MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH
WERNER HERZOG AND JONATHAN DEMME

Werner Herzog and Jonathan Demme are two of the most accomplished and adventurous filmmakers in contemporary cinema. Emerging on the international scene in the 1970s, they have each made—and continue to make—a wide range of fiction and documentary features: Demme's films include *Silence of the Lambs*, *Philadelphia*, and *Neil Young: Heart of Gold*, while Herzog's include *Aguirre: The Wrath of God*, *The Mystery of Kaspar Hauser*, and *Encounters at the End of the World*. This lively conversation between Demme and Herzog celebrated the launch of the Moving Image Source (www.movingimagesource.us), a Museum website devoted to the history of film and media.

A Pinewood Dialogue with Jonathan Demme and Werner Herzog (June 5, 2008):

DAVID SCHWARTZ: Please welcome Jonathan Demme and Werner Herzog. (Applause)

JONATHAN DEMME: Hi everybody. You can see I brought some research with me. I would like very much, if it's okay with [Werner] to read a couple paragraphs from a letter that was written by Roger Ebert. Would that be alright?

HERZOG: Yes.

DEMME: I think they're very beautiful. Skipping thorough here… this was a letter written to you by Roger Ebert, November 17, 2007.

HERZOG: I have to say one thing beforehand. The film *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007) is dedicated to Roger Ebert, whom I love; he's a wonderful warrior, a soldier, a good soldier of cinema. (Applause) I said to him, "Roger, this dedication will prevent you from reviewing the film. You can not do this any more." (Laughter) So he decided to send me a letter, which he did. I kept it completely secret, but Roger eventually published it on his website. (Laughter)

DEMME: Well, it's a very beautiful letter, so I'm glad he did; that's where I discovered it. Incidentally, I mentioned this briefly when we met each other earlier tonight, but I really feel compelled to say it again: I saw your new film, *Encounters at the End of the World*, last night on the big screen, up at the Jacob Burns Film Center, and it's such a thrill to be seated here with you—because you've made another, *yet* another brilliant masterpiece. Congratulations. It's so extraordinary. (Applause) Amazing film, amazing—of course—which is what we've basically come to expect from you at this stage of the game. (Laughter)

Leaping forward, he says, "Dear Werner: Without ever making a movie for solely commercial reasons, without ever having a dependable source of financing, without the attention of the studios and the oligarchies that decide what may be filmed and shown, you have directed at least fifty-five films or television productions—and we will not count the operas. You have worked all the time because you have depended on your imagination instead of budgets, stars or publicity campaigns. You have had the visions, and made the films and trusted people to find them, and they have. It is safe to say you are as admired and venerated as any filmmaker alive—among those who have heard of you, of course. Those who do not know your work, and the work of your comrades in the independent film world, are missing experiences that might shake and inspire them. You often say this modern world is starving for images; that the media pound the same paltry ideas into our heads time and again; and that we need to see around the edges or over the top.

When you open *Encounters at the End of the World* by following a marine biologist under the ice floes of the South Pole and listening to the alien sounds of the creatures who thrive there, you show me a place on my planet I did not know about, and I am richer.

You are the most curious of men. You are like the storytellers of old, returning from far lands with spellbinding tales. In the process of compiling your life's work, you have never lost your sense of humor. Your narrations are central to the appeal of your documentaries, and your wonder at human nature is central to your fiction. In one scene you can foresee the end of life on earth, and in another show us country musicians picking their guitars and banjos on the roof of a hut at the South Pole. You did not go to Antarctica, you assure us at the outset, to film cute penguins. (Laughter) But you did film one cute penguin, a penguin that was disoriented, and was steadfastly walking in precisely the wrong direction, into an ice vastness the size of Texas. "And if you turn him around in the right direction," you say, "he will turn himself around, and keep going in the wrong direction, until he starves and dies." The sight of that penguin waddling optimistically toward his doom would be heartbreaking; except that he is so sure he is correct.

But I have started to wander off like the penguin, my friend. I have started out to praise your work, and have ended by describing it. Maybe it is the same thing. You and your work are unique and invaluable, and you ennoble the cinema, when so many debase it. You have the audacity to believe that if you make a film about anything that interests you it will interest us as well, and you have proven it. With admiration, Roger." Isn't that beautiful? (Applause)

HERZOG: I salute him, the good soldier of cinema. We have very few left.

DEMME: It's interesting because with fewer and fewer film critics, obviously there is less and less interesting discussion of film; a drastically abbreviated diversity of opinion. It's too bad, thinking back to a time when there were more interesting ideas, perspectives around. Roger Ebert has always been an extraordinary film critic. Just recently with his health struggles, he's come to reveal himself as just a *great* extraordinary human being, hasn't he?

HERZOG: Yes, he's soldiering on despite his affliction. He has battled cancer for more than two years, and because some very major surgery around his neck, he can not speak any more. So he would communicate by smiling at you and writing little notes on a pad, and that's the way I communicate with him. This is the reason why he—of course, he couldn't write a review of the film. You don't do that when it's dedicated to you. For me, it's very moving to have received this letter, and I never expected he would publish it. I would never have published it. Those things should stay among two men. But he chose to have it published, and I thank him for it; he has been very kind to my films and to my work.

