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Werner Herzog's Filmmaking and the Issues of Nature, Selfhood, and History

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Abstract: Richard Eldridge's stimulating book outlines how Werner Herzog's films both visualize and grapple with abstract philosophical concepts. To this end, Herzog's films become interlocutors in Eldridge's analysis, which is less concerned with critiquing Herzog's sometimes staged scenes in his documentaries; instead, Eldridge perceives Herzog's works as visualizations of human experiences, concerning mainly the ideas of nature, selfhood, and history. This essay evaluates each of these different categories of human experience that Eldridge identifies as being the central issues in his three chapters. Some focal points such as corporeality, religion, and language, to be sure, could have formed bases for additional discussions in Eldridge's otherwise already rich juxtapositions of philosophical issues with key scenes in Herzog's feature films and documentaries..

Keywords: Herzog, Werner; Eldridge, Richard; nature; selfhood; history; corporeality; religion; language.

Richard Eldridge's lucidly written *Werner Herzog: Filmmaker and Philosopher* covers nearly the entire oeuvre of Werner Herzog's close to one hundred films.¹ Eldridge's approach to Herzog's films is one prompted by his personal encounters with these films, which led him to explore them through a philosophical lens. This connection to philosophical questions is not one that aims to illustrate various theories of philosophy, but one that puts the philosophical narratives of Friedrich Nietzsche, G. W. F. Hegel, Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger, Stanley Cavell, and Walter Benjamin, among others, into dialogue with Herzog's films. By drawing upon these narratives, Eldridge reads these works as ways that take up and grapple with the

problems of human life that motivate the philosophies, as the films think creatively and in images about exactly what these problems are and how to address them. [WH 4]

This is a less skeptical approach to Herzog's filmmaking, which, especially in his documentary films, operates with a deliberate construction of often staged images, thus demanding a critical approach that uncovers the ways in which Herzog stages both his own performance and the performances in his films that play with ideas of truth and reality. Nonetheless, his films convey human experiences (and problems engendered by these experiences) that make abstract philosophical thoughts accessible and visible. This also informs Eldridge's interpretation of Herzog's works. For Eldridge, these problems of human life are centered around issues of nature, selfhood, and history as becomes clear when

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

looking at his sparse table of contents that lists nothing else but these three categories as the chapter titles of the book. While some more detail would have been helpful to guide readers at this point, one also wonders why these categories were chosen and why others were left out. For instance, the issue of corporeality, as seen through a philosophical lens, emerges as an important category in Eldridge's introduction as he reflects in this context on Herzog's construction of images with full attention to their "bodily placement in relation to objects" (WH 27), and also on a viewer's placement in and engagement with the story. Herzog's images are "signature stylistic constructs" (WH 32), and trigger in viewers, as Eldridge writes, a "modulation of attention" (WH 38). While Eldridge returns to this relationship between Herzog's protagonists, the viewers, and the constructed images in all three of his chapters (which could have prompted a treatment in a chapter of its own), he addresses questions regarding the viewer and Herzog's *dramatis personae* mainly in his central chapter on selfhood. The pursuit of selfhood is essentially a role that both his protagonists and viewers (and by extension also Herzog himself) attempt to achieve once they are thrown into and embodied in nature and history. Herzog's constructed images and the subsequent modulated images can then particularly help and support the viewers with their own embeddedness in history and nature and their desire to enter the role of selfhood. The three chapters are prefaced by an introduction in which Eldridge combines a thorough review of the literature on Herzog's oeuvre with the filmmaker's own thoughts. This is also the place where Eldridge adds to the conversation the thoughts of, for example, Freud, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, and by doing so he is proposing that Herzog's films are the visual expression of some of the concerns that had been on the minds of these philosophers.

