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WERNER HERZOG HAS moved from images to messages, and the change isn't for the better. **Where the Green Ants Dream** pits Australian aborigines against a company mining for uranium: In particular, a tribe blocks Ayers Mining's work because it threatens to disturb the green ants' dreaming grounds. During the course of the battle, a company geologist on the scene is gradually won over by the natives. That's the message.

Where the Green Ants Dream touches on many familiar Herzog themes: the futility of Western expansion (*Aguirre*), apocalypse (*La Soufriere*), flight (*The Great Ecstasy of the Sculptor Steiner*), anti-modernity and isolation (*Kaspar Hauser* and *Stroszek*). Herzog also incorporates some documentary elements into the film. And as in so many of his movies, the forbidding setting almost becomes a character in its own right.

But the greatest strength of Herzog's earlier movies was their eerily compelling visuals: a valley filled with ten thousand turning windmills in his first feature, *Signs of Life* (1967), an overhead shot circling Aguirre's tiny raft with its load of dead humans and triumphant monkeys (1972), and encaged animals ("Fire Chief Rabbit," "Piano Playing Chicken") at the amusement park where *Stroszek's* title character (1977) commits suicide on a ferris wheel.

And linking these images were studies of individuals whose extreme loneliness lent them strange intensity. Kaspar Hauser grew up

chained in a basement and deprived of all human contact, but when released into human society he looks back on his captivity as freedom. Aguirre proclaims his grand ambition to found a new race even as, in the final scene, the monkeys overrun the raft on which he is the only person still alive. Though critics have taken *Aguirre* as a condemnation of that mad would-be monarch's imperialist designs, I suspect that Herzog was rather attracted to Aguirre's insane certainty that mere reality wouldn't stand in the way of his inner vision.

In *Green Ants*, though, Herzog's fascination with possessed loners gives way to a sentimental support for endangered civilizations. Sentimental not because the cause isn't necessarily just, but because the movie never makes it convincing. Ironically, Herzog was at his best when he defended the indefensible. Now that he has discovered "causes" (his *Ballad of the Little Soldier*, which I haven't seen, backs Nicaragua's Miskito contras), his unique perspective seems to be giving way to cliché.

Green Ants tries to persuade the audience by means of its geologist's conversion to the aborigines' world view. But Lance Hackett's transformation is never believable. Perhaps it is just too verbal. In the film, one character compares another to someone rushing to the back of a train that's heading for an abyss. Someone speculates that the expanding universe is curved back upon itself: the stars that seem to be speeding away from us are about to round the bend and come crashing back. An aborigine explains that a mute companion is one tribe's sole survivor and that he speaks a language no one any longer understands.

In this movie, Herzog's visual metaphor for a stalled Western civilization is a stuck elevator. But a stuck elevator gives us nothing to look at. Herzog needs to go back to showing more and telling less. ■

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