



Werner Herzog Between Romanticism and Late Modernity

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Abstract: Setting forth the sources and critical presuppositions underpinning Richard Eldridge's *Werner Herzog: Filmmaker and Philosopher*, this essay seeks to show how Eldridge's approach establishes the philosophical pertinence of Herzog's style and themes while also raising instructive questions about their scope and meaning. The essay addresses Eldridge's use of William Wordsworth and Walter Benjamin as aesthetic and philosophic precedents for Herzog's style while also laying out Eldridge's broader understanding of the relevance of a post-Romantic aesthetic, both to the films themselves and to the larger themes they engage with. The essay raises critical questions about the mediation of a post-Romantic aesthetic to the interpretation of Herzog's films and about the implied enlistment of the films as models for a critique of late modern culture.

Keywords: Wordsworth, William; Benjamin, Walter; Taylor, Charles; Lyotard, Jean-François; the sublime; temporality; ecstatic truth; history; Romanticism; epiphany.

Ecstatic Truth and the Therapeutic Model

Richard Eldridge's book, *Werner Herzog: Filmmaker and Philosopher*, belongs to the Bloomsbury series *Philosophical Filmmakers*.¹ The concept behind the series raises some questions related to artistic and disciplinary genres and their limits. In what sense, or senses, are filmmakers, or is filmmaking as such, philosophical? Given that there are no genres of writing dedicated to philosophical painters, philosophical composers, or philosophical choreographers, the series' informing concept may be an implicit claim that filmmaking is or has become a particularly instructive subject for philosophical reflection. In that case the series may be following an established trend urging

philosophy to seek its objects and contexts outside of the seminar room in, say, the contexts of popular culture. Professional philosophy knows two conspicuous and influential, albeit quite distinct examples of the use of popular film as a framing device for philosophical questions. These are Stanley Cavell and Slavoj Žižek. Eldridge's approach hews to Cavell's example, especially in its reading of Herzog's films against a broadly construed understanding of Romantic and post-Romantic literature and aesthetics.

Rather than attack the broader questions raised above, Eldridge takes a tactical approach by addressing Herzog's films through four chapters dedicated to images and contemporary culture, nature, the self, and history, in that order. The approach is topical and thematic, proceeding through broad characterizations of the films interwoven with ample references to philosophical and critical sources. Each chapter, with

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

the exception of the last, begins with a selective survey of philosophical opinion on the topic. These surveys, however, serve less as a lens on Herzog's work than as a means of showing how questionable or strictly provisional a philosophical opinion may be when tested on Herzog's work. Moreover, as the critical sources brought to bear change with each chapter and as the chapter headings do not correspond to discrete genres or topics in Herzog's oeuvre, the result is a prismatic procedure that has the static effect of making each chapter read like a new take on the same material without yielding a sense of cumulative progress.

It may be of course that Eldridge never aimed at such an effect. The fact that he treats Herzog's oeuvre neither in its chronological development nor according to the discrete topics and events his work addresses but elects to focus instead on single frames from the films or, on occasion, sequences implies that it is not finally important whether the genre of a film is documentary or narrative or whether its topic is fictional, historical, or a mixture of the two. The dominant accent of the book lies squarely on the single frames and sequences that stand out as arresting moments. The opening sequence of *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) is his preferred example. For Eldridge these arresting moments are the signature feature of Herzog's style from beginning to end. He ascribes to them a singular force. They are not simply aesthetically striking but they have the power, he suggests, to disrupt and transform our ways of seeing and inhabiting the world.