DEMME: Well, I think that it's safe to say that we—myself, certainly not—I don't know many people here who would not characterize your films in such a poetic way. But certainly, I thought it really summed up a great way of viewing your body of work.

In *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* (1972)—here's a question I've wanted to ask you ever since I saw the film *every night* when it opened in Los Angles, where I was living at the time. Has most everybody seen *Aguirre*? (Applause) Of course, yes. So, here is this amazing film. It begins, and there's a trek through the jungle, and then the party arrives at the river. Now we see a sustained fairly wide shot of the water, and maybe the music of Popol Vuh is on the soundtrack, creating this amazing marriage—which is so emblematic of all your work—of sound and image, music and image. And this shot keeps lasting, and it's wonderful! Then, extraordinarily, I think the film cuts to a *tighter* shot of the water…

HERZOG: Yes, it does. (Laughs)

DEMME: …which then plays and plays and plays. Why did you do that, what lead you to that moment? (Laughter) I have a theory.

HERZOG: It's very hard to verbalize this, but I was very fascinated by these raging waters of Urubamba River, right down below Machu Picchu. I filmed it and I told the cinematographer, "Hold

the shot; hold the shot. This is so, so violent. This is so incredible." I knew I would use it in the film—which I did—out of any proportion. You have the information of the river raging down there and boiling in rage. Yet, although we understand the image within two seconds, the shot is held more than a minute. For a while, I thought I would have opening credits over it; and then I decided no, they must not be over this. I just hold it and I prepare the audience for something out of proportion; for human beings that are completely crazed in their insane dreams of power. It's going to be a fever dream in the jungle which is completely out of proportion. Many serious people who are working in the industry tell me, "Ah, this is mis-cut and mis-edited; you should have made it much shorter." (Demme laughs) And I said, "No, I do it as it is and it is fine." (Laughter)

DEMME: I love that explanation. First I was trying to understand why this moment of cinema moved me so much and had such a—really, within the context of watching film—such a profound impact on me; and why I loved that it kept going on, even though I didn't exactly understand why that was. I eventually moved from that. I noticed that I started trying to hold shots longer and longer in my own work, and never achieving this kind of magic. (Laughs) But I then moved to trying to figure out, "Why did the filmmaker—why did Herzog do this?" My explanation is that because this group of humans arrives at this river upon which they will all meet their deaths, there's *nothing* more important than this water and this river; and once upon it—*whew*!

HERZOG: Right, but sometimes these things—there is something obvious that everyone notices, but very often things are very subtle, and they can not be really explained. For example, at the end, it's pure fever dream and they see a brigantine in the treetop—thirty meters, ninety feet high up there, and no flood can have washed it that high. Then all of a sudden, one of the men on board receives an arrow that hits him in the leg. He just looks at it he says…

DEMME: "Long arrows are coming back in fashion." (Laughs) Sorry!

HERZOG: Well, that's another moment, but yes: A man gets shots with an arrow—and before, they were shot by little darts from blow pipes. All of a sudden one is shot by an arrow that is six feet long; it goes in and out on the other side. He grabs the arrow calmly, and he looks along the shaft of the arrow and he says, "The long arrows are coming into fashion." (Laughter)

And then he dies—he falls over and he's dead! But this subtle, strange moment prepares you for the most inconceivable. It opens, and all of a sudden the audience is ready to accept the most inconceivable. Sometimes it's very, very subtle and very strange how—for example, there's a clear orientation of movement. You have the feeling, "Yes, I am moving towards El Dorado." But somehow, imperceptibly, we lose orientation and they lose orientation. How this is done is very, very subtle and very well-thought through. In the same vein, I keep wondering about your films. How, for example, you establish in a very, very subtle way, complete and utter primal fear? I've never been scared so deeply—like for example like in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). I've never been as scared as this—and you can't scare me easily. (Laughter)

DEMME: I believe that! (Laughs) I can't respond to that…

HERZOG: Well, I'll give the answer instead of you. (Laughter)

DEMME: Thank you, thank you.

HERZOG: We are just professional men who know how to handle cinema. We have learned it the hard way, thorough lots of defeats; and that's what made us into what we are. (Applause) I'm a result of defeats.

DEMME: (Laughs) Thank you. I loved *Rescue Dawn* (2006). I hope lots of people saw that one. (Applause) There was that article in *The New Yorker* which you must have read at some point; I devoured that article, and I wanted to enlist other filmmakers and Herzog fans to get on planes and go beat up everybody who was giving you a hard time. I think that the writer really wanted to permeate the piece with a sense of doom for the film; that it was destined somehow to fail, given

the kind of obstacles that you were faced with. I was so thrilled when I saw it to see not only how you were able to make a Werner Herzog film in what might arguably be considered a Hollywood formulaic basic situation—but that you were able to deliver the best possible version of that formula. That you actually fulfilled all the requirements of the genre while still making the film tremendously personal, unique. I was really so impressed… and I was kind of horrified at how thin and emaciated Jeremy Davies was! I wondered, is that something that you could talk about a little bit?

