

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Lo and Behold 2016

Werner Herzog (1930-)

STORY

An overview of this film will have to begin with a question: is this documentary at the same time a film, part of the history of cinema? We can ask because the genre of highly diversified document pieces, which Herzog fastens together here, forces us to abandon our appetite for both narrative and characterfulness. *Lo and Behold* gives us something different, a compelling set of vignettes from the digital age, but it does not give us a story, properly speaking. It tracks the tendency, in Herzog's work, toward stepping into the odd corners of the actual—think of *Woyzeck* or *Stroszek* or *Kaspar Hauser*; the inner lining of the sociological—while staying on the down to earth level. (When Herzog wants to fly high he lets himself go into *Nosferatu* *Heart of Glass* or an adventure story like *Fitzcarraldo*; he has no limit of registers.) *Lo and Behold*, though, reaches down quite thickly into the mix of ordinariness and fantasy which characterizes our contemporary western mindset, right here and now where we sit, predictably establishing our own argument right off the history Herzog is depositing in our lap.

Opening. A documentary, like a narrative film, must start somewhere, and because that start is not precisely in the imaginative origins of the creator's mind, it starts, in the present instance, with a chronological first, the invention of the computer in the University of Southern California computer labs in 1955. Herzog himself voices in from time to time—he forms his own character as he intervenes, gentle, probing, ironic, all curious—as he interviews—he calls it 'converses with'—various leading figures of the computer intelligentsia that had gathered in Southern California, around the great Universities of Cal Tech, Berkeley, Stanford, and UCLA. We are immersed in the excited atmosphere which Herzog himself reflects—as a shadow on the side of the screen; in which immersion we both learn what actually happened, the making of cumbersome main frames, the anxiety fraught first efforts at contact—with a corresponding signal receiver four hundred miles to the north of the sender—and as the prompter, Herzog, plies the old time professionals with questions, about the atmosphere of their origins, we realize that Herzog himself is the main character, and his name is *Listener*.

Herzog. The hearer, Herzog himself, is the shadowy figure who appears in the left hand corner of the screen at the end of the documentary called *Grizzly*. In that instance Herzog is watching the expressions of Timothy's best friend, as she imagines what Herzog is learning from the tape recording of Timothy's last mortal moments. Though we can only see the ominous profile of the listening director, we experience the whole thrust of the documentary through him, its main character. In the same fashion Herzog distributes his presences and voice ins throughout *Lo and Behold!* The sequence of his interventions, or conversation prompts, would be the best descriptor of the narrative being made in this documentary. It is up to us to follow the stages of conversation, through which Herzog induces us.

Sequence. Our unfolding experience will have to comprehend the following meetings of Herzog with characters: a) Denny Hillis' first person academic account of the early stage of internet use, as well as his account of the finite number of internet users, whose names could be compiled in a single thin 'telephone book'; b) Ted Nelson's highly poetic and personal account of the ebb and flow of wavelengths that constitute the inner movement of internet information, an account at the end of which a half glimpsed Herzog is backing out of the film and at the same conceding inclusion in a selfie Ted is taking; c) Whiz kids of the self-drive automobile industry who introduce a fake-reeling Herzog, heard but not seen, to the culture of driverless cars, a culture including politeness and yielding, skills still only partially embedded in human drivers; d) Adrien Treuille, video gamer and molecular physicist, who takes Herzog through a sense-opening deployment of information bearing wave cycles in nature, calling on Herzog to fascinate us with the ways 'natural forms fold and then unfold' like a shirt; e) a sequence of listeners who turn Herzog into an open source of curiosity and wonder, as he discovers what he would rather not know

about families trolled on internet, harassed around their dead daughter, lethal internet born radio signals, or the visionary internet computations of Elon Musk, who shroud Herzog in exhausted awe.

Takeaway. Herzog has no intention of weakening his awe by overdescribing it. He leaves us struck, as he is, by the ways in which the internet can be expected to continue shaping our lives, and impacting even our values, and our senses of what it is to be human.

THEMES

Technology. Technology is the name of the game here. The early California internet pioneers, whom Herzog converses with, are above all problem solvers, and are in this instance concerned with how to communicate at vast distances and high speeds. The very media of enabling films like Herzog's require the presence of the internet.

Gamesmanship. Videogaming is among the skills displayed by some of the consequential designers of uses for the internet. The imaginative yet mathematically disciplined thinking, that can trigger internet innovation, links closely to the spirit of effective gaming.

Conversation Is the medium in which Herzog conducts the discussions that make up his documentaries. In *Lo and Behold* he moves from one issue or interviewee after another—requiring only the flow continuum to include issues around the internet. As we know, about good conversation, it flows laterally and picks up richness as it flows, like a Platonic dialogue.

Future. The documentary flares toward the future in its confrontation with issues like driverless cars or robotics, as well as in its interaction with Elon Musk, and his advanced notions of future space travel.

CHARACTERS

Werner Herzog is the main character, a listener, a shaper, a responder. He contributes to the documentary a tone of quiet and ironic control, as would the interviewer of a lineage of artistic creators, whose co-presence in the end depended on the interviewer's superior insights.

Denny Hillis takes us back. Here he is, a computer academic from the first mid-20th century days, of the giant main frame and the inimitable sense of discovery. He knows he is a pioneer, working in the UCLA Labs to send the first internet message, to a receiving station 'four hundred miles north.'

Ted Nelson, the internet pioneer who reflects from the experience of water flow over his fingers, is the most articulate spokesperson for interconnectedness; the oneness of humanity, for him, lies at the end of working through the possibilities of the internet.

Elon Musk, the supreme entrepreneur of the future of the net for transportation, glistens before us like a tee-shirted genius, crowning the achievements Herzog has brought us to envisage, but in the end occupying his democratic role among the figures Herzog has allowed into his camera-field.

Main Character. The main character, Werner Herzog, is visible by the manner in which he remains almost invisible, appearing as a profile or receding image that is backing out of the film; or even as a voice tuned in on the film. It is the genius of this director to make his presence actual both by what he constructs through others, and through what he allows to be assumed about his own attitude toward what he traces before him.

Parallels. One might want to shift genres, to find a parallel. How about painting? Doesn't a great painter, like Breughel, Rembrandt, or Seurat emphasize his presence to his canvas by gradually expunging the evidence of that presence, while intensifying the control he exercises over what he has made? Or take Cézanne's Mt. Saint Victoire versions. With each maturing essay, he withdraws his own traits from the work, while leaving his inner or spiritual mark increasingly clear.

Illustrative moments.

Entering. Without seeing him we enter with Herzog into the UCLA sacred computer history lab, where the presence of the former luminaries of the computer world surrounds us. Herzog is already a voice and a shaping presence.

Accepting. When asked for a selfie, by the most laid back of his interlocutors, Herzog accepts while fading backwards out of the scene. His physical presence and his voice have been noted.

Voicing. Herzog regularly addresses his interviewees, interacting with them in speech, and shaping them into the presences they make possible out of themselves.

Discussion questions

What is Herzog's own attitude toward the phenomenon of the internet? He sees some bad consequences of the net—as in the case of the family net-harassed after the death of their daughter. Is he on the whole, and in the final analysis, pro-internet?

What kind of creation is the documentary, for Herzog? Is it a place in which to discover new aspects of the world, or a place where one simply says, *this is it, this is what the world is?*