“An ‘Impassioned and Adventurous Career’: Celebrating Filmmaker Werner Herzog”

Introduction of *Fitzcarraldo* and Director Werner Herzog

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie
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1. WELCOME

Thank you, Jon.

I am very pleased to welcome you all to the Indiana University Cinema for the world premiere of this digitally restored version of *Fitzcarraldo*, to be followed by a conversation with our very distinguished guest, one of the most revered filmmakers of modern times, Werner Herzog.

We are honored to have Mr. Herzog on our campus as a featured speaker in the William T. Patten Lecture series. Many of you were present for his excellent talk (which was at capacity) last night on *“The Search for Ecstatic Truth.”* Our university community looks forward to hearing the lecture he will deliver tomorrow on *“The Transformative Role of Music in Film”* in the Auditorium. And, of course, we are very pleased to be able to screen a number of his marvelous films in conjunction with his visit, and to host a conversation with him here in the Cinema later this week.

It is a distinct pleasure to welcome Mr. Herzog to Indiana University.

His prolific body of work includes 43 full-length films, 19 of which are full-length fiction features and 24 of which are documentary features, 7 fiction shorts, 7 documentary shorts, 18 staged operas, and numerous appearances as an actor in film and on television.

Francois Truffaut notably called Werner Herzog the most important film director alive.

Time magazine selected him as one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World in 2009.

"Among directors of the last four decades," as critic Roger Ebert rhetorically asked, "has anyone created a more impassioned and adventurous career than Werner Herzog?"

As those of you who are familiar with Mr. Herzog's "impassioned and adventurous career" know, he has risked his life to make films, he has been shot at, and he has travelled to the furthest reaches and some of the most inhospitable parts of the earth.

In fact, Mr. Herzog has noted that he may be the only professional filmmaker ever to have made films on all seven continents.

2. *FITZCARRALDO*: "ONE OF THE GREAT VISIONS OF THE CINEMA"

Tonight, we will see one of the films that Mr. Herzog made in a remote and inhospitable part of the world: *Fitzcarraldo*.

Roger Ebert has called it "one of the great visions of the cinema."[1]

[1] http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20050828/REVIEWS08/508280301

The film tells the story of a mad dreamer, Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald, whose name has been simplified to "Fitzcarraldo" by the indigenous South Americans. Fitzgerald dreams of bringing opera to the jungles of the Amazon, and commits everything to making it happen.

The production has become the stuff of film legend.

"*Fitzcarraldo,"* Ebert writes, "is one of those brave and epic films, like *Apocalypse Now* or *2001*, where we are always aware both of the film, and of the making of the film. Herzog could have used special effects for his scenes of the 360-ton boat being hauled up a muddy forty-degree slope in the jungle, but he believed we could tell the difference."[2]

Burden of Dreams, Les Blank's documentary about the making of *Fitzcarraldo* (which was screened here two weeks ago), notes that the production encountered obstacles including:

- attacks by warring indigenous tribes that resulted in injuries to several crewmembers,
- a civil war that forced Herzog to stop shooting at one location and move the entire production to a different river system 1,000 miles away,
- the near-destruction of one of the two steamships that was used in the film,
- and the nearly fatal illness of Jason Robards, who was originally cast in the title role. About 40 percent of the film had been shot with Robards when he became ill with dysentery. All of those scenes had to then be re-shot with Klaus Kinski.

Incidentally, Mick Jagger was also originally slated to play Fitzgerald's assistant in the film, but because of schedule delays, he had to resume touring with The Rolling Stones, and the character was cut from the film.

[2] Ibid.

In the International Cinema Review, Douglas Messerli calls *Fitzcarraldo* a “daring cinematic act, a spectacle of insistence that movies really matter, that they can create realities vastly larger than life.”[3]

The film was nominated for the Palme d'Or award and Mr. Herzog won the award for “Best Director” at the 1982 Cannes Film Festival.

3. WERNER HERZOG: DOCUMENTING LIFE AT THE EXTREMES

Throughout his entire career, Werner Herzog has created “daring cinematic acts” that insist that “movies really matter.”

He was born in Munich during World War II. When the home next door was destroyed in a bombing raid, his family moved to a remote mountain village in Bavaria, where Herzog spent his formative years. There, he had no access to films or television. He made his first film in 1961, at the age of 19. While still in high school, he worked the night shift as a welder in a steel factory in order to produce that first film.

Within a few years, he had become an integral figure in the creation of the New German Cinema, a period in German cinema during which the success of Mr. Herzog and other young directors sparked a renaissance in German film.

He has gone on to become one of the world’s most celebrated international filmmakers and one whose work has expanded the language of modern cinema. Much of his work focuses on life lived at the extremes of nature and at the edges of human existence.

His early masterpiece, *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, made in 1972, was one of the touchstones of New German Cinema and has remained an enduring classic. The film, his first with Klaus Kinski, tells the story of a mad 16th century conquistador, who leads

[3] http://internationalcinemareview.blogspot.com/2012/08/werner-herzog-fitzcarraldo.html

his men to their deaths in search of gold in South America. *Time* magazine counts it among the “100 Best Films of All Time" and the film’s visual style had a strong influence on Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film, *Apocalypse Now.*

Mr. Herzog has been a documentarian throughout his career. Much of his work blends fact and fiction. He has made documentaries that contain fictional elements and he has made feature films, like *Fitzcarraldo*, that were based on actual events. No director has done more to show us that all fiction films have elements of documentary, and that all documentaries are, in part, constructed fictions.

Three of his recent films that are considered to be documentaries—*Grizzly Man, Encounters at the End of the World*, and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams,* which had its United States non-festival debut here at the IU Cinema in April 2011—have garnered a great deal of international attention.

His work has been honored by all of the world’s major film festivals, including Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Sundance, and Toronto at prestigious film award ceremonies around the world.

Mr. Herzog has also founded and directs the Rogue Film School, a seminar-based school that offers workshops across the country.

The school’s philosophy is summarized by these words from Mr. Herzog that appear on the school’s web site: “The Rogue Film School is not for the faint-hearted; it is for those who have travelled on foot, who have worked as a bouncer in a sex club or as wardens in a lunatic asylum, for those who are willing to learn about lock picking or forging shooting permits in countries not favoring their projects. In short: for those who have a sense for poetry. For those who can tell a story to four year old children and hold their attention. For those who have a fire burning within. For those who have a dream.”

4. PRESENTING WERNER HERZOG

Following tonight's screening of *Fitzcarraldo,* Mr. Herzog and I will have a short discussion about the film and about his career, but first, I would like to invite him to say a few words.

Would you please join me in welcoming one of the most passionate and adventurous cinematic artists of our time, Werner Herzog.