



Volume 15, No 1, Spring 2020

ISSN 1932-1066

Selfhood, Modernity, Romanticism, and Art

The Case of Werner Herzog

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Abstract: I describe five major thematic ideas that are present in my book *Werner Herzog – Filmmaker and Philosopher*. These ideas connect my work with lines of thought in Romanticism and with the work of Karl Jaspers. I note that the argumentative core of my thought—*independent of any work on Herzog*—consists first of a view about selfhood as a status to be achieved by embodied human beings; I reject the claim that the self is any kind of object. Second, the achievement of this status, which involves finding satisfaction in one's agentive presences in one's activities, in one's relations to others, and in one's institutional settings (all within nature) is, as Sigmund Freud saw, all at once fraught, incompletable, and yet addressable. Industrial-commercial modernity both enables and inhibits the achievement of selfhood in specific ways, in making available both wider possibilities of social identity and new forms of alienation and mutual opacity. I describe how Herzog's work addresses this situation of the modern human subject in pursuit of selfhood, and I extend and develop my argument by replying to the insightful remarks of my critics.

Keywords: Herzog, Werner; Freud, Sigmund; Romanticism; selfhood; modernity; nihilism; art.

Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to Pierre Keller and Helmut Wautischer for organizing this session, to my commentators, who have engaged with my book with care, insight, and critical passion, and to both the audience in Philadelphia and now, more broadly, to the members of The Karl Jaspers Society for their attentions. One could not ask for a fuller and more apt reception than what I have been fortunate enough to receive.

In this journal, it seems especially pertinent to begin by mentioning some broad themes that connect my work, both in my Werner Herzog book and in general, with the work of Karl Jaspers. I notice five important affinities between Jaspers' thought and my own.

First, there is the thought, shared by both Jaspers and me that there are questions about meaning, value,

and the sense that life is worthwhile—about how to overcome nihilism, one might say—that cannot be wholly or adequately addressed by the experimental natural sciences. Second, there is our shared sense that human life and subjective experience exist within nature; hence, there is no Cartesian dualism here. Third, there is a sense that numinous or emphatic experience might have powers of disclosure that aid human beings in achieving senses of orientation and of the lived value of one's life that are otherwise not available or accessible. While Jaspers took some interest in mystical experience, as Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa described it, I have turned more to the experience of art. Fourth, there is a sense, associated by Jaspers with Søren Kierkegaard and by

me with William Wordsworth, Friedrich Hölderlin, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, that human lives are marked by a kind of itinerancy, in having available no fixed, absolutely dispositive *arché* (no voice of God) such that encounter with it might yield finished and incontrovertible doctrinal thought; the possibility of further, disruptive numinous experience always remains open. Fifth, there is our shared sense that the overcoming of nihilism and the achievement of a sense of orientation and meaning in one's life are open processes that are not detached from broader courses of interpersonal histories and sense-experiences.

Werner Herzog: Filmmaker and Philosopher is the second title in a series,¹ conceived and edited by Costica Bradatan, called *Philosophical Filmmakers*. The first volume by Vittorio Hösle was on Eric Rohmer (2016), and as of today, five additional volumes have been published; some sixty or so further volumes are planned.

The idea of the series was that a philosopher should be given the space to write freely about how and why the work of an individual filmmaker has mattered to him or her. Bradatan's compelling thoughts, I conjecture, were that this would both open up a new, perhaps more humanist-philosophical way of thinking about film and enable philosophers to write about what they cared about, and what others might care about, in a manner that is more creative and less under the constraints of professional protocols than usual. I took this thought and ran with it. The result, I think my readers will agree, is a book that is personal and direct, in setting out my responses to Herzog's films, both positive and negative, and in developing my understanding of why and how they matter. I particularly appreciate Francey Russell's remark that my "text about film...prompts a reader to look up often, to reflect on one's own experience of cinema and much else" in a way that unsettles one's sense "of the nature and limits of philosophy itself."¹² At the broadest level, that is exactly what I was trying to do.

The book is organized into four longish chapters: a general introduction on Images and Contemporary

Culture, followed by chapters on Nature, Selfhood, and History. The argumentative core of the book, into which my accounts of Herzog's work is woven, is most evident in two places. The first place consists of the first twelve pages of the chapter on Selfhood, where, without talking about Herzog at all, I analyze the concepts of substance, subject, human being, person, and self, drawing on Aristotle, G. W. F. Hegel, Martin Heidegger, and Stanley Cavell, and guided somewhat by Peter Hacker's work on human nature.³ The short bottom line here is that there is no such object as the self; rather, selfhood is a status concept, or selfhood is something to be achieved, via the formation of a comparatively stable and secure ego that is catheted continuously to its activities and relationships, and more broadly to its ongoing life in time.

The second crucial part is the general discussion in the Introduction of the problem of overcoming nihilism or of finding meaning in life, a discussion that draws most closely on Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*, and, in addition to Hegel, Heidegger, and Cavell, also brings into view Pierre Hadot and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as well as some of Herzog's own remarks. The short bottom line here is, first, that liberal, commercial, and industrial modernity both enables and inhibits the achievement of selfhood in important specific ways, and, second, that art and the experience of art, and in particular of Herzog's films (among many other things), can play a productive role in furthering the achievement of selfhood under current cultural conditions. Liberal modernity enables the development of manifold forms of individuality, and it makes available to many (but not to all) historically unimaginable forms of ease, enjoyment, and health, but it also threatens to overwhelm individuality with deadening industrial work, with widening social opacities, inequalities, and antagonisms, and (via a kind of Schopenhauerian materialism that rejects any sense that ultimate reality is scripted or meaningful) with the sense that life is overwhelmingly and ultimately a matter of pain and suffering.

