

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Grizzly Man 2005

Werner Herzog. 1942-

OVERVIEW

Nature. Werner Herzog works from a keen interest in nature, and its presence as a backdrop to human drama and to the meaning of the human other—for to this director wild nature and the human occupy a conflictual relation. When we look back to films like *Heart of Glass*, *Aguirre*, *Fitzcarraldo*, even the horror film *Nosferatu*, we see large panning shots of hills and mountains, sometimes awesome and wondrous, sometimes, as in close ups of the Amazon jungle, fearsome and threatening. This same engagement with nature quite expectedly shows up in the documentary films which Herzog has created since 2000. We see it in, for example, *The Wild Blue Yonder*, which deals with extra galactic (and other remote) space, or in *Grizzly Man* (2005), in which scenes of Alaskan wonder blend with presences of the cold and other face of nature.

Footages. *Grizzly Man*, which first showed in 2005, is a documentary film based on the film footage made by amateur naturalist and bear lover, Timothy Treadwell before October 6, 2003, the year he and his girlfriend, Annie Huguénard, were killed by a bear in Alaska's Katmai National Park and Reserve. Treadwell had been spending his summers in this well preserved area, rich in grizzlies, for the previous thirteen years, and had developed a complex, buddy-buddy relation to many grizzlies, had on occasions petted them, and had filmed the park's bears and its scenery from many angles, and in depth; this Herzog documentary draws on footage from the last five years of Treadwell's life, and records the audio portion of the brutal death of Treadwell and Annie.

Identity. Who Treadwell really was/is should emerge below, but a preliminary word may give shape to this interview. Timothy Treadwell (1957-2003) was a Long Island teen ager with a strong desire to act. The crisis of that desire came when he tried out for a part in *Cheers* and came in second to Woody Harrelson; a loss which drove Timothy into a season of drink and drugs which nearly killed him, but from which he emerged into a new obsession which was to see him spending the better part of thirteen years in the Alaskan wilderness.

Ambition. There he discovered his passion for protecting bears, a passion blending a cutesy attitude—calling his pet bears Mr. Chocolate or Sgt. Brown—with the attitudes of what one critic has called a mixture of a drama queen with a devotee of extreme sports. However, we view this man, we may want to subscribe to the thoughts of an astute professional bear biologist, Charlie Russell: 'The fact that Timothy spent an incredible 35,000 hours, spanning 13 years, living with the bears in Katmai National Park, without any previous mishap, escapes people completely. Even with his city-kid background, I found myself mesmerized by what he could do with animals.'

STORY

Simple. In one sense the story of *Grizzly Man* is simple. We have looked at the biography of Timothy, we have seen the evolution of his passionate relation to bears, the opinions of numerous interested observers, about Timothy's obsession, and the ultimate violence that put an end to Timothy's quest. In another sense, the story is the way Herzog unfolds the basically simple tale.

Inserts. The basic material, into which Herzog studs the opinions, personal takes, and indeed himself at one point, is the 750 hours of camera footage taken by Treadwell in the years before his death. There is much great filming in there, of the Alaskan meadow and mountain landscape, of incidental discoveries of beautiful corners and nooks, of hidden dens of insect and fish life, of bears in mating or macho sparring rites, of rushing rocky streams.

Participants. The inserts—which of course are always pieces of art in themselves, organically built into Treadwell’s film—open with the seaplane pilot, who surveys the landscape in Treadwell’s camping vicinity, and from the air spots the killer bear, and the already decomposing remains of Timothy and Annie. Not long after this revelatory intrusion we sit with the Air Emergency Crew, who have arrived to clean up the mess, and farther toward the end of the tale, Herzog himself declaiming fascinatingly about the harshness of nature, and a coroner staidly declaring the final condition of the human remains that had been handed over to him.

Consummation. The most moving intercalation is left for Herzog himself, and for Jule Pavolak, the designated inheritor of Treadwell’s photo archive, as well as his former girlfriend. We have seen Herzog once before, explaining to us the rapaciousness of nature, as he had done for Les Blank, in the onsite Amazonian interviews of *Burden of Dreams*. In the intercalation left for Herzog, himself, the director is barely visible, in a slim dime quarter of profile, listening (with ear phones) to the never before heard audio feed of the death struggle of Timothy. We are looking at Herzog listening and at the same watching Julie watch him listening.

Puzzle. Is Herzog listening to what he calls ‘the ecstasy of fact’? We have no way to know. One perceptive critic says that for him what Herzog calls the ecstatic truth lies in the experience of this final scene: ‘I want to watch Jewel watch Herzog listening.’ So awe-filling was that final listening, that when Herzog advised Jewel not to keep the tape—which was hers—she agreed (whether or not she carried through,) to seal it in a bank vault, and never to listen to it.

