

**WERNER HERZOG AND THE DOCUMENTARY FILM**

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**ABSTRACT**

Werner Herzog has made nearly as many documentary films as narratives, though his non-fiction films have received far less critical attention. Some of the films are dismissed as being inferior to his fiction films, but the documentaries, which explore the same themes as his other films, serve as an interesting counterpart to or exploration of these artistic themes. Indeed, Herzog himself insists that an understanding of his documentaries is essential to an understanding of his fiction films, and that the line between the two formats is

blurred for him. While Herzog is not interested in interrogating the boundaries between documentary and fiction, his films ultimately challenge those boundaries by including as much staged and scripted material as “real” documentary footage. He defends this manipulation with his 1999 “Minnesota Declaration,” a manifesto of sorts on the subject of documentary film which denounces Cinema Verite as a superficial cinema that confuses “fact” with “truth.” Herzog argues for the expression of a different kind of truth in documentary cinema—a “poetic, ecstatic truth” that can be found only through “fabrication and imagination and stylization.” Ultimately Herzog’s documentaries are always an exploration of one of his own personal themes rather than an exploration of the film’s subjects; their stories are secondary.

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## Werner Herzog and the Documentary Film Introductory Chapter

Werner Herzog occupies a unique space in the spectrum of documentary filmmaking. While theoreticians pursue an endless philosophical, ontological, and ethical debate over the nature of documentary and exactly how much stylization and manipulation it can contain and still retain its non-fiction label,<sup>1</sup> Herzog has quietly been churning out non-fiction films that each, in varying degrees, flirt with – or outright defy – the terms of that definition. From heavily stylized essay-films like *Lessons of Darkness* to those such as *Land of Silence and Darkness* which are, for the most part, more loyal to the “reality” of their cinematic subjects, Herzog’s documentary approach is characterized not by any single signature style but by an ever-changing mixture of many styles. His *themes* are carried over from film to film – the same themes he explores in his narrative films – but in terms of visual style, one would be hard-pressed to detect that the science-fiction essay-film *Fata Morgana* and the more traditional documentary portrait of a ski-jumper in *The Great Ecstasy of the Woodsculptor Steiner* were made by the same man. There are certain visuals that are repeated in some of the films – *Fata Morgana* and *Lessons of Darkness* are near-twins in style and structure, while the recurring image of a ski-jumper can be found in *Steiner* as well as *Land of Silence and Darkness*, among others. But one cannot immediately recognize a

Werner Herzog documentary as easily as one could an Errol Morris or Fred Wiseman film. His themes remain constant – the necessity and tragedy of the acquisition of language, communication vs. isolation, human beings’ subservience to an indifferent nature – but it seems that Herzog picks and chooses among cinematic styles to suit the topic at hand. On-camera interviews, dramatic music, fly-on-the-wall observation, purely invented dream sequences – all are fodder for Herzog’s documentaries. Just as he has alternated throughout his career between fiction and non-fiction filmmaking to suit his subject, within the field of documentary he likewise merges various non-fiction styles depending on his subject matter.

But one thing that is constant in all his documentaries is his presence. This does not necessarily mean Herzog’s image or the sound of his voice is present in the film, though on occasion it is. But his presence is always palpable even when he himself is not visible, through his (often heavy-handed) manipulation. No matter how close to “reality” certain of his films may appear, they are never purely “about” their subjects. Herzog has no interest in simply telling someone else’s story and has no loyalty to objectivity in documentary filmmaking. His film about auctioneers, *How Much Wood Would a Woodchuck Chuck*, is more about language and communication (“The last poetry of latent capitalism”<sup>2</sup>) than the world of professional auctioneers. All of his films are similarly interested in a certain Herzogian theme or idea that the film’s subjects somehow embody or

represent; the subjects themselves and their stories are secondary. *Land of Silence and Darkness*, a film about the deaf-blind, encapsulates many Herzog themes but for the most part is the story of a group of real-life Kaspar Hausers. There is a similar relationship between many of his documentary and fiction films: *Woodchuck's* examination of the language and poetry produced in and by capitalism seems likewise to have served as raw material for *Stroszek*, made just one year later.

Herzog's expropriation of a subject's specific story to serve as expression of a universal theme can become a tricky ethical issue, especially in a film like *Wodaabe: Herdsmen of the Sun*, an ethnographic film of sorts about a mating ritual among a tribe in Africa. Of all forms of documentary, ethnography takes most seriously the obligation to objectivity and unbiased representation of its subjects,<sup>3</sup> and here Herzog's manipulation – through very subtle and muted in this case – may cross the line into exploitation.

Some may say *all* of his documentaries are worthy of critique, not only for the issue of exploitation but on the more basic level of authenticity and truth-telling. Herzog, it seems, scripts some parts of his documentaries. As wide as the boundaries of documentary have become, as malleable as the genre definition continues to be, the basic point where all definitions agree is that the documentary image claims an anchor in real life. The referent comes from the world, not from a script.<sup>4</sup> One can accept stylization, manipulation of the image,

use of music for dramatic effect, and even insertion of fantasy sequences, re-enactments, and clips of Hollywood films a la Errol Morris (who is already at the very fringe of the genre), but no definition of documentary allows the scripting of events and their presentation as reality. One is not being asked to believe that the re-created roadside shooting sequences in *The Thin Blue Line* are real. They are clearly fantasy spaces created to add meaning to the film's documentary images. Even in Dusan Makavejev's *WR: The Mysteries of an Organism*, which includes an extended original narrative segment inserted into the documentary footage about cult leader Wilhelm Reich, the viewer is never fooled into thinking this scripted story is real. These lapses into narration and artifice are sealed-off, separate from and subservient to the documentary footage. But in Herzog's films, the artifice is not revealed. It is presented as real. In fact, in an amazing display of logic, Herzog says he believes that the documentary form has rules that re-enactments would violate.<sup>5</sup> By his definition, then, fabrications are acceptable as long as they appear real; to break out of the *illusion* of reality is to violate the documentary form. When Herzog declares in Les Blank's documentary *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe* that filmmaking is "illusionist's work," he is far from being the first to make this observation. But, applied to the ethics and aesthetics of documentary film, this twist of logic takes the concept to a new level.

Herzog's specific illusions range from something as minor as fudging the length of Dieter's trip in *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* for pragmatic production-related reasons to actually scripting a speech for Dieter to recite and pass off as his own poetic reflection on his experience. Every film has a few examples of these minor and egregious inventions – in *Lessons of Darkness*, for example, an image that appears to be an other-worldly mountain range is actually an extreme close-up of bulldozer tracks in the mud. The image is *intentionally* meant to represent something it's not, but the transgression seems rather minor when compared to a more outrageous example: the quote that opens the film, attributed to French philosopher Blaise Pascal, is pure invention. "I needed something for the audience to step into the film at a high [intellectual] level," he said in an interview. "Of course, I made [the quote] up."<sup>6</sup> Herzog defends these deceits in various ways. In the case of *Dieter*, Herzog says that his inventions are faithful to the film's subjects and merely express something that already exists in them but which they may not be able to articulate or may not even know is there. In other cases, he simply throws off the issue by questioning the definition of documentary or even, in the case of *Lessons of Darkness*, removing the film from the category altogether. "Lessons of Darkness is definitely not a documentary," he says. "It is rather a science fiction film, a musical requiem, or something else again."<sup>7</sup>

But by far his most forceful defense of his practices comes in the form of his 12-point Minnesota Declaration, a manifesto of sorts, sub-titled “Lessons of Darkness.” It was written, he says, in a sleepless fit of anger the night before he was to be honored at a screening of *Lessons* at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1999. The Declaration, he says, encapsulates everything that has always bothered him about documentary film.<sup>8</sup>

