



## The Screening and Screenable Animal

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**Abstract:** In this review I discuss two broad sets of issues in response to Richard Eldridge's *Werner Herzog: Filmmaker and Philosopher*. The first concerns the ontological continuity linking screened world and real world, and by implication the depth of human beings' relationships with screens and screened images. We see the screened world as continuous with our own world, and can also come to experience the real cinematically. The second issue is Eldridge's claim that Herzog's films are primarily interested in the quest for an authentic life. I offer a critique by engaging with Eldridge's own idea of Herzog's formal stylization in order to suggest that such stylization guides our reflection to dimensions of human life that do not have to do with humanist questions of authenticity and deep selfhood, but have rather to do with the aesthetic and formal dimensions of life, whereby human beings and the human body are put on equal formal footing with all other natural and material objects.

**Keywords:** Herzog, Werner; Eldridge, Richard; Cavell, Stanley; film-philosophy; ontology; self-knowledge; authenticity; cinematic form.

In *The Pleasure of the Text* Roland Barthes writes about reading a text: "it produces, in me, the best pleasure...if, reading it, I am led to look up often, to listen to something else."<sup>1</sup> By inciting reflection, the text prompts one to look away from the text itself. The pleasure of the text is the pleasure of looking elsewhere, one of a renewed and transformed attention. Richard Eldridge's text describes Werner Herzog as a filmmaker who is dedicated to finding, framing, and producing images of the world that command attention, and in so doing, these images prompt the spectators to see anew their own world, within the very world Herzog screens. Eldridge's text about film not only prompts a reader to look up often, to reflect on one's own experience of cinema and much else, it cultivates a tendency to see the world cinematically, as if it were on a screen, as if it were a filmic scene. One of the pleasures of a text about film is that it can generate a

cinematic form of thinking, or more accurately expressed, a cinematic form of perceiving. Film, and texts about film, re-orient one's perception of reality. Thus, when Stanley Cavell asks, "What happens to reality when it is projected and screened?,"<sup>2</sup> the same question must also be understood reflexively: what happens to the spectator? What does cinema do to human beings?

In an effort to clarify the difference between cinema and painting, André Bazin muses that unlike painting, "what the screen shows us seems to be part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe."<sup>3</sup> That is, the

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, New York, NY: Viking Press 1971, p. 16. [Henceforth cited as *WV*]

<sup>3</sup> André Bazin, "Painting and Cinema," in *What is Cinema? Vol. 1*, ed. and transl. Hugh Gray, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1967, pp. 164-169, here p. 166. Internet Archive at [https://archive.org/details/Bazin\\_Andre\\_What\\_Is\\_Cinema\\_Volume\\_1/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/Bazin_Andre_What_Is_Cinema_Volume_1/mode/2up).

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, transl. Richard Miller, New York, NY: Hill and Wang 1975, p. 24.

screen provides a frame for the real, material world, where the world that the film shows is continuous with our own world, with the universe that humans in fact inhabit. The world on film is our very world, framed and screened. Cavell develops this point at length when he insists that photography and film are of the world: they do not exactly provide mere representations of the world; rather a photograph "is a segment of the world as a whole" (*WV* 200). Bazin and Cavell call attention to the continuity between screened image and reality, and especially Cavell argues that a philosophy of film must grapple with this as a dimension of both the ontology and the phenomenology of film viewing. That is, not only is it the case that film shows the one and only world, one's enchanted, sometimes dizzying awareness of this strange link is a feature of filmgoing, part of the pleasure the spectator takes in it.

But notice that one can also extend and reverse Bazin's claim: what the screen shows is part of the world, and at the same time one's experience of the world is the experience of something potentially screened. Any material thing in the world, anything that appears, can be the object of cinematic attention and projection. And especially once cinema assumes the position of being the most popular public artform of the twentieth century, and once photographic apparatuses take up residence in people's homes and pockets—which is to say, once humans were significantly changed by cinema and became a filmgoing public or species—the experience of reality came to reflect this ontological continuity between film-world and world-world. Just as the spectator experiences what is seen on film as being real—one knows this is a real street, those are real people—so too one can come to experience the real world cinematically—by seeing this street as noirish, by watching those figures as if they were movie characters, one is struck by the light or by a mood as it becomes a cinematic moment. Reading how Eldridge reads Herzog allows for a deeper appreciation of this fact: that as a technology, as an artform, and as a practice—hence a lifeform—cinema reveals the human condition to be essentially cinematic. The popularity of the practice of moviegoing and making pictures reveals how readily human beings have adopted to being captured by such screens. We have become a screening and screenable animal.