These two bottom lines—the achievement of selfhood as a standing problem; and the character of liberal, industrial, commercial modernity in shaping both that problem and possibilities of addressing it—plus the further thought that art might help in

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

² Francey Russell, "The Screening and Screenable Animal," *Existenz* 15/1 (Spring 2020), 107-110, here pp. 107, 109. [Henceforth cited as FR]

³ P. M. S. Hacker, *Human Nature: The Categorical Framework*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007.

achieving a transformed selfhood are the main thematic ideas that organize the book. They resonate both with Jaspers, as I have indicated, and as my commentators have indicated, they also resonate with other figures whom I have taken up in my writing prior to this book, namely Wittgenstein, Cavell, Kant, Hölderlin, Wordsworth, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Regarding Herzog in particular, then, the main idea is that his films productively address the problem of one's achievement of selfhood under the conditions of modern life. I will not talk about individual films here, but instead make only two short points. The first is the general point that I read Herzog's films as displaying a kind of courage or heroism in facing up to a problem that is, as I see it, both unsolvable with any completeness and yet addressable. Of course, not every Herzog film does this equally well or even, I think, successfully. But the percentage of successes is high, and at its best Herzog's work is as good as it gets, though of course there are other modes of address to this problem. There are also other ways of constructing film than Herzog's and, more broadly, other ways of making art that are very different from Herzog's and that are important, too. Second, whatever courage or heroism (without triumphalism) is displayed in Herzog's films, especially when at their best, it is importantly leavened by irony and qualification, and it is importantly distributed or achieved among the characters (actual and fictional), on the one hand, and the director, whose presence is evident in editing, stylization, scoring, and the use of the gaze of the camera, on the other. Here it might be of some help to say that in my view something similar is true of literary art in general, as readers' identifications are mobilized and held by both presented characters (fictional or actual) and authorial attentiveness.

Thus, my overall aim was to show that there is an existential problem of the achievement of selfhood, that this problem takes a particular shape in modernity, and that Herzog's films productively address it without solving it. They do this in particular by bringing into view through images experiences of the numinous and senses of passionate commitment, for characters in the films and for viewers, where these experiences and senses solicit our identification and trust while also risking madness and inviting mistrust. It is, therefore, worthwhile to think both about and along with them, as one confronts one's own problems of the achievement of selfhood within the framework of modern life.

Response to Verena Kick

Verena Kick accurately and elegantly summarizes my main thematic concerns in writing that according to me the pursuit of selfhood is essentially a role that both [Herzog's] protagonists and viewers (and by extension also Herzog himself) attempt to achieve once they are thrown into and embodied in nature and history.⁴

Indeed, I extend this thought to human beings as such, whom I regard as always already cast on the path to selfhood (self-consciously or not, as may be) in the form of seeking, but never quite fully arriving at, full satisfaction and at-homeness in their activities, relationships, and institutional settings. Human beings seek, but never quite fully find, the expression of their distinctive personalities, energies, and points of view in ways that win recognition from others in general and that are stable as a result. This is, of course, a Hegelian line of thinking, dropping, however, Hegel's sometime claim that this *telos* can be fully achieved. One reason why the achievement of selfhood is never complete is that, as Kick notes, "the path to selfhood" is marked by a "gap between one's own purpose and self-reflectiveness compared to nature's purpose" (VK 102), since nature's purpose (if there is one at all) is both inscrutable for human beings and frequently enough hostile to their interests. The lives of reflective, desiring beings are inevitably marked by this kind of gap (again, whether self-consciously or not) that opens space for further reflection (practiced self-consciously or not). A second, related reason for the standing incompleteness of the achievement of selfhood is provided both by the manifold differences in specific passion and interest between distinct individuals and by the many different and mutually incompatible ways in which human beings have organized their social lives, each of these ways being marked, too, by internal conflict. Largely by way of engaging with Freud, I develop some reasons in support of this picture of human life.

In light of this general philosophical anthropology, I take Herzog's films to address the standing problem of the achievement of selfhood through the artistic construction of successively modulating images of various forms of partial achievement and partial failure. There are, for example, the tragedies of Kasper

⁴ Verena Kick, "Making Philosophy Accessible: Werner Herzog's Filmmaking and the Issues of Nature, Selfhood, and History," *Existenz* 15/1 (Spring 2020), 101-106, here p. 102. [Henceforth cited as VK]

Hauser, both Stroszeks, and the dwarves in *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (1970)—figures who are stuck in unsatisfying repetitions and subjected to violence in ways that significantly restrict their achievements of selfhood. These figures remain persons in my usage of the word, in their being human beings who are to some extent responsive to reasons, able to carry on conversations, to reflect, and to participate in human life. In fact, most human beings are often or sometimes no more responsive to reasons than these protagonists are. Yet their achievements of full cathexis to their lives are badly stunted by hostile forces. Or there are the comparative, but fraught successes of the woodcarver Steiner, Little Dieter, Juliane Koepcke, and the scientists in *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007) and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010). Or there is the sheer narcissistic madness of Aguirre. In each case there are, as Kick rightly sees, "unusual political concerns present" (VK 105), as I see it, "essentially by way of stylization" (WH 173) as the audience is shown figures who are suffering, reflecting, changing, and surmounting or succumbing to obstacles in various ways. Some cases, perhaps in particular the feats of bodily activity on the parts of Steiner, Dieter, and Juliane Koepcke, as well as the figures in *Encounters at the End of the World*, point to what I call "possibilities of resistance to modern emptiness" (WH 183) that one might refiguratively take up to some degree in one's own distinct historical settings. For example, in *The White Diamond* (2004), Graham Dorrington's combination of curiosity, enthusiasm, and wonder, leavened with self-irony and directed at both nature and technology, is also a useful model of this kind of productive resistance to emptiness.

