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Director Cuts: Werner Herzog

Rich Johnson

Few filmmakers loom as large as Werner Herzog. A defining voice of the New German Cinema movement, he has carved a distinctive path entirely his own, delivering truly mythic works that are a mix of fearless adventure and feverish dreams. Whether shot in the Amazon or Antarctica, he chases what he once famously called an “ecstatic truth” — we can hear that *iconic* Bavarian tone — as he often flits between fiction and documentary in ways that remain unmatched. Showcasing one of the most vital filmographies in modern cinema, this latest course offers the ideal entry point into Herzog’s vast (and daunting) career, exploring landmark cinema in the shape of *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* and *Fitzcarraldo*, along with his ode to the roots of horror with *Nosferatu the Vampyre* and his powerful documentaries that include the standout *Grizzly Man*.

Resources:

Book:

Every Man for Himself and God against All: A Memoir (2024)

Author: Werner Herzog

Publisher: Vintage

Documentary:

Werner Herzog: Radical Dreamer (2022)

Director(s): Thomas von Steinaecker

Available on: BFI Player, DVD and Blu-ray

Main films:

Aguirre, the Wrath of God (1972)

Director(s): Werner Herzog

Studio(s): Werner Herzog Filmproduktion / Hessischer Rundfunk

Nosferatu the Vampire (1979)

Director(s): Werner Herzog

Studio(s): Werner Herzog Filmproduktion / Gaumont / Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen

Fitzcarraldo (1982)

Director(s): Werner Herzog

Studio(s): Werner Herzog Filmproduktion / Pro-ject Filmproduktion / Filmverlag der Autoren / ZDF / Wildlife Films Peru S.A., Iquitos



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***Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972)**

Director(s): Werner Herzog

Studio(s): Werner Herzog Filmproduktion / Hessischer Rundfunk

***Grizzly Man* (2005)**

Director(s): Werner Herzog

Studio(s): Discovery Docs / Real Big Production

***Rescue Dawn* (2006)**

Director(s): Werner Herzog

Studio(s): Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures / Top Gun Productions / Gibraltar Films / Thema Production

***Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* (2009)**

Director(s): Werner Herzog

Studio(s): Millennium Films / Edward R. Pressman Productions / Saturn Film / Polsky Films / Osiris Productions

***Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010)**

Director(s): Werner Herzog

Studio(s): History Films / Creative Differences / Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication / Arte France / Werner Herzog Filmproduktion / More4

References to:

“Herakles” (1962)

Director(s): Werner Herzog

Studio(s): N/A

***Signs of Life* (1968)**

Director(s): Werner Herzog

Studio(s): Werner Herzog Filmproduktion

***The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920)**

Director(s): Robert Wiene

Studio(s): Decla-Film

***Nosferatu* (1922)**

Director(s): F.W. Murnau

Studio(s): Prana Film

***Metropolis* (1927)**

Director(s): Fritz Lang

Studio(s): UFA



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The Blue Angel (1930)

Director(s): Josef von Sternberg

Studio(s): Universum Film (UFA)

M (1931)

Director(s): Fritz Lang

Studio(s): Nero-Film A.G

Triumph of the Will (1935)

Director(s): Leni Riefenstahl

Studio(s): Reichsparteitag-Film

Olympia (1938)

Director(s): Leni Riefenstahl

Studio(s): Olympia-Film

The Murderers Are Among Us (1946)

Director(s): Wolfgang Staudte

Studio(s): Deutsche Film (DEFA)

Germany, Year Zero (1948)

Director(s): Roberto Rossellini

Studio(s): Produzione Salvo D'Angelo and Tevere Film

Heart of Stone (1950)

Director(s): Paul Verhoeven

Studio(s): Deutsche Film (DEFA)

Not Reconciled (1965)

Director(s): Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet

Studio(s): Produktion Straub-Huillet

Yesterday Girl (1966)

Director(s): Alexander Kluge

Studio(s): Independent Film / Kairos-Film

It Is Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse, but the Society in Which He Lives (1971)

Director(s): Rosa von Praunheim

Studio(s): Decla-Film

Ali: Fear Eats the Soul (1974)

Director(s): Rainer Werner Fassbinder

Studio(s): Tango-Film

The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum (1975)

Director(s): Volker Schlöndorff and Margarethe von Trotta

Studio(s): Willi Benninger / Eberhard Junkersdorf / Gunther Witte

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The Tin Drum (1979)

