

Document Citation

Title	Balancing dreams: the burden of Les Blank
Author(s)	Les Blank Deborah K. Lazaroff
Source	<i>City Arts Monthly</i>
Date	1982 Dec
Type	interview
Language	English
Pagination	17
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Herzog, Werner (1942), Munich, Germany Blank, Les (1935), Tampa, Florida, United States
Film Subjects	Burden of dreams, Blank, Les, 1982 Fitzcarraldo, Herzog, Werner, 1982

BY DEBORAH K LAZAROFF

Les Blank is an 'intimist'; the internationally known Bay Area documentary filmmaker has an acute and perceptive eye for intimate detail. Blank's films appear deceptively simple in their straightforward style. But films like Garlic Is As Good As Ten Mothers and Always For Pleasure are complex, sympathetic and intelligent accounts of humankind and the often unrecognized and unappreciated minutiae that define a culture.

Blank's most recent film, Burden of Dreams, is a look at a man's collision with a culture: the subject matter is Werner Herzog's filming of Fitzcarraldo in the jungles of Peru. Like all other Les Blank films, Burden of Dreams has several rewarding, revelatory moments. During Herzog's impassioned harangue against the 'obscenities' of the jungle the camera moves in on a tiny green tendril of jungle foliage that bobs up and down in sensuous (and mischievous) counterpoint. It's images like these that make Les Blank's films experiences worth relishing.

Our interview took place in the stock room of Blank's Flower Films warehouse in El Cerrito. Accompanying him was Maureen Gosling, fellow traveler to the jungles of Peru, film editor of all of Blank's productions, and vocal counterpart to Blank's usually reticent manner.

our films.

Maureen Gosling: It's not a blatant point of view.

CAM: When you've completed a film and you've been very involved with the subject, do you find you can immediately distance yourself from it and view it in a different way than perhaps you were viewing it while in production?

LB: No, because the film is so hard to make and I'll work at it over and over for a long time until, from my point of view, it's the film I wanted to make. And it stays that way forever. I don't regret anything in the films I've made.

CAM: You don't ever change your opinion that it was bad or good or...?

LB: Or off the mark?

CAM: Or off the mark, but perhaps you might see things that you didn't see while you were making the film. Something new comes up, some new question, some new motif comes into your mind after seeing it again.

LB: (To Maureen) Do you?

MG: No, a couple of things usually in editing; you're really close to it. Some of the things that surprise people, or make people laugh or get annoyed or whatever in the film, get to be old hat after a while. You get so used to it that it doesn't surprise you anymore. The jungle speech in *Burden of Dreams*, for example; I can see why people react to

Angeles *Times* describing the screening at the Telluride Film Festival the reaction was very negative towards Herzog. Your letter to the *Times*, which was printed shortly afterwards, was a defense of Herzog and stated that what was screened was incomplete. Did you screen a rough cut at Telluride?

LB: Not really. It was just a selection of unedited footage. We probably took a risk because we showed footage that was out of context, and it was possibly inflammatory material that people would respond to. Because of the power of film editing and of the lack of film editing, people can get the wrong idea. When Werner Herzog was confronted by a woman crying because she thought her son was going to be killed—a scene which Maureen pulled out of the footage and clipped before Herzog put his arms around her and consoled her—people thought Herzog was heartless and didn't care about human suffering. But when we put the scene back in where he touches her, everything was okay.

CAM: But is that something you regret? Would you take that chance again, showing unedited footage, or would you try to put the film more in semblance of what you wanted it to be before you screened it?

LB: If it's a situation like that where it's

easily been wasted here in San Francisco at our labs and sound recording studios by screwing up. But Herzog of course chopped down trees and built that slash through the jungle that I found disturbing. The scene in *Fitzcarraldo* where they chopped down this gigantic tree was really painful to watch. It was done just for the effect. That I have trouble with.

CAM: Yes. There was something very disturbing in your helicopter shot of that huge gash that looked like it had been burned through the hill. Herzog was saying that he didn't want industry to come in and disturb this environment, and yet he and his crew were a sort of 'industry' and were disturbing the environment.

LB: I would hope that the film could serve as a catalyst to bring attention to the Amazon, to find out what the oil companies and lumber companies are doing. What Herzog is doing is just a pinpoint; that land is being destroyed at the equivalent of the state of Massachusetts or Israel every month, and in thirty years it will all be gone. That's what's important, not what Herzog did. He's just a good example of this destruction on a small scale.

CAM: So you believe he represented a microcosm of a much larger form of destruction. Was that your intent, to present that microcosm, or did you just discover that afterwards?

LB: Well, while I was there I could see it happening. All the same, Herzog was a gentle microcosm. He wasn't ruthless.

CAM: One of your upcoming projects is a film about gap-toothed women. With such subject matter, you seem to be touching on something more subtle about culture than food or music. Do you think you're moving a little more in that direction, towards dealing with little subtleties to determine how people respond to things?

