

## arts

Toronto's annual film-binge:  
junkies, ants, and Argentina

*Where the Green Ants Dream* (D: Werner Herzog, West Germany, 1984)

Werner Herzog has by now become one of the best known directors of the New German Cinema. His films *Aguirre*, *Stroszek*, *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* and *Nosferatu* have gained him a reputation for thoughtful, mystical, and obsessive films about society's eccentrics in extreme situations. Herzog's romantic glorification of the poetic and irrational is quite evident in this, his latest, film about a group of Australian aborigines fighting off the advances of a giant uranium mining company onto their sacred land—the land “where the green ants dream.”

The theme here is the clash of civilizations—modern society raging forward in spite of its cultural bankruptcy, and an aboriginal culture mystified and powerless in the face of it. This clash guarantees that the most normal characters become quirky oddballs.

The geologist Haggart, for example, develops a warped form of abstract speculation in the course of the film. In one scene he announces at a business luncheon that he and the three gentlemen with him are not at the table that appears before them, but are really still stuck in the elevator.

The others fare no better: the anthropologist viciously raving against modern civilization, as a “train that's headed for an abyss,” the crazed quasi-scientist happily explaining the green ants' sensitivity to the deviant magnetic field in the area; the old woman, who sits in a chair by the mining tunnels



waiting for her lost dog Ben to return and eat his meal; the agitated worker exclaiming wildly in his thick Australian accent, “Why the fuck don't they (the green ants) dream someplace else?”

The aborigines and their sympathizers, of course, win out in Herzog's view, despite the inevitable loss of their land. Unfortunately, Herzog's sense of humor, and his hardly subtle jabs at modern society's absurdities are not as effective as in his earlier films. The characters and situations are not fully developed, as if enough care wasn't put into the making of the film. In addition, the classical music periodically intrudes into the primitive world in an oddly colonialist manner.

Herzog typically takes his time to feel out the desolate, arid Central Australian landscape with his camera; slowly panning across the reddish-grey, martian-like fields, over the cone-shaped piles of dust spread out like teepees, and pondering silently a dust storm or a raging tor-

nado, to the accompaniment of Faure's *Requiem*.

At the end, we are left with the tornado representing the ultimate power of nature, while the senseless voice of civilization - an ecstatically pompous Italian soccer announcer on the radio - drowns out the quiet explosions tearing apart the once-sacred land.

Nonetheless there are some wonderful moments. When the tribe obtains an airplane in compensation for their soon-to-be-lost land, for instance, they convert it into a drum-pounding temple to perform their ritual songs. One of their elders, explaining their attitude to the geologist, puts it quite succinctly: “What would you do if I bring a bulldozer and pick up your church?”

Still, *Where the Green Ants Dream* leaves Herzog working well below the form he is capable of.

Adrian Iwachiw

Recommended

Henry James was one of the nicest old ladies I ever met.

William Faulkner (1897-1962)

FESTIVAL  
OF FESTIVALS

*WILDROSE*

Dir: John Hanson (U.S.A. 1984 95 min.)

What is most striking about *Wild Rose*, an American entry in the Contemporary World Cinema program at this festival, is that it is shockingly un-American. Missing from *Wild Rose* are the laser beam screen effects, the staccato dialogue, the Hollywood penchant for everything tinsel and larger-than-life. Instead, director John Hanson has crafted a stark and simple film about a woman's struggle for working equality as a miner in small-town Minnesota.

Hanson's *Wild Rose* wavers between coarse, earthy realism and social documentary. For the most part the line between the two becomes blurred, with the result that viewers feel they are witnessing private everyday drama - a feeling which is at first unsettling.

In creating the subtle, docu-drama mood of *Wild Rose*, Hanson uses lo-

cal townsfolk as actors, and there are large doses of improvised speech. Real-life rustics and spontaneous chit-chat do not necessarily make good cinema, however. In *Wild Rose*, the “all-too-real” often borders on banality.

Hanson does, however, avoid making *Wild Rose* a feminist propaganda piece on equal pay for equal work. What Hanson ultimately achieves is a bare, understated film shot in the rugged fringe of America - a deliberately rough-edged film whose lack of polish proves to be its most charming feature.

Paul Pivato

Recommended



*The Power of Emotions* (D: Alexander Kluge, West Germany, 1983)

This new film, by one of the New German Cinema's foremost intellectual spokesmen, is an often fascinating, but long and drawn-out, essay on the “power of emotions.” From the opening strains of Wagner's *Parsifal*, set to a time-lapsed sunrise in a German metropolis, the scene is set for an exploration of sound and image in film and opera, and how they rule, and are in turn ruled, by human emotion.