The manifesto opens provocatively: “By dint of declaration the so-called Cinema Verite is devoid of verite. It reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants.”<sup>9</sup> Throughout the manifesto Herzog targets Cinema Verite specifically, saying that it confuses fact and truth, that its practitioners “resemble tourists who take pictures amid ancient ruins of facts,” and derides an unnamed “well-known representative of Cinema Verite” who, Herzog writes, declared publicly that “truth can easily be found by taking a camera and trying to be honest.” It seems, however, that Herzog may be confusing Cinema Verite with direct cinema, the American version of the stripped-down documentary style pioneered by Jean Rouch in France. The original Cinema Verite movement was characterized by a total self-reflexivity – the films were as much about the filmmakers and their experience of their subject as they were about the subjects themselves. It was an attempt to interrogate the documentary form and its claims to objectivity by exposing the mode of production and the producers. The American version of this type of documentary, exemplified in the work of

filmmakers such as Fred Wiseman and Ricky Leacock, was more detached, focused on observation and not intervention. The filmmaker was not part of the sound or image. The films eschew narration and stylization and find their meaning from what they discover, unprovoked, in front of the camera.<sup>10</sup> The way a subject interacts with the camera (but not the filmmaker) often becomes the subject of the films (or at least shades that subject in some way), but for the most part meaning in direct cinema is created through serendipity rather than stylization; it is a cinema of revelation and discovery, patience and timing. Cinema Verite, meanwhile, is the cinema of provocation, its practitioners catalysts rather than observers. As Eric Barnouw writes, "Direct cinema found its truth in events available to the camera. Cinema verite was committed to a paradox: that artificial circumstances could bring hidden truth to the surface."<sup>11</sup> This definition of Cinema Verite echoes the wording of Herzog's own manifesto – after charging Cinema Verite with confusing fact and truth, he writes that he is in search of a "deeper strata of truth in cinema... a poetic, ecstatic truth," which "can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization." While Cinema Verite was not interested in stylization, it shares the same goal of actively seeking to uncover "hidden truth" rather than hoping to passively observe it; of using artificiality to expose truth. Thus Herzog appears to be taking aim at the wrong camp. However, direct cinema has occasionally been referred to as "American Cinema Verite", so the mistake may be a minor one.

But quibbling over terminology aside, even if Herzog were to correct his aim and attack direct cinema rather than Cinema Verite, he still seems to misunderstand the scope, aim, and concept of this type of cinema. It is extremely reductive to charge direct cinema with being concerned only with facts. Its approach may be extremely passive and may rely on finding rather than creating, but the filmmaker is no less a creator and manipulator. He simply has limited his creative tools. He must have a good eye, and must rely on camerawork and editing for his artistry. And as often is the case, limitations can force an artist to be *more* creative rather than less. Even Fred Wiseman, the archetypal direct cinema filmmaker, has said that his fly-on-the-wall style has nothing to do with “objective” reality. “The objective-subjective argument is... a lot of nonsense,” he says. “My films are *my* response to a certain experience.”<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately, Herzog seems to be confusing Cinema Verite with direct cinema and direct cinema with journalism. But at the same time, his outcry is valid, because as Brian Winston writes, direct cinema not only revolutionized the documentary genre, but also seems to have replaced it. Hand-held camera, source lighting and sound, and raw, unmediated events became the new definition of documentary, despite the fact that since its origins in Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* documentary has always included artifice and stylization. With the advent of direct cinema, the common practice of stylization suddenly became suspect, Winston says.<sup>13</sup> Further, one can argue that any

manipulation of the image – even one as basic as editing – is a form of stylization.

Still, today it is no longer fashionable to make such demands of reality on documentary, lest one be accused of espousing nineteenth-century notions that the camera does not lie. Few theorists today claim that documentary is even capable of representing objective reality, either for post-modern reasons having to do with the slippage between reality and referent, sociopolitical reasons having to do with the inherent bias in all representation, or for the more metaphysical motivations of “poetic, ecstatic truth.” But as accommodating as today’s definitions of documentary have become, the baseline still remains that fakery is not allowed. Even Winston, who argues forcefully for a separation between journalism and documentary, for an inclusion of stylization and recreations, and for releasing the filmmaker from any ethical obligations to the audience, does not allow for the presentation as real of events that are purely fabricated. He has such faith that this is obvious that he dismisses the suggestion quickly, saying it is the least interesting aspect of the debate over ethics in documentary filmmaking. “Such people are simply common liars,” he writes.<sup>14</sup> However, he goes on to argue that the filmmaker should not have any obligation to the audience, because no real damage can be done. No audience is ever negatively affected by any documentary it sees, he claims. He equates outcries over deceptions in documentary with religious charges of blasphemy. But with

blasphemy, he says, it can be argued that there actually is a materially negative result – the damage of one’s faith and, potentially, eternal damnation. With documentary fakery, however, he says there is little negative result in one’s loss of faith in images, in film, in the media.<sup>15</sup>

While Winston may be arguing only for stylization and creativity in documentary film, not for outright fakery, his argument opens the door to allow it. His own unexamined assumption that such fakery is obviously wrong is a blind spot that leaves a gaping hole through which Herzog’s “poetic” manipulations can slip. If the documentarist has no truth-telling obligation to his audience, if there can be no material harm resulting from it, why should outright lies be a problem? Winston argues that the filmmaker’s ethical obligation is to his subjects, not to his audience, thus Herzog’s fabrications, which he claims are always approved beforehand by his subjects, violate no ethical codes. There is no victim. In fact, it is more likely that a participant in a direct-cinema documentary will object to his representation in a film than one of Herzog’s subjects. The officials at the asylum who cooperated with the filming of Wiseman’s *Titticut Follies*, for example, objected to the way they were portrayed after the film was released and they realized the public was seeing them negatively.<sup>16</sup> The officials had signed releases and given approval as well, but were unaware of the film’s focus. Often in direct cinema, the aim is to get subjects to unwittingly reveal things about themselves that they might not want exposed or might not even be

aware of. At worst, Herzog adds poetry to his subjects' stories, elevates them to a spiritual or philosophical concept rather than an individual one. He may make their story subservient to some "poetic truth," but he does not set out to expose them. Ironically, the passive approach of direct cinema may turn out to be much more aggressive and potentially damaging to its subjects than Herzog's fabrications.

The only victim of Herzog's deceptions, it seems, could be Herzog himself. Knowledge of one deception tends to cast doubt on all his films – in *Lessons of Darkness*, for example, the interviews with two Kuwaiti survivors of atrocities in the Gulf War simply don't ring true. The subjects, Herzog claims in voiceover, have lost the power of speech or have chosen to give it up after witnessing the horrors of war. One does not need to know beforehand that barriers to speech is a Herzogian leitmotif in order to doubt the veracity of this claim. In the same film, the image of an oil-fire worker re-igniting a gushing oil well is accompanied by Herzog's voiceover saying that the man is now "happy that he once again has something to extinguish." The viewer cannot contest the image – the man is actually re-igniting the fire. But the reasons why he does this remain mysterious. Herzog's explanation is most likely a fabricated one intended to add a poetic shading to the image, but the viewer is left wanting to know the facts of the matter. In this, Herzog's manifesto seems to have been written expressly as a defense of this film, and explains why it is subtitled "Lessons of

Darkness.” He continually emphasizes poetic truth over documentary facts, but notes that “facts sometimes have a strange and bizarre power that makes their inherent truth seem unbelievable.”<sup>17</sup> Here, the fact of the image is indeed unbelievable, and the viewer’s persistent belief in the documentary truth-claim creates a problematic tension. The film is so stylized that the viewer is conscious of the fact that Herzog is going for something other than mere depiction of reality here, yet there seems to be a point at which we are no longer willing to suspend our disbelief or allow these images to be removed (for poetic reasons) from their connection to reality. We can accept the otherworldly, science-fiction pall he casts over the images of burning oil fires, but in this image, ironically, his fabrication is not believable enough and his sleight of hand becomes too visible.

These same doubts about authenticity infect Herzog’s manifesto as well. His comment about an unnamed “well-known representative of Cinema Verite” claiming to be able to find the truth by being honest with the camera is so generic and sounds like something so many filmmakers have said at some point that one doubts that Herzog has any specific filmmaker in mind at all. Frankly, it sounds fabricated. He seems to be doing in his writing just what he does with his films – inventing “facts” (which he has established are inferior to “truth”) which work to support his own ideas and beliefs. He seems not to trust that what he needs to support his thesis – filmic or literary – exists out there in the world, so he invents it.

It is, in a sense, a re-enactment of a central theme in most of Herzog's films – the barriers to authentic, raw human expression. Be it through the confining categories of language, the codes of socialization, or the rules of documentary cinema, the tools one needs to express oneself fully simply do not exist. Poetry and art are the tools we use to give expression to that which otherwise would remain silent and unexpressed; in Herzog's documentaries it is stylization and fabrication that fills those gaps.

