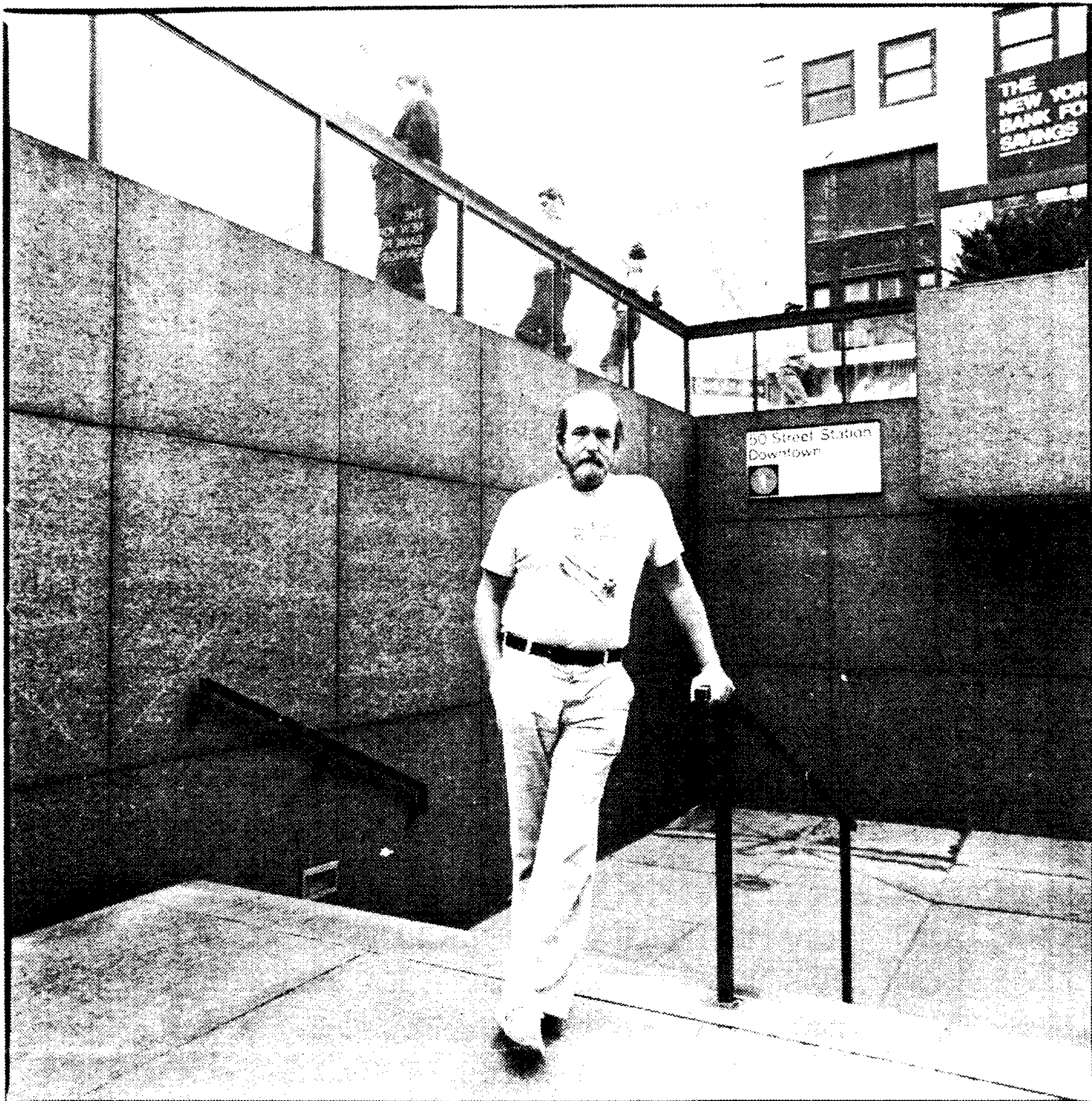


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Les Blank: His *Burden of Dreams* is *Fitzcarraldo*'s best defense.

