though Herzog’s apocalyptic vision of the future takes on little more than an air of spectacle in the landscape of Antarctica. How can Herzog’s directorial intentions be reconciled with the worldview he presents?

Humanity’s relationship with Antarctica is one of curiosity and fascination, yet also one of fear and longing, as evidenced by Herzog’s fascination with the four corners of the planet. In the world of Encounters at the End of the World, we are presented with a contradiction: however recognisable are the flaky snow pavements, they are depicted as hostile and unfriendly, taunting the scientists, parallel to the air of electronic music that Zicha, who has a similar mind to Herzog’s, produces for his film. The industrialised landscape on the ice surface is the moment that keeps a survivalist such as Herzog from the hook. This is not the world we need to look for, but a representation of one that could be powerful and yet remain human, just as the flaky snow pavements are depicted as hostile and unfriendly. Herzog’s film, however, is more than mere visual spectacle; it is a philosophical statement about the nature of human presence on earth and the potential for a future in which we can live in harmony with the planet.

One must be likeable character in Herzog’s films, and so the species? Yes, that snow-driven field in the landscape of Antarctica. The director’s vision of the future is one of fascination and curiosity, yet also one of fear and longing, as evidenced by Herzog’s fascination with the four corners of the planet. In the world of Encounters at the End of the World, we are presented with a contradiction: however recognisable are the flaky snow pavements, they are depicted as hostile and unfriendly, taunting the scientists, parallel to the air of electronic music that Zicha, who has a similar mind to Herzog’s, produces for his film. The industrialised landscape on the ice surface is the moment that keeps a survivalist such as Herzog from the hook. This is not the world we need to look for, but a representation of one that could be powerful and yet remain human, just as the flaky snow pavements are depicted as hostile and unfriendly. Herzog’s film, however, is more than mere visual spectacle; it is a philosophical statement about the nature of human presence on earth and the potential for a future in which we can live in harmony with the planet.
though Herzog may be annoyed with mankind, awaiting the apocalypse and even simulating it on the screen in the form of those desolate, empty spaces where he finds little more than abject traces of human industry, the director likes people, especially the ‘dreamers’ who inhabit Antarctica. He appears to find them endearing, just as he did Timothy Treadwell, the late star of Grizzly Man (2005). How can Herzog have so much antipathy towards humans – taunting and objectifying them, even comparing them unfavourably to ants, apes and other animals – while at once offering them a steady supply of sympathy?

Most of McMurdo’s researchers, these apparently flaky snow people who have made Antarctica their home, are depicted with kindness. Herzog obviously likes the scientists, particularly the ones whom he encourages to lie upon the surface of the ice and listen to undersea songs produced by the seals they study, songs that suggest electronic music. He shows a particular affection for Libor Zicha, who he describes as having ‘lived like a prisoner behind the Iron Curtain’. Owing perhaps to his past, Zicha keeps a survivalist’s backpack ready to go at all times, and the moment he becomes emotional, Herzog lets him off the hook. The director is generous here (he says, ‘you do not have to talk about it’), but he knows that silence can be a powerful cinematic tool; the scene is moving. Herzog likewise sees eye to eye with William Jirsa, a linguist who has come to this place after parting ways with what Herzog describes as the ‘stupid trend of academia’. Though his own authoritative voice covers over parts of Jirsa’s account, and perhaps reduces it to terms that are too simple, Herzog wants to include this one among his array of interesting Antarctic tales.

One must then ask: are we to see these redeemable, likeable characters as exceptions to the rule? How can Herzog revere them, yet exhibit disdain for the whole of the species? Why does he appear to eagerly await the day that snow and ice will once again consume the planet, when nature will finally set us aside and move on? His attitude is not connected to an environmentally conscious antipathy – he is not concerned about whether nature will take its revenge against a culture that has produced too many chemicals – but is instead a symptom of a limited patience for the detritus of mass culture. Herzog describes the aerobics studio and the yoga classes at McMurdo Station as abominations. Polluting the world like so much greenhouse gas, cultural debris encroaches on the vast space that will one day be reclaimed by rude nature. How does this human culture find the nerve to set up shop in places where apocalypse should hold sway? For this reason Herzog pokes fun at ‘Frosty Boy’, a soft serve ice cream machine he encounters in a cafeteria. If the director loves landscapes, why linger so long on Frosty Boy? Perhaps it is because this man-made attempt to make ice with a machine, a puerile stab at imitating the world of snow outside, fascinates him. The sheer silliness of Frosty Boy only highlights nature’s power, and like all similar creations it says that its creator is merely a mockery. Frosty Boy and those who made it have nothing on the cold white world outside.

