

A Companion to



WILEY-BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO FILM DIRECTORS

**A Companion to
Werner Herzog**

Edited by
Brad Prager

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Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Film Directors

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Contents

Notes on Contributors	viii
Acknowledgments	xiv
Werner Herzog's Companions: The Consolation of Images <i>Brad Prager</i>	1
Part I Critical Approaches and Contexts	33
1 Herzog and Auteurism: Performing Authenticity <i>Brigitte Peucker</i>	35
2 Physicality, Difference, and the Challenge of Representation: Werner Herzog in the Light of the New Waves <i>Lúcia Nagib</i>	58
3 The Pedestrian Ecstasies of Werner Herzog: On Experience, Intelligence, and the Essayistic <i>Timothy Corrigan</i>	80
Part II Herzog and the Inter-arts	99
4 Werner Herzog's View of Delft: Or, <i>Nosferatu</i> and the Still Life <i>Kenneth S. Calhoon</i>	101
5 Moving Stills: Herzog and Photography <i>Stefanie Harris</i>	127
6 Archetypes of Emotion: Werner Herzog and Opera <i>Lutz Koepnick</i>	149
7 Coming to Our Senses: The Viewer and Herzog's Sonic Worlds <i>Roger Hillman</i>	168

8	<i>Death for Five Voices: Gesualdo's "Poetic Truth"</i> Holly Rogers	187
9	Demythologization and Convergence: Herzog's Late Genre Pictures and the Rogue Cop Film in <i>Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call—New Orleans</i> Jaimey Fisher	208
Part III Herzog's German Encounters		231
10	"I don't like the Germans": Even Herzog Started in Bavaria Chris Wahl	233
11	Herzog's <i>Heart of Glass</i> and the Sublime of Raw Materials Noah Heringman	256
12	The Ironic Ecstasy of Werner Herzog: Embodied Vision in <i>The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner</i> Roger F. Cook	281
13	Tantrum Love: The Fiendship of Klaus Kinski and Werner Herzog Lance Duerfahrd	301
Part IV Herzog's Far-Flung Cinema Africa, Australia, the Americas, and Beyond		327
14	Werner Herzog's African Sublime Erica Carter	329
15	Didgeridoo, or the Search for the Origin of the Self: Werner Herzog's <i>Where the Green Ants Dream</i> and Bruce Chatwin's <i>The Songlines</i> Manuel Köppen	356
16	A March into Nothingness: The Changing Course of Herzog's Indian Images Will Lehman	371
17	The Case of Herzog: Re-Opened Eric Ames	393
18	The Veil Between: Werner Herzog's American TV Documentaries John E. Davidson	416
19	Herzog's Chickenshit Rembert Hüser	445
20	Encountering Werner Herzog at the End of the World Reinhild Steingröver	466

Part V Toward the Limits of Experience Philosophical Approaches	485
21 Perceiving the Other in the <i>Land of Silence and Darkness</i> Randall Halle	487
22 Werner Herzog's Romantic Spaces Laurie Johnson	510
23 The Melancholy Observer: Landscape, Neo-Romanticism, and the Politics of Documentary Filmmaking Matthew Gandy	528
24 Portrait of the Chimpanzee as a Metaphysician: Parody and Dehumanization in <i>Echoes from a Somber Empire</i> Guido Vitiello	547
25 Herzog and Human Destiny: The Philosophical Purposiveness of the Filmmaker Alan Singer	566
Filmography Compiled by Chris Wahl	587
Index	611

23

The Melancholy Observer

Landscape, Neo-Romanticism, and the Politics of Documentary Filmmaking

Matthew Gandy

The starting point for many of my films is a landscape, whether it be a real place or an imaginary or hallucinatory one from a dream, and when I write a script I often describe landscapes that I have never seen.

Werner Herzog¹

Werner Herzog is one of a number of film directors for whom landscape plays a pivotal role. Along with figures such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Terrence Malick, and Wim Wenders, Herzog's work has become closely associated with the cinematic experience of landscape. Whilst landscape forms a vibrant motif for many of his feature films, notably *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972), *Nosferatu—The Vampyre* (1979), and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), landscape also plays an extremely significant role in his documentary films. For Herzog, however, landscape is not a straightforward dimension to cinematic realism, in the sense of neo-realist or cinéma vérité approaches, but rather an exploratory terrain in itself that is capable of revealing insights beyond surface appearances. There is an eschatological aspect to Herzog's films that seeks an "inner truth" through extreme encounters with danger, deprivation, and death. Landscape emerges as a dramatic provocation for Herzog and his cinematic protagonists: an existential motif for mortality that contrasts the ephemerality of human life with the indifference and infinitude of nature.

The staging of landscapes in Herzog's work links with early expressionist forms of cinematic experimentation as well as more recent developments in independent cinema. There is an enigmatic dimension to Herzog's landscapes that invites

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contemplation and reflection: scenes such as figures dragging themselves across ice in *Bells from the Deep* (1993), or banks of windmills in *Signs of Life* (1968), illustrate Herzog's fascination with the hidden meaning of landscapes. For Herzog, landscapes appear to hold unique powers of creative inspiration: in his recent documentary about Antarctica, for example, *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007), the complex sound of seals under ice is comparable to avant-garde electronic music. In these and other similar moments Herzog reveals a realm of aesthetic experience that lies beyond our imaginative expectations. He seeks to surprise or confound his audiences through the use of cinematic imagery as a kind of aesthetic transcendence that instills thoughts and sensations that are not easily conveyed through conventional narrative structures.

Herzog has consistently decried what he sees as simplistic approaches to realism in documentary filmmaking. He has sought instead to present highly stylized and personalized accounts of people or phenomena that capture his creative imagination. His self-styled role as "hornet" rather than "fly-on-the-wall" signals a determination to use cinema as a form of aesthetic provocation (Häntzschel 2010: 3). Yet Herzog's attachment to a neo-romanticist Wagnerian aesthetic, marked by spectacular combinations of image, sound, and metaphysical contemplation, poses its own set of cultural and political tensions that are rarely considered in relation to his cinematic oeuvre.

