

CONCLUSION

Cinematic Poesis

Echoes from a Sombre Empire begins with a mystery. Michael Goldsmith is stylised as a scientist or a detective searching for the truth, but it rapidly becomes evident that the story of this African dictatorship is not a mystery Herzog means to solve, at least not in any logical, methodical way. Here, as in his other films, Herzog offers explanations that go beyond the prosaic and the rational and into the realm of the poetic. If his films document anything, it is the constant search for a standpoint beyond conventional means of experiencing the world – an aesthetic standpoint, one that cannot be found on the editorial pages of newspapers. For this reason Herzog resists ‘the accountants’ truth’, breaks the frames and makes short work of history. From the perspective of his films, the truth is elusive and is best approached through a process of negation, which is to say through the exchange of prosaic facts and aesthetic fictions such that a reflection on the constitution of ‘truth’ itself comes to the fore. His perspective is that rationality is always instrumentalised for curious motives and is best undermined by its aesthetic other, by a search for a space beyond its prosaic limits. The director’s standpoint is not sought in argument, and it is never achieved through the accumulation of facts, but instead finds footing in the conjunction of music, images and occasional poetic epigraphs. Herzog’s search is, in this way, rooted in an existential problem: where is the alternative or outside position from which we can stand and view ourselves?

There is, however, no fixed standpoint of this kind. The most we can hope for, and that for which Herzog aims, is that we view ourselves ‘as if’ we were standing

outside. We can seek the utopian intimation of an elsewhere, or the intuition of a different perspective. Insofar as this is his motivation, Herzog is no humanist; he is not searching to view the world through the filter of that which is best in our humanity, but to see that which is human through eyes other than our own: eyes of the alien or the animal, for example. From his interest in extraterrestrials, who see the world with something other than our values and our language, to his fascination with cannibalism, that unspeakable boundary of human behaviour which helps us conceive of our own limits, the quest for new images that Herzog articulated throughout the 1970s can today be understood as a quest for a transcendent, possibly even post-human, point of view.

The search for this standpoint can already be found in Herzog's earliest films. One could look at *Land of Silence and Darkness*, a film that explores the world of the blind and deaf, which pays special attention to Fini Straubinger, a woman who has learned, against all odds, to communicate. In that film, Herzog's apparently isolated cinematic subjects pay a visit to the zoo, something we are told is a rare event in their lives, because it is hard to find willing guides for them. Straubinger tickles the belly of a chimpanzee, and here with the animal she has a very human moment of reprieve from a difficult world in which there are hardly adequate social structures for the deaf and blind. Bearing in mind the images of other primates in Herzog's work, the scene can be understood to contrast with the cruelty and barbarism evident in *Echoes from a Sombre Empire*, *Even Dwarfs Started Small* and *Aguirre, Wrath of God*, films in which primates are made dependent on cigarettes, suspended from crucifixes and thrown into rivers. What are these animals if not the lenses through which we may encounter our inhumanity? Herzog's works, by way of their animals, offer us the intuition of a boundary line that, he suggests, we have already crossed.

Such scenes of compassion are not the only motifs in *Land of Silence and Darkness*. Fini Straubinger is thoughtful about her own isolation. She is generous and she is a figure to whom Herzog often returns when he describes the protagonists with whom he found himself most sympathetic. It is hard to believe that he did not have her in mind, at least in certain respects, when he scripted *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*. Like Kaspar, Straubinger is kind-hearted, but her situation is difficult; words always seem inadequate to articulating her experience, the inner representation of which at times comes to her in quiet images. Straubinger's description of her condition is itself poetic and Herzog would like for us to take it as evidence that there is a truth – evidently an aesthetic truth – beyond the truth with which we always live, which is to say, beyond the dull facts of our existence. Straubinger rhapsodises:

If I were endowed with the divine gift of a painter, I would paint the fate of the deaf and blind roughly like this: blindness as a dark melodious stream which slowly but surely flows towards a fall. To the left and to the right are beautiful trees with flowers and birds which sing wonderfully. The other stream, which comes from the other side, should be very clear and transparent. This stream flows slowly and soundlessly downward as well, and then, below, there is a very dark, deep lake. First there would be rocks on both sides where the rivers

converge, the dark one and the clear one, against which the waters push, foam and form whirlpools; and then, very slowly, very very very gently, they flow together in this very dark pool. And these waters would be very still and from time to time they would spray upward. This would depict the tortured soul of the deaf and blind. I don't know if you actually understood properly. The pushing and spraying of the waters against the rock are, so to speak, the psychological depressions of the soul which accompany the deaf and blind when he proceeds towards deafness and blindness. I cannot paint it otherwise, it is right inside me so, but one doesn't know how to get it out in words. (Herzog 1980a: 192–3).

