



Volume 15, No 1, Spring 2020

ISSN 1932-1066

Werner Herzog's Ecstatic Truth

Katrina Mitcheson

University of the West of England, UK

katrina.mitcheson@uwe.ac.uk

Abstract: In his stimulating discussion of Werner Herzog's work, Richard Eldridge emphasizes that Herzog's films are truth-disclosing. At the same time Eldridge acknowledges that Herzog makes clear the presence of the filmmaker and the process of filmmaking. In this essay, I explore further how the emphasis upon interpretation and perspective that one finds in Herzog's films can be reconciled with Herzog's notion of ecstatic truth. Eldridge's move to relate Herzog's work to Pierre Hadot's discussion of spiritual exercises is key to resolving this apparent tension, because it allows one to better understand the relationship between the subject and truth. I argue that an understanding of truth is operative in Herzog's films that is comparable to Friedrich Nietzsche's understanding of truth; in which the practice of truth involves a gradual breaking of habits and a purification of false beliefs which is ultimately transformative.

Keywords: Herzog, Werner; Eldridge, Richard; Hadot, Pierre; Nietzsche, Friedrich; ecstatic truth; spiritual exercises; conversion; perspective.

Richard Eldridge—steeped in both the details of Herzog's prolific oeuvre and the German philosophy that informs the cultural and intellectual legacy in which Herzog works creatively—ably and engagingly demonstrates the philosophical richness of Herzog's films. The various Herzogian themes that Eldridge picks out; nature, religion, the absurd, artistic practice, the cost of so-called civilization, selfhood, the human quest for meaning, the sublime, spiritual exercises, and the nature of truth, all intersect. It is the problem of truth that I wish to focus on in my response to this welcome study of Herzog's philosophical filmmaking.

Eldridge emphasizes that Herzog's films aim at a disclosure of a deeper truth than the banalities of the technological, capitalist, civilized world, writing of:

a disclosure of something fundamental—the whole of nature, the self-development of the Absolute, the fact

of the ocean—that surrounds and shapes everything we do, but that fails to present itself within the orbit of business as usual.¹

Eldridge insists that "Herzog is interested in ecstatic truth disclosed by way of aesthetic images" (*WH* 171). When Herzog introduces the term ecstatic truth he suggests it is something inherently "mysterious and elusive" and also refers to it as a "poetic" truth.² Herzog thus seems to be suggesting that art works

¹ Richard Eldridge, *Werner Herzog: Filmmaker and Philosopher*, London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic 2019, p. 13. [Henceforth cited as *WH*]

² Werner Herzog, "The Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema," in *Herzog on Herzog*, ed. Paul Cronin, London, UK: Faber and Faber 2002, pp. 301-302, here p. 301. [Henceforth cited as *MD*]

or aesthetic experience can reveal a truth that is not otherwise articulable or available to the spectator, but what this involves he leaves obscure. Cinema's ecstatic truth, or "deeper stratum of truth" as Herzog also describes it, lies in contrast to the "accountant's truth," which Herzog maintains is of no interest to him.³ To speak of a deeper truth relies on such a contrast, it implies that there is a something which eludes our existing approach to truth. A clue to what this deeper truth might be is in the many examples, which Eldridge describes in his book, of how Herzog's films linger on the power and chaos of nature and evoke that which cannot be captured in culturally coded imagery. The presence of the sublimity of nature in Herzog's films, such as the immensity of the Amazon or the force of a rapid, when combined with his claim that art works can possess a deeper truth, put one in mind of Arthur Schopenhauer's understanding of world as will, as the violent truth underlying the world of representation or particulars.⁴ On this basis one could construe Herzog's ecstatic truth as Schopenhauer's will; a blind striving that can only be intimated through aesthetic experience and is not reducible to representational terms.

Herzog's own films, however, complicate this reading. While Herzog suggests that art can give one insight into a more fundamental truth, which contrasts to or is obscured by a truth that one can grasp in language and codes of representation, there is also in Herzog's work the clear presence of the filmmaker's art and the activity of representation. The spectator might be powerfully moved if one gives oneself up to his images, but I do not think the viewer is entirely lost in the rapids in *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) or in the drift of the clouds in *Nosferatu* (1979), thus one is neither experiencing Schopenhauer's deparicularized idea of rapids, nor that one is unified with the clouds. Certainly, when taking any one of the films as a whole, the spectator is always pulled back to an awareness of oneself as a viewer and of Herzog as a director who is imposing a recognizable style on his films. To encounter his images does not, I think, involve a loss of self or a transcendence of the particular. Neither the filmmaker,

nor the viewer disappear – the latter being a criterion of aesthetic contemplation for Schopenhauer (*WWR* 195-212).