## Chapter One Language and *Land of Silence & Darkness*

Whatever one decides about the ethics of Herzog's documentary fabrications, in terms of critical analysis of the films, his manipulations stand out as helpful markers to his artistic intent. When a documentary filmmaker finds reality to be so insufficient for his purposes that he is moved to leave it behind and embellish, those embellishments reveal his purpose in its purest and most distilled form. *Land of Silence and Darkness* (1971) is a film about the deaf-blind, a concept which in itself is close enough to the concept of *The Mystery of Kaspar Hauser* (1974), released just three years later, to draw connections between the two films and suggest that Herzog is exploring the same themes in both. But beyond the naturally-occurring, inherent similarities between the deaf-blind and a man locked away in a dark room without human contact for most of his life, the moments that Herzog chooses to embellish make the connection even stronger. This is not to say that *Land of Silence and Darkness* is nothing more than a real-life replica of *Kaspar*, but it does seem to have served as a space for Herzog to explore the themes of communication, speech, and language – and that part of experience which may be unavailable to them – which run through most of his films. *Kaspar* may have been created from the raw material of *Land of Silence and Darkness*, but he also exists in some form in all of Herzog's films. This may make *Land of Silence and Darkness* one of the most important of Herzog's films, fiction or

documentary. Indeed, Herzog himself has said that an understanding of his documentaries is essential for an understanding of his narrative films,<sup>18</sup> and here one of his most pervasive themes is explored in its rawest form.

In the opening sequence of *Land of Silence and Darkness*, over the image of black leader, the deaf-blind Fini Straubinger describes in voiceover an image from her childhood that she says she cannot forget. Before she was injured and lost her sight and hearing, she says, she went to see a ski-jumping competition. The image that sticks in her mind, is that of the ski-jumper, and particularly of his face, as he flies through the air. "I wish you could see that," she says, as the screen remains black. Thus Herzog immediately calls attention to that part of lived experience that is inexpressible, which words can only approximate loosely. While Fini cannot experience our world, she has an inner world that we, the seeing and hearing, cannot experience either. By immediately foregrounding this aspect of Fini's experience, Herzog establishes an association between the viewer and the deaf-blind, suggesting that in the space of the film, Fini is not merely an individual who is deaf and blind, but a metaphoric stand-in for all human beings and their difficulties with expression. We are all Fini, we are all locked in a land of silence and darkness with only very rough and primitive tools to bridge the gap. Herzog is not merely telling Fini's story, or even the story of the deaf-blind. One might say he's not even interested in their personal stories, except for how they might assist his exploration of this theme. It is echoed

throughout the film in each of the many long-held closeups of those deaf-blind persons who never learned to communicate. In the sequences involving Else Fuhrer or Vladimir, whose parents – their only links to the world – have recently died and left them with no way to communicate, the camera stares insistently, quietly, for what seems like an eternity, unable to pierce the barrier as the deaf-blind sit unaware of its presence. There can be no interaction between camera and subject, and the camera seems interested not so much in telling that person's story but in pondering the inability to do so, the abyss, the metaphorical state the subject represents.

When Fini finishes her description of the ski-jumper in the opening sequence, Herzog then inserts a series of images of jumpers flying through the air, as if an attempt to rescue Fini's memory and give it expression, to bridge the gap between Fini and us. Art is continually presented throughout the film as a way of tapping that interior state unavailable to language – for example, the obscure poetry that the deaf-blind continually recite to describe their experience – and in this case, film, the medium of light and sound rather than silence and darkness, attempts to give expression to Fini's memory. The theme is echoed later, when Fini describes the image she would paint to represent the experience of the deaf-blind to those who can see and hear. After describing an image of a mountain and a river with sharp rocks that represent the depression of the deaf-blind, she says finally, "I wish I could explain it better, but that's how

I feel it.” Again words cannot express her feeling, and she resorts to metaphor, to images, to poetry, to tap that emotion.

If it seems that these examples fit a bit too neatly into Herzog’s world view, it’s because they’re all Herzog. The ski-jumper sequence is pure fabrication, a script Herzog asked Fini to recite.<sup>19</sup> Her description of a painting to represent the deaf-blind experience is questionable as well. The language she uses – and in fact the language used in most of the poetry of the deaf-blind – is so similar to the language Herzog has often used himself that it casts doubt on whether it really springs from Fini’s thoughts. Even her wish that she could “explain it better,” and the futility that wish expresses, smacks of Herzog. In a 1979 workshop interview, Herzog at one point tries to explain why he feels *Signs of Life* is his only “innocent film,” and after several attempts, stops himself. “I think we should leave it at that,” he says. “I cannot explain it any better.”<sup>20</sup> And he has become similarly frustrated when asked in interviews to explain the metaphor of the boat in *Fitzcarraldo*.<sup>21</sup> So the chances that Herzog happened upon a group of people who are deaf and blind and who continually spout inscrutable poetry that they feel expresses them and which, coincidentally, fits Herzog’s agenda, are slim. The same doubts surface when Fini utters the title of the film during her birthday party, noting that the guests need help communicating “so they do not find themselves alone in the land of silence and darkness.” The viewer is reminded of an earlier passage in the film, in which Fini describes that

deafness is *not* silence and blindness is *not* darkness, thus she is either contradicting herself or revealing Herzog's influence. Documentary cinema thrives on serendipity, and these examples could in fact be an extreme case of it, but it seems doubtful. This is a case where Herzog's tendency toward fabrication may infect the viewer's reception of the film and cast doubt. But ultimately such doubts do not change the nature or meaning of his metaphors – they may serve as a momentary distraction, and those viewers who are more insistent on documentary objectivity may not be able to forgive the fakery, but ultimately, if one sets aside ethical concerns and considers the deceptions a creative device, they can become revealing indications of the artist's intent. It is of course not necessary to know which parts are faked in order to understand the film or grasp its themes – whether or not one knows that the opening sequence was scripted does not change its effectiveness in conveying Herzog's message. It means the same thing whether it's real or faked; knowing that it's faked merely makes the message more concrete. Further, his fakery could be seen as a kind of metaphoric re-enactment of the film's focus on the inexpressible – just as language often fails to express us, Herzog finds the tools of documentary cinema insufficient to express *him*. His scripting of events is his attempt to give expression to something that cannot be articulated with the available tools.

Throughout the film Herzog continues to focus on various themes of speech and communication, as if exploring all its metaphysical ramifications,

both positive and negative. The opening sequence uses Fini to establish the concept that we all have our own inner land of silence and darkness, and the rest of the film devotes itself to examining the various ways people (using the deaf-blind and their real-life difficulties with communication as metaphor) try to give expression to that space. The film explores and deconstructs the concept of human communication, revealing it to be as much a necessity and a “spiritual birth” (as a speech coach for the deaf-blind will say, quoting Helen Keller), as it is a tragic, pre-*Kaspar* “terrible fall” into the symbolic order. Language helps us by giving us expression and breaking us out of isolation, but at the same time it forces us to use rigid symbolic systems that may rob us of a raw, natural form of expression that cannot be accessed with words. It is a drama that Herzog will reenact in *Kaspar Hauser*, as the protagonist is at first “saved” from his total isolation by being broken out of his prison and taught to speak and read, but ultimately Kaspar decides that his progress has too high a cost. As Kaja Silverman writes, Kaspar undergoes the transition from “meaningless satisfaction to meaningful dissatisfaction,” and the film ultimately privileges “being over meaning” and silence over language.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the film Fini stands as a representative of the need for communication. Having lost her sight and hearing as a teenager, she is highly functional and knows the world of vision and sound. She spends her time trying to reach out to those with less communication skills than herself, and encounters