HERZOG: Yes; well, Jeremy Davies is fairly thin most of the time. (Laughter) But I kept wondering—when he arrived, he hoisted a couple of very heavy overseas trunks with him. We found out later that they were all filled it with bottled Evian water, which you could buy right next to the hotel in a little store. (Laughter) I said, "Jeremy, my God! What is this here?" He wanted to feed himself only on water. I tried to persuade him to eat once in a while, which he eventually did. But it's just amazing, his dedication.

Of course, you were speaking about the witness—a journalist who was there from *The New Yorker*—a very keen observer who was there in the very early phase, when things were not that bad yet. But he couldn't figure out that I had to keep the film, like many others, out of all the turmoil and out of all the ugliness in order to maintain its integrity. That was the hardest thing in *Rescue Dawn*, and I'm proud that I was able to really maintain the integrity of that film.

DEMME: You certainly did. I've always liked Steve Zahn very, very, very, very much; it was fantastic seeing him. Yet to me, it was an unlikely match in a way, because the kind of films that Steve has thus have far have…

HERZOG: Yes, he's known as the funny sidekick in Eddie Murphy movies. (Laugher) However, there are some very early films with Steve Zahn in them where has a vulnerability and something… When I see him, I always have the feeling he's a man we should hug and protect and help along. He's wonderful in his performance, and I think it was a great achievement of Steve's to morph himself into this part and do something that nobody expected from him.

DEMME: Definitely. By the way, Jeremy Davies is someone I've noted [before]; I think *Solaris* (2002) was the first time I noticed him. I thought; "What a really splendid, different, stylistically very different American actor he is."

HERZOG: Yes, he's a unique, very, very significant talent. There are very, very few actors of his caliber onscreen anywhere in the world, and of course, Christian Bale. I had the privilege to work with the best, and I really, really enjoyed it.

DEMME: Yes, he was terrific. Werner, you were born in Germany…

HERZOG: In Bavaria. I would like to make that distinction. (Laughter)

DEMME: Okay, fair enough. Was that Munich…?

HERZOG: A Scotsman would not agree easily that he was British, and I don't like the Germans. (Laughter)

DEMME: Would your life growing up as a boy in Bavaria be quite different from a boy who was living in Germany proper?

HERZOG: Yes, certainly; I grew up in a very inaccessible, very remote mountain valley in the Bavarian Alps. Actually, I was born in Munich, but when I was only two weeks old bombs hit all around us, and my mother found me under a thick layer of glass shards and brick. She got scared and grabbed my older brother and me and fled into the mountains, and that's where we got stuck.

So I had a different life than other people in Bavaria or other people in Germany. All my peers grew up in ruins, and they had wonderful childhoods because they possessed the entire city that was in ruins. No fathers around to tell them how to behave and what to do, so it was anarchy in the best sense of the word. Of course, I grew up in some sort of anarchy and without any knowledge of the world outside; I only knew about the world through fairy tales or so. Then, all of a sudden American soldiers occupied the small

town of Sachrang. There was a black man, and I ran to my mother and I said to her, "I saw a Pitch-Black Moor!" because the Pitch-Black Moor was part of a nursery rhyme. I marveled at him, and I immediately wanted to befriend him. I sat at the slope of the mountain and talked to him, and he gave me a chewing gum which I kept for a year—chewing on it, and hiding it away from my older brother. (Laughter) My mother said, "You kept talking to him for three hours now. In which language did you speak to him?" I said, "In American." Since then, I marvel and I have the warmest feelings about African-Americans. What a wonderful warmth this man had, and the voice was incredible, and he loved me and gave me a chewing gum! (Laughter)

Of course, we had no toys, so we had to invent our own toys. In way, later, I had the feeling I was inventing cinema myself, because I did not seen films until I was eleven. I didn't even know they existed. And I have to add—I do this often, but I have to add it for the fun of you—I made my first phone call when I was seventeen, but I made my first film when I was nineteen. I was, in way, in a situation where without much knowledge of cinema at all, I started to develop projects and become a filmmaker. I became a filmmaker the day I was thrown out again from an office of some producers who laughed at me because I was still very tiny. I decided to make my own money and become my own producer. I worked the night shift as a welder for the last two-and-a-half years in high school; of course, then I had money. I stole a camera and I bought some raw stock and I made films… and I'm still doing it somehow. (Laughter)

DEMME: Your pictures are so utterly unique, it's impossible to perceive what kind of influence… An outsider might go, "Okay, now I'm going to look a these films of Werner Herzog's and I'm going to figure out what influenced him." It's impossible! Do you think you were influenced by any films in particular?

HERZOG: Not really, no. I can't really recall... Maybe *Dr. Fu Manchu* [*The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932)], when I discovered that shot one recycled ten minutes later. I was the only one who saw that, and I started to look with different eyes. But probably it's more music that had a deep impact on what I am doing, or literature. *Encounters at the End of the World* is very much influenced, as strange as it may sound, by—I read again Virgil's *Georgics*. I hated school and dismissed it when I had to learn Latin and ancient Greek. Now I am glad that I did [learn it], and I have gone back into reading writers of antiquity. In the *Georgics* of Virgil, it's so incredible how he describes agriculture and country life. The most amazing of all is when he names the glory of the country; and he names the glory of the beehive; and he names the glory of the cloud going through the field; and the oxen moaning and grumbling—he just *names* it.