In the chapter titled "Nature," Eldridge draws parallels between Herzog and Nietzsche in their view of nature as being hostile to human powers, and he maintains throughout the book that Nietzsche continues to be a consistent partner-in-thought for Herzog. For instance, on the back cover of Paul Cronin's book of conversations with Herzog, one can read twenty-four aphorisms by the filmmaker;² the first

one being, "Always take the initiative." This approach is reminiscent of Nietzsche's thought about the will to power, references to which Eldridge addresses in the context of contrasting forces of nature with the force of willpower (WH 50-1). When reading this chapter, one wonders if Herzog's filmmaking could be described as being Nietzschean. However, it appears that Herzog's images of nature help to refuse creating a harmonious picture between human beings and nature, and instead they visualize the juxtaposition of humans' quest for meaning with a self-developing nature void of meaning or purpose. While one has to be careful not to rely too much on Herzog's own stylized statements in this regard, Eldridge's reference to the filmmaker's own childhood experiences is appropriate, in contrast to other passages in the book where a more critical approach to Herzog's own statements would have been beneficial. Herzog's encounter with nature as he was growing up in rural Bavarian mountains and villages was still in youthful awe and respect for nature which then, when becoming an adult, marks along with the path to selfhood, also the gap between one's own purpose and self-reflectiveness compared to nature's purpose. Eldridge writes,

the experience of Herzog's images of nature includes an experience on the part of the viewer of being left outside the movement of nature, as nature relates itself to itself. [WH 68]

This self-referential and cyclical movement of nature brings it then about that the images of nature and landscapes are becoming the least accessible to Herzog's viewers. In contrast to this view, I argue that the more constructed Herzog's images become in his films, the more approachable these films become to his viewers, whereas in my estimation the long pans of landscapes leave out his audience. Yet, this seems to be the necessary estrangement in that viewers cannot readily relate to nature's images, as they are too familiar with them outside of the movie theater. In this regard, Eldridge points toward Herzog's documentary *The White Diamond* (2004) in order to demonstrate "what worthwhile human action might look like, even while accepting the transitoriness of human life in nature" (WH 89). Eldridge's description and particularly the subsequent interpretation of the documentary's final sequences arguably fall a bit short, especially as he calls them "one of the most astonishingly evocative sequences in the history of filmmaking" (WH 92). However, he still manages to

² Werner Herzog, *A Guide for the Perplexed: Conversations with Paul Cronin*, ed. Paul Cronin, London, UK: Faber & Faber 2014, back cover (<https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/81yBVgLnwJL.jpg>).

highlight in this close reading that there is a nature relating solely to itself, proliferating "unusual forms of life without either regard or any privilege for the human" (WH 90). At this point, while Herzog's role as a filmmaker includes immersing himself in his films, often present either via his body or voice (close or next to his protagonists), he also often positions himself as an observer outside of nature, such as in regard to the swifts and the waterfall in *The White Diamond*. This prompts the question as to where this frame arrangement positions his viewers. In this context, Eldridge writes about the aforementioned modulation of attention that is being achieved through the editing of images and sound, and in this instance is including Herzog's voiceovers. For Eldridge, the editing of *The White Diamond* with its final waterfall sequence is an example of attention modulation. In addition and by answering the question posed above, this editing practice aligns viewers with the camera's eye, enabling them to have a privileged position of meta-reflection that allows them to pay attention to the contrast between "nature's indifferent self-development" (WH 90) and one's capacity of becoming an outsider due to one's "reflective intelligence and language" (WH 92). Eldridge's consideration of the position of the implied viewer's body would have been an interesting addition to this otherwise productive close-reading of key passages in an array of Herzog's films that elaborate on the ways in which the filmmaker's images address the gap between nature and human beings without the latter becoming the endpoint of the former's aim.

