Werner Herzog Dialogue with Roger Ebert, 1999

Roger Ebert:
Six months after I became a film critic, I met Werner Herzog at the New York Film Festival. And that began a dialogue that has continued to this day on various continents, at various cities, at various times. I have never found him less than fascinating on this subject of film. And during all those years, my entire career as a film critic, Werner Herzog has been a touchstone, a person who constantly challenged me with the strength of his new ideas and of his strong visuals.

Roger Ebert:
I'm Roger Ebert. And I'm at the Walker Art Center where we're going to have a dialogue of Werner Hertzog tonight. And he has promised to start with a declaration of principles that he calls the Minnesota Declaration.

Bruce Jenkins:
I welcome to this dialogue, Mr. Roger Ebert and Mr. Werner Herzog.

Werner Herzog:
Thank you. If you leave the microphone here for me.

Werner Herzog:
Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, before we start this dialogue, and Roger Ebert knows about that I would like to make a statement. And it is something I have reflected upon for many years in the frustration of seeing so many documentary films. When you look at television, you probably have experienced the similar frustration. There's something ultimately and deeply wrong about concept of what constitute fact and what constitutes truth in documentary cinema, in particular.

Werner Herzog:
And very recently, traveling around a lot, I was jet lagged, woke up a couple of times during the night and try to switch on television, and it was all bad. So, between 3:00 and 3:15 in the morning in Sicily, I wrote down quickly a manifesto which I would like to read to you. I would like to call it the Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema, and it has a title, Lessons of Darkness, and the lessons are numbered.

Werner Herzog:
One, by dint of declaration, the so-called cinéma vérité is devoid of vérité. It reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants. Two, one well-known representative of cinéma vérité declared publicly that truth can be easily found by taking a camera and trying to be honest. He resembles a night watchman at the Supreme Court who resents the amount of written law and legal procedures. "For me," he says, "there should be only one single law. The bad guys should go to jail." Unfortunately, he is part right for most of the many, much of the time.

Werner Herzog:
Three, cinéma vérité confounds fact and truth, and thus plows only stones. And yet, fact sometimes have a strange and bizarre power that makes the inherent truth seem unbelievable. Four, fact creates norms and truth illumination. Five, there are deeper strata of truth in cinema and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization.

Werner Herzog:
Six, filmmakers of cinéma vérité resembled tourists who take pictures amid ancient ruins of facts. Seven, tourism is sin and travel on foot virtue. Eight, each year at springtime, scores of people on snowmobiles crash through the
melting ice on the lakes of Minnesota and drown. Pressure is mounting on the new governor to pass a protective law. He, the former wrestler and body guard, has the only sage answer to that. You can't legislate stupidity.

Werner Herzog:
Nine, the gauntlet is hereby thrown down. Ten, the moon is dull. Mother Nature doesn't call, doesn't speak to you, although a glacier eventually farts. And don't you listen to the song of life. Eleven, we ought to be grateful that the universe out there knows no smile. Twelve, life in the oceans must be sheer hell, a vast, merciless hell of permanent intermediate danger, so much of a hell that during evolution, some species, including men, crawled flat onto some small continents of solid land, where the lessons of darkness continue. Thank you very much.

Werner Herzog:
Ladies and gentlemen, I've never had a majority on my side, all throughout my life. I wish you to adopt this as a Minnesota Declaration by acclamation.

Roger Ebert:
So moved.

Werner Herzog:
I have asked the Walker Art Center, who was kind enough to invite me with this kind of stuff to distribute the text to you, because some of it... as a souvenir to this evening, which I enjoy a lot already. Thank you very much. Okay.

Roger Ebert:
I have a question to ask you about the declaration, but I will wait until it is handed out. And I'll say something first. The first time I met you was in 1967 at the New York Film Festival, and I had been a movie critic at that time for six months. And you showed a film, Signs of Life, at that time and we were invited to the home of Robert Shaye, who founded New Line Cinema, but at that time, as you remember, was a very poor young man who lived in a very small apartment in Greenwich Village.

Roger Ebert:
And I sat at your feet, where I've been seated ever since, and we were both 25 years old. I knew at that moment that I sensed in a way that as long as I would be a film critic, I would be interested in what you did, because you burned with a special flame with an intensity and with a joy. And it has been true. Now, all of these years later, I know every time I see one of your new films that I am going to be inspired by it.

Roger Ebert:
I remember, in particular, and I wrote about it in a note for the Walker, a time when we set at the Martinez Hotel in Cannes, and you told me that we are starving for images, starving for images. And I said that I went out and I looked at a movie, and it had people running around, and then people in cars, and then people smoking cigarettes in diners. And then they got back in their cars.

Werner Herzog:
On the telephone. Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
And they're on the telephone. And I thought it's true. It's true. We cannot look at infinite variations of these four shots and call it the cinema.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
And when you use the word ecstasy here-
Werner Herzog:
Yeah, ecstatic truth.

Roger Ebert:
Ecstatic truth.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
I think that that may be the very key to what you're getting at.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. It's not easy to get this across, what does it mean, ecstatic truth, and what constitutes as mere fact, which is that the truth of accountants, even though one has to... we shouldn't dismiss the power of facts because, as one of the lessons says, fact create norms and they create norms including ethical norms. When you see, for example, a footage shot in concentration camps right after they were liberated, it is fact, fact, fact and nothing but that. And it has such an immense power that it creates norms of moral behavior.

Werner Herzog:
So, we should not dismiss that. But it's not the end of it. It's not what can be reached in cinema. There are deeper strata of truth, and you have to be inventive and you have to fabricate, and you have to stylize. And you have to catch and try to find this elusive magic of images. If we don't have these images, if we don't develop an adequate language of images, an adequate grammar of images, our civilization will be, sort of, maybe even die out like the dinosaurs.

Werner Herzog:
I have the feeling that we must develop adequate images, and they are limping behind. They're lagging behind. There have been such dramatic evolutions in the last past decades. And when you look at television or at much of what Hollywood does, there is something very unsatisfying. And there is a deep gap between what is us and what these images are. So, that's where we have to... we have to look out for that.

Roger Ebert:
You wrote or spoke once of your belief that the ordinary person has within him enormous poetry that is not liberated. And you talked about hypnotizing people and asking and telling them that they were looking at a giant sapphire, which was such a hard stone that a poet, the greatest poet-

Werner Herzog:
An emerald, yeah.

Roger Ebert:
An emerald that he had spent his-

Werner Herzog:
A whole cliff of emerald. Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
He had spent his lifetime engraving a poem to this.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
And then you ask them to read the poem and ordinary people-
Werner Herzog:
Sure. Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
If you could tell that story because it shows that there is a poetry inside of us that we're not always willing to access.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. It refers to work on a film which I did many years ago. It's called Heart of Glass. All the actors in the film acted under hypnosis. It was not a circus gimmick. It had to do with a story where a village collectively lapses into trance or like sleepwalkers walk into a foreseeable disaster. So, at first, stylize it, for the sake of stylization, people were hypnotized and they opened their eyes under hypnosis without waking up. Americans, by the way, hated the film because it's so slow and people speak so strangely.

Werner Herzog:
Anyway, the Scandinavians loved it. Yeah. But the Americans, yeah. Anyway, and in choosing a cast, I invited potential actors for it and I explained to them that they would act under hypnosis. And I would have 20, 25 people each week assembled and would put them under hypnosis. I was curious to find out what is intensified under hypnosis. For example, memory works very well under hypnosis. People would learn their lines by heart much faster under hypnosis than without the effect of hypnosis.

Werner Herzog:
I tested what I sensed some sort of a poetic sort of language inside of them, deeply buried inside of them. It depends also on the quality of suggestion. I can't put you under hypnosis and say, "Roger, you are Hemingway now. You are Shakespeare now. Write me a poem. You wouldn't do it." But you have to suggest something very evocative. A cliff of emerald and the holy monk, or a poet who was spent all his life to engrave a poem.

Werner Herzog:
And there was one man who took care of horses for a police squadron on horseback. He just cleaned the stable and took care of the horses. And I put my hand on his shoulder and he opened. I said, "You will open your eyes when I put my hand on your shoulder." And he opens his eyes and I said, "Can you see the poem?" He says, "Yeah. I kind of see it blurred, but I don't have my glasses." So, I said, "Put your glasses and then you will focus and you will see it very clearly." And he looked with a glasses and sees it all of a sudden and he reads with a very strange, beautiful voice. He read, "Why can't we drink the moon? Why is there no vessel to hold it?" I don't remember fully, but it was very, very beautiful.

