to be having a good old time, playing a cat-and-mouse game with the interviewer.

The book answers, in part, the question, “Why does Werner Herzog give so many interviews?” He is undeniably a great storyteller, and the interviews, as Ames points out, seem to be a form of autobiography when read collectively. They provide “a platform for establishing his own identity as a filmmaker.” The interviews are all part of his creative process of “narrating a life through a series of vibrant and memorable stories.” What we can discover in these discussions are “the dynamics of performance, scripting, rehearsal, staging, citation, fabrication, transformation and improvisation”—all elements we associate with Herzog's methodology of filmmaking.

Herzog is a maker of myths. In both his films and interviews, he blurs the line between fiction and documentary; the hard truth of the matter always remains uncertain. The myths he helped to create are enhanced, shifted and changed through repetition, as in the childhood game of “telephone.” With each telling, the stories become more mysterious and visionary.

In a 1968 interview, the filmmaker is asked, “How did you come to make films?” He answers, “I never really had a choice. From the moment I could think independently, I knew that I would make films.” A short while later, in the same interview, he states, “I almost think that the fact of my birth is just a rumor.” Now we see what we are up against: When we have an inkling what Herzog plans to do with us, he muddies the waters; we begin to doubt what we are told.

South American Experiences: A Conversation with Werner Herzog on Aguirre, the Wrath of God, an interview conducted by Peter Schumann in 1973, was most interesting. As Schumann says of the filmmaker, “His magical, archaic gesture, with which he describes the world and people, tends toward mythological thinking.” The same could be said of Schumann, an artist and founder of the iconic Bread and Puppet Theater, which suggests he is projecting his own worldview onto Herzog. This kind of projection Herzog invites.

Aguirre, the Wrath of God remains one of Herzog’s best-known films. Shot on location in Peru and situated around 1560, the work takes on majestic themes, showcasing the failure of imperialism, a concept that resonates in modern times. In the interview, Herzog comments on fear: “I’ve filmed in Black Africa; during the shoot I was jailed five times in a row, I had malaria, we almost died. Nothing scares me any more—neither a jungle, nor [actor] Klaus Kinski, nor costumes, nor being with hundreds of Indians.” Elaborating on his infamous relationship with Kinski, Herzog maintains, “The man is actually crazy. [During production on *Aguirre*] his behavior was impossible; he raved like a lunatic at least once a day. To his credit, I also have to say that he worked for a much lower fee than usual, out of pure fascination for the role and for the script.”

The interviews overflow with the energy that infuses Herzog’s films. His comments run the gamut from poignancy (“There are a lot of broken people in my films, and perhaps *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* is a film without hope.”) to hilarity (“There is something that really frightens me about chickens. There’s a flat, incredible stupidity in their eyes. If the devil existed, he would appear in the form of a chicken.”) More on his attitude towards animals: “Now a monkey, that’s an animal I can like, as opposed to chickens, which frighten me. A situation always becomes clear with monkeys...”

This extraordinary man claims, “I am not an intellectual. I know perfectly well that I am not eccentric. I feel that I am a part of the times and that I am motivated by the same things that motivate other people. For example, like other people, I have no private life.” This statement made in 1973 proves to be prophetic in today's world of surveillance, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and all the rest.

The book is not all conundrum, however. The chronology here, beginning with Herzog's birth on September 5, 1942, in Munich, Germany and ending in 2013 with the release of his Web video *From One Second to the Next*, a documentary short on the dangers of texting and driving, is factual and verifiable. The filmography, starting in 1962 with his first film, *Herakles*, through the second season of *On Death Row for Investigation Discovery* in 2013, is a detailed and valuable reference.

For the first time, in all my reading about Werner Herzog, I found myself utterly charmed by him. It became apparent to me that he is one of the world's most conscious artists, aware every minute of the effect he is having on his audience.

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