Eldridge's discussion of Herzog is sensitive to this aspect of Herzog's films. Agreeing with Roger Hillman's comments on Herzog's imposition of voice-over in place of characters' speech, Eldridge notes the presence of Herzog as filmmaker in his work (*WH* 23). Eldridge also refers to Alan Singer who goes even further than that by suggesting that through techniques such as tracking shots or the presence of the camera Herzog's films reveal the conditions of viewing (*WH* 33-4). This aspect of Herzog's filmmaking is also what struck me previously, when I used Herzog's work as an exemplar of clear signaling of interpretation, in order to help explore the problem of how to understand Friedrich Nietzsche's mature perspectivism.⁵ In using Herzog in this way, I never claimed to be describing Herzog's own views on truth rather than employing his films to deepen one's understanding of how the overt presence of perspective, and the use of fictions, can be truthful in Nietzsche's sense, in which perspectives are understood to be inescapable and there is no truth beyond the activity of interpretation. Yet, while I did not see Herzog as himself advancing a Nietzschean perspectivism, my initial experience of Herzog's films was that he is a filmmaker who had no pretense to objectivity, and who asserts his own perspective into the narrative; this is why his films had and have an appeal to me as a vehicle for understanding what a perspectival truth could be. Hence, I turned to Herzog's work in order to understand how one can be truthful by presenting, and signaling the presence of perspective, rather than by trying to step out of all perspectives, thereby supporting my claim that Nietzsche's insistence on the inescapability of perspective, most famously argued in *On the Genealogy of Morality* where he claims that, "There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival 'knowing'," is not a rejection of a truth but a different understanding of truth.⁶

Eldridge however, suggests that Singer goes too far in his emphasis on the visibility of construction in Herzog's work, and that the viewer's awareness of the

³ Werner Herzog, "Fact and Truth," in *Herzog on Herzog*, ed. Paul Cronin, London, UK: Faber and Faber 2002, pp. 238-272, here p. 240. [Henceforth cited as *FT*]

⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume I, transl. E. F. J. Payne, New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1969. [Henceforth cited as *WWR*]

⁵ Katrina Mitcheson, "Truth, Autobiography and Documentary: Perspectivism in Nietzsche and Herzog," *Film-Philosophy* 17/1 (December 2013), 348-366.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, transl. Carol Diethe, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 2002, p. 87.

processes of construction does not prevent disclosure of something beyond this construction (WH 35). In the light of Eldridge's criticism of Singer's reading of Herzog and his putting the emphasis instead on the possibility that Herzog's films offer a disclosure of truth, I want to revisit what might be seen as a tension. If Herzog's presence as a filmmaker is so overt how does one square this with the idea of a deeper truth that his films may reveal? I find myself wondering why I saw in Herzog a source for exploring perspectival truth, despite his own statements on the pursuit of ecstatic truth, and his tendencies toward romantic imagery and sublime subject matters.

Eldridge is right in emphasizing that Herzog is interested in truth, a truth that transcends a coded and mechanized world. But I think the way in which construction is signaled in his films also has to be brought into dialogue with this goal. The extent to which Herzog imposes his own voice, whether in his own voice-overs, by scripting what his protagonists say, for instance in his interviews with Dieter Dengler,⁷ or by inventing quotes, for example by attributing his own words to Pascal (WH 54), is something which has to be incorporated into one's account of the deeper truth Herzog says he believes his films can express. Following Richard Wollheim, Eldridge briefly suggests that "both forms of awareness are aspects of the same experience," that is, the spectators can be aware of both the construction of the filmic image and of what this image presents and discloses to them (WH 35). But I would be very keen to see how Eldridge might unpack this further. How does Eldridge think that the self-signaling film techniques that have been pointed to by Singer, work with or contribute to the possibility of the experience of a deeper or ecstatic truth? What does Eldridge think Herzog's strong presence as a filmmaker in his own films says about how we should understand the disclosure of a deeper or ecstatic truth that he has emphasized in his account of Herzog's work?

Herzog goes far beyond merely signaling to the viewers that they are watching a film through camera techniques; this is evidenced by his documentaries which are explicitly and unashamedly interpretative. While Herzog's statements on ecstatic truth and his focus on the striving found in nature suggest that his

idea of cinematic truth is most akin to Schopenhauer's will, or to the Dionysian truth evoked in Nietzsche's early work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in which the influence of Schopenhauer looms large, the overt interpretation present in Herzog's films has an affinity with Nietzsche's mature perspectivism. Hence, one must not be too quick to reduce Herzog's understanding of truth to the contrast between representation and a deeper reality that is present in Schopenhauer and arguably also in the early Nietzsche. Rather, one may find a more complex view of truth in Herzog's films, such as the one which Nietzsche grapples with in his late work. Nietzsche's mature philosophy may thus help one to elucidate what Herzog means by ecstatic truth and how his films contribute to a philosophical understanding of truth just as I have previously argued Herzog's films help one understand Nietzsche.

