FILM SUMMARY

Prolific film director, Werner Herzog, travels to Antarctica after seeing a diver’s under-ice footage. There, at the bottom of the world, Herzog finds 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 a frozen 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 otherworldly cathedral 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 life. Out of his heartfelt curiosity comes what Roger Ebert has called “rapturous truth.”
FILM THEMES

Herzog said he didn’t go to Antarctica to make another penguin movie, but with a lot of questions about the nature of things.

SCIENTIFIC QUESTS

Antarctica has no indigenous people, and much of it seems like a lifeless, white desert expanse, but scientists brave the harsh inhospitable terrain to set up their various experiments. For example, a neutrino detector goes there seeking clues about the origins of existence, while divers try to put single-celled organisms in chronological order. Oftentimes, a researcher’s encounter with nature leads to an examination of our own human nature. Although the scientific research in Antarctica utilizes cutting-edge technology, the questions driving many of these scientists are the same questions posed by people in ancient times.

FRINGE SOCIETY

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

SPIRITUALITY

Antarctica’s scope and grandeur elicits an awe that is almost religious, a tone that runs through the film. Herzog describes the wordless ritual of divers preparing to go under the ice as “priests preparing for mass.” Russian orthodox music is chosen to complement underwater scenes, as divers describe the world under the ice as “the cathedral.” We also meet a physicist who’s trying to detect subatomic particles called neutrinos. These particles rarely interact with other particles. Elusive and mysterious, they drift across the universe, potentially carrying secrets about the beginnings of time. They’re “almost like a spirit or a god,” the physicist says. He understands them intellectually, but when it comes to measuring neutrinos, “it’s like trying to measure the spirit world.”

ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

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 of an Aztec descendant, the last among his royal lineage. As we watch a penguin trot toward certain death, Herzog speaks about the “end of human life on this earth.” Yet each winter, there is new ice and new snow. And many who end up in Antarctica are wishing to reinvent themselves, to seek a new life.

“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. What do the people working and living in Antarctica have in common with the early explorers like Ernest Shackleton and Roald Amundsen? How are today’s expeditions different than those of the early explorers?

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 about Antarctica attracts “professional dreamers” and those seeking to reinvent themselves? Have you ever sought adventure, inspiration, or understanding of yourself through an extreme environment?

6. What did you think of the marine biologist’s idea about the separation of humans from nature being part of our survival and evolution? What factors explain our ever-increasing disconnection from nature today?

7. The linguist in the film describes the rapid dying of languages as a “catastrophic impact on an ecosystem.” Do you agree with him? What is gained and lost in the growing dominance of English in today’s globalized world?

8. How is science like religion in its search to unlock mysteries and find answers? Why do you think Herzog uses religious terms to explain the grandeur of the ice and the solemnity of the divers?

9. In the film, we meet a refugee whose escape from behind the Iron Curtain can only be described by his newfound freedom to travel. Herzog understands and says, “The best description of hunger is a description of bread.” Can you relate to this? Is there something you once lacked that can only be explained in terms of what you have and experience now?

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?”
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 first 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 is large as the UK and upsets the Antarctic Treaty System’s condition prohibiting all territorial claims.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Introduce others to this beautiful, thought-provoking film.

2. Follow and support filmmaker Werner Herzog’s on-going film projects at WernerHerzog.com. You can also follow him on Twitter: @wernerherzog

3. Stay informed about the earth’s ice poles—how human activity is changing them, and how humans might need to change in response.

4. Consider the characters in this film, the “professional dreamers” who had deeper, more authentic personalities beneath their day-job personalities. In your own life, try getting to know these deeper aspects of people that society often fails to validate. Try expressing these aspects of yourself too.

5. In our lifetime, 90% of languages will be extinct. Take the effort to learn about a dying language, a dying culture or tradition, or at least to embrace the last bearers of these cultures.