

# Tales from Antarctica

FILM

Werner Herzog has always been interested in extreme environments, and in the relationship between man and nature. In *Encounters at the End of the World*, Herzog finds a new way to look at the Antarctic, finding insights in the stories of the people who live there, and showing us beauty in

unexpected places.

With equal measures of wit and curiosity, Herzog interviews some of the people working in this remote corner of the globe. Among the glaciologists and biologists, we meet a philosopher-turned-forklift-driver, a linguist-turned-gardener and a plumber of royal descent.

First stop is the town of McMurdo, the heart of the US Antarctic programme, and home to a thousand or so people. Full of construction sites and forklift trucks, this rather bleak and muddy town is a far cry from the images of Antarctica we are used to seeing on television. But the drabness of the place belies the extreme likeability of the characters that live there.

One such inhabitant — a part-Apache plumber — has immense pride in his fingers. Once told by an anthropologist that these are the hands of Aztec royalty, he holds them up — again and again — for the camera to see. Unfortunately, he doesn't explain what is unique about them.

Another resident, an East European mechanic, lived most of his life like a prisoner behind the Iron Curtain. Choked back with emotion, he is unable to talk about his life then. Instead, he shows us the contents of his rucksack, which he keeps packed at all times, always ready to escape or to go on new adventures and explore new horizons.

Outside McMurdo we meet the scientists. Particularly moving is an encounter with a cell biologist on mainland Antarctica. The biologist, who is about to embark on his last dive into the Southern Ocean, sits pensively, preparing himself for his final encounter with this underwater world. When drawn into conversation by Herzog, he muses on the unexpected violence and horrors of that hidden world. The creatures he describes are like something out of a science fiction novel. One uses its tentacles to ensnare its prey — the more the prey struggles, the tighter the tentacles grow. Eventually



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the victim exhausts itself and the creature moves in for the kill. The camera follows him on his dive; rather than terrifying, it is hauntingly beautiful.

Another touching moment is Herzog's meeting with a penguin specialist; a reclusive man who has been studying these creatures for 20 years. Although not forthcoming when it comes to human interaction, he breaks into a smile when Herzog probes him on the subject of gay penguins, and expounds with great amusement on the dynamics of penguin prostitution.

Watching the film, it becomes clear that there must be something very special about Herzog's manner that allows people to interact with him in an achingly honest and open way. But he doesn't pander to the frivolous or self-indulgent. So when a traveller talks in painstaking detail about her experiences in a garbage truck in Africa, her voice fades out and we hear Herzog — in his soft, affable way — "her story goes on forever".

But it's not just the people that capture your attention. Although Herzog didn't want to make a film about fluffy penguins, one of the most heart-breaking scenes is when a penguin — faced with the decision of whether to follow his companions to the water's edge or back to the colony — shuffles round in a circle and then heads straight for the mountains and the interior of

Antarctica. Watching the penguin waddle to its death, you will them to interject. But, as our narrator explains, it wouldn't make a difference — its mind is made up.

Herzog uses these small stories as a way in to the majesty, epic scale and strangeness of Antarctica. As he intersperses personal tales with footage of towering ice cliffs, and icy underwater scenes of colossal beauty, you understand the tremendous — and contagious — reverence Herzog has for this place.

The topic of climate change is scarcely touched upon directly, but the theme of human fragility and destruction runs right through. From the apocalyptic films the researchers watch in their spare time to a volcanologist's words of warning about the planet's catastrophic past, it is hard to escape. One researcher says that in his dreams he can hear the iceberg "screaming, this iceberg is coming north".

In the final scene, the philosopher-turned-forklift-driver quotes Alan Watts, "we are the witnesses through which the universe becomes conscious of its glory". Perhaps Herzog shows us a touch of this glory here.

## ANNA ARMSTRONG

*Encounters at the End of the World* by Werner Herzog, Discovery Films: 2007. UK release date: 24 April 2009.