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Into the Abyss: A Tale of Death, a Tale of Life

Abstract

This is a film review of *Into the Abyss: A Tale of Death, a Tale of Life* (2012), directed by Werner Herzog.

Werner Herzog opens his recent documentary, *Into the Abyss: A Tale of Death, a Tale of Life*, with a close-up of Texas death-house chaplain Richard Lopez, who speaks with visible emotion about his pastoral duties in caring for criminals about to be executed. He stands at the edge of a cemetery, a field of uniform grave markers—crosses that bear not names but numbers, for they stand over the bodies of criminals put to death by the state of Texas. Rev. Lopez seeks to humanize, though not to excuse, the criminals destined for lethal injection. Asked to describe his role at the executions, Lopez says he places his hand on the ankle of the condemned, being present for “what God has prepared for all those involved” as the deadly chemical cocktail is discharged into the bloodstream. “God is always there for us,” Lopez insists, even when it comes to the execution of a convicted murderer.

The question of theodicy is one driving issue of this movie, which asks, “Why does God allow capital punishment?” (The question of how a good God could allow for the murder of innocents is also raised.) Having no answer to this question, Lopez resorts to the kind of odd, incongruous anecdote that one comes to expect in a Herzog documentary: he relays a story about encountering a squirrel while driving a golf cart. Though Lopez’s misty-eyed account of halting his cart before hitting the squirrel elicited laughs from the audience when I saw the movie, they were soon quieted by Lopez’s desperate proclamation concerning the preciousness and precariousness of life, “whether it’s a squirrel or a human being.” “For someone on the gurney,” he remarks, “I cannot stop the process for them. But I wish I could.” A shot of that gurney follows; empty and cruciform, it echoes the cemetery crosses, which seem less like promises of resurrection than a chorus of reminders of victims to come.

This opening sequence captures in miniature something of the movie on the whole. *Into the Abyss* does not attempt answers to the theodical question of why a just and good God would allow capital punishment, the murder of a human being by the state. Rather, Herzog (who has made clear in interviews that he believes no state should put a human being to death) sets out to raise the question in a manner at once precise, poignant, and mindful of complexity, through the investigation of a horrific story and its consequences.

The documentary focuses on two men—Michael Perry and Jason Burkett—implicated in a triple homicide in the usually quiet town of Conroe, Texas. The first of the three murders took place in a home within an affluent gated community, where the pair of drugged-up teens allegedly shot a woman in order to steal the family's Camaro. (The car—which is red, the color of desire—is a kind of emblem of covetousness and its tragic destructiveness.) Moving beyond the neighborhood's gates, the teens go on to hunt down and kill the woman's son and one of his friends.

Herzog masterfully incorporates crime-scene footage to evoke the violent interruption of the domestic idyll, as well as the terror of the victims' final moments of life, establishing a sense of horror through the rawness of the images. We find blood spattered on the walls of the house and smeared across the floor; in the background, the television still plays, and lumps of cookie dough lie on the counter, waiting to be put in the oven. Soon after, we see the pale limbs of the woman's body, which has been dumped from the back of a truck and into nearby Crater Lake; her remains are caught up amidst debris and tangled linen from her own bed. And we see the

haunting image of a boy's body caught in the dense thicket he had struggled to penetrate in fleeing a killer who would soon shoot him like an animal.

The horror of the crimes is made all the more disconcerting by the interviews Herzog conducts with the perpetrators. At the time of his interview, Michael Perry is eight days from execution. Perry initially comes across as astonishingly cheerful for a man facing imminent execution. He proclaims his Christian faith, saying that "paradise awaits" him. "I'm either going home or going home," he says—either to heaven, if executed, or out of the cell, if his appeal succeeds.

But it does not. As the movie progresses, Perry's proclamations of innocence grow less convincing and his worldview appears more delusional—and in some sense more cruel. Lisa, the sister of one of the victims, is present at Perry's execution and reports that Perry announces that he forgives her for having him put to death—a burning insult from a man Lisa is convinced killed her brother. (The Jobean sufferings Lisa has endured make her among the movie's most tragic characters. She has lost her entire family, with the exception of her daughter, to violent accidents, drugs, sickness, murder, and suicide. "Our lives are very empty," she says, and the scope of her misery is heart-rending and intense.)

Jason Burkett, the other accused, claims, like Perry, to be an innocent victim of circumstance. In his interviews, he comes across as a gentle, thoughtful individual whose philosophy of life is to "cherish every minute." The sentiment may come off as schmaltzy in a review, but in the context of Herzog's film, and combined with Burkett's generally reflective

demeanor, it has an air of sincerity that puts the audience in the situation of sympathizing with a man who is serving a life sentence for murder. That Burkett is sympathetic is underscored by the inclusion of interviews with a woman who has fallen in love with and married Burkett. She claims to be carrying his child, though she is allowed no contact with her husband beyond holding hands. As her interviews continue, it becomes clear that she is likely deluded about Burkett's innocence.

Herzog in fact courts the kind of play of sympathy and delusion at work here, seeking not to establish a firm platform for a moral position, but rather to reveal how unstable, unreliable, and complex our own moral dispositions are. Although Herzog himself believes that capital punishment is immoral (he remarks off camera that the execution of criminals is akin to the "Old-Testament wrath of God"; "Jesus would not have been an advocate of capital punishment"), one of the strengths of the movie is its evenhandedness and the broad, sometimes conflicting, range of sympathies it evokes—for the victims' families, for the alleged killers, and for those involved in executions, whether as executioner or pastor. The theme of the pervasiveness of guilt and the possibility of forgiveness runs throughout this movie, and with it, the specter of delusion. At times it suggests that the idea that a good God could allow for capital punishment—or that there is a God at all—is delusional.

And yet the appeals to God are frequent, even in his absence. For instance, Herzog conducts an interview with Jason Burkett's father, himself a prisoner, who had pleaded with the jury not to execute his son. Burkett relates the moving story of weeping before the jury, who spare his son the death penalty. "God helped me," he claims. But as he goes on to discuss his

own tragic shortcomings, which he believes are to blame for his son's lot—"He had trash for a father," he says, speaking about his absence from his son's life—it is hard not to see Jason's father as some version of God the Father, God as an absent father, a criminal who cannot, or will not, get things right for his creation.

The movie comprises six sections plus an epilogue, inviting, perhaps ironically, theological interpretation. The epilogue is titled "The Urgency of Life." That urgency is expressed in the emotionally harrowing interviews with the former captain of a death squad, who recounts his spiritual breakdown after having presided over the executions of scores of men (and one woman). He is haunted, clearly, by what he has seen and done, and finally had to remove himself from the position.

Echoing the care evident in the chaplain's reverence for nature, the former death-squad captain speaks of his desire simply to behold the birds. The evocation of nature—a theme rarely absent from Herzog's movies—calls to mind Matthew 10:29: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care." Implicitly, and perhaps not intentionally, this movie at once advances and rebukes the notion of a God watching over his creatures. Rather, though God is invoked at various points throughout the movie, his presence is only occasionally felt, mostly in desperation, by the criminals who are seeking the peace that comes with assuredness of redemption or a life beyond their earthly prisons.

The scope of *Into the Abyss* goes well beyond that of the criminals and criminal acts that are its ostensible focus. It is a meditation on evil, guilt, hope, desire, forgiveness, and human

nature. The urgency it finally announces would seem to coincide with the almost supplicatory desire of the former death captain, who wants to “hold still and watch the birds”—even, it would seem, as those birds inevitably fall to the ground.