Given the strong presence of interpretation in Herzog's work, what he intends by ecstatic truth, cannot be the kind of stripping away of interpretation that Nietzsche mocks in his mature discussions of truth. For Herzog, truth is reached "through fabrication and imagination and stylization" (MD 301). Clearly then, Herzog's ecstatic truth is not the cold, depersonalized enquiry of "the objective spirit" of the scholars and scientists who Nietzsche mocks.⁸ Nor is it, as Eldridge notes, a transcendental standpoint (WH 25). If Herzog's films allow one to see the world in a way that breaks the everyday habits of viewing, it is not by pretending to see the world from nowhere. Hence, I suggest that for Herzog as for Nietzsche, escaping socially mandated perspectives is not a matter of attempting to expose a reality that stands apart from the multiple perspectives through which one interprets the world. Rather, having recognized that interpretation is inescapable and purified oneself from the delusion of objectivity, one can aim to expand one's perspectives and inhabit and explore new perspectives.

Indeed, Eldridge at times seems to suggest that the ecstatic truth that one might find in Herzog's films is an inner truth. He draws attention to Herzog's self-description of filming "landscapes of the mind" (WH 69), and he opens the book's final chapter, chapter four, History, by quoting Herzog's description of civilization as being "a thin layer of ice resting upon a deep ocean

⁷ Herzog says of Dengler: "He had to become an actor playing himself. Everything in the film is authentic Dieter, but to intensify him it is all re-orchestrated, scripted, and rehearsed" (FT 265).

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, transl. Judith Norman, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2002, p. 97. [Henceforth cited as BGE]

of darkness and chaos."⁹ This latter quote strongly resonates with Nietzsche's language and, I argue, connects the chaos in nature which Herzog attempts to capture on film with what Nietzsche describes as the "terrible basic text of *homo natura*" (BGE 123), which are the drives or wills to power that compete within human beings and which civilized man wants to deny. The notion of an inner truth, indeed the implication that there is a self, and that there is an interior at all, can fall into a trap of essentialism, but it can also be conceived in Nietzschean terms as the denial of any sharp divide between an inner and outer, suggesting a continuum between the active power of interpreting and shaping one's experience and oneself, and the active powers of nature. Such an inner truth is not then a fixed truth or essence, but a description of natural processes. This interpretation of ecstatic truth allows us to connect the constructed aspects of Herzog's filmmaking, the deliberate signaling of his own will and of his active interpretations, with his claim to aim at a deeper truth; we can understand the latter as a truth that challenges our self-understanding as civilized, moral beings.

I find the connection that Eldridge makes between Herzog's films and spiritual exercises as described by Pierre Hadot, to be extremely fruitful; this move helps us to make sense of the idea of Herzog's films as truth disclosing and reconcile the apparent tension with the overt presence of perspective. Eldridge suggests that Herzog is interested in "a conversion of a way of life" (WH 117). To understand the connection between the subject's way of life and truth it is useful to turn to Michel Foucault. Foucault takes up Hadot's ideas and suggests that Ancient philosophy was engaged in spirituality because the subject must transform itself in order to access truth, and is, in turn, transformed by it.¹⁰ The conversion in one's way of life that Eldridge refers to can thus be aligned with Herzog's quest for ecstatic truth. This move allows one to understand Herzog's concept of ecstatic truth as a truth that can only be arrived at through a process that changes the subject, rather than as a truth that one merely experiences in a fleeting Schopenhauerian moment

of aesthetic contemplation—admittedly, the sublime imagery in many of Herzog's films could push one toward this more Romantic interpretation of Herzog's ecstatic truth.