varying degrees of success. She is most successful with her friend Julie, who, like her, was not born deaf and blind. Immediately following the opening ski-jumping sequence, the film establishes Fini's importance as a bridge to the deaf-blind by presenting a full shot of Fini sitting on a bench, flanked by an interpreter on her left and Julie on her right. The camera zooms in quickly to focus on Fini's hand as the interpreter uses the touch-alphabet to tell her that the filmmakers want her to describe the animals she saw as a child. Before we even get a close-up of the subject, then, we get a close-up of her hand. The film is clearly more interested in this, the process of communication, than in Fini's personal story. Indeed, it is telling that the film does not open with Fini describing how she lost her sight or relating the practical experience of the deaf-blind – we don't get that until several sequences later. Even here, where Fini is telling a story about visiting a zoo in her childhood, it is a completely banal story that offers no insight into her experience. The focus is on her hands, her speech, not her story. The camera tilts up to ponder Fini's face for a moment as she talks about the animals and, again echoing the ski-jumper sequence, she says, "What a pity you cannot see the colors!" While she continues to speak, Herzog cuts to a closeup of Julie, further emphasizing a lack of interest in Fini's actual words. Julie sits quietly, smiling, cut off from the sound of Fini's voice that we, as viewers, can hear. By juxtaposing the closeup of Julie with the continuous sound of Fini's speech, the film seems to be emphasizing the distance that separates

these two people sitting right next to each other on a park bench. We as viewers don't care what Fini is saying either; we simply wonder where Julie is as we watch her. The expression on her face – eyes fixed upward, a warm smile on her face – seems to be that of someone lost in reverie, and because we know she cannot hear what Fini is saying, we wonder, as the camera continues to stare at her, what she's thinking. Fini then asks Julie to describe her own experience with the animals, and the sequence ends with a long take of the three sitting silently on the bench. The camera again seems to ponder their existence as Fini and Julie sit motionless and the interpreter, who is not blind, plays with a leaf and glances behind her at passersby.

The focus on the act of communicating rather than the actual message is echoed in the following sequence, where the pair take their first ride in a plane. As the two excitedly communicate by hand, the camera positioned so that their hands are always in the foreground and their faces in the background, Herzog does not even bother to translate what they're saying. All that can be heard on the soundtrack is Bach; what the two say to each other is unimportant, according to the film. Their excitement is evident in their faces, in their smiles, in Julie's intermittent shivers of excitement and clapping hands. While we do not know what Fini and Julie are saying to each other, their nonverbal communication – a language they cannot speak with each other – conveys the message to us just as clearly as if we had their words translated. Thus, while the sequence emphasizes

the importance of communication (we are anxious for a moment when Julie reaches out to Fini but cannot reach her, and is momentarily isolated, and then relieved when they regain contact), it also deconstructs the hegemony of verbal communication. One might say that the deaf-blind's entire system of communication rests on the nonverbal as well – while they have an alphabet and use words to communicate, they are also constantly touching, always holding hands. We, the seeing and hearing, read gestures and tones, and the deaf-blind do the same with touch. On the plane, when Julie smiles and sighs and caresses Fini's hand at the end of their conversation, the message comes through to us just as it does to Fini.

The moment of anxiety we feel when Julie temporarily cannot find Fini's hand is explored much more deeply throughout the rest of the film, as Fini encounters more difficulty reaching out to the more severely isolated deaf-blind subjects. She visits Else Fuhrer, a deaf-blind woman who lost all communication with the world when her mother died; she has forgotten how to read Braille and does not understand the tactile alphabet. Even Fini cannot reach her. Else is housed in a psychiatric hospital, and Herzog's quietly staring camera seems to emphasize Else's isolation amid a room full of people. The others, who are not deaf-blind, look at her, look at Fini, look at the camera, fascinated by this spectacle, but Else knows nothing of it. Else is presented as a tragic case, a

human being who has lost all contact with the world and has, as the narrator says, withdrawn into herself. To emphasize the point, Herzog ends the sequence with an intertitle that reads, “When you let go of my hand, it is as if we were 1000 miles apart.”

But while the pathos of this scene suggests the tragedy of life without human contact, Herzog also begins to insert some critique of the formal aspects of communication. Earlier in the same sequence we get a closeup of a psychiatric patient sitting on her bed, dressed formally and shifting herself into various poses. She clasps her hands in mock prayer, resettles herself, straightens her dress, then gazes out the window wistfully, resettles again, and moves into another pose. The camera watches quietly as she changes her expression periodically, and then cuts to a closeup of Else, a stark contrast in her utterly blank stare and motionlessness. One woman is an exaggerated mix of exterior expressions, almost a parody of communication in the seeing and hearing world (a parody of *us*), while the other woman is the total absence of such expression. And in neither instance do we get any closer to understanding the women. But the contrast also seems to build on a point that was planted in the plane sequence with Fini and Julie – that the deaf-blind, who are unaware of their own exterior appearance, are privileged communicators of body language. Their gestures, because they are not aware of them, are more authentic. Herzog seems to be using the psychiatric patient, then, as a metaphor for the unreliability of

nonverbal communication among those who can see and hear. Those who are aware of themselves, of their externals, are unreliable communicators. Else, meanwhile, has recently lost her mother and has no way of communicating with the people around her. She is, as the narrator says, depressed and withdrawn, and her blankness expresses that. Because she is not aware of her external appearance, she does not put on a false face. The deaf-blind seem to represent for Herzog a prediscursive space, an embodiment of the pure, raw expression that is constrained and compartmentalized by language.

This theme is expanded upon in the sequences involving Vladimir and Harald, both born deaf-blind and thus completely unaware of their external appearance. Vladimir is, like Else, a sad case. His father, who recently died, “never tried to awaken him,” according to the narrator. He cannot communicate; he never even learned to walk. The camera watches him for a seemingly interminable four minutes as he sits on the floor, entertains himself with a plastic ball, crawls, hits himself, and makes seemingly-random noises and mysterious expressions that seem to indicate boredom. He *is* the prediscursive, it seems, and we watch him with such fascination that it is almost shocking when we witness him making the sign of the cross on himself. To us this gesture is read as evidence of socialization, of institutional influence, but to him it most likely represents a simple memory of human contact, of touch, and an expression of calm washes over his face when he performs the gesture. He then returns to

making gestures that are inscrutable to the audience, until Fini enters the room. He stops and seems to sense her presence even before she touches him, and when she does, it immediately calms him. He has the same raw expression of calm when she hands him a radio, which he hugs and refuses to let go. "He likes it," Fini says. "He senses something living." Fini tries to communicate with him in various ways without much success, until he guides her hand to make the sign of the cross on himself. "He responded!" Fini says excitedly. Again this sign of socialization, of symbolic language, seemingly so out of place when used by this individual we assume is beyond its reach, is appropriated and inscribed with a different meaning. Herzog again seems to be emphasizing a raw form of communication whose real meaning lies somewhere outside the symbolic. Vladimir is using a sign whose meaning he does not – cannot – know, yet it has meaning for him that has nothing to do with its symbolic meaning.

Harald was also born deaf and blind, but his case is slightly different from that of Vladimir. He is a teenager and lives in an institute for the deaf-blind, where he has learned the tactile alphabet and undergoes rigorous speech therapy. He is surrounded by people and seems happy; he giggles constantly and, like Vladimir, his expressions are raw and unfiltered. The comparison of the two again emphasizes the importance of human contact and communication, but Harald's story is not entirely positive either. His training at times seems violent – the speech therapist must physically force his mouth into certain

positions in order to teach him to talk; likewise the attempts to get him to swim underwater despite his very visible fear seem to be somewhat brutal and insensitive. Here is an individual who has the benefits of society and of communication, which is clearly positive, but the film suggests that progress, the process of socialization, and the acquisition of language itself are somewhat tragic and painful. Harald's teacher quotes Helen Keller, saying that the invention of the tactile alphabet was the "spiritual birth of the deaf-blind," but Herzog seems to also subtly suggest the beginnings of what a disillusioned Kaspar Hauser will later call his "terrible fall" into the world of language and society.

This downside to the acquisition of language is emphasized (more fully realized?) in the final sequence, in which Fini visits Heinrich and his mother. The narrator says that his parents neglected him so badly that he forgot how to speak and write, and that, "rejected by human society, he sought the company of animals," and lived in a horse stable for several years. As the description is spoken by a narrator, it's possible that it was fabricated by Herzog, as it is *very* close to the character of Kaspar Hauser, but it could also be the case that Heinrich's true story served as the inspiration for Herzog's Kaspar. Throughout the sequence Heinrich seems uncomfortable and standoffish, and unlike others in the film, does not welcome Fini's touch. He tries to pull away and even makes gestures as if to shoo her. His mother notes that he only responds to *her* touch,

and that he doesn't like strangers. Finally, when the group is saying their goodbyes, Heinrich wanders off alone (after pulling away from Fini's touch) while the women speak, and the camera follows him. He bumps into a tree branch and touches it, follows it along to the trunk, feels the branches, and continues to touch the tree, almost embracing it. The camera remains on Heinrich as the women's conversation continues on the soundtrack, oblivious to Heinrich standing 30 feet away, and the Bach score returns. Again the presence of their voice emphasizes his isolation; his embrace of a tree following his rejection of human contact further illustrates this.