Herzog, now based in Los Angeles, is arguably at the most successful point of his career and is reaching new, much wider audiences, particularly in the United States, as he cements his reputation as one of the great cinematic survivors, transcending both the German New Wave epithet and the confines of independent cinema. Over the last five years Herzog has experienced a career renaissance, driven in particular by the critical acclaim and commercial success of his documentaries *Grizzly Man* (2005) and *Encounters at the End of the World*. In the early 1990s, however, his position was much less secure: dogged by accusations of irresponsibility towards his cast in *Fitzcarraldo*, resolutely out of fashion, and facing open hostility at film festivals, it seemed as if Herzog was destined to both critical and commercial marginalization.

In this essay I focus on two of Herzog's documentaries—*Lessons of Darkness* (1992) and *Grizzly Man*—before reflecting on some of the cultural and political implications of his cinema. Although I make use of Herzog's own testimony—either from interviews or film commentary—I do not consider that his own words can provide more than a useful starting point for analysis since it is a characteristic feature of romanticist aesthetics to emphasize the role of the individual human subject rather than their cultural or political context. Indeed, the presence of the "extreme subject," which is a feature closely associated both with Herzog's own persona and those of his main cinematic protagonists, raises its own set of questions for any critical understanding of the enduring resonance of human encounters with landscape within contemporary cinema. With Herzog's extreme subject the Burkean notion of "sublime terror" takes on a literal connotation of

heightened self-awareness in the face of death so that cinema becomes a testing ground for the limits of human experience.

The Aesthetics of War

The collapse of the stellar universe will occur like creation—in grandiose splendor.
Werner Herzog (attributed to Blaise Pascal) in *Lessons of Darkness*²

Herzog has revealed that the opening quote of *Lessons of Darkness* was not in fact written by the philosopher Blaise Pascal but by himself in order to “elevate the audience into a higher level.”³ Whether Herzog uses this ruse to elicit a sense of faux profundity or perhaps inject a rare moment of sardonic humor into his philosophical exegesis, the key question is the status of “fabrication” in the context of documentary filmmaking. What is at stake here is the relationship between two different forms of truth: the faithful realization of artistic expression without compromise and the attempt to reveal a hitherto unnoticed or overlooked facet of reality.

The documentary *Lessons of Darkness*, concerning the aftermath of the first Gulf War, is among Herzog’s most controversial works. When the film was first shown at the Berlin Film Festival the director was not only booed by the audience but also spat at as he left the auditorium (Häntzschel 2010: 3). Such was the outrage at what was perceived as an aestheticization of war through his “science fiction” representation of recent historical events. The presentation of war as Wagnerian spectacle seemed a deliberate provocation with unsettling echoes of the European past. But can a distinction be drawn between “aestheticization”—deriving some kind of sensory delight from the aftermath of war—and the aesthetic exploration of the effects of war, through a serious engagement with landscapes produced by human conflict? The overwhelming emphasis from the opening frames is a meticulous exploration of the landscapes of war: the film is not an investigation into the causes or wider geo-political consequences of war but quite literally a survey of the landscapes produced by intense conflict.

Lessons of Darkness, centered on a pivotal collaboration with the aerial cinematography of Paul Berriff, is divided into thirteen parts and opens with a strikingly unfamiliar landscape set to the opening bars of Wagner’s *Rheingold*. “A planet in our solar system,” begins Herzog’s distinctive commentary, “White mountain ranges, clouds, a land shrouded in mist. The first creature we encountered tried to communicate something to us.” It becomes apparent that the scale of what we are seeing is quite different from what the opening commentary suggests: the “mountains” are in fact rubble, the “mist” is derived from plumes of smoke produced by burning oil, and the “creature” is a fire-fighter encased in protective clothing. In these and other scenes Herzog transposes classic romanticist imagery

to a contemporary setting: the sense of aesthetic estrangement and mode of philosophical contemplation in the art of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), for example, is now reprised in the context of these landscapes of destruction.⁴ In paintings such as *The Wanderer before the Sea of Fog* (1818) Friedrich depicts a lone figure looking out onto a swirling expanse of mist that renders the familiar indistinct so that we can just make out the edges of rocks and trees. Friedrich is certainly one of the most significant and consistent influences on Herzog’s cinematic imagination: in *Nosferatu*, for example, we encounter the figure of Jonathan Harker (played by Bruno Ganz) as he nears mist-shrouded cliffs (also set to Wagner’s *Rheingold*) while in another scene Lucy Harker (played by Isabelle Adjani) sits in a graveyard looking out towards the sea.⁵ Her small presence and the vastness of the sea is reminiscent of one of Friedrich’s most abstract works, *The Monk by the Sea* (1809), in which the frame is almost completely filled by a leaden sky. In *Lessons of Darkness*, by contrast, the references to Friedrich are more subtle: rather than showing us figures in contemplation we are invited to assume that role ourselves as the camera moves slowly across the landscape. We are joined with Herzog in his aesthetic reverie rather like the alternative romantic motif of two figures drawn closer together through their mutual apprehension of the strange or mysterious, as in Friedrich’s *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (1819). Herzog draws extensively on the nineteenth-century romantic tradition to enhance the aesthetic impact of his work: these motifs of landscape contemplation work very effectively in a cinematic context where the space is vastly enlarged in comparison with the original canvasses deployed by Friedrich and his contemporaries. A cinematic sublime emerges from the conjunction between romanticism and the cinematic apparatus itself to produce technologically enhanced forms of aesthetic experience.

