



Some Risks May Be Necessary

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Abstract: This essay offers an assessment of Richard Eldridge's study *Werner Herzog: Filmmaker and Philosopher*. As Werner Herzog's body of work includes a substantial amount of self-citation, this essay reflects on whether Eldridge and others should permit the entirety of Herzog's oeuvre as well as his extensive catalogue of remarks and commentaries to be viewed in this self-referential manner in order to substantiate their own interpretations of any particular Herzog work. Furthermore, this essay contends that approaches that foreground the whole body of work tend to hinder the analysis of individual films. It also examines the connections Eldridge draws between Herzog and Martin Heidegger, asking whether such interpretations are not required to reflect critically on Heidegger's neo-Romantic regressions, and, finally, it concludes with a proposal to adopt a wider view, namely, one that looks beyond Heideggerianism, in the interest of drawing real material and cultural conditions into consideration.

Keywords: Eldridge, Richard; Herzog, Werner; Heidegger, Martin; German film; film authorship; intentional fallacy; self-reference; neo-Romantic regression.

Let's face it, the world is impossibly risk-averse these days...Wall to wall protection is devastating.
Werner Herzog, *A Guide for the Perplexed*

In Richard Eldridge's elegant and readable study *Werner Herzog: Filmmaker and Philosopher*,¹ the author provides an analysis of how Werner Herzog's films express the struggle for a meaningful life (in other words, how they correspond to the motif of Faustian striving) in industrial society, which, in this case, is a world as it is described and critiqued by a number of philosophers including Martin Heidegger. For purposes of comparison, one might recall how Andréa Staskowski wrote about *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) more than thirty years ago. After summarizing Heidegger's standpoint that being always exists in an historical mode of social existence, Staskowski

explains, "Herzog's project is to reveal the world as a world. In *Aguirre* he reveals the way of Being within the cultural/conceptual framework of a particular world."² Staskowski adds that Herzog depicts a sense of Being-in-the-world in order to critique our contemporary world and concludes that *Aguirre's* narrative structure

discloses a condition. Herzog's achievement is the depiction of the conditions of beings in the world of nature and in the world of their creation. He invites us to extend that insight to an understanding of our own way of Being-in-the-world. [FP 26]

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

² Andréa Staskowski, "Film and Phenomenology: Being-in-the-World of Herzog's *Aguirre, Wrath of God*," *Post Script* 7/3 (Summer 1988), 14-26, here p. 14. [Henceforth cited as *FP*]

In quoting Staskowski, my point is not to show that she was already examining this set of questions in the 1980s, but rather to reflect on whether one needs to study the entire body of Herzog's work to draw these conclusions. Staskowski was looking solely at *Aguirre*, one of Herzog's earliest feature films. Anyone who writes on Herzog today knows that it is necessary to contend with the question of how to approach his wide-ranging and expansive authorship. Herzog has been making films since he was very young: born in 1942, he started making films in the early 1960s and his filmography now contains no less than seventy titles. This is a large body of work to examine, even if one opts not to dive deeply into the well of his many interviews, diaries, essays, and other forms of self-expression. There may, however, be advantages to analyzing Herzog's films independently of one another.

Such reflections, of course, recall longstanding debates on film authorship. Can any of Herzog's works be viewed in isolation, and what would this mean for one's interpretation of, for example, his more recent work such as *Salt and Fire* (2016)? More than one critic ranked that film among the director's worst works, yet it echoes many that preceded it: the vast salt flats that constitute *Salt and Fire's* visual centerpiece resemble the Antarctica on display in Herzog's *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007), and aerial shots of unpeopled landscapes resemble the footage of Kuwait that Herzog included in *Lessons of Darkness* (1992). *Salt and Fire* trades on viewers' memories of Herzog's other films, turning the whole body of work into a tapestry with themes that appear and reappear. Many auteurs rely on recurring motifs, but moments of self-citation are rarely as explicit as they are in Herzog's work. One of the signatures of the director's mature style is his capacity to draw on, retool, and revisit his earlier films. In an early essay published not long after the release of *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), Noël Carroll asks whether Herzog's ideas remain "fresh," writing, "in recent works like *Fitzcarraldo*, Herzog's approach is becoming predictable, a repetition of mannerisms from earlier films."³ The question concerns whether all of this repetition and self-citation, rather than offering viewers new ideas, acts as an obstacle to those new ideas, an impediment to seeing the film that is in front of the spectator.

