

Desire, Incomprehensibility, and Despair in the Antarctic Vision of Werner Herzog

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Abstract



Werner Herzog's 2007 documentary *Encounters at the End of the World* concerns human ideals of exploration in the extreme environment of the Antarctic. Throughout the film, Herzog and his characters enrol the Antarctic variously as a site of desire and as a site of incomprehensibility in self-told narratives about their own lives. Their ability to do so is a consequence of both popular myth that casts the Antarctic as a static and empty wasteland, and nationalistic modes of governance that promote science but squeeze other modes of knowing to the fringe. The characters in Herzog's film are thus doomed to a cycle of endless repetition: forced by myth to constantly revisit the moment of discovery, and constrained by modes of governance that deny formal expression of the heightened sensibility they experience when engaging with Antarctic space. Ultimately, this cycle generates despair and so the film bears witness to an inversion of frontier tropes: Instead of heroic white male coming to the aid of nature in distress we instead find the heroic white male in distress staring into an utterly hopeless void. In this way, Herzog's film becomes a parable about history constraining new forms of knowing. In an age of increasing environmental uncertainty, and with the Antarctic enrolled as both a litmus test for human impacts on the planet, and for gauging the future of the human race, *Encounters* asks us to reject history where history teaches us nothing new, and it asks us to find ways to renew the great experiment of living in the world.

Keywords: Werner Herzog, Antarctica, climate change, myth, despair, history.

Resumen

El documental *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007) de Werner Herzog reflexiona sobre los ideales humanos de exploración en el medioambiente extremo de la Antártida. A lo largo de la película, Herzog y sus personajes dan un rol a la Antártida como lugar de deseo y como lugar incomprensible en las narrativas que los personajes cuentan ellos mismos sobre sus propias vidas. Su habilidad para hacer esto es consecuencia del mito popular que muestra la Antártida como un páramo estático y vacío, así como de los modos de gobierno nacionalista que promueven la ciencia pero apartan otras formas de saber hacia la periferia. Los personajes de la película de Herzog están condenados a un ciclo de repetición interminable: forzados por un mito a revivir constantemente el momento del descubrimiento, y restringidos por los modos de gobierno que niegan la expresión formal de la sensibilidad exacerbada que experimentan al encontrarse en el espacio de la Antártida. Por último, este ciclo genera desesperanza y la película lleva a los espectadores hacia una inmersión en los tropos de las fronteras: En lugar del héroe hombre blanco yendo a rescatar a la naturaleza en peligro, encontramos al heroico hombre blanco angustiado con la mirada fija contemplando el vacío imposible. De esta manera, la película de Herzog se convierte en una parábola sobre la historia limitando y refrenando nuevas formas de saber. En una era de cada vez más incertidumbre medioambiental, y con la Antártida actuando como un test de tornasol para el impacto de los humanos en el planeta, así como una evaluación del futuro de la raza humana. *Encounters* nos pide que rechacemos la historia que no nos enseña nada nuevo, y nos pide que encontremos maneras de renovar el gran experimento de vivir en el mundo.

Palabras clave: Werner Herzog, Antártida, cambio climático, mito, desesperanza, historia

Introduction

Encounters at the End of the World (2007) is a documentary by Werner Herzog about those living and working at and around McMurdo Station research base on Ross Island just off the coast of Antarctica. The film is structured around a series of interviews with the “professional dreamers” that populate this research station, and is broken up by both archive footage of the early explorers who opened the continent and by images of the violence, desolation, and disturbing beauty of the Antarctic landscape. Herzog’s styling eschews a comfortable narrative about the importance of the research performed by the scientist who occupy this space in favour of a doubt-filled commentary about what it means for humanity to occupy and experiment with and on this extreme and hostile environment. The Antarctic’s particular characteristics—the way ice challenges the fundamentality of the ground, its disavowal of a regular cycle of day and night, and its seeming hostility to life—raise particular challenges for Herzog and his characters.

