Unit 6105 Screen Analysis 1
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MOVIES IN THE MIRROR

A paper

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Cinema is the only art which borrows, or perhaps steals, from all other art-forms. Considering its voracious nature, it was probably inevitable that cinema would eventually begin feeding from itself as well. A classic example of this creative cannibalism is the 'behind-the-scenes' or 'making-of' documentary.

Although the behind-the-scenes documentarist has always teetered on a tightrope between advertising and academic criticism, the best of these films avoid the limitations of either approach to come up with something new. In this paper I intend to examine, compare, and contrast three exceptional films about film-making; *Burden of Dreams* (1982), *Hearts of Darkness* (1991), and *Filming Othello* (1977).

To understand the importance of these three documentaries, it is necessary to first explain what came before them.

BACKGROUND

Films about films are not a new phenomenon. The genre appears to have begun with the French television series *Cineastes de notre temps*, in the 1960s.[1]

Created by Andre Labarthe and Janine Bazin, this series consisted of interviews with famous directors, shot and edited in the styles of the subjects. While the series did not include out-takes or scenes of film professionals at work, it did focus upon recently released material, and the probing questions and innovative production techniques went beyond the usual, shallow, entertainment news approach.

Most of the documentaries which were to follow dealt with a director's body of work rather than examining an individual production in detail. They included *Directed by John Ford* (1971), *The Man You Loved To Hate* (about Erich von Stroheim, 1979), *Whoever Tells the Truth Shall Die* (on Pasolini, 1980), *Unknown Chaplin* (1983), *'I'm Almost Not Crazy': John Cassavetes, the Man and His Work* (1984), *Motion and Emotion: the Films of Wim Wenders* (1989) and *Preston Sturges: the Rise and Fall of an American Dreamer* (1990). Although some of these films delved into dark themes such as the insanity and obsession associated with movie-making, many were essentially fairly safe, idolatrous 'show and tell' treatments of their subjects.[2]

One common approach from Hollywood has been to highlight the contrib-utions of stunts and special effects people to film-making. Two obvious examples are *The Making of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *The Making of Star Wars*.[3] Variations on this straightforward promotional format avoid potentially unpleasant questions, and are still being used to fill television downtime around the world today.

The French have also maintained an interest in the behind-the-scenes genre, with varying success. The follow-up to *Cineastes de notre temps*, a TV series called *Cinema de notre temps*, has been cautiously supported by critics for its attempts to staunch the flow of vacuous Hollywood self-promotion (in its examination of film-makers such as David Lynch), while Chris Marker's attempt at the form, *AK* (1985), about the making of Akira Kurosawa's *Ran*, has been reproached for further blurring 'the distinction between advertising and criticism'.[4]

Despite the number of films that have been made about film-makers and their work, few stand up to independent examination. Those that do tend to be made by people who have some personal connection with their subject, but who are not so close as to be adulatory. Les Blank's film about the making of *Fitzcarraldo* is a prime example.

BURDEN OF DREAMS

Fitzcarraldo, Werner Herzog's 1982 movie about a man who drags a boat over a mountain, has been called everything from 'dazzling'[5] to 'preposterous'.[6] Les Blank's documentary about that film, *Burden of Dreams*, has been consistently praised since its release in the same year. The reason seems to be that audiences get what they want from Blank's film; those who see Herzog as a racist and *Fitzcarraldo* as the 'kind of movie we would have seen in very large numbers had Germany won its wars'[7] can find plenty of evidence here to justify their views. Those who love Herzog's work are fascinated by the stories behind the story. For whatever reason, *Burden of Dreams* is one of those rare behind-the-scenes films to generate as much critical and commercial interest as its subject.

Les Blank's background as a producer of off-beat documentaries about subjects like garlic, obscure blues musicians and Polish polka dancing, was not his only preparation for an artistic collaboration with Werner Herzog, the 'romantic visionary'[8] of the New German Cinema movement. In fact they had collaborated before, on a film called *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe* (1980). Blank's documentary features Herzog doing exactly that, following a bet with his assistant.

Outwardly, Blank appeared to have little in common with Herzog. However there were similarities. Both men were about the same age (Blank born 1935, Herzog born 1942), both grew up in out of the way towns (Tampa, Florida and Sachrang, Germany respectively), and both had struggled on the edges of the mainstream film industry to make personal, passionate films via independent means.