Now that our lives are lived largely online, the relentless screenability of human life and the undivided attention that is given to screens is oftentimes addressed with great anxiety. For instance, Herzog himself voices

these anxieties, some of which Eldridge quotes (*WH* 20-1). Undoubtedly there are good reasons to feel uneasy about this development, to be uncertain about what it all means and how it is changing societies. And yet successful cinema, and successful writing about cinema, 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. Paying attention to cinema can produce a kind of anthropological self-knowledge, for reflecting on one's capture by screens discloses something deep and lasting, rather than radically new, about who and what humans are.

This is no doubt the real source of the contemporary anxiety about screens: The truly unsettling anxiety does not arise from a worry about a detached, new, inhuman technology that is taking over human life, as if this technology were wholly alien to our form of life. The anxiety rather arises as humans realize the depth of their investment in and ravenous attraction to screens, the fact that motion pictures tap into old and rooted human experiences. Herzog's *The Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010) is surely an expression of awe that the aesthetic, expressive, self-representative, projective activities of the earliest human beings were already preparing future generations for a life with screens. So, it is not only that previous generations are merely our ancestors, as Herzog's camera marvels at the cave paintings as kindred beings; it becomes clear that these are also cinema's ancestors. What is both uncanny and reassuring is that there is something deeply human about screens, they are not alien to human life. Eldridge presents Herzog's oeuvre as a whole as fundamentally oriented by this awe, by a sense of human life and the natural world as deeply, essentially cinematic, and of cinema as a basic modality of human experience and sensemaking.

In contemporary philosophy it is becoming popular to insist on the difference between film-philosophy, film theory (as practiced in film studies departments), and using films as examples or illustrations of philosophical positions that have been given in advance by familiarly recognizable philosophers. The aim in drawing these distinctions is usually to set a unique target of philosophical attention: philosophers ought to attend to films as philosophizing in and by themselves, rather than as pre-philosophical objects onto which philosophical significance is projected. The differences between these modes of engaging with films oftentimes are not clear,

and the insistence on the differences can emit an aura of philosophical defensiveness to it, a defensiveness that evidences how uncertain the boundary is between philosophy and theory, and between the idea that film does philosophy and the idea that films can be interpreted philosophically, all of which suggests one cannot be sure of the nature and limits of philosophy itself, of where it ends and something else – theory, art, pre-philosophical experience – begins.

Of these uncertain boundaries and differences, David Rodowick writes:

one might also say that theory is *outward directed* while philosophy is inward directed...Theories designate or refer to an object, which they hope to describe completely and whose effects they wish to account for or explain...Alternatively, in turning to art and other forms of human inventiveness, philosophy expresses knowledge of our selves and our relations with others.<sup>4</sup>

So, while film theory examines film as a special object, and film-as-example examines a film as an illustration of a philosophical position, film-philosophy reflects on film as a phenomenon capable of disclosing dimensions of human being. Eldridge's Cavellian approach to the relationship between reality and cinema suggests just such a view: that for film-philosophy to be a genuinely distinctive and genuinely philosophical mode of reflection, it must develop a reflexive ontology of cinema, one that articulates what cinema essentially is in terms of the place it occupies in human life.

While this basic orientation to film and philosophy strikes me as importantly correct, I want to take issue with one of Eldridge's central specifications of this idea, namely his claim that Herzog's cinema is primarily concerned with opportunities for authenticity and the achievement of selfhood. As Eldridge writes, Herzog's "rogue filmmaking" undertakes the work that

one must somehow find a stance that yields meaningful orientation in life, in a self-sustaining way, against the grain of commercial and consumptive business as usual. [WH 10]

I worry that too much emphasis on authenticity and selfhood obscures Herzog's more distinctive and challenging insights about cinema and human beings. One way to put this is that while Herzog is clearly interested in existentially harrowing images, I do not

think this means one has to read his films as primarily focused on existentially harrowing (or harrowed) individuals and their striving for authenticity. Or more cautiously: one must be careful in emphasizing personal authenticity insofar as such preoccupation with the individual risks obscuring some of Herzog's most interesting and resolutely anti-individualist cinematic concerns (as well as his absurdist humor and unexpected camp).

