WERNER HERZOG WRITTEN Q&A

Q: *Dear Werner, I love your films both fiction and documentary, and my question is: How do you manage to work equally brilliantly in both formats? How is the mentality and the approach different when you work in a documentary than in a fiction, and how do you deal with the unexpected aspects of documentary as opposed to fiction when you start from a ready-made script and shot list?* - Tom

A: The borderline between fiction films and documentaries is not very clear in my work. For me, it's all movies. Of course I apply methods of feature filmmaking in documentaries. For example, casting, sometimes rehearsing, stylization, invention. So a lot of things that are normally not considered documentary filmmaking, I put into it. The deep reason for that is, in documentaries, I want to get away from the merely fact-oriented sort of documentaries or away from a form of journalism, which you have in documentaries. I want to have something much deeper.

Vice versa, my documentaries influence my feature films. My best example would be *Fitzcarraldo*, where sometimes, jokingly, I say, "This is my best documentary." Of course, it is not a documentary, but it has elements of a documentary in it. So for Tom, don't be afraid to extend the narrow definitions of documentaries that you see nowadays, and do not be worried about extending, on the other hand, the definition of feature filmmaking.

Q: *Hello Mr. Herzog. I am currently in the middle of reading The Peregrine, and it seems as I read it, that in some ways, it parallels Timothy Treadwell's story, especially in the way that both J.A. Baker and Treadwell seem to identify more with the animal than they do with other pfeople. Is this something that you thought about or perhaps inspired you to make Grizzly Man? Thank you for doing this course, I have been a fan of yours since seeing Nosferatu at age 12.* - John

A: *The Peregrine* I discovered somehow eight or nine years after I did *Grizzly Man*, so there's no influence. You should be careful not to enforce some sort of connections between, let's say, *Grizzly Man* and *The Peregrine. The Peregrine* is basically an attitude. An attitude of keen observation and also immersion in something, in the observation. That of course, comes close to Treadwell.

But both *The Peregrine* and on the other side, Treadwell, *Grizzly Man*, are so complex in their own right that I would be careful to try to construct a connection. *The Peregrine*, of course, is invaluable for the intensity of observation and the intensity of participation in the way that you love what you are observing. So, it is a very, very good piece of literature for those who make films.

Q: *In your opinion, what's the biggest mistake that young, starting documentary makers make?* - Prillevitz

A: The biggest mistake is that they still adhere to a form of journalism. I think documentaries should divorce themselves from journalism. The belief that facts constitute truth is erroneous.

Facts create norms, and truth creates illumination.

Q: *How do you find your stories? At what point do you decide that a story is worth telling through a film?* - Morteza

A: There is no rule for it. But as a storyteller, when something stumbles into me, or I stumble into something, I instantly know this is big. It's so big that I have to do it.

Grizzly Man is a very good example. I was searching for my car keys on a table, not for a story, and the producer shoves an article over to me and says this is a great story we are doing right now, read this. It was an article on Treadwell and the moment I read it, I knew this was so big I had to do it, I had to get into it, and I had to somehow become director of this project, which I eventually did. But there's no rule.

I can only say film projects are like, like burglars coming at me in the middle of the night. And one of them comes with great vehemence at me, and I have to deal with that one right away. So dealing with the project that comes with the biggest vehemence at me.

Q: *In your MasterClass, in Lesson 2, Teach Yourself Storytelling, Watch Films, you refer to the universal rules of filmmaking, but don't specify what they are. Could you expand on what some of the universal rules are? And this is a question that we heard from several students in your class.* - Multiple Students

A: Well, I would need 48 hours to elaborate.

To go into specifics I would say, look at film history in particular, and you will filter it out very easily yourself. And by the way, we should be careful about speaking about rules because we are called upon to challenge the rules and step beyond the rules, but there are a few fundamental things in filmmaking that we should pay attention to and the best way is to look at some of the great films

that are around. You find, for example, quite a few real, real wonderful films at Criterion Collection, and many of them are not Hollywood films. You see films from India, you see films made in France, you see films throughout film history, and that's a very good way to understand the fundamentals of filmmaking.