When I went down to Antarctica, I had no idea what I was going to find, no idea what I was going to do. I took consolation in Virgil. I said to myself, "This is what I'm going to do: I'll name the glory of Antarctica in my film, one after the other." I named the glory of these wonderful men and women that I met down there. This is why, at the end of the film, I used some music from Russian Orthodox church choirs. There is a *basso profundo*, a bass voice that is one octave lower in pitch than a regular octave. The voice—which is incredible, like a *big column of voice*—establishes the glory of one saint after the other. It just names saint after saint after saint after saint, and that's what I tried to do in my movie.

DEMME: Is that piece at the end of the film?

HERZOG: That's the very final piece.

DEMME: That's an *extraordinary* piece of music; very, very moving.

HERZOG: I had this piece of music before I started shooting. I knew it was going to be the end.

DEMME: Well, that's actually one of my questions: finding music for your films. As always, the score of this film is amazing. Did you choose this beautiful guitar playing because we have sort of a pioneer-like "frontier" association with a certain kind of guitar music played a certain way?

HERZOG: I always had the feeling that the other part of the music, apart of the sacrality of the Russian church choirs, should be a great guitar player, David Lindley.

DEMME: My God, he's so amazing.

HERZOG: Yes; and Henry Kaiser too—to whom I owe a lot, because he was the one who filmed the underwater footage. He's a great expert diver. He was never convinced that this was any good and wanted to throw it away. I said, "Henry, I've never seen anything so beautiful." I'm very grateful that he worked on the film and recreated the music. I'm very fast in knowing what sort of music I should have. In twenty seconds flat I know this piece belongs to the end, and this should be there—sometimes to the dismay of the editor who wants to try this and that with the other. I say, "No. Don't you hear? This is the only and perfect piece."

DEMME: Do you ever let the editor try something else, and to your amazement, discover that you like it even better?

HERZOG: Sometimes yes; sure. It happens once in a while—though in music cases, very rarely. I'm so sure. And I think I do not make major mistakes.

DEMME: (Laughs) As far as we're concerned, you've made no mistakes.

HERZOG: But of course cinematographers, editors, musicians—they always have their word in it, and I'm never surrounded by yes men.

DEMME: Did David Lindley, who I have been a fan of—he had a band back in the late sixties called Kaleidoscope and I still have these records, I still listen to his stuff; brilliant… You know him, therefore you know he plays every stringed instrument and probably others. Did he do that music to picture?

HERZOG: He saw the picture, but he didn't do it *to picture*. I didn't want to slavishly follow some written... He understood the basic rhythm of it, and we talked about the use of instruments. For example, he would do an almost American sounding tune, but played on a Mid-Eastern instrument, an oud. It's absolutely ingenious, because all of the sudden there's a strangeness and a very subtle beauty in it that you didn't expect. I just love to work with musicians. There's nothing better than that.

DEMME: Yes. Henry Kaiser and the opening footage that you just described—I don't know if you've seen this with an audience; you guys will see this when you see this film. It's happened with other Herzog films, I've had this experience before, but this time I really noticed that I felt it along with the audience. Suddenly you'll feel everyone in the audience going… (Laughter) and being drawn, literally drawn to the screen—for many reasons. The *richness* of what you're seeing is just *incomparable*. You don't see stuff like this anywhere. It's so beautiful, and it changes your life a little bit. You see things, and then you're just more experienced that you were before that shot came on. I thought—I wrote it down here, I wanted to get it right—I thought that if you had business cards, and wanted to hand them out…

HERZOG: Which I never had, but anyway… (Laugher)

DEMME: If you ever do, you'd have your name, and then it should say on it: "Previously unseen images, previously unheard sounds and thoughts." It's a reinvention of the whole visual vocabulary. This guy Henry Kaiser must be *quite* an interesting cat, if he can come to you with that footage, then turn around and create music for the film.

HERZOG: Well, he didn't come to me with the footage. He showed it to the editor, out in the control room. I was sitting with the musicians when we did—

DEMME: Which control room?

HERZOG: When we did *Grizzly Man* (2005) with Richard Thomson. I always sit in physical contact with the musicians. He was out there in the control room; [we were] separated by several walls of glass. He turned around, and for a moment I saw something I have never seen before. I stopped everyone, rushed out, and I said, "Henry, show me this again. I want to see this." He said, "Oh no, it's bad; and I didn't film it that way, and I was underwater…" I didn't even know that he was a diver! I said, "I must have this footage, and I will do a science fiction film out of it." It ended up in a film I did called *The Wild Blue Yonder* (2005). So I owe him the backbone, the most wonderful footage from the entire film.

I met him years, years, years before, because I listen to recordings of ethnic music from all over the world, and mostly very old recordings. For example, one in Madagascar recorded in 1931 is at the end of *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997). I saw this series of recordings, and I thought, "This is extraordinary; there must be someone very, very special behind it." I kept asking around, and somebody said to me, "His name is Henry Kaiser." I said, "I must meet him." I met him without any agenda, just to express to him how wonderfully he had worked on this. It turned out he was a musician himself, so we got to know each other.

