



Encounters at the End of the World Discussion Guide

Director: Werner Herzog

Year: 2007

Time: 99 min

You might know this director from:

Grizzly Man

Cave of Forgotten Dreams (2010)

My Best Fiend (1999)

Happy People: A Year in the Taiga (2010)

Fitcarraldo (1982)

Aguirre, the Wrath of God (1972)

FILM SUMMARY

Prolific film director, Werner Herzog, traveled to Antarctica after seeing a diver's under-ice footage. There, at the bottom of the world, he found not only an array of sea creatures and ice formations, but a society of "professional dreamers." Whether researchers, expert divers, political refugees, linguists, or perhaps a plumber who descended from royal Aztec lineage, the people working at McMurdo station come from all over the world, some with great scientific ambitions, others with a plain love for life. Their days are lived out on the continent once seen as "a cold monolith of ice" to be conquered in the name of empire, but is now viewed as a "dynamic, living entity that is constantly producing change."

Nature is the film's lead character. From neon-colored jellyfish, lactating seals, and a lost penguin to crystallized hallways of snow, erupting volcanoes, and an other-worldly ceiling of ice, all of Herzog's Encounters at the End of the World lead to philosophical musings about life, about human behavior, and more specifically, about the role and place of human beings in the universe. Herzog did not go to the end of the world to watch birds sail across the surface of ice, but to dive into the depths of the earth. Out of his heartfelt curiosity comes what Roger Ebert called "rapturous truth."

FILM THEMES

Herzog said he didn't go to Antarctica for another penguin movie, but with a lot of questions about the nature of things. He wondered why humans conceal their identity with feathers and masks, and why they're always compelled to chase "the bad guy." He wondered why ants keep lice as slaves, and why more sophisticated animals like chimps do not. Now it's our turn to ask questions about this film, about life.

ENDINGS

A marine biologist takes his very last dive beneath the ice, ending his long career in Antarctica. A linguist talks about the number of languages dying out in the world. An ice cream machine runs out of ice cream, causing great distress to the 1,200 people working at McMurdo station. We see the hands an Aztec descendent, the last among his royal lineage. And as we watch a penguin trot naively to its doom, we are to think of our own species. These are a few encounters at the end of the world.

"CUTTING EDGE" SCIENCE

The film reveals how brutally the Antarctic landscape has been industrialized by stations like McMurdo. Interestingly, while scientists constantly warn about the end of human life, they search ardently for our origin. But every clue leads to another question and "logical order" remains just out of their grasp. Scientists discover many things, and yet never find answers to their deepest questions - which are very similar to the questions humans have been asking since the dawn of time.

FRINGE SOCIETY

Antarctica is not owned by any one nation, or subject to a particular sociopolitical code. Therefore it catches all those who wish, or are willing, to fall off of the grid. As Herzog interviews these glaciologists, divers, computer technicians and manual laborers, he finds that they are actually poets, investment bankers, philosophers, refugees, "professional dreamers" on a journey of sorts, whether it's looking for answers to life's greatest questions, or just looking for themselves.

SPIRITUALITY

A religious feeling, almost cosmic in size, is maintained throughout the film. To complement the natural soundscapes of Antarctica, Herzog chose Russian orthodox music - appropriate, since the under-ice world is often referred to as "the cathedral." He meets a physicist who's trying to identify some elusive particles called neutrinos. The origin and continuation of life is possible only through these subatomic particles that cannot be seen, cannot be touched, and yet they constantly surround us. They're "almost like a spirit or a god," the physicist says. He understands them mathematically and intellectually, but when it comes to measuring neutrinos, "it's like trying to measure the spirit world."

"For many reasons, our presence on this planet does not seem to be sustainable. Our technical civilization makes us particularly vulnerable."

Werner Herzog

"If you take everybody who's not tied down, they all sort of fall down to the bottom of the planet, so that's how we got here, you know. We're all at loose ends, and here we are together."