Noting all this, Kick wonders about the less successful cases of

subjects that struggle both with external influences and the actualization of their selfhood, while either not having achieved or having fully rejected "personhood," and hence who might not fulfill any roles, norms, or have the status of a moral being. [VK 103]

The answer to this is that human beings are all such subjects. While they possess some powers of reflection and agency that they can sometimes employ with comparative success, human beings are also in the end always already subject to (or subjects of) historical and natural processes that they can neither fully understand nor fully control. To that extent, as I have argued elsewhere, human life is more accurately captured by

tragedy than by comedy.⁵

Even in the most reduced, hostile, and exigent circumstances of defeat, however, human beings retain their moral status: their entitlement, as beings capable of reflection and of articulating and pursuing their distinct individual ends, to treatment with respect. Once acquired (as it normally is explicitly in the course of learning language and becoming minimally responsive to reasons, or even earlier in having a biologically enabled potential for becoming responsive to reasons), the status of being a moral being or person is not something that can be simply lost (though it can be provisionally forfeited, for example through criminal behavior), even if one's efforts at leading a human life with self-respect and the respect of others are tragically thwarted and crushed—as they sometimes are, both in life and in Herzog's films. Stroszek, in particular, strikes me as a kind of moral hero—certainly someone with the status of a moral being—in his defeats.

Kick further nicely summarizes my analysis of how the movie camera in general and Herzog's use of it in particular enable the viewers both to participate in and to reflect on the experiences and thoughts of other human subjects who are bound up in the pursuit of selfhood. Through Herzog's editing viewers come to occupy, as she puts it, "a privileged position of meta-reflection that allows them to pay attention to the contrast between" (VK 103) what I call "nature's indifferent self-development" (WH 90) "and one's capacity of becoming an outsider" (VK 103) that is bound up, as I put it, with "reflective intelligence and language" (WH 92). That is, Herzog cuts from images of the swifts circling in front of the waterfall, to images of and conversation between Graham Dorrington and Mark Anthony Yhap, and then back again to the swifts. The viewers also see what Dorrington and Yhap see that prompts their thought and talk, they hear Dorrington and Yhap's conversation against the background of what the viewers already know about them, and the viewers are further instructed by the score to share in the open-hearted wonder and

⁵ Richard Eldridge, "How Can Tragedy Matter for Us?" in *The Persistence of Romanticism: Essays in Philosophy and Literature*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2001, pp. 145-164, especially p. 164: "when we seek to reach some understanding of the mind and its places in culture and nature, then tragic representations have some claim to being regarded as the most illusion-free representations of reality."

curiosity, coupled with the acceptance of limitations, that Dorrington and Yhap express and that Herzog's use of the camera captures and expresses in its way.

Finally, Kick wonders whether Herzog's repetitions in

revisiting religious protagonists and his fascination with the corporeality of religious acts...can also be applied to Herzog's interaction with the cinematic image, aiming to make his viewers see what would remain otherwise unseen. [VK 104]

The answer to this is an emphatic yes. Heightened modes of bodily involvement in repeated activity connect religious pilgrims and ritualists, as Herzog presents them, with virtuoso auctioneers and world-class athletes, and through his presentations of them Herzog argues that in their bodily involvements these figures are touched by something out of the ordinary. It is then up to viewers to sort out how far they might trust these involvements or instead are to regard them—sometimes also—with bemused suspicion, as they are surely directed to do in the case of Ashrita Furman in *Encounters at the End of the World*.

One of the most interesting thoughts that I find in Herzog and that I am prompted to by Kick's question is that the achievement of selfhood both, first, requires a willingness for repetition, for doing something skillfully over and over, but also, second, that achieving this frequently involves obsessiveness and weirdness. I am thinking here of the auctioneers in *How Much Wood Could a Woodchuck Chuck?* (1976), of Steiner's ski-jumping, and of the obsessively repetitive pilgrims and ritualists who populate Herzog's documentaries on religion. A further thought to which Kick prompts me is that Herzog himself is an obsessive, repetitive moviemaker who frequently risks bodily harm in the course of filming. At age eighty, after by my count over one hundred films, he is still going strong, with three films scheduled for release soon, and in his oeuvre he obsessively revisits certain topics: religious devotion, life in extreme places such as the Peruvian jungle or Antarctica, and figures of obsession or possession such as Timothy Treadwell, Huie Rogers, and Gene Scott. This suggests, as Kick proposes, that Herzog's "filmmaking itself is also turning into a spiritual act," (VK 104), as he explores possibilities of repetition that embody successful sensuous meaning-making. I think the audience's attention is held as much by

Herzog's own obsessive agency, often under extreme circumstances, as it is by the human subjects whom he explores in his work, and I could not agree more.