It's not only that. You just look around, how far filmmakers would step beyond what we normally expect from a documentary for example. *Sans Soleil* by Chris Marker is a wonderful example to see how far somebody expands the rules and definitions of documentary.

Q: *Werner, you say you change your ideas in reaction to event and outside stimulus, but how much are you prepared to deviate? How close is the film we see in the screen to the film you had in your mind?* - Vainen

A: You can never generalize, because you never know what's coming at you. But if, on location, something unexpectedly beautiful, exciting, momentous is coming at you, even though it may not be completely directly connected to what you are doing, keep your windows open, keep your doors open, incorporate it.

For example, the iguanas in *Bad Lieutenant*. They were not in the screenplay, but I saw iguanas in some branches of a tree and I had the feeling they should be in the film. And of course they ended up in the film, and everybody remembers the iguanas in *Bad Lieutenant*.

Q: *Have you ever given up on a documentary when you reached a roadblock, not referring to finance and logistics, but the story and access, during production?* - Tazeen

A: This is not permissible.

A film that you have started, you have to finish it. Not finishing it is the last thing you would ever be allowed to. When you start to make a film, you may abandon it before you start shooting, but when you go into shooting, you better come up with a film.

Q: *How do you pass on your vision of the whole film to the crew and actors? Do you dilute certain details depending on the role of the person? Do you create a unified vision for all participants at the same time? I am very curious.* - Anwar

A: A complicated question because on each set, things are different. The actors, the crew with whom you are dealing is quite different each time, but I do not assemble everyone and speak about my vision. It comes bit by bit, and normally I'm very cautious to say too much. I'm cautious to over explain to actors.

I'm a very good observer, and I would tell them, "No, this doesn't look right", but I do not explain too much. A very good example, it is in the MasterClass, it's how I spoke to Nicholas Cage in *Bad Lieutenant*.

I wouldn't explain much and give them some sort of a very general impulse. Sometimes of course, you have to explain to an actor very, very precisely what you want and what you need, even technical sort of things. There is no general way of approach. However, I'm very cautious of talking too much and over-explaining. It happens quite often on movie sets, that you have the feeling that a director is just speaking way, way, way too much instead of starting shooting.

Q: *Can you give an example where your work was completely misunderstood? In retrospect, would you have made your film differently to avoid such misunderstanding?* - Kamayar

A: I couldn't say a film has been misunderstood. The audience, and I make films for audiences, always has the privilege to understand your film in their specific way. If they laugh, they have a right to laugh. If they see the film in a specific way, it's their privilege. And that's the beauty of film making.

Even Dwarfs Started Small, which was made in the late 60s, today, shown in a federal prison here in the United States, acquired a completely different meaning and shape. And it's wonderful that it can morph into the spirit of an audience locally different. How do they see it in Brazil? How do they see it in a penitentiary? Do they see it 40 years after it was made? So I would not say a film has been misunderstood ever.

Q: *What is your process in working with a film composer? What advice would you give on telling a film composer what you want?* - Alex

A: Normally I start to show some of the earliest footage that I've shot. Something that has a certain significance. For example, I would send to the composer first shots from the desert in Queen of the Desert, and try to explain this is the amount of space that you see here. It's endless space. I want

music that carries a feeling of space. So I'm never completely specific. But normally, I have some elements from a composer beforehand.

I look into recordings made by him or her, and I would say I need something in this, this way. Or I would need something that sounds a little bit like, let's say, Russian Orthodox church choirs. Something of this feeling of sacrality. But it's never too specific. I am with the composer during recordings. And I slow things down, or I would emphasize certain things. It's a very fluid way in which I work with composers.