Director(s): Volker Schlöndorff

Studio(s): Franz Seitz Filmproduktion / Bioskop Film / Argos Films / Jadran Film

Wings of Desire (1987)

Director(s): Wim Wenders

Studio(s): Road Movies Filmproduktion / Argos Films / Westdeutscher Rundfunk

Rome, Open City (1945)

Director(s): Roberto Rossellini

Studio(s): Excelsa Film

The 400 Blows (1959)

Director(s): François Truffaut

Studio(s): Les Films du Carrosse / Sédif Productions

Breathless (1960)

Director(s): Jean-Luc Godard

Studio(s): Les Films Impéria

Look Back in Anger (1959)

Director(s): Tony Richardson

Studio(s): Woodfall Film Productions / ABPC

“Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe” (1980)

Director(s): Les Blank

Studio(s): Flower Films

Apocalypse Now(1979)

Director(s): Francis Ford Coppola

Studio(s): Omni Zoetrope

Paddington in Peru (2024)

Director(s): Dougal Wilson

Studio(s): StudioCanal / Columbia Pictures / Stage 6 Films / Marmalade Pictures

Nosferatu in Venice (1988)

Director(s): Augusto Caminito and Klaus Kinski

Studio(s): Scena Film Production / Reteitalia S.p.A.

Nosferatu (2024)

Director(s): Robert Eggers

Studio(s): Maiden Voyage Pictures / Studio 8Birch Hill Road Entertainment



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Sorcerer (1977)

Director(s): William Friedkin

Studio(s): Flower Films / Independent Documentary Fund / The National Endowment for the Arts / Ford Foundation / Corporation for Public Broadcasting

Burden of Dreams (1982)

Director(s): Les Blank

Studio(s): Flower Films / Independent Documentary Fund / The National Endowment for the Arts / Ford Foundation / Corporation for Public Broadcasting

My Best Fiend (1999)

Director(s): Werner Herzog

Studio(s): Werner Herzog Film Produktion / Cafe Productions / Zephir Film Produktion

Project Grizzly (1997)

Director(s): Peter Lynch

Studio(s): National Film Board of Canada

The Edge (1997)

Director(s): Lee Tamahori

Studio(s): Art Linson Productions

The Revenant (2015)

Director(s): Alejandro González Iñárritu

Studio(s): Regency Enterprises / New Regency / Anonymous Content / M Productions / Appian Way Productions

Little Dieter Needs to Fly (1997)

Director(s): Werner Herzog

Studio(s): Werner Herzog Filmproduktion / ZDF / BBC / Arte / Media Ventures

Bad Lieutenant (1992)

Director(s): Abel Ferrara

Studio(s): Edward R. Pressman Film Corporation

The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser (1974)

Director(s): Werner Herzog

Studio(s): Werner Herzog Filmproduktion / Filmverlag der Autoren / ZDF

My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done? (2009)

Director(s): Werner Herzog

Studio(s): Industrial Entertainment / Defilm / Paper Street Films

Lo and Behold, Reveries of the Connected World (2016)

Director(s): Werner Herzog

Studio(s): NetScout / Pereira & O'Dell Entertainment / Saville Productions / Skellig Rock



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Jack Reacher (2012)

Director(s): Christopher McQuarrie

Studio(s): Paramount Pictures / Skydance Productions / TC Productions

The Mandalorian (2019-2023)

Director(s): Various

Studio(s): Lucasfilm / Fairview Entertainment / Golem Creations

Penguins of Madagascar (2014)

Director(s): Eric Darnell and Simon J. Smith

Studio(s): DreamWorks Animation / Pacific Data Images

Bucking Fastard (2026)

Director(s): Werner Herzog

Studio(s): Gateway to Orkney

The Twilight Wordl (2026)

Director(s): Werner Herzog

Studio(s): Knudsen Pictures / Psyop / Sun Creature Studio

Notes:

*“What would an ocean be without a monster lurking in the dark?
It would be like sleep without dreams.” — Werner Herzog*

OVERVIEW

- Born: 1942, in Munich during WWII
- Career span: 1960s-present day
- Debut film: Signs of Life (1968)
- Notable works: Aguirre, the Wrath of God (1972), Nosferatu the Vampyre (1979), Fitzcarraldo (1982), Grizzly Man (2005), My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done (2009)
- Themes: Madness as destiny, nature as indifferent, the delusion of conquest
- Style: A pursuit of “ecstatic truth” — a deeper, poetic reality that blurs the line between fiction and documentary
- Awards: has won more than 60 awards and received over 70 nominations throughout his prolific career, including Academy Award and BAFTA nominations.