Of course, when we spoke about the music in *Encounters at the End of the World*, he not only knew very, very quickly what sort of music should be recorded, he also listened to this *basso profundo* church choir, and he kept feeding me with the most wonderful Russian Orthodox church music. He immediately grasped it, picked it up and sent me—and kept feeding me. I listened to it with Joe Bini, the editor and I said, "Number six, that's the one that we need for the beginning." And we did.

DEMME: Fantastic.

HERZOG: Sometimes I'm blessed that men with whom I do not normally have to deal come like a gift out of the sky and fall in my lap! It's like golden coins raining on me.

DEMME: And by extension, on us. Werner, the subjects, the people you speak with who speak to the camera and speak to you, they're so relaxed. They're speaking with such candor that it's hard to imagine arriving at a moment like that *without* a camera rolling. Do you have a little trick you do? How do you get people to…?

HERZOG: Somehow I know the hearts of men. (Laughter) That's why I am a filmmaker. There was a very strange incident when I did *The Wild Blue Yonder*. Not only did I use Henry Kaiser's strange planet material, I also found images—material shot on 16mm celluloid by astronauts back in 1989 on one of the space shuttles—of unspeakable beauty. Nobody's ever seen this footage. I discovered it in an abandoned NASA archive, and I wanted to meet the astronauts and film with them sixteen years later. I finally got them together, and we met in Houston at the Johnson Space Center. There were these five or six chairs for them—two women and three men, five of them—and a chair for me. I was introduced to them, and I stood there and I didn't know what to say now. My heart somehow sank, and I looked from face, to face, to face.

Then I had some sort of a moment, a glorious moment of intuition. I said to them, "As a boy, I grew up in Bavaria in the mountains, and I was looking after cows. As a boy, I learned how to milk cows. From that time on, I could tell from a face who is able to milk a cow." (Demme laughs) And I say, "You sir, you can milk cows!" He said "Yeah, yeah, yeah!" (Laughter) He truly looked like a man, like a good farm boy who knew how to milk a cow. I did the right thing. From that moment, the ice was broken. After three sentences, the ice was broken, and we were in business!

Or for example in *Encounters at the End of the World*, I spoke very briefly to this man, David [R. Pacheco Jr.], a journeymen plumber. He was kind of reluctant to even listen to me, and he had to go back to work right away; I met him for five minutes. Instead of shaking his hand, I turned to the side and showed my elbow. (Demme laughs) And he turns around and elbows me—and we were in business! (Laughter) See?

Or for example, the man who has studied these gigantic icebergs. He was on an iceberg that is larger than the country that built the Titanic; larger than Northern Ireland; larger than Lebanon, the country of Lebanon. Somehow, he caught my attention again at the cafeteria, and I wanted to film with him. No, he had to leave. Then I saw him again and I said, "Can we do it now?" He said, "No chance; in thirty-five minutes, my plane is leaving from the ice runway."

I had thirty-five minutes. So I said to him, "Let's give it a try. Let's go wild, let's give it a try." So he sat down. I started to make an espresso for him, and we talked about Bavaria, and we talked about this and that. Then I had to silence a noisy Italian group that had just come back in, drank Chianti and sang songs. It was just too loud for me as a sound man—because I did sound. Then there was this traffic [noise from] carts wheeled around

outdoors… I silenced the entire environment, and left him alone for five minutes. So we had twelve minutes left. I had the feeling he should be instructed in a special way, and I said to him, "I don't want to hear the scientist. We know roughly what you are doing. I want to hear the poet now." He looked at me and then he nodded. He's a real poet, how he speaks about it.

DEMME: Yes, that's an exquisite passage.

HERZOG: If I had rushed into doing an interview with him, it would have been insignificant, and I probably would have not used it in the film. You have to understand a situation, and you have to know the hearts of men. If you don't, you are not a filmmaker. As a filmmaker, you know where the epicenter of all fear is. If you don't, don't make movies. (Laughter)

DEMME: You were the sound recordist on the film—you took that great responsibility?

HERZOG: Yes, that's right; it was a two-man team. Oh, I've done it before. I have also done cinematography in films, and embarrassed as having myself too many times in credits, asked some well-known cinematographers, "Can I borrow your name?" So I put them instead of me. (Laughter) But yes, I'm alright as a sound man, and I'm proud. But however, I have to say the finest piece of sound was done by Douglas Quin, a wonderful artist who had an artist-and-writers grant. He went down to Antarctica two or three years before me and recorded, with underwater microphones, the strangest of all calls of seals…

DEMME: That scene is amazing; that listening scene is amazing.

HERZOG: Of course, it was kind of staged because the scientists wouldn't listen like this with their ear on the ice. Actually, a lady almost froze to the ice. (Laughter)

DEMME: Really, her ear almost stuck? (Laughter)

HERZOG: There's this one with his fuzzy white beard, and I gave him exactly the kind of position how he should look. So it's very precisely staged, but it's very moving, and it's just wonderful how you—

DEMME: It's a *great* scene!

HERZOG: And only because they are listening with this incredible intensity, we as an audience start to listen too; and we listen in a way we have never listened to sound.