Meanwhile, this final sequence is, like much of the film, an example of the power of cinema verite and/or direct cinema that Herzog critiques in his manifesto. While the meeting and conversation between Fini, Heinrich, and his mother is staged for the camera and its presence is commented upon by the participants, the moment when Heinrich (who by definition cannot be aware of the camera's presence) walks away and the camera chooses to observe him rather than the women's conversation is a sublime moment of unprovoked, direct cinema. A similarly serendipitous moment occurs in the sequence involving Harald, when he and his teacher get out of the pool and Harald, eager to get back to the shower, pulls away from the teacher and the camera catches their arms and fingertips slowly parting like the image of Michaelangelo's God and Man. Herzog makes allowances for these moments of true serendipity when he notes

in his manifesto that despite their inferior status, “facts sometimes have a truth that makes them unbelievable,” but the whole of his manifesto would ultimately label these images – which are arguably the most powerful in the entire film – as inferior, archaeological, “facts.”

While the final dramatic tree-embracing sequence leaves the film on a rather dismal note, overall, *Land of Silence and Darkness* doesn't ever come to a conclusion about language; the film is structured as an open-ended exploration of the theme rather than an argument. Communication is alternately (and at the same time) vital, superfluous, destructive, impossible, misleading, constraining, and insufficient for human expression. The complexity and ambiguity of the issue is encapsulated in the final intertitle Herzog inserts at the end of the film. Following Heinrich's withdrawal back into the house with his mother, the following appears printed on the screen: “If a worldwide war would break out now, I wouldn't even notice it.” Implicit in the sentence is the question of whether it would be good or bad to be without this kind of knowledge.

## Chapter Two Freaks, Oddity, and the Ethnic Other Werner Herzog and Ethnographic Film

Herzog has often been accused of having a fascination with freaks, outsiders, and people on the fringe of society. A quick look at the subjects of his films – fiction or documentary – may seem to confirm that assumption. His narrative films often center on “outsiders” (Kaspar Hauser, *Nosferatu*, *Stroszeck*, the institutionalized dwarves in *Even Dwarves Started Small*) or focus on European colonizers immersed in a world of the ethnic Other – Peruvian Indians in *Aguirre* and *Fitzcarraldo*, Africans in *Cobra Verde*. Likewise in his documentaries Herzog seems to select subjects that deal with societal outsiders or the ethnic Other, be it the deaf-blind in *Land of Silence and Darkness* or non-European groups in films as varied as *The Ballad of the Little Soldier* (Sandanista schoolchildren), *The Flying Doctors of East Africa* (European doctors who fly to remote African areas to provide medical care to tribes), *Echoes From a Somber Empire* (an African dictator), *Bells From the Deep* (religious practices in Siberia), and *Herdsmen of the Sun* (an African tribe and its male beauty ceremony). Even *The Great Ecstasy of the Woodsculptor Steiner*, a subject that one would think would be anything *but* Other to Herzog, who is German and a former ski-jumper himself,<sup>23</sup> focuses on Steiner as so *freakishly* excellent a ski-jumper (he must shorten his runs so that he doesn’t kill himself or be unfair to the competition by flying too far) that he is isolated by the burden of his talent. Much like Kaspar

Hauser, Herzog's Steiner is an outsider, a marginal, a man who does not fit societal patterns.

And when Herzog casts his eye on America, in films such as *How Much Wood Would a Woodchuck Chuck* (auctioneer society and the Pennsylvania Dutch) and *God's Angry Man* (televangelists), it is with the gaze of an awestruck observer of bizarre spectacle. (Indeed, he has said he believes Americans to be the most "exotic" people in the world.<sup>24</sup>) *Woodchuck* treats American auctioneers as exotic creatures, speakers of mysterious, ritualistic languages of capitalism that he and his film crew cannot understand. He posits as opposite (and equally exotic) the society of the surrounding Pennsylvania Dutch, who reject modern society and, likewise, speak an early, preserved version of German that Herzog attempts to, but cannot, understand. Thus while his primary focus is, like in many of his films, language and communication, this fascination with language itself is, like in *Land of Silence and Darkness*, based on an attempt to locate a basic, prediscursive essence of humanity.

It is as if the subject must be Other for Herzog to be interested. As difficult as it may be to pin down Herzog's documentary "style," it is clear that one thing he is *not* is an observer of what is to him everyday experience or the mundane. He has said that he believes the extremes of human experience are where one discovers what it means to be human. "Under this sort of pressure, people reveal their various natures to us," he says. He likens the concept to a chemical

experiment, where one must put an “unknown” substance under extreme conditions of heat, pressure, or radiation in order to determine its essential structure.<sup>25</sup> And his choice of film subjects reflects this concern. While he clearly posits his subjects as different, to Herzog these people are not marginal at all. They represent all human beings. His is a humanist quest that seeks commonalities with his subjects, not differences. But it is *in* difference, in the exception, that Herzog believes he can find basic human traits shared by all, traits not created or manufactured by society. Kaspar Hauser, he insists, “is *not* an outsider. He is the very *center*, and all the rest are outsiders.” He likens this to his own experience as a filmmaker in Germany, where people label him “an eccentric...some sort of strange freak that does not fit any of their patterns.” But, he says, “That’s ridiculous. *They* are insane!”<sup>26</sup>

Thus difference is very important to Herzog, but only in order to highlight commonalities and make them stand out more starkly. If one finds similarities in societies as different as Europe and the nomadic African Wodaabe tribe, that commonality is then that much more profound, he might say. Herzog at once fetishizes difference, emphasizing the strange, bizarre, or exotic and making it into spectacle, but at the same time does so in order to highlight commonality. This is his agenda, his ethnographic ethos. He seeks out the ethnic Other not to tell *their* story, but to tell the story of humanity. He seeks out difference ultimately in order to erase it. Such a humanist agenda is uncomplicated when

fixed to subjects such as a German ski-jumper or American auctioneers – members of dominant, Imperialist cultures – but becomes problematic when attached to colonized or third-world cultures. To define an African tribe as an exception, even if only in order to locate a common human bond, is an agenda that is fraught with bias. It also comes dangerously close to privileging the “outsider” as being closer to some basic truth about humanity, in some sense a variation on the “noble savage” theme which ultimately makes the ethnic Other into a mere tool for dominant society to learn about *itself*.<sup>27</sup>

But this would not be a terribly alien concept to Herzog, who in all his documentaries seems to be little interested in merely telling a subject’s story. His subjects must not only be Other to him – or *made* Other *by* him, treated cinematically in such a way as to make even the German ski-jumper Steiner into a spectacle of difference – but to be suitable for his filmic purposes they must also fit into one of his personal themes. American, German, or Wodaabe, Herzog’s subjects are first and foremost representatives of his vision, and only secondly do they represent themselves.

These issues become clearest (and most controversial) when Herzog steps into the territory of ethnography, a subset of documentary that is intricately bound with sociopolitical concerns about cinematic representation of ethnic groups. So politically-charged is the issue of ethnography that some say it shouldn’t even exist, that approaching a group as Other can never result in

adequate representation, that cameras should instead be handed over to ethnic groups so that they can control their own image and representation.<sup>28</sup> But Herzog is not interested in the mantle of ethnographer nor even in the rules of ethnographic filmmaking. If his interest takes him into the territory of ethnography, it is only by happenstance. He goes to Africa not in the interests of exploring the continent and bringing back the story of its people, but in the interests of exploring the human condition. He goes in search of universal truths, not specific ones. Whatever ethnic group he makes his subject, his loyalties are to his own conception of “poetic truth” and not to objective ethnographic representation. Films such as *Herdsmen of the Sun* are indeed made in the tradition of ethnographic film – are made to *look* like ethnographic film – but are also made with a focus that is oblivious to the boundaries and sociopolitical concerns of traditional ethnographic filmmaking. Just as Herzog believes that it is more important that his documentaries *behave* like documentaries than actually conform to any ethical standards of documentary reality, so too his ethnographic films are for the most part ethnographic in form but not in function.