³ Noël Carroll, "Herzog, Presence, and Paradox (1985)," in *Interpreting the Moving Image*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 1998, pp. 184-299, here p. 298.

Along these lines, I am less concerned about the academic question of whether Herzog's films are better judged in isolation, and more about the possible circularity involved in allowing the director—on the basis of his works and a persistent vision that he developed over many decades—to determine the course of one's interpretation. Articulating his own project, Eldridge writes that Herzog's films support his conviction that they,

engage originally and compellingly, by way of images, with issues about meaning and value in a way that contributes to and compares well with the most important contemporary philosophy. [WH xiii]

This position on the body of works and on its creator risks being entangled by what John Davidson describes as the "tar baby" of Werner Herzog scholarship, which is the biggest of the traps on a path that contains many snares.⁴ It remains a contentious issue as to whether Herzog's films support the meanings that the director in his fifty years of interviews claims they corroborate, or whether they mean what a spectator wants them to mean; which would be a lot of different things to a lot of different people. The Philosophical Filmmakers series in which Eldridge's book appears is geared toward examining the work of influential filmmakers through the lens of philosophy, but when filmmakers are treated as philosophers, how is one to approach the supplemental relationship between art and philosophy? For example, take Adorno's dictum that "Philosophy says what art cannot say, although it is art alone which is able to say it; by not saying it."⁵ If Adorno is correct, then allowing an artist to embellish a work by speaking on its behalf places the spectator in an awkward position. One may want Herzog's works to adopt certain meanings, perhaps even Heideggerian ones, but should it matter whether the artist personally espouses or eschews such meanings? How could anyone hope to fix the meaning of a film such as *La Soufrière* (1977), Herzog's excursion through an abandoned city on the island of Guadeloupe as a volcano is about to erupt? The volcano—much like the vampire in *Nosferatu* (1979) and much like the ruby

⁴ John E. Davidson, "The Cinema of Werner Herzog: Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth (review)," *Monatshefte* 101/1 (Spring 2009), 146-147, here p. 147.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. Christian Lenhardt, London, UK: Routledge and Kegan 1984, p. 107.

glass in *Heart of Glass* (1976)—is a metaphor that is hardly fixed in its meaning.

It is perhaps a result of the constant confrontations with death in Herzog's films—due to Herzog's death metaphysics—that there is so much overlap between his work and Heideggerian rhetoric. Comparisons with Heidegger are among the most vexing ones insofar as Heidegger's descriptions of Being-in-the-world were hardly neutral or value-free, which makes them difficult to apply as though they were simply non-valuative film theoretical terminology. Heidegger aimed to present his philosophical approach as a disinterested one, arguing that he offered a mere description of *Dasein*, but his explanations of Being are rarely as disinterested as he purported them to be. Although many different Heidegger interpretations are available to readers, *Being and Time* is, at points, highly prescriptive—it is normative where it comes to its descriptions of authenticity and especially regarding the question of who has access to historicity. New evidence in this direction has come to light in view of the publication of his black notebooks, which brought some of his anti-Semitic leanings into sharper relief.

Philosophical preferences clearly impact the exegesis of Herzog's films. For example, Steven Vogel's insights, which were published alongside Staskowski's in 1988, express arguments similar to the ones advanced by Staskowski and by Eldridge. Vogel's interpretations of *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (1970), *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner* (1974), and *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974) are pertinent. He writes,

For Herzog being unable to fit into the world is not a condition that makes it possible to understand what being human is like: it is what being human is like. Kaspar Hauser is not a prophet, come to describe the human situation: his is the human situation. His pain and loneliness, poignantly expressed as he declaims with a halting and childlike sincerity that "it seems to me that my coming into this world was a terrible fall," is not primarily a despair caused by unsatisfactory social arrangements. It has a deeper source: it is a despair caused by the world itself.⁶