In the beginning of his longest chapter on the topic of selfhood, Eldridge defines the three concepts of (1) substance, (2) subject—as applying to "anything that responds to external influences"—and (3) person—as being a "role, norm, or status concept" (WH 100). After reading the chapter on Herzog's visualization of the individual's struggle to fully realize its selfhood, I found myself going back to the beginning of the chapter while wondering, whether all individuals in Herzog's films are to be understood as being primarily "subjects"? 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? Yet, stripping the protagonists of *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974), *Stroszek* (1977), and *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (1970) of their personhood

would go too far as Eldridge shows for these and other films:

Herzog continuously investigates a range of cases involving both the achievement and the defeat of the expression of selfhood in forms of worldly practice. These forms include not only madness and withdrawal, but also experiences of striking self-presence in bodily activity. [WH 111]

To this end, Herzog is not interested in depicting the everyday life of ordinary characters, but instead he portrays the life of outsiders, eccentrics, or outcasts. These choices, in turn, serve specifically well to express the powers of selfhood:

They have either chosen or been forced into efforts to make meaning and express their powers of selfhood in the face of a hostile administered social world. [WH 113]

In this context, Eldridge points out especially those of Herzog's protagonists who either struggle with language (muteness), use it in non-ordinary ways (preaching, auctioneering), or whose struggle with the world and their actualization of selfhood has impacted their body (Reinhold Messner's or Walter Steiner's physical achievements, Juliane Koepcke's downfall into the jungle, or Aguirre's and Fitzcarraldo's manically and physically demanding projects). As with the previous chapter, a further engagement with the body, this time it is not the viewer's body, but the protagonist's body, would have been a welcome addition to Eldridge's discussion. Nonetheless, his readings of key passages in films such as *Huie's Sermon* (1981), *Bells from the Deep* (1993), *Wheel of Time* (2003), or *Signs of Life* (1968) in the context of selfhood are most insightful. Moreover, in particular the broad spectrum of the more than a dozen films that Eldridge takes into consideration in this chapter allows readers to see, as Eldridge writes, that

for Herzog, one must, in order to achieve selfhood and a sense of meaning more fully, be underway passionately, as if on a quest for the sacred. Drift, stale convention, and anomie are the enemies of the achievement of human selfhood; passionate bodily engagement in repetition is its necessary condition of possibility. [WH 127]

In this chapter, Eldridge also covers Herzog's documentaries that are concerned with religion. For Eldridge, Herzog understands religion as a spiritual exercise, as it allows for a "conversion of a way of life from within a way of life" (WH 117), in which his own filmmaking essentially becomes a religious or spiritual

exercise for him. Eldridge quotes a passage by Eric Ames who writes that the relationship at heart in Herzog's documentaries on religious practices exteriorizes spirituality by making it "sensual and tangible, through the believer's interaction with the unseen image" (WH 122).³ In reading this chapter that focuses primarily on Herzog's protagonists, I wonder whether Ames' assertion can also be applied to Herzog's interaction with the cinematic image, aiming to make his viewers see what would remain otherwise unseen through repeatedly revisiting religious protagonists and his fascination with the corporeality of religious acts? In the same way as the repetitiveness of his protagonists' performances becomes apparent in Herzog's repeated attempts to visualize selfhood, this suggests also that his filmmaking itself is turning into a spiritual act. This would have been a possibility to explore in this chapter (similar to when Herzog's childhood played a role in the chapter on nature), but as proven by the array of films and subjects that Eldridge discusses in terms of selfhood, this might have simply overburdened the chapter.

In addition to the connection between the actualization of selfhood and repetitive bodily engagement, also language plays an important role in the acts of self-actualization. Discussing Herzog's fiction films in the second half of the chapter, Eldridge writes,

convention and social authority, thought of as coercive and *represented by language*, are set in opposition to nature and internal powers of self-making. [WH 130, my emphasis]

He continues to clarify that the events in Herzog's films are connected due to a thematic structure that posits convention, social authority, and language in contrast to nature, internal power, and visibility. Eldridge successfully illustrates this opposition in regard to Stroszek's interaction with nature in *Signs of Life* (1968). Using the category of language is useful here in order to understand why Stroszek fires his rifle in the air after seeing a valley full of windmills: it is his lack of ability to communicate his experiences via language. Even the farmer's daughter in *Signs of Life*, who has troubles speaking, is able to sing a song. Yet,

