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Close Encounters

Arthouse unites Bemis, Film Streams in dialogue over Herzog documentary

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Early in Carroll Ballard's marvelous if flawed film, "Never Cry Wolf," Tyler, a research scientist, sets out alone in the Canadian tundra to discover the truth about *Canis lupis*' impact on caribou.

Way past second thoughts, Tyler is on edge more than one way. The day before, a grizzled prospector in this Kewatin province warns him about the "menace" of wolves. "They'll come after you, son. Just for the ugly fun of tearing you apart." Not the sort of sendoff Tyler needs as he looks out over the frozen landscape from the window of a single prop plane transporting him to the northern edge of the earth.

Suddenly, as the engine sputters and dies, Rosie, the bush pilot, turns to the wide-eyed Tyler and screams, "Take the stick!" as the plane floats silently in the updraft between mountain peaks. In disbelief, Tyler then watches the cackling Rosie open the plane's door and lean out to clear a clogged and frozen fuel line.

"What's wrong?!" Tyler screams back.

"Boredom, Tyler," Rosie calmly answers. "Boredom, that's what's wrong. And how do you beat boredom, Tyler? Adventure! Adventure, Tyler!" as he brandishes a monkey wrench in defiance.

Ballard's film was loosely based on the novel of Farley Mowat, a biologist who did indeed carry out such research in the far Northern wilderness and learned among other things: wolves are not responsible for the declining numbers of caribou; animals in general are losing their habitat and species are dying off faster than new ones are discovered; the Inuit are losing their land, resources, culture and languages as they are simultaneously exploited and seduced by modernity; the relative insignificance of humankind in the wilderness; and perhaps most ironically of all, that even when people venture into Nature with the best of intentions their impact risks its demise.

Almost 25 years later, German filmmaker Werner Herzog released a variation on these similar themes and paradoxes called "Encounters at the End of the World," a polar opposite, as it were, as this film chronicles scientific research at the other edge Antarctica near the South Pole. While "Never Cry Wolf" is hauntingly lyrical and ruefully elegiac, "Encounters" is hauntingly lyrical and darkly forbidding. It's a matter of sensibility and POV. And while you will have to rent the DVD of the former if you haven't seen it, you can see Herzog's latest film, which opened recently at Film Streams' Ruth Sokolof Theater and continues through Aug. 14.

By itself, "Encounters at the End of the World" is one of the best and most provocative films you will see this year. But the film's opening last Friday night gave the viewer an additional opportunity, the chance to put Herzog, and this film in particular, into a broader context via a recent Film Streams collaboration with the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts called Arthouse, an ongoing conversation series post screening. Bemis Curator Hesse McGraw headed a panel discussion between Bemis artists and the audience while Rachel Jacobson, Film Streams'

director and Casey Logan, communications coordinator, kept things moving.

Jacobson is justifiably proud of the indie house's efforts to broaden the scope of its screenings. "Having some sort of dialogue about film with visual artists as the springboard was something I'd thought of quite a long time ago," she said. "People who only watch films tend to criticize it in a bubble, judging it only within the context of the medium itself, but I think the work is more interesting when it's seen from a larger-world perspective."

Likewise, a partnership with Bemis continues Director Mark Masuoka's vision to broaden the institution's footprint within the community. "Arthouse" is just one of several Bemis cross-disciplinary collaborations under its umbrella program, "Endless Summer," initiated and organized by McGraw. Participating with him in discussion were Bemis artists in residence David Bowen, Aili Schmeltz, Janelle Iglesias and Peter Miller. While this may have been one too many for the sake of continuity as the audience often waited patiently for each to respond to the same question, all contributed enthusiastically and gave a unique perspective on the "art" in art films especially when dealing with complex material from a complicated director.

Miller, a filmmaker himself from Vienna, Austria, says that artists do more than review a film. "They are looking at film with as fresh and open mind as they can. Although this means an artist's opinion may not be as conclusive or interpretive as a critic, talking about a work is always a good thing. One thing I have always felt about film is that it is the medium that people felt most comfortable expressing their feelings toward."

Ironically, in an age of private, even anonymous digital dialogue via blogs, text messages, MySpace, etc., "Arthouse" proves that viewers still enjoy traditional forms of "face time." "I think accelerated access to information only generates a greater desire for thoughtful conversation," Hesse said. The kind of conversation Miller believes that electronic media can't provide.

"As technology produces more ways of communicating, personal interaction seems to become more sacred," he said. "Part of the definition of the cinema is that an anonymous community of people gathers to experience it. The Internet may parallel that in some ways but will never satisfy our need to share things with real people in real space and time."