But while Herzog’s depiction of any subject may not be entirely objective or perfectly accurate, his humanist aim means he generally elevates rather than criticizes; he romanticizes and poeticizes rather than critiques. In this, his films seem to be made in the tradition of Robert Flaherty, with whom he shares not only a willingness to stage and script his “documentaries,” but also a (potentially

patronizing) desire to make his subjects into romantic heroes (albeit unrealistic ones). It is telling, then, that on a recent list of his top ten favorite films of all time, Herzog placed *Nanook of the North* as No. 7,<sup>29</sup> preceded by a variety of other pseudo-documentaries, including two from Errol Morris, two from essay-filmmaker Chris Marker, and one from ethnographic filmmaker Robert Gardner, who himself is often accused of poeticizing his subjects.<sup>30</sup>

In fact, Robert Gardner and Werner Herzog make an interesting comparison, as they both made films about the nomadic Wodaabe tribe and its annual male beauty ceremony, the Gerewol, in which the men of the tribe decorate themselves with elaborate makeup and dress to compete for the attentions of the women in the tribe. Not only do the women select a lover from the group, but they also confer at the ceremony's conclusion to decide who shall receive the title of the most beautiful man. But while Gardner's *Deep Hearts* and Herzog's *Herdsmen of the Sun* share the same subject and the same humanist rather than purely ethnographic agenda, Herzog's more-blatant manipulations and shadings have drawn criticisms from even Gardner himself.<sup>31</sup> Particularly objectionable, many say, is Herzog's opening sequence, which features an old scratchy opera recording of "Ave Maria" laid over close-up images of ornately-decorated Wodaabe men competing in Gerewol. Gardner's film opens with the same images – closeups of the men dancing in competition – but is accompanied on the soundtrack by the indigenous sounds of the men singing and chanting

while they dance. The effect of Herzog's juxtaposition of Western classical music and native tribal images is complex – on the one hand, it could simply serve as a contrast of European and non-European conceptions of beauty. It could be Herzog's attempt to immediately establish the film's polemic about the nature of beauty, by contrasting two wildly different versions of it. The European version is very different from the Wodaabe version, but the fact that these two very different cultures have a definition of beauty, however different, locates a common human bond in the *search* for beauty. There is no universal conception or manifestation of beauty, but there is a universal desire for it, Herzog seems to be suggesting. A culture's *definition* of beauty may be culturally created, but its *interest* in beauty is a basic human trait. The quest for beauty, then, is another form of the prediscursive that Herzog continually seeks.

But on the other hand, the juxtaposition of the opera recording and the images of the Wodaabe men may have the unintended effect of making the images of the men, which go unexplained until halfway through the film, seem freakish. We are immediately confronted with faces of men wearing colorful makeup and ornate headdresses and making facial gestures that, to a Western observer, are strange. Not until halfway through the film does the viewer learn that it is considered exceptionally beautiful among the Wodaabe to show off the whites of the eyes and teeth, therefore one does not understand the wide-eyed expressions or forced smiles of the dancing men. Accompanying these images

with music that a Western viewer would associate with “classical” beauty could create an ironic contrast that accentuates the strangeness of the unexplained images. In this sense Herzog immediately alienates the viewer from the Wodaabe, firmly (and one might say heavy-handedly) placing the men in the exotic Other category. He fetishizes their difference, and accentuates it with music that is familiar to Western observers. But one might also say that the effect of Gardner’s opening sequence is similar – he provides indigenous rather than Western music, but he doesn’t immediately explain the images either. The effect of his opening sequence is likewise to immediately thrust the viewer into an alien experience with ethnic spectacle, only his choice of indigenous soundtrack makes the thrust a bit more gentle. Ultimately it’s a matter of degree. Gardner explains the ceremony soon enough, but also is careful to note that the Wodaabe *want* to “create a spectacle” and “display themselves,” revealing a certain self-consciousness about his own agenda and, in a sense, attempting to absolve himself from blame for potentially exploiting his subjects. It is a guilty-consciousness that Herzog, oblivious to such ethical concerns in his search for poetic rather than ethnographic truth, does not display.

But both films highlight the “performance” aspect of the Wodaabe’s Gerewol ceremony – Gardner does so seemingly as a way of explaining the images (and his own agenda), but Herzog seems to do so as another way of locating similarities with Western culture. He does not verbally articulate the

Wodaabe's interest in performance and spectacle, but merely takes advantage of it. He juxtaposes the extensive footage of the beauty competition – the performance – with behind-the-scenes footage of the men applying makeup and of post-show conversations where the men act very differently. The images of the men making up, looking into small hand mirrors as they apply colorful substances to their faces and fix each other's hair, call to mind in the Western viewer backstage images of any Western theatrical performance, fashion show, or beauty pageant. Likewise the interviews with men after the ceremony, where they have removed their makeup and costume, highlight the performance aspect of the ceremony images. Away from the ceremony, the men act differently, do not meet the camera's gaze, and seem rather shy and quite different from the mugging for attention that is central to the ceremony. Thus Herzog highlights that the ceremony is not everyday reality for these people – they have "real" and "performed" selves like any other culture. Thus the opera music on the soundtrack is given another dimension – *Gerewol* is the Wodaabe's opera.

Herzog also highlights the ceremony vs. reality issue with the structure of the film – after the opening images of the men in makeup competing in *Gerewol*, the film does not return to these images (or explain them) until halfway through the film. It instead explores the Wodaabe's nomadic lifestyle, the women's ownership of property, their agrarian existence, and the four-year drought that nearly killed off the population. The men are not seen in makeup again until

much later, after Herzog has established that the Gerewol only takes place once a year and that the present ceremony is the first to be held in four years, postponed by drought. Some ethnographic films are criticized for focusing on a ceremony or ritual, thereby ignoring the everyday reality of their subjects and creating the impression that the ritual *is* the everyday. But, as John Adams writes, “‘Ritual’ as an organizing principle in peoples’ lives does not by any means entirely account for their actions.”<sup>32</sup> I would not suggest that Herzog made his film with this ethical principle in mind, but rather that in emphasizing the Wodaabe’s “real” and “performed” selves as a link to Western culture, he coincidentally satisfied this ethnographic principle.

In his description of the life of the Wodaabe, Herzog also constructs a detailed account of the tribe’s gender roles. He explains in detail that the women of the tribe own all property and have the right to leave their husbands – and often do – and take with them all of the couple’s possessions. Women not only have the power of choice at Gerewol, but also can choose a different man each night, even if they are already married. In the film’s two brief exchanges with women, one is dismissive of the men and says none of them are beautiful enough for her; the other is asked by her chosen man whether she chose him for his beauty or his charms. In neither case do the women engage with the camera; they speak only to a Wodaabe man, and if the off-camera voice asks a question, it is asked of the man, who then speaks to the woman. The overall impression is that

the women are unapproachable and refuse to submit to the gaze of the camera. In this culture it is the men who are the subject of the gaze, and the women seem almost hostile toward the camera. In some shots they hide their faces behind their headress, in some they simply refuse to acknowledge the camera, and in others they simply stare back in defiance. Women are the real Other in this film, if only because the power of the gaze belongs to the them and they refuse to be made its subject. Herzog tries, but is kept at a distance, which is literally manifest in the many long shots of the women accompanied by Herzog's voiceover describing them and their role in the tribe. Like wild animals, Herzog cannot get close to them (at least not without a male Wodaabe chaperone). Women are perpetually Other in most of Herzog's films (recall Kaspar Hauser asking a female character what women are good for), but here the women's status as Other is a self-made and oppositional one rather than a default position.

Clearly women's place in Wodaabe society is very different from that of women in Western society, and Herzog is emphasizing that difference. The men are the ones primping and preening for the attention of women, while the women sit in judgment. Herzog's camera travels past the line of dancing men in closeup, each trying to appear taller and more beautiful and attract more attention than the others, and in the following shot the camera travels past a line of women—silent, stoic, judging, refusing to meet the camera's gaze. The worlds of men and women are shown to be very different, much like in Western culture,

only here the roles are obviously reversed. But for Herzog, ultimately the point is that they *have* such strictly defined roles, however they are manifest. The existence of Wodaabe culture may prove that patriarchy is not a natural human order, but as always what is most important to Herzog is not the specific story, but what it means in a universal sense. The difference in gender roles is not the point – the point is that they have gender roles at all. They have an order of their own, completely outside Western influence. One cannot blame imperialism or industrialization for these social norms.