Stroszek cannot express himself via song or interact with others. Only the act of setting off fireworks serves as a visual expression, which for Eldridge demonstrates "achievements of visibility" (WH 131). Similar to Stroszek, also other characters in Herzog's fiction films are in non-linguistic environments that seem to provide a connection to nature while the introduction of language is a destructive force, even leading, for instance, to the death of the main character in *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*. In *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972), language at first seems to be employed quite differently. Aguirre not only commands the expedition to continue relentlessly, he also eventually states his self-founding in proclaiming to marry his daughter in order to found the purest dynasty on earth. Yet, this use of language remains only a wishful manifestation, considering Aguirre's daughter is deadly wounded and he is alone on a raft, drifting down the Amazon together with only monkeys and dead bodies. Thus, in Herzog's fiction films, language becomes a factor that hinders its characters from achieving meaning or actualizing themselves in their environment.

This employment of language to demonstrate the failure of self-actualization seems to continue throughout in Herzog's documentaries, as Eldridge shows in the last part of his chapter on selfhood. Many of Herzog's non-fiction protagonists are, similar to Stroszek and Aguirre, also "isolated, fanatically committed, or eccentric" figures (WH 146). In *Land of Silence and Darkness* (1971), the protagonists are not able to communicate, either being born deaf-blind or having lost over time the ability to communicate. Yet, this isolation does not mean a loss of selfhood – it is only a different way of manifesting selfhood, for example, when deaf-blind Fleischmann explores the world around him in a tactile manner through embracing and feeling a tree. Neither language nor vision are needed in this case. Albeit in a very different way, also for Steiner, in *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner* (1974), enacting his selfhood involves his entire body when he ski-jumps, which is also similar to Reinhold Messner, who feels empowerment by mountain climbing in *The Dark Glow of the Mountains* (1985). Steiner, Messner, and an array of other protagonists in Herzog's documentaries are able to manifest themselves by being removed from others and via "experiences of striking self-presence in bodily activity" (WH 111). Language does not play a role here, which marks a continuity to Herzog's

³ Cited, with minor omission, from Eric Ames, *Ferocious Reality: Documentary according to Werner Herzog*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 2012, p. 94.

feature films. Eldridge emphasizes this connection by way of arguing that Herzog's

interest in single extreme cases [such as Steiner or Messner] is prefigured not only by the fiction films *Aguirre*, *Kaspar Hauser*, and *Stroszek*, but also by the 1971 documentary *Land of Silence and Darkness*. [WH 146]

These connections between these films, their protagonists, and their bodily interactions with the world, which excludes language, seem less relevant for Herzog's documentaries related to religion that Eldridge examines separately at the beginning of the chapter. Eldridge discusses the performances of the preachers in *God's Angry Man* (1981) and in *Huie's Sermon*, whose engagement with the audience relies on "repeated verbal motifs and their cadences" (WH 117). Comparable with other protagonists in Herzog's non-fiction films, the preachers use language to connect to a venerated image, often also via their "repeated bodily religious doings" (WH 127). Although in this context body and language seem to play an equally important role in self-actualization as in the films Eldridge discusses later in the chapter, in analyzing the documentaries on religious topics first, I wonder whether Eldridge suggests a continuation with Herzog's other films or rather, conversely, a break from them, as the preachers' actions are performances in a space distinctive from the natural world that one sees in *Kaspar Hauser*, *Aguirre*, or *Stroszek*.

The final chapter on history starts with covering the controversies around Herzog's films that regard the representation of historical and political realities that arose because they often overlay, over-stylize, or even erase the actual historical and socio-economic realities depicted. Yet, as Eldridge also points out, Herzog criticizes "Euro-American civilization in broad terms as barbaric," and while he does not offer a solution to his criticism, Eldridge notes a recovery may be possible through the "ressentiment-laden formation of the ego" (WH 175). Eldridge's main interlocutor for framing his discussion of Herzog's understanding of history is Walter Benjamin and his view of history not so much as science, but rather as a constructivist-aesthetic remembrance. His argument follows a movement that intertwines the films' plots and Herzog's own statements as evidence, yet, this time he is focusing on passages from, among others, *Fata Morgana* (1971), *Where the Green Ants Dream* (1984), and *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007). In the beginning of the chapter, Eldridge underlines that a productive analysis

of these films also means to recognize that instead of an absence of socio-historical and political issues in Herzog's films, there are unusual political concerns present, namely, as Eldridge states, "essentially by way of stylization" (WH 173). One of these concerns, for instance, is the worry about "European barbarism" (WH 174), for which Herzog does not offer a filmic solution that would portray a "productive social change" (WH 175). According to Eldridge, the main reason for this is the fact that Herzog's projections of life respond to cultural and religious experiences that lie outside of life in an industrialized civilization (WH 175). This then begs the question what kind of history one sees in these films? In evoking Benjamin, Eldridge suggests one could see history as remembrance—a history that "seizes on past, singular, exemplary possibilities" (WH 179), which resonate and are actualized in the presence, not aiming to represent images of progress and achievements. As examples, Eldridge refers to the pimp and madam playing the drums and the piano in *Fata Morgana*, to Steiner's ecstatic ski jumps, or to the sermonizing of Huie Rogers and Gene Scott. These simple resistances are complemented by "collective possibilities of resistance to modern emptiness" (WH 183), as, for instance, in *Ballad of the Little Soldier* (1984) or *Where the Green Ants Dream*, which depicts that modern civilization overpowers the Aborigines' rights and experiences. Looking back to the chapter on selfhood, Eldridge is able to align the interaction between the authorities and the marginalized Aborigines with the marginalized figures in *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* and *Woyzeck* (1979). At the end of his analysis of *Where the Green Ants Dream* he points out that the film's message and its signature images of nature do not fit the legal and political issues at hand. Yet, they still manage to show a concern about modern life's oppression. I suggest, one could even go one step further, by way of looking at how the viewers' attention is modulated with these images (WH 38), as history is neither only constructed by showing legal issues, nor is history avoided by Herzog by only showing landscapes and captivating close-ups of the Aborigines' faces. It seems that these unexpected juxtapositions of images of legal procedures, landscapes, and close-ups of faces requires viewers to continuously transform their attention while watching the film that perhaps, in this way, translates Herzog's worries about the impact of modern life to the viewers' experience of his films. In his analysis of the final sequence of *Gesualdo*:

Death for Five Voices (1995), Eldridge comments on the significance of this sequence as it challenges the viewers directly when a character looks right at the camera, and thus at the viewers: "Why is this scene there? Who is speaking to us visually, how, and about what" (WH 196)? I wonder, if films like *Where the Green Ants Dream*, *Fata Morgana*, or *Lessons of Darkness* (1992) achieve the same challenge via their stark juxtapositions, even without a direct address of their viewers—for instance, when Herzog juxtaposes in *Lessons of Darkness* shots of torture instruments with images of burning oil wells that manage to evoke a sublime beauty.

After a discussion of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* and *Encounters at the End of the World*, Eldridge concludes his study by aligning the reader (together with Herzog) with "halted travelers" (WH 208), either struck by sudden achievement or by sudden failure. He observes

that both scenarios "will require a particular courage and resoluteness to seek out and respond to such achievements and defeats of selfhood" (WH 208). Particularly this sentence that connects the chapters on history and selfhood prompts a wish for a more in-depth conclusion at this point, as it is bringing together all three of the book's chapters. Such a conclusion would not have needed to synthesize what has been said, but could have further elaborated on the overlapping aspects between the categories of nature, selfhood, and history, which, in turn, seem to bring Herzog's fiction and non-fiction films closer to each other than expected. Nonetheless, Eldridge not only succeeds in putting philosophical issues in dialogue with Herzog's films, he also does so in covering a substantial part of Herzog's oeuvre, which makes his study a valuable contribution both to philosophy and film studies in general, and to the Werner Herzog scholarship in particular.