Documenting the Documentary

Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video

NEW AND EXPANDED EDITION

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“YOU MUST NEVER LISTEN TO THIS”

Lessons on Sound, Cinema, and Mortality from Werner Herzog’s Grizzly Man

David T. Johnson

HERZOG: I think you should not keep it. You should destroy it.

PALOVAK: Yeah?

HERZOG: I think that’s what you should do.

PALOVAK: Okay.

HERZOG: Because it will be the white elephant in your room all your life.

Werner Herzog and Jewel Palovak, discussing the audio footage of the deaths of Timothy Treadwell and Amie Huguenard, in Grizzly Man

For all of the theories we have used to cocoon ourselves against the intrusion of reality in cinema, none has been able to expunge the fundamental sense of presence—or “presence of . . . absence,” as Christian Metz so famously put it (57)—that the medium always returns us to. And perhaps no other experience accomplishes this effect better than seeing someone on film who no longer exists. Normally it is easy enough to repress or simply ignore the fact that many of the cinema’s populace no longer have living, breathing counterparts. But when a film explicitly acknowledges the death of its inhabitants, then, in a very immediate way, we are forced to consider once again what it means to be recorded—and how those recordings function beyond one’s death.
Perhaps no recent documentary confronts these issues more directly than Werner Herzog’s Grizzly Man (2005). The film details the life and horrific death of Timothy Treadwell, a self-appointed savior to the Alaskan Grizzly who spent thirteen summers among the animals before being killed by one of them; his girlfriend, Amie Huguenard, also tragically lost her life on the same night. The film is a meditation on Treadwell’s life and what led him to pursue the extreme lifestyle that he adopted, but the film is also as much about, if not more about, the facts surrounding Treadwell’s and Huguenard’s violent ends. Herzog underscores Treadwell’s own death from the very beginning, with a subtitle in the first shot we see of him that could function as a modest grave marker: “Timothy Treadwell, 1957–2003.”

And the circumstances surrounding these deaths acquire even more weight when we learn that during the bear attack, which occurred in his tent, Treadwell turned on a video camera but never removed the lens cap. Thus the video recorded the sounds of the bear attack but not the images. We learn of the existence of this audio footage roughly fifty minutes into the film, during an oddly performative description from the pathologist about what must have occurred when the bear attacked the couple. But more disturbing is the scene that follows this one, a pivotal moment and perhaps the key scene of the entire film.

The scene begins with a shot of Jewel Palovak, one of Treadwell’s friends, with a camera in her lap, as a man in the foreground, his back to the viewer, listens to headphones running from the camera. The man holds his left hand to his temple, and although we cannot fully see his face, we know that his eyes are closed in an attitude of concentration. “This is Timothy’s camera,” Herzog’s voice-over states. “During the fatal attack, there was no time to remove the lens cap. Jewel Palovak allowed me to listen to the audio.” Herzog—we now know that the man on camera is the filmmaker—hunches forward, intently listening to the audio, as the camera slowly zooms in on Palovak. “I hear rain, and I hear Amie, get away, get away, go away.”

Herzog notes, the camera holding on Palovak before swinging back to him. The film then cuts to a shot from the original position, and Herzog, after a long pause that prompts Palovak to laugh nervously, tells her, “Jewel, you must never listen to this.” After she promises not to listen to the audio or look at the photos at the coroner’s office, the film cuts again to the same shot, only now with the filmmaker and the subject holding hands. And now Herzog goes one step further than warning her against listening to the audio; here, Herzog actually advises her to destroy it, “because it will be the white elephant in your room all your life.”

The narrative and dramatic logic of the scene is clear: here is the moment when one of our subjects, Palovak, will be both confronted with and denied access to evidence of Herzog need not prompt us: which accounts for its minimalistic camera). But the gene functions in this way. Ratlief other important aspects: (1) to—and what Palovak must that Herzog is listening, not age. These two aspects might theoretical veins, one archaicalist-theory tradition and the to use the word “tradition” v and part of why the scene fits between these two modes of Herzog tells Jewel Palovak—so, he has already left an impression on the minds of viewers, who are for Thad Treadwell and Amie Hu came back.
Grizzly Man: Jewel Palovak watches as filmmaker Werner Herzog listens to the audio recording of Timothy Treadwell's death.