Vogel thus concludes,

Steiner's despair, then, like Kaspar Hauser's or Aguirre's, is not a despair at being in a world which has this or that form of social organization; it is a

despair at *being in any world at all*...In the world of dreams, he seems to say, our choices...are stark but at least romantic: we can fly or we can be destroyed. But in this world, the one in which we are condemned to live, they are merely terrible...For we cannot fly. [OC 13]

Seeing Herzog as a Heideggerian filmmaker-philosopher, Vogel's Herzog is the representative voice of a deliberate and highly stylized bleakness, that is, the proponent of a Schopenhauer-like pessimism, one that knows no history beyond the world into which every human being is thrown. Vogel's work represents one side of a coin, whereas film theorists Gertrud Koch and Eric Rentschler represent another. For Koch, writing in 1986, Herzog's Heideggerianism is dangerous insofar as it relies on a poetic reduction, or a neo-romantic regression.⁷ Rentschler goes even farther, critiquing the authoritarian style in Herzog's productions, finding his anti-Brechtian approach (especially in *Heart of Glass*) consistent with Herzog's other authoritarian propensities.⁸ These two essays constituted a breakthrough in considering Herzog's politics of authenticity, and they are especially important if one is concerned about the aphoristic and universalizing tendencies that suffuse Heidegger's work. Writing about the de-concealing he seeks in Herzog's films, Eldridge quotes Heidegger:⁹

The resoluteness...intended in *Being and Time* is not the deliberate action of a subject, but the opening up of a human being, out of its captivity in that which is, to the openness of Being. [WH 18]

Yet, as indicated above, Heidegger's descriptions along these lines were rarely value-neutral, and, whether one speaks of his aesthetics or his critiques of modernity, such descriptions bring a problematic history with them, the least problematic of which concerns their

⁷ Gertrud Koch, "Blindness as Insight: Visions of the Unseen in Land of Silence and Darkness," in *The Films of Werner Herzog: Between Mirage and History*, ed. Timothy Corrigan, New York, NY: Methuen 1986, pp. 73-86, here pp. 74-5.

⁸ Eric Rentschler, "The Politics of Vision: Herzog's Heart of Glass," in *The Films of Werner Herzog: Between Mirage and History*, ed. Timothy Corrigan, New York, NY: Methuen 1986, pp. 159-181.

⁹ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, ed. and transl. Albert Hofstadter, New York, NY: Harper & Row 1971, pp. 18-86, here p. 65.

⁶ Steven Vogel, "Ontological Critique in the Work of Werner Herzog," *Post Script* 7/3 (Summer 1988), 2-13, here p. 5. [Henceforth cited as OC]

premodern or authoritarian inclinations. One can hardly apply Heidegger's ideas to filmmakers or to the protagonists in their films without acknowledging that they were ideas associated with specific contexts. Many of those ideas emerged in Germany during a politically fraught era and many concepts that were deemed important at the time were promoted for politically suspect reasons. When applying Heidegger's ideas to films, one encounters an array of issues and concerns, or at least one runs the risk of doing so.

The penultimate risk with which I am concerned has to do with how one relates to Herzog's oracular visions—the salvation myths he sometimes perpetuates, and the discourse on the miraculous nature of his art. Without a doubt Herzog was ahead of his time in offering insights into the era of the anthropocene, as has been suggested, for example, by Tom Cheesman who examines Herzog's interest in the major catastrophes that have defined human progress and in our impending extinction, especially in the films *Where the Green Ants Dream* (1984) and *Lessons of Darkness*,¹⁰ or as I have elsewhere suggested in a study of the ecocritical perspectives taken up by Herzog's films.¹¹ Herzog has had a career-long fascination, dating as far back as *Fata Morgana* (1969), with envisioning the end of humankind and with a type of science fiction that looks back to an age before ours in order to find clues about what is to come. Such observations were ahead of the curve, yet they hardly make Herzog prophetic. This much—that Herzog stages himself as a prophet—is arguably a matter of self-stylization. If one were to read this tendency against the grain, as one should, then one should consider recontextualizing elements of Eldridge's standpoint. For example, Eldridge writes,

It will require a particular courage and resoluteness to seek out and respond to such achievements and defeats of selfhood, and to do so without fantasy,

¹⁰ Tom Cheesman, "Apocalypse Nein Danke: The Fall of Werner Herzog," in *Green Thought in German Culture: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Colin Riordan, Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press 1997, pp. 285-306.