In response, Herzog’s film demonstrates how many of his characters seize upon this supposed void, appropriating the space around them as a site of desire and incomprehensibility and enrolling it to serve self-told narratives about their own lives. Herzog’s film reacts to this move, and the position of the persona he presents here is one that squirms uncomfortably at the ways his characters consume and regurgitate popular myths about this space, even as they claim to reject them. This discomfort manifests on screen as a fearful obituary for a civilisation doomed to inevitable and imminent collapse, a spectre that haunts other films in Herzog’s own oeuvre (in particular *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, *Fitzcarraldo*, *Grizzly Man*, and *The Wild Blue Yonder*). Yet, the film’s critical (and perhaps tragi-comic) stance towards its own characters suggests an ironic hopefulness. The nationalistic modes of governance that promote science in the Antarctic have squeezed other modes of knowing to the fringe, and yet the esotericism of the characters here, and their particular brand of experimental playfulness, presents a form of salvation in itself. As a result, Herzog’s film emerges as a parable about history constraining new forms of knowing, with an implicit suggestion that by rejecting the history and myths of the Antarctic we might find new ways of occupying this space that could lead us beyond the film’s own vision of hopeless ecological apocalypse.

Much of Herzog’s oeuvre concerns attempts to explore the relationship between nature and culture, and yet despite a couple of films that explicitly deal with ecological concerns (*Where the Green Ants Dream*, *Lessons of Darkness*) his body of work is not particularly environmental in tenor. As a consequence, Herzog’s body of work has not been given sufficient attention outside of film studies and literary criticism (Gandy ‘Visions of Darkness: The Representation of Nature in the Films of Werner Herzog’). This paper is not intended as a response to Gandy’s 1996 article *per se*, but it was noted

during the research and writing process that Gandy's prompt has not yet been adequately met in either ecocritical literature or the environmental humanities more broadly. With this in mind, this paper also aims to contribute to a more determinedly environmental reading of some of Herzog's work. The paper considers *Encounters at the End of the World* alongside the history of Antarctic exploration, the history of scientific enterprise in Antarctica, aesthetic discourse and environmental humanities approaches to the polar regions through a couple of core texts (Polli & Marsching, *Far Field: Digital Culture, Climate Change, and the Poles*; Glasberg, *Antarctica as Cultural Critique*). That said, this context is only loosely sketched and exists in support of a textual analysis of Herzog's film and the themes that it foregrounds.

A site of desire

Elena Glasberg has stated that what the Antarctic is missing is 'a philosophy' (*Antarctica as Cultural Critique* 17). Every attempt to explain Antarctic space is burdened by a form of repetition, as if the only way to trace this 'traceless territory' is to repeatedly encounter it as if for the first time (Krapp 147). Even though the Antarctic has already been discovered, its allure still depends on the act of discovery. Snow, ice and wind conspire to scour the landscape 'clean' again after each usage and return it to an untouched state. And so, despite a storied history, it remains somehow unknown, inaccessible and unrepresentable, "there to be found and rediscovered" (145). Despite best efforts, however, the disappearance of human footprints and the reclamation of buildings by the snow cannot empty the cultural archive of those encounters. Herzog arrives here to witness the effects that this lack of a philosophy and this desire to retrace has. Characters arrive here as refugees, drifters, and professional dreamers. Their single point of unification seems to be the way in which they reconstruct the very myths that drew them here in the first place. An act of collective repetition that in itself engenders further repetition.

In an early scene a forklift operator/philosopher climbs out of a large tracked construction vehicle. He walks off screen to the left before awkwardly recognising his mistake and turning to walk towards the camera. Upon arrival he discusses the many physical and philosophical journeys he has taken in his life. He describes how the workers of McMurdo are "*full-time travellers and part-time workers*" before describing how the philosophy of Alan Watts has influenced him. We are told that his life is but one of many acts through which the universe perceives itself. It is here outside of the world that he has the space to philosophise and make sense of the inside space of the world he has left behind. However, if the forklift operator arrives here in a philosophical wasteland in order to help the universe perceive itself, in doing so he simply re-enacts the actions of those who came before him and the ways in which they freighted their own (colonialist) fantasies.

Later a 'true Englishman' stands on the crater rim of Mount Erebus. Despite the high-tech synthetic clothing worn by his colleagues the Englishman wears a green and yellow woollen scarf that billows in the wind. The braces of his salopettes cover a thick

woollen jumper, and over that, a shaggy tweed jacket. This very particular outfit is a tribute to the previous explorers to come to this continent. Despite the harsh conditions and his old-fashioned attire he appears to be in better condition than his colleague wearing more modern attire whose beard is thick with ice. The true Englishman has selected his clothing in honour of past explorers. In doing so he shares in that moment of history, and in some small way gets to 'repeat' their discovery. His attire brings him one step closer to his ideal: he is a rugged and authentic explorer, cracking open this continent, even while this very act of "cosplay" signals that the continent was already opened by others.