In the book *Burden of Dreams*, which he co-wrote with James Bogan, Blank suggests that he chose to make another film about Herzog more out of boredom with what he'd been doing than because of any particular interest in the *Fitzcarraldo* script. In his own words: 'I could not share [Werner's] excitement over pulling a real 320 ton steamship over a mountain, but I did want to make a film about him and I *had* always wanted to go to the Amazon... I felt ready to plunge into another world'.[9] In the finished documentary, Blank manages to hold on to his interest in Herzog and the Amazon while maintaining a healthy lack of emotional involvement with Herzog's self-imposed mystical ordeal. This allows him to cast a sympathetic but mildly amused eye at all those whose lives are turned upside-down by *Fitzcarraldo*.

Burden of Dreams, which has been described as 'one of the most vivid studies of the creative process ever filmed'[10], is constructed in a deceptively simple fashion. In contrast to Herzog's technology, most of the images are shot with a handheld camera. The only images taken directly from the film itself are off-cuts and unused sequences, rough around the edges, such as the early material with Mick Jagger and Jason Robards in the belltower. To accompany this most masculine of stories, Blank uses a no-nonsense female voiceover, delivered quickly and straight-

forwardly, in contrast to Herzog's slow, accented English. The main talking head is that of Herzog himself, who spends most of his time ranting at the jungle but is also given the opportunity to voice his version of the rumours against him. Although we never hear the direct voice of his accusers, lead actor Klaus Kinski does have his opinion of Herzog immortalised: 'This much idiot no one has ever been in the world!'[11]

The cinematography often seems to have a wry humour to it. When Herzog describes himself as someone who is capable of articulating visions lesser mortals can only dream about, he is placed at the bottom of the frame, an insignificant figure. When he says the jungle is a stinking, evil place of death we see pictures of beautiful green plants and exotic beetles. Music is used in a similarly contrapuntal way; we hear glorious opera as the Indians perform hard, menial labour on Herzog's behalf, and Peruvian folk music lifts the mood when things are getting a little black: 'the birds here are in misery. I don't think they sing, they just screech in pain'.[12]

Maureen Gosling's editing is extremely important in this film, weaving together apparently unconnected strands of narrative to provide a complete picture, and bringing out the small, nagging conflicts between cast and crew. Throughout the film there is a narrative parallel to the real-life drama which complements the obvious comparisons between Herzog and the fictional character Fitzcarraldo. Whether by accident or design, the documentary has a classic three act shape, with turning points one and two provided by the loss of the original cast and the completion of the mountain stunt, and a resolution of sorts provided by the boat rocking down the rapids (what is a disaster in the fictional film is a victory here) and Herzog winning the Best Director prize at Cannes.

One of the main differences between *Fitzcarraldo* and *Burden of Dreams* is the treatment of the Indians. Where for Herzog the Campa, Machiguenga and Aguaruna are just actors, playing shallow versions of themselves, Blank's eye is more that of the ethnographer, but with a sense of humour. While Herzog and his crew fight gravity and water, the Indians are always shown going with the flow, using the power of nature to help them. They are disdainful of the camera, and make jokes about the film crew, while also showing themselves to be politically astute and well aware of what is being done to them.

At first there is very little emphasis on the usual 'director directing' footage. Until late in the film, when Herzog is in full megalomaniac mode, we usually only see him on the set when he is bogged down with problems. These are not grand artistic problems but annoying, ridiculous, practical obstacles, usually concerned with props that won't behave. (Of course it could be said that the whole film is about a prop that won't behave - the boat itself).

HEARTS OF DARKNESS

Another movie about a boat, a river and people going mad is *Apocalypse Now*, and the behind-the-scenes film, *Hearts of Darkness*, has many similarities with *Burden of Dreams*. Blank's film could almost have been used as a blueprint; both documentaries were released theatrically to great acclaim, both tell real-life stories that mirror fiction, and both ask the question (*Burden* by suggestion and *Hearts* more openly) of how far an artist can justifiably go to put his or her vision on film. There is one important difference however. While *Burden of Dreams* was made by an

independent colleague of Herzog's, the heart of the Fax Bahr/George Hickenlooper documentary *Hearts of Darkness* is the films and sound recordings made by Francis Ford Coppola's wife, Eleanor. Here is a technically accomplished portrait of a man falling apart, made by the woman who supposedly loves him; what makes this big budget home-movie so fascinating is the perversity at its core.