Fini Straubinger protests that she does not know 'how to get it out in words', yet it seems evident that she has done a marvellous job. As with Kaspar, she is presented as having a remarkable advantage over us; she apparently has insight into a utopia, one that is utopian precisely because it is unburdened by chatter. In the cinema of Herzog, language, insofar as it is an extension of the culture that produced it, is an obstacle to be overcome through ecstatic images and through poetry. Whether or not Herzog truly believes the obstacle can be overcome (whether or not he is naively Romantic), the problems presented are slippery: one ultimately needs language in order to show that one can exceed its bounds. Just as one must fabricate to get to the truth, one is forced to use language to identify its limits.

And along exactly these lines, one must note that in the 'documentary' *Land of Silence and Darkness*, Herzog also invents. When it comes to Fini Straubinger's memory of seeing a ski-flyer, it is a memory Herzog has written for her. Perhaps this aspect, his willingness to fabricate and his Nietzschean distrust of 'truth' is what is most distinctive in Herzog's work. Although he has been fabricating truths for decades, there is presently a renewed interest in such fabrication, an interest that goes along with the technology of digital reproduction. Although questions were already raised in the nineteenth century as to whether photographs communicate the truth – whether they constitute, more than written documents, 'evidence' of anything – it was at the turn of this new century and in the name of digital art that artists themselves began to forget the difference between photographs and paintings. Works by contemporary German artists such as Gerhard Richter and Andreas Gursky eschew this distinction. Today it is more urgent than ever to avow that works are neither the one nor the other, or to assert that the question is irrelevant. That one could today be contained by a medium, particularly a medium defined by its ability to state truths against lies or facts against fictions, appears as an anachronism or at least a compromise at the expense of art. It is against this background that one may choose to read Herzog's resistance to the concept of the documentary in relation to that of the feature film.

In this way, the question of genre (of documentaries and features) misleads: because film is constituted by photographic images we expect it to present things as they really are, but for Herzog this expectation denies film its real potential. There is no reason that film would not be a poetic medium more than a means to convey information, and this is perhaps why, when Herzog speaks of influences, he mentions the

poet Hölderlin more often than he mentions other filmmakers. Those whom he does mention – D. W. Griffith, Carl Theodor Dreyer, F. W. Murnau, Jean Rouch and Tod Browning – have a certain poetry in their work. Herzog acknowledges this, yet he also seems to speak of the film-historical canon as though it were a straightjacket. It is not so much that comparisons with Francis Ford Coppola or Terrence Malick diminish his work, but rather that he does not want to be known only as a filmmaker; Coppola and Malick produce works that may be too easily framed in comprehensible categories – facts and fiction, documentaries and features. Herzog's engagement with the question of art's transcendent potential places him in the position of the poet, and as he sees it, poetry is subject to its own, autonomous standards of truth.

At the same time, however, and as I have tried to indicate throughout this book, this wholly aesthetic viewpoint – one that is concerned only with the truth of art – carries with it certain risks. The search for standpoints that set themselves in the sphere of poetry and beyond that of politics is illusory; the standpoint itself is a mirage. Whether as epic or as aphorism, poetry contains politics, and even the least engaged works are often inadvertently embedded in extant debates. Is it really possible to imagine one's self standing elsewhere, outside of 'the political'? Would progressive audiences in the US and Europe be able to tolerate another *Ballad of the Little Soldier* or *Lessons of Darkness*, another film that thumbs its nose at political engagement in the name of beauty or in the interest of challenging our preconceptions about film form? One has the impression that Herzog sometimes presses the point precisely in order to test his audience's willingness to follow. Were audiences to turn away, it would only prove what Herzog has known all along: they are not willing to pay more than lip-service to the ideals of ecstatic truth.

As indicated at the outset, Herzog can, in this way, appear to be a demanding super-ego. One of so many Herzogs available to the imagination is the one that appears in the film *Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999), directed by Harmony Korine. In that film, Herzog plays a father of a schizophrenic boy, Julien (Ewen Bremner), and a teenage wrestler, Chris (Evan Neumann). Spraying cold water from a garden hose at his more athletic son, Herzog attempts to teach him to 'be a man' and to quit his 'moody brooding'. Later in the film he tells his schizophrenic son that he looks 'utterly and completely and irrevocably stupid'. In what is likely improvised dialogue, Herzog insists: 'If I were so stupid I would slap my own face ... You should slap your face!' Such imposing incarnations – ones we find in his documentary and in his feature films – make it hard to imagine that Herzog would allow any group of spectators, critics or producers to influence the course of his work.