““It takes the poetic imagination to make visible a deeper layer of truth.” — Werner Herzog, Every Man for Himself and God Against All: A Memoir.”

Herzog has written a dozen books so far.



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First films...

In 1961, when Herzog was 19, he started work on his first film, “Herakles”. His first feature film was *Signs of Life*, released in 1968.

INTRODUCTION: GERMAN CINEMA

A history...

Between 1919 and the 1950s, German cinema:

- Invented modern horror and sci-fi aesthetics
- Influenced Hollywood film noir
- Demonstrated how film can serve both art and propaganda
- Reflected Germany’s political upheavals
- Many directors who emigrated during the Nazi era helped shape classical Hollywood cinema.

1. The silent era & German Expressionism (1910s–1920s): German cinema flourished artistically, marked by stylised visuals, distorted sets, and psychological themes. Films such as Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) and F. W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922) explored madness, fate, and modern anxieties, influencing global film language and horror aesthetics that defined genre filmmaking.
2. The Weimar sound era (late 1920s–early 1930s): With sound technology, German cinema embraced musicals, social dramas, and political critique. Landmark films such as Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931) blended expressionist style with realism. The likes of Lang and Josef von Sternberg examined crime, class, and instability during the fragile Weimar Republic.
3. Nazi cinema (1933–1945): Under Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels, film became a propaganda tool, productions ranging from overt ideology to escapist entertainment. Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935) exemplified persuasive visual propaganda, while many artists fled censorship and persecution.
4. Post-WWII “Rubble Films” (1945–early 1950s): In a devastated post-war Germany, “Trümmerfilm” confronted guilt, loss, and reconstruction. Films like *The Murderers Are Among Us* (1946) depicted moral reckoning amid ruins. Shot on location, these works emphasised realism, reflecting societal trauma and the challenge of rebuilding identity after World War II.
5. 1950s: East vs. West German cinema: Cinema split along Cold War lines. East Germany’s DEFA produced socialist, anti-fascist narratives, while West Germany favoured escapist Heimatfilme and later critical works. Diverging ideologies shaped storytelling, reflecting tensions between capitalism and socialism during the Cold War. Key films included *The Black Forest Girl* (1950) and *Heart of Stone* (1950)



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PART ONE: EARLY LIFE (or OUT OF THE ABYSS)

As mentioned, Herzog was born in Munich in 1942 but grew up in a remote Bavarian village after World War II. Raised without television or running water, he experienced poverty and isolation. These formative years fostered independence, imagination, and resilience, deeply influencing his later filmmaking style and fascination with extreme human experiences.

Munich was heavily damaged during World War II. Allied forces conducted over 70 air raids, destroying approximately 50% of the city, including many historic buildings. Nearly 300,000 people were made homeless, and the city was captured by American troops on April 30, 1945.

Young Werner

There seem to be no photographs of Herzog as a child due to his poverty and upbringing.

Anecdote #1: Herzog once walked from Munich to Paris (over 500 miles) in winter because he believed if he made the pilgrimage, film critic Lotte Eisner would not die. He later said: “When I walked, I felt she could not die.” This myth-making impulse becomes central to his cinema.

His book *Of Walking in Ice* from 1978 is an account of the long walk. Travel and the wilderness, losing oneself, seem to be key.

“I believe the common denominator of the universe is not harmony, but chaos, hostility and murder.”
— Werner Herzog

Anecdote #2: He was shot... on camera. In 2006, he was shot by an air rifle during a televised interview with Mark Kermode. The incident is famous primarily for Herzog’s remarkably stoic and unfazed reaction while on camera.

Associate figures...

Rainer Werner Fassbinder
Wim Wenders
Volker Schlöndorff

At the heart of Herzog’s films there is a profound exploration of the human spirit, often desperate with a struggle against a chaotic, indifferent universe. Herzog is driven by an intense passion that has characterised him, along with an “overwhelming” obsession, and the pursuit of (what he calls) an “ecstatic truth”. You can hear his voice in your head, right?