Werner Herzog:
Same thing happens with audiences who watch cinema under hypnosis. I would hypnotize an audience, like this here, some 300 or so people, and show films like Fata Morgana, some of Aguirre. And it is very strange because it's mysterious. We do not know much about how vision functions and how we elevate things, and how, for example, some of the people felt they were circling around Kinski like a helicopter and see him from behind, and really scared by him. It was very, very strange and very mysterious and still mysterious. And I'm trying to discover more in trying to articulate that. We have one excerpt which we'll show you.

Roger Ebert:
Yes, we have an excerpt that we want to start with from-

Werner Herzog:
Lessons of Darkness, yeah.
Roger Ebert:
Lessons of Darkness, which is a film about... well, I shouldn't say what it's about because it takes place on another planet.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. Okay. Can we see that, please? And it's the very beginning of the film, Lessons of Darkness. Number one, this quote, the collapse or the cataclysm of the stellar universe will occur like creation in grandiose splendor. Philosophers or people who know about philosophy asked me, "I've tried to find it in Pascal's works. Is it in policy? Is it in his thoughts? Or where is it?" And I kept evading the question and they kept saying, "Yeah. He had this critical edition of him and it was in some appendix?"

Werner Herzog:
Truth is, it's all made up. I made it up myself. But why? Yes, it sounds funny, but it has a very particular reason. As the audience, before the film even begins, you are sensibilized and you are elevated to a very high level, and I do not allow the audience to step down from that ever during the film. Everybody of course knows it's about Kuwait. It pretends to be a science fiction film.

Werner Herzog:
The next image that you see is, I show mountain ranges, valleys, and the landscape enshrouded in mist. The mountain ranges actually were less than a foot tall. It was some tracks of trucks in the sand in Kuwait, and I shot it close up and panned, and it was all because it was so hot and so overheated, it was kind of steaming or smoking. But for me it looked like a strange landscape and it is fabricated. It's an imaginary landscape. It's an ecstatic landscape, not a real landscape.

Werner Herzog:
And the first creature that we encountered on this planet is not just an extraterrestrial. He was just one of the firefighters who wanted to have the water flow in a hose being cut off something because he tramples on it in points and does things. And I kind of liked him. I like this man and I made him into a extraterrestrial. And that constitutes something that is deeper, that is beyond the facts. Fact is that what you see, the landscape and the mountain ranges that you see are just tracks in the sand and no more. But in our imagination and with a kind of music and that text that you have read before, it constitutes a deeper strange, deeper ecstatic truth.

Roger Ebert:
You know it does. I saw it at the Telluride Film Festival for the first time, this film. And critics sometimes make ridiculous statements, such as, I laughed so hard that I fell out of my seat and had to have artificial respiration, and be given oxygen and so forth. I try never to make statements like that, ever. But I will tell you something that, because I never make statements like that, I'm telling you it's literally true.

Roger Ebert:
Sometimes when I'm watching a film, I will feel an electrical charge go through my body, a tingle. And I get that so frequently with your films a moment when... it's like when the Star Spangled Banner is, when you sing it before the baseball game. I don't know if any of you feel like that. I do even though I may think it's a pretty bad song. I think we could have a better song for our national anthem. But when I saw this film, I was sitting in my seat and I had been transported to this place that had to do with man's... with the fires of hell and you knew the story of the war, but also you saw the sites that we're going to see in the next clip. Then, several months later, I saw a very bad film on the same subject that was shot for IMAX.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah, that's exactly what-
Roger Ebert:
They had a five-story screen and 180 speakers and it was-

Werner Herzog:
In the accountants' truth.

Roger Ebert:
It was accountants' truth.

Werner Herzog:
In the accountants' truth, yeah.

Roger Ebert:
And some narrator saying, "193 fires burned out of control for more than six weeks." And I'm thinking, "Werner didn't use any narrator to... he let us feel." It was the feeling and feeling more than just this event. It was the feeling of the symbolism of it. And maybe we should look at the next clip because it shows the approach, and with the music, and with the slowness of the camera.

Werner Herzog:
Which transforms, yeah.

Roger Ebert:
Instead of cutting down into a documentary rhythm, we look at this and that. You have the immensity.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. All of you probably have seen the fires of Kuwait on CNN or in the evening news day after day after day, always in these 15 seconds clips, and all this Sonar voiceover that Saddam was bad, or something like this. Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
7 million gallons of oil a second.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. And here we have an event that is unique in human history and it is singular. It is kind of singular and it will remain singular because technically it cannot happen in the future anymore. And it has a great significance. I thought I will go with a camera out there because it must be recorded for the memory of humankind. There is something deeper about it, something more significant than just pollution of this, and an invasion by a dictator, and a guy whose name is Saddam and who is bad. So, maybe we can see this clip, this excerpt. There is a problem with rolling it quickly to that point.

Roger Ebert:
It's as if the television news has made us think that everything has to be told in 60 seconds or 45 seconds, and it all can be explained.

Werner Herzog:
Sure. Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
The way to cover this story would have been just to put the cameras out there in the field for an hour and let you look at it burn.

Werner Herzog:
Right. Yeah.
Roger Ebert:
Or to show your film.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah, it was also... here it comes. It's okay. We'll eventually get lesson number seven, I think. And a smoke arose like a smoke from an oven. Now, there it is.

Roger Ebert:
Now we have to stop.

Werner Herzog:
No. Let's show it. It's okay. Whatever comes.

Roger Ebert:
Okay. I think that what we should do is go ahead and look at the clip of *Aguirre*, since that's the one we have.

Werner Herzog:
Whatever is coming along. Let's just go wild. We'll just go wild with whatever is coming.

Roger Ebert:
So, go ahead and look at that clip. And we were going to get to it next, anyway. So, here we are.

Werner Herzog:
Okay. I actually am just finishing... a speedboat, people thought it was a helicopter shot, but it's a speedboat.

Roger Ebert:
This is a speedboat.

Werner Herzog:
And the real tough thing is to slow it down and not create awake. So, I was good at that.

Roger Ebert:
Because when the camera comes around, you don't see the wake.

Werner Herzog:
Well, you'll notice, if you're now to the left, you see some wake, but it's very tricky to do it that way.

Roger Ebert:
You don't know where to look, yeah. Wow.

Werner Herzog:
Okay.

Roger Ebert:
That is man's pride and his ego, and we are all on the stream with Aguirre, with big plans. This film was the film that, really, I think made you famous all over the world. And it was-

Werner Herzog:
But it took quite a while. It took many, many years until anyone wanted to even see the film.

Roger Ebert:
Really? Which is inconceivable to me.
Werner Herzog:
No. The film was finished and it was shown at the Quinzaine des realisateurs and Kunenborg had some attention, but
from then, it was lost. Nobody wanted to see the film. In Germany at that time, we had some sort of a rating system.
It was a panel of a jury which decided whether the film was culturally valuable or even particularly valuable. A totally
ridiculous system, but it was helpful because cinemas would get tax reduction if they showed one of those films.

Werner Herzog:
They were a very, very clement and very benign sort of panel, who would toss this at every single film almost, every
single film that got this label, valuable, or particularly valuable. Out of 62 films or so, only three films didn't get it. Two
of them were too hardcore pornos, which didn't get it. And the third one was unique because it was Aguirre. In cases
where the panel decided unanimously, in this case, five to zero votes, not to grant any sort of label to it.

Werner Herzog:
They have to do it in writing and it's a wonderful document. It says that the film was so unbelievably bad that panel
members needed to vomit. In particular, Klaus Kinski's performance was of such deep stupidity and embarrassment
that the panel could not help but decide unanimously to deny any sort of evaluation for this film.

Roger Ebert:
So, out of 63 films, this was the only one that really made them feel anything.

Werner Herzog:

Roger Ebert:
It's incredible to me, because when I see this film, it is one of the great epics of the period of time when I've been a
film critic.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah, but the Cannes Film Festival didn't want to accept it. It was shown to the festival president and he said, "This, I
don't take such bad films." So, I ended up in a side event, which was the Quinzaine des realisateurs.

Roger Ebert:
But it is clearly a great film.

Werner Herzog:
Yes.

Roger Ebert:
I saw it.

Werner Herzog:
At least, Roger, go back to 1972-

Roger Ebert:
I'm sure you're right.

