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PELICULA O MUERTO (FILM OR DEATH)

A Proposal By Les Blank For A Documentary Film On The
Making of Werner Herzog's New Feature, FITZCARRALDO

In early 1981, famed German filmmaker Werner Herzog will begin shooting his latest film, a controversial and daring project called FITZCARRALDO, in the midst of the rainy season in the remote Peruvian Amazon jungle. The film stars Warren *Klaus Kinski* Oates, Claudia Cardinale and Mick Jagger. The filming of FITZCARRALDO may be even more challenging than the historical event that inspired Herzog's script: moving a 650-ton steamship overland (up one side of a steep mountain and down the other) by 900 Indians to gain access to a parallel river. This amazing feat was actually accomplished around the turn of the century, under the command of an infamous rubber baron. Herzog's fictionalized Fitzcarraldo, an ambitious Irishman with fantasies of building an elegant opera house in Iquitos (at the confluence of the Amazon and two other jungle rivers), schemes to move a steamship overland in order to bypass the perilous rapids that have prevented successful exploitation of rubber resources deep in the jungle.

It is not surprising that Herzog wishes to take on this perilous challenge, involving elaborate engineering feats and the surmounting of enormous obstacles due to the remote location and the hazards of the rainy season. In some ways, he seems most deeply attracted to projects that force him to risk his life for his art--as if he believed that only in the crucible of mortal danger could the purest art be forged. Herzog has already established himself as an original, energetic director with films like THE MYSTERY OF KASPER HAUSER, STROSZEK, AGUIRRE THE WRATH OF GOD (also shot in Peru) and, most recently, NOSFERATU and WOYZECK. His films have a strong following in the United States and Europe, and he is widely acknowledged by critics and audiences alike to have earned a place at the cutting edge of new cinema art, especially for his insistence on the necessity for "fresh images."

But in addition to his artistic credentials, there is another dimension to his growing legend. With each film come horrifying stories of harrowing risks and adventuresome escapades. There's the time he swore to jump into a cactus bush at the conclusion of EVEN DWARFS STARTED SMALL, after one of the dwarfs was hit by a driverless car running in circles; Herzog fulfilled his promise at the completion of the picture, and still has cactus needles lodged in his knee cartilage. In order to shoot his extraordinary

documentary on an erupting volcano, LA SOUFFRIÈRE, Herzog and a tiny crew ventured right up to the perking cauldron and resigned themselves to death. (The rest of the town had been totally evacuated in anticipation of the "inevitable catastrophe" which, fortunately for Herzog and crew, turned out to be less inevitable than advertised.) And during the recent shooting of NOSFERATU in Holland, Herzog threw himself directly into the path of a bulldozer attacking the film set. (The dozer was dramatizing the townpeople's objection to Herzog's plan to release thousands of rats into the city streets.)

FITZCARRALDO promises no fewer dangers. Aside from obvious physical perils, there have been a series of painful disputes with the Indians, about which international press reports have created much curiosity. The reports derived from the production company's difficulties in negotiating with the Aguaruna Indians who live in the territory where part of FITZCARRALDO was to have been shot. Although Herzog had a contract with the Aguarunas' leaders, a splinter group contested the agreement and, armed with guns, burned the film camp to the ground at a cost of \$60,000. (It has lately been revealed that the rebel leader is employed by an oil company as a labor contractor, which may explain the intensity of his displeasure--since Herzog had contracted for all the available labor in the area.) Herzog now has a new location, and firm agreements with the tribes on whose land he will be filming.

For several years, Herzog has considered Les Blank to be "the best documentary filmmaker in the world." Blank is equally impressed with the body of Herzog's work, so it was not surprising that Herzog agreed to Blank making a short film last year, WERNER HERZOG EATS HIS SHOE. Herzog was so pleased with the result that he invited Blank to begin a documentary on the making of FITZCARRALDO--an independent film, not a paid promo documentary. Blank was intrigued; he felt that such a film offered the possibility of raising normally-abstract artistic and political questions in highly concrete terms--and he spent the month of October, 1979, in Peru, with Maureen Gosling, his sound-recordist and associate of seven years. They stayed four weeks and shot six hours of film, including footage of the crew at work, "anthropological" background material in various tiny river towns, and several extraordinary interviews (in English) with Herzog, in which the German filmmaker addressed himself to questions of cultural imperialism and well-meaning artistic aggression with astonishing honesty and sensitivity. Assuming that necessary funding is available, Blank will return to Peru early in 1981 to complete several more months of filming as Herzog's picture is actually shot.

Blank feels that PELICULA O MUERTO will be of particular interest to the PBS audience, since it will explore important (and rarely-touched) theoretical questions about cultural imperialism and artistic exploitation in concrete terms, rendering them more easily understandable. Are visiting artists any different from exploitive capitalists? Is Herzog's compulsive brand of cinematic authoritarianism distinguishable from colonialism? Given the best intentions, is it possible to bring a high-tech, big-budget film crew into contact with "backward" people without cruel exploitation? What if the "backward" people are wearing John Travolta t-shirts? These are the kinds of questions that should intrigue the PBS audience.

Nor are these political-aesthetic issues the only interesting questions worth raising. Herzog's willingness to risk his life for art may be admirable (it's certainly in the grand, Romantic tradition), but how far can he go in risking the lives of others--superstar actors, salaried crew-members, Indian extras--before his obsession creeps uncomfortably close to madness? The critical issue at the heart of PELICULA O MUERTO is simply: What is the value of art? Is it worth a human life? Herzog is quite sensitive to these complicated issues, and will speak to them--but PELICULA O MUERTO offers the unprecedented opportunity to see these ideas in physical conflict. Are the risks and energies spent for a film like FITZCARRALDO worth it--and to whom? PELICULA O MUERTO will be an adventure film in the best sense of the word--an intellectual adventure set in the midst of great physical danger.

Blank will shoot from January to April, 1981. Editing will take place between May and September, 1981. The first answer print will be ready October 15, 1981. The crew will consist of Blank as director and cameraperson, Maureen Gosling as assistant director and second camera, and Academy Award-winning sound technician Mark Berger as sound recordist and interpreter in Spanish and German. The film will be shot in 16mm.

Les Blank is a prize-winning documentary filmmaker whose films have been gathering wide praise and growing audiences for more than ten years. His New Orleans documentary, ALWAYS FOR PLEASURE, was broadcast nationwide over the PBS network in 1979; two more films of his, CHULAS FRONTERAS (on Tex-Mex border culture) and SPEND IT ALL (on the Cajuns of southern Louisiana) will be broadcast over PBS in Spring, 1981, as part of the Southbound series. GARLIC IS AS GOOD AS TEN MOTHERS, by Blank with Maureen Gosling, was broadcast in 1980 over ZDF national network in West Germany on Eckart Stein's program. HOT PEPPER, A WELL SPENT LIFE, CHULAS FRONTERAS, and ALWAYS FOR PLEASURE were broadcast in West Germany over WDR in three regions.