For this purpose, Kluge draws from a wide array of sources: World

War II action footage, of a child wounded in an army hospital, scenes of people dying in silly fantasy flicks, and the funeral of an unidentified world diplomat in which Albinoni's *Adagio* resoundingly accompanies the widow's tears.

Kluge returns again and again to the opera house—the “power plant of emotions.” Only in a few segments does the film turn to narration: when a salesman, after a long day's work and “ready for action” rapes, but also rescues, an unconscious woman in the woods; and when we witness a bizarre story of two criminal couples on the run. “What is a stronger bond



than marriage?” asks Kluge. “A murder, in which both know what the other has done.”

Adrian Iwachiw

Recommended



*Funny Dirty Little War* (D: Hector Olivera, Argentina, 1983)

“This was the beginning. It started like a big joke. No one believed that it would turn into ten years of military repression,” says veteran filmmaker Hector Olivera, director of the acclaimed *Rebellion in Patagonia*, describing the story behind his latest film, *Funny Dirty Little War*.

The film depicts a town in Argentina prior to the military takeover in 1974. The rightist Peronist faction is plotting to oust the leftist Peronist mayor, and what begins as a farcical squabble soon develops into a minor war. The satirical absurdity of it all is evident: the opposing factions murder each other, while both loudly proclaim “Viva Peron!”

“Patriotism” for these blokes comes first, no matter what absurd ramifications it leads to. It is therefore appropriate when the drunken

pilot Cervino flies over the town spilling cow dung on the supposed enemy.

*Funny Dirty Little War* was shot in seven weeks and rushed to completion before the 1983 Argentinian election, when freedom of speech was temporarily allowed as part of the military election platform. Despite the national shift towards democratic government, the significance of a film like this is hardly diminished. In countries like Argentina, political oppression is if not present, only a thin stroke away from becoming reality once again.

Through the effective combination of comedy and the horror of war, Olivera reminds us of the absurdities of which human beings are capable in such situations.

Adrian Iwachiw

Highly Recommended

*Burroughs* (D: Howard Brookner, USA, 1983)

Explaining why he became a writer, William S. Burroughs says, “I thought they lived glamorous lives, smoking hashish in Tangier, sniffing cocaine in Mayfair. It struck me as a very pleasant and easy life. Little did I know . . .”

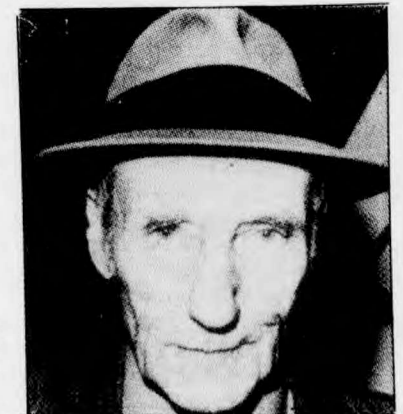
With this documentary, four years in the making, director Howard Brookner leads us into Burroughs' strange personal world. Brookner does so through interviews with Allen Ginsberg, John Giorno, Terry Southern, Francis Bacon, recorded footage of Burroughs' readings, and dramatizations of Burroughs' writings. In one scene, while dressed up as Dr. Benway in *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs uses a toilet plunger to massage the heart of a patient.

Brookner and his camera also follow Burroughs' brother Mortimer who politely explains his disgust for *The Naked Lunch*. We hear Allen

Ginsberg, and later Burroughs' young assistant, James Grauerholz, openly and tenderly describe their affectionate homosexual relationships with Burroughs. We are led through delicate discussions of sensitive events, such as Burroughs' wife's accidental shooting death, and his novelist/alcoholic son's death during the making of *The Naked Lunch*.

We hear Burroughs explaining his working methods—his cut-ups, he explains are attempts to “tamper with the pre-recordings” of a “pre-recorded universe.” We are shown a glimpse of his daily life in the windowless New York loft he calls “The Bunker.”

Burroughs, on the screen, is a gaunt, skeletal old man, whose hoarse drawl and obsession with weapons can give sensitive viewers a chill. Before he dies, Burroughs says, “I want to kill somebody. Preferably one of those gay-baiters.” Then he shows us a weapon that he could cut



off a guy's head with “right in the middle of a sentence.”

For his fans, *Burroughs* is a fascinating portrait of the man behind the words. For others, it shows that he is probably the only world-famous writer who could, on a normal day, be easily mistaken for a senile, decrepit old drunkard.

Adrian Iwachiw

Recommended