Q: *When you find yourself stuck in the process of creating a film, what do you do to get unstuck and back in the right frame of mind?* - Alvin

A: I never got stuck.

But, it has happened, for example, writing a screenplay which is always very, very fast. Because I see an entire film. It has happened that I got stuck, for let's say five minutes. I would just force myself, continue writing whatever you see, even if it makes sense in context or not. Just write it down and keep on working. That has given me the possibility to get unstuck but in fact, I never really have been stuck.

Q: *Dear Mr. Herzog, I'm working on a short film I wrote during one of the darkest times of my life. It's been over a year and I'm having a hard time finding a reliable crew. What would you recommend as the bare minimum needed to produce a professional short film?* - Destiny

A: Find a crew in your own area of work. I do not know if she is doing a short film, there must be others around her who are also making short films or documentaries. Don't look for the Oscar-nominated cinematographer. Don't look for this and that. Find them in your neighborhood. Find them, if you are in a film school, find them around there. Look around in your immediate vicinity. Look around people who are, who are doing the same you are doing and start to build them up.

You see a cinematographer may not be the most experienced one. Make them an experienced cinematographer when you are doing the film with the cinematographer.

Q: *Where are the boundaries between fiction and documentary films? When does a documentary stop being such, and when does a feature film acquire enough truth to be considered a documentary?* - Vanja

A: You would find a more specific answer in my book, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, where I do a lot of detailed explanations. Don't worry about this question about documentaries or feature films. Just do whatever you have to do. Don't worry about the boundaries, just look at films that do not seem to accept any boundaries, like Chris Marker and *Sans Soleil*.

Don't worry about categories. Just do what you see in front of you, what has to be done.

Q: *I am in my senior year in college and have just begun the process of applying for film production at a masters program at several universities. I've researched and found that many who go to film programs at a masters level say that in the end, it's not really worth the money. What would you recommend as a self-taught filmmaker? Is film school really that overrated?* - Carlos

A: No, just forget about all these thoughts of grants and programs and scholarships and so. Just roll up your sleeves and make your own film. You waste too much time and too much energy in looking what is available out there. Just do it. Go. Today. There's no excuse.

Because all the equipment that you need is quite inexpensive. You can edit your film on your laptop, just go and do it.

Q: *How do you respond to studios who ask for harmful changes in your film? How do you protect the artistic integrity of your film and vision?* - Evan

A: I have never worked with a studio who would come back with suggestions. But of course, it's a question which is wider. Sometimes, when you have a finished film, a distributor would come and ask everybody if they think the end is way too long, can you do something about it. I would look at my own end and sometimes you get the feeling, if there's such an overwhelming response to a certain element in your film, there might be something which you should do about it without losing your basic integrity. But I hardly have ever done that in my life.

It is a way of doing films and that's one of the basic rules, you make a film for audiences. In some

cases you should listen to the audiences. However, it may be very confusing because each audience might contradict itself so, ultimately, you have to make the choice no matter what a studio or distribution or maybe some test audiences are telling you. It's in you and you have to maintain what you are set out to do. And in many cases I just ignored any attempt at interference.

Q: *Mr. Herzog, I would like to ask you a question about images and the creative process. Often your films contain images that seem to have a profound allegorical meaning. I am thinking of, for example, the monks in Lo and Behold. I think these images have a profound emotional impact on the viewer because their meaning is somewhat obscure, ambiguous. Yet I was wondering whether, while the writing of a script, do you know what this kind of images exactly mean in relation to the topic of your film, or whether you somehow just see them, like in a dream, regardless of any precise significance they may have? Basically, my question is, is it necessary in your opinion, to have a clear idea of the meaning of all the images that come to mind during the creative process in order to convey their power to the audience?* - Lorenzo

A: No, it's better that sometimes you don't know the meaning yourself. You only know there's something powerful in this image that you are just creating. Or that you are just planning. A good example, you mentioned the monks on their cellphones in *Lo and Behold*, it is an image that I didn't even know we had filmed until I was in the editing room.