This is a large claim that Eldridge frames anew with each chapter. But owing to the book's method and tactics, that is, the noted fact that theoretical sources are deployed in an *ad hoc* manner and that no single source is consistently foregrounded, these arresting moments serve perforce as the book's organizing principle. Eldridge justifies this tactic by recourse to Herzog's own notion of "ecstatic truth." According to Herzog,

cinema has a strange, mysterious, and illusory quality... It sheds light on our fantasies and – like poetry, literature and music – can illuminate in ways we will never truly be able to grasp...I have...attempted to move beyond facts and illuminate the audience with ecstatic truth.²

² Werner Herzog, *A Guide for the Perplexed: Conversations with Paul Cronin*, ed. Paul Cronin, London, UK: Faber & Faber 2014, p. 288, as quoted in WH 45. [Henceforth cited as *GP*]

Similarly, in "The Minnesota Declaration," a compact set of eleven propositions delivered by Herzog at the conclusion of a month-long tribute to him and his work at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1999, he avows the following:

There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization.³

It would be important nonetheless to state more precisely the nature of this ecstasy. This declaration, being a manifesto statement, does not provide one, nor do other statements from Herzog provide further insight into the nature of this ecstasy. The solution might have been to illuminate the notion through its posited resemblance to German Romanticism, a signal moment in the modern investigation of the genre of fragments and of the temporality of consciousness, or through the work of Walter Benjamin; but Eldridge declines to do that in any systematic way.⁴ Instead, he defers to the films' image constellations and to Herzog's manifesto statements.

That deferral is intentional. And in any case, it is consonant with Herzog's sense of the fundamental incompleteness of his work. In an interview with Roger Ebert, "Images at the Horizon," Herzog states that none of his films achieves the projected shape conceived for it in his mind. Each film, in effect, is an impetus to search one more time for "those images that I see at the horizon."⁵ Incompleteness, then, is integral to Herzog's project rather than a sign of failure or shortness of vision and is of a piece with his indifference to plot line and audience expectations and his preference for

³ 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.

⁴ Manfred Frank supplies a thorough discussion of temporal consciousness in Romanticism in *Das Problem "Zeit" in der deutschen Romantik: Zeitbewußtsein und Bewußtsein von Zeitlichkeit in der frühromantischen Philosophie und in Tiecks Dichtung*, Paderborn, GER: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1990. It bears mention that Walter Benjamin's first book, his doctoral dissertation (*Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*), addresses German Romantic poetic theory. I discuss Benjamin's place in Eldridge's discussion below.

⁵ Roger Ebert, *Herzog by Ebert*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 2017, p. 45. [Henceforth cited as *HE*]

image constellations over sequence and movement; Eldridge speaks of it as

Herzog's predilection for what Gilles Deleuze calls the time-image over the movement-image and continuity editing. [WH 23]

Herzog's style is ecstatic, not only in the sense that it is captivating or absorbing, the more familiar sense of ecstasy, but also in a more literal sense: as the outside, as what stands apart, the ecstatic is what lies on the horizon, beckoning yet unattainable.

Eldridge makes clear that the unattainable images at the horizon are more profitably viewed as a prod rather than as a limit. To this extent his approach is reminiscent of Friedrich Schiller's revision of the Kantian aesthetic. These are the following: the problematic of human finitude and the felt absence of the absolute; the motif of the arresting image or scene that, in a productive sense, brings the viewer/traveler to a reflective standstill; the paradoxical ascendancy of image over language as witnessed in lyric texts as well as in visual images; the quasi-sacred status of poetry and art as a bulwark against the pressures of industrial-commercial life and its "distracting spectacles" (WH 42).

Poetic Visions and the Romantic Inheritance

An allied though never thematically developed motif is Eldridge's implicit claim that Herzog's films represent an effective indictment of late modern commercial society and culture. In this respect some reference to Theodor Adorno would have seemed likely, but this connection is never made. Even so, Herzog's largely dismissive view of critical interpretation and historical precedents for his work put aside, Eldridge's claim is hard to gauge. In general, Herzog's films document aspects of the cotemporary world and culture without developing a definite critical stance towards that culture. This makes for an often-remarked perspectival ambiguity that for some viewers is an irritant. I shall use as my example *The White Diamond* (2004), a documentary film Eldridge discusses twice, toward the respective ends of the chapters on nature and selfhood. Though it is not among Herzog's best-known films, Eldridge's view that the film merits greater attention seems correct.