Response to Francey Russell

Francey Russell focuses initially on André Bazin's ideas that were further articulated by Cavell, that film—or at least photographically produced film, as opposed to cartoons and computer-generated imagery (CGI films)—captures and presents the world on screen and that this fact has something to do with the special, medium-specific powers of photographic film as a form of art. "Successful cinema, and successful writing about cinema" as she puts it,

make perspicuous this uncanny continuity of the world on screen with the world humans inhabit, where such reflection can generate not only anxiety but also wonder. [FR 108]

This is a thought that I am happy to endorse, and I conjecture that the wonder she has in mind occurs distinctively when a movie successfully invites and sustains lingering in its particular filmic densities, as opposed to focusing on a detachable message that is mongered. Through the compelling filmic image, one sees the world—one's actual world—anew in a guided, emotion-saturated way. Herzog is a kind of master in presenting what the film scholar Daniel Yacavone calls a film world—that is, the actual world presented in a consistent, compelling stylized way on film.⁶ This form of presentation is different from the creation of a fictional world or a story world that Kendall Walton talks about.⁷ It is, rather, the real world captured and

⁶ Daniel Yacavone, *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press 2014, p. 4: "It is vital and necessary to distinguish between the more or less skillfully constructed fictional story-worlds present within narrative films and the larger, multidimensional, and aesthetically realized worlds of film as artworks." See also p. xiv: "A 'film world'... is a singular, holistic, relational, and fundamentally referential reality...that relies heavily on the given properties of the preexisting realities out of which a film is more or less creatively and skillfully made."

⁷ Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1993, p. 4: "What all [fictional] representations have in common is a role in *make-believe*. *Make-believe*, explained in terms of imagination, will constitute the core of my theory."

screened in a particular, guided, coherent, and stylized way.

She then develops this thought by suggesting that

Herzog's stylization orients one's attention away from one's humanist preoccupation with the quest for a personally meaningful life, and toward the aesthetic, sensuous surface of human life. That is, cinematic aestheticization demonstrates that human beings and human activity can be considered in terms other than those provided by psychology and narrative, and it calls attention to the fact that human beings are themselves aesthetic objects that can be brought to a level shared with all other material things. [FR 109]

I am less sure about this set of ideas. Human beings certainly are material, visible objects, and their doings are likewise visible. Herzog does sometimes linger on human subjects and their aesthetic presence to the viewers, as in his tracking of Stroszek's humiliations and Aguirre's manias. But he also attends prominently, as Yacavone's work on film worlds suggests, to phenomena of nature: all the flowing rapids, swirls of fog, underground ice caves, mobile sand dunes, blowing grass fields, and so forth that populate his work. I wonder whether either form of attention—to human faces and bearings or to natural phenomena—is in any important sense non-psychological. My sense is that the objects on which the camera lingers, both human subjects and nature, are presented as objects of and for the viewer's emotional experience, where the camera functions as a vehicle of the director's emotionally informed attentiveness to their modulating lives. That is, with and by means of the camera, Herzog is thinking and feeling things, and inviting the viewer to think and feel things about both the looks of human subjects and the looks of nature in highly guided ways. In the case of human subjects, that attention, as I have suggested, is directed to Stroszek's humiliations, as registered in his face, gait, and bearing, and not to the latter alone, or to Aguirre's madness as registered in his bearing and gait. By means of the camera, the audience sees these things, and in seeing them the audience is enabled and prompted to have thoughts and feelings about them.

See also pp. 60, 69: "What is fictional in a work is what appreciators of it (qua appreciators of it) are to imagine... Fictional worlds are associated with collections of fictional truths; what is fictional is fictional in a given world—the world of a game of make-believe, for example, or that of a representational work of art."

In general, then, I do not see the opposition between attention to aesthetic surface and attention to psychology that Russell suggests. She observes that "Herzog's stylization calls attention to the aesthetic, spectacular, non-narrative dimensions of human life," adding that "these are some of the deepest, most real, and most human concerns" (FR 110). As the word "concerns" suggests, however, this stylization presents these aesthetic dimensions not only as objects of interest in themselves, but also as objects of momentary arrest within the viewers' unique ongoing courses of life, things about which figures in the films, the directorial gaze, and viewers stopped in their tracks, might variously be awed and chastened by, horrified at, spellbound by, or shocked at, in ways that then ultimately are to figure in their own senses of life. Otherwise, why make a film at all? So, Russell is right in noting that I might take aesthetic-spectacular versus narrative-broadly ethical to be "a false opposition" (FR 110). Importantly, however, the idea of fullness of attention to human life and nature (including their surfaces or looks) that Herzog's films at their best enact and promote is not a matter so much of the cultivation of "psychological interiority" (FR 110) as it is the cultivation of emotion- and thought-suffused practical comportment and stance toward and within the real, including a sense of humility and a sense of the partiality of one's own perspective. The moments of sudden arrest in fullness of attention that occur in Herzog's films importantly cut as much or more against as toward "the quest for a personally meaningful life" (FR 109) that is grasped in terms that one already understands; they compel the viewer, rather, to notice and think and feel otherwise.

Russell is also right that among Herzog's films, *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979) is perhaps the most highly formally stylized one, in drawing in detail on F. W. Murnau's composition in his *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922), and she is correct, too, in pointing out that there is some humor in Klaus Kinski's portrayal of Dracula. But why was that Murnau-esque stylization chosen? Why homage to that rather than to a different Dracula film? Here there is, as I read it, considerable pathos in the film. Herzog's and Kinski's Dracula seems to me to present the Heideggerian-Taylorian thought that a life without death would be a life without meaning, as one then could no longer ask the question: "who or what shall I be (in my limited time on earth)?" but

only "who or what shall I be next (in a life without end)?," perhaps together with an undercurrent of irony and humor at the self-absorbed character of spending one's whole life worrying about meaning that is nowhere to be found. All this is presented as something that it would be apt for anyone to confront and feel, precisely because one perhaps tends narcissistically to repress such thoughts and feelings in one's continual pursuits of material comfort.