Impossible Dreams & Obsession: Characters are often driven by, and ultimately destroyed by, intense passions or quests, such as in *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* and *Fitzcarraldo*.

The “Ecstatic Truth”: Herzog seeks a deeper, poetic truth beyond mere facts, creating a blend of fiction and documentary.

Man vs. Nature: A central conflict where characters grapple with, and are often consumed by, the raw and hostile power of the natural world.

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The Outsider/Holy Fool: Protagonists are frequently social misfits, rebels, or individuals with unique, sometimes mad, visions that set them apart from society.

Extreme Situations: Both in his narratives and filmmaking process, Herzog forces his subjects (and himself) into real, dangerous, or uncomfortable situations to capture authentic, raw emotion

This latter point makes us ask: “Why does Herzog risk lives for images?”

Themes from childhood...

Some of his early works show a genuine connection with youth. These aren't always logical memories; they're emotional or visual imprints that later define the tone and subjects of his films.

Early images and memories become lifelong obsessions:

Herzog believes that powerful impressions from childhood — especially vivid, even strange images — embed themselves deeply and resurface in creative work.

Isolation and environment shape worldview:

Growing up in a remote Bavarian village without modern technology, Herzog often emphasises how childhood environments (silence, nature, hardship) influence how one sees the world. This early sense of isolation and confrontation with nature becomes a recurring theme in his films.

Childhood experiences drive a search for meaning, not explanation:

Rather than treating childhood as something to analyse psychologically, Herzog sees it as a source of mystery. The themes that emerge — madness, obsession, human struggle against nature — are not meant to be “explained” but explored. He's more interested in the “ecstatic truth” (a recurrent phrase/theme) than factual autobiography.

New German Cinema

As with most European New Wave cinema of the time, New German Cinema (*Neuer Deutscher Film*) was a movement that broke new ground in social realism and techniques in filmmaking. Its main period is from 1962–1982, led by a new generation of predominantly West German directors seeking to break from traditional filmmaking, confront the Nazi past, and address contemporary social issues.

Notable films include *Not Reconciled* (1965), *Yesterday Girl* (1966), *It Is Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse, but the Society in Which He Lives* (1971), *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum* (1975), *The Tin Drum* (1979) and *Wings of Desire* (1987).

Influences

As with Britain and later the US, New German Cinema was heavily influenced by the French New Wave and Italian Neorealism of the '40s and '50s, in which directors used very low (cost-effective) budgets, auteur-driven styles, and subversive narratives to create critical and, often, internationally acclaimed, arthouse cinema that is still influential today. Filmmakers and their films include



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Roberto Rossellini with *Rome, Open City* (1945), François Truffaut with *The 400 Blows* (1959), Jean-Luc Godard with *Breathless* (1960) and Tony Richardson with *Look Back in Anger* (1959).

Herzog's eight favourite movies of all time:

1. *Cane Toads: An Unnatural History* (Mark Lewis, 1988)
2. *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* (Errol Morris, 1997)
3. *Forest of Bliss* (Robert Gardner, 1986)
4. *Good News: Von Kolporteuren, toten Hunden und anderen Wienern* (Ulrich Seidl, 1990)
5. *Letter from Siberia* (Chris Marker, 1958)
6. *Les Maitres Fous* (Jean Rouch, 1955)
7. *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922)
8. *Spend It All* (Les Blank, 1972)

Anecdote #3: He once ate his own shoe. In 1980, he fulfilled a bet with Errol Morris, who had promised to finish his film *Gates of Heaven*. The event was documented in the short film "Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe" (1980), symbolising artistic commitment and perseverance.

PART TWO: AN IMPOSSIBLE SELECTION OF FEATURES

Aguirre, the Wrath of God (1972)

"I am the wrath of God. The earth I pass will see me and tremble." — Don Lope de Aguirre

Synopsis: Herzog's 1972 film follows a 16th-century Spanish expedition searching the Amazon for El Dorado. When the mission falters, the ruthless soldier Don Lope de Aguirre leads a mutiny and seizes control, declaring himself the leader of a new empire. As the group drifts deeper into the jungle on makeshift rafts, hunger, disease, and Indigenous attacks decimate them. Aguirre grows increasingly paranoid and delusional, obsessed with power and destiny. The film ends with him isolated and mad, surrounded by monkeys, still proclaiming imperial glory.