Consider Eldridge's discussion of Herzog's formal stylization, that is, Herzog's eschewal of narrative cinema's preoccupation with plot and psychology in favor of a more emphatically aesthetic orientation. Eldridge focuses especially on Herzog's long takes and non-natural acting, a technique taken to its logical limit in the hypnotized, non-acting of *Heart of Glass* (1976). The question I want to raise is: how does such formal stylization disrupt and transform the spectator's relationship to human psychology and agency? One possible answer is that such stylization attends to elements of human life that do not have to do with ethico-existential, humanist questions of authenticity and commitment and selfhood. Another possibility, which I shall pursue, is that one of the philosophical and irreducibly cinematic achievements of such stylization is its ability to accent other no-less-human concerns.

It seems to me that the central point of the emphatic, stylized presentation of the world and human beings on film is not, as it is for Eldridge, the disclosure of possibilities of authentic human life. Rather I would argue 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. For instance, in *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* (1972), it is clear that Herzog finds human faces endlessly compelling, but this does not mean he is interested in authentic individuals. It is clear in this film and elsewhere that Herzog finds human action spectacular – exactly: a spectacle – but one need not agree with Eldridge's assumption that spectacularity is the cinematic expression of personal striving and authenticity.

<sup>4</sup> D. N. Rodowick, *Philosophy's Artful Conversation*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2015, p. 297, my emphasis.

Eldridge's interest in authenticity seems most tenuous when analyzing *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979). Eldridge claims that the film "treats vampirism as a release from stultifying ordinary life" (WH 144) and that

the argument of the film seems to be that the distinctively human, inexplicable, essentially intermingled powers of sexual desire, fantasy, and meaning-making cannot be readily housed within the routines of ordinary life, if at all. [WH 146]

To my mind this is not the right lens for this film. I see instead an exploration of the aesthetic possibilities afforded by both the practice of homage and the constraints of genre; I see meticulously constructed shots emphasizing the structural, aesthetic dimension of human interactions, and the shared aesthetic standing of humans and inanimate objects; I also see the great humor in Kinski's portrayal of Dracula as morose and tortured, and as witheringly short-tempered as he distractedly shoves away the affectionate and creaturely Renfield; and finally there is Isabelle Adjani in turns flat and histrionic, bringing an excessive, operatic tenor to the film. But as I see it, it simply does not work to read this film through the lens of individual authenticity. Such a reading domesticates the film within a humanistic framework that it turns out to be a great pleasure to leave behind. Thus, one might think of Herzog's cinema as providing an opportunity to be momentarily relieved of the imperative to achieve or be concerned with selfhood.

My point is not that Herzog engages in mere aestheticization and turns away from real human concerns, a criticism that Eldridge considers (WH 22). Rather I want to say that Herzog's stylization calls attention to the aesthetic, spectacular, non-narrative dimensions of human life and that these are some of the deepest, most real, and most human concerns. Herzog's aesthetic stylization reveals human life to be itself aesthetic (cinematic) and shows that human beings are themselves motivated by aesthetic concerns: to be impressive, to be spectacular. This returns me to the topic I began with, namely the idea that cinema reveals human life and the natural world to be essentially cinematic and worthy of grand projection.

All of this raises the question concerning the relationship between style and authenticity. Eldridge might reply that I have insisted on a false opposition, and that a concern with spectacularity is one of the central desiderata of an authentic human life. This might be correct. But the idea of authenticity carries with it the baggage of psychological interiority and narrativity, and this means that more would need to be said about how the styling of human appearance is itself an aesthetic presentation that fits within the pursuit of authenticity.

That Eldridge's book raises these significant and difficult questions regarding the human condition by way of attending to films both attests to the relevance of cinema for philosophical reflection, and to Eldridge's skill of guiding the reader to recognize the importance of these questions and reflections.