The subject of *The White Diamond* is Graham Dorrington, a rather Quixotic British aeronautical engineer who designs two-person airships for use in the search for medicinal plants in the Amazon jungle.

Dorrington has had his share of mishaps and failures, most notably the accidental death of a photographer on one of his earlier expeditions.

The film's closing sequence, which traces the flight of countless swifts over the Kaieteur Falls, instances for Eldridge "one of the most astonishingly evocative sequences in the history of filmmaking" (WH 92). The flight of the swifts is accompanied by a Kyrie by the contemporary composer Ernst Reijseger, who also composed the score for *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010). This visual-acoustical ensemble instills a sense of awe, as the swifts, now shown against the sky, now against the cascading waterfall, seem to answer the waterfall's continuous motion. The viewer's first response is likely to be allegorical: a wish to see the motion of the swifts and the waterfall as a metacritical comment on what Eldridge calls the "obsessive eccentricities" of the human figures in the film (WH 92). But the image sequence resists that wish in the way the sublime sometimes will, especially in its modernist iterations. It elicits the desire to assign to the scene a larger, transcendental meaning yet at the same time frustrates that desire. That the scene will not yield the sense we want to invest it with means not only that we are halted, but halted without prospect of anything further happening. According to Jean-François Lyotard, this lack of prospect names privation as a fundamental condition for the experience of the sublime: "the sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening."⁶ For Eldridge this inconsequence of the sublime produces a singular filmic insight into the temporal conditions of human life: the apparently endless happenings of the natural world finally pass the human by; they persist indifferent to human perception or human presence. Eldridge notes that the final image on the screen before the credit roll is a verbal message:

May the Secret Kingdom of the swifts be around till the end of time, as the lyrics to this song suggest. [WH 92]

From this vantage point the film's conclusion celebrates a potential future scene from which the human is totally absent. If, in Lyotard's Burke-inspired definition of the sublime, the sublime is the prospect of nothing further happening, the surcease of happening, then the final scene effectively presents the sublime as inhuman time.

⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, transl. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1991, p. 99. [Henceforth cited as IRT]

In contrast, a more positive view of the sublime as a symbol of infinity is captured by William Wordsworth:

Our destiny, our nature, and our home,
Is with infinitude, and only there—
With hope, it is, ...
...
And something evermore about to be.⁷

Wordsworth's strongly potentiated sense of hope contrasts not only with Lyotard but at least as much with the moral landscapes of Herzog's films.

Eldridge, however, turns the reader's view back to the human actors. In his discussion of *The White Diamond* in the chapter on selfhood, Eldridge cites Dorrington's wish simply to float above the jungle canopy with his craft's motor turned off, and then turns the reader's attention to the surrounding figures, but especially to Mark Anthony Yhap, a Rastafarian who is extremely fond of the rooster he keeps. It is Yhap who gives the film its title, remarking within the film itself that the airship is like a "big white diamond floating around in the sunrise."⁸ Eldridge writes that "in different ways" the two men are examples of being "open to perceptual experiences of astonishment and admiration at the unfolding of the world in time," noting how as they sit in conversation on the rock ledge overlooking the falls, the final footage of the circling swifts begins to roll (*WH* 161). Given that the scene is Herzog's construction, a product of his editing, it is possible to forget for an instant that Dorrington and Yhap are not characters in a narrative feature. It is the viewer who sees at one take Dorrington and Yhap on the rock ledge before the falls and the swifts as they take flight. What is presented as a continuous sequence is indeed more of a juxtaposition. If, as Eldridge says, the two men "introduce the extraordinary final footage of the swifts," they only do so in a formal, constructed sense. It is the viewer who registers the gap in the juxtaposition.