Key themes...

Obsession and madness: Don Lope de Aguirre's relentless pursuit of El Dorado and power drives him into paranoia and delusion. His descent reflects how unchecked ambition can destroy both the individual and those around him.

The futility of imperialism: The expedition symbolises the arrogance of colonial conquest. Despite grand claims of empire and glory, the mission collapses into chaos and death, exposing imperial ambition as hollow and self-destructive.

Man vs. nature: The Amazon jungle is an overwhelming, indifferent force. Nature dwarfs human schemes, emphasising humanity's vulnerability and insignificance.



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Isolation and existential despair: As the group dwindles, Aguirre becomes physically and mentally isolated. The drifting raft suggests aimlessness and the absurdity of human attempts to impose order on an uncontrollable world.

Power and illusion: Aguirre claims authority and destiny, yet his “empire” exists only in his mind. The film questions the legitimacy and meaning of power when detached from reality.

It is impeccably shot and put Herzog on the map as a filmmaker.

Significance and impact...

Landmark of New German Cinema: The film became a defining work of the New German Cinema movement. It established Herzog internationally and showcased a bold, unconventional style that rejected Hollywood spectacle in favour of psychological and philosophical depth.

Iconic Performance: Klaus Kinski’s portrayal of Aguirre is considered one of cinema’s most intense performances. His volatile energy shaped the film’s atmosphere and cemented his reputation as a powerful, unpredictable screen presence.

Influence on filmmakers: The film influenced later works about obsession and colonial madness, most notably Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*. Its themes of power, delusion, and human insignificance echo in many subsequent films. You can also more recent populist cinema, such as *Paddington in Peru* (2024).

Redefining historical epics: Instead of glorifying conquest, the film presents imperial ambition as futile and destructive. This critical perspective helped shift how historical exploration narratives were portrayed in art cinema.

Enduring artistic reputation: Today, *Aguirre* is widely regarded as a masterpiece of world cinema. Its hypnotic pacing, haunting imagery, and existential tone continue to be studied in film courses and admired by directors and critics alike.

Nosferatu the Vampire (1979)

“Time is an abyss... profound as a thousand nights. Centuries come and go... To be unable to grow old is terrible. Death is not the worst. Can you imagine enduring centuries, experiencing each day the same futilities...” — Count Dracula

Synopsis: In Werner Herzog’s 1979 remake of the classic silent horror and Dracula tale, real estate agent Jonathan Harker travels to Transylvania to meet Count Dracula, a grotesque, plague-bearing vampire. The Count becomes obsessed with a photo of Jonathan’s wife, Lucy, and travels to Wismar, bringing a swarm of black rats that trigger a devastating plague. While the town collapses into madness, Lucy realizes only a selfless sacrifice can stop the evil. She lures Dracula into her room, distracting him with her blood until sunrise, which kills him. However, the victory is hollow: Jonathan, already infected, survives as the new Nosferatu to spread the darkness further.



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Key themes...

Isolation and Loneliness: Herzog's vampire (Count Dracula) is not just a monster but a tragic figure. He is cursed with eternal life and unable to connect with others, and his existence is defined by profound loneliness and alienation. Unlike typical horror villains, he evokes pity as much as fear.

Death as Inevitable and Natural: The film presents death not as shocking, but as a constant, creeping presence (symbolised by plague and rats). An unavoidable part of human existence. This aligns with Herzog's often philosophical, almost existential outlook.

Disease and decay (the plague motif): Dracula brings a literal plague as rats flood the town, and society collapses into chaos and denial. This reflects the fear of uncontrollable contagion as well as the fragility of civilisation.

Obsession and desire: Jonathan Harker and Lucy are drawn into the vampire's orbit. Desire becomes dangerous and consuming, and Lucy's sacrifice shows the thin line between love and destruction.

Nature vs humanity: As usual, Herzog contrasts vast, indifferent natural landscapes and the fragility of human life and order. Nature is portrayed as uncaring and overpowering, reinforcing existential themes.

Significance and impact...

A philosophical horror film: Unlike mainstream vampire films, it blends horror with arthouse cinema, focusing on mood, meaning, and emotion rather than action. This makes it closer to a meditation on existence than a typical genre film.

Reinvention of Dracula: While inspired by the 1922 *Nosferatu* and the original *Dracula*, Herzog humanises the vampire, Dracula becoming a tragic, suffering being, not just evil.

