

Struggling With Nature and One Another

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The German filmmaker [Werner Herzog](#) is no stranger to obsession. In "Aguirre: The Wrath of God" (1972) and "[Fitzcarraldo](#)" (1982), which are probably his best-known films, he pitted driven, half-mad adventurers, both played by [Klaus Kinski](#), against the jungle wildernesses of South America.

"[Burden of Dreams](#)," Les Blank's documentary about the calamitous making of "Fitzcarraldo," presented Mr. Herzog as a kindred spirit, compelled by some enigmatic inner force to take extravagant risks in perilous circumstances.

"[The White Diamond](#)," which can be seen starting today in a two-week engagement at the Film Forum, is the first of three recent documentaries by Mr. Herzog that will open in the coming months. The film suggests that while he has mellowed a bit with age, he is still fascinated by the danger and romance of the natural world and attracted to characters who share this fascination.

His foil and alter ego in this case is Graham Dorrington, an English aeronautical engineer who designs airships and pilots them over remote tropical rain forests.

"White Diamond" is the record of an expedition to Guyana, where Mr. Dorrington, Mr. Herzog and a small crew of researchers, technicians and porters struggle with the elements, the laws of physics and one another as they try to get one of Mr. Dorrington's vessels, a white, spherical minidirigible with a cone-shaped tail, off the ground.

The film, which includes some breathtakingly beautiful images of the green, wet Guyanese jungle and a monumental waterfall that cuts through it, is driven less by narrative than by ideas and impressions. Nudged into shape by Mr. Herzog's voice-over narration, "White Diamond" seems motivated by a reverent, sober curiosity and a willingness to accept the irreducible mysteriousness of nature, in both its wild and its human incarnations.

Fascinated by the waterfall, whose curtain of mist has been penetrated only by birds, Mr. Herzog rigs a camera to capture images never before seen by human eyes, but then says he declines to include them in the film because he does not want to violate the integrity of the cataract or to dispel its mythic potency.

He displays a similar tact with his human subjects, pushing them toward self-revelation while at the same time keeping a respectful distance. He is particularly drawn to Mr. Dorrington, whose temperament mixes scientific ambition with an emotional openness that is almost childlike, and to Mark Anthony Yhap, a Guyanese diamond miner whose quizzical, stoical appreciation for natural beauty and human oddity matches Mr. Herzog's own sensibility.

The film's title comes from Mr. Yhap's description of the airship, which at first seems puzzling, since it looks more like a pearl, but which seems more and more apt once you begin to understand the essentially poetic character of Mr. Yhap's mind.

Both he and Mr. Dorrington have been grazed by sorrow. Mr. Yhap has lost touch with his family, while Mr. Dorrington is still haunted by the 1993 death of a friend and fellow explorer in an airship accident over the jungles of Sumatra. Their reflections on their own lives give the film a poignant gravity.

But as Mr. Dorrington is fond of pointing out, what they are after is levity - the miraculous chance to float beyond the earth and observe it from a new, unfettered perspective. Mr. Herzog, with an appropriately light touch, honors the seriousness of this desire while acknowledging, and sharing in, its fundamentally and gloriously quixotic nature.