I sent out my cinematographer after I was done filming in Chicago, in an observatory. When I was done there, I sent the cinematographer and I said, "Please shoot the skyline of Chicago, it's still very early in the morning." And when we got into the car, he said, "Oh yeah, I filmed, and I tried to film without people but I saw some monks and filmed them anyway." So I said, "Fine, yeah, okay." And when I was editing, I discovered that there was something very strange about what the cinematographer very casually had created.

And I had the feeling there was something big in it. And I started to create a text with it. And only the image, with this specific text, gives it this kind of very mysterious meaning and mysterious ambivalence. And don't forget, I added "Are You Lonesome Tonight" by Elvis. So sometimes you find it, sometimes you organize it. You have to develop a sense for what makes an image mysterious and powerful. I cannot teach you the specifics of it.

Q: *When do you find the essence of the film you envision reveals itself to you? During writing, shooting, editing, or throughout the entire process?* - Bill

A: Oh, it's throughout the entire process. Filming, writing, and editing, and shooting, it's all a very fluid process. And you do have some sort of a light in the distance and you are trying to follow it. But of course, keep yourself mobile. Keep yourself flexible, otherwise you will only create a stillborn baby.

Q: *What would your solution be if an actor, the lead perhaps, dropped out of a project, or even died after filming has already started?* - Django

A: There's no direct answer to it because it depends how important the part of the actor in the film was. Let's say, if the actor dies, of course it's awful, you should try to film, continue filming anyway and change the screenplay or change some dialogues in a way that it can absorb this loss and can absorb the gap. You have to be intelligent.

If your leading character drops out, what happened to me in *Fitzcarraldo*, Jason Robards fell ill after half the film was shot. I had to start all over again from the very first day of shooting until I had finished the film with a different actor. So that's a terrible thing that can happen, and you have to cope with it, with anything that's thrown at you. You have to deal with it.

Q: *Mr. Herzog, I am a first year film student, and I've recently just completed a short film project where the production itself was almost literal hell. There were many problems in production, mostly due to inner conflict between the crew, cast, and the director. I had conflict with the director previously and tried to avoid conflict by being highly non-confrontational and so did the rest of the crew. The end film was awful, and I think that it was because I tried to avoid it. So my question is, what kind of attitude should one have during a production in a conflict? Should I have undermined the director's authority by challenging it when I think it is wrong? What if it were to hurt morale?* -Timothy

A: There's, of course, no straight answer to that. It depends on the nature of the conflict. But I have solved conflicts always by listening well to others, but there may be 15 different opinions on this matter. So you have to rely on yourself in such a case. Keep yourself open to listening to crew members and keep yourself open to listening to actors.

If you have a deep basic vision, that will always somehow prevail. If you're very clear about what you want to do, you can explain it, and you will somehow transform it into a film no matter what, whether you have differences of opinion on your set.

WERNER HERZOG WRITTEN Q&A

Q: *Soon after starting the The Peregrine writing exercise in your MasterClass, I found myself locked alone in my bedroom due to a faulty doorknob. In the time it took to get out, I spent two hours writing about locking mechanisms, something I didn't really understand until I was kept away from the world by one. So my question is, do you write to understand or do you write to explain?* - Geoff

A: That's a very deep question. But I have to say on the outset, the exercise itself was not my invention. It was those who, who organize and create the MasterClass. However, the question is a very fine one.

You should take time to scribble down things. Don't try to imitate any other style or any other things, but write down sometimes even if it's a single word that fascinates you. Sometimes it's a sentence you read and you kind of modify the sentence and it keeps lingering in your mind and it keeps lingering in your notebook. And all of a sudden, years later, these things might become activated. So there's a value in writing, even though there's no absolute necessity right away to do it. The necessity may come later on for the sake of something much bigger.

But your experience is an interesting one. Keep on doing that.