Yet despite his manifest strength of will, Herzog's weighty proclamations with regard to form have also yielded a measure of playfulness, one that is apparent in films such as *The Wild Blue Yonder*, as he documents the aliens' initial arrival on Earth or when he lets the camera linger on a sneezing NASA scientist, or in *Death for Five Voices*, when he stages a debate between Italian chefs as to whether or not Gesualdo was the devil incarnate. The boldest example of his humour, however, can be seen in connection with *Incident at Loch Ness* (2004), a film in which he and the film's director Zak Penn experimented with the boundary between documentary and feature films

through an extra-filmic manipulation of rumours and realities (see Church 2005). For the purposes of the film, the mythical Loch Ness monster was an apt subject. Herzog and Penn circulated press releases suggesting that Herzog was at work on a documentary about the monster, and the film, a 'mockumentary' of sorts, was later framed as recovered fragments of a documentary about Herzog's own film, one that was originally to be titled *Herzog in Wonderland*.

Incident at Loch Ness is clever, yet even in its parodic dimensions it questions the boundaries of genres less aggressively than the fifty or so films that constitute Herzog's own *oeuvre*. His body of work has continued to expand in ways that make less sense rather than more, which is to say ways that force us to re-evaluate and reassess our expectations about cinema. *Rescue Dawn*, his feature film version of Dieter Dengler's story, courts an abundance of related issues, ones that Herzog has raised before: In taking on this task was he aiming to put himself through Dieter's difficulties? Did he turn his own documentary into a feature in order to prove that there was no difference between the pilot's 'documented' experience and its aesthetic realisation? Somewhat predictably, the production of *Rescue Dawn* ran into problems when the company paying for the film began to oversee the shoot in Thailand. Herzog is fiercely independent, yet, as was reported in *The New Yorker*, he was getting interference from a producer who asked him to watch *The Rundown* (2003), a film featuring the actor known as The Rock, with the idea that Herzog should hire that film's cinematographer in place of his longtime collaborator Peter Zeitlinger (see Zalewski 2006). The way the story unfolded, one might suggest, is presaged down to the letter in the staged antics seen in *Incident at Loch Ness*; life imitates art, and as is appropriate to Herzog, the facts and fiction, here and elsewhere, turn tables on one another. It is precisely this dialogue between art's conceits, held tenuously in the frame and on the screen, and the multiplicity of truths exposed by its ecstatic promise, that one hopes will continue.

FILMOGRAPHY

The following filmography is limited to the dates, titles, durations and cinematographers of Werner Herzog's films. Though different sources periodically provide different dates, I have relied for information on the website of Werner Herzog Film <<http://www.wernerherzog.com>>. More comprehensive filmographies are included in *Herzog on Herzog*, at the website of Werner Herzog Film and at the Internet Movie Database <<http://www.imdb.com>>.

- Herakles* (1962) 12 min. Director of Photography: Jaime Pacheco.
Spiel im Sand (*Game in the Sand*) (1964) 14 min. Director of Photography: Jaime Pacheco.
Die beispiellose Verteidigung der Festung Deutschkreutz (*The Unprecedented Defence of the Fortress Deutschkreutz*) (1966) 15 min. Director of Photography: Jaime Pacheco.
Letzte Worte (*Last Words*) (1967) 13 min. Director of Photography: Thomas Mauch.
Lebenszeichen (*Signs of Life*) (1968) 87 min. Director of Photography: Thomas Mauch.
Die fliegenden Ärzte von Ostafrika (*The Flying Doctors of East Africa*) (1969) 45 min. Director of Photography: Thomas Mauch.
Maßnahmen gegen Fanatiker (*Precautions Against Fanatics*) (1969) 12 min. Director of Photography: Dieter Lohmann.
Auch Zwerge haben klein angefangen (*Even Dwarfs Started Small*) (1970) 96 min. Director of Photography: Thomas Mauch.
Fata Morgana (1970) 79 min. Director of Photography: Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein.
Behinderte Zukunft (*Handicapped Future*) (1971) 43 min. Director of Photography: Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein.
Land des Schweigens und der Dunkelheit (*Land of Silence and Darkness*) (1971) 85 min. Director of Photography: Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein.
Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes (*Aguirre, Wrath of God*) (1972) 93 min. Director of Photography: Thomas Mauch.
Die große Ekstase des Bildschnitzers Steiner (*The Great Ecstasy of the Woodcarver Steiner*) (1973) 47 min. Director of Photography: Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein.