



Werner Herzog

In Conversation with Karen Beckman

Booklet featuring selections from:

Herzog on Herzog, 2002
Minnesota Declaration, 1999
Of Walking in Ice, 1974

Produced and edited by Aaron Levy and Nicola M. Gentili,
With the 2007-2008 RBSL Bergman Foundation Curatorial Seminar, University of Pennsylvania



SLOUGHT FOUNDATION
Contemporary Arts

From *Of Walking in Ice*, 1974

Wednesday 11 December

All I see in front of me is route. Suddenly, near the crest of a hill, I thought, there is a horseman, but when I moved closer it was a tree; then I saw a sheep and was uncertain as to whether or not it would turn out to be a bush, but it was a sheep, on the verge of dying. It died still and pathetically; I've never seen a sheep die before. I marched swiftly on.

The region was very disconsolate, like outskirts that refuse to stop, interspersed with a few farmhouses. The electrical cables howled and swayed in the storm; I walked bent forward a bit to avoid being blown off my feet. The clouds were no higher than 300 feet at most, just one big chase. Near a factory a guard screamed at me from behind, thinking I intended to enter the premises, but I was merely keeping away from the trucks carrying huge fountains on them. It's impossible to walk across the fields, everything's flooded and swampy. Where the land is plowed, the soil is too ponderous. Fortified by the weather, it was easier to confront faces today. My fingers are so frozen that I can write only with a great deal of effort.

Minnesota Declaration

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 30, 1999

LESSONS OF DARKNESS

1. By dint of declaration the so-called Cinema Verité is devoid of verité. It reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants.

2. One well-known representative of Cinema Verité declared publicly that truth can be easily found by taking a camera and trying to be honest. He resembles the 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.

3. Cinema Verité confounds fact and truth, and thus plows only stones. And yet, facts sometimes have a strange and bizarre power that makes their inherent truth seem unbelievable.

4. Fact creates norms, and truth illumination.

5. 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.

6. Filmmakers of Cinema Verité resemble tourists who take pictures of ancient ruins of facts.

7. Tourism is sin, and travel on foot virtue.

8. 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 bodyguard, has the only sage answer to this: 'You can't legislate stupidity.'

9. The gauntlet is hereby thrown down.

10. 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.

11. We ought to be grateful that the Universe out there knows no smile.

12. Life in the oceans must be sheer hell. A vast, merciless hell of permanent and immediate danger. So much of hell that during evolution some species—including man—crawled, fled onto some small continents of solid land, where the Lessons of Darkness continue.

From *Herzog on Herzog*, 2002

In my 'documentaries' I have constantly explored the intensified truths of the situations that I have found myself in and of the characters I have met, whether it be abused people who lose their speech in *Lessons of Darkness* or the chain-smoking African chimp of *Echoes from a Sombre Empire*.

[...]

We are immediately in the realm of poetry -- whether or not the audience knows the quote is a fake -- which inevitably strikes a more profound chord than mere reportage. With Pascal you are immersed in the cosmic even before the first picture appears on the screen, and *Lessons of Darkness* never lets you down until its last frame. It holds you up there without shame, something I do with real pride and with the confidence that I am not manipulating the audience in any way. Pascal himself could not have written it better! After the quote the film continues with the voice-over talking of 'Wide mountain ranges, the valleys enshrouded in mist.' What I actually filmed were little heaps of dust and soil created by the tires of trucks. These 'mountain ranges' were no more than a foot high. I keep telling young people who always ask with hesitation in their voice about history and concoction and invention that *this* is what cinema is about.

[...]

The real Fitzcarraldo moved a far lighter boat from one river system to the next, but he disassembled the boat into little pieces and got some engineers to reassemble it later on. But for what we did there was no precedent in technical history, and no book of instructions we could refer to. And you know, probably no one will ever need to do again what we did. I am a Conquistador of the Useless.



Werner Herzog, during the filming of *Fitzcarraldo* (1981). Photograph by: Beat Presser (www.beatpresser.com)

Werner Herzog's Fall 2007 visit to Slought Foundation and the University of Pennsylvania was made possible through the generous sponsorship of the Jerry and Emily Spiegel Funds in Fine Arts, the Cinema Studies Program, and the Department of German at the University of Pennsylvania, as well as the Society of Friends of the Slought Foundation and the Roy & Niuta Titus Foundation.

Very special thanks also goes to Paul Holdengräber and Nathaniel Kahn.