denied access to evidence of the remaining minutes in her friend's life. Herzog need not prompt us any further in sensing the scene's importance, which accounts for its minimalist aesthetic (the long pauses, the relatively static camera). But the generative power of this scene rests not only in its functioning in this way. Rather, that power has everything to do with two other important aspects: (1) our-perception that what Herzog is listening to—and what Palovak must not listen to—is real; and (2) our knowledge that Herzog is listening, not looking and listening, to a piece of video footage. These two aspects might simply be defined as the commingling of two theoretical veins, one archaic and the other still very young. They are the realist-theory tradition and the sound-theory tradition (though one hesitates to use the word "tradition" with the latter). Both meet here in this scene, and part of why the scene fascinates is because of the complex interactions between these two modes of discourse. "You must never listen to this," Herzog tells Jewel Palovak—and, by extension, the audience. Yet in doing so, he has already left an indelible impression of imagined trauma in the minds of viewers, who are forced to confront the simple reality that Timothy Treadwell and Amie Huguenard went into the wilderness and never came back.
Realism, Mortality, and the Cinema

With its equal interest in realist film theory and sound studies, this essay is indebted to the work of Jonathan Kahana, who identifies Herzog as one of a few recent documentary makers who explore older ideas about film realism, often ascribed to Andrè Bazin,1 while maintaining a critical sense of the inherent limits and pitfalls one encounters within them. Kahana begins his “Cinema and the Ethics of Listening: Isaac Julien’s Frantz Fanon” with a brief history of film realism, showing how Bazianian ontology gave way to the film theory of the 1970s, which often set itself explicitly against what it saw in Bazin’s work as an ultimately naïve understanding of cinema. Yet Kahana also shows how Bazin’s questions have become relevant to a number of recent filmmakers: in addition to Isaac Julien, “Chantal Akerman, Werner Herzog, Errol Morris, and Trinh T. Minh-ha, to name only a few innovators,” who wish to “challenge the importance of the documentary form while maintaining the importance of Bazin’s question” (21). And that question, according to Kahana, is, “What kind of irrational desire makes the cinema real?” (21). While he sets up this theoretical tension to study the use of sound in Julien’s Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask (1996), this essay, albeit interested in a similar tension, asks what happens when the sound in question is one that we cannot hear.

In terms of Herzog’s work more generally, the idea of the irrational desire for realism cannot help but resonate with the dreamers that populate his fiction and nonfiction work, since they so often operate in an obsessive state films find magnetic yet ultimately inaccessible. Timothy Treadwell, like Dieter Dengler (Little Dieter Needs to Fly, 1997) and Graham Dorrington (The White Diamond, 2004), is in this way very close to what Amos Vogel once called the “Holy Fool” in Herzog’s work, or “the person considered a fool because outsider and eccentric, the one who dares more than any human should, and who is therefore—and this is why Herzog is fascinated by him—closer to possible sources of deeper truth though not necessarily capable of reaching them” (38). Herzog’s oeuvre, while often unpredictable in its course from project to project, is nonetheless remarkably coherent, particularly in relation to this figure in both documentaries and fiction films. In the latter mode, one need only think of two of his most famous films, Aguirre, the Wrath of God (1972) and Fitzcarraldo (1982). It can even be tempting to read Herzog himself as a kind of “Holy Fool,” with the exception that one feels he, in fact, is capable of reaching “sources of deeper truths,” particularly since he so often addresses the concept of truth in his interviews and commentaries.

Such truth, however, is documentary. For Herzog, a law of truth is after, or what of Herzog describes the motto is a moment that “exceeds what we have already seen at a director, he is not reporting, ecstatic. This capacity to transcend the poets from the account of Herzog’s famous or truth, the truth of account. Such aesthetic aims all we might normally consider close a tendency to rehearse the filmmaker intervention such desire for a tattoo, at the outset of this more poetic approach Herzog’s films both rely on a cinematic realism.