DEMME: You staged the body language in a very precise, beautiful…

HERZOG: Yes. Millimeter by millimeter, exactly where the hands had to be, exactly how they would lean, how far they would come down to the ice. (Laughter) It's very, very precisely staged.

DEMME: In terms of the framing of the shot, the composition, were you as precise yourself? Or do you trust the eye of Peter—

HERZOG: Peter Zeitlinger, an Austrian. I did the last fourteen films with him.

DEMME: *Magnificent* cinematography. Do you tell him exactly the composition you want, or do you want his composition?

HERZOG: Not always, no; I was staging the three scientists who were listening. In that case, I needed to balance the kind of frame myself. But Peter is strong like an ox; he (as a very young kid) was a hockey player for Sparta Prague, one of the best teams in Europe. But I love the confidence in his physical strength, and I love his feeling for rhythm. He stops me in the middle of shooting let's say *Rescue Dawn*, and he takes down the camera and says, "Werner, let's stop this. The scene has no rhythm." It's the first time a cinematographer sees that and tells me—and of course, he was right.

DEMME: So you weren't enraged when he said that?

HERZOG: He was so right. I immediately sensed that yes, there was something not working, and I said, "Peter, what do we do?" "Number one, the scene doesn't work because the dialogue sounds like paper. It reads very well in the screenplay, but it sounds like paper. Let's have life in the dialogue." So it takes me thirty seconds and I write new dialogue. And he suggests, "How about swinging in with a camera a little bit earlier, so that

I pick up this decisive moment?" We do it again one-and-a-half minutes later, and it works. I am blessed with good, good people… but I discovered him in a way, also.

DEMME: Like Columbus discovered America. (Laughter)

HERZOG: Well, I discovered him in a film [*Loss Is to Be Expected*, 1992] that was really derided—an Austrian film by Ulrich Seidl, a very radical, very unusual filmmaker whom I like. He got such bad reviews that I walked up into the building of the best newspaper in Austria and demanded to write a review for the next film. So I did it, and I wrote a very good review. At the end I wrote, "The real discovery in this film is a young cinematographer, Peter Zeitlinger." Peter was so, so stunned by it that he wrote me a letter and said, "I would love to work with you maybe in five, maybe in ten years." Three weeks later, we were working together. (Laughter)

DEMME: Fantastic, beautiful. So sometimes you're quite happy to have his eye; he's also very comfortable if you say, "I want you to do it exactly this way, Peter;" he's perfectly happy with that, as well.

HERZOG: Of course, yes. If you do not understand how to collaborate, you will never get the real sense of movie-making.

DEMME: Werner, in *Rescue Dawn*, something I wanted to ask you; I'm now picturing him back when you were doing that scene, and it brought a thought to mind. First of all, the captors in the camp were as terrifying to me as any Hannibal Lecter. I don't know where you got these men and I don't know how much direction you lavished on them, but it was terrific the way, with a minimum of dialogue—they have very little to say—nevertheless, distinct personalities emerge. They weren't the sort of stock stereotypical guys, and each in his way had different things to be afraid of, and maybe different vulnerabilities. How did you get it to be so good?

HERZOG: Well, I find the right people. Casting is always such an important element, and somehow I find the right ones. Most of them, actually, were people who had been in films before, not as actors, but as stuntmen; the one who did the summersaults forwards and backwards and so. I loved him so much for that, that I said, "Do it in this scene." I took the best of him into the movie, and the best of someone [else] into the movie as well.

Then by coincidence, I saw a video of a scene in a Thai movie. There was one man in the background who had this very intense, intimidating look, and I said, "We have to find this man." Turned out that he was not Thai, but he lived in Cambodia. We located him, and he only spoke his own Cambodian language. He did not speak Thai, nor French, nor English, nor anything. He was brought on the set, and he was acting as the mute—they called him Walkie Talkie because he never talks, he never speaks. Never, never. (Laughter) Walkie Talkie, an actor whom nobody knew, and nobody could have any conversation with him, I directed him anyway. We understood each other, and there was actually one assistant, a Thai assistant who spoke a few words of Khmer, the Cambodian language. But it's fine to work in the unknown, in an area where you have to make everything that's beautiful and intense and special about a human being productive for the screen. Sometimes you have to do it without understanding the language and without any verbal communication.

Or for example, the native Indians in *Fitzcarraldo* (1982). Very few of them spoke Spanish, and all of them spoke either Ashaninka Campa or they spoke Machiguenga. Of course, you have to make yourself understood anyway, and that's a beauty about making movies. They were the ones who understood my travails and tribulations with Kinski so instantly that they offered to kill him for me. Sometimes I regret that I didn't give them the nod. (Laughter)

DEMME: That reminds me about *Aguirre*, and a question. Popol Vuh, who was credited with the score of a number of your films around that period—I know there are roots to this name—is that a band?

HERZOG: Yes, a band which was basically one person, Florian Fricke, who unfortunately died three years ago. [He was] a close friend of mine who was a prodigy as a piano player, but had to

give up a very promising career because he had inflamed ligaments, and became a composer. He named his group—which was mostly him, because he played many instruments parallel, and recorded it on parallel tracks, and a few other musicians—he named it after the sacred text of the Kaqchikel Maya Indians, the *Popol Vuh*, the book of—*Buch des Gottes* [*Book of the Gods*]—well, I can't translate it right now. It's one of the very, very beautiful and important texts for me, and I gave it to him to read. Actually Lotte Eisner, the great film historian, reads some of Popol Vuh as a text for *Fata Morgana* (1971).

