



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 10
Issue 1 April 2006

Article 7

10-18-2016

Grizzly Man

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Recommended Citation

Vest, John W. (2016) "Grizzly Man," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol10/iss1/7>

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Grizzly Man

Abstract

This is a review of *Grizzly Man* (2005).

A lover of the outdoors myself, I'm not quite sure how to respond to this film. The magnificence and beauty of the Alaskan scenery and the majestic grizzly bears that populate it are truly inspiring. By contrast, the story of Timothy Treadwell is sad and at times absurd. There is no doubt that there is tragedy here, but I'm not sure if the tragedy is Treadwell's death or his life. His passion and devotion are unquestionable. His crusader zeal to protect these animals - what exactly he is protecting them from is not clear - and to educate others about the natural world he considered home is admirable. But the more one learns about Treadwell's persona - on and off camera - the more one is faced with the crux of the film: was Treadwell a mystical philosopher genius in touch with the harmony of creation, or was he a misguided fool who entered a hostile environment that literally consumed him?

I suspect that my ambivalence about this film mirrors the ambivalence of its maker, the iconic German director Werner Herzog. On the one hand, Herzog has a deep respect for Treadwell as a filmmaker and marvels at the unplanned glimpses of nature he was able to film. Herzog discerns in Treadwell's extensive footage a cinematic artistry that captures the unpredictable beauty of the wilderness. Yet Herzog also finds himself in fundamental philosophical disagreement with his troubled protagonist. "I believe the common denominator of the universe is not

harmony,” says Herzog, “but chaos, hostility, and murder.” Where Treadwell finds friendship and salvation, Herzog sees only indifference and animal hunger.

The story behind *Grizzly Man* is by now well known. Timothy Treadwell, a failed actor and recovering alcoholic, escaped the chaos of the human world to find refuge in what he considered an Eden-like sanctuary in the Alaskan wilderness. An environmental advocate and self-styled defender of bears, he spent thirteen summers living and interacting with grizzlies. Over the course of his last five summers, he recorded one hundred hours of video footage, intending to produce a film of his crusade. In 2003, at the end of that summer's sojourn, Treadwell and his girlfriend Amie Huguenard were eaten by one of the very bears for whom he devoted his life. The footage was edited posthumously by Herzog, who also narrates the final film.

During his lifetime and in this film, Treadwell elicits controversy and disagreement. For some environmentalists and friends, he is a martyred hero. For other observers, he did more harm than good by habituating the bears to humans, and in crossing the line between human and animal got what he deserved.

Herzog's respect for Treadwell is balanced by the unavoidable mockery of Treadwell's own footage. He names all of the bears he encounters and talks to them as pets. At times, he comes across as a strange mix of Steve Irwin and Richard

Simmons. He oscillates between giddy, childish bursts of joy and rages of wild, paranoid anger at those he feels are endangering the bears. One of the most powerful scenes of nature, a brutal fight between two bears, is ruined by Treadwell, who recounts it as a professional wrestling match, complete with an "interview" of the loser. Complementing this absurdity are scenes shot by Herzog in which Treadwell's friends and the coroner who examines his remains are eccentric and at times unsettling.

Yet it is clear that Treadwell was on a spiritual quest. On one level, his time in the wilderness with the bears was his path to personal salvation. In several introspective scenes, Treadwell reveals that his mission gave his life purpose. It helped him stop drinking. It provided him with a community.

On another level, Treadwell sought some type of mystical union with the bears. As Herzog narrates: "As if there was a desire in him to leave the confinements of his humanness and bond with the bears, Treadwell reached out, seeking a primordial encounter." At one point Treadwell speaks of his desire to "mutually mutate into a wild animal." One of Treadwell's ecologist friends muses about the religiosity of wanting to become a bear, of connecting to something so deeply that you lose your humanity and become something else.

Through the lens of his camera, Treadwell transforms himself into a character in his envisioned film. He is a prophet, speaking truth to power and calling down rain from God. Not completely oblivious to the dangers of his project, he speaks of dying in the way a martyr thinks of death - he will become more and accomplish more in death than he could in life.

In a sense, by being consumed by a bear, Treadwell finally realized the mystical union he was seeking. And though the cost of this union was his own life and the life of the bear (not to mention the life of his girlfriend), it may very well be that in death Treadwell is able to achieve more than he ever could in life. In this film, Timothy Treadwell has become Grizzly Man Superstar, and this movie is his video-diary of a madman.