Werner Herzog:
... and talk to these guys. Just speak to them and make it clear to them. It actually took some four years until the
tiniest imaginable distributor in France took it for no money at all. They exhibited in two little theaters with 110 and 90
seats, respectively. And all of a sudden, it was sold out for two and a half years. And I saw people in the afternoon
lining up in the rain around the entire block. So, I was totally stunned, "What the hell is going on there?" I'm still
puzzled about it.
Roger Ebert:
The folly of the expedition of these people in armor and they're carrying their women in bearer carriages, and they have their clothes and their priest, and their rituals, and their allegiance to the king who is thousand miles away. And they are in the middle of this jungle that is sublimely indifferent. And it's such a wonderful example of the way that we could convince ourselves how important we are, when nature is so indifferent to us. I can understand why the jury or the people in Germany on the panel wouldn't understand it.

Werner Herzog:
I had these difficulties quite often in my own country. The last big thing was Lessons of Darkness, which showed at the Berlin Film Festival at the forum, International Forum, and there were something like 1,100 peoples, and they howled in disgust and shouted me down, and spat at me. And it was just stunning and I thought it was a good film. I stood there and I said, "You're all wrong. This film is good." And there were shouts that I glorified the horror.

Werner Herzog:
And I said yeah, "Well, Mr. Dante Alighieri did the same in the Inferno and Hieronymus Bosch did it in his paintings. And Goya did it in his paintings. So, what?" Then, Gregor, the festival director, he told me, "Can we get out here backstage?" I said, "No. I'm going to walk down all this aisle." And I walked down. Of course, I had even agitated them more and they spat at me, and threw things at me, and howl, 1,100 people in howling disgust. Look, it's truly a fine film. I swear to God. Just I don't know whether it has been shown yet here but-

Roger Ebert:
I'm reminded of when Salvador Dali made Un Chien Andalou, and they showed it in Paris, and he loaded the pockets of his coat with rocks so that he could throw them back at the audience.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. He expected it, but I didn't.

Roger Ebert:
You didn't.

Werner Herzog:
I thought it was a fine film and they would like it, but they didn't.

Roger Ebert:
But when you think that people go to see the most miserable trash and they walk out and you ask them, "How did you like the film?" "Oh, it was fine." It is a tribute if people have a strong reaction, if you reach them.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah, that's fine. Yes.

Roger Ebert:
Now they may have a reaction seems to be stupid, but obviously the film assaulted them in some way that was important to them.

Werner Herzog:
But Roger, you see, I really do not spend any sleepless nights over that.

Roger Ebert:
Good. Good.

Werner Herzog:
And it's fine and it's honorable to have many a foe out there. So, fine. Good. Why not?
Roger Ebert:
But there was one moment in the Kuwait film that I'm sure you know, the one I'm referring to, when they fight and battle and struggle, covered with oil and with dirt and in exhaustion to put out this fire. Then the man smiles at your camera, and he lights it again.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. And the text says that some of those pilgrims, like all the pilgrims, it's about life without fire. Has life without fire become unbearable for them? And now they reignited and now they're happy again. Now, they are content again and they grin at the camera, and smoke a cigarette, and they're in true bliss. When I filmed this, I just made a joke behind the camera and I said, "Don't you laugh," and they just couldn't hold from just somehow grinning inwardly.

Werner Herzog:
And I made this text, and then you see, the text says, others seized by madness follow suit. And you see two other guys who throw a torch at this gushing oil and it reignites. It was actually needed for technical purposes because the fires would spread out into lakes, and the whole lake of oil would catch fire. And they would have had a much larger problem if the lake had expanded to other oil wells. So, they reignited it on purpose. But I transformed it into some sort of people who cannot live without fires anymore. It meets-

Roger Ebert:
This is what we're talking about in the manifesto because the 60 minutes approach would be, they reignite the well so that it won't spread for the lake and start other fires.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
But what you give us, and that's nothing, it leaves us with-

Roger Ebert:
What you give us is a vision of Dante and proportions.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. It's what I would call the poetic, ecstatic truth that can be inherent in pictures. And they can be organized. You have to find them. You have to organize them. You have to fabricate them. And in many of my documentaries, like Little Dieter Needs to Fly, I shot the same part of the narration of theater six, seven times over, because he would tell me the story how he fled along a path with his friend and they couldn't walk anymore, and crawling along. And his friend, in a very crazed and tragic incident, was beheaded by villagers.

Werner Herzog:
And Dieter, not knowing why he does so, totally exhausted and delirious in fever, grabs the only sole of a tennis shoe that they found and tied with rattan to one of their feet, they would alternate it, grabs it and then runs. And Dieter told me the story on camera in a way that was totally exceptional. And I said, "Dieter, we have to do it again. You forgot the detail about the sole that you ripped away from your dying friend."

Werner Herzog:
So, he told me the story again, and again he forgot, or he would give me the detail, but spend endless time in totally useless details. He had no concept of the density of narration. So, I would shoot it six times over, like a feature film. And I would guide him and I would say, "Dieter, do it like this. Forget about the details. I'm not interested behind how many rocks you hit, and that there was a round rock, and this and that. It's not interesting. We need to focus on the few things that are essential." And the essentials, all of a sudden, in combination with a man, with what's in him, make something very, very special.
Roger Ebert:
So many of your films involve an element that is not only beyond your control, but threatens your life. Stanley Kauffmann said that your films are about risking death, in many cases. When you think of going into the jungles of Peru and going into the-

Werner Herzog:
Which is not a risk. Any idiot can do it without being harmed.

Roger Ebert:
It is not a risk, except that people were killed, by arrows when your group was attacked.

Werner Herzog:
No. Nobody was actually killed.

Roger Ebert:
Oh, good.

Werner Herzog:
But one man was shot with a very huge arrow through the throat.

Roger Ebert:
Oh, that was-

Werner Herzog:
And I just met him a few months ago. He can even sing by now. He was very proud that he can sing.

Roger Ebert:
Well, you see, that would qualify as a risk to me.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
But other-

Werner Herzog:
Another person, his wife was shot by three arrows that were seven feet tall, arrows with arrowheads that long and razor sharp made out of bamboo. And she was shot into the abdomen and the one arrow broke at the inside of her pelvis and one was deflected from her pelvis. And the third one, very narrow, went to the other, went to through her body just above the kidneys. We had to operate on our kitchen table in the camp because we couldn't transport them anymore. They would have died. So, for eight hours, we operated on them and I assisted with a torch light, lighting the abdominal cavities, and with the other hand I would spray the mosquitoes away. So, there are tough moments. You have to go through them when-

Roger Ebert:
Well, you see, I want to-

Werner Herzog:
It's not a joke.

Roger Ebert:
If I could continue my point a little bit because the Tarzan movies were shot in Burbank. And you have spoken to me in the past of the voodoo of location, of the notion that the film has to take place in the right place for the film. For
example, you use some of the locations of Murnau's Nosferatu for your Nosferatu. You went on to the top of a volcano that was scheduled to explode, and if it had done so-

Werner Herzog:
Oh, we would have been gone. Sure.

Roger Ebert:
You would have been killed. You were once on top of it-

Werner Herzog:
But that was stupid. Sorry.

Roger Ebert:
... of a mountain, and you were covered with snow.

Werner Herzog:
But, Roger, this thing about the volcano is more a singular event, because it was kind of stupid and blind lottery. And we knew that if it would explode with a force of a couple of atomic bombs, Hiroshima size, we would be airborne. That's what I told the cinematographer. He was scared and he said, "But Werner, what's going to happen if it blasts?" I said, "We will be airborne." I asked him, "Are you still with us?" And he said, "Yes, I'm going to be with you." But that was the only stupid blind gamble.

Roger Ebert:
But what I'm saying is that, frequently, you seek out a story in which there are elements in the story that involve the kind of courage or risk or effort that leads, for example, when you use Bruno S. He is a person who is not controllable in a way that a Hollywood actor is, although he may be more intelligent than a Hollywood actor. In film after film, you welcome... in Fitzcarraldo, you decide, having already told us that you fictionalized some things in documentaries, you didn't make a fiction film, which literally is showing us the truth. You are actually moving the boat across the land even though any other director in the world would have done it with models.

Werner Herzog:
The so-called plastic solution, which was offered to me, by the way, by Hollywood people who were interested in it.

Roger Ebert:
But it's like this is like a spiritual quest. Each film is like a test or a situation in which the filmmaking itself, not just the film, but the filmmaking is part of the test that you set yourself.

Werner Herzog:
No. It doesn't really count what the challenge was during the making of a film. The only thing that counts is what you see on the screen. That's the only thing that remains, the only thing that counts.

Roger Ebert:
But maybe what you see on the screen is enhanced by what the actors and the crew are really doing. Maybe the-

Werner Herzog:
But you sense something that is more than than just shooting in a studio. When you see Aguirre on this raft with 450 monkeys, and they bit like hell... I got bitten 50 times. There were only the cinematographer and me on board that raft, and I did the sound. So, I was defenseless because both hands were somehow occupied with the microphone in the Niagara. And I got bitten all the time, and you just are not allowed to scream. You just try to shake them off.