Monster Movies

By J. Hoberman

BURDEN OF DREAMS. Photographed and directed by Les Blank. Recorded and edited by Maureen Gosling. Released by Flower Films. At the Waverly I.

HEY GOOD LOOKIN'. Written, produced, and directed by Ralph Bakshi. Released by Warner Bros. Opens October 1 at the Manhattan I and Murray Hill.

FORBIDDEN WORLD. Directed and edited by Allan Holzman. Written by Tim Curnen. Produced by Roger Corman. Released by New World. At the RKO Cinerama and other theaters.

The most original documentary filmmaker of the past decade—even his fictional films are grounded in travelogue or behavioral pretexts—Werner Herzog has often described himself as a director of landscapes. Such bravado is his hallmark: the typical Herzog film is the end product of some self-imposed ordeal. *La Soufrière*, the half-hour documentary for which he and two cameramen risked their necks on the evacuated island of Guadalupe filming a volcano that “embarrassingly” failed to erupt, is only the most extreme case.

Given Herzog's I-am-my-films methodology, *Burden of Dreams*, Les Blank's on-set record of the making of *Fitzcarraldo*, is as much an analogue as it is a documentary of Herzog's film about a visionary madman (Klaus Kinski) who wants to bring Caruso

to the Amazon and drags a steamship over a mountain to do it. Blank's 90-minute film (a shorter version of which was telecast over WNET earlier this year) is not only the best trailer for *Fitzcarraldo*, but also its most persuasive defense, detailing the agonies that Herzog's surprisingly dull film papers over.

“Humiliation and strain are essential parts of filmmaking,” Herzog has said, and he elected to shoot most of *Fitzcarraldo* 1500 miles deep in the jungle because the remote location would affect his crew and cast in intangible ways. The historical *Fitzcarraldo* disassembled his boat and carried it up a 20-degree slope; Herzog insisted that the boat in the movie be transported intact up a grade twice as steep. As if these trials were not enough, the project also had to contend with Indian raids, German provocateurs, a border skirmish between Peru and Ecuador, the airlifting of supplies and spare parts, and the longest dry season in the recorded history of the region.

Fitzcarraldo took nearly four years to complete, with its director prevailing over everything from an Indian bid for community control of the film's content to the loss of his original stars (Mick Jagger, Jason Robards) with 40 per cent of the film in the can. Herzog has more in common

with the explorer-filmmakers of the 1920s than with anyone working today, but he's closer to the artist-showman Christo (another “director of landscapes”) than with any filmmaker at all. The ideal pairing with *Burden of Dreams* would not be *Fitzcarraldo* but the Maysles brothers' reverential documentary of Christo's *Running Fence*.

Fleshing out Herzog's more prosaic account of jungle madness with shots of outsized insects, Indians schlepping barefoot through the rain forest carrying fuel for the bulldozer, the maestro sinking knee-deep in mud or plucking a swimming deer out of the river, the cameraman gashing his head open, and Klaus Kinski complaining, “You can't go anywhere—you can't escape off this fucking, stinking camp,” *Burden of Dreams* combines the plot of *Fitzcarraldo* (slyly appropriating most of its strongest set pieces) with the story of the project. Blank, who once made a movie of Herzog cooking and eating his shoe on the stage of the Pacific Film Archives in Berkeley, marvels at his subject's drive and simply lets his mania speak for itself. Inexorably, Herzog's early, less than convincing paeans to the terrain and its Indian inhabitants give way to something more feistily Faustian: “We are challenging nature and nature hits back!”

The harmony of the jungle, says Herzog in his most memorable monologue, is “the harmony of overwhelming and collective murder. . . . I don't think the birds even sing here—they screech in pain. . . . Even the stars in the sky are a mess.” Unfortunately, this vision comes through not at all in Herzog's film. *Burden of Dreams* is not only the more vivid evocation of the jungle but the richer study in pathology. Herzog is far more interesting than *Fitzcarraldo* or *Fitzcarraldo*.