While there is some examination here of issues familiar to viewers of *Burden of Dreams*, such as exploitation of local labour, questionable alliances (for instance between Coppola and Ferdinand Marcos) and unethical behaviour (the reaction to Martin Sheen's heart attack is only the most obvious example), *Hearts of Darkness* is essentially a portrait of a film director with too much money for his own good; a man who is going insane and knows it. Coppola makes this point himself at the start of the film. If we are to believe his speech, things weren't supposed to work out that way. Unlike Herzog, who planned the elements of his own exquisite torture in making *Fitzcarraldo*, *Hearts of Darkness* suggests that Coppola was purely a victim of bad luck. However it is plain that many of his problems stem from a lack of preparation. If he'd had a firm ending scripted before leaving home then most of the celebrated difficulties with Marlon Brando (which make such good dramatic material in the documentary) would never have eventuated.

Again, there are strong elements of conventional narrative drama in this film. Some sequences are lifted directly from *Apocalypse Now*, music and all, with behind-the-scenes footage edited in. Other fictional material, such as Orson Welles' 1938 radio broadcast of *Heart of Darkness*, is also used extensively for dramatic effect, with music and sound effects effectively bridging these sequences and sometimes continuing under the talking heads, building a mood of instability and disintegration.

One of the most interesting things about both *Burden of Dreams* and *Hearts of Darkness* is the fact that they were made and released at all. Is it, as *Newsweek* suggested, 'a lot of guts'[13] which made Coppola reveal the story behind his master-piece, or simply a desire to show what hell everyone suffered to produce it? It seems to me that the psychology here is something similar to a king who orders that a large number of virgins, horses and cattle be put to death when he dies to prove what a great man he is. While Herzog seems always to have been vulnerable to this sort of criticism - Pauline Kael once said 'he thinks he's producing art because he turns the making of a film into such a miserable, difficult struggle for all concerned'[14] - Coppola avoids similar attacks by continually reminding the audience that he knows what he's doing is crazy. By admitting the crime, he is excused.

And so we come to another maverick independent, Orson Welles.

FILMING OTHELLO

Although Orson Welles never completed his own planned film version of *Heart Of Darkness*, in 1948 he began work on another story about the nature of evil, *Othello*.[15]

In *Filming Othello*, Welles describes Shakespeare's tragedy as a 'monument of Western civilisation'. He presents himself, by comparison, as a humble craftsman, posed beside one of his tools - a Movieola editing machine.

Filming Othello is an oddity of the behind-the-scenes genre. It was produced for German television in 1977, 35 years after the release of the film on which it was based.[16] No director was credited, but it is now generally agreed that *Filming Othello* is as much Orson Welles' film as its subject. Certainly there are classic Wellesian touches, such as the striking low camera angles and use of oval-shaped haloes of light to enhance the limitations of the talking head style.

The focus in this film is upon the protracted production period of *Othello*. Visuals consist of re-edited extracts from the film (mute apart from the extraordinary opening scene), and two separate sequences; a lunch discussion between Welles and two of his collaborators on *Othello*, and a Q&A session about the film featuring Welles and a cinema full of Boston film buffs. All of this material is presided over by Welles sitting alone at his editing machine; like God, he starts and stops the segments of film, and explains what we are seeing. There are no conventional scenes of the director directing, we see few stills from the set, and there are no hidden microphones a la Eleanor Coppola. This is an illustrated, openly biased reminiscence.

As with the two films discussed previously, much of the fascination of *Filming Othello* comes from the comparison between the cast then and 'now', particularly Welles himself (who played the Moor). However this nostalgia is a long way from the 'good old days' approach. The story of *Othello's* production is a darkly comic nightmare of epic proportions. Welles describes the role of the director as 'the man who presides over accidents', and highlights include his explanations of the Turkish bath murder scene (born out of necessity when the costumes didn't arrive), the inter-continental editing of fight sequences, and the entry of the film at Cannes under the Moroccan flag (for extremely convoluted and unplanned reasons).

Technically, *Filming Othello* is uncharacteristically rough for a Welles production. If he *was* directing, it seems odd that the same man who could remember fight continuity across years and continents could not manage to avoid crossing the line confusingly during the lunch discussion scenes.

While Welles' modesty at the start of *Filming Othello* seems false, he steers the documentary in such a way as to shrink his own stature and expand Shakespeare's during the course of proceedings. Welles' passion for the source material is tangible, and in some ways *Filming Othello* becomes a tribute to the genius of Shakespeare. This is the main difference between *Filming Othello* and the two films discussed earlier. If *Hearts* and *Burden* could be described as being about egos out of control, then *Filming Othello* is about the inspiration given by one artist to another.