¹¹ Brad Prager, "German Film Ventures into the Amazon: Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* as Prelude to Michał Marczak's Eco-documentary," in *German Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene*, eds. Caroline Schaumann and Heather I. Sullivan, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 229-245.

sentimentality, narcissistic projection, or, in the end, despair. In the risks it takes, and in its ranges of frequent spectacular artistic success as well as sometime failure, Herzog's work displays in full measure this kind of courage and resoluteness. [WH 208]

In such readings, Herzog becomes an apostle.¹² A position of this sort requires clarity: is it the work (that is, the entire body of films) or the artist to whom one attributes this resoluteness? If Eldridge means the artist, then a position of this sort is in my view problematic. However, if the work is intended by it, then clarification is needed as to whether this attribute is ascribed to individual films or to all of them. When Eldridge asks which of Herzog's films achieve the miracle of art (WH 48), this seems to me to be a loaded question.

A final concern has to do with the de-contextualization that follows from philosophical readings—from existential interpretations that are arguably isolated from histories and contexts. Eldridge wisely summarizes his interlocutors' counter-position:

In general, the criticism is that Herzog, via his excessive aesthetic stylizations in his films, avoids actual history, especially real political and social history, and has no sense of ordinary life: he attempts to forward via symbolization a premodern salvation myth that makes no contact with life as it is actually lived. [WH 22-3]

Eldridge caricatures such critics, yet I would count myself among them. Rather than abstraction (and, salvation myths), one might concern oneself directly with the material conditions that determine a culture's ideas and values. Heideggerian abstraction is, in this light, a place to hide from real world considerations. Examples of reading Herzog's films in connection with life "as it is actually lived" include John Davidson's study of the middle-period documentaries *How Much Would a Woodchuck Chuck* (1976) and *Huie's Sermon* (1981), in which, taking note of divides between religious and secular ideologies, Davidson interprets Herzog's films as reflections on United States culture in the late 1970s, or Erica Carter's insights into Herzog's films about Africa from the perspective of

¹² For example, Eldridge writes: "Given the prose of the world—our falleness into average everydayness, whatever its unavoidable and enabling features—we stand in need of such openings" (WH 25). Eldridge describes here Herzog's lyrical imagism.

his views on race.¹³ Carter explores whether something akin to an "African Sublime," or a sense that Africa and its people constitute a radically and unspeakably "other" to the West, can be isolated in Herzog's films.¹⁴

For purposes of comparison, one might look to Wolfgang Fischer's recent film *Styx* (2018) in which a German doctor named Rike, played by Susanne Wolff, attempts to sail from Gibraltar to the island of Ascension and comes across an overloaded boat full of refugees. She is forced to reckon with Europe's contemporary immigration politics relative to the boundaries of her empathies and her own need for self-preservation. One has a better chance of contending with such issues

watching Fischer's extraordinary film than Herzog's *Queen of the Desert* (2015), a film that will only have an afterlife owing to its inclusion in the director's extensive oeuvre. Herzog's body of work is impressive, to be sure, but it can also be flawed and uneven, and, now and again, I find it troubling, not least in its abstractions, particularly in the deliberate distance many of his films take from political and social history. For this reason, it is best, in my opinion, to adopt the widest possible view, one that acknowledges that Herzog's films speak to their viewers in many different ways, and that their interpreters, even the most philosophical ones, may attribute many different meanings to them.

¹³ John E. Davidson, "The Veil Between: Werner Herzog's American TV Documentaries," in *A Companion to Werner Herzog*, ed. Brad Prager, Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell 2012, pp. 416-444.

¹⁴ Erica Carter, "Werner Herzog's African Sublime," in *A Companion to Werner Herzog*, ed. Brad Prager, Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell 2012, pp. 329-355.