Like the angels of Wim Wenders’ *Wings of Desire* (1987) or even Walter Benjamin’s reflections on the “angel of history,” inspired by Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus* (1921), the role of Herzog in *Lessons of Darkness* is that of a melancholy observer watching over human folly and despair. Unlike Benjamin, however, Herzog’s emphasis is on the production of geography rather than the unfolding of history: these unfamiliar science fiction landscapes have been removed from their historical context to create dramatic spaces for aesthetic and philosophical contemplation. Herzog is perplexed by what he finds as if he is a visitor from another world. As in previous documentaries Herzog makes extensive use of helicopter footage in order to survey a series of devastated landscapes: his lofty vantage point enabling a powerful sense of omniscience.⁶ This emphasis on the aesthetic impact of war makes the film markedly different from other documentaries about human conflict and also lends the work a degree of cultural and political ambiguity.

In the first part of the film, entitled simply *Eine Hauptstadt* (*A Capital City*), there is an aerial view of an unspecified city as if to underlie the universalist import of the unfolding events (Figure 23.1). As we near the city’s skyline the sounds of call to prayer reveal that this is a modern Islamic city though these architectural features serve to instill a sense of incongruity or otherworldliness: here is an urban



Figure 23.1 An aerial view of Kuwait City in *Lessons of Darkness* (1992). Directed by Werner Herzog, produced by Lucki Stipetić for Canal Plus, Première, and Werner Herzog Filmproduktion.

space that is contemporaneous yet radically different. The use of sweeping aerial views marks a reprise of Herzog's earlier survey of the town of Basse-Terre in *La Soufrière* (1977), in anticipation of a volcanic eruption on the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, only with *Lessons of Darkness* the threatened catastrophe actually takes place. "Something is looming over this city, this city that will soon be laid waste by war," intones Herzog, "Now it is still alive, biding its time. Nobody has come to suspect the impending doom." Kuwait City is presented as an unsuspecting living organism with cars flowing like corpuscles through its tree-lined avenues. The segue into war has a dream-like quality so that we see the grainy CNN footage of the city under attack and sounds of air raid warnings accompanied by Edvard Grieg's *Peer Gynt*. The choice of *Peer Gynt* lends the unfolding drama a plaintive almost abstract quality: the city under attack is presented as a flickering tableau like an impressive firework display as flares and tracer shells light up the night sky.

In the next part of the film, entitled *Nach der Schlacht* (*After the Battle*), we encounter an apocalyptic landscape with scattered animal bones, debris and smoke on the horizon, accompanied by the prelude to Wagner's *Parsifal*. "All we could find were traces," Herzog informs us. "Had human beings actually lived here? Had there ever been a city? The battle raged so ferociously that afterwards, grass would never grow here again." A modern civilization has been reduced to archaeological

remains in need of interpretation: the traces and craters resembling the surface of the moon as revealed by the Apollo space landings.

In *Lessons of Darkness* intricate combinations of sound are used to intensify the aesthetic power of the film: ambient sounds are often mixed with music, commentary, and other elements. We see destroyed radio towers accompanied by muffled radio transmissions like ignored voices of warning and restraint with the threads of communication now shattered. In the wake of intense destruction Herzog presents us with an eerie stillness punctuated only by his own commentary and carefully selected pieces of music to lend an intense sense of pathos to the devastated landscapes. The music and cinematography build a powerfully European aesthetic sensibility towards what are non-European landscapes: even the human figures are overwhelmingly specialist firefighters from overseas sent into inhospitable environments, attempting to restore some kind of order out of the postwar chaos, with only two women and a child drawn from the local population.

In one sequence, set to Prokofiev's *Sonata for Two Violins, Opus 56*, the camera pans across a terrifying arsenal of tools found in torture chambers including blood-spattered meat cleavers and household appliances transformed into instruments of terror. The exquisite beauty of the violin duet is juxtaposed with brutal evidence of violence and inhumanity. A mother who has witnessed her own sons tortured to death can only utter the word Allah and glances occasionally towards the sky. Herzog presents this intensity of human suffering as something beyond comprehension: a realm of cruelty and irrationality that cannot be explained. The only other comparable attempt by Herzog to explore similar themes is his film about the African despot Jean-Bédél Bokassa, *Echoes from a Somber Empire* (1990), made in collaboration with a journalist who had worked in the Central African Republic in the 1970s. In this harrowing and at times surreal film we encounter abandoned artifacts such as a fridge that is purported to have once stored human flesh, disturbing photographs, and other remnants of his nefarious reign.⁷ As in *Lessons of Darkness*, a sense of pathos is evoked through the combination of newsreel footage with classical music yet the precise circumstances surrounding Bokassa's rise to power or the geo-political interests that sustained his position for so long are never directly addressed.

In one striking sequence without commentary we see huge trucks and diggers moving amidst the rubble and flames in an inescapable evocation of the ruins of postwar German cities. These vehicles resemble dinosaurs or "giant beasts" roaming the landscape with their heat protective shells, mounted headlights resembling eyes, and jaw-like digging apparatus. The soothing *recordare* from Verdi's *Requiem* is used to accompany these lumbering mechanical creatures which creates a quite different effect to the dramatic use of Wagner elsewhere in the film: it appears that Herzog is seeking to produce forms of aesthetic experience that are not reducible to mere spectacle. In this case the use of Verdi suggests a restorative quality since these trucks and diggers appear to be "healing" the landscape.

Much of *Lessons of Darkness* focuses on the impact of the deliberate destruction of oil fields. Herzog examines, for example, the strange landscapes produced by oil spills where these reflective surfaces resemble lakes or waterlogged fields. Herzog even suggests that the oil is “trying to disguise itself as water” to instill a sense of duplicity and estrangement. We encounter huge swirls of black smoke twisting across the landscape like menacing tornadoes: the darkened sky presenting a vast spectacle of destruction. A series of immense oil fires become visible on the horizon accompanied by the funeral march to Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung* and a quote from the ninth Revelation—one of the most eschatological passages from the bible—in which “men shall seek death and not find it.” These burning landscapes evoke a sumptuous revelry of destruction that finds an uneasy historical corollary with fantasies of national renewal through violent erasure. The “sublime inferno” of burning oil wells resembles a vast volcanic eruption with rivers of molten lava, accompanied by a deafening roar of flames; even the ground itself seems to be melting. Most extraordinary perhaps is a bubbling expanse of hot oil that looks like a primordial soup as if geological rather than political forces were at play.

Insomuch as Herzog engages with the reasons for this devastation he comes close to suggesting that there is a human desire for destruction. In one telling sequence—*Leben ohne Feuer (Life Without Fire)*—we see firefighters re-igniting flames they have just extinguished by hurling lighted rags towards the oil. “Has life without fire become unbearable for them?” asks Herzog, as we see more wells being re-lit. “Others, seized by madness follow suit. Now they are content, now there is something to extinguish again.” There is a sense in which this destructive mania is condemned to be perpetually repeated: the human–fire interface is presented as a late modern “dance of death” that holds a peculiar and enduring fascination for the firefighters, who peep out from their protective clothing, taking a few drags on cigarettes that jut awkwardly from their oily faces, only meters from certain death.

The extensive use of Wagner to accompany the destructive power of war is without doubt one of the most contentious dimensions to *Lessons of Darkness*. Is Herzog using Wagner to venerate or deprecate these landscapes of destruction? Or is his ambivalence a deliberate provocation? Can Herzog’s use of Wagner be read as an ironic accompaniment to the denouement of war? Or is Herzog’s use of music a new kind of aesthetic synthesis, a series of experimental juxtapositions, which is not intended to evoke any specific historical references? The Wagnerian impulse towards the “total work of art” became transformed into the Hollywood spectacle of mass entertainment so that the actual use of Wagner in modern cinema evokes an uneasy cultural and historical lineage to the sensory overload of late-romanticist opera (Koepnick 2008: 203). In *Lessons of Darkness* Herzog evokes a cultural rather than an aesthetic disjuncture unlike other cinematic representations of the effects of war such as Roberto Rossellini’s *Germany Year Zero* (1948) where the combination of different sources of sound produces an uncanny effect: the sense of dissonance in *Lessons of Darkness*, by contrast, is philosophical rather than

aesthetic in origin. We encounter what Lutz Koepnick terms a “negative theology” rooted in the “sublime beauty of catastrophe” rather than a “modernist aesthetic of disruption and emotional restraint” (2008: 203). Yet Koepnick’s contention that Herzog moves “homeopathically, with Wagner beyond Wagner” (2008: 207) is hard to sustain, since there is little evidence that the use of Wagner in *Lessons of Darkness* is intended to play a redemptive role in a cultural or historical sense. It is more likely that Herzog chooses Wagner simply because he likes it and seeks to re-create or perfect earlier aesthetic juxtapositions in a new cinematic context: excerpts from *Parsifal*, for example, are used in *La Soufrière*, which is the closest thematic parallel to *Lessons of Darkness* in his previous work. Unlike Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Alexander Kluge, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, and other leading German film directors, Herzog does not use music to signal specific historical associations: with the possible exception of nineteenth-century music to accompany period landscapes Herzog’s overriding concern is the evocation of a particular kind of aesthetic experience that corresponds with his own powerfully expressed cinematic vision.⁸ In other words, we might characterize Herzog’s choice of music as an attempt to produce a form of “cinematic exceptionalism” that, with the exception of specific references to expressionist cinema, serves to intensify his authorial presence. Of other German filmmakers Wim Wenders is perhaps the closest exemplar for this kind of musical eclecticism. What we experience with Herzog is the further evolution of the cultural meaning of music, landscape, and the sublime, to produce a late-modern cinematic synthesis. Yet the occlusion of political or historical import brings Herzog much closer to the popular genres of cinematic spectacle that he attempts to differentiate himself from. Indeed, Herzog’s more recent and highly successful foray into large-scale film production suggests that his skills as a filmmaker—irrespective of his inchoate cultural agenda—serve to further confuse the historical relationships between different elements of his work.

In the penultimate part of *Lessons of Darkness* Herzog’s commentary falls away to leave an ambient soundscape set to Schubert’s *Notturmo* (this elegiac music is also used to accompany a chain-smoking chimpanzee at the close of *Echoes from a Somber Empire*). We see the now slowed down and graceful movements of the firefighters: their faces are covered in a film of oil but their eyes are clearly visible. After a burning oil well is finally capped a stillness falls across the devastated landscape. Yet in the closing part of the film, *Ich bin so müde vom Seufzen; Herr, laß es Abend werden (I am so weary of sighing, O Lord, grant that night cometh)* we return to the vast landscapes of destruction: a line of fires in the gloaming, as night and day merge into a smoky darkness without any commentary. For this final scene Herzog uses Mahler’s second symphony—the resurrection—to re-introduce the sense of foreboding and otherworldliness he presents at the start of the film.

Though *Lessons of Darkness* contains elements of a humanist eloquence—most notably through the extensive depiction of firefighters—the overwhelming mood is somber and fatalistic. The landscapes exemplify Herzog’s neo-romanticist cinematic vision, combining elements from his earlier films into a powerful synthesis

of images, music, ambient soundscapes, and evocative commentary. *Lessons of Darkness* can be interpreted as an elaborate remake of his earlier "disaster movie" about an expected volcanic eruption which did not happen in *La Soufrière*, which also opens with vast plumes of smoke, and makes extensive use of helicopter footage of the deserted nearby town of Basse-Terre. In *La Soufrière* Herzog's commentary makes a direct allusion to the now empty town as a "science fiction" locale and there are several scenes of animals having effectively taken over the streets. His interest in dystopian science fiction landscapes can be read as a metaphor for the end of modernity: an eschatological fantasy of redemption that eschews the possibilities for progress (see Jameson 1982). There is a tragic inevitability about *Lessons of Darkness* which conveys these landscapes of disaster not as the outcome of neo-imperial conquest in the Middle East but rather as a fatalistic denouement for modernity.

The Indifference of Nature

I believe the common denominator of the universe is not harmony but chaos, hostility, and murder.

Werner Herzog in *Grizzly Man*

There is a brutal immediacy about Herzog's award-winning *Grizzly Man* that poses a profound challenge towards benign or sentimentalized conceptions of nature. For audiences inured to aesthetically soothing or entertaining representations of nature the film has proved something of a revelation. The release of *Grizzly Man* coincided with an upsurge of interest in documentary films stemming from various sources including new approaches to investigative reporting, technological advances in digital media, and changes in popular culture. Expectations of cinema audiences are now more predisposed to various forms of "reality culture" that purport to bring viewers much closer to their subjects. Cinematic expectations have changed as part of a wider shift in the forms and vocabularies of contemporary visual culture. For Herzog, the re-emergence of the documentary as a powerful cinematic presence is also related to a growing saturation with virtual realities so that audiences are eager to experience films in which they "can trust their eyes again" (Walters 2007: 66).⁹ Yet Herzog's relationship with his audience is both awkward and attenuated: he seeks to dominate possible interpretations of his work and simultaneously liberate the viewer through various forms of aesthetic didacticism.

With *Grizzly Man* we already know the end at the beginning: Timothy Treadwell, a maverick environmentalist, has recently been killed, along with his girlfriend Amie Huguenard, by one of the Alaskan bears which he has lived alongside for thirteen summers in the remote Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge. Over the last

three years of his life Treadwell recorded extensive film footage in Alaska that Herzog has edited and extensively used in his film. The incorporation of Treadwell's own material is highly effective since it allows us to see how he wishes to present himself to the outside world, as a lone protector of the bears and "kind warrior" living in harmony with nature. The documentary clearly reveals, however, that the bears within this federally protected area were not in any danger, that poaching was extremely rare, and that if anything Treadwell's eccentric behavior towards the bears was endangering them by giving an impression that any human presence might be harmless. Indeed, the interview with the curator from Alaska's Alutiiq Museum suggests that Treadwell's antics were not only "disrespectful" towards the animals but towards Alutiiq culture as well.

Treadwell forges what he believes are relationships with the bears, often talking to them as if they were human. By anthropomorphizing the bears Treadwell began to believe that he was safe among them, needing only to show "strength" on occasion to maintain his peaceful interaction. For Herzog, however, Treadwell fatally misread nature, projecting his own fantasies of ecological companionship onto an alien realm of raw survival. "In all the faces of the bears Treadwell filmed," remarks Herzog, "I can see no kinship, no understanding, no mercy. I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature. This blank stare speaks only of a half-bored interest in food." In Treadwell's final footage of a bear—his likely killer—he presents a scene which at first appears playful: the bear repeatedly dives into a fast-flowing river and balances awkwardly on one of its paws. Yet this slightly comical scene of an ungainly bear perched upside down in a river may in fact have represented something quite different: a hungry bear searching in desperation for salmon carcasses to eat before going into hibernation. In one of the most telling scenes Treadwell must confront the brutal side to nature itself after finding the remains of a bear cub eaten by other bears (probably either for food or by male bears to suppress female lactation and prolong the mating season). These and other instances of violence in nature clearly unsettled Treadwell's conception of nature as essentially benign. "Perfection belonged to the bears," notes Herzog, "but once in a while Treadwell came face-to-face with the harsh reality of wild nature."

Herzog describes his cinematic encounter with Treadwell as "a film of astonishing beauty and death" that connects with "human ecstasies and darkest inner turmoil." We are in classic Herzog terrain here that links Treadwell with a litany of his other cinematic protagonists. "As if there was a desire in him to leave the confinements of his humanness, and bond with the bears," reflects Herzog, "Treadwell reached out seeking a primordial encounter. But in doing so he crossed an invisible borderline." For Herzog, there is a tragic inevitability to the Treadwell story: a death foretold through his delusional attachment to a conception of nature that does not exist. Herzog is clearly drawn to aspects of Treadwell's personality: his fearlessness in the face of danger, his physical endurance, and his obsession for an imaginary nature. In many ways Treadwell is the classic Herzogian figure,

making a futile gesture in the face of immense adversity, yet at the same time Treadwell emerges as something of an anti-hero, a deluded and paranoid opponent of a narcissistic modern culture to which he is nonetheless integrally related.

When we return by helicopter to the place where Treadwell and Huguenard were killed we are confronted with a much more inhospitable environment than Treadwell's own video footage ever revealed: among the tangled mass of vegetation and clouds of mosquitoes we are shown a bear's rib bone—all that is left of the bear which killed them. The interview with the coroner is harrowing as he relates relevant details about the dismembered body parts recovered from the bear's stomach. In the most chilling scene of all, however, we see Herzog himself listening to the audiotape of their deaths—the camera in their tent had been switched on at the moment of attack but there was no time to remove the lens cap. After a few minutes Herzog asks for the tape to be stopped and suggests that it should be destroyed. Herzog's role here as "observer" is powerfully reinforced: he controls what we may see or hear, but his call for the tape to be disposed of suggests that he may be the last person to ever encounter it. Herzog places himself in the role of a cultural adventurer—the contents of the tape are so extreme that only he can or should listen—and we as an audience must simply look on and observe his reactions. This narrative device underpins a sense of aesthetic limits in conveying horror so that Herzog's words and the sound we cannot hear are combined to dramatic effect.