In these scenes Herzog's characters demonstrate the ways in which philosophical baggage is freighted to the Antarctic and then projected onto Antarctic space. For both of these characters the appeal of the Antarctic lies in its untameable frontier qualities, despite the fact that their very presence on the ice undermines the authenticity of these very attributes. In a sense, what Herzog's characters display here is a kind of desire. This desire speaks to the imagined untouched white-space of the map. However, upon arrival this unknowable space disappears, revealing in its stead a barren and dangerous, but nonetheless occupied, dynamic, living and *known* space. What dies here is that which Derrida might call "the fiction of the world" (1). That is to say, the sum of all the anachronistic fictions and pioneer myths that we seem to cling to in our cultural understanding of, and longing for, this space. But if we venture further, Herzog's film also reveals the way that this very myth is built out of the knowing rejection by those who carry it to acknowledge that it is in itself a form of repetition. Repetition of the act of discovery, exploration and inhabitation that inspires them and shapes their actions here.

Both the forklift operator above and a linguist who appears later in the film describe their arrival in Antarctica in the same way. As if the world could be picked up and shaken around, and all those people who had no firm roots elsewhere would come loose and collect again at the bottom of the globe. It is an idea which writes a core contradiction into the fabric of this space. "*Jumping off the map*" (as the forklift operator puts it) would seem to imply in very clear language that the world has been left behind. Yet, to imagine the Antarctic as the point at which "*the lines on the map reconverge*" confirms the Antarctic's position as being an essential part of that same world. The Antarctic gets to play the anchor at the end of existence that holds the world in form. Its abyssal cold and resistance to external logic give civilisation elsewhere some structural coherence. It is an important part of a world that it holds together by virtue of the contrasts it presents to that world, yet it is never allowed to threaten the logic of the 'inside' world. In this way the Antarctic also exists as a static absolute outside of the world. And it is this stasis, as contrasted to the perpetual social transformation of the inner world, that allows the Utopian fantasy of Herzog's characters to operate here (Krapp 146).

The reasons given by Herzog's characters for arriving at McMurdo are varied, but feature one unifying theme. For all of them, arrival at this challenging frontier carries the possibility of escape and rejuvenation. Thinking about frontier in this utilitarian way is

an import from Hollywood cinema (Ingram 28), and Herzog certainly implies that his subjects have bought into and replicate this trope. In moving off the page onto an exotic frontier, his characters allow themselves to recover something rugged and authentic of their own being. But to consider masculine recovery alongside ‘outside space’ is in itself an act of repetition. The early expeditions that ‘discovered’ the world combined fact-finding with the desire for masculine adventure (Driver). Even the early telescopic exploration of Mars placed a huge emphasis on the importance of human endeavour in reaching appropriate observation sites at the peaks of mountains and at other exotic locales, despite this masculine posturing contributing little in itself to the knowledge being produced. More so than the knowledge an expedition produced, authority and legitimacy derived from the image of the scientist as a heroic adventurer out on the literal and metaphorical frontier. As Lane notes, “in the process, [adventurers] capitalised on a popular reverence for sublime [locations] as sites of clarity, vision, and perspective” (94). As a consequence, adventure led to a swaying of the meaning of scientific endeavour, compounding both the veneer of distance and objectivity with the deeply subjective desire to experience thrilling adventure in the blank spaces of the map. Herzog’s characters embody this myth in *Encounters*. Positioning their bodies outside of any notion of regular spatiality these characters are able to fulfil their sole desire of this place: to afford the perspective to centre themselves at the heart of their own stories of self-discovery.

Herzog stated on the promotional circuit for *Encounters* that “I only filmed people I really like... you can sense the warmth” (in MacNab 21). I’m not convinced that this is true. There is a particularly jarring cold jump cut between a canteen staff member’s description of an ice-cream (substitute) machine and Herzog’s verbal takedown of McMurdo prior to leaving again. The editing reveals Herzog’s distaste for the people of McMurdo, not as individuals, but as representatives of people in a place Herzog had hoped to find somehow less oppressive and ugly. The canteen worker jokes about how the occasional breakdown of the Frosty Boy ice-cream-maker causes social collapse at McMurdo, but Herzog’s silence forces his subject to squirm awkwardly in front of the camera and continually reaffirm his point:

It's the equivalent of ice cream in the States, and it's a really big hit... And it has the texture of ice cream... But it's not quite ice cream. There's a lot of crises that happen in McMurdo when the Frosty Boy runs out. It's bad news... Word circulates everywhere throughout McMurdo when Frosty Boy goes down... It's really good stuff.

