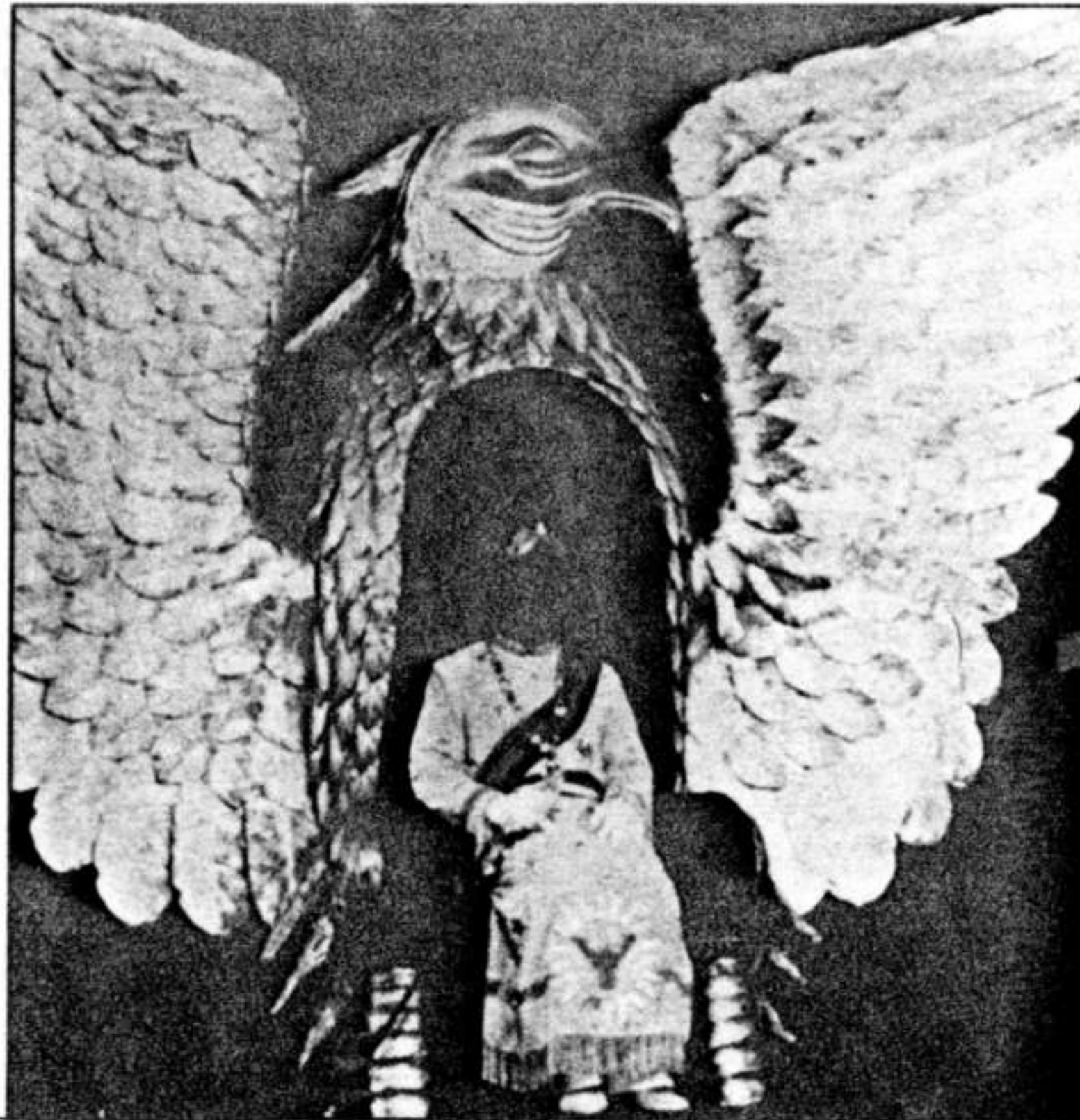


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ECHOES FROM A SOMBER EMPIRE

A calm look at madness, Werner Herzog's nightmarish documentary traces the grim legacy of Jean Bedel Bokassa, a lesser known counterpart of such modern despots as Idi Amin, Shah Reza Pahlavi, and Saddam Hussein. Ruler of the Central African Republic from 1966 to 1979, Bokassa instituted a regime of murder and torture, drained the national economy in ludicrous extravagance, fathered over 50 children, crowned himself emperor, and reputedly ate several of his enemies. Serving as our tour guide through this backwater of hell is Michael Goldsmith, a journalist who was imprisoned and tortured by Bokassa. As he interviews Bokassa's wives, children, and surviving victims, Goldsmith sets a tone of quiet amazement, as if he were still struggling to believe what happened. Astonishing archival footage of the grotesque pomp of Bokassa's "Empire" has the distanced, hallucinatory quality of a bad dream. In the present, Goldsmith finds surreal, scattered artifacts: a massive iron statue rusting in the grass, a freezer allegedly used to store human comestibles, and a dilapidated zoo where people were once fed to lions and crocodiles. This Kurtzian horror is viewed with eerie calmness but not indifference. Without preaching, the film makes it clear that such figures as Bokassa are abominable perversions of nature – a point underscored by two of the most powerful and haunting passages of Herzog's career: an opening vision of orange crabs teeming over the earth, and a final, overwhelmingly sad image of a trained chimpanzee smoking a cigarette in the ruins of the tyrant's zoo.

Germany/France, 1992. 91 mins. Color.
In French with English subtitles.

Rental: Apply.

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