William Jirsa, linguist

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Of the many unique characters featured in this film, which one(s) did you connect with most, and why so?
2. Did you find Werner Herzog’s philosophical questions interesting? Did they inspire you to think in new ways?
3. If the Antarctic scientists all agree that human activity is producing irreversible, unpredictable changes to ice poles, then why are they still there, probing mechanically into its heart? What do you think they are looking for?
4. Antarctica is commonly referred to as “the bottom of the world.” So why, then, did Werner Herzog choose the title, ENCOUNTERS AT THE END OF THE WORLD?
5. What are your feelings about global warming? Does it worry you? Do you think humans are playing a role in climate and geological change, and should we be doing things now to relieve the planet of our impact, to find a harmonious role in this ecosystem before we reach a “point of no return?”
6. What did you think of the marine biologist who sees the separation of humans from nature as an aspect of our survival and evolution? Or what other factors could explain our ever-increasing disconnection from nature?
7. Does it bother you that entire species, languages, civilizations and natural resources are dying off at a rapid rate in the name of a strong, globalized economy that relies on nonstop consumption?
8. The Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, said that the only constant thing in life is change. “Like a river, nature flows ever onwards.” Is it possible that one day nature will continue on without humans?
9. Is science like religion in that it is fundamentally another way of trying to explain the universe and origin of life?
10. Herzog suggests that true adventure died the day that the last frontier was conquered, and that adventure itself became nothing more than imperial conquest and power. How would you define “adventure?” When is the last time you experienced adventure for the sake of pure adventure, without any personal gain, without any boasting, without even taking your camera?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- The film is essentially a two-man enterprise including cinematographer, Peter Zeitlinger, and Werner Herzog who did the sound.
- When asked if he ever got scared in Antarctica, Herzog replied, “We had to come back with a film. That’s the only thing that was frightening – and I’m never frightened of making movies. This was the first and only film that I’ve been frightened to do.”
- ENCOUNTERS AT THE END OF THE WORLD is Werner Herzog’s 51st film and the 1st one to be nominated for an Oscar.
- The main research season at McMurdo season extends from October to February. As many as 1200 people are there during this season, most of them working 60, 80, even 100 hour weeks.
- During winter months, the population at McMurdo station falls to just 165 or so people who remain isolated together until August.
- From 1992 to 2011, Antarctica lost more than 70 billion tons of ice, and the rate of loss is now twice as high as it was in the 1990s.
- Scientists first thought that Eastern Antarctica was so cold that it resisted ice melt. But recent research shows that since 2006, it has been losing mass along with western Antarctica.
- Many countries have strong interests in Antarctica. China, South Korea, Argentina, Russia, and South Africa are just a few who want the land for expanding their tourist corridors and exploiting the continent’s untapped resources.
- Human-induced ozone loss above Antarctica has led to a strengthening of the winds that encircle Antarctica. These winds blow ice away from the coast, further out to sea. The water in between freezes again during winter months, so it appears that the Antarctic ice mass is actually increasing, but the surface is deceiving.
- Antarctica was first “conquered” in the name of British imperialism. Recently, in December 2012, a fury rose up in global politics when Great Britain claimed a vast swath of Antarctica as “Queen Elizabeth Land.” The claimed area is twice as large as the UK and upsets the Antarctic Treaty System’s condition prohibiting all territorial claims.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Introduce this beautiful and deeply thought-provoking film-poem to others.
2. Follow and support filmmaker [Werner Herzog’s](#) and the [Werner Herzog Foundation](#). You can also follow him on [Twitter](#).
3. Stay informed about the earth’s ice poles – how human activity is changing them, and how humans might need to change in response. Be open to these changes when possible.
4. Consider the characters in this film, the “professional dreamers” who had deeper, more authentic personalities hiding beneath their day-job personalities. In your own life, try getting to know these deeper aspects of people that our society doesn’t often validate. Try expressing these aspects of yourself too.
5. Take the effort to learn about a dying language, a dying culture or tradition, or at least to embrace the last bearers of culture. In our lifetime, 90% of languages will be extinct and will have “a catastrophic impact to our ecosystem”.

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Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.