Here among the “detritus of industrial society and new age holism” (Chaiken 71) Herzog’s discomfort derives from the inherent tension between a substitute ice-cream dazzlingly white against its off-white bowl—that the residents of McMurdo have apparently invested so heavily in—and the displacement of real ice that has been churned into the mud-brown slurry of McMurdo Station to facilitate its presence here. Herzog asks how people can claim to truly wish to jump off the world when they bring it with them in the name of mere comfort.

In *The Wild Blue Yonder*, an earlier film by Herzog which shares much with *Encounters*, Herzog comprehensively makes the case that we take our philosophies with

us wherever we go, for better or worse.¹ As Brad Dourif's alien narrates in the voiceover, the first human voyage to his abandoned home planet (the eponymous Blue Yonder), he questions how human colonists could possibly plan to install utilities under the untouched and pristine world of ice he used to call home. Herzog intersects these moments with documentary footage of scientists lost in what Léger has called "utopian moments" ("Ecstatic Struggle in the World System"). Waxing lyrical about the prospects of the human colonisation of space, scientists riff on similar ideas, describing visions of the installation of yoga studios and shopping malls on other worlds (and these are things that we actually see in some form or another in *Encounters*). The desire for a simpler, less complicated life may draw people to McMurdo, but this desire also distorts what they find here (Lopez).

While acknowledging that it would have been naive to expect an untouched wilderness upon arrival, Herzog is nonetheless quick to express great disappointment in finding a site similar to any construction lot, with noisy oversized vehicles and tracks carved out of mud and rock. Instead of pristine whites and blues, the colour palette is grey and rusty. The soundtrack screams as heavy machinery tears into rock. "From the very first day, we just wanted to get out of this place", we are told. Herzog's camera does not hide the rubble of McMurdo, or later, the dirty ice left in the wake of a controlled explosion. Even in its smaller moments the film is not afraid to show the snow as lumpy and imprecise rather than as the perfect angelic white blanket common in romanticised Western snowscapes. Herzog gives the impression that he is mocking his characters by pointing to the difference between their desires for a pristine and wild frontier and the reality of a site like McMurdo. Yet, despite his characters demonstrating how they simply retrace the Antarctic through repetition, Herzog seems unwilling or unprepared to move beyond this himself. Unable to reconcile the world of his desire with the realities of McMurdo, Herzog immediately denounces the research base as an abominable site and sets out in search of the map's mythical blank white space. While Herzog may not find any such site, he nonetheless frames his departure from McMurdo as a kind of victory, with his snowmobile bouncing merrily over the blue ice of the Ross Sea while a euphoric score signals his freedom.

A site of incomprehensibility

In Herzog's film the Antarctic becomes a site of struggle. It is a battleground littered with the charred remains of machinery through which we must forage for clues that might answer lingering questions about the place and permanence of humanity on the earth. But Herzog's film also notes how science and discovery have not eradicated

¹ This is actually true of almost all of Herzog's work (Gandy, Corrigan), but I want to draw comparison here to *The Wild Blue Yonder* because it shares so much with *Encounters at the End of the World*. Specifically, the use of the under ice Ross Sea as a primary shooting location, and the blending of genre conventions that melds documentary with elements of narrative fiction. So *The Wild Blue Yonder* exists as a narrative built out of documentary footage, and as I will discuss below, *Encounters* emerges as something like a horror film built out of a documentary.

myth here, and raises questions about the limits of human rationality in explaining both Antarctic space and our own relationship to it. Rationality and objectivity become sterile buzzwords for a project of control, one that seeks to mask political desires behind scientific research ideas (Carruth & Marzec, Glasberg, Gerhardt et al). Science might “be government” (Glasberg “Who goes there?” 61) in Antarctica, but its application has less to do with the (mostly) important scientific goals of the researchers on the ground, and more to do with toxic goals like the aggrandisement of national science programs that have been enrolled into a resurgence of the ideal of territorial empire (Bloom & Glasberg 121; Steinberg). As a result, Herzog’s film casts the Antarctic as a mirror that reflects our own recourse to irrationality under duress. In fact, Herzog shows a strong antipathy towards the application of any rational approach here. Upon leaving McMurdo part of Herzog’s elation relates to escaping the strict overwatch provided by the penitentiary subcontractors that maintain the station, “*decent people*” who were simply “*too concerned*” with Herzog’s personal safety to allow him the freedom he felt he needed to make this film. In this way, Herzog begins to explore the idea that rational approaches, and those called upon to apply them, are somehow insufficient to the task of explaining the particular materialities of Antarctic space.

