
Werner Herzog's Movie Grizzly Man: The Creativity Of Self Referent And Acting

Grizzly Man: The Glaring Reflexive and Performative Modes Within

As John Grierson once said, "Documentary is a creative treatment of actuality." Grizzly Man, directed by Werner Herzog, does just that by presenting a man's tragic, yet enduring reality through the creative attributes of the reflexive and performative mode. While no documentary is ever purely one mode, the reflexive and the performative modes take the spotlight in Grizzly Man. The reflexive and performative modes dominate Grizzly Man's stylistic choices, adding a sense of realness, yet simultaneously raising ethical concerns.

What can be argued as the most prominent mode of the film is that of the reflexive mode. One definition of the reflexive mode states that it, "calls attentions to the assumptions and conventions that govern documentary filmmaking. It increases our awareness of the constructedness of the film's representation of reality." Within Grizzly Man, one can see reflexive qualities in many occasions. All of these occasions help to intensify the experience of the character study, in relation with its filming process. As viewers, it also raises the question if one is experiencing a pure reality, or just a "creative treatment" of it. Through Treadwell's documented nature footage that lies prominent throughout the entire film, Herzog uses the reflexive mode in analyzing Treadwell's footage as something more than simply a man living in the wild among the bears. Herzog brings the attention to Treadwell's filming process and what more it can tell the viewers about the subject himself. This reflexive approach brings this documentary from watching a man's journey to protect the bears, to watching a man with psychological troubles and his interpersonal struggles in protecting the bears. Using the reflexive mode makes the story more personal and enhances the audiences' understanding of Treadwell's mind. As Werner Herzog put it in regards to his film Grizzly Man, "We gain insight into human nature, the human heart, our souls, our human condition, more than anything I have seen in a long, long, long time." This film clearly became more than just the investigation of one man's journey through the wilderness. It manifested into Herzog's own reflection on the world and the individuals in it. Bringing the attention to his filmic techniques allowed for another dimension of the content and subjects to be unveiled and observed.

Another quality of the reflexive mode that is present within the film is Herzog's own approach to the interviews and interactions with the historians, doctors and Treadwell's loved ones. Through the reflexive mode, Herzog's stylistic approaches include long end cuts, the direct address and voice of authority within the interviews and his reflective narration through the film. These stylistic choices leave the viewers feeling many things emotionally like sympathy for Treadwell's mental struggles through his friend's testimonies, and a sense of personal exploration through Herzog's narration. As stated by Bill Nichols in, Introduction to Documentary, he writes "Rather than following the filmmaker in his or her engagement with other social actors, we now attend to the filmmaker's engagement with us, speaking not only about the historical world but about the problems and issues of representing it as well." (Nichols, 194) Treadwell's self-taped, in-between moments with his camera are mirrored with Herzog's long end cuts. Herzog's long cut choices establish the same sort of realness in the filmic process and the reality in the lack of smoothness that comes with raw filmmaking. The

embodied voice and presence of Herzog throughout the film makes the viewer feel as though it's a communal journey in the unfolding of this man's story. Herzog's personal tone in his narration creates the experience of understanding not only Treadwell's vision of nature, but Herzog's views of nature and life itself as well. This reflexive tactic effectively takes the viewer on a multilevel discovery of one man's life, a filmmaker's perspective of this, and possibly a viewer's perspective of all the enduring issues along the way too.

Where there's one mode of documentary filmmaking, there's usually another. Through the performative's attribute of using what's considered as 'found footage,' Treadwell's self-taped records of his trips are used as a tool to put the viewers mentally and physically in the heart of the beast, literally. The "found footage" is a much more effective choice of filmmaking as opposed to simply an individual describing what is to be imagined. In this case, the performative mode is another potent aspect of *Grizzly Man* as well. The Performative mode as described by Peter Biesterfeld in his article, "Six Primary Styles of Documentary Production," from the website Videomaker, it "emphasizes the filmmaker's own involvement with the subject. The filmmaker shows a larger political or historical reality through the window of his/her own experience... the performative filmmaker becomes a personal guide who shows it and tells it like it is with raw emotion." Werner Herzog's filmic approach does all of the above and more with his stylistic decisions. One of the most impactful and performative sequences is when the audience is led through the retracing and recounting of Treadwell's death by his friend, the man who actually discovered the bodies. Not only was this man Treadwell's friend, but he was also the pilot that would drop him off at the beginning of every summer, and pick him up at the end. The performative aspects used in the reenactment sequence is unbelievably effective in setting the raw emotion of the circumstances by bringing the camera to the actual location of the death and where his friend discovered the bodies. Nichols states that the performative mode in documentary, "sets out to do something, it is to help us sense what a certain situation or experience feels like. They want us to feel on a visceral level more than understand on a conceptual level." (Nichols, 2003) To have the individual, who's already walked those steps before, but with a devastatingly different outcome, intensified the drama and heartbreak that came with the tragic story and end of Timothy Treadwell. This performative decision puts the viewer in the heart of the emotion.