Q: *Mr. Herzog, your films look deep into the heart and lives of the people that appear. The perspectives are often revealing. How do you establish trust among actors and documentary subjects?* - Owen

A: I think you have to deeply respect the person with whom you are dealing. And that means including someone on death row. For example, in my death row series, even though I'm not on camera, even though I'm behind the camera, I wear a formal suit and a tie. I never do that in normal life, I just want to show I respect you and I respect your situation. You have to know the heart of men. And find the right way to communicate. You have to find the right language to speak with someone.

It's one of the keys for making a film that has some depth. You have to find a deep connection with the people who are in front of your camera. With actors, it's easy to explain, there are no stars on my set for example, Christian Bale knew there's no stars in my movies. No star behavior, however everyone who steps in front of my camera is royalty.

I keep repeating that. Treat the people in front of your camera as royalty, including people in front of your documentary camera.

WERNER HERZOG WRITTEN Q&A

Q: *How important is language for you in making documentary cinema? Would you prefer the subject to speak in their native tongue during an interview, or do you have it in English to appeal to larger audiences?* - Ramon

A: I think normally a person should speak in his or her native tongue. You can see that in my last documentary which is just out on Netflix, it's called *Into the Inferno*.

I'm speaking to some tribal chiefs in the Vanuatu Archipelago in the Southwestern Pacific, and they speak in their language, and at the same time, I have a translator who simultaneously translates. Or I have scientists in North Korea and they speak Korean. Everything that's really important, have them speak in their native tongue. No matter whether your film is going to be released in let's say a widely understood language like English.

Q: *Have you ever had a project so deeply woven into your own being that it took time to gain the proper vantage point for telling it?* - Scott

A: Yes, it happens all the time. A good example would be my first long feature film, *Signs of Life*. As a 16-year-old, I had seen a valley with 10,000 windmills, which looked completely like a science fiction fantasy. But these windmills actually existed on the island of Crete and this image was deeply disturbing me and was dormant in me then for a long long time.

Eight years later, I made my first long feature film, and this image became the central pivot, the central visual metaphor in my film. So it was deeply interwoven with my own memories and with my own feelings. Can it be true that there are 10,000 windmills spinning like a field of crazed flowers? So yes, I absorbed many things and they become interwoven, and then sometimes, decades later, they spill out into a coherent story I didn't have before.

Q: *When releasing a new film, how do you deal with the press?* - Rafa

A: It is part of my duty because a film has to be brought from the filmmaker to an audience. And it's the media in between who do that. I do not like it at all, but I have discipline enough to take it seriously, and I do my job. I do my duty.

Q: *How exactly do you plan and script your questions which you ask your interview partners when you're filming?* - Alexandra

A: I never script anything. I am not a journalist. Again, I try to quickly understand the depth of the soul of somebody who is in front of me, but I never come prepared with a questionnaire.

And understanding things conceptually is very important. For example, you may need to understand a scientist who is into creating artificial intelligence, or a hacker on the internet. You have to deeply understand what they are doing. Not in technical terms, but conceptually. So it comes easily to me to understand conceptual things. And to do the right thing with the person in front of my camera.

Q: *When selecting literature and other works to read, listen to, etc, for inspiration, what should we be looking for? I do know there is a great deal of garbage out there. Thank you.* - Bryan

A: I leave it completely up to you, but look into the kind of literature that has stood the test of time. Be it Roman or Greek antiquity or be it the great novels of Russia at the end of the 19th century, anything. It's up to you, just stay curious.

And there's one thing that happens to me, whenever I read a book, I think, sometimes, you have the feeling, the pile of books is becoming smaller. No, it doesn't, with each book I read, the pile of unread books becomes even larger. So don't worry about it. Stay curious, make your choices, make your intelligent, educated choices.