Roger Ebert:
You're the sound man. Right?
Werner Herzog:
Yeah, I'm the sound-

Roger Ebert:
You can't squirm at your own work.

Werner Herzog:
But I think as an audience, you sense there is something that is going on there, which is different.

Roger Ebert:
I know you do.

Werner Herzog:
But, Roger, I have to say one important thing about the so-called plastic solution, a little model plastic ship over a studio hill in Burbank or so. Pulling the ship, 360 tons of real mountain in the middle of nowhere, the next town was 1,400 kilometers away, where you could make a phone call by a torch light battery, pulling this real ship of a real mountain in one single piece was not done for the sake of realism. When you look at the film, the moments where the ship goes over the mountain, looks transformed into an operatic event. It looks unreal.

Werner Herzog:
And that's a strange thing, a very strange twist that something extremely factual, extremely naturalistic, realistic transforms into a great scene of opera, a great event of opera. And to achieve that is a very strange procedure. On the other hand, Roger, I knew pulling a ship over a mountain, which has no precedent in technical history, so you have no one to help you and to guide you-

Roger Ebert:
In real life, they took the ship apart.

Werner Herzog:
Oh, sure. They would transport ships across Peru and put it together in Lake Titicaca high up in the mountains, but disassembled in hundreds of pieces, and some engineers would put it together. Any idiot can do that. But the strange thing is, and I knew it beforehand, I knew that doing this for real, would create things that not the most fertile imagination could ever envision. And things happened. For example, just the sound of the howl, croaking, and screaming, and farting, and yelling out is something no sound man on Earth would ever have invented.

Werner Herzog:
And little details and incidents happened that became part of the film, which all of a sudden, is very rich in life. It's very much alive. And it comes because we didn't choose to shoot in a studio. And it's not that I'm looking out for the dangers and for the adventure stuff. I hate adventure, and I can't stand the concept of adventurism. It's just ridiculous. Where it became really obviously ridiculous was the time at the early time of the century when people try to reach the poles, South and North Poles, as the first ones in history. How totally stupid and ridiculous that was.

Werner Herzog:
And it signaled the end of some sort of a deeper quest of something maybe evil or more ancient, a quest where you went into the unknown and you would find a vision and you would fulfill something, and you would come back richer. You are not any richer by setting your trample on some piece of ice and and you establish, "Ah-huh! This is the North Pole." So, what?

Roger Ebert:
What I think, and it might get us into our next clip, is when the ropes are around the giant pulleys to pull the ship, and
we know, you don’t know it from the film, but we know it from other sources that the Brazilian engineers told you that the ropes would break and whip around and cut everyone in two, and they left. They left.

Werner Herzog:
The engineer left.

Roger Ebert:
The engineer didn't want to be there when it happened, because you wouldn't listen to him. Well, when Kinski is looking at the rope and we're hearing the groan of the timbers and the twang of the rope and we see his face, no actor, no conceivable actor could stand in front of a blue screen or stand in front of a prop rope, and how would he look.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
All you have to do is film him standing there and his whole body is responding to the fact that he knows that this rope and others like it are holding the ship. And by the same token, in Kaspar Hauser, which is our next film, if we have a man who has lived in captivity and been beaten in a cell all of his life, and we cast an actor, however extraordinary an actor he might be, we will never get the performance we get from Bruno S. whose life was not exactly like that. But it wasn't that different in a way, in that he was held away from nature and happiness, by the circumstances of his life. And then, the people around him, the other actors in the scene, when they look at him and talk to him, relate to him in a way that no actor could possibly-

Werner Herzog:
They transform, yeah.

Roger Ebert:
I think so.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. But, Roger, I want to say one thing about the risks and the dangers that I put other people in. Of course, the engineer left, but at that moment, I halted the entire production for a fortnight, and I only resumed shooting of the film after I had mounted a deck post, which was so solid that it would have taken 10 times a weight of the ship. So, there was no physical risk for anyone anymore. And had the ship broken loose and come down backwards, sled down on the mountain, there was nobody behind the ship. So, I would categorically forbid it to anyone. So, there were precautions taken that were adequate.

Roger Ebert:
Well, I'm not accusing you of putting anyone in danger.

Werner Herzog:
No. No.

Roger Ebert:
What I'm suggesting is that, although it is true that the post could hold 10 times the weight of the ship, if I'm Klaus Kinski standing there, I'm thinking-

Werner Herzog:
To sigh and to give sounds very unhealthy. It sounds unhealthy. And when it snaps, there's so much pressure inside that the cable is glowing red inside. And when you see something like that, you really respect the cable and you really respect the kind of stuff that it's pulling.
Roger Ebert:
That is the kind of feeling that I so often get in your films that we are being treated to an intensity that you are able to create or to allow that could not be done in a more conventional way. And I think that maybe if you-

Werner Herzog:
Well, I think my way should be the conventional way and that-

Roger Ebert:
Well, I would be much happier as a critic if I saw more films by you, yes, and like yours.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
The next clip is the *Mystery of Kaspar Hauser*.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah, with Bruno S. Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
And maybe you want to say something about Bruno.

Werner Herzog:
Well, Bruno, Kaspar Hauser is a person, a historical figure who was locked away all his life in a dark dungeon, in a cell, not knowing what daylight was, how other people looked like. He thought he was the only one; didn't know what human speech was, and had no concept of the world, and was later murdered after he was pushed out of his dungeon. Bruno S. who plays the part wanted to remain anonymous. So, his name is only Bruno S and dot. And he had a similar life. He was the illegitimate child of a prostitute who didn't want their child, beaten from tiny on. And when he was three, she beat him so bad that he lost speech and she put him away into a home for retarded and insane children.

Werner Herzog:
And he grew up like this, and started to escape, was captured, put into more and more severe institutions and correctionals. Later, a minor criminal record, and he spent 23 years of his first 26 years locked away. And he is the leading character. And I think he's unique and wonderful and better than any Oscar winner of the last 20 years.

Roger Ebert:
Let's look at it. Where did those images come from, the Caucasus?

Werner Herzog:
The Caucasus was here. That's a strange thing, and that's also one of those transformations of images. I'll tell you what it is in a moment. But I would like to point out first, the image is set up by a certain climate that is set for it, not only in how Kaspar tells about his dream. It's also set up by music and an image all of a sudden transforms. It actually was some eight-millimeter footage that my younger brother, who now is my producer, shot in Burma. It was just not even Super 16. It was regular 16-millimeter footage. And he showed me some stuff that he shot on a long voyage that he did in Asia.

Werner Herzog:
And he said, "Ah, there is this spat, unsteady shot," which I hate. And I looked at it and I said to him, "Look here, this is such a great image. It's such a wonderful thing. It only can occur in dreams. Let me do something. Let me make something with it." And what I did is I projected it from very close distance onto a screen only from that distance on a semi-transparent screen. So, it would shine through on the other side. And I filmed it with a 35 millimeter camera.
from the other side, changing the structure of the screen, some sort of a strange texture in it, and not taking care of
the different speed of projector and camera. And that's why it flickers out into dark, into more light.

Werner Herzog:
It's one of the real wonderful images that I have somehow stolen, a thief without loot that I have gotten it which has
fallen into my lap. And I think as a filmmaker, you have to develop an eye for what is the truth, the innermost truth,
what is a power of an image, and to put it in the right context and create a climate for that, will create something
special. Also, it doesn't say this is Burma. Of course, it was somewhere in Burma and there are hundreds of temples
in this valley, very, very strange and mysterious. But for Kaspar and for the audience, this is the Caucasus, period.

Werner Herzog:
There's something else which strikes me here. The story of Kaspar Hauser is a story of an adolescent, estimates
range from 15 until 18 years of age when he pushed out into a street, not being able to speak, with the exception of
one sentence that he could speak like a parrot, without knowing what language it was, and an anonymous letter in
his hand. So, the real Kaspar Hauser in 1828 or so was a relatively young man, an adolescent.

Werner Herzog:
And Bruno in this film looks like an adolescent. He looks very young. Fact is that, at the time of shooting, he was
already 41. And you have to be able to transform someone into something, very hard to explain how it's being done,
to make him sublime, to make him credible all of a sudden, from deep inside to be an adolescent. And when you
create that inside of him, you would create an image that make him look an adolescent.