Herzog is often criticized for patronizing his ethnographic subjects and placing them closer to a basic human nature uncorrupted by civilization (and he is guilty of this to some extent in *Herdsmen*, as his voiceover narration in the beginning of the film specifically links the Wodaabe to prehistoric times) but in this film he also seems to be suggesting (or possibly discovering, with amazement) that even a people as far away from European ideas of culture as the Wodaabe have their own *drive* to build culture. They live off the land, they are not industrialized, but they are not the prediscursive. Herzog may be positioning them as closer to it than Western cultures, but also seems to be suggesting that – perhaps tragically, in his opinion – they do not embody it. Even a people as “close to nature” as the Wodaabe are not uncontaminated by culture, Herzog seems to suggest. They have their own theater, their own gender roles, their own rules about ownership of property. They are no freer from cultural norms than

any Westerner. Such is Herzog's tragic view of the human condition. The basic human trait he locates is the drive *away* from the prediscursive. When the Wodaabe in the film lament that the drought has forced them into industrialized areas and taken them away from the land (in words that are suspiciously Herzogian: "The Wodaabe in the city does not walk the sweet earth"), they seem to be voicing Herzog's own lament over the loss of a basic essence of humanity. Industrialization is just one of many manifestations of this tragic human drive, along with language, performance, and countless forms of socialization.

But to make this point Herzog does indeed engage in "ennobling" the Wodaabe. He omits unflattering information about the Wodaabe that is included in Gardner's film, such as the men's extreme vanity and jealousy of each other and of other tribes, with whom they are always fighting. The title of Gardner's film, *Deep Hearts*, refers to the Wodaabe's desire for a deep heart in which one can hide one's envy and self-love. None of this is in Herzog's film, and the omissions make the subjects seem more dignified, more powerful, more noble. He notes in the opening narration that the Wodaabe are "despised by neighboring tribes," and "consider themselves the most beautiful people on earth," but this is very different from describing them as vain and prone to excessive self-regard, as Gardner does. Herzog's spin on the same information makes the tribe sound dignified and noble – a misunderstood band of romantic outsiders that could fit into any of his narrative films.

### Chapter Three

#### Metaphysical Meditations on Reality: *Lessons of Darkness and Fata Morgana*

While ethnographic film is the branch of documentary that takes most seriously the truth-claim in documentary cinema, at the opposite end of the spectrum is the essay-film, a subgenre that is by definition purely subjective.<sup>33</sup> While there is no clear definition of an essay-film style, the baseline quality is a voiceover narration that expresses the filmmaker's personal meditation on the film's images.<sup>34</sup> It is fitting, then, that Herzog's most thorough expropriation of a particular story to convey a "universal" truth comes in *Lessons of Darkness*, an essay-style film that casts the burning oil-fires in Kuwait after the Gulf War into an otherworldly realm of science-fiction. Herzog went to Kuwait and shot footage of the fires from a helicopter, at times frighteningly close to the towers of flame. The death-defying footage seems to fit with Herzog's oft-repeated desire to "articulate new images"<sup>35</sup> for a society that is suffering from a proliferation of "worn-out" images. His quest to find adequate images that will express the human condition seems to lead him to ever-more astonishing feats—dragging a steamboat over a mountain in the jungles of Peru in *Fitzcarraldo*, visiting a deserted town where a volcano is threatening to erupt in the 1977 documentary *La Soufriere*, flying over the burning oil wells in Kuwait.

And of all Herzog's documentaries, *Lessons* is his most pointedly and rigorously removed from documentary "reality." While its images consist entirely of "real" post-war oil fires in Kuwait and the surrounding destruction caused by the war, its structure creates a skeletal science-fiction narrative that tells not the story of the oil fires or the war – he never even names Kuwait – but of universal and metaphysical concepts of destruction and apocalypse. In this, the film seems to be the counterpoint to his 1969 film *Fata Morgana*, which uses a similar style and structure with images of the Sahara desert to tell the story of Creation. Both films consist mainly of landscape footage and an occasional interview with an inhabitant whose words are either suspiciously Herzogian and potentially scripted or are made to seem strange in the otherworldly context of the film. Again they are *made other by* Herzog – even the Germans interviewed in *Fata Morgana* are like alien creatures. That film establishes a rhythm of long, slow, panning shots of desert, and when a human finally appears, the impression is that he is one of the last few inhabitants on a deserted planet. Coupled with the narrated story of failed Creation, the film seems to tell the story of a planet sparsely inhabited by flawed creatures deserted by God.

Both films are also broken up into sections with titles – in *Fata Morgana*, there are three sections, titled "Creation", "Paradise", and "The Golden Age", while *Lessons* is broken into thirteen sections with titles such as "A Capital", "The War", "After the Battle", "What is Found in Torture Chambers", "Satan's

National Park”, “A Pilgrimage”, and “Life Without Fire.” And while the hushed, intermittent voiceover in *Lessons* is Herzog reciting his own text, in *Fata* it is Lotte Eisner reciting an ancient Guatemalan creation myth. In both cases, the style and structure of the films have the effect of disengaging the “real” images from reality and specificity and fact. The stories the films tell are stories that can only be told from above, from afar, from a distance...from a helicopter. Herzog’s aerial shots of Kuwait become the perfect metaphor for his approach to his documentary subjects. He’s not interested in the minutiae, the specificity and particularity of a story. His is not the firefighter’s story. The *real* story, for Herzog, hovers far above the heat and flame and spurting oil.

While Herzog could surely count on the media-savvy viewer recognizing the images in *Lessons* as those of Kuwait, he never names the country nor describes the particulars of the horrors the film witnesses – indeed, he deliberately removes the film not just from Kuwait but from the planet earth entirely. The film opens with a quote, written by Herzog but attributed to 17<sup>th</sup>-century French mathematician, philosopher, and Christian apologist Blaise Pascal,<sup>36</sup> which immediately pushes the viewer into the realm of the spiritual rather than the specific. “The collapse of all universes will unfold – just like creation – in grandiose beauty,” the quote reads. Herzog himself said that he manufactured the quote and placed it at the opening of the film in order to get the audience to step into it “at a high intellectual level,”<sup>37</sup> admitting his intent to

pull viewers away from the particularity of the images. The use of Pascal seems an attempt to establish some context for the film's decidedly spiritual slant by attributing the quote to a man who was both a mathematician and an apologist, dedicated equally to logic and to Christ. And the content of the quote, which is now given added weight by this attribution, seems to be an explanation or at least preparation for what will be the film's overall aestheticization of the horror of the fires. The film's images are indeed gorgeous, and lest we think Herzog is merely admiring the beauty of the spectacle of destruction, the quote links that beauty to a spiritual concept.

This displacement of the images from their context continues rigorously throughout the opening sequence – the first images of Kuwait are of an otherworldly red sky with an accompanying voiceover that names the location merely as “a planet in our solar system.” The next images seem to be a misty, alien reddish-brown mountain range from some far-off planet – Herzog has admitted that this is actually an extreme close-up of tractor tracks in the mud made to look like mountains<sup>38</sup> and labeled as such by the voiceover, which continues, “Wide mountain ranges, clouds, the land shrouded in mist...” The next image is of a wall of red fire in front of which is a darkened shelter with two figures – firefighters – moving inside. The voiceover continues, “The first creature we encounter tries to tell us something.” One of the men leaves the box

and seems to be motioning toward the camera to tell Herzog's crew to stop filming.