Treadwell's cinematic encounter with Alaska involved a meticulous effort to record himself in order to produce his own testimony and control the way in which his life might be perceived. "As a filmmaker," notes Herzog, "he was methodical, often repeating one short take fifteen times." Treadwell sought to craft his persona through a combination of rhetorical and technological means. Herzog is especially fascinated by the accidental moments captured in Treadwell's film footage where, for example, the camera is left running with no one in the frame. Herzog finds that these "seemingly empty moments had a strange secret beauty" where "sometimes images themselves develop their own life." It is certainly characteristic of Herzog's work to lend agency, or at least a form of serendipity, to nature and landscape itself, so that unanticipated variations in wind, light, and other elements become incorporated into the filmmaking process. To these interstitial moments Herzog adds music or commentary so that his documentary becomes partly about the film that Treadwell is trying to make, as he inadvertently contributes to another, as yet unknown project, which is that of Herzog himself. So intense is Herzog's encounter with Treadwell that the film begins to encompass autobiographical elements of Herzog's own struggles with filmmaking:

Beyond his posings, the camera was his only present companion, it was his instrument to explore the wilderness around him, but increasingly it became something more, he started to scrutinize his innermost being, his demons, his exhilarations, facing the lens of a camera took on the quality of a confessional.¹⁰

Towards the end of the film Herzog takes a helicopter across the glacier that separates Treadwell's wilderness from the modern world. This icy terrain is described by Herzog as a "gigantic complexity of tumbling ice and abysses," a "landscape in turmoil" that "is a metaphor of his soul." "It was clear to me that this was not a film about wild nature," reflects Herzog, "it was going to be a film about human nature" (Holdenraber 2009: 39).¹¹ By rejecting the possibilities for knowing nature—as Treadwell thought he could—the film becomes an exploration of those who seek refuge in nature as an escape from modernity, mortality, or the limitations of human relationships.

Neo-Romanticism and the Ecstasy of Truth

What, if anything, lies beyond the human—God or the gods, the daemon or Nature—is matter for great disagreement.

Thomas Weiskel (1976: 3)

The cinema of Herzog is characterized by a striving for transcendence through dramatic juxtapositions between the human figure and the vastness of nature. The "ecstasy of truth" that Herzog seeks reflects the post-Enlightenment drive towards the expansion of the sensory realm: a proliferation of new modes and extremes of expressive possibility that accompanied a loosening of ties to doctrinal certainty and social convention. In this sense we can link Herzog's cinema to what Thomas Weiskel has termed "the larger drama of Romantic transcendence" and specific elements of the German romantic tradition with its pivotal focus on the opposition between the human realm and the "infinite" of nature (1976: 5).¹² There is, though, something of a paradox here because the rise of the cinematic sublime, as it has emerged since the 1970s in the cinema of Herzog, Tarkovsky, and others, coincides with a move away from idealist understandings of human consciousness and a fading of the universal human subject. At the same time, however, we cannot ignore the "unknowable" or what lies beyond rational discourse as part of the legitimate scope of cinema.¹³

Though Herzog alludes to a spiritual dimension to his work—he acknowledges a "distant echo" from his earlier Catholicism—he is largely antithetical to organized or institutionalized forms of religious belief (Phipps 2003). The cinema of Herzog is marked by a pantheistic spirituality where sacred spaces are to be found within nature or landscape itself. His documentary *Bells from the Deep*, for example, explores the persistence of Christian belief in remote Siberian communities yet at the same time hints at the dangers of manipulation by self-styled healers, exorcists, and other unscrupulous individuals. Though Herzog has repeatedly derided New Age hokum—even ending his long-standing musical collaboration with Florian Fricke for this reason—he is nonetheless a filmmaker in perpetual search of hidden

meanings or universalist forms of "cinematic transcendence" that belie the European cultural heritage that informs his work.¹⁴

From the late 1970s onwards Herzog's documentaries have been increasingly marked by the authorial presence of the director himself through his characteristically evocative approach to commentary. Herzog has stated that the use of his own voice gives his works "authenticity and credibility" but to English-speaking audiences his accent adds a further dimension: that of Herzog as a German auteur, taking us on a distinctive kind of cinematic journey (Walters 2007: 66). Filmmaking is invoked by Herzog as a kind of instinctive vocation that cannot be taught in any formal sense: in interviews he reminds us that he was never an assistant to another director and never went to film school.¹⁵ For Herzog, filmmaking entails a physicality of direct confrontation with landscape: in *The Dark Glow of the Mountains* (1984), for example, Reinhold Messner and his companion Hans Kammerlander scale the dangerous mountain peak of Nanga Parbat in northern Pakistan, using the so-called "alpine style" of climbing with minimal equipment. Panoramic shots of vast mountain ranges are interspersed with details of treacherous torrents, deep crevasses, and sheer rock faces. In these and other films Herzog reveals a certain contempt for "ordinariness," the soft comforts of modernity are eschewed for a harder and more "authentic" mode of being. In *La Soufrière*, for example, Herzog risked his own life, and that of his crew, by filming a volcano which was on the verge of exploding: he was particularly fascinated by the handful of people who refused to evacuate and were calmly awaiting their deaths. Yet more recently Herzog appears to have tempered his views on dangerous confrontations with nature suggesting that climbing may involve a "disrespect of the mountains" and is not so far removed from the damaging effects of tourism (Holdengräber 2009: 31).

Herzog contends that "landscapes can be stage directed" so that physical reality can be made to conform to his imaginary landscapes.¹⁶ His refusal to use digital effects in order to embellish his films produces a somewhat paradoxical version of cinematic reality as a form of physical presence. The "ghost" of *Rescue Dawn* (2006), for example, is an actor whose skin has been lightened by make up whilst the ship in *Fitzcarraldo* is no model or computer-generated image but a real steamship being dragged over a hill. These modifications of landscape as a cinematic stage to be altered at will are reminiscent of Antonioni's direct manipulation of color in films such as *Red Desert* (1964) and *Zabriskie Point* (1970).¹⁷ Like Antonioni, Herzog places great emphasis on the intricate details of landscape, and the degree to which landscapes both reflect and instill the emotional states of his cinematic protagonists. Whereas Antonioni's figures tend to have a more passive relationship to space, however, we find that Herzog's characters seek to transcend their insignificance through wild or futile gestures.

