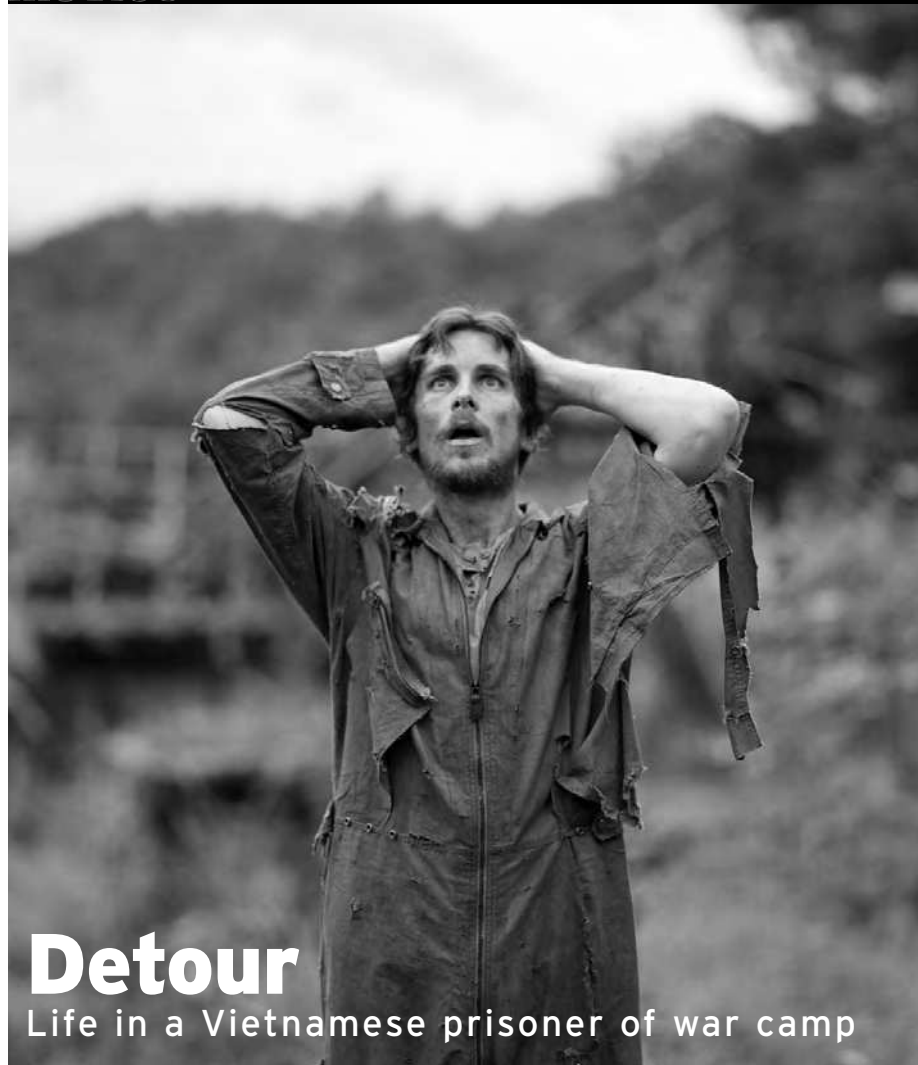




Detour

Life in a Vietnamese prisoner of war camp

RESCUE DAWN: Written and directed by Werner Herzog. Cinematography, Peter Zeitlinger. Music, Klaus Badelt. Starring Christian Bale, Steve Zahn and Jeremy Davies. MGM, 2007. PG-13. 126 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

Does the woman make the man? That question sprung to mind like a lock released when, about 45 minutes into *Rescue Dawn*, I spotted a ring on Dieter Dengler's wedding finger. Dengler, you may recall, is the subject of *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, Werner Herzog's documentary about the Navy pilot who became a prisoner of war in Vietnam. Now Herzog (*Grizzly Man*) is back with *Rescue Dawn*, a dramatization of Dengler's story. In the current film, wedding rings feel incongruous and peculiar, but not because women are absent from *Rescue Dawn*. It's more that Herzog views anything that might distract his beloved Dengler — such as doubt, confusion or emotional complexity — as a drag on the aerodynamics of his story. Sure enough, when someone finally asks Dengler about his fiancée, he recalls her with the fondness we reserve for high school math teachers.

Emotionally and geographically, this is familiar territory for Herzog, who over the course of more than 50 films has examined madness and obsession among eccentrics and geniuses. The jungle is home to Herzog's grandest "historical fictions," as they've been called, such as 1982's *Fitzcarraldo* (in which a man attempts to build an opera house in remote Peru) and 1972's *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* (about the search for El Dorado). Commercial attention eluded Herzog until *Grizzly Man*, which is odd because the film succeeds despite the director, not because of him. (Herzog identifies so much with Timothy Treadwell that he inserts himself too deeply into the film.) What *Grizzly Man* lacks, and what *Rescue Dawn* contains, is a sublime

visual expression of how we interact with our landscape. In Herzog's finest moments, the world seems to float; some of his films have imagery so indelible that decades later they're still bright, like the image of the boat being dragged over the mountain by the natives in *Fitzcarraldo*.

Rescue Dawn is visually impressive, but for a jungle movie its emotional surfaces are wiped clean. The story is simple: Shot down over Laos in 1966, Dengler (Christian Bale) is marched to a POW camp. Confident but innocent, even a little goofy, Dengler as a hostage is more annoyed than afraid. His cocky smile goes slack, however, when fellow POW Duane (Steve Zahn, who lost 40 pounds for the role) reveals that he's been captive for almost two years. For Dengler, a number of realizations coalesce: The war has already begun, he's now a prisoner in it — and it's time to start planning an escape.

Along with serene imagery, there are some touching moments in *Rescue Dawn*, such as the "my fridge" game, during which the men imagine favorite foods, or the way Gene from Eugene (Jeremy Davies) won't allow others to sniff a greasy food label he's kept to himself for months. There's a high degree of realism here, an almost neutrality of tone that underscores the banality of war. Actual leeches attach themselves to Dengler at one point, and I'd swear that's a real snake he's eating toward the end. Bale, as usual, does a fine job with the material he has. Whether you find his Dengler and *Rescue Dawn* effective will depend on your ability to appreciate Herzog's cold, impersonal view of his characters. Nowhere is Herzog's method more pronounced than when Dengler, safely aboard his vessel — it's not called *Rescue Dawn* for no reason — is surrounded by 1,000 cheering men. And the fiancée? She's nowhere in sight. **EW**

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