To return to Kahana’s question: the cinema real?”—André Bazin, fully articulated. While they at least part of his answer in the book, Christian Keathley has that André Bazin—that theorized film’s force of realism, relation to death” (158). Keath that follow, but they call for Bazin’s foundational essay, probably most explicit in this an attempt by humanity to re
Such truth, however, is not what we might normally associate with documentary. For Herzog, a lie, in fact, may enable truth—at least the kind of truth he is after, or what he calls “ecstatic truth.” Brad Prager’s study of Herzog describes the moment we experience ecstatic truth as viewers; it is a moment that “exceeds our ability to assimilate it into the archive of what we have already seen and heard,” an experience closer to poetry: “As a director, he is not reporting, but rather poetizing or rendering the world ecstatic. This capacity to transfigure reality is, in Herzog’s view, what separates the poets from the accountants” (5). (Prager’s use of “accountants” refers to Herzog’s famous critique of cinema verité as “merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants” in his “Minnesota Declaration” [Herzog 301].) Such aesthetic aims allow Herzog to approach documentary in ways we might normally consider a violation of the viewer’s trust; examples include a tendency to rehearse interviews as well as other more direct kinds of filmmaker intervention such as Herzog’s invention of Dieter Dengler’s desire for a tattoo, at the outset of Little Dieter Needs to Fly, as a way of narrating Dengler’s hallucinations in Vietnam. Wisely recognizing Herzog’s own ambivalence toward the terms “documentary” and “narrative,” Prager chooses not to emphasize distinctions among the films along these lines. This ambivalence—or, rather, willingness to work in both documentary and narrative modes—is perhaps why Herzog has moved easily between them for his entire career, with documentaries returning to earlier narrative films (such as his Klaus Kinski film, My Best Fiend [Mein liebster Feind—Klaus Kinski, 1999], which explores Kinski’s persona) and narrative films returning to documentaries (notably, the retelling of Dieter Dengler’s story in Rescue Dawn [2006], with actor Christian Bale playing the lead). In light of this more poetic approach to truth, it should come as no surprise that Herzog’s films both rely on and interrogate some of the central issues of cinematic realism.

To return to Kahana’s question—“What kind of irrational desire makes the cinema real”—André Bazin’s own answers were complex and carefully articulated. While they resist any easy summary, we might say that at least part of his answer involved speculations on mortality. On this subject, Christian Keathley has noted, “It is remarkable, and often forgotten, that André Bazin—that theoretician who, more perhaps than anyone, celebrated film’s force of realism, its life force—wrote just as much about film’s relation to death” (158). Keathley has already treated some of the examples that follow, but they call for reexamination in the context of this essay, Bazin’s foundational essay, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” is probably most explicit in this regard, as he characterizes the history of art as an attempt by humanity to resist time and death, which “is but the victory
of time” (What Is Cinema? 9). One of the central analogies of the essay is to the Egyptian process of embalming the dead; the cinema, he writes, is “change mumified as it were” (What Is Cinema? 15). He also cites, in explaining the irrational power of photography, “the charm of family albums” that conjure “the disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment in their duration, freed from their destiny” (What Is Cinema? 14). Although his other essays are clearly not exclusively concerned with mortality, the subject often underpins his observations. The famous footnote to “The Virtues and Limitations of Montage,” after all, is about an awareness of the real potential danger within a narrative film, when a montage cutting between a lion and a child gives way to a single shot in which viewers see lion, child, and parents. Here, “trickery is out of the question” (What Is Cinema? 49)—the threat of death seems real. Consider a similar moment in “Cinema and Exploration” when, in discussing a shot of a killer whale in Kon Tiki (1950), Bazin notes, “It is not so much the photograph of the whale that interests us as the photograph of the danger” (What Is Cinema? 161). And of his writings in English, perhaps no essay has as long a meditation on death as “Death Every Afternoon,” about The Bullfight, where Bazin writes, “Death is surely one of those rare events that justifies the term, so beloved of Claude Mauriac, cinematic specificity”; “For every creature, death is the unique moment par excellence”; and “Death is nothing but one moment after another, but it is the last” (30).

Of course, Bazin’s reflections on mortality and cinema also dovetail with the interests of Grizzly Man whenever he discusses examples of people interacting with animals (though the danger to Treadwell is much greater than to many of Bazin’s case studies). In “The Screen of Fantasy (Bazin and Animals),” Serge Daney argues that among the many reasons Bazin cites for his investment in a cinema without montage—“no more cinema,” as Bazin phrased it in his essay “Bicycle Thief” (60)—is “the nature of what is being filmed, the status of the protagonists (in this case men and animals) who are forced to share the screen, sometimes at the risk of their lives” (33). One thinks, again, of “The Virtues and Limitations of Montage” (an example Daney cites), where a sense of potential danger gives “immediate and retroactive authenticity to the very banal montage that preceded it” (49).