Redefined the vampire genre: It influenced later portrayals of vampires as emotional, existential, and sympathetic. You can see echoes in later films that treat vampires as tragic figures rather than monsters.

Cult and critical acclaim: Praised for its cinematography, music, and atmosphere. Became a cult classic, especially among arthouse audiences.

Visual and stylistic influence: Slow pacing, eerie silence, and haunting imagery influenced by Gothic horror aesthetics and the use of atmospheric filmmaking in general.

If you look carefully at the 1922 original, Herzog's '79 version and Robert Eggers' recent remake from 2014, there are distinct visual parallels throughout.

There is an unofficial sequel to Herzog's version, with no former cast members or characters returning except for Klaus Kinski. It would be a film that was doomed from the start, and went on to endure a disastrous production shoot, in large part due to Kinski's notorious behaviour that became dangerous.



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Fitzcarraldo (1982)

“I am planning something geographical.” — Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald

Synopsis: In Herzog’s next epic, Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald (Klaus Kinski), known as Fitzcarraldo, is an opera-obsessed dreamer in the Amazon. He dreams of building a magnificent opera house in the remote jungle town of Iquitos. To fund this vision, he acquires a patch of inaccessible rubber territory. To reach it, he executes an impossible feat: he must haul a massive 320-ton steamship over a steep mountain between two rivers. Despite hostile terrain and Indigenous resistance, his obsession fuels the ordeal. Ultimately, he loses the rubber business but triumphs by bringing opera to the riverbank

Key themes...

Obsession and impossible dreams: Directed by Werner Herzog, the film centres on Fitzcarraldo’s relentless ambition to build an opera house in the Amazon, portraying the pursuit of an unattainable vision as both inspiring and irrational.

Human ambition vs nature: The film’s most iconic feat —hauling a steamship over a mountain — symbolises humanity’s attempt to conquer nature, ultimately revealing nature’s overwhelming power and indifference.

Madness and visionary genius: Through the performance of Klaus Kinski, Fitzcarraldo is depicted as both a dreamer and a madman, blurring the line between brilliance and delusion.

Art vs material reality: Inspired by opera and figures like Enrico Caruso, the film contrasts the transcendent beauty of art with the harsh, unforgiving realities of the jungle.

Another landmark of New German Cinema: As a defining work, the film established Herzog internationally and showcased a bold, unconventional style that rejected Hollywood spectacle in favour of psychological and philosophical depth.

Legendary production and realism: The extreme real-life production—documented in *Burden of Dreams*—mirrored the film’s narrative, redefining filmmaking as a physically and artistically demanding pursuit.

Significance and impact...

Revolutionary filmmaking approach: Directed by Werner Herzog, the film rejected studio artifice by accomplishing its central feat practically, redefining cinematic realism and demonstrating the extremes a director could pursue to realise a vision.

Blurring fiction and reality: By using real physical labour and danger, *Fitzcarraldo* dissolves the boundary between narrative cinema and documentary, making the filmmaking process itself part of the film’s meaning.



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A huge influence on William Friedkin's *Sorcerer* (1977).

International recognition and legacy: The film elevated Herzog's global reputation, establishing him as one of the most daring auteurs in world cinema and influencing future filmmakers drawn to ambitious, unconventional storytelling.

Mythic production history: The notoriously difficult shoot — captured in *Burden of Dreams* — became legendary, shaping the film's legacy as much as the final product itself.

Enduring cultural and academic impact: Widely studied in film and postcolonial discourse, the film continues to provoke discussion about obsession, exploitation, and the ethical limits of artistic ambition.

Herzog vs. Kinski

The partnership between Herzog and Kinski was intensely creative yet highly volatile. They collaborated on five films, producing remarkable performances amid a constant conflict. Herzog admired Kinski's talent but endured his erratic behaviour, resulting in a legendary, turbulent relationship blending artistic brilliance with personal hostility.

Grizzly Man (2005)

"*Fuck you, Park Service!*" — Timothy Treadwell

Synopsis: In this haunting documentary, Werner Herzog explores the life and death of Timothy Treadwell, an amateur environmentalist who spent thirteen summers living among wild grizzly bears in Alaska. Treadwell believed he had found a kinship with the animals, acting as their self-appointed protector and filming his interactions with intimate, often erratic detail. The narrative culminates in the 2003 tragedy where Treadwell and his girlfriend, Amie Huguenard, were killed and eaten by a bear. Herzog uses Treadwell's own footage to examine the thin line between nature's indifference and human delusion, portraying a man lost in a dangerous, romanticised fantasy.