Werner Herzog:
Bruno was very intensively into it. He would, for example, not take off his costume at night, and he would sleep in it.
And he would not sleep in the bed because he was always accustomed to be on the run and flee from police. So, I
found him in one morning, he overslept, and I knocked at the door. He didn't answer. So, after fifth time when he
didn't answer, I pushed the door open which was not locked and he was sleeping on the ground right next to the
door. And I pushed the door at him and he bolted. He shot bolt upright and he said, "Yes, Werner. What is it?"

Werner Herzog:
And it was so frightening for me to see that he was still in this fear of being captured and being taken away by police
and being locked away again. So, I said, "Bruno, we don't have to hurry. You overslept. But now, we are going to
have some coffee first and the crew is going to wait." And he got nervous, I said, "Bruno..." But all, what is inside this
man, inside of this totally tragic and catastrophic life that he led, there is something that can be made visible and
perceivable on a screen. And as stupid as it may sound, that's my profession. That's what I have to do.

Roger Ebert:
And you did. You used him again in Stroszek. And in both cases, there was a texture to the performance, an
originality. Look, for example, when he says, "I dreamed," and you show him just-

Werner Herzog:
And he says it-

Roger Ebert:
I can't put it into words, but I know that a professional actor, and actually it sounds as if I'm saying professional actor
should all quit, and that's not what I'm saying, because that's not what I believe, but that he was able to give you an
aura, an unspoken quality that would be very difficult to create, if it weren't there.

Werner Herzog:
Sure. Yeah. And nobody wanted to accept him.
Roger Ebert:
And that's the same thing that happened in Stroszek.

Werner Herzog:
Nobody wanted to accept him. There was a participation of a TV station in it and they said, "You will, under no circumstances, hire men like him." And I did something that I never did before, after in my life. I did some test shooting which was terrible. It looked so bad that I felt so ashamed and I turned purple and sank in my chair, and there were 30 people who had worked with me, and some of the financiers of the film. And this guy from the network jumps up and he says, "Who else is against Bruno?" All the hands shoot up.

Werner Herzog:
And I look around and all of a sudden right next to me, I see the cinematographer Schmidt-Reitwein, the look in his eyes and I say, "Jorg, is your hand up or not?" And he shakes his head. I see his hand is down. And I stood up and I said, "Now, it is 30, 32 voices, or 32 hands up against two hands down. The hands down have won the ballot." And I said to the network executive, "Get out of the production right now because within 30 minutes, I have to find a replacement for this amount of money to fill the gap." And he stayed on, all of a sudden.

Werner Herzog:
So, it was very strange how these things sometimes happen. And it happens. I learned from medieval monks who did not do the accountants sort of balloting, not like we do it, counting the ballots for yes and no. If some monks were feverishly, with utmost fervor and conviction, for a reform or innovation in monastic life, they would declare themselves as a million apart as the better part, the part who feverishly, ecstatically knew. And the other monks would accept that, even though they were far outnumbered by those who were lazy and didn't want to have the innovation. And I thought this was a very fine principle. When you make films, you are not allowed to be democratic in the sense that we know nowadays.

Roger Ebert:
Do you want to introduce the next film that also has Bruno in it? We have a clip of-

Werner Herzog:
Yes. Stroszek was a film that I had to do for Bruno because I made a contract with him to do Woyzeck with him, after the drama fragment of Georg Buchner, probably the finest drama writer who died at the age of 22, in the early 1800s. And all of a sudden when everything was prepared, I realized, oh my god, that's a mistake. Kinski must play this part. And actually, Kinski did Woyzeck later.

Werner Herzog:
And I called Bruno and he worked in a steel factory, driving a forklift. And I said, "Bruno, it's terrible, but I have to tell you. I cannot do this film with you." And there was long silence and he said, "But Werner, I have already taken my vacations, plus three unpaid weeks of vacation to do this film." And I sensed it was terrible. So, I said to to Bruno, "Today is Tuesday. You know what? I'm going to write a screenplay quick."

Werner Herzog:
And I invented a title. I will call it, sounding a little bit like Woyzeck, Stroszek. I said, "It will be called Stroszek, and by Saturday, you will have a screenplay in Berlin, and we do something else." So, I sat down in two and a half days. I wrote the screenplay, and we did this film together. Thanks, God. I absolutely have-

Roger Ebert:
We might mention that when you sat down to write the film, it was based on a visit you had made a year or so earlier to Plainfield, Wisconsin.
Werner Herzog:
Right. Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
Which you might want to describe.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah, Plainfield, Wisconsin is one of my favorite places in the United States, like Wall Street Stock Exchange or San Quentin Prison or Las Vegas. So, one of the focal points of the United States here, it's a focal point of horror and anguish. It's a place where five people became mass murderers within a very few years, including Ed Gein. And my friend, Errol Morris was planning to write a big book on Plainfield, had spent months there. And he was pondering over the question, "Why had it Gein not only murdered people, but also excavated freshly buried bodies at the cemetery, and had made a throne seat out of the flesh and preserved things?" I mean, really horrifying things.

Werner Herzog:
And Errol was the one after speaking to the sheriffs and speaking to Ed Gein, who was also in penitentiary, and to all the people, he had found out that there was a perfect circle of graves that Ed Gein had excavated. In the very center was the grave of his mother and he wondered over the question, has he also excavated his own mother. And I said to him, just casually, you would know if you dig into the grave. If the coffin is empty, of course, he has taken her out. If the coffin is still there with a body in it or the bones in it, he has not.

Werner Herzog:
So, we decided we would dig secretly at night. And I was filming in Alaska and I was coming back, and I said, "On September 15th or so I'll be there." And I was there but the man had chickened out. So, he wasn't there. And I immediately liked Plainfield and my car had broken down and nobody could repair it. But there was a wreckage yard where there was some guy who knew about mechanics and he helped me, and I liked him a lot. And he's one of the leading actors in Stroszek.

Roger Ebert:
In fact, apart from the three German actors that you brought with you, all the actors are from Plainfield. Isn't that true? Or almost all of them?

Werner Herzog:
Yes, sure. Yeah. And there was one Native Indian young man, a chubby 19 years old man, and H. Lapinski who ran this wreckage yard didn't remember him at all. And it turned out that he had hired him this very morning when I met him and fired him the same night. He had completely forgotten and we tracked him down and he's also in the film now. And I love Plainfield and I love the gloom and I love the... something very special.

Werner Herzog:
Your sense that from this part of the country, and that includes South Dakota, Wisconsin, Minnesota, all the best people of America, not only the mess murderous, this is a place... I think this is a place where the real talents come from. There's one other exception and that's the deep south, plus very fine writers like Flannery O'Connor or Faulkner RS came from. But the real good people normally come from this part of the country. I truly like this part. I do not know Minnesota well, but I know Wisconsin much better, but it's all quite similar. I don't know what are you showing.

Roger Ebert:
We have a scene from Stroszek and it's just to set it up a little bit. The three people in Germany, there's a prostitute. And she is a friend of Bruno S. and also of the old-
Werner Herzog: Crooked men, shites. Yeah.

Roger Ebert: Shites.

Werner Herzog: Yeah.

Roger Ebert: And the pimps come around and beat them up and humiliate Bruno. And they decide enough of this. They're going to move to America.

Werner Herzog: Yeah. Do we see the pimps in this-

Roger Ebert: No.

Werner Herzog: No.

Roger Ebert: We're going to-

Werner Herzog: Because pimps were for real and one of them was very dangerous. He was an ex-prize fighter and he was jail quite often. And the other pimp was a law student who a fortnight before he did his final exams, committed a bank robbery and got five years for it, and became a famous writer, actor, and director. And they really look dangerous.

Roger Ebert: They do.

Werner Herzog: And they look for real, yeah.

Roger Ebert: So, these three innocents-

Werner Herzog: But describe after that. Yeah.

Roger Ebert: These three innocents go off to Plainfield and rent a mobile home that is 70 feet long and 14 feet wide, and fill it up with all sorts of things that they buy on time payment, and are living here, this very unlikely family, these three people. Then you will see what happens because Bruno insists, if I recall the film correctly, Bruno insists to the other two that they are going to have to make payments, that the bank didn't just give them the money. And the other two basically reject that argument. But it turns out that Bruno was right. I may be simplifying it, but it turns out that-

Werner Herzog: Let's go ahead with it. Yeah.
Roger Ebert:  
... the trailer is repossessed.

Werner Herzog:  
Okay. Okay.

Roger Ebert:  
That shot of the trailer leaving the frame, and he looks out at the barren landscape, there goes the American Dream, exit right.

Werner Herzog:  
Somehow. Yes.

Roger Ebert:  
And you of course made a documentary later about auctioneers called *How Much Wood Would a Woodchuck Chuck*, because you became fascinated by the speech pattern. And I love the fact, this auctioneer says, "I can't understand a word you're saying."