Q: *When making films do you ever deal with perfectionism from others or yourself that affect the film? How do you deal with it?* - Alonna

A: It's a difficult question because number one, I do not like this kind of soulless perfectionism. I do not allow it on my set. Sometimes you need a certain amount of perfectionism. I would accept it from certain situations or from certain collaborators, if the perfectionism serves an essential goal. Otherwise, beware of the perfectionist.

Q: *Do you think it is normal to feel disappointment about making films when you realize that you can't make a living out of it? What do you think if you realize you cannot sustain your lifestyle by making films? Do you continue?* - Carla

A: I would say yes, continue. If there is a deep urgency in you to make films, but if you can't make a living with it and you are not the only one, try to find some sort of a basis where you can survive. Where you can pay the rent. And it doesn't have to be something related to filmmaking, what you are doing. I don't know. Go into education. Go into something practical. Become a homicide detective or whatever. Anything. But don't stop making your films if they are really important for you.

Q: *How do you think about casting in the filmmaking process? What do you see in an actor or actress when you choose him or her to be in your film?* - Ashley

A: Casting is essential for feature films. Even for documentaries. I do casting in documentaries and you can see it very well, for example, *Into the Abyss*. Or you can see it in a film like *On the Internet, Lo and Behold*. It's one of these essential things of filmmaking. Develop an eye for it. You have to take a very, very good look at somebody. Is he or she good on a screen? You see sometimes, people are completely impressive, or a woman may be absolutely beautiful, and on a screen completely meaningless and nothing comes across. And vice versa.

You have to learn it. You have to do it as an almost daily mental exercise. Meeting strangers. Would this stranger be good on your screen or not. Even though you are not planning a film right now. Look how casting is done sometimes in big films. In big films of the industry it happens, there's no chemistry between the actors, so it's not just a single person, you always have to look out for chemistry. How do they interact? How do they create some sort of a climate? Excitement, suspense, you just name it.

Extremely important and do not overlook the importance of casting in your documentaries.

Q: *Hi Werner, I'm a young filmmaker about to embark on a journey traveling across Europe to find my voice as a storyteller and grow as a human being. What would your advice be to filmmakers trying to find their voices?* - Daniel

A: If you are traveling across Europe, try to do good parts of it on foot. That will, that will give you a huge amount of inner orientation.

Q: *How do you come up with projects that stand out amidst a sea of monotonous and redundant Hollywood blockbusters?* - Joshua

A: Well you will inevitably find your own vision, your own relationship to what is going on in the industry. If you do not like the standardization of stories in the Hollywood blockbusters, become imaginative, and do your own things and just do something that is better than the blockbusters.

Q: *Has there been any recent films that impressed you so much that you wished you had made them yourself? Or any contemporary directors whom you have learned a lot from?* - Fred

A: No, not that I would have liked to do them myself, but there's a wonderful example, *The Act of Killing* by Joshua Oppenheimer. I was so deeply impressed by the first materials I saw that I accepted the role of an executive producer, which I did with great, with great pride. And this is a film, when you look at, in particular, the director's cut, this is a film you don't see in the next 25 years again. It's so intense and such an incredible accomplishment. Not that I envy Joshua. I am proud that I could somehow be of some help.

Q: *Have you ever been in a situation where your emotions take over your professionalism? What would you recommend if that happens to a filmmaker experiencing it for the first time during an interview for a documentary?* - Leslie

A: You have to stay professional. Your set is a no-cry zone. You have to be disciplined, you have to perform the role. However it has happened to me like in the series of films on death row.

After eight films, I wake up in the middle of the night because I hear somebody screaming, and I notice it was me screaming, and waking up. So that was a moment where I immediately knew, you are not going to continue this series, although I had offers to make another four films. And I went to the phone and I said, "No, this is not gonna happen." There's such a thing like an economy with your own emotions. You have to be economical with your own existence, and with your own emotions.

Q: *Do you have any other words of advice that you'd like to give students?*

A: Best of luck to all of you.