Herzog narrates his documentaries like a prophet who's slightly annoyed with humanity.

Key themes...

Exploration of obsession and identity: Directed by Werner Herzog, the film examines Timothy Treadwell's intense personal identification with wild grizzly bears, portraying his devotion as both deeply meaningful and dangerously obsessive.

Human vs nature: Set in the wilderness of Katmai National Park and Preserve, the film challenges the idea that nature is harmonious; instead, it is indifferent and often brutal, in contrast to Treadwell's romanticised view.

Illusion vs reality: Through Treadwell's own footage, Herzog contrasts the subject's idealistic beliefs about coexistence with the harsher reality of the natural world, exposing the tension between perception and truth.



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Mortality and the limits of control: The film underscores the inevitability of death and humanity's inability to fully control or integrate with the wild, culminating in the tragic fate of Treadwell.

Significance and impact...

Ethics of documentary filmmaking: Herzog raises questions about the role of the filmmaker—what should be shown, what should be withheld, and how to represent real tragedy responsibly.

Critical and cultural impact: *Grizzly Man* received widespread acclaim for its haunting narrative and philosophical depth, influencing modern documentary storytelling through its blend of found footage and reflective narration.

Reinforcement of Herzog's auteur style: The film further established Herzog's signature approach—combining real events with philosophical inquiry—solidifying his reputation for exploring the extremes of human experience and belief.

Notable films that explore the wilderness and power of the bear include the documentary *Project Grizzly* and the feature *The Edge*, both from 1997, along with the overlooked *Blackfoot Trail* (aka *Black Country*, US, 2014) and Alejandro González Iñárritu's *The Revenant* from 2015.

This is a great survival story, belonging to a genre that highlights the plights of the human spirit.

Rescue Dawn (2006)

"No, I never wanted to go to war. I just wanted to fly." — Dieter Dengler

Synopsis: In this harrowing survival drama, Werner Herzog dramatises the true story of Dieter Dengler (Christian Bale), a German-born U.S. Navy pilot shot down over Laos during a secret mission in 1966. Captured by the Pathet Lao, Dengler endures brutal torture and starvation in a primitive prison camp alongside other disillusioned POWs. Refusing to break, the irrepressible Dengler organises a daring prison break through the dense, unforgiving jungle. The film captures his descent into a primal state as he battles leeches, hunger, and madness. Ultimately, his sheer will to live leads to a miraculous rescue against impossible odds.

A return to the subject matter of Herzog's documentary *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997).

Key themes...

Survival and resilience: *Rescue Dawn* portrays the brutal physical and psychological endurance of prisoners of war, emphasising the human capacity to persist against overwhelming odds in the face of starvation, torture, and isolation.

Defiance and individuality: Through the character of Dieter Dengler, the film highlights unwavering personal conviction and resistance, reflecting Werner Herzog's recurring focus on individuals who refuse to submit to oppressive systems.



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The thin line between civilisation and chaos: The narrative explores how quickly social order erodes under extreme conditions, revealing both the fragility of human morality and the primal instincts that emerge in the struggle to survive.

***Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* (2009)**

“Everything I take is prescription - except for the heroin.” — Terence McDonagh

Synopsis: In Herzog’s surreal crime drama, Terence McDonagh (Nicolas Cage) is a New Orleans police detective whose life spirals into drug-fuelled chaos after injuring his back during Hurricane Katrina. While investigating the brutal murder of a Senegalese family, McDonagh balances a crippling Vicodin addiction, a relationship with a high-end prostitute, and mounting gambling debts. His hallucinations—including soul-singing iguanas—mirror his internal decay. Despite his corrupt methods and deepening mania, McDonagh’s erratic behaviour bizarrely leads to a breakthrough in the case. The film is a hallucinatory exploration of a man teetering between moral bankruptcy and professional triumph.

Key themes...

Corruption and moral decay: *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* delves into the blurred boundaries between law enforcement and criminality, portraying a protagonist whose ethical compass deteriorates amid addiction, power, and systemic dysfunction.