As for what Russell called (in her spoken remarks but not in the published text) Herzog's "frankly masculine grandiosity and self-satisfaction": this is something I cannot deny, and there are times when I, too, am suspicious of it, perhaps especially in his autobiographical film *Portrait* (1986), which is more than a little over-the-top in presenting Herzog alone, striding through mountain valleys, wearing a dark-green loden cape and heavy boots and intermittently stopping to read from his journals. (I include this paragraph in light of the fact that many viewers have had a similar sense of Herzog's markedly masculine style.) At the same time, however, there is sometimes in what she calls his masculinity grandiosity and self-satisfaction also something that I think is worth admiring, for both men and women. Here I take masculinity and femininity as styles of subjectivity rather than anything that is fixed by biology. What I mean is the form of courage in facing up to the ultimate unknowability of a hostile nature and to the consequent unavailability of any clearly formed, conceptually tidy doctrine of how to do well in a life that is, inevitably, a camel ride to the tomb. A few women in some of the films seem to share in this courage—for instance, Juliane Koepcke in *Wings of Hope* (2000) or Karen Joyce in *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007)—though I do not doubt that as a matter of socio-cultural history it is a style that is generally coded masculine. More importantly, that masculine style attaches to Herzog's directorial gaze, in his choices of subjects, plots, and *mises-en-scène*. I do not expect everyone either will or should love every instance of this attention. But as one directorial style among many, and itself leavened with humor (as in the shot of the chimp riding a goat in *Encounters at the End of the World* or that film's somewhat mocking use of Ashrita Furman), it does seem to me to offer genuine resources for thinking about and responding to life intelligently and emotionally, though never with absolute command.

Response to John M. Baker, Jr.

John Baker is on target in seeing my readings of Herzog's films as taking place "against a broadly construed understanding of Romantic and post-Romantic aesthetics."¹⁸ He worries, however, that my readings are too recuperative and therapeutic—too Wordsworthian and Schillerian (as he reads these figures)—and not disruptive enough along lines marked out by Walter Benjamin, Jean-François Lyotard, and Charles Taylor. He argues that recuperative-therapeutic Romanticism that elicits meaning from images or experiences is no longer relevant to current times, and he proposes a counter-epiphanic focus on a disturbing, non-disclosive, autotelic image that finds its end in itself or, if it discloses anything, discloses only "by means of indirection, silence, and abstraction" (*JB* 116). Oddly enough, however, he also criticizes what he sees as my "focus...on single frames from the films, or, on occasion sequences" (*JB* 112), at the expense of considerations of genre and plot, while also himself noting that such a focus on

the singular moment [and] the peculiar power of the aesthetic to resonate with an audience and to create resonances between different objects and across perceptual fields [are] central motifs in Benjamin. [*JB* 116]

He concludes by complaining that I fail to provide criteria for the adequacy of the singular images on which (so he thinks) I uniquely focus in a therapeutic spirit (*JB* 118). Finally, he notes, aptly, that my readings of Herzog undertake to align his work with Karl Jaspers' thought "that one has at best ciphers of transcendence" (*JB* 118).

Clearly some sorting out is in order. Broadly speaking, the comparison with Jaspers is on the mark, and the version of Romanticism that I favor and see Herzog's films as developing in fruitful new ways splits the difference between Wordsworthian and Benjaminian Romanticism as Baker understands them. My reading of Wordsworth is less recuperative than his, and my reading of Benjamin is modestly more recuperative. To take Wordsworth first: while Wordsworth's announced intention is to find "Paradise, and groves /Elysian, Fortunate Fields—

¹⁸ John M. Baker, Jr., "Werner Herzog Between Romanticism and Late Modernity," *Existenz* 15/1 (Spring 2020), 111-119, here p. 111. [Henceforth cited as *JB*]

like those of old /Sought in the Atlantic Main" to be continuously available to anyone as "a simple produce of the common day,"⁹ his actual accomplishment—above all, the text of *The Prelude* itself—is more a continuing itinerary of unresolved swerves between confident recovery and recurrent anxiety, crisis, and despair than it is a recipe for achieving stabilized meaning. Dramas of alternately recuperative and alienating moments of experience are foregrounded in Wordsworth's writing over consoling dogma. Likewise, I am far closer to the cannier, more realistic, less naïve position taken by Friedrich Schiller in his essay "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry" than to Schiller's more optimistic, yet self-contradictory position taken in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* and to his sometime thought that beauty can save humanity. My Romantic plaidoyer is for heightened attentiveness and conversation about complexities and contradictions in human life, not for overcoming them or for achieving ultimate salvation. This heightened attentiveness and conversation can and ought, in my view, inform and figure in one's daily life: there is a kind of modest, qualified salvation from living in a state of anomie, alienation, and depression that is available through such attentiveness and conversation. Achieving that modest salvation is more an ongoing and incomplete process than it is a matter of achieving a final condition, as humans tend to live within alternations of what some religions refer to as apocalypse and *akedah*, or selfhood and love; and what Cavell called avoidance and acknowledgment. I am not sure that the fact of the problem of mediation—the fact, that is, of the complexities and contradictions of modern culture, however standing they are—makes an aspiration to this modest salvation that includes alternation either impossible or undesirable. The thought that no modest salvation is available strikes me as the counsel of either cynicism or despair.

I also take seriously Benjamin's relentless suspicion of the thought, perhaps the Gadamerian thought, that tradition is largely continuous and simply exists to be recovered. The idea that this is so, nurtured by the defenders of universal history, leads to seeing the achievements of the past as what Benjamin calls

Kulturgüter (cultural treasures) that turn into spoils that may be appropriated by the victors.¹⁰ Herzog's frequent rejection of straight linear narrative and his interest in the weird and the obsessive run counter to that way of looking at history as tradition, and, with Benjamin, I think that is a good thing. At the same time, however, what Benjamin calls the dialectical image, the "caesura in the movement of thought"¹¹ that yields a truth that "flashes up at the moment of its recognizability" (*CH* 390), sometimes in the form of or by way of a work of art, is not only momentary and disruptive. It is also able, Benjamin would have it, to contribute to the "courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude" of the victims of history and to bind them to the class struggle (*CH* 390). In the "initially excluded, negative component...a positive element emerges" too (*AP* 459, N1a,3).

How does all this bear on Herzog's work and on my reading of it? Contrary to what Baker suggests, one does not need to choose between an outdated therapeutic-recuperative, transcendence-seeking Romanticism and a more plausible paratactic, skeptical, Lyotardian historical-critical vigilance. One can, and should, have it both ways, by focusing on dramatic itineraries of experience rather than on bottom line conclusions.

In this context, it is important that Baker gets right my reading of the concluding scenes of *The White Diamond* as turning one's view "back to the human actors" (*JB* 114)—in particular to Graham Dorrington and Mark Anthony Yhap, who are experiencing the circling of the swifts around the waterfall, and to oneself, as one who is experiencing that same circling through the camera's attentions. Baker is also right to point both to the analogy between Dorrington-Yhap and Don Quixote-Sancho Panza and to the comic deflationary effect of showing the fruitless launching of champagne glasses over the falls in order to test the air currents. Overall, what matters is not only the isolated content of the arresting image, the circling of the swifts, but also how that content is experienced by human beings,

¹⁰ See Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, transl. Edmund Jephcott and others, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2002, pp. 389-400, here p. 391. [Henceforth cited as *CH*]

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, transl. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1999, p. 475, N10a,3. [Henceforth cited as *AP*]

⁹ William Wordsworth, "From The Recluse," in *William Wordsworth, Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company 1965, pp.45-7, here p. 46, ll. 800-2, 808.

both by Dorrington and Yhap, about whom the viewer at this point has learned quite a lot, and by oneself in one's sympathies with them and in sharing their spatial point of view by way of the camera's placement. My focus, then, is not only on arresting images, but also on the plot and context in relation to which these images matter either to the characters or to the viewers, as a film itself plots their experiences. To me, at least, in all at once presenting characters with histories, subjecting them to directorial commentary, and showing them experiencing the effects of an arresting moment that viewers, too, experience perceptually, *The White Diamond*, and frequently enough Herzog's work in general, earns one's trust as serious thought about life in the form of images that compose a narrative. Is there any good reason to think that this trust is naïve or misplaced?

Response to Brad Prager

Brad Prager raises two important general questions about art. The first is "how is one to approach the supplemental relationship between art and philosophy?" coupled with the suggestion that it may be inapt in general to treat filmmakers as philosophers.¹² To this I offer a general response. Yes, there is a supplemental relation between art and philosophy, but it is two-way, not a relation of one-way dependence with art having priority (as the passage from Theodor Adorno that Prager cites seems to suggest). Here I follow Arthur Danto's Nietzsche-derived argument in Chapter 1 of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* that making and responding to art emerged as distinct practices when and only when the literal re-presenting of the gods in ritual was slowly transformed into artistic representation of them.¹³ As this transformation took place, there must have been some degree and kind of transformation in self-consciousness about exactly what the agents in question were doing in wearing masks, stepping onto a raised platform and representing the gods rather than incarnating them; likewise for transformation in the self-consciousnesses of members of the audience in assembling in order to

watch these presentations. And this is to say that the emergence of art as distinct practice is inseparable from some form of philosophical thought, that is, some form of reflective self-consciousness. Or, to put the same point in an idiom closer to Friedrich Schlegel and Walter Benjamin, art lives in part through being talked about.

And *vice versa*, as the passage from Adorno suggests, philosophy arises from and lives in relation to the practices of art (among others), while also itself making ineliminable use of images, metaphors, rhetorical tropes, patterns of emplotment, and other devices of artistic organization. As I have argued elsewhere, literature and philosophy are "partly complementary, partly opposed forms of attention to human life that...engage with and contest one another."¹⁴ Hooray for them both, in both their complementarity and difference, as medially specific forms of thought and attention. Rather than urging any sort of replacement of one by the other, let alone any sense that Herzog does better what philosophy does less well, I am all for continuing interaction.

The issue of the relation between art and philosophy is further bound up with issues about the material conditions of each of them as forms of practice and with images of what critical attention to and in both art and philosophy should look like. Prager proposes that one would do better not to focus on meanings and artistic achievements, but instead to "concern oneself directly with the material conditions that determine a culture's ideas and values" (BP 123). Works of art in general, and especially films with their significant financing costs and many-member production teams, are made within the framework of social and economic conditions, and these conditions frequently enough have a significant share in shaping the contents of works, especially in more-or-less clichéd and pandering works that cater to the fantasies or prejudices of mass audiences. But do these conditions determine either a culture's ideas and values or the contents of the works that are produced within it? This claim about determination strikes me as either vague but uncontestable (when "determine" means "sometimes shape" as one factor

¹² Brad Prager, "Some Risks May Be Necessary," *Existenz* 15/1 (Spring 2020), 120-124, here p. 121. [Henceforth cited as BP]

¹³ Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1981, pp. 1-32, here p. 19.

¹⁴ Richard Eldridge, "Introduction—Philosophy and Literature as Forms of Attention," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Richard Eldridge, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2009, pp. 3-15, here p. 13.

among many) or false (when "determine" means "causally dispositive over all else," in all cases, no matter what). There are many ways to do criticism and to do it well, and foregrounding attention to material conditions is certainly one of them, apt for some cases. Prager is himself a distinguished practitioner of this style of criticism with respect to Herzog, and I have been instructed by his work. But there is also surely room for attention to meaning and artistic achievement. Prager implicitly concedes this when he asks, "How could anyone hope to fix the meaning of...*La Soufrière*?" (BP 121)—a film that, as he sees it, is dominated by a metaphor that is "hardly fixed in its meaning" (BP 122). If it is not fixed in its meaning, then surely that meaning is not determined by material conditions. One might of course consider multiple threads of complex determinations of complex meanings. But one might equally well try to understand and appreciate the complex content of the metaphor without reducing it to any kind of simple message.¹⁵ As Cavell argued long ago, paraphrase is a way of trying, along with more extended critical acts of comparison, historical situation, and so forth, to come to grips with a complex, difficult work of art, not a replacement for the work or its meaning.¹⁶ To revert explicitly to the first question, it is, again, through being bound up with critical conversation that both art and philosophy are living practices (and *vice versa*).

The second question Prager raises is: how seriously should one take artists' largely post-hoc characterizations of the meanings of their works. In particular, do Herzog's voluminous staged and stylized remarks about his films constitute what Prager (citing John Davidson) calls a tar baby that attaches to one's thought and produces misunderstandings (BP 121)? Here I offer a second general response. The primary uses of the verb "intend" are to describe plans for the future where there is some uncertainty about whether the plans will come off and to qualify, explain, or partially excuse what one did in the past, as in "I

intended to feed the cat, but I forgot." An intention, as J. L. Austin demonstrated, is not any sort of introspective object-in-mind. Rather, "intentionally," "unintentionally," and their cousins are style-of-performance adverbs.¹⁷ If this is right, then it would be a mistake even to consider Herzog's remarks about his own work as reports on some introspective idea that existed prior to the appearance of the work itself and that was determinative of its shape and meaning. Of course, Herzog can and does make comments such as "I planned to do x, but y happened, so I did z instead" or "I planned to do x, faced some difficulties, and then succeeded in doing x." But these plans are formed within a temporally sustained practice of filmmaking, they are subject to ongoing modification, and they are variably more or less well fulfilled in the work. Works of art, including films, are intentionally made things; the so-called intentionalist fallacy is itself a fallacy. It makes no sense even to try to interpret a film or any other work of art as being just a structure. Making a film requires considerable planning and execution, and Herzog can describe that planning and execution and comment on how it went. But such descriptions and comments are not absolutely evidentially privileged reports on fully formed states of mind that are dispositive for a work's meaning. It follows that one should read what Herzog, or any other artist, has to say about his own artistic practice, and one should take what he says seriously, as one would take seriously the efforts at qualification, justification, exculpation, and so forth of any other agent. Herzog surely has some reflective acquaintance with what he wanted to achieve. But as with any other agent, one must look and see for oneself what was done and whether the agent's report is reliable. One must test Herzog's account of what he was up to in making a film against the film itself, letting film and account of it shed light on each other, and noting and resolving conflicts where one can. Should one then, as Prager asks, attribute courage and resoluteness to the man, so that Herzog becomes a dangerous apostle, to the films, to all of them, or only to some (BP 123)? My answer is: we should attribute courage and resoluteness to some films that were made by the man, and I hope my book goes some distance toward sorting out which ones: *Aguirre*, *Stroszek*, *The White Diamond*, and *Little Dieter*,

¹⁵ I doubt that Prager would readily apply the picture of the material determination of meaning to works by artists from historically oppressed groups, to works with political stances that he favors, or to his own critical writing.

¹⁶ Stanley Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, ed. Stanley Cavell, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2015, pp. 68-90.

¹⁷ J. L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," in *J. L. Austin, Philosophical Papers*, eds. James O. Urmson and Geoffrey J. Warnock, Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press 1979, pp. 175-204, here pp. 199-200.

for example, but not *The Wild Blue Yonder*, *Salt and Fire*, or even *Fitzcarraldo*.

This position about critically assessing what agents do applies as well to how to read Heidegger. Yes, the Black Notebooks did make his anti-Semitic tendencies more evident than they had been before, and in my view this should affect one's reading of *Being and Time*. Indeed, while citing approvingly and drawing on Heidegger's general understanding of human being-in-the-world, in this Herzog book I also call Heidegger's accounts in *Being and Time* of how to achieve resoluteness "distressingly empty and hence open to appropriation by decisionist fascism" (WH 19), citing disapprovingly his remark about the importance of "the nation...return[ing] to itself for the fulfillment of its vocation."¹⁸ My way of using Heidegger is to accept his anti-dualism, his sense of the occlusion of the Absolute or the whole from one's conceptual grasp of it, and his sense of humans being thrown into a world-with-others that is not what it might better be, but instead to look elsewhere, for example to Herzog, for better models of the achievement of resoluteness.

Here, along with Prager, I accept Steven Vogel's remarks that "Kasper Hauser is not a prophet, come to describe the human situation: his is the human situation,"¹⁹ and that "Steiner's despair... 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*" (OC 13). Accession into self-consciousness, ego-formation, language, and the symbolic order is per se a fall into separateness and isolation, at least in part, as the props of one's affections are removed. The one qualification I would add to this ontological point is that different social worlds offer different possibilities of both tragedy and qualified recovery in relation to this ontological fall. And my argument overall is that Herzog in some films (but not all) powerfully and aptly scrutinizes ontologically primordial possibilities of tragedy and qualified recovery that are also historically specific to industrial commercial modernity.

¹⁸ 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. 42.