On this interpretation in which ecstatic truth is understood in terms of a spiritual practice, the conversion of the subject, allowing one to access the truth, is achieved gradually, through hard work, repetition, and exercises. This notion of spiritual exercises, which affect the subject, allows one to understand how one can undergo a profound shift in how one views the world while still seeing it from a perspective or perspectives. In the context of spirituality the shift in viewing, in comprehending, is the achievement, of a perspectival shift, or as Foucault would put it, a shift in the subject's being (HS 29). One changes and expands rather than going beyond one's perspectives. Building upon a remark made by Nietzsche, Eldridge conjectures that the following idea accurately describes Herzog's viewpoint:

We stand in need of finding ourselves—of a radical reorientation of our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and interests—rather than in need of more piecemeal reforms within accepted frameworks of orientation and concern. [WH 172]

This suggests an affinity between the heroes of Herzog's films and the solitary wanderer of Nietzsche's texts. The journey may be arduous and gradual but the reforms will require stepping out of existing social frameworks; the resulting shift in perspective will thus be radical. Eldridge notes that one can find characters in both Herzog's documentaries and fiction films who are estranged from ordinary life, and who fail or refuse to fit into society (WH 129). While the capacity for solitude is according to Nietzsche a characteristic of genuine free spirits and future philosophers who will be "researchers to the point of cruelty, with unmindful fingers for the incomprehensible, with teeth and stomachs for the indigestible" and as such will be "born, sworn, jealous friends of solitude" (BGE 42).

Both Herzog, and Nietzsche speak of revelatory moments, Eldridge quotes Herzog's account of his encounter with ten thousand windmills in the Lasithi Plateau (WH 29-30), while Nietzsche famously, by his own account, while walking in the Swiss mountains in Sils Maria, was struck suddenly with the thought of the Eternal Return. Both Nietzsche and Herzog also spurn religion as a source for acquiring truth. Eldridge notes that Herzog's own interest in religion

⁹ Werner Herzog, *A Guide for the Perplexed: Conversations with Paul Cronin*, ed. Paul Cronin, London, UK: Faber & Faber 2014, p. 5, quoted in WH 167.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982*, transl. Graham Burchell, New York, NY: Picador 2005, p. 15. [Henceforth cited as HS]

as a subject matter focuses on the themes of ritual and repetition. This resonates with Nietzsche's rejection of Christianity, and the ascetic ideal, whilst still taking an interest in ascetic practices, and praising ascetic discipline. This suggests an interpretation of Ecstatic truth in which poetic and intense expressions can operate as moments of conversion which can move one forward in acquiring a transformative understanding or new way of seeing the world, but in which these moments are part of a journey that is to be undertaken by the subject, and which will be underpinned by hard work, or as Nietzsche puts it, by subterranean excavations as well as by climbing mountain peaks.¹¹ The patient self-examination that Nietzsche celebrates in *Dawn*, the long and lonely wandering of the knowledge seeker, is crucial to the task of finding oneself as part of the practice of truth.

Herzog perhaps remains more of a Romantic than Nietzsche. Nietzsche might see in Herzog's talk of a deeper truth a continued reification of the ideal of truth. And I do not want to subsume Herzog's philosophy to Nietzsche's, nor to deny the breadth of philosophical influences that Herzog draws upon, nor Herzog's own contributions. However, I argue that Nietzsche and Herzog share the idea that a better understanding of the world requires that one break with existing habits and social conventions in how we live, allowing us to break out of otherwise ossified perspectives which involve denial of their perspectival character. I think that for both one cannot achieve a shift in perspective without a shift in habitual behavior and practices. Nietzsche calls for an experimental approach to the development and trying out of new perspectives, and we can view Herzog's film practice as such experiments. However they

conceive of the goal, for both Herzog and Nietzsche the journey towards truth involves hard work, pain, and discipline. At the same time both see the poetic, and the creation of myth, as playing an essential role in this process. In Eldridge's words, "poetic visions are needed in order to disclose possibilities of significance in life" (WH 35). This thought-provoking study by Eldridge of Herzog's work has left with me the idea of truth as a solitary journey, and the image of ships or rafts at sea, seems to resonate across Herzog's films and Nietzsche's texts:

we philosophers and "free spirits" feel illuminated by a new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, forebodings, expectation – finally the horizon seems clear again, even if not bright; finally our ships may set out again, set out to face any danger; every daring of the lover of knowledge is allowed again; the sea, our sea, lies open again; maybe there has never been such an "open sea."¹²

In his discussion of Herzog's oeuvre Eldridge has started to answer the question of how film can contribute to the journey of the lover of knowledge. One can become fixed in a particular framework, but artworks can redraw one's horizons, they offer one new ways of seeing the world, and as such they have the potential to change a person. While many films simply reinforce existing ways of seeing, the cinematic medium in its complexity, weaving together narrative, visual imagery and sound, allows the viewer to inhabit different perspectives, and has the potential to create new ones. Hence, if one is interested in personal or social change, cinema provides a powerful resource.

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Dawn: Thoughts on the Presumptions of Morality*, transl. Brittain Smith, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2011, p.1.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, transl. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press 2001, p. 199.