That's the context. Popol Vuh comes from this book, which was very important for me; I kept reading and re-reading it, and gave it to him; and he named the group Popol Vuh. We had a very, very fine rapport about music, and he was very important for me. Then later on, after about ten or twelve years of collaboration, we slowly drifted apart because he was moving very much into a pseudo-culture of "new age," which I can not stand at all. (Laughter) I still loved him, but I moved into some sort of a different direction. The style of his music was more and more influenced by a babble of pseudo-philosophy. So that was the reason why our collaboration drifted apart; we stayed friends until he died.

DEMME: Werner, are you a musician? Do you play?

HERZOG: No, I'm not; I can't even read music scores. But I do stage operas, and one of my next works—well, I have to do a film in New Orleans, and from there, I have to scramble to Spain and do an Opera, *Parsifal*, the last Wagner Opera, together with Lorin Maazel, who wanted to have me—

DEMME: And where will this be?

HERZOG: In Valencia, in Spain. There is a fantastic modern building, which looks like a landed spacecraft, by a great architect, [Santiago] Calatrava—whom I kind of dislike because the stage is very lousy. It looks like it's a wonderful building, but you can't do more than at La Scala Opera House two hundred years ago. You can push things from left and right and from the back, and you can bring things down, and that's about it. But it's okay, I will live with it. The building is phenomenal; the music is extraordinary; and the conductor, one of the greatest alive. Can't get any better.

I was disconnected from music because when I was thirteen, a music teacher forced me to sing in front of the whole class—just wanting to break my back—and I disconnected my self from music like an autist. Then when school was over—five years later when I was eighteen—there was this enormous void and hunger for music. Without any teaching and without anything, I immersed myself into music with a more ferocious intensity than anyone else that I knew among my peers.

DEMME: How did you deal with that moment when you were being forced to sing?

HERZOG: Well, everyone sang a song. At that time, there was a stupid idea floating around that everybody had some talent for music or talent for painting, which was kind of ridiculous. (Laughter) When it came to me, I stood up and I said, "I'm not going to sing." Then I became obstinate and I said to the teacher, "You may do the summersault forwards and backwards, but I'm not going to sing." So they called in the headmaster, and now they took the class hostage. These bastards took the class hostage! (Laughter) I could strangle them, if I met them today.

From that moment on, I have seriously planned to burn the school building to the ground at night… which, unfortunately, I never did. (Laughter) And I said to myself, "Never in my life is anybody going to break my back. It will not happen again." That is unique—rather dead than having your back broken again.

So that was very helpful. It was very helpful that I immersed myself, all on my own, into music in a way that was kind of strange. I deal well with music, and I love to stage operas once in a while; to work and breath and form music and images. It's wonderful. I can't read music scores, and I have to tell the conductors, "Are you ready to take the insult that the director of the opera can not read the score?" But I can listen very well; I *really* listen well.

DEMME: Do you ever, when you're directing an opera, bring a camera with you to work? Never?

HERZOG: No. They're such different worlds. Cinema and opera bite each other like cat and dog. (Demme laughs) No one—even the competent filmmakers, including Ingmar Bergman—ever really succeeded in transforming an opera into a movie. It just doesn't function for very fundamental reasons, which we should not go into… But take my word.

DEMME: Yeah, we probably wouldn't want to hear that. (Laughter)

HERZOG: Whoever tries will fail, because the fundamental incompatibles are so high that it's not going to work. Opera should remain opera, and let movie remain movie.

DEMME: Werner, in America your first films arrived more or less, I believe, at the same time as other films—and forgive me for saying—"from Germany"—and not saying "from Bavaria." I think there was a sense that the great exciting thing that had happened in world cinema was The New German Films. [There was] this remarkable, what appeared to be synchronicity—suddenly here are films by Werner Herzog, and the [Rainer Werner] Fassbinder films, and Wim Wenders, and [Margarethe] von Trotta, all this. The *best* films now suddenly seemed to be coming from Germany. You were branded by being part of the New German Cinema, or something like that. Did you feel any kind of affinity—even though there were no stylistic similarities—with these other directors? Did you feel that you didn't like being labeled as part of a movement?

HERZOG: Well, I was labeled, and you can't do anything against it, so I let it pass as it was. But what was significant and what I understood was that there was a real renaissance of German cinema. We were not accepted immediately. It took many years until—there was a very understandable reluctance to accept German culture again. Germany had lapsed into the utmost deepest abyss of barbarism in the Third Reich during the Nazi time. All of the sudden, a new generation that grew up after the Nazi regime—we were old enough in the mid-sixties, late sixties to articulate ourselves. A man like Fritz Lang could not believe that German cinema would ever emerge again. Lotte Eisner sent him a letter, and she said, "I saw *Signs of Life* (1968)…" That was my first film that was shown here in New York, for example. She said to him, "…There is a film you must see. It's called *Signs of Life*, by a young man...." Fritz Lang wrote back, "Lotte, it is not possible that there will ever be any decent movies out of Germany." That was somehow the mood of the time. It was more a question of perseverance, of continuing making films and bringing them to audiences. Within seven, eight, ten years, the audiences here in America and in other countries started to accept us.

DEMME: During that period of time where you were sort of branded and faced with the same kind of hurdle to overcome, did you become well acquainted with Fassbinder and Wenders and people like that?

HERZOG: Not very well acquainted, but Fassbinder liked me a lot and I liked him. For example, when I went out to preproduction on *Aguirre: The Wrath of God*, I said to myself, "I'm not going to go to a country like Peru and show up with empty hands." I brought eight films with me: some of my own stuff, three films by Fassbinder. He didn't even know that I grabbed some of his prints and showed them to students in Peru!

DEMME: Wow!

HERZOG: He learned about it, and when he met me a year later or so, he just—we didn't know how to deal with each other. There was always a menacing group of leather-clad consorts of his (Laughter) who were suspicious about me because Fassbinder would grab me and hug me. We had these kinds of strange fleeting hugs. (Laughter) But we *really* liked each other and really respected each other, as different as we were in lifestyle and movie-making and everything.

Wenders, yes; I always liked his films. Not all of them, but most of them. Same thing with Fassbinder. Sometimes I lost confidence and I thought, "Three films sloppily made in a row…" Then all of the sudden he comes with a sensational movie—I mean, it's just staggering—

and it took him three months to make three, four movies.

[Volker] Schlöndorff has been a great defender of mine. He's a very dear friend of mine, a personal friend. We hardly ever talk about cinema. We speak to each other when we are in sorrow; when things do not go right in life, we call each other and try to meet.

DEMME: Did Schlöndorff arrive maybe a year before you guys did your first films, but then get energized by what you were doing?

HERZOG: No, not really... I made films before Schlöndorff; I made featurettes back in 1961, '62. He came out with his first feature film, I believe in 1966, *Young Torless*. I made my first long feature film a year later, in '67 [*Signs of Life*]. So although he's older than me, we came out with our first films almost at the same time. He's a very, very dear friend of mine, even under most vicious attack. I was labeled as a criminal who had put native Indians into prison, and so there were a lot of wild things going on in the world press. He stood up—and I thought the man was going to die from a stroke because he was purple in his face—and yelled at this bunch of journalists. I do not forget things like that.

DEMME: Werner, are you familiar with YouTube? (Laughter)

HERZOG: Not really, but I have eventually seen a little bit, maybe four, five things at YouTube.

DEMME: Are you on the computer?

HERZOG: I use a computer, but mostly for communicating with my brother in Munich—we are nine hours apart, because I live in Los Angles, so email is very good. Or writing a screenplay and sending it to a friend in Boston and asking him for corrections in my English grammar—I know it's lousy, but I need corrections and he sends it back to me a half a day later. But I'm not very much into YouTube and things like that—although it's a wonderful instrument, and what we saw, the presentation of the website [*Moving Image Source*, movingimagesource.us]—is absolutely formidable. All of the sudden, the web gains significant depth. You see, it was so shallow, much of it was so shallow, and so half-informed. All of the sudden, about movies, you just access this website and you will find you can branch out and you can go in very deep, to deep bottoms of the unknown in cinema. So I salute the website.

DEMME: Yes, defiantly; definitely. I asked you about YouTube, because—I haven't thought this through, but for the past several weeks I found myself feeling that the most exciting thing going on in American cinema now is happening on YouTube. That with this tremendous proliferation of cameras, and young people especially knowing how to edit on their computers now, then they can—*whsst*!—get it to YouTube. I think the exciting new directors are probably doing stuff for YouTube and for this limitless audience. There was an article, a column, by Frank Rich a month or two ago, where he came out with some statistics about how—he referenced, for example, [Barack] Obama's speech on race and how a certain number of people saw it broadcast live, and twenty times that or—I don't remember the multiple—have seen it on YouTube. The idea, on the one hand, of YouTube being a medium for ideas being exchanged. There are lots of short videos, and now you'll see more and more excerpts from speeches.

HERZOG: But you can see entire speeches. My wife, for example, watches on YouTube or over the internet a great discourse, for example, between political analysts; or she would see Obama's entire speech; or she would see… I have to catch up with it, because there's something of great significance occurring right now, and I do not want to exclude myself—although I probably will not produce films for YouTube. (Laughter)

Sometimes odd things about me end up on YouTube. You'll see some very fancy little moments, and somehow it's too selective and too exclusive to give an idea about a person. So it has its disadvantages, but it will settle in. It will settle in and we'll probably have a great forum for watching things. As long as they are connected to a very tiny screen, I think it's not really my kind of thing. I like to see a film on the larger screen. There is a validity in having short clips and doing something in three minutes, why not? But I believe that YouTube or other forms of the internet will

allow us to view a whole three-hour movie and somehow connect it at home to a large flat screen, and inviting a few friends, you'll have something which will eventually create a different culture of viewing films. It's most exciting to see how many people there are out there: It's just totally wild.

SCHWARTZ: I want to thank you. We all love watching movies, but to hear two amazing people talk—it's been a great experience, so I want to thank you. (Applause)

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