For Herzog, landscape is itself a cinematic protagonist: he has suggested that many of his ideas emerge directly from landscapes themselves, whether those he has seen or in other cases simply imagined. Landscape typically precedes the development of a screenplay and is often inspired by the study of maps or other

cartographic sources: contours, symbols, and unfamiliar place names becoming incorporated into a vivid cinematic tableau. The sense of poetic contemplation in Herzog's cinema is heightened by the use of slow tracking shots or long takes, to add an elusive or indefinable quality to everyday spaces or situations. His work is marked by a striving towards aesthetic limits, drawing inspiration from figures such as the German renaissance painter Matthias Grünewald, the Dutch landscape painter Hercules Segers, the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin, and even mathematical propositions such as Zorn's Lemma, proposed by the mathematician Max Zorn in 1935 (Herzog 2009: 152). Though Herzog's cinematic oeuvre cannot be reduced to the German romantic tradition there is nonetheless a clear resonance between his cinema and the drive towards new forms of self-expression that gathered momentum in German art and literature from the eighteenth century onwards: the landscapes of emotion explored by Hölderlin, for example, are suggestive of a "poetic truth" that Herzog has sought to capture in his cinema.¹⁸ Similarly, Herzog's disavowal of what he terms the "accountant's truth" finds echoes with the idea of truth as "essence" developed by Martin Heidegger.¹⁹ Herzog shares with Heidegger a rejection of naïve forms of empiricism or "actuality" and the emphasis on truth as a form of revealing or manifestation of "primordial essence" (Heidegger 1993: 133). Heidegger draws a contrast, for example, between the "imperishable and eternal" characteristics of metaphysical truth and the "transitoriness and fragility that belongs to man's essence" (1993: 124). There are connections here between Herzog's emphasis on the insignificance of human life in the face of nature and the development of existentialism in the writings of not only Heidegger but also Camus. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), for example, Camus reflects on absurdity, mortality, and the illusion of freedom: like Herzog he is drawn to those figures who rail against the universe.²⁰ It is perhaps also Herzog's ambivalence towards religion—especially organized forms of Christianity—that also places him beyond the pantheistic impulse of nineteenth-century Romanticism and links his worldview to existentialist currents of European thought (see Gandy 1996).

There is a restlessness that pervades Herzog's work that extends from an anthropological fascination with non-Western or pre-modern cultures to a repeated questioning of the limitations of modernity. In André Bazin's essay on "Cinema and Exploration" he connects the postwar demand for "realism" with the cinematic legacy of European empires and the drive to document remote or unfamiliar places. Writing in the 1950s Bazin describes cinematic attempts to probe the "experimental psychology as it were of an adventurer" which could easily apply to Herzog and his use of cinema as a means to reveal hidden worlds (Bazin 1967: 156). More recently, however, Herzog has acknowledged that the frontier of the "unknown" is receding, which may partly explain his growing fascination with hidden spaces under ice (*Encounters at the End of the World*), above trees (*The White Diamond*, 2004), or in caves (*Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, 2010).²¹ It is clearly part of Herzog's delight as a filmmaker to reveal parts of the earth that human beings

cannot ordinarily see without technical assistance so that these hidden worlds or neo-romanticist “peaks” are brought into view as hitherto unseen spaces of wonder or contemplation.

Herzog’s documentaries have little in common with “mainstream” documentary filmmaking and elude simple categorizations (Walters 2007: 66). For Herzog, “truth” as such does not reside in the faithful recording of events but is something to be found within the landscape itself or hidden in the tortured psyche of its human occupants. There is, therefore, a juxtaposition of anti-realism—the repudiation of a naïve faith in external appearances—with an insistence that what is truly real lies hidden beneath the surface of both his human protagonists and the threatening landscapes with which they must contend. Herzog repeatedly contrasts what he terms “the ecstasy of truth” with the limitations of *cinéma vérité*, arguing that because facts do not produce truth, filmmakers should seek to articulate deeper forms of truth (Aftab 2006). In discussing his documentary about the lives of the deaf-blind, *Land of Silence and Darkness* (1971), for example, Herzog makes one of his many trenchant critiques of *cinéma vérité* and what he sees as the narrow conventions of documentary film making:

It’s a documentary, although a very stylized one. None of the documentaries I’ve made have been *cinéma vérité* ... I think *cinéma vérité* is something we should get rid of pretty soon and consign to oblivion. There’ll always be a renaissance of *cinéma vérité*, but it’s only the simplest form of truth. There are more dimensions of truth than that offered by *cinéma vérité*.²²

In *Land of Silence and Darkness* the central figure, the deaf-blind activist Fini Straubinger, who gradually lost her sight and hearing after a childhood accident, describes her experience in terms of an inner landscape. Her vivid description of being cut off from the world as a still lake where two black rivers meet provides an insight into extreme forms of sensory deprivation. At the same time, however, the moving testimony of Straubinger powerfully reinforces Herzog’s faith in landscape as an inner reality.

Conclusions

Herzog is a brilliant yet at times disingenuous filmmaker who encourages his work to be viewed within a context of cinematic exceptionalism: his auteur status as explorer of hitherto unseen cinematic realms—whether real or imagined—is combined with a panoply of distinctive aesthetic motifs that render his work immediately recognizable. Any attempt to engage specifically with his documentary work, however, runs up against a difficulty of orientation since all his films contain documentary elements yet none of his films are pure works of documentary.²³ Herzog’s antipathy towards *cinéma vérité*—exemplified by his Minnesota Declaration of 1999—can also be viewed as a rhetorical maneuver to subvert possibilities for the appraisal of his work. The pervasive separation of Herzog’s

“pure cinematic vision” from its cultural and political context serves to subvert the scope of critical interpretation. The evasions that pervade Herzog’s cinematic persona are powerfully revealed in his documentary films where questions of legitimacy, veracity, and cultural purpose become most pressing.²⁴

Herzog is interested in extreme landscapes that test his cinematic protagonists to their limits; these adventurers, however, are invariably half-crazed Caucasian men. Landscape becomes a masculinist metaphor for courage, endurance, and self-realization: mountains to be climbed, forests to be penetrated, and icy wastes to be traversed. Women are almost completely absent from Herzog’s cinema. It is not without irony that Amie Huguenard is the “invisible” partner of Treadwell, also killed, and yet little more than a ghostly presence within *Grizzly Man*.