Although it has been said that *Othello* was a project 'obviously jinxed from the start'[17], few of the problems seem to be of Welles' making. Although the film ended up being shot on locations all over the world, there were no Herzog-style plans to drag real ships over real mountains; it was originally intended to work in the studio. When Welles did get into difficulties, it was he who got the cast and crew out of trouble, usually by taking on acting jobs (such as his 1949 role in *The Third Man*).

Once again there is a strong narrative structure to this documentary, and the story of how *Othello* was made is so engrossing that the eternal question posed by behind-the-scenes films - was it all worth it? - seems redundant here.

More successfully than *Burden of Dreams* or *Hearts of Darkness, Filming Othello* is a portrait of the eternal, unwinnable struggle of the creative artist to satisfy him or herself. At the end, Welles refuses to bask in the light of positive reviews, as he might have done, but reaches out to the audience with a sad lament: he doesn't feel he's done justice to the material and wishes *Othello* was a future project instead of a piece of history. The power of this moment comes from the fact that here is a man telling his own story. It is a more intimate perspective even than that offered by Eleanor Coppola.

A recurring theme of these three documentaries is that auteuristic film-making on a grand scale can be seen as an epic quest; a self-imposed struggle in a world which some believe is running out of great challenges. The irony is that the end result of any film-making project, however arduous, is an illusion. There is nothing tangible to show for the labours of hundreds of people but a strip of film which will eventually lose its image and be forgotten. Perhaps this is why some film-makers seem to feel a need to not only live through the torments of their fictional characters, but to prove the experience was real by documenting the process via behind-the-scenes films.

For audiences, the appeal in watching these films seems to have something to do with the age-old desire to bend the real world to suit human needs. Behind-the-scenes documentaries offer the spectacle of large numbers of people creating stories for human consumption out of the raw materials of earth, water, fire and light. As with warfare, there is a fascination in the destructiveness associated with this process. Another parallel with warfare is the way film-making brings out the best and worst in people, creating superb drama, as long as you're not too close.

Although I believe audiences seeking reality from film and television are looking in the wrong place, *Burden of Dreams*, *Hearts of Darkness* and *Filming Othello* offer glimpses of the reality that lies behind the business of illusion-making. These documentaries transcend the limitations of the behind-the-scenes genre to say at least as much about the human condition as has been said with any other type of film. My hope - and it may be a forlorn one - is that documentaries of this calibre will survive the structure of today's studio system and continue to be made.

David Lowe, June 1994.

NOTES

1. *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1990/91, Vol.60, No.1, p.53
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3. *Cineaste*, Vol.12, no.4, p.54
4. *Sight and Sound*, op cit, p.51
5. S.H. Scheuer, *Movies on TV*, New York: Bantam, 1987, p.209
6. *Cineaste*, op cit, p.42
7. ibid, p.43
8. *Baseline's Encyclopedia of Film*
9. L. Blank & J. Bogan, *Burden of Dreams*, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1984, p.12
10. D. Chute, quoted in L. Blank & J. Bogan, op cit, p.7
11. K. Kinski, quoted in the film *Burden of Dreams*
12. W. Herzog, ibid
13. Harry F. Waters, *Newsweek*, quoted in the *Hearts of Darkness* press release
14. P. Kael, *Taking It All In*, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1982, p.403
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16. ibid, 28/6/1978
17. *Sight and Sound*, Oct-Dec.1952, Vol.22, No.2, p.93

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2. *Sight and Sound*, Vol.1, Issue 9, p.44
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4. *Variety*, 3/6/1991, p.52

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1. Cinemania
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1. M. Mac Liammoir, *Put Money in Thy Purse: the Filming of Orson Welles' Othello*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1952

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1. *Apocalypse Now*, 1979, Omni Zoetrope, dir: Francis Ford Coppola
2. *Burden of Dreams*, 1982, Flower Films, dir: Les Blank
3. *Filming Othello*, 1977, dir: Orson Welles
4. *Fitzcarraldo*, 1982, Werner Herzog Filmproduktion, dir: Werner Herzog
5. *Hearts of Darkness: a Filmmaker's Apocalypse*, 1991, Zoetrope, dir: Fax Bahr