Shortly after leaving McMurdo Herzog encounters a group of seal experts out on the ice bagging seals and extracting milk samples. We are told that bagging the head of the seal keeps it calm during this procedure, but this does not mesh well with Herzog’s imagery here. The snow and ice are stained with piss and shit, markers of struggle as a seal wails in desperation and a dark plastic bag is pulled over its head. A nutritional ecologist, face and eyes covered in a thick black scarf and dark goggles, stands before the camera, resembling the very cliché of a masked assailant, and explains how the seal’s suffering is only temporary: “... and really that’s the ideal for us is to have an animal species that we can work on that will not be so disturbed by the work that’s being done on them that they behave abnormally”. All of this work would be justifiable, perhaps, if the goal of the research was highly laudable. However, in sarcastically cutting to an explanation from another ecologist that the ultimate value of the milk samples lies in providing insight into human weight loss, Herzog criticises what he clearly regards as a pointless instrumentalisation of animal life.

Later, a series of long shots dwarf a massive laboratory against the huge plain at the foot of Mount Erebus that surrounds it. Inside, Herzog meets a physicist working at the forefront of neutrino detection. Despite the visual noise provided by huge amounts of complex machinery, tangled cables and scientific equipment, Herzog’s camera picks out the ornate Hawai’ian spiritual engravings on the side of a neutrino detector. As he does so, the physicist’s earnest attempts to communicate the science of neutrinos collapses into a meaningless and incoherent ramble. After a brief moment of pause the physicist changes track, stating that even though neutrinos can be grasped intellectually and mathematically, it is more akin to “*measuring the spirit world*”. Why it is, Herzog asks, that the spirit world needs to be evoked at all.

Antarctic space is certainly *weird*. It is a space haunted by silence as much as the cacophony of howls and wind that arrive with inclement weather. The view flips

between impossible postcard vistas of pure white and glacial blue and white-out conditions that foreclose on every avenue of human sensory experience (Glasberg, *Antarctica as Cultural Critique* 16). The Antarctic seems to exist far outside of the spectrum of the human lived world. Perhaps it is exactly this reason that makes the importance of the Antarctic so hard to convey to a global body-politic concerned with more personal, intimate, and immediate issues (Boes). It does not help that cartographic convention renders this place a featureless white desert. The effect of this featurelessness on the map is that when we encounter the poles we have been prepared to expect a space that is silent and numbing (Lopez, c.f. Said). According to Glasberg, the lack of any kind of native knowledge has afforded mapping a disproportionate importance in Antarctica. Mapping attempts to fill in the blanks here, but cannot possibly fill the massive expanse with enough detail. In effect, the features that do show up on the map only serve to highlight the vast tracts of land for which no features have yet been recorded (*Antarctica as Cultural Critique* 17).

As we have seen at the other end of the world in Ecozon@’s special edition *Northern Nature* there is more at play than this conception of a blank space allows for. Despite vast differences in their actual make-up, histories of habitation, and political operation there are ways in which the poles are conflated; with both sharing a common history in the Western imagination as spaces constructed by their supposed antipathy towards human habitation. Expeditions must be well funded and aggressively supported from the outside to succeed, or even survive. As a consequence, the Antarctic had remained for a great many years “a wasteland of marginal human concern” colonised in turn by flag waving attempts at neo-imperialism on the one hand, and irrationality, fear, and incomprehensibility on the other (Glasberg, “Who goes there?” 640) despite its status as an international territory. Herzog arrives to investigate the increasing desire to use untouched Antarctic space to measure the impact of human life on the planet and how these practices have altered our understanding of this place. Now, despite the whiteout conditions emulated by the map and the way that this communicates a site of terminal frozen stasis, the Antarctic also becomes a site of rapid, unstable change; a place where “nothing—or anything—can happen” and the annihilation of all earth life lies in the balance (652). In this sense Herzog’s film follows a trend in popular media representations that take advantage of the poles to stand in for an entire planet on the brink of ecological collapse (Glasberg, *Antarctica as Cultural Critique* 120).

The time spent with the seal ecologists, and the contrast played between the animal’s implied suffering and the banal explanation offered to justify it suggests that there is a space between Herzog’s desire to view the science conducted here as something external to mankind’s own hubris, and his crushing disappointment in discovering its role in the production of that same hubris. Whatever the underlying motivation, we are forced in this moment to acknowledge the bizarrely absent morality of those whom Herzog enlists to speak for science. It is as if here, where a “magnetic compass no longer aids navigation and orientation, the moral compass also fails” (Krapp 157). As a consequence, Herzog is constantly left reacting to the short-sightedness by which science is called upon to investigate the Antarctic. For Herzog it is not the

construct of scientific rationality itself that is at fault. Rather, given his history of complex, flawed protagonists, and his disapproval of the societal artefacts humans carry with them to exotic spaces (Gandy), Herzog's anxiety regards the capacity of the human—as an irrational and flawed agent—to maintain rationality in the face of a space like the Antarctic. Scientific endeavours, like volcanologists rappelling into the open caldera of Mount Erebus, are presented as if they were unnecessary thrill-seeking.

In one extended sequence, Herzog focuses in on the possibility of insanity amongst penguins, dwelling on difficult imagery of a penguin running across an 80 km expanse of frozen wasteland towards the interior of the continent and certain death. As we watch, Herzog struggles to elicit conversation from a marine ecologist who seems unwilling to hold the camera's gaze. Watching the penguin march towards its inevitable death connects with two prevalent themes in Herzog's oeuvre. The first concerns an interpretation of the natural world that is violent, unrelenting and indifferent to the presence of humans (cf. Gandy 1). For Herzog's flawed protagonists, the sum of their success is simply to have survived their encounter with the natural world, whatever the physical and/or emotional costs. The second theme concerns Herzog's ideas about language and its fundamental incapability to facilitate communication. The penguin's behaviour cannot be explained in a coherent way—and Herzog himself treads lightly around the term 'insanity'—but for Herzog the natural world is utterly incomprehensible and resistant to our attempts to define and explain it. The natural world is an enigma, and Herzog suggests that we can never truly get inside its head. Like a doomed Herzogian quest, language merely reaches an anti-climax when it encounters the "threshold of rationality" in the sublime (Gandy 10; cf. Elsaesser 147). And so for Herzog there is a deep gulf between explaining the world and experiencing it that he finds unbridgeable.

While some of Herzog's criticisms are clearly apparent, I don't think that science bashing or criticising individuals is his intention here, although such a reading is certainly possible. Instead we might suggest that Herzog follows Susan Ballard's implication that the scientists here have developed "deep emotional and spiritual engagement[s] with the materials they are studying and are often frustrated by the tools they must use that do not always capture this heightened sensibility" (175). The physicist is not at fault for drawing the spirits into his explanation of neutrinos. Elsewhere Herzog is charitable in his framing of subjects as amateur musicians, as filmographers, and as grasping with complicated philosophy. However, the application of a singular frame here, a version of science shackled to geopolitical outcomes, stifles the expression of these other frames of reference. So the agents of rationality here, the very actors who produce scientific knowledge in this space, must themselves have recourse to multiple frames of knowing (be that scientific, intellectual, spiritual, philosophical, or aesthetic), in order to grasp the vastness and magnitude of the experiences and research conducted. And yet, these modes of knowing are nonetheless squeezed out of the continent by the very agents that have brought these actors to the Antarctic.

At the mercy of forces bigger than any of the individual scientists—the insufficiency of language itself, the failure of human protagonists to apply that language, and the enrolment of science in acts of political imperialism—the science on display here emerges as somehow incommensurate with the reality of the struggle to merely survive in the face global threats and our own biological contingency. For Herzog the problem lies in the application of a science which has become completely divorced from this struggle. Instead of serving practical ends, the science on display in *Encounters* serves as mere commentary that contributes to the social and environmental problems it is called upon to solve by virtue of not really doing anything at all. Lost in this struggle to apply rationality to an incomprehensible world, the scientists like the seal ecologists appear as dreamers, conducting science without questioning their own aims. If the scientists in the Antarctic—with their fantasies of escape or, even worse, morbid fascination with the end of human life—cannot answer the questions that need answering, and have themselves given up, then where exactly are we to turn? *Encounters* envisions the end of humanity as inevitable, another link in a “chain of endless catastrophes.” As Herzog drolly notes, the only piece of evidence that will be found will be a whole sturgeon and a wreath of popcorn around some trinkets buried frozen under the South Pole. This is a darkly comic obituary to a civilisation that Herzog accuses of having produced nothing, and of understanding even less.

A site of despair

At its climax Herzog’s film transitions from documentary into a kind of horror film. While on the surface Herzog seems torn between fondness for his characters and a more macabre fascination with the forbidding nature of Antarctic space, it is this second reading that is ultimately borne out. As a result, Herzog’s film forces us to re-read even the scenes that do not stage despair in any overt way. In this way despair emerges as the underlying commitment of the film, the very condition in which all of the action is staged. The passing joy and enthusiasm of characters is rendered as a condition of blissful naivety. Ultimately, desire and incomprehensibility conspire to produce despair, and Herzog’s Antarctic reveals itself as a sustained assault on the permanence of the human body. While the imagery is often wondrous and sublime, the effect is to draw us so far outside of our bodily experience that we can look back upon our implied and inevitable destruction as a source of aesthetic pleasure. Like Herzog’s characters, exposure to the terrifying power of the Antarctic numbs our ability to react, and we no longer answer it with fear. The end of human civilisation is presumed as inevitable and imminent in *Encounters*, and we are asked to simply enjoy the spectacle.

Before Herzog is allowed venture beyond McMurdo Station itself he is required to undergo survival training. The bright blue sky and personable warmth of the instructor mask the seriousness of this training, one participant even makes light of the prospect of losing his fingers to frostbite in the night. During one exercise the participants wear white plastic buckets over their heads in order to simulate the white-out conditions of an Antarctic storm. The scene is played for laughs, and there is clearly a sense of levity

amongst both the participants and the instructor. Each of the buckets has a comical face drawn on with black marker pens and the exaggerated body proportions afforded by the use of bulky winter clothing combined with these goofy masks gives the impression of children playing. Yet the scene is also undercut with a sense of dread. The characters navigate through the simulated storm to find a missing colleague. It is a task at which they fail hopelessly—unable to locate their colleague they are also unsuccessful in doubling back to their own cabin and end up lost. While it is undoubtedly funny to watch these characters snarking about in the snow, we must contend with the fact that they are, in effect, dying out on this monstrous slab of ice.

Later, Herzog goes to meet the underwater diver whose footage had prompted his trip here. This diver is also a leading biologist specialising in protists, specifically foraminifera. He sits in contemplative silence in preparation for a dive whilst discussing the ways in which the natural world is “*so horribly violent at the miniature scale*”. He compares the creatures on the sea bed to the monsters of science-fiction, beings that possess many ways to rend human flesh. To a soundtrack of scratched strings we bear witness to this underwater world. Lit by the single-point light of the diver’s torch and with this unsettling score, the scene resembles a horror film. The creatures here are discomfiting to look at, lacking any features to which we might relate. A swarm of starfish are scattered by the light as they pick scraps of flesh from the carapaces of dead crabs. Herzog reinforces the diver’s comparison by cutting to the diver’s research group watching 1950s science fiction monster movie *Them!* while he narrates their assumption that human life is doomed. The scene continues to reinforce this connection to horror, with the next cut transitioning us to shots of foraminifera taken through a microscope. The foraminifera send long tentacular pseudopodia out into their surroundings to collect fragments of sand with which to create a protective layer around themselves. Their pseudopodia evoke the monstrous horror of John Carpenter’s *The Thing*, which ensnares the inhabitants of a similar research base in much the same fashion, drawing its victims in and building its body out of their flesh.

Herzog’s nature is cruel. In *Encounters* seal ecologists lie prone on the ice, transfixed by the sounds of the Weddell seals below. The shot is long and slow, and the scientists look like they have simply given up and lain down to die. A mechanic keeps a bag stuffed full of survival gear ready to go at a moment’s notice, as if disaster awaits him at every turn. In a supreme act of bathos a scientist recounts a kind of highlight reel of remarkable stories about their life before climbing into a bag. A glaciologist describes a recurring dream in which he is standing on a massive iceberg eminently aware of its intense power. The glaciologist’s tone is full of wonder, and yet he does not try to evade the element of fear. In footage and in the scientist’s own voiceover the icebergs always loom over the viewer. These blocks of ice might be huge, but they are not the static monolithic ice of the age of explorers. Indeed, Herzog deliberately undermines that very perspective by showing us the age of exploration through the cheap studio reconstructions commissioned after explorers returned home, rather than through primary footage. Instead, we see time-lapse footage of icebergs bumbling around the Ross Sea. It is a jarring shift in scale to jump from seeing the ice as a lumbering

behemoth to watching these clumsy movements play out from such an elevated perspective in such quick succession. However, it works to good effect in suggesting that while the sense of scale that so awed the early explorers is not lost, increased knowledge has not so much tamed the ice as unleashed it. The ice maintains its absolute crushing power—we are told that iceberg B-12 contains enough water to run the Nile for 75 years—but is also fused with an unpredictable ability to move in dynamic ways.