Herzog’s self-styled outsider status, combined with his exaggerated embrace of “the other,” is most powerfully evoked by his fascination with “tropical” landscapes. There is a latent primitivism that runs through his work that suggests an underlying ambivalence or even antipathy towards modernity itself.²⁵ In comparison with the furor that accompanied the release of *Lessons of Darkness* in 1992 the problematic dimensions to Herzog’s more recent works have received much more muted critical responses. The use of exoticized stereotypes for Laotian people in *Rescue Dawn*, for example, has scarcely been commented on yet the film differs little from the “heart of darkness” genre of post-Vietnam War movies except in its even more visceral attempts at cinematic realism.

It is as if Herzog’s recent rediscovery through his documentaries has coincided with a widening distance between his work and its original cultural context. The cinema of Herzog raises pressing questions about landscape, perception, and human subjectivity; it is his documentary films, however, that most poignantly reveal the tensions between cinematic truth—in all its complexity—and his neo-romanticist drive towards self-expression.

Notes

- 1 See Cronin (2002: 83).
- 2 Herzog’s original pastiche of Blaise Pascal reads: “Der Zusammenbruch der Sternwelten wird sich—wie die Schöpfung—in grandioser Schönheit vollziehen.” Hans Günther Pflaum has suggested that some of the translations of Herzog’s interviewees may also have been altered for dramatic effect. The question, however, in this context is whether the presence of some form of fabrication immediately renders the film problematic as a war documentary where questions of truth and veracity are highly charged. See Pflaum (2010).
- 3 Werner Herzog, “The Conquest of the Useless.” In conversation with Paul Holdengräber, Royal Festival Hall, London, as part of a film retrospective organized by V22, Intelligence Squared, and the Barbican (October 3, 2009).
- 4 On romantic imagery in Herzog’s films see Gandy (1996). See also Prager (2010).
- 5 See also Rentschler (1986). On the origins of the prelude to Wagner’s *Rheingold* see Darcy (1989).

- 6 For logistical reasons Herzog was not in fact with his cinematographer Paul Berriff when the helicopter footage of Kuwait was taken. See the account in Cronin (2002: 247).
- 7 Unusually, Herzog gives the central stage to a journalist, Michael Goldsmith, who relates his experience of working in the Central African Republic during the 1970s, including his imprisonment as a suspected spy, along with interviews with a range of key figures from that era, including the former president David Dacko and members of Bokassa's family.
- 8 See also Hillman (2005).
- 9 See also Rich (2006).
- 10 Comments from Herzog's "Audio Commentary" (2005).
- 11 See also Everschor (2010).
- 12 On contemporary readings of the sublime see Crowther (1989) and Morley (2010). For greater detail on the tensions between "rationalism" and "irrationalism" in the German Enlightenment see Kondylis (2002).
- 13 See, for example, Pence (2004).
- 14 Werner Herzog interviewed by Jonathan Demme, Museum of the Moving Image, New York City, June 5, 2008.
- 15 Mentioned in the course of the interview conducted by Laurens Straub in Christian Weisenborn and Erwin Keusch's documentary *I Am My Films—A Portrait of Werner Herzog* (1978).
- 16 The comment was made at "Werner Herzog: Conquest of the Useless" (2009).
- 17 On Antonioni's landscapes see Gandy (2003, 2006).
- 18 See poems such as "An die Natur" in Hölderlin (1988). For an analysis of Hölderlin's later works see Santner (1986).
- 19 See Zimmerman (1990).
- 20 Camus, for example, draws on Heidegger's interpretation of the relationship between consciousness and mortality as a form of absurdity. See Camus (1975).
- 21 See "Werner Herzog's Cave Art Documentary Takes 3D into the Depths" at www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2010/apr/13/werner-herzog-cave-art-documentary-3d (accessed October 15, 2010).
- 22 Quotation from the interview conducted by Laurens Straub in *I Am My Films—A Portrait of Werner Herzog*.
- 23 See, for example, Bingham (2003); Kriest (2008); and Orgeron and Orgeron (2007). It is clear that Herzog's work does not fit easily into categorizations of documentary cinema devised by Bill Nichols and others. See Nichols (1991).
- 24 On Herzog as a persona see Corrigan (1986).
- 25 On relations between primitivism and twentieth-century modernism see, for example, Charles Harrison *et al.* (1993). The presence of exoticism in Herzog's cinema remains somewhat underexplored but see Lemarié (2008).

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Portrait of the Chimpanzee as a Metaphysician

Parody and Dehumanization in *Echoes from a Somber Empire*

Guido Vitiello

To call Echoes from a Somber Empire a "documentary" is like saying that Warhol's painting of Campbell's soup cans is a document about tomato soup.
Werner Herzog (Cronin 2002: 242)

The real truths are those that can be invented.

Karl Kraus (1986: 60)

Echo/Icon: The Truth of a False Etymology

In his bizarrely erudite and immensely imaginative *Etymologiae* (624–636), which not by chance wielded a deep influence on Jorge Luis Borges, Isidore of Seville, the early medieval scholar, claims that there is a close kinship between the words *Echo* and *Eikôn*, the latter being the Greek term for "image" or "icon." As he writes in the chapter "On common stones" (*De lapidibus vulgaribus*):

Icon is a rock which captures the sound of a human voice, even imitates spoken words. *Icon* is Greek, *imago* Latin, for image; responding to the voice of another, the image of speech is made (Isidore 2005: XVI, 3, 4).

A millenary tradition going back to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and to the intertwined myths of Echo and Narcissus establishes a connection between the realms of the