Addiction and self-destruction: The film examines compulsive behaviour and substance abuse as driving forces behind erratic decision-making, illustrating a downward spiral where dependency fuels both personal and professional collapse.

Chaos, fate, and absurdity: Reflecting Werner Herzog’s distinctive worldview, the narrative embraces surreal and unpredictable elements, suggesting that life operates on irrational forces beyond human control, where chance and disorder shape outcomes.

Style and techniques...

Hallucinatory visual style (colour and imagery): Herzog leans into a surreal, almost dreamlike aesthetic. The colour palette often feels humid and sickly — yellows, greens, and murky shadows — reflecting post-Hurricane Katrina decay. He also inserts bizarre, non-naturalistic shots (like lingering close-ups of animals or distorted perspectives) that mirror the protagonist’s drug-induced mental state rather than objective reality.

Unconventional framing & camera movement: The framing is deliberately off-kilter at times — tilted angles, awkward close-ups, and compositions that feel slightly “wrong.” Herzog mixes handheld immediacy with strangely static shots, creating tension between chaos and detachment. The camera often lingers longer than expected, forcing attention onto uncomfortable details or performances.

This latter point reminds us of Abel Ferrara’s original *Bad Lieutenant* from 1992. You can read further about this film and Ferrara in my essay “Morality Crisis: The Vice and Virtues of Abel Ferrara” on the [4K release from 101 Films](#).



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Cave of Forgotten Dreams (2010)

“In a forbidden recess of the cave, there’s a footprint of an eight-year-old boy next to the footprint of a wolf. Did a hungry wolf stalk the boy? Or did they walk together as friends? Or were their tracks made thousands of years apart? We’ll never know.” — Werner Herzog

Synopsis: This remarkable documentary follows Herzog as he explores the Chauvet Cave in southern France, home to some of the oldest known human paintings. Using rare access and 3D cinematography, the film reveals astonishing images of animals created over 30,000 years ago. Herzog blends scientific insight with philosophical reflection, pondering the origins of art, human consciousness, and time itself. Interviews with experts and quiet, immersive visuals create a meditative tone, inviting viewers to connect with prehistoric minds and consider humanity’s enduring urge to create and express through images across millennia.

The documentary deserves a place alongside another definitive and accessible work: EH. Gombrich’s *The Story of Art*, first published in 1950.

The documentary not only explores humanity’s earliest known artworks, revealing sophisticated Ice Age imagery but also helps to reframe art history as deeply ancient, spiritual, and continuous. It reminds us how easily we are able to link Palaeolithic expression to modern creativity — echoed in graffiti’s handprints and markings, which similarly assert presence, identity, and the human urge to leave a trace.

Key themes...

Art, time, and human connection: *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* reflects on the origins of artistic expression through prehistoric cave paintings, emphasising a deep continuity between early humans and modern audiences across tens of thousands of years.

The limits of perception and knowledge: The film explores how restricted access, technology, and human senses shape our understanding of the past, suggesting that history is always partially obscured and mediated rather than fully knowable.

Wonder, mystery, and the sacred: Through its contemplative tone, Werner Herzog presents the cave as a near-spiritual space, evoking awe at both the beauty of the artwork and the enduring enigma of human existence.

CONCLUSION: HERZOG’S LEGACY

Other notable films include the features *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974), *My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done?* (2009), along with documentaries *Lessons of Darkness* (1992) and *Lo and Behold, Reveries of the Connected World* (2016), to name a few.

“All what I’ve seen so far is dead on arrival. Slick and well made, but completely dead. It does not acquire the soul of poetry.” — Werner Herzog



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Acting (and cameos)

Herzog often crops up (often with some irony) in films, bringing an enigmatic presence. As well as villains, he often portrays eccentric, philosophical figures with dry humour. Films include *Jack Reacher* (2012), *Penguins of Madagascar* (2014) and the first season of the *Star Wars* series *The Mandalorian* (2019). He has also been immortalised on *The Simpsons*.

Upcoming films include *Bucking Fastard*, out this year and, in pre-production, an animated adaptation of Werner Herzog's novel, *The Twilight World*. The film tells the incredible story of Hiroo Onoda, a Japanese intelligence officer who defended a small island in the Philippines for 29 years after the end of WWII.

“Coincidences always happen if you keep your mind open...” — Werner Herzog