These icebergs portend major climatic upheaval in the near future. And, as much as Herzog forces us to focus on the machinery needed for survival here—with huge machinery flanking individuals during interviews—the camerawork and editing constantly work to remind us of two juxtaposing scales; the sound, violence, and power of the expansive life support system required for civilisation to survive in a hostile world, and just how miniscule these machines look in comparison to the landscape around them. While the human relationship with Antarctic space might have been defined previously by its inability to respond, watching icebergs dance around on screen as they drift northward into *our* world is a frightening end to our “comfortable thoughts” about this place. As Glasberg notes, the Antarctic transitions from a site to which humans migrate, to a site which itself migrates towards the human world. In doing so the ice reveals the hubristic impossibility of “human being on ice”:

The desire to impose human ways of knowing and being on the material of the earth and the equally strong refusal to fully recognise human inscription and its constituting limits is a problem, which like climate change, has begun with modernity and is only now overtaking human capacities for sensing. (Glasberg, “Who goes there?” 133)

Antarctica emerges as unstable and responsive rather than simply vulnerable. Its movements hint at behaviours we cannot fathom and which our models do not let us predict. The landscape recovers a life of its own, and an agency which threatens to push back against our desires to control it.

At the opposite end of the scale the tree foraminifera appear as a particularly unpleasant addition. In the diver’s terms they are “a manifestation of the best or our abilities,” capable of demonstrating something that we might compare to intelligence, and yet completely devoid of any of the higher characteristics we afford ourselves. Instead, foraminifera register as a “visually disgusting pastiche of biological possibilities” (White 400). As a result, humanity is assaulted from both sides of the scalar spectrum. The microscopic world appears as a ghastly and unknowable ‘abject’ world (Kristeva), in which humans are always under threat from creatures that embody the violence of the evolutionary process and reduce human existence to “irresolvable uncertainty” (Addison 156). At the same time, the macroscopic world of the icebergs appears as an unstoppable leviathan ready to roll over and obliterate human civilisation. Stuck in the middle of these processes and their massive scalar injunction, humans register as little more than one possible—and very temporary—configuration of elements. In *Encounters* Herzog presents human bodies as something cobbled out of borrowed material; material that will be ground apart and then built up again in new configurations the moment we are gone. And in response his characters become mere spectators. Unable to respond, they simply serve to bear witness to the end of human

life. And in creating an aesthetic spectacle of it, Herzog alienates us from our own suffering.

Conclusion

Encounters at the End of the World presents challenges as well as potential answers to questions regarding the position of the human in a such an extreme locale, although Herzog's auteur/director/character persona does not make it entirely clear what he wants from us. Herzog's own self-professed philosophy that truth has very little to do with facts means that at times we are left wondering exactly what on screen is 'real' (MacNab). As is typical of many of Herzog's works, this is also a film that progresses without any real direction, offering a series of vignettes without necessarily building towards a clear or coherent narrative (Elsaesser 140). Nonetheless, what emerges is a text that can give us an insight into the way in which the particular materialities of Antarctic space allow it to be enrolled as a site of desire, and the constraints of nationalistic science programs cultivate incomprehensibility for its occupants. The characters on display here, Herzog included, wield the Antarctic as a yardstick to measure their own passing, but trapped within this cycle of desire and incomprehensibility they can only respond with despair. At the end of the world it is not the heroic white male coming to the aid of nature in distress that we find, but rather the heroic white male in distress, staring into an utterly hopeless void.

But this distress is a phantom, conjured up through the very acts of repetition that allow for individuals to mimic the act of discovery even though they merely retrace the routes of those who have come before them. And through the inability to cultivate other modes of knowing here, which are always pushed to the fringe, explored only by individuals in their leisure time, but never as the focus of highly geopoliticised scientific practice. This nightmare is more the result of human activity and particular Western cultural imaginings than of any extant reality. Herein lies an optimistic environmental reading of Herzog's film: as a place that has been defined by what it has to say about other things (both human civilisation and our current ecological crises), the Antarctic now seems to respond in tenaciously readable ways (Clark vi). It emerges as an actor with its own agency and its own story to tell, and pushes back against human attempts at control. The mechanics behind human appropriations of Antarctic space unravel on screen, opening up the prospect of interacting with this chaotic space anew even while the film is unable to explain how this might be achieved. In this way, Herzog's film becomes a parable about history constraining new forms of knowing. In an age of increasing environmental uncertainty, and with the Antarctic enrolled as a litmus test for both human impacts on the planet, and gauging the future of the human race, *Encounters* asks us to reject history where history teaches us nothing new, and it asks us to find ways to renew the great experiment of living in the world.

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