LB: I don't know. I film what interests me, and worry about analyzing it later. When I did *Garlic is as Good as Ten Mothers* I wasn't trying to do a film on American subculture or however anthropologists have referred to it. That's a trouble I have with all the anthropological and folklore filmmakers. They want the filmmaker to have a preconception or theory and go ahead and prove it in the process of making the film.

CAM: When you say you work with things you're interested in, what makes you interested? Do you suddenly see something? Perhaps you don't consciously go out and look for subjects. Perhaps they come to you.

LB: Sometimes they do, like the Mexican films. The garlic film came to me because of my interest in Alice Waters and fondness for her. The film was an excuse to stay longer in her kitchen. It didn't really start out as a film but as a short subject, and just kept growing and growing. The Cajun film was my own inspiration. I was living in Louisiana and liked the music a lot, and wanted to know more about the people. But I'm more interested in making a film than making a film about gap-toothed women, for example. I'm just hoping that it will become an interesting film.

It is difficult to determine how much of Les Blank's opinion of Werner Herzog's actions in Peru is colored by his personal fondness for the man. It is perhaps sufficient to point out that although Les Blank may make harsh judgments in his films he does not allow those judgments to become condemnations. As he's pointed out himself, Les Blank the man is virtually inseparable from Les Blank the filmmaker; he prefers to keep an open mind when examining the eccentricities of people and their cultures. On the whole, it's perhaps the most simple and essential philosophy a documentary filmmaker, indeed any artist, should have.



BALANCING DREAMS

The Burden of Les Blank

it, but I've seen it so many times now that it isn't fresh anymore.

However, in a way there is a difference in looking at the film in our little closed studio and then suddenly releasing it out into the public. It's really a thrill when you realize that the connections are being made that you want to get across. Of course audiences are different, some of them don't get it, some of them do.

CAM: I wanted to ask you both about audience response to this film. When I saw the film I was with an audience that was laughing uproariously at Herzog's jungle speech, and because it was a collective experience I was laughing along with them. But I wonder if I had been in an audience that was in complete agreement with Herzog if I might have responded differently. Did you intend that laughter to be there or did you just want to present it and see the response?

LB: When I screened it at the Pacific Film Archive before it was released, we found the laughter and we worked on it. We showed it again and we got it to the point where we felt the balance was right.

CAM: You wanted to balance the laughter at that scene, not make it just an absurdity.

LB: Yes. It's extremely difficult to balance all that and maintain the right tension in the right places.

CAM: I could imagine it would be with a film like this, where it could be so easy to go off the deep end because there is so much absurdity in the situation.

LB: And tragedy.

CAM: And tragedy. Definitely. When the article was published in the Los

strong material that could considerably damage both me and the subject, I would edit it. Now that it's all over I'm actually kind of glad it happened because it got lots of people talking about the film and a documentary needs all the help it can get.

CAM: Was Herzog one of the more difficult people that you've worked with?

LB: No, he was the easiest by far. He's so flamboyant and outrageous and articulate and eloquent in what he says that he's interesting; also very cooperative. Whenever I asked him for an interview he would give me one, he wouldn't say well, okay, but *hurry*. He respected me as a filmmaker.

CAM: The example that Herzog presents in the film is of someone completely obsessed—at the expense of all else—with just completing a film and being a filmmaker. Do you see yourself as really obsessed with filmmaking? Does it take a tremendous amount of your life? Do you think there are things that are more important?

LB: It's such a part of my life it's hard to separate where one stops and the other starts. I go to film festivals and that's my vacation and my travel and my fun, but it's still dealing with film. I can't escape it.

CAM: Watching Herzog in the film, there seemed to be a lot of waste, of human and other resources: Do you believe that is a prerogative of all filmmaking, that a lot of people and things will and must be used and discarded? Or does this apply only to Herzog's filmmaking?

LB: I don't think we waste resources. We waste a lot of money when we get down to the end. Thousands of dollars have

City Arts Monthly: Your choice of subjects has been primarily American folklore and culture, but your most recent film, *Burden of Dreams*, about Werner Herzog filming *Fitzcarraldo*, is quite a change of pace. Why did you choose to do that film?

Les Blank: I make films on subjects that interest me. It just happened that the folklore films seemed to follow one after the other. The garlic film could be called contemporary folklore, or urban folklore. Herzog to me is just one more thing that's going on in the world. I got to know him and he struck me as an interesting person.

CAM: Did you meet him first through filming *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe*?

LB: No, I met him in 1975 when he came over to Berkeley to show *Kasper Hauser*, and he saw my film *Spend It All* and liked it, and we've maintained the dialogue ever since.

CAM: What do you think is the extent of editorializing in this form of film making? Do you think that something happens while you're shooting the film or does something go on in the editing room?

LB: It's in both places. It's a balance between telling our story and then telling facts that we feel people need to be told, and putting over a point of view. A lot of people think there's no point of view in