While Eldridge's two treatments of the film under the rubrics of nature and selfhood register acute insights, those insights also tend toward the solemn and generic,

⁷ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850: Authoritative Texts, Context and Reception, Recent Critical Essays*, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, New York, NY: W. W. Norton 1979, p. 216, VI, 604-8.

⁸ Ebert notes this detail (*HE* 76) and apparently omits mention of a scene depicting a diamond mine that temporarily deromanticizes the image and title.

so that the ironic humor in the film is underplayed. The humor begins with the film's title, which is indeed nicely poetic but also humorously inaccurate. The airship is less a diamond, a famously indestructible product of billion-year natural processes, than it is a bubble, or a floating bauble, a transient cultural artifact. As a bubble-bauble it resonates with other motifs like the champagne glasses—more bubbles—which are attached to balloons and launched over the falls to test air currents, and even the inflatable chair on which Yhap sits. Not surprisingly, the balloons and glasses do not fly far before being sucked into the downdraft of the falls, and with that the Dorrington fantasy of flying his craft over the falls is also deflated. One might ask how intentional all of this is on Herzog's part, though the point is finally moot. Intentionally or not Herzog effectively deploys here the trope of bubbles and bubble-blowing, which at least since the seventeenth century has been an emblematic figure for the frivolity and fragility of human fantasies. With the juxtaposition of Dorrington's romance with technological fantasy against Yhap's homely grounding in the everyday, the two form a Don Quixote and Sancho Panza pair. Art may indeed be serving here as a modest kind of therapy, in that it is Herzog, a sometime partner in Dorrington's forays, who in an ironic, sidelong manner suggests that Dorrington might well cut loose from his illusions.

Eldridge advocates for the viability of poetic visions that he says are urgently needed by the late modern world if it is to awaken to a new order of perception. His plea is tied to the post-Romantic universalist claim that Herzog's films "emphasize those poetic visionary qualities that are hidden inside so many people" (*WH* 35). The words cited come from remarks Herzog made about his use of hypnosis on the actors in *Heart of Glass* (1976).⁹ Whatever Herzog may have meant by that, the remark seems to imply the sentimental, in Schiller's sense, view that modern humanity has lost touch with its own best powers. Poetic visions will serve the purpose of reacquainting us with those powers:

poetic visions are needed in order to disclose possibilities of significance in life within the framework of contemporary industrial-commercial culture. [*WH* 35]

⁹ Werner Herzog, "Images at the Horizon" (Interview, 1979), in *Herzog by Ebert*, ed. Roger Ebert, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 2017, pp. 3-48, here p. 24. [Henceforth cited as *IH*]

Schiller, to be sure, never imagined loss to be recoverable through the application of poetic visions. Yet Schiller aside, the statement's construal of late modern culture in purely oppositional terms—repressed and freed, or estranged and recovered—does not consider the contradictions and complexities of modern culture, as many of the effects of a capitalist commercial economy have long since become welcome effects. And it does not hold in any case for Herzog's depiction of the human soul in *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974), *Stroszek* (1977), *Heart of Glass* and other films as something strange to rather than estranged from the world. As Stanley Cavell observes, estrangement implies a once having been at home that strangeness does not.¹⁰ Indeed the strangeness of many of Herzog's central figures, including Aguirre as well, is that they are sealed off from the world, that they possess no language that would enable contact with world or a self. That the figures themselves in no way exemplify the achievement of significant action is not to say they are meaningless, but that their meaning lies in their status as representations rather than in their status as models for meaningful action. They are captivating not because what they do achieves anything but because of the economy and vividness with which Herzog distills the unrelieved anomie that the figures inhabit. Eldridge's discussion herein displays a level of ambiguity as to how Herzog's figures are to be seen, namely, as representations of a general social and cultural plight or as models for some kind of a solution. The discussion of *Stroszek* illustrates this ambiguity:

Stroszek has done what it is in him to do in the natural and cultural circumstances in which he has somehow found himself. The manic celebratory harmonica suggests meaning, at least to an observer of Stroszek's life and viewer of the film, but tells us nothing about what it might be. Somehow music might inform natural and social life, but perhaps at best intermittently, without evident purpose, and under coercion, especially in a cruel commercial world. [WH 143]

In this light it seems apposite to frame the single arresting moments in Herzog's films within a wider context. These revelatory moments resemble what James Joyce famously called epiphanies, moments in which an object or scene suddenly stands forth with a peculiar and arresting radiance. Joyce's application

to secular writing and experience of what had been a technical theological term for divine manifestation was in its own right a programmatic gesture. The field of revelation had suddenly been expanded: manifestation in the strong sense of epiphany was no longer the exclusive realm of religion but something possible within the fabric of everyday experience that would enhance that experience without delivering it over into the logic of theology or some other doctrine. It is precisely this kind of sudden illumination, not to say revelation, that Eldridge prizes in Herzog's films and from which he draws lines to artists and thinkers from the Romantic era to the modern, most prominently Wordsworth and Benjamin. But while these connections are suggestive, they also constitute a historical ellipsis which brackets much that has changed between Wordsworth and Benjamin, or between Romanticism and late modernity.

In *Sources of the Self* Charles Taylor notes that a key development in modern literature's use of the epiphany is the emergence from it of a counter-epiphanic moment.¹¹ Taylor himself does not use the phrase, but others have also spoken of a practice of negative epiphany in modernism. In either case it is important to note that the counter-epiphany is not merely the negation or disqualification of the epiphanic moment but rather its turning in another direction toward, if one will, a dark illumination. Taylor draws attention to the centrality of Charles Baudelaire in this development, the original inspiration of Benjamin's massive *Arcades Project*.¹² Formally speaking, the counter-epiphanic image still has the shape of a sudden illumination and the force of a reciprocal arrest: bringing the object or scene into a sudden, intense perceptual focus, it also brings the viewer to a standstill. But unlike singular moments of illumination in Romantic poets such as, for example, Wordsworth or Percy Bysshe Shelley, the counter-epiphany does not generate a promise of redemption or renewal. Taylor's word for its different effect is austerity, an instructive word that, notably, has also been used to describe Herzog's style. In what does this austerity consist? According to Taylor the counter-epiphanic image is auto-telic in nature: it finds

¹¹ Charles Taylor, "Epiphanies of Modernism," in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press 1989, pp. 456-93.

¹² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, transl. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

¹⁰ Stanley Cavell, *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell 1995, p. 97.

its end in itself. Counter-epiphanic images only reveal or disclose from within their own self-created space and not by virtue of a reference to something external to them. In modern art the epiphanic image does not bring something to expression; it does not, as in the Romantic era of Wordsworth and Schelling, speak with or from the spirit of nature. I would say that something similar is true for Herzog's films. The sequences in *The White Diamond*, for example, are no exception to this. However arresting they are, they do not frame natural life and natural processes in a spiritualist perspective. Ebert seemed closer to the truth of the matter when he reported that Herzog had spoken of a "voodoo of location," a phrase that he glosses by noting that the location "carries a psychic, or emotional, or sensory charge to the screen" (*HE* 131). This raises the question regarding criteria again. When is an emotional or sensory charge anything more than a temporary charge? While one might agree with Eldridge that Herzog's films do not lend themselves to a postmodernist irony, it is not clear that they can directly be described as "aiming seriously at disclosure," at any rate not without further qualification of what is meant by disclosure (*WH* 35). To go back to Taylor's point, the disclosive potential of the modern austere style consists precisely in the way that it withholds. Its disclosures come less by way of sensory charge or image than by means of indirection, silence, and abstraction. A full exploration of how Herzog exploits the counter-epiphanic moment would require a typology of the kinds of such moments in the films, including their qualitative differentiation and the different ways they serve to inflect the films' narratives.

History, Moments of Arrest, and Transcendence

As noted at the beginning, the book's final chapter on history does not follow the pattern of the other three. Instead of adducing canonical texts on the meaning of history, it begins directly with Herzog's treatment of historical topics, probably the most controversial aspect of his work. When Eldridge does adduce a theoretical text, it is the peculiar theologically inflected Marxism of Walter Benjamin. And for a good reason so. As throughout, the emphasis is on punctual, ecstatic breaks rather than on any sense of history as a continuum. Eldridge sees Herzog's most striking images as

neither records of [his] experience alone, nor depictions of what is simply given apart from human experience, imagination, and desire, but instead [as] collective dream images of encountered meaning. [*WH* 28]

This statement is striking for the way it replicates some of the surrealist aesthetic that made such a strong impression on Benjamin and that informs the peculiar archaeology of urban psychology and space in *The Arcades Project*. Herzog's own diction is no less Romantic: Herzog avers a film's capacity to "strike directly into the soul of man" and to bridge yawning gaps between persons and times (*GP* 46). Eldridge uses the critical debate around Herzog's purported suppression of historical context in order to emphasize that Herzog prefers to attend to immediate political and social concerns by way of stylization rather than by direct reference, or pointing.¹³ This permits Eldridge to dwell on the collocation of motifs that define his reading of Herzog's work: the ecstatic image, the importance of the singular moment, the peculiar power of the aesthetic to resonate with an audience and to create resonances between different objects and across perceptual fields. It is no accident that these are also central motifs in Benjamin, whose approach to history is overtly stylized, placing resonance and analogy over narrative and causal explanation.

The book's final paragraphs take caution against any expectation that experience inclines toward coherence or a sense of continuity. Eldridge writes that it is "a serious question how anyone can achieve and sustain a sense of meaningful orientation within relationships and circuits of activity" (*WH* 206). Caution taken, he proceeds to say how meaningful orientation might be kept in sight, even if it is not achieved. In the end Eldridge sets the bar rather high, much as Nietzsche does, his own ambivalence toward Nietzsche notwithstanding. What Herzog's films finally deliver, in Eldridge's view, is "courage and resoluteness" in the face of the inevitable defeats entailed by human finitude. Not the least of these defeats are the ideals of "self-presence and self-mastery," which finally serve less as practical goals than as "vanishing points within human practices" (*WH* 208).¹⁴ Eldridge continues with

¹³ Herzog makes this point to Cronin in *GP* 289-90. The importance of stylization informs Herzog's rejection, in this same passage and repeatedly elsewhere, of any generic difference between his documentary and feature films.

¹⁴ Eldridge translates from Georg W. Bertram, *Kunst als menschliche Praxis: Eine Ästhetik*, Berlin, GER: Suhrkamp 2014, p. 14: "Selbstgegenwart und Selbstbestimmung sind nicht selbstverständlich gegeben, sondern vielmehr ein Fluchtpunkt menschlicher Praktiken." The more usual translation of *Selbstbestimmung* is self-determination.

Paul Cronin's observation that Herzog is "showing us how to transcend the bankrupt world into which we are sinking" (*WH* 208).¹⁵ The statement is well chosen, for it raises the question of the direction or intentionality of this transcendence. The words transcendence, courage, and resoluteness bespeak a disposition and direction without a complementary object, unless courage and resoluteness are being recommended as an inducement to more of the same.

While it is true that the open-ended, practically Nietzschean vigilance Eldridge recommends matches Herzog's own sense of his vocation as a filmmaker, it is not unproblematic if taken as a general prescription, and Eldridge does seem to think that Herzog's films implicitly offer a model of how to lead a philosophical life. He writes:

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]

Eldridge's discussion of the *Gesualdo: Death for Five Voices* (1995), which precedes his book's conclusion and counts as one of its lengthiest treatments of a single film, may serve to illustrate this point. Highlighting the film's concluding sequence, a street pageant taking place on the town that has only a paratactic relationship to the preceding narrative treatment of the sixteenth-century composer's life, Eldridge takes this rather jarring juxtaposition as Herzog's provocation of the viewer to assume a more open and responsive level of consciousness. This behest is repeated in the book's conclusion when "a particular courage and resoluteness" are prescribed for the achievement of such consciousness (*WH* 208). That is followed by the following enjoinder: "we must make and re-make our lives...by developing and exercising qualities of character and attention" (*WH* 209). This passage is one instance of the book's rather frequent use of modal auxiliaries (must, should, dare, for example). Eldridge may be correct in seeing Herzog as party to his own sense of the aesthetic and ethical imperative necessitated by the parlous state of late modern society and culture. But it is impossible to overlook the gap between, on the one hand, the kind of experience being recommended as paradigmatic

for an informed and attentive late modern sensibility and, on the other hand, the lessons the reader and viewer is urged to draw from that experience. This gap corresponds to a similarly unmediated gap between Wordsworth's and Benjamin's quite different senses of time and experience. This is the focus of my final paragraphs.

In the concluding pages Eldridge alludes one final time to Wordsworth's use of the ancient *sta viator* topos, suggesting that

we might become, with Herzog, halted travelers, struck by some sudden sense of either dramatic achievement and promise or dramatic failure. [*WH* 208]

This is a Benjamin-like perception. The agent of perception in his *Arcades Project* is the *flâneur*, the urban stroller endowed with the requisite attentiveness and leisure to be struck by what for others is mere perceptual debris. Herzog says something similar:

I've always tried to give audiences short flickering moments of illumination, some kind of understanding of who we are. [*GP* 414]

The indefinite quantifier "some" is telling. It designates an unknown and unpredictable yet presumably essential kernel of sense. The result is what might be called an aleatory economics of illumination matching Benjamin's epistemology in the *Arcades Project* with Herzog's discontinuous narrative style. Eldridge twice quotes the words "Guerilla tactics are best...Get used to the bear behind you" (*WH* 73, 165) as an epitomization of the aleatory perspective, of an

awareness of the more or less itinerant character of one's course of life, of its being hostage to fortune. [*WH* 73]

But the aleatory perspective sorts oddly with Wordsworth, for whom arresting experiences are valued, indeed treasured, precisely for their repeatable potential and thus for their power, however intermittent, to supply a thread of coherence, whereas Eldridge sees in Herzog a charge always to be ready to remake the story of our experience.

There is an incongruence in Eldridge's simultaneous appeal to two paradigms of the temporality of the moment: a Romantic paradigm derived from Wordsworth and Schiller and a modern paradigm derived from Benjamin. It is an incongruence reflected in the ambiguous status of transcendence in

¹⁵ Paul Cronin, "Visionary Vehemence," in *A Guide for the Perplexed: Conversations with Paul Cronin*, ed. Paul Cronin, London, UK: Faber & Faber 2014, pp. xi-xli, here p. xxxix.

his discussion. The frequent recourse to Wordsworth notwithstanding, Eldridge seems on balance to align Herzog with a perspective which says, in Karl Jaspers' terms, that one has at best ciphers of transcendence. The arresting, transformative moments taken to be the hallmarks of Herzog's cinema are not arresting in the way of transcendence; they do not escape the temporality that will make them, too, yield to remaking. To this extent Eldridge endorses the radical finitude of Martin Heidegger's philosophy, and Benjamin's as well, the latter's moments of cognitive arrest having the same cipher-like quality as Herzog's cinematic images. And to this extent I would agree with Eldridge that the philosophical tenor of Herzog's films is a strictly provisional, skeptical view of the human capacity for transcendence. But then it remains puzzling that Eldridge wishes to recruit Wordsworth's decidedly less skeptical and indeed residually providential view of the relation between human subjectivity and nature to illuminate Herzog's broken narratives. The residually providential character of Wordsworth's view of selfhood and nature was demonstrated by M. H. Abrams who discerns in Wordsworth's awe of nature a naturalistic equivalent of traditional Christian theodicy.¹⁶ At the book's beginning Eldridge uses the Wordsworthian word intimations to aver that

art present[s] at best incomplete and uncertain intimations of the possibilities of fuller life, while ending in cadences...that involve only temporary and temporalized diminishings of a sense of outsiderliness and anxiety. [WH 14]

While that phrasing coheres with Eldridge's *ad hoc* view of art's therapeutic efficacy, when applied to Wordsworth it understates the sense of continuity and promise that is thematic to his poetry, a sense that yields a story of human commerce with the world and nature that does not square with Herzog's jagged narratives of human folly and failure, Beckett-like at times in their dark comedy, nor with his decidedly disenchanting view of humanity's place in nature.

Similarly problematic is Eldridge's playing off of a post-Romantic tradition against what he regards the largely deplorable effects of late capitalist culture. Once again, I discern here an unmediated passage

from a Romantic temporal economy to the temporal economy of late modern culture. Lyotard was not the first to have pointed out that the modern market economy has changed the temporal conditions of experience and that the transitory moment has become the signature time of late modernity. Lost in that change was the sense of being tied to earlier generations by a temporal continuum. In its place the discontinuous moment emerged as kind of vanishing point within the present; it is the thing in front of us that permanently eludes grasp. That view seems consonant with Herzog's understanding of his work as a pursuit of images at the horizon and with Eldridge's view of moments of arrest as what is most valuable in that work. But Lyotard was also not alone in pointing out that avant-garde art does not simply work in opposition to capitalist society. When he observes that there is a "collusion between capital and the avant-garde" (IRT 105), he is not accusing avant-garde art of bad faith or opportunism. Instead, he is observing, as had Karl Marx, that avant-garde art and capitalism share common traits. Among others, these are a deep skepticism, a mistrust of established rules, and a willingness, radical at times, to experiment with styles and materials. The capitalist economy has, in Lyotard's words,

something of the sublime....It is not academic, it is not physiocratic, it admits of no nature. It is, in a sense, an economy regulated by an Idea – infinite wealth or power. [IRT 105]

Lyotard is not making this claim without a note of irony. The "Idea" he cites is no longer the idea of Romanticist art theory, the idea for which the work of art was a sensible incarnation. On the contrary, what stands out in late capitalist culture, where the calculus of profitability and consumption threatens to make everything increasingly thin and impermanent, is precisely the lack of "any example from reality to verify this Idea" (IRT 105). Herzog mourns this absence of what he calls "adequate images":

At the present time, I think that we do not know very much about the process of vision itself...This kind of knowledge is precisely what we need. We need it very urgently because we live in a society that has no adequate images anymore. [IH 24, WH 44]

In line with Cavell and his own experiential-therapeutic view of the uses of art, Eldridge recognizes but firmly rejects the critical view, presented by Alan

¹⁶ M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1971. See for example "The Theodicy of the Landscape," pp. 97-117.

Singer,¹⁷ which says that what is absorbing in Herzog's films is ultimately "the conditions of their viewing" (WH33). In other words, he rejects the view, widespread since poststructuralism, that what impacts a spectator is not the presentation of a thing or world but rather a representational device. Eldridge is certainly right about Herzog's dedication to creating arresting visual images meant to startle perception. Whether those images meet the criteria for the noted adequacy and

what those criteria will be, are compelling questions about Herzog and film in general that he opens up in an instructive way. Those criteria are not spelled out, though, within the parameters of this book. In the absence of such criteria the book does not finally rise beyond declarations that Herzog's arresting images have the kind of transformative force that is claimed for them.

¹⁷ Alan Singer, "Comprehending Appearances: Werner Herzog's Ironic Sublime," in *The Films of Werner Herzog: Between Mirage and History*, ed. Timothy Corrigan, New York, NY: Methuen 1986, pp. 183-205, here p. 184.