¹⁹ 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]

The final issue Prager raises is whether one might do better to pay attention to very different sorts of documentaries that are more genuinely historical and attentive to political and ethnic differences than Herzog's stylizations are: for example to Wolfgang Fischer's 2018 film *Styx* (BP 124). My answer to this is that of course one should pay attention to such work along with Herzog's. That is, I did not mean anywhere to suggest that Herzog's films were a unique and self-sufficient source of morally and politically sufficient self-understanding. In fact, I think there is no such thing at all. Instead, for me his films occupy an important place, though just one place, in a broad and contested field of artistic and historical objects, attentions to which might enrich one's self-understanding but never perfect it. To put my claim on Herzog's behalf another way, I was reminded by Prager's urging of the importance of Wolfgang Fischer's film over Herzog's of a moment in François Truffaut's *Day for Night* (1973) where two evidently vapid German actresses, who have been brought to visit the set where the director, Ferrand, is shooting the film "Meet Pamela," ask him, respectively, "Why don't you make political films? Why don't you make erotic films?" The implication of the humor here is that these actresses' sense of how art achieves importance is misplaced and that the film one is watching, *Day for Night*, has its own politics and eroticism that are less obvious and predictable than what the actresses seem to expect. I would also make a similar point about Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* (1992) in particular. This film, to me, holds up strikingly well, despite, or rather in virtue of, the fact that it is largely highly stylized and apocalyptic, not analytically journalistic about immediately political causes and effects of the first Gulf War. It is worth seeing and talking about, with both appreciative and critical attention to its vision and politics, along with attention to and talk about many other films and artistic objects.

Response to Katrina Mitcheson

Katrina Mitcheson asks an excellent question: "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?"²⁰ Here she is worried, but

²⁰ Katrina Mitcheson, "Werner Herzog's Ecstatic Truth," *Existenz* 15/1 (Spring 2020), 125-129, here p. 127. [Henceforth cited as KM]

also curious, about a potential conflict between the marked presence in Herzog's films of his perspective on events as it is signaled in such details as voice-overs, bravura shots that allude to other Herzog films, and Herzog's own appearances on screen within many of his documentaries, on the one hand, and truth on the other. She asks,

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? [KM 127]

Mitcheson goes on to suggest that these questions might be answered, and the initial appearance of conflict might be resolved, by thinking of "an inner truth," or the kind of ecstatic truth that Herzog claims to pursue and to embody in his films,

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...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 [KM 128]

rather than as simply the neutral recording of some reality exterior to the subject. Picking up on my comments on Pierre Hadot's work on philosophy as consisting in spiritual exercises, she suggests that "the conversion of the subject, allowing one to access the truth, is achieved gradually, through hard work, repetition, and exercises" (KM 128).

I think this is exactly right, both with regard to my own views about Herzog and with regard to truth in philosophy and art in general. It is worthwhile to follow out a bit further what is involved in thinking of these active powers quoted above. First, I take it that human beings are natural beings whose lives are themselves bound up with natural processes of growth, development, and, ultimately, decay. Yet humans are also distinctive natural beings who develop perspectives on these processes and, more broadly, on their lives in time, led in awareness of death, and conducted with the thought that one might live (and others have lived and do live) differently than how one actually does live or how one is expected to live by one's community. In Heideggerian terms, human beings are the kinds of beings who call their own being into question, who wonder how to lead their lives within nature and time actively and fruitfully.

According to my own Romantic and neo-Hegelian line of thinking, a principal issue that human beings have in view as they reflect on their courses of life, actual and potential, is how they might effectively deploy their powers of reflection, of choice, and of making and participating in culture so as to achieve and sustain both a stable, enduring sense that their lives are worthwhile (are to be willed) and the endorsement from other reflective subjects of the fact that they have achieved this sense and done something worth willing. Wordsworth memorably gives expression to this worry as he comments on what much of modern industrial commercial life in cities looked like to him:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!²¹

More broadly, humans are creatures of commitments and disappointments, and we are reflectively aware of both.

Unfortunately, human beings' powers of addressing their disappointments and forming new commitments in new modes of cultural life are divided and contested among them, as the pervasiveness of structural social conflict in history shows. Here I am closer to Adorno and to other radically left neo-Hegelians than to Hegel in his moments of optimism. Sometimes apocalyptic, world-denying, chthonically individual energies in the style of Nietzsche will be called for in order to challenge staleness; sometimes domestication and rebinding to the common will be called for as the only arena in which, finally, thought, sanity, and reciprocity are possible. In no cases, I think, will there be clear, dispositive recipes for avoiding significant conflict and unsettlement.

In this situation, a body of images that shows one not only agents deploying energies of heroic departure from ordinary life and expectations (for example, climbing 8,000 meter mountains or prostrating oneself after every step of a thousand-mile religious pilgrimage), but also offers perspectives on those deployments and opportunities to think and feel along with both their agents and with

²¹ William Wordsworth, "The World is Too Much with Us," in *William Wordsworth, Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company 1965, p. 182, ll. 1-4.

a composing directorial intelligence, as well as accounts of the ends these deployments meet, may be of some use to anyone in thinking comparatively about one's own situations and directions of interest. Such images will also be multiple and conflicting. Engagement with them will not spare one the work of interpretation, evaluation, criticism, and interaction with others. Contrary to the dreams of Platonic philosophers, life involves incompleteness and risk, and it is not merely a solvable engineering problem.

Thus, I am happy to accept Mitcheson's useful formulation that Herzog, and I, along with many others, are working with

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. [KM 129]

This is exactly the kind of difficult, provisional, but vital human truth, the continual pursuit of which is essentially bound up with the practices of art and philosophy that is offered to anyone productively—for one's own critical reflection and work—by many of Herzog's films.