CHARACTERS

Timothy Treadwell Treadwell is the focus of the entire documentary; the bear lover who spends thirteen summers in the Katai National Park, photographing bears; the apostle of the bears’ lamentable plight—which was arguably quite exaggerated; and ultimately the victim of the animals he cared for so much.

Werner Herzog Herzog, the director of the film, appears once during the film, and again at the end, in a narrow profile at the left side of the screen, as he portrays himself listening to the tape of the death agony of Treadwell, and at the same time looking at Jewel Pavolak, who is watching him.

Jewel Pavolak The former girlfriend, then associate, of Timothy Treadwell, and in addition the trustee with power over the footage that Timothy has left as his legacy. She is deeply invested in the footage archive of her friend, and gives Herzog permission to use the material. She appears once, crucially, at the end of the film.

Assorted clips: the pilot who found the remains; the emergency air team that cleared up the mess; the coroner; two ecologists; Herzog. These inserts vary the narrative of the film, and give us fresh insights into the life, manner of death, and significance of Treadwell’s work.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

TIMOTHY TREADWELL

Character This character is complex. We have reviewed it above, but incompletely. A frustrated actor, with high ambitions, Treadwell seems to have found his passion in a uniquely fond relation to grizzly bears, whom he has adopted in the Alaskan wilderness. His approach to the grizzlies, and to other wild encounters like a beloved fox who runs away with his hat, is childlike; it is like he is pretending to be one of their own, in his bandanna and fatigues; as though (in some way) he is declaring an allegiance to these simple innocents of the grasslands and streams of Alaska. That he misunderstood them in the end was no surprise to those park rangers, whose strong advice was that one should never get closer than one hundred yards to a grizzly.

Illustrative moments

Charmed In one film clip Treadwell approaches a bee seemingly asleep on a large flower. He expostulates at its beauty, then his film catches the bee waking, pulsing, rising. It is a small vignette. But there are many of these. We are talking many hundreds of hours of sometimes rare and fascinating nature observation. Only the melodramatic ending of this story can divert our attention from what was a remarkable opus in photography.

Driven. Treadwell longs to make the world realize the pleasures of concourse with bears. He also believes that society has it in for these animals, and that they need his presence, as a knight in shining armor, to take care of them. He is generous with speaking engagements to school children, and public television appearances, to draw attention to the (usually greatly exaggerated) plight of North American grizzlies.

Mr. Chocolate. Mr. Chocolate and Sgt. Brown are two of Treadwell's pets, huge grizzlies he imagines as guardians, of him and weaker bears. He addresses them casually, like old friends passing in the street. They hear him call out 'Hiya, hi man,' and lumber on in search of sex or salmon, combing the streams like archeologists. One day they will have had enough.

Free spirited. The conclusion of this tale is grim, but from its outset, in broad Alaskan meadows, with Treadwell dancing across a field, and a couple of grizzlies snarfing fish near a nearby stream, we have an inspiring sense of Treadwell truly having found himself in life, being in the right place at the right time. We are happy with our original hippy. What fate brought him down? Did #141, the bear who did him in, simply have a bad day?

THEMES

Ecstasy Herzog is concerned with ecstatic emotions, like that highlighted at the documentary's end, when we watch Jewel watching Herzog's face as he listens to the audio tape of Timothy's death. Herzog is crafty. He may have been listening to the audio tape, or he may not have been. The audio tape may have been terrifying or it may not. The ecstatic conclusion may have been real or it may have been staged. It sure works!

Mission For thirteen years Treadwell had been spending his summers in the Alaskan wilderness, with his bear friends, but increasingly he felt the need to protect the grizzly bear population of North America. He founded a grassroots organization, Grizzly People, spoke in schools to children, appeared on Letterman—who expressed fear that Timothy would be eaten by a bear—and became the spokesperson for his branch of the Animal Rights Movement.

Naivete "I am a kind warrior! I will not die at their claws and paws! I will be a master!" These words of Timothy Treadwell, in relation to his control over his bear friends, unveil the complex and naïve attitudes this amateur naturalist adopts, toward the population of grizzlies who circulate in his neighborhood. Tim seems to feel that he is a savior of the bear population, even though he meets those animals in a protected and unthreatening environment, a well cared for national park. Timothy's paternalistic concern for the bears sparked his founding of a grassroots organization, Grizzly People, and a busy schedule of speaking at schools and community organizations, about the plight of the North American grizzly.

Nature Herzog makes it clear, that he finds Treadwell's view of nature simplistic; for Herzog, as he puts it in Les Blank's documentary, *Burden of Dreams*, nature is heartless toward human beings. Yet the director of this film is respectful toward the simplicity of Treadwell's animal sentiments, and even toward the cutesy manner that gives pet names to Mr. Chocolate, etc., and speaks in a 'Hi ya' tone to his particular favorite bears, as they circle leerily around his camp.