Bazin’s careful analysis, however, notes that the people onscreen are not really in danger, since the animal had most likely been “half tamed” prior to filming, though he adds, “This is not the point”—it is the “respect for spatial unity” that matters (49–50). Still, the admission suggests more complexity in his realism than is often ascribed it, an impulse Daney draws upon when describing Bazin’s “cinema of transparency” as one that “only desires whatever limits it, impedes it, it only worships transparency because it knows that—all the words, for Bazin, according to both a sense of unmediated act limitations and artifice in spectator’s encounter is inherent those limitations. This paradox the cinema as an absent-presence in the cinema, unlike live theatre is something to see, called there is a great deal of ‘flight’ something that lets itself be set has gone out of the room before Metz, a strong sense of a defines cinema—the idea that and definitively inaccessible” (different paths than Bazin’s indebted to Jacques Lacan; for influenced by Christian social Daney’s reading of Bazin’s “cit what however . . . impedes it,” draw cinema as presence and absent

When one turns to Grizzly Man a realist aesthetic to figurative and self-conscious Herzog’s a filmmaking (recall his inventing ample). In other words, Bazin’ only “desires whatever . . . imp,” themselves, much less a realistic presence-as-absence. And yet the subject’s mortality satu Herzog plays the audio footage of subject matter, of course, a spectator’s mind, as Herzog co and Huguenard’s death, when voice-over, or the many shots inly, however, the scenes the reality most convincingly are Herzog characterizes Treadwell’s inherent connection between

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because it knows that—all the same—there is no such thing" (34). In other
words, for Bazin, according to Daney, cinematic realism often depends on
both a sense of unmediated access and, at the same time, an awareness of
the limitations and artifice imposed by the film so that, in some cases, the
spectator’s encounter is enhanced, not muted, by the acknowledgment of
those limitations. This paradox recalls Christian Metz’s famous ideas about
the cinema as an absent-present. In The Imaginary Signifier, he notes that
in the cinema, unlike live theater, the spectator is a “voyeur, since there is
something to see, called the film, but something in whose definition
there is a great deal of ‘flight’: not precisely something that hides, rather
something that lets itself be seen without presenting itself to be seen, which
has gone out of the room before leaving only its trace visible there” (63).
For Metz, a strong sense of presence and absence, in the same moment,
defines cinema—the idea that a film is both “simultaneously very close
and definitively inaccessible” (64). Metz’s argument may lead him in quite
different paths than Bazin (for Metz, a psychoanalytic reading of cinema
indebted to Jacques Lacan; for Bazin, a humanist reading of cinema heavily
influenced by Christian socialism and postwar French philosophy); but
Daney’s reading of Bazin’s “cinema of transparency,” one that only “desires
whatever . . . impedes it,” draws some useful parallels with Metz’s sense of
cinema as presence and absence.

When one turns to Grizzly Man, however, one might not at first ex-
pect a realist aesthetic to figure heavily into this film, given how self-aware
and self-conscious Herzog’s approach to “ecstatic truth” is throughout his
filmmaking (recall his invention of Dengler’s asking for a tattoo, for ex-
ample). In other words, Bazin’s ideas of a cinema of transparency, one that
only “desires whatever . . . impedes it,” do not immediately seem to present
themselves, much less a realist aesthetic, however inflected by a Metzian
presence-as-absence. And yet a realist aesthetic that trades on our sense
of the subject’s mortality saturates the film, making this key scene where
Herzog plays the audio footage for Palovak even more compelling. In terms
of subject matter, of course, mortality in Grizzly Man is rarely out of the
spectator’s mind, as Herzog constantly returns us to the facts of Treadwell’s
and Huguenard’s death, whether through his interview subjects, his own
voice-over, or the many shots of Treadwell interacting with bears. Interest-
ingly, however, the scenes that seem to connect the cinematic image to
reality most convincingly are the more quiet, reflective moments, when
Herzog characterizes Treadwell’s own aesthetic as itself dependent upon an
inherent connection between camera and reality.

Several scenes make this connection explicit, both through the images
and sounds of Treadwell’s original footage and through Herzog’s guiding
Grizzly Man: Timothy Treadwell records himself with the bears.

voice-over. In one scene, for instance, we see footage of a fox outside of Treadwell’s blue tent and hear its paws scratch the surface, as Herzog describes Treadwell: “I, too, would like to step in here in his defense, not as an ecologist but as a filmmaker. He captured such glorious improvised moments, the likes of which the studio directors with their union crews can never dream of.” Herzog here emphasizes the spontaneous aspects of the shot; the scratching sound of the paws and the fox’s shadow are invested with a sense of material reality. In another scene, Treadwell is signing off, a bear in the background, when a fox and her pups come running through the frame, unplanned by Treadwell. Herzog remarks, “Now, the scene seems to be over, but as a filmmaker sometimes things fall into your lap, which you couldn’t expect, never even dream of.” He follows this remark with a line that could have been lifted from Bazin’s “Ontology of the Photographic Image”: “There is something like an inexplicable magic of cinema.” And in yet another scene, Treadwell is setting up a shot where he will emerge from the brush and begin speaking to the camera. Because he does not have a film crew with him, however, he must start the camera rolling, walk up the path, out of sight, and then walk into the frame. Here, Herzog’s voice-over emphasizes not the moment when Treadwell emerges from the brush but the moments preceding his entrance: “In his action-movie mode, Treadwell probably did not realize that seemingly empty moments had a strange, secret beauty. Some time, their own mysterious star see a shot of brush blowing in Christian Keathley’s text. The onscreen, we are gently reminded it has been set in motion. F invested in film realism, brush who emerges from it. H Bazinian issues, even if he does.

The more “quiet” scenes to—developing a strong link because they establish a fund a spontaneous, uncontrollable the stakes are rather low in running through the frame: wind—the connection of can expect the tape as real, even if it is on part of what makes the scene.

The visual aesthetic of Palov holds the camera—T. It is important that it is not so one that recorded the death connections that have already b and reality, this camera has by Palov. Such tactile trans. ers, is not unlike the sense of realism invest the cinematic f reiterates its recording funct Mini-DV deck, for instance, o effect would have been quite the intensity of the moment: his holding his hands to his l expectancy and alertness. Pa signs of what he hears—mu of the scene for evidence the tates our own curiosity here to pick up some kind of clue by extension, what we cannot hear, which is the tape itself connection of cinema to re: listens to is really the ultimat-
strange, secret beauty. Sometimes images themselves developed their own life, their own mysterious stardom." As Herzog says these words, we simply see a shot of brush blowing in the wind (one thinks here of the subtitle to Christian Keathley's text, *The Wind in the Trees*). Watching such a moment onscreen, we are gently reminded that a camera makes no distinctions once it has been set in motion. For a viewer (or a filmmaker, for that matter) invested in film realism, brush in the wind can be as interesting as the person who emerges from it. Here, we find Herzog's interest in reanimating Bazinian issues, even if he does so only to question them further.

The more "quiet" scenes are thus implicit in—and not at all opposed to—developing a strong link between the cinematic image and mortality because they establish a fundamental link between Treadwell's camera and a spontaneous, uncontrollable reality that exists around him. Although the stakes are rather low in these scenes—a fox scratching his tent; foxes running through the frame; some excess footage of grass blowing in the wind—the connection of camera to reality sets up the existence of the videotape as *real*, even if it is only audio footage. And this deep association is part of what makes the scene between Herzog and Palovak so compelling.

The visual aesthetic of the scene adds to that awareness even further. Palovak holds the camera—Timothy's camera, Herzog tells us—in her lap. It is important that it is not simply a camera but Timothy's camera, the very one that recorded the death during the attack. Beyond the important connections that have already been established between Treadwell's camera and reality, this camera has been touched by Treadwell, which is now held by Palovak. Such tactile transference, if only imagined in the minds of viewers, is not unlike the sense of indexicality with which theorists of film realism invest the cinematic frame. And simply seeing a camera onscreen reiterates its recording function (think if Herzog had played the video on a Mini-DV deck, for instance, or simply had the camera placed offscreen—the effect would have been quite different). Herzog's posture, as well, indicates the intensity of the moment; his strain is apparent by his closing his eyes, his holding his hands to his head, and his leaning forward in an attitude of expectancy and alertness. Palovak nervously tries to read Herzog's face for signs of what he hears—much as we, too, scan all of these visual elements of the scene for evidence the film is never ready to yield. The camera imitates our own curiosity here, as it swings from Palovak to Herzog, trying to pick up some kind of clue. Finally, those brief cuts indicate ellipses and, by extension, what we cannot know—or what Herzog will not permit us to hear, which is the tape itself. The tape thus at once represents the strong connection of cinema to reality—the awful knowledge that what Herzog listens to is really the ultimate end of Treadwell and Huguenard both—and,
at the same time, for viewers, does not exist insular as we cannot hear it. If Bazin’s cinema of transparency only “desires whatever . . . impedes it,” what better metaphor might there be for it than the denial of access to the footage itself—evidence both present and absent that has, as Metz would put it, “gone out of the room before leaving only its trace” (63)?

Such complex but compelling invocations of cinema and the realist film tradition weight this moment as much as, if not more than, any other scene in the film with our sense of Treadwell’s and Huguenard’s mortality. But what also makes this scene so effective and affecting is that the footage is aural—and not visual and aural—evidence. While this fact is simply a matter of chance, in that the lens cap was never removed, it nonetheless is a major part of why the scene works in the way it does. It functions as evidence, but the fact that it is sound evidence necessitates further reflection.

**Sound and the Cinema**

Unlike the history we associate with theories of film realism—be they Bazinian or explicit rejections of that approach—cinematic sound has traditionally undergone less critical and theoretical consideration (though recent scholarship suggests this is becoming less the case). In 1992 Rick Altman raised the issue succinctly: “the image has been theorized earlier, longer, and more fully than sound”; therefore, “sound’s importance has been recognized only belatedly, thus tending to make sound theory and analysis tributary of image theory and analysis (even if sound itself is not dependent on the image)” (171). Although Altman does not here speculate on the reasons behind this critical imbalance, his point is well-taken. A cursory glance through any critical or theoretical anthology shows how much our discipline relies on the image—and how little on sound—to construct its theories. The discipline itself, however, may not be at fault. It may simply be that the discipline’s overemphasis on the image is symptomatic of the ways in which most spectators tend to absorb sound—as existing only in relation to the image, if it is acknowledged consciously at all.

For intelligent reflection on the relationship between sound and image, one need look no further than one of the only theorists of film sound, Michel Chion. Chion’s work has been central to the development of scholarship on film sound, and his precision, clarity, and at times lyricism have made him an attractive theorist for anyone working in film sound in the past twenty to thirty years. Crucial to almost all of his major theoretical statements on sound has been the inherent bond between sound and image, with sound’s legibility dependent upon its relation to image. For instance, in his *The Voice in Cinema*, soundtrack” (3), Chion explores not received as an auditory and distributed in the speculation each bears to what the sounds are generally only physical or imaginary (3). And one of his work is “synchrony,” induced between a particular when they occur at the same time we generally presume the remarkable tolerance and seem as though they belong together, making the sync a part that the way the visuals sound does not. Studio synchronization are a few examples of synchrony on audience.

What happens, then, to which we have no idea than practical, since it was screen and listen instead, as interested in film sound perimetrical ones, can be in Jeffrey K. Ruoff, discussing the representational documentary, images as well:

listening to many of watching the screen unrecognizable sources in virtual cacophony of and various unidentifiable music. Freed of resurface in their ph...
in his *The Voice in Cinema*, he makes the following provocation: "there is no soundtrack" (3). Chion explains this odd formulation: "a film's aural units are not received as an autonomous unit. They are immediately analyzed and distributed in the spectator's perceptual apparatus according to the relation each bears to what the spectator sees at the time" (3). In other words, sounds are generally only processed in relation to visualized spaces, actual or imaginary (3). And one of the most important concepts running through his work is "synchrony," or "the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time" (Audio-Vision 63). Synchrony is crucial to the way we generally process sound in cinema, and what is interesting is the remarkable tolerance spectators have for sounds—any sounds—to seem as though they belong to the image. As he writes, "Synchrony is what makes dubbing, postsynchronization, and sound-effects mixing possible, and enables such a wide array of choices in these processes. For a single body and a single face on the screen, thanks to synchrony, there are dozens of allowable voices—just as, for a shot of a hammer, any one of a hundred sounds will do" (Audio-Vision 63). One cannot, however, think of such freedom with the visual. While one can make the sound of a hammer by hitting a wrench or a screwdriver against a board, for instance, the substitution of the same visuals would alter the meaning of the shot in a way that the sounds do not. Studio sound libraries, Foley artists, and the history of animation are a few examples that would seem to confirm the powerful effect of synchrony on audience reception of the cinema.

What happens, then, when we are confronted with cinematic sounds to which we have no images? Such an experience is more experimental than practical, since it would require that a viewer actually not watch the screen and listen instead—an experience that few moviegoers beyond critics interested in film sound would seek out. Yet these practices, even experimental ones, can be instructive. Consider the following description by Jeffrey K. Ruoff, discussing the uncanny experience of listening to an observational documentary, shot with location sound, without watching the images as well:

listening to many of the scenes of observational films without watching the screen can be a dizzying experience. Without recognizable sources in the image to anchor the sounds, we hear a virtual cacophony of clanging, snippets of dialogue and music, and various unidentifiable sounds, almost an experiment in concrete music. Freed of their associations to objects, the sounds resurface in their phenomenological materiality. (221)
This materiality is not the materiality of sounds “attached” to their visual source but sounds in and of themselves, roaming free of any visuals whatsoever.

It may be a conceptual leap to suggest that sounds without images are necessarily anxiety producing, based on a brief discussion of Chion and Ruff, and counterexamples would certainly debunk any overly rigid theoretical approaches to those few occasions when we encounter cinematic sound without image. Despite the tentative (and, potentially, theoretically precarious) position, however, the remainder of this essay would like to take up these ideas as they apply to Grizzly Man, because it is my contention that part of the anxiety inherent in that scene is rooted in our knowledge that the footage is sound without image.

Most of Grizzly Man’s use of sound confirms the desire for legibility, and while the two most identifiable and common sounds in the film do not have onscreen visual counterparts, they are easily identifiable and hardly anxiety producing: they are Herzog’s voice-over and music. Very little of the film unfolds without Herzog’s voice, music, or both guiding the spectator’s experience. In many ways, these sounds provide an antidote to the often oppressive sense of mortality that suffuses the image; both music and voice-over provide a critical distance, either in Herzog’s digressive, questioning rhetoric or in the music, which imitates Herzog’s digressions, its melodies tending to wander among various smaller themes rather than play strictly structured songs. It would not be going too far to say that sound and image in this film quite often have a dialectical relationship, with Herzog’s voice-over and music pulling against the weight of Treadwell’s presence onscreen. As a result, the Bazinian questions about cinema—its irrational power, often linked to the viewer’s consciousness about mortality—are not diluted so much as complicated by a critical distance that sound often provides. While it may be perfectly Bazinian, for instance, to have an “empty moment” in one’s film, it is hardly Bazinian to point out that moment through voice-over, which is precisely what Herzog does. Grizzly Man’s sounds rarely produce anxiety in and of themselves.

There is an early important exception, however, one that lingers and complicates any easy associations of sound as somehow “safe.” In the opening sequence of the film, a bear approaches the camera, quite docile, as we hear Treadwell’s voice say, “Go back and play.” Previous images of the bears have characterized them as tranquil and reflective, matching Treadwell’s own romanticized vision of the bears. The music has also encouraged this reflective mood with a gentle melody led by acoustic guitar. But in one shot, the bear comes close, and all at once, the sound cuts from the musical score to direct sound. This cut happens as Treadwell loses his balance, either because the bear has just approached the camera at this moment or that the threat to him. In any case, the reflective mood of the music is ruptured by what makes the shot so sound within it, and the high pitch and has deep not only because Treadwell are beyond easy identification, Herzog’s inclusion of a certain instability, past vio present and the document inside Treadwell onto the opening subtitle of the opening footage of Treadwell. E capable of fulfilling a dream this death onscreen, it is quickly supplanted by.

In the scene in question to Treadwell and Hugues, it is clear that he is listening much of the visual and emphasizes the unifying Hugues. He sits hunched over, very little. At one moment scene indicate both the h want to another terrifying aspect identification. When he away, go away,” it is as though those are the only vitory jumble evoking viol Sound produces anxiety, but because it is, at least speech, unintelligible.

The final turn in the narrative that this is a sound drive, is a sound that does not we never actually hear a drive. Treadwell and Hugues, the audio evidence is in
achieved" to their visual and audible elements. Without images are meaningless and without sound, the film is silent. It is only when these two elements are combined in a harmonious way that they can create a meaningful experience for the viewer. The desire for legibility in the film is not just about the characters' actions on screen but also about the way the story is conveyed. Very often, the guiding principles of the film are the music and the sound design, which work in conjunction with the images to create a cohesive and immersive experience.

In the scene in question, when Herzog sits with Palovak and listens to Treadwell's voice, he is able to hear the sounds of the bear without the images. This is a crucial moment in the film, as it highlights the power of sound to evoke emotions and create a sense of place. The bear's calls are not only a sound of nature, they are also a symbol of the tension between man and nature. Herzog's inclusion of this early exception gives the rest of the film a certain instability, past violence always threatening to disrupt the order of the present and the documentary itself at any moment. In addition, we already know that Treadwell onscreen has died (in the present of our viewing, given the opening subtitle of the film) and will die (in the temporal present of the footage of Treadwell). Every potential eruption of violence thus becomes capable of fulfilling a dreadful promise—that Herzog might actually show us this death onscreen. That he does not comes as some initial relief, but it is quickly supplanted by another kind of anxiety, one related to sound itself.

In the scene in question, when Herzog sits with Palovak and listens to Treadwell and Huguenard's deaths, part of what makes the scene so difficult is that he is listening to sound without its accompanying image. So much of the visual and auditory information of the film at this moment emphasizes the unworkability of the sound that Herzog is listening to. He sits hunched over, clutching the headphones to his ears, and he says very little. At one moment, he even seems to tremble. Such aspects of the scene indicate both the brutality of the sound—its terrifying violence—and another terrifying aspect—that its sounds are incoherent and without easy identification. When he says, "I hear rain, and I hear Amie, Get away, go away, go away," it is as though he is listening to a corrupt transmission, as though those are the only sounds he can identify, the rest an inchoate auditory jumble evoking violence and death but ultimately incomprehensible. Sound produces anxiety here not only because it is divorced from the image but because it is, at least as interpreted through Herzog's own posture and speech, unintelligible.

The final turn in this scene, of course, and the most important one, is that this is a sound divorced not only from image but from sound itself. It is a sound that does not exist, at least within the world of the film, since we never actually hear it, and yet its absence echoes the absence of both Treadwell and Huguenard. For Herzog, who experiences the sound directly, the aural evidence is, in the Metzian sense, a presence that has "gone out
of the room before leaving only its trace” (audible rather than “visible”); but for Palovak, one step further removed from the footage (given that she never hears it), the sound is a trace of a trace, an absence she experiences only through the gestures and fragmented speech of the filmmaker. For us, at an even further remove, this scene should yield a near kaleidoscopic effect of absences, traces, and echoes. And yet it is at this precise moment when the Metzian presence seems most compelling, or when the Bazinian real comes closest to seeming like an empirical, material fact. The lesson here is that rational awareness of the cinema’s tenuous connection to reality sometimes falters in the face of the compelling irrational power of the medium when the mortality of its subjects is its main concern. As Bazin perhaps knew all too well, the absence always returns as a presence to be reckoned with. And although this particular recording was an accident, its existence as sound footage, and only sound, acts as an even more appropriate memorial to these figures, given that sound itself is an absent-presence within cinema studies—and given that, like death, it is a subject that still evokes mystery and anxiety, despite our rational apprehension of the material processes by which sound is made.

This scene’s complex use of sound, however, is but one facet of Herzog’s larger engagement with the documentary form, and his approach raises questions so many other essays in this volume ask: how can we represent the world in an ethical way when our ideas about truth and representation have been called into question by the intellectual, cultural, and aesthetic movements of the last and current centuries? What of the multifaceted media culture to which those movements have responded and of which they are ultimately a part? Can we recover a notion of truth and the real, and, furthermore, do we want to? Grizzly Man does not necessarily answer any one of these questions. Instead, Herzog’s film is a dispassionate but empathetic investigation into the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Treadwell and his companion Huguenard, one that does not so much seek to form clear answers but rather to articulate its inquiry as carefully as possible, without reducing the complexity of what it is asking. If viewers wish to find such answers, they must ultimately look—and listen—elsewhere, for although his voice-over accompanies so much of the film, when it comes to certainty and closure in the culmination of his discourse, Herzog, like the audio footage he never provides us, remains silent.

Notes
I am indebted to the Film Criticism reader and the current volume’s editors for the insightful comments and suggestions on this essay.
Grizzly Man

So much has been written about André Bazin in the brief time since the first publication of this essay. For more, see especially Dudley Andrew, ed., with Hervé Joubert-Laurencin, Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

WORKS CITED