What audiences in indie film houses seem to share beyond the escapism and entertainment of mainstream film is a search for something meaningful in life that perhaps only independent film can provide. "Mainstream films are so alike as to be interchangeable," Miller said, "but then the same is true of mainstream architecture or painting. Good works of art have the ability to change for each viewer, even possibly change the viewer. Herzog's film is like each one of us with its own unique incarnation."

Which is not to say that each of us are the same as any of Herzog's compulsive/obsessive protagonists who test themselves well beyond the brink of civilization and the ordinary, an obsession that the filmmaker also shares. Yet Herzog fans can identify with fictional and non-fictional characters who seek truth and fulfillment in Nature as opposed to what Thoreau described as leading lives of quiet desperation.

While the answer to one's quest may not be as simple as Rosie's rant of "Adventure" in "Never Cry Wolf," neither is it a daily diet of "Shark Week" or reality TV as a substitute for self-expression and knowledge. "Aguirre," "Fitzcarraldo," "Grizzly Man" and "Encounters" may end ambivalently, even tragically, as do many of Herzog's films, but their "heroes" somehow manage to heed Thoreau's warning to not "go to the grave with the song still in them."

What they often do take to the grave, as in the case of "Grizzly Man" Timothy Treadwell, among others, is the meaning of the song, however its expression or outcome. Despite this Herzog and his fans embrace the ambiguity of his films and their own ambivalent response because it, at least, offers clues and cues to the quest for meaning in their own lives.

In "Encounters at the End of the World," a group of eccentric scientists and adventurers have fallen to the bottom of the earth, as one of them put it, and landed at Antarctica's McMurdo research station. What is readily apparent as we meet many of these characters is that they are terra firmly "at home" on six feet of ice, fully satisfied with their various missions as if this was last roundup after a lifetime of unique experiences.

We meet a linguist turned philosopher, a banker turned bus driver, a plumber who claims Aztec heritage and a couple of scientists who celebrate the discovery of three new species by holding an impromptu rock concert in the deep freeze replete with fuzzed up guitars. The doc overall has a surreal edge to it as Herzog and cameraman move in and out of the alternately magical and mundane episodes of McMurdo's existence.

Early on, the director as narrator eschews films about "fluffy penguins" but can't resist following a single, seemingly deranged bird wander away from the madding crowd and head inland far from the life-sustaining ocean to certain death. It is a characteristic Herzog moment and image, symbolic of the irony several at McMurdo feel in trying to save what they fear to be a dying planet. Conversely, he also captures

others elated at being able to measure particles of matter so small they can never be seen.

Herzog contributes to this conundrum of melancholy/fatalism and life-affirming optimism with contrasting images of beauty beneath and above the ice alongside the lackluster and depressing McMurdo station itself. It is a duplicity never resolved, the kind that Herzog relishes leaving the viewer to wander about like his penguin or his "bucketheads," (which need to be seen to be believed) changing their minds as to direction in search of some meaning or satisfaction.

Much of this reaction surfaced, if never quite resolved, in discussion after the "Encounters" screening and both Jacobsen and McGraw promise this kind of dialogue will continue after this summer. "This is going to be an on-going collaboration," McGraw said. "Rachel and I are looking forward to novel ways to collaborate. We believe in the cultural value of thoughtful conversation, and this is an accessible forum to explore the relations between film and contemporary art."

N-VOTE

Every four years C-SPAN and the like moan and groan about the pathetic voter turnout for the U.S. presidential elections. A measly 41 percent of the eligible voters in the 18-24 age group voted in the last presidential election. Sammy Nabulsi and Skyler Wills have chosen to agree with the patriotic complaints in a more proactive fashion.

The freshly graduated pair from the Millard West Class of 2007 have joined forces to create the Nebraska Organization for the Teen Electorate, coincidentally acronymed N-VOTE. They have a clear goal: "Plain and simple, we register people to vote!" And they have.

N-VOTE had their first registration booth at the Taste of West O on Sunday, July 13, and registered 62 people to vote in Omaha. Eager voters simply fill out the registration form and Nabulsi and Wills personally drive or mail it to the county clerk. Or for the technologically savvy, N-VOTE has even recently created a Web site, NVote.org, where eligible citizens have easy access to Nebraska's registration forms, links to candidate comparisons, election calendars and information about the organization.

The non-profit organization has covered all the semi-valid "I couldn't vote" excuses imaginable in the Nebraska area and they are planning on expanding their organization to the surrounding states – making that "N" conveniently refer to national. Stay updated on the election news online and e-mail any questions to nvtoe@gmail.com.

– Caroline Larose

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