Another crucial component to the performative mode's appearance within the film is during the exchange between Herzog and Treadwell's close friend. This exchange was when the director was granted access to listen to the actual tape recording of Treadwell and his friend Aimee's death. The audience unobtrusively observes as Herzog listens to the tape on screen, and although his face is not visible to the camera, the intonation of his voice suggests the severity of emotion this tape brings. Referring back to Biesterfeld's quote, "the performative filmmaker becomes a personal guide who shows it and tells it like it is with raw emotion." Through Herzog's emotional reaction to the tape, he makes the authoritative decision to not include the recording of the tape in his film. Watching Herzog's reaction and decision on what to do with the tape, it brings the film back to the real world. Herzog takes into the consideration the ethics of this individual's situation and how some privacy of Treadwell and Aimee's death must be respected. Through the performative mode the audience is able to witness this first hand and take themselves out of this "creative treatment of actuality" and remind themselves that this is really someone's reality and there are ethical boundaries that come with that.

While the reflexive and performative modes add many crucial things to the overall quality of *Grizzly Man*, these modes do have their limitations on the film too. Although the reflexive mode

gives another layer to the construction and outlook on the film, the reflexive mode often leaves many audiences to “question the authenticity of documentary in general,” as Bill Nichols writes. In *Grizzly Man*, a few interactions during the interviews might feed some audiences’ suspicion when it comes to its authenticity. For example, again in Nichols’ *Introduction to Documentary*, he states “Almost all contemporary filmmakers who rely on interviews meet and talk to their subjects first, often prerehearsing what will be said on-camera to ensure, at the very least, it is terse and coherent.” (Nichols, 177) This point made by Nichols may be relevant in *Grizzly Man*, in cases when the interviews sounded a bit too rehearsed and unauthentic. As the coroner of Treadwell’s death is interviewed, he describes the attack and state of Treadwell and his girlfriend Aimee’s bodies as he examined them both. He had a way of speaking to the camera that sounded as if he was rehearsing a pre-written monologue. The awkward ending to his speech, which was captured by the uncomfortably long camera hold on him, only added to the idea that he could have been told what to say and when he finished he didn’t know what to say next.

Another possible weakness that the performative mode may have had on the film could be in regards to ethics. Some individuals may argue that because the filmmaker does often emotionally involve him/herself and guide the viewers through the story through the performative mode, it can come off as obtrusive and exploitative to the subject and matter surrounding it. This aspect is often argued through *Grizzly Man*’s choice to use all of Timothy’s footage, including the raw in and outs that give the audience a deeper look into the individual he may have been. Many argue that Timothy’s purpose of recording was to create footage to be shown after the post-production of it under his own doing. Many deem Herzog’s use of Timothy’s film to be unethical as it shows parts of Timothy Treadwell that we could very well assume he never wanted anyone to see. The performative aspect of “found footage” creates for the subject to not have much of a say in whether he or she was being recorded for the specific use of this documentary. This is especially true considering Treadwell was not alive when this film was made. He had no choice in what parts about him were being presented to the world through this documentary and many accuse some of Herzog’s performative choices to be ethically incorrect.

While *Grizzly Man* encompasses aspects from all kinds of modes, as do most documentaries, Werner Herzog’s film uses mainly the reflexive and performative modes. These modes create an intimate yet unobtrusive look into the tragic yet captivating story of Timothy Treadwell, through the multilayered filming process and all the discoveries that come along with it.