Werner Herzog:  
Yeah. These livestock auctioneers have always created a deep sensation and fascination within me. And I made a film on the World Championship of Livestock Auctioneers. And the auctioneer here, his name is Colonel Ralph White, who was an ex world champion of livestock auctioneers. And I liked him so much that I tracked him down somewhere in Wyoming, and brought him over there, and he did the auction.

Werner Herzog:  
And I do believe that each civilization has created its own poetry, and the rawest of raw capitalism has created the last poetry to which it was capable, and those are these auctioneers. There's something very beautiful about them, something very tender, something very... even though when you watch the auction, they auction off millions of dollars of livestock within half an hour. It just goes, rattles away, and there's something real happening, real money exchanging ownerships, exchanging hands. And yet, these men who do the auctions have developed a very strange, very bizarre poetry.

Roger Ebert:  
It's not required. That's the thing. We are so accustomed to auctioneers that we don't stop to think-

Werner Herzog:  
It's ritualized.

Roger Ebert:  
... how odd it is that somebody should talk like this just because they're selling something.

Werner Herzog:  
Yeah, it is-

Roger Ebert:  
They could say, "How much will anyone pay for this trailer? Mrs. Smith pays, she bids $4,000." They don't have to talk... and they have created an art form that is completely irrelevant to what they're doing.

Werner Herzog:  
An ecstatic ritual.

Roger Ebert:  
Yes, it is.
Werner Herzog:
And I like it a lot. So, that has always been in my thoughts, and that was why the scene was in it.

Roger Ebert:
Now, the young man who's standing next to him with a big tie plays the banker in the film.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
And he has that beautiful scene. He is so polite. He's trying to explain to them.

Werner Herzog:
But really phony also and dangerous.

Roger Ebert:
Yes. But he's got all of the little learned phrases.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
The bank is trying to work with you here in making your payments because you haven't paid us anything.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
And it's a wonderful film. I am so pleased, by the way, that a company I was going to say right here in Minnesota, but I gather they're partially here and partially in Detroit, is bringing out your films on DVD, because here we saw some disintegration-

Werner Herzog:
Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
A great mini film shot in the '70s had degradation of color because the film that they used to replace Technicolor didn't have any shelf life. So, they'll be able to restore it.

Werner Herzog:
The film actually has not aged even though you saw all in pink and the colors lost-

Roger Ebert:
No. The film has not aged.

Werner Herzog:
Only the cars have aged. That's the only thing. Otherwise, the film is very fresh. Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
We're running just a little behind schedule. So, perhaps we should move on to Nosferatu, which came out in 1978, and which you made not as a homage to Murnau, but as a colleague of Murnau's.

Werner Herzog:
No, it was meant a homage.
Roger Ebert:
Well, it was-

Werner Herzog:
It was meant to connect to the great culture of German cinema of the '20s, as we were a fatherless generation without great masters of a father generation from whom we could learn. So, we were orphans. And connecting to our grandfathers was very important for me, which gave me some sort of, culturally speaking, a basis in some sort of solid ground under my feet. It is an homage to Murnau. No doubt.

Roger Ebert:
I didn't want to use that word because it is also a work in its own right, of course.

Werner Herzog:
No. I bow my head in reverence to Murnau.

Roger Ebert:
I know that you deliberately shot on some of the same locations that he used.

Werner Herzog:
Yes. In Lubeck, one of them. Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
And of course, the makeup and the presentation of Kinski is very much inspired by the original film, which was your first Dracula film, I gather.

Werner Herzog:
You're probably right because you have quite a knowledge of those things. I don't even know.

Roger Ebert:
I read in the New York Times today an article about Disney's Tarzan, that Tarzan is number two in terms of characters had films devoted to him, and way out in number one is Count Dracula.

Werner Herzog:
But I think there was never a vampire like Kinski.

Roger Ebert:
Never. No.

Werner Herzog:
All the others are boring and insignificant compared to him.

Roger Ebert:
Let's have a look.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. Okay.

Roger Ebert:
And of course, when he's looking at it, we're reminded of the line earlier in the film. He looks at her photograph and tells her husband, "What a beautiful throat."

Werner Herzog:
Yeah.
Roger Ebert:
This is a man that you hated and love, Kinski.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah, it's true. I actually did my very last film on him, which will be shown in a few days at the Cannes Film Festival. It's entitled My Best Fiend. We loved each other and we respected each other. But at the same time, both of us independently, and unbeknownst to each other, plotted to murder each other, seriously.

Roger Ebert:
I know. I know that it was serious.

Werner Herzog:
There were serious plans and some odd circumstances which prevented it, ultimately. And when I was in Peru last August-September to shoot about this film, I met one of the Native Indian chief who they hated Kinski because he was screaming and causing scandals. And in their culture, there is only very, very... you never speak loud. You never speak loud to them. Always softly, you wait until it's your turn. They never touch you, grab your hand, or so. They will touch you very, very tenderly, softly.

Werner Herzog:
And Kinski was some sort of anathema for them. They couldn't take it. And they would huddle together and then whisper and fall silent. At the end, one of the chiefs told me, that I evidently saw that they were afraid and he said, "Don't you believe that we were afraid of the screaming madman." They were afraid of me because I was so silent. And towards the end of shooting, this chief came to me and he's very seriously proposed, "Shall we murder him? Shall we kill him for you?" And I looked at him and I saw it was serious.

Werner Herzog:
And for a moment, I vacillated. And I realized that I still needed Kinski for the last couple of days of shooting to complete the film. But the instant I rejected this idea, I regretted it already. And this being torn between liking him and regretting that he was not murdered, somehow, is still within me. But I can take it much easier now. You see, I have a much more relaxed attitude about all this. And I truly do miss him once in a while. Not always, but sometimes I do miss him.

Roger Ebert:
I remember once that you told me that you saw him when you were very young. And you knew that it was your destiny to work with him, to direct him in a film. And that when you sent him the script of Aguirre, he was very famous for only wanting to make films on locations that were pleasant for him.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
He used to boast that he never saw any of the films he was in and he didn't care about any of the films he made. And he only chose his films on the basis of where he wanted, where he could get a good hotel. And you wanted him to go a thousand miles up-river in the rain forest, and he asked you why in god's name should I do this?" And you said, "Because it is your destiny." And apparently he listened to that, nodded, and agreed.
Werner Herzog:
Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
I may have simplified the story beyond recognition but-

Werner Herzog:
No. It was a little bit more complicated because when I sent him the screenplay, two days later, the phone rang between 3:00 and 4:00, and for the first half hour I couldn't figure out what it was because they were unarticulate screams, just raging and screaming. And after half an hour, I realized that was Kinski and he kept screaming, totally unarticulate. It was just screams and shrieks and yells. And it turned out that he had liked the screenplay so much.

Werner Herzog:
But at the same time, he didn't want to go because it meant he would rot away in moldy costume and he would live on a raft, and all these things. I left no doubt that it was not going to be an easy sort of thing to do. And besides, we only had $360,000 or $370,000 to make the film. So, it was kind of a hard thing. And of course, I said to him, "Yes, there is destiny and even if we try, we will not be able to escape that. This is what is upon us."

Werner Herzog:
And I knew what was expecting me because by a chain of coincidences, I lived with him in the same apartment when I was a school boy of 12, of 13 years age. I lived with my mother in one room and with my two other brothers. So, we were very poor, lived in one single room. And it was a boarding house and an elderly lady who had a heart for artists one day picked up Kinski from the street. He was somehow getting notorious in some minor tiny little theater roles.

Werner Herzog:
And she picked him up literally from the street or rather from an attic where he stylized himself as a starving poet, and Dostoyevsky is idiot. That was one of his stylizations of his earlier life. And he would live there stark naked and filled the whole attic, not with furniture, only with rustling dry leaves. And when the mailman knocked and rang, he would come through the rustling leaves, stark naked, sign something, and close the door again.

Werner Herzog:
And this lady, Clara picked him up from the street and gave him a little room for free, fair to him, and did his laundry. And from the first moment when he entered this apartment, he wrought havoc on everyone. He didn't waste a minute. And I remember that in the first 48 hours in an unabated nonstop tantrum and rage fit, of rage and anger. He locked himself into the only bathroom for all the parties there, for 48 hours, and kept the destroying and smashing everything into smithereens, into such small smithereens. Wash basin, toilet bowls, bathtub, all made of China could be sieved through, sieved afterwards. And he would do unbelievable things.

Werner Herzog:
Oh, yes. Really, much, much wilder stuff, even much wilder stuff that I witnessed, and after three months, he was thrown. Actually, my own mother threw him out after a wild, wild incident. And, of course, I knew what was going to expect me, if I had to work with him. And he had caused so many scandals and so many had broken so many contracts. And I knew exactly. And that somehow made me think about the unthinkable, the utmost.

Werner Herzog:
So, when he threatened to leave location 10 days before the end of shooting, and the film was by far not completed yet, and he was not allowed to do that, because I told him, "The film is more important than our private feelings and our personal lives." And I had months or even years to consider, what would I do in the worst case scenarios. All the

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scenarios were played through and I told him I will not deliberate even two seconds. And I told him I would shoot him right here and now. He would reach possibly the next end of the river, and he would have eight bullets through his head.

Werner Herzog:
I was actually unharmed and the press made some stupid things out of it, as if I had directed him with a gun from behind the camera for the next 10 days. But Kinski had instincts. He had real instincts and he immediately sensed this was not a joke. And within less than 15 seconds, there would be two dead bodies on the side. And he screamed for help and he screamed for police. And the next police post was more than 400 miles away, and they would have testified me any sort of hunting accident, anyway, for only 20 bucks. But again-

Roger Ebert:
And the amazing thing is-

Werner Herzog:
No. He backed down and he was very docile and very good. And we owe the performance with a monkey to this facility and the discipline. I disciplined this wild beast somehow and organized him for the screen.

Roger Ebert:
He made something like 183 films and your films are the ones that have made him immortal, really.

Werner Herzog:
I wish it was like that. I do not believe in immortality but-

Roger Ebert:
Longevity then.

Werner Herzog:
Yes. And Kinski, when you see him as a vampire, he’s very much alive. And he actually died, how many years, eight years ago or so, and he’s totally present, totally physically there. And it’s wonderful that we have something like movies.

Roger Ebert:
His autobiography, which was recently printed, it was originally published in this country and then withdrawn because they hadn’t taken out libel insurance. And then it was released within the last two years, as I recall. And Werner was telling me a dinner that most of it is made up. In fact, he helped him with the dictionary.

Werner Herzog:
Much of it is fictitious, of course, particularly his childhood. But Kinski, page after page, starts to rant against me and insult me. And there’s page after page of invectives.

Roger Ebert:
And you were suggesting words to him, right?

Werner Herzog:
Yes. I found some good ones in the dictionary and supplied it for him. Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
Let’s go ahead and look at him again in *Fitzcarraldo*. Now, this was a film where you began shooting with Jason Robards and Mick Jagger, and then Robards developed amoebic dysentery, and was too ill to continue. And you then had to take the entire production and move it several hundred miles away because of a border war.
Werner Herzog:
Yeah, that burnt down my camp for 1,100 people. It's attacked.

Roger Ebert:
And then you started again with Kinski, inviting him to come back into the jungle that he hated, and he did come back.

Werner Herzog:
Well, we he always claims that he loves mother nature, but it's all fake and phony. But anyway, that was one of his stylizations.

Roger Ebert:
Let's look at *Fitzcarraldo*, which is another great film. That is such an eerie moment when it gets close enough so that you can see that it's an umbrella.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
Because there shouldn't be anyone further up river than they are with an umbrella.

Werner Herzog:
Sure.

Roger Ebert:
It's a great image.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah, it was a spontaneous invention, but I knew it was kind of belonged to the film and it was a good scene.

Roger Ebert:
This man wants to build an opera house. He feels that if he can create a shipping company or have a boat on another river system, he will make enough money to build an opera house and bring Caruso to the jungle. And oddly enough, someone did that. Caruso actually did sing in Belem, I think, in Brazil.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. The film actually starts at the Teatro Amazonas in Manaus on the middle course of the Amazon. And it was built something like in 1905. And at that time, the city of Manaus didn't exist. It was the time of the rubber boom and only a few overnight billionaires built palaces in the middle of the channel and all the rest was shanty towns. And they built this lavish, unbelievable, dreamlike opera house in the middle of the jungle. And it's such a fantastic idea and image. I always like that a lot. And I started to film there and I have become involved in doing operas.

Roger Ebert:
In opera, yes.

Werner Herzog:
I never had seen an opera before in my life when I did this film. A colleague of mine, Werner Schroeter, whom I like a lot, did the opening sequence inside the theater. He staged the stage performance there, because I had no idea what it was all about. And I started to like it so much that now I'm doing work in staging operas, once in a while, and I truly like that. What is also strange about the scene in the screenplay, *Fitzcarraldo* is playing... according to the text of the screenplay, *Fitzcarraldo* is playing Wagner. He's playing Valkyria into the jungle.
Werner Herzog:
And now, something very odd happens. Looking at the jungle and playing Wagner does not fit together, and for reasons that nobody can explain. It's very, very mysterious. It bites each other like cat and dog. It doesn't fit together. But the moment you go into Italian opera, Verity or Bellini, it fits perfectly. Why? It's a deep mystery to me. And there's a sort of delirious exuberance as an inherent quality in the jungle, some sort of fever dreams, almost like a human innermost quality.

Werner Herzog:
And that's why the jungle is never some sort of a scenic backdrop. It's always like a human quality there. And strangely enough, it only fits together with Italian opera. And why that is so is a mystery. Thanks god I discovered it in time and changed the entire music and the recordings in the dialogue accordingly.

Roger Ebert:
One of your operas, *Chushingura* has just been released on video, which is-

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. Some of them have been released.

Roger Ebert:
Some of them.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah, like *Lohengrin*, which I did in Bayreuth. That is the mecca of Wagner lovers, a very strange place. And I did some other places in La Scala, in Milano. But it's very good and healthy for me to work and breathe and live with music very intensively for a few weeks.

Roger Ebert:
I remember your documentary, the backstage documentary of the stage and singing along with the star.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah, the transformation of the world into music. Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
We are running a little bit late and we have one clip. We still want to get to. And I think that this is a very important clip to where... well, we may even show two clips from *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, because I think this film fits into your declaration in a very interesting way. This is a film that is completely true, but it may not be completely factual.

Werner Herzog:
Yes. You said it very well.

Roger Ebert:
And I love this film. Should we just start with the scene?

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. Okay. Let's just have a look.

Roger Ebert:
Yes. We have a scene where he comes into his house. At this point in the film, we know nothing, really.

Werner Herzog:
It's very early in the film.
Roger Ebert:
We know very little about him. Now, that's not entirely absolutely 100% factual.

Werner Herzog:
Yes, and I have confessed to more educated audiences, and I will do so again, I was intrigued by Dieter's house that when you enter the house, there are seven or eight oil paintings of open doors. And I asked him, "Dieter, why do we have that sort of images?" And he couldn't really answer it. And he said, "Yeah, I kind of like that, the open doors, and I like to have an open view." And I realized that it was a very, very deep metaphor for him in this unbelievable drama of his captivity, and the ordeal he's going through, liberty meant to be able to open and close a door.

Werner Herzog:
And I invented and asked him, "Dieter, you bang your car door two to three times, and open and close the door a couple of times for us for the camera." And you kind of see that that he is a little bit shy about it. And he becomes very sympathetic through that. Even though you have no idea of the film, you started to laugh and you laugh in appreciation. You immediately have a warm feeling about him. And it's totally invented, totally staged, and yet with a background of the pictures that he has right inside the door, open doors, looks into an open free space, is an essence of what constitutes Dieter.

Werner Herzog:
And that's exactly what I mean by factually that even the accountants would even tell me, "Yes, this is fake. This is a lie." Yes, it is a lie. It is a fabrication, but it is forgery, but for the sake of a much deeper truth. So, it is false or it's fake and it's fabrication. And yet, it is a deep poetic truth about him. And that's what what I try to defend and that's why I am against cinéma vérité. And that's why I'm against the superficial sort of stuff that you see day after day after day on TV. I just get sick and tired of it.

Werner Herzog:
And we have to find means to find this, the deeper truth that is possible on film. That is something that we should work on, and that's why the gauntlet is thrown down. And that's why I go into such wild rambling statements like we ought to be grateful that the universe out there knows no smile. It has nothing to do with with truth and fact in cinema, and yet it is connected, because that is a poetic truth. And that's against all the political correctness of those who are the lovers, these phony lovers of Mother Nature and in eat the vitamin pills in pound after pound. And yes, I'm against them.

Werner Herzog:
You may whistle as much as you want. I like to have you as my enemy out there. We can meet later in the men's room and sort things out. But I think we have to voice... somehow, I needed to voice my concern and I needed to state certain things that have been in turmoil inside of me. And this, the manifesto, I think is something that should stay in your hands as a souvenir of this evening. And I gladly hand it over to you and bite on these nuts as much as you want, and disagree with it as much as you want. That's fine. I'm not a biblical prophet out there. I'm just struggling to do something for the sake of cinema and for the sake of audiences, and for the sake of illumination that is possible when you sit in front of a screen.