Among McMurdo’s denizens is Stefan Pashov, a man Herzog identifies as both a philosopher and forklift driver. Pashov describes those he meets in Antarctica as professional dreamers, and adds that ‘through them the great cosmic dreams come into fruition, because the universe dreams to our dreams’. One suspects that Herzog has had a hand in shaping Pashov’s words. His reflections resonate with observations about dreams Herzog made years earlier in Les Blank’s documentary on the making of Fitzcarraldo, Burden of Dreams (1982), and elsewhere. Fitzcarraldo itself opens with an epigraph asserting that according to the ‘forest Indians’, God will return to finish his work only after the disappearance of man. Pashov here brings us back around to the concept of cosmological unfolding. He paraphrases Alan Watts: ‘through our eyes the universe is perceiving itself’, he says, adding, ‘we are the witness through which the universe becomes conscious of its glory, of its magnificence’. If this is the case, and if Pashov is indeed pointing us in the direction of Herzog’s own world view, we are just a small stage in an imperceptible scheme. The ice and the oceans will be here for ages, and our appearance on this earth is
INTO THE WHITE

only an interruption. Nature overwhelms and will eventually win out.

That nature is titanic and we are trivial is a point Herzog makes by repeatedly including images of the Ross Sea, a frozen surface so extensive that it would cover the state of Texas. The sun reflecting off the surface of snow and ice can be blinding, but Encounters implies that we have blinded ourselves. In one sequence, new arrivals to McMurdo prepare for the dangerous eventuality of a white-out, a massive snowstorm, by placing plastic buckets over their heads. During a two-day training exercise called ‘happy camper’, they learn to construct survival trenches and igloos. The activity that involves white plastic pails – each with an eerie happy face scrawled upon it – is known as ‘buckethead’. Predictably the bucketheads lose their way; as is often the case in Herzog’s films, his protagonists find themselves, either despite or because of their intentions, wandering in circles. Self-imposed blindness is, of course, his point. Snow and ice, however powerful they may be, are not our enemies. In wilfully forgetting that we are guests on this planet, it is we who have placed the buckets atop our heads. Though Herzog includes historical footage of Ernest Shackleton struggling heroically to overcome the perils associated with Antarctic exploration, our real foe is not the ice, it is us.

Herzog has a history of making nature films that seem to set themselves against other nature films. He is slowly reshaping the genre, and in this regard Encounters is no exception. It recalls its many predecessors: a visit to Mount Erebus, an active volcano on Ross Island, suggests scenes from Herzog’s La Soufrière (1971); the seal-scientist sequence reproduces images from Bells from the Deep (1995); and footage of a plane landing on a wide frozen space brings the opening moments of Fata Morgana (1971) to mind. Each of these films are stages in the director’s continuing dialogue with the nature film, but even more they concern our relationship to nature itself. In making sport – more or less directly – of the family-friendly film March of the Penguins (2005), Herzog teasingly asks an Antarctic penguin researcher about ‘gay penguins’, about the possibility of their ‘strange sexual behaviour’, and about whether or not there is ‘insanity among penguins’. This is clever, and it confirms for us that Herzog is refusing a quaint portrait of the penguin world, yet his point becomes poignant when we watch one penguin wander off course, parting from the pack. Herzog describes the penguin as ‘deranged’, and as we observe the lone wanderer helplessly crossing the snowscape Herzog informs us that ‘he is heading towards certain death’. The director’s aim, however, is not to depict animal insanity – he has little interest in penguin psychology – but he instead wants to let the image of the penguin resonate with us. It is doomed and lonely, small and stubborn, and will in the end have been tormented by its own volition. Whether we are penguins or bucketheads makes little difference: though at times we may be likeable, the ice will long outlast us.

Brad Prager is the author of The Cinema of Werner Herzog: Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth.
Into the White
Celluloid snow from Icelandic road movies to Christmas slashers

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:
- Interview with Jerzy Skolimowski
- Werner Herzog's *Encounters at the End of the World*
- *Gonzo*: new Hunter S Thompson documentary
- Lotte Reiniger's animated fairy tales

The film magazine that explores the darkest corners of the cinematic basement