Roger Ebert:
And you do.

Werner Herzog:
Hopefully. I don't know. Sometimes, I surely have some doubts, but whatever.
word, apologia or justification, because it's true. If you had a shot of him opening the door going inside and closing it, you would have a shot of him opening the door, going inside, and closing it. What we have here is a shot of Dieter's soul.

Werner Herzog:
Yes.

Roger Ebert:
And we know him. And it seems to me that the-

Werner Herzog:
And you instantly like him. Dieter thought, my friends will dislike me, and I said, "No, no, no, no. They will like you even better. They will love you. They will love you for this. They will love you for your hesitation. They will love you for your clumsiness. They will love you for all this." And it is true. People like him for that.

Roger Ebert:
People are always sending me letters, "Oh, this movie wasn't true to the novel," or it's not true that things are like that in Fargo, or if people don't really talk like... or whatever. And I think the answer is, the responsibility of the director is to the film. The responsibility of the director is to make the best film he can, and that's what you always do.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. Do we have the clip of Lessons of Darkness, lesson number seven? Do we have that ready? Can we-

Roger Ebert:
Do we have that clip that we didn't have at the beginning?

Werner Herzog:
Do we have that ready because... Can we have-

Roger Ebert:
And if Bruce can hear me, do we have time for a few questions because I know that-

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. Sure.

Roger Ebert:
I don't hear Bruce saying sure.

Werner Herzog:
Oh, we'll just take over.

Roger Ebert:
Here comes... We don't really have time. No, we don't.

Werner Herzog:
Is this clip not available of Lessons of Darkness?

Roger Ebert:
So, we'll end on this clip.

Werner Herzog:
Do we have contact with the booth? Okay, if we don't have it.
Roger Ebert:
You don't really think we better take any questions because we run over. Is that-

Bruce Jenkins:
Well, why don't you get a couple?

Werner Herzog:
Oh, no, we should.

Roger Ebert:
A couple of questions.

Werner Herzog:
Of course, it's your term. No.

Roger Ebert:
We can have a few questions.

Werner Herzog:
We cannot see you properly. Yeah. Okay.

Roger Ebert:
Oh, there you are.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. This gentleman was the first one I saw here.

Participant:
What I heard you saying, it reminded me of something Caucus said. A book should awaken the frozen sea inside of you. Inside of you. And I think it's the same as two of your films. Did you feel any sympathy towards existential writers?

Werner Herzog:
I do not know much of them, but I like your statement because I think I'm after something very similar. Sometimes, I believe that the images that I have created are nothing sensational, nothing futuristic or avant garde artistic. It is something that is deeply inside of us, dormant inside of us. And I'm the one who can awaken these images. And it's your images, actually. And it's like a brother or sister, unknown, unbeknownst to you, who all of a sudden comes to life, and you realize you've got a brother.

Werner Herzog:
And this is wonderful, if I can create that. And all of a sudden, all of a sudden, in rare moments, it happens when you hear great music or when you see a great movie, very rarely it happens that you have moments of deep illumination, in moments where you know that you're not alone anymore. And that's the ultimate I can reach. If there's anyone out there, after seeing, let's say, Stroszek, has a feeling, I'm not alone anymore, then I've achieved everything I wanted to achieve in my life. There's someone there.

Participant:
Do you think you'll make any more future film or narrative?

Werner Herzog:
Yes, I'm moving more into that. It has become more difficult because nobody wants to finance my stuff. But there are three, four, five feature film projects now lining up, and I'm working very hard and very fast at the moment. This year I
did two films. I shot a third film. I acted in a film and I staged two operas. And we are only 14 or so weeks into the year. So, I've really worked a lot.

Werner Herzog:
And I'm pushing very hard a project, which is going to be called Invincible. I have another project, this is on a strong man in their 20s. And then I have a project about the last Japanese soldier who fought on 30 years beyond the end of the Second World War, Hiroo Onoda, whom I met and who I like very much. And he has refused to hand over the rights of his life story and of his book that he wrote, for reasons that are too complicated to explain. But he said, he kept saying, you are the only one who should do it. And he said, "But I'm sorry, I cannot hand it over for all complicated political reasons."

Werner Herzog:
When I came back from Peru after doing Wings of Hope and My Best Fiend, I found a fax in my fax machine by Hiroo Onoda, and he wants to give me the rights now. He's 77 years and I said to him, "You are not immortal. You will die, so sooner or later. And somebody has to do the story. And I'm the one who would be competent." And he realizes that I am, that I would be. Let's put it this way. And there's a couple of other stories. I've got a couple of very good ones to tell.

Roger Ebert:
Let's take one more question. Oh, wait a minute.

Bruce Jenkins:
Yes. You've got lesson seven.

Werner Herzog:
Oh, yeah.

Roger Ebert:
Oh, we have lesson seven.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. Let's show lesson seven and then take one more question.

Roger Ebert:
Lesson seven, and then one more question.

Werner Herzog:
I hope it's the right lesson. It's just-

Roger Ebert:
Good.

Werner Herzog:
... something about ecstatic images. No, that's not number seven. Okay. Let's stop it. That's lesson number two or so. Can we stop it? That's not the right one. Anyway. So, let's take one more question please. There was somebody there, a gentleman.

Werner Herzog:
I wouldn't like to quote and go into the thin blue line, because there are other films that make it much more evident that he is a comrade in spirit somehow, who is not... of course, he's also fabricating but he is very deeply in stylizing, into stylizations of great enormity. And in this film about the four people, it's fast, cheap, and out of control. They're
Werner Herzog:
And I would like to point your attention to one film that I really love dearly, and that is Vernon, Florida, which in my opinion is one of the greatest "documentaries" in the American film history. And the enormity of his will to stylize creates a depth in this film that is unprecedented, I have nothing to compare with. It's a wonderful film and you must see Vernon, Florida. It has something very deep and beautiful.

Roger Ebert:
Vernon, Florida is a town where Errol Morris discovered that a large number of people were missing limbs, because they were cutting them off to collect the insurance. And the fact that so many people had done this that Vernon, Florida was known locally as Stump City.

Werner Herzog:
Or nub city.

Roger Ebert:
Nub city.

Werner Herzog:

Roger Ebert:
But when he went there to film a film about these people, he found that they were prepared to kill him.

Werner Herzog:
Right.

Roger Ebert:
So, he decided to focus more-

Werner Herzog:
To change his mind.

Roger Ebert:
... on turkey hunters and so forth.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. Yeah. Watch his stuff. And there are a couple of others out there internationally. There's this, a French very, very fine, what is his name? Anyway, I could name a lot of people who are doing quite different stuff, but they are they are trying something similar, to deviate, to depart from the accountants' truth and go somewhere else, and whoever is out there is welcome.

Roger Ebert:
Let me just say that not only are many... of course, you had an opportunity, many of you to see a lot of Werner's films here at the Walker. Some of you didn't see all of them, may have seen films tonight, that you want to see in their entirety. Many of them are available on New Yorker tape, and can be rented not only locally, but if you can't find them locally, you can rent them through the mail from Fastest Multimedia, Home Film Festival, and so forth. Even better news is that Anchor Bay is bringing out a large number of his films on DVD, of which the first title of Nosferatu-
Roger Ebert:
In the future.

Werner Herzog:
Nosferatu was the first. Yeah.

Roger Ebert:
Nosferatu is already out. And these are the films that make it worth going to the movies for. We cannot survive on Adam Sandler and Pauly Shore. We just can't do it. I'm not implicating you. I'm making that as my own statement. We need films that put us in touch with the full spectrum of what it is to be alive and to think and to fear and to dare.

Roger Ebert:
And when I see your films, I feel that my decision to spend my life reviewing films has been vindicated, because if they were all junk, then I would have wasted my life. And when I see your film, I say if I can get a few more people to share these films, or to know that these films exist, to know how films can enter into our minds and give us these visions and dreams, then it's all worthwhile. So, thank you very much for your career-

Werner Herzog:
Thank you very much. You said that very nicely.

Roger Ebert:
... and for your continuing-

Werner Herzog:
Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, Roger. That was very nice.

Roger Ebert:
Thank you.

Werner Herzog:
Thank you very much.

Roger Ebert:
We could have gone for another hour, easily.

Werner Herzog:
Yeah. Okay. Thank you very much.

Roger Ebert:
Thank you.

Werner Herzog:

Participant:
Bye.