So the opening sequence pulls the film out of Kuwait, off the planet earth, onto some unnamed "planet" with a red sky and red misty mountains inhabited by "creatures" rather than human beings who "try" to communicate but cannot be understood. The first of thirteen section titles again is characteristically vague: "A Capital," it reads. Not Kuwait, not any specific city, but an unnamed capital. The next image is an aerial shot of the city cast in a bluish, pre-dawn tint, starkly contrasting the previous red-tinted shots. The early-morning image accentuates the voiceover's claim that the city "will soon be laid waste by war. Nobody has yet begun to suspect the impending doom." Had this aerial shot of the city been the first image in the film it would look like a recognizable city on the planet earth, possibly unnamed but not otherworldly. But Herzog's thorough defamiliarization of the landscape now makes this ordinary aerial shot of a city seem otherworldly as well. Likewise with the following section title, "The War", which is followed by well-known CNN footage of the Gulf War – nighttime bombings, with balls of light streaming through the air and the sound of sirens on the soundtrack. These images have been so visible in the media that they are immediately recognizable as Gulf War footage, but Herzog has done so thorough a job of establishing a science-fiction tone that he has effectively loosened these familiar images from their referent and they do, in fact, appear otherworldly. He

has taken “worn-out” images and re-articulated them. Throughout the film Herzog has kidnapped Gulf War images, not in a consciously self-reflexive, post-modern interrogation of the status of the image but merely as part of his quest for poetic truth through stylization and fabrication. But here Herzog’s manipulations are, unlike his previous films, not intended to fool anyone. He would surely know that viewers would recognize the famous images and could not be hoping the audience would believe the film actually took place on another planet. Yet it is precisely because these images are so recognizable that the film has drawn so much criticism for taking a particular tragedy and turning it into a universal theme. When Herzog interviews two Kuwaitis who witnessed atrocities and now, Herzog claims in voiceover, have difficulty with speech, his interest is not so much in their pain but in how their pain fits into his vision. (And because he has already established the location as otherworldly, these inhabitants of this strange city must then be alien beings, not even humans.) He doesn’t even translate their words as they speak – he summarizes in voiceover, which takes the power of storytelling away from them and gives it to Herzog. It also casts doubt on the veracity of Herzog’s version of their speech, not only because their aphasia fits a little too perfectly into Herzog’s artistic themes but also simply because we are being asked to trust a man who is already asking us to suspend our disbelief and imagine that the film’s real earthly images are not of this world.

The film's overall structure progresses from the city to the war to the post-war destruction (bombed-out buildings and satellites, burned-out shrubbery, blackened bones on the ground), to the beautiful images of the fires, and then to the activities of the firefighters. With the section title "A Pilgrimage" (which again casts the fires as a spiritual occurrence rather than a specific one), the firefighters are first shown spraying water on the fires, and then on each other to cool off. The extreme heat is palpable as they spray the high-power hoses inside their jackets and on each other, and even on the bulldozers as they work, seemingly in order to prevent melting or other damage from the intense heat. The intermittent music that accompanies the images on the soundtrack has dropped out, and one hears only the diegetic sound of the gushing fires and hoses. The images are predominantly long shots and extreme long shots of the men, keeping them anonymous, but in the first of few close-ups of the men they are wearing bizarre mirrored masks, which, in context, make them appear alien. Herzog includes their voices on the soundtrack as they talk to each other, but he keeps the sounds muffled and indecipherable, as if they are speaking an alien language we cannot understand.

The men then use explosives to stop a gushing well, and the utter silence that follows the explosion is extraordinary. One recalls the quote that opens Herzog's *The Mystery of Kaspar Hauser*: "Can't you hear that screaming that men call silence?" Standing alone, these images would provide only a tenuous link to

the quote, but when coupled with a later sequence the link is strengthened – in the section titled “Life Without Fire,” one of the firefighters approaches a well that is gushing oil but is not aflame. The man lights a piece of fabric, throws it at the well, and it explodes into flame. In voiceover, Herzog says with amazement, “Is he insane?” As the man walks away laughing, Herzog says, “Now he is content, now there is something to extinguish again.” Human beings need the distraction of noise, of work, to distract us from the tragedy of our existence, Herzog is suggesting. Silence and inactivity open up a dangerous space for us to become conscious of this tragedy, so we try to divert ourselves, preferring to live in denial. The concept is also very Pascalian. As Pascal writes in his *Pensees*: “The natural misfortune of our mortality and weakness is so miserable that nothing can console us when we really think about it....The only good thing for man, therefore, is to be diverted so that he will stop thinking about his circumstances.”<sup>39</sup>

The image of the man re-igniting the fire is quite shocking, and the viewer is likely to feel deprived of a “real” explanation for it. Why would this man re-ignite the spurting oil well? As thorough a job as Herzog has done in removing the images from reality, the viewer’s familiarity with the images here threatens to undermine Herzog’s poetic project. The image is so powerful that it pulls the viewer out of the imaginary world Herzog has created. It seems fitting, then, that Herzog wrote his documentary manifesto, the Minnesota Declaration, on the eve

of presenting *Lessons* at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1999. The manifesto is not only subtitled “Lessons of Darkness”, but seems to have been tailored specifically as a defense or explanation of this film. The declaration’s focus on cinema’s ability to express “poetic, ecstatic truth” that “can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization,” and its dismissal of traditional cinema verite as “superficial”, as confusing “fact and truth”, and its practitioners as “tourists” photographing “ancient ruins of facts”, seem well-suited for a film that so thoroughly ignores the “facts” of its subject, such as the real location of the city and the specific causes or effects of the oil fires (or their re-ignition) or of the Gulf War itself. Such “facts”, Herzog would say, are inferior to the “truth” found by stepping back and finding the poetry in a subject. The specific causes and effects of the oil fires are the “accountant’s truth,” Herzog would say; the poetic truth lies somewhere above and beyond these “ancient ruins of facts.”

Yet the film is not entirely devoid of such “facts” – its images are of real oil fires, of real firefighters trying to put out the fires, of real machinery and hoses and rivers of oil. They are beautiful images, but they are not stylized or doctored in any way. They are simply “factual” images of the fires. But these facts do not represent themselves in the film, they are instead put into a context that elevates them above the level of “accountant’s truth.” And Herzog includes in his manifesto a statement that nearly reads as a disclaimer for realism: “And

yet, facts sometimes have a strange and bizarre power that makes their inherent truth seem unbelievable.” The awesome power and beauty of the Kuwaiti oil fires has nothing to do with Herzog’s stylization; it is a fact. The shocking image of the firefighter re-igniting an oil well was not Herzog’s intervention; it is a fact. These factual images do indeed have a “strange and bizarre power” and an “inherent truth” all their own.

Meanwhile, Herzog himself says the manifesto fits best with the film. “*Lessons of Darkness* fits in very well with my manifesto, in what I define as ecstatic truth,” he said in an interview with *Cineaste*.<sup>40</sup> “We have fifteen-second film clips of fires in Kuwait hundreds of times on CNN, and that is the accountants’ truth. But in this film, more visibly than in others, I was searching for something different, for something beyond that, for an epic, ecstatic truth. [The film clarifies] what I mean by the terms of my manifesto – of what distinguishes the accountant’s truth, what constitutes fact, and what constitutes the inherent truth of images in cinema and, of course, in poetry.” The “facts” about why the firefighter re-ignited the oil well, then, can easily be found on CNN or in the newspaper, along with other facts about the war, and are unimportant for Herzog’s agenda.

And in an ironic twist, Herzog’s tendency to uproot his subjects from their specific circumstances in this case has produced an account of the Gulf War that actually *corrects* the official version propagated by the U.S. media and the

military. According to U.S. television news reports and official military accounts, the Gulf War was a remote-control war carried out with surgical precision. There was relatively little damage or loss of life, and the perception among the U.S. population is that it was a “minor” war, easily won and heartily celebrated as proof of American power and heroism. The actual effects on Kuwait and the surrounding areas were glossed over by the media and are for the most part unknown to most Americans. But ironically, Herzog’s drama and bombast tell a very different story that inadvertently corrects this “official” version of the war. It is not his intention to correct the public’s perception about the Gulf War or to offer any specific message about any specific war, but by immersing the viewer in the terrifying images of destruction and heightening those images to an apocalyptic level – images which previously had only been seen, as Herzog said, in “fifteen-second clips” on television – his film forces the viewer to confront the awesome devastation brought by the war. No matter how Herzog tries to turn the images into metaphor or poetry, they carry their own realistic power that even his rigorous manipulation cannot erase. Images of pools of boiling oil surrounding the fires are labeled “Protuberances” by Herzog, but while the viewer may grasp his metaphor, the “realistic” power of the images supersede the power of that metaphor. Likewise his characterization of the firefighters’ work as “A Pilgrimage” does not remove the power of the images to convey the awesome effort required to stop the fires. Almost despite himself, Herzog’s

stylization has ironically produced a more “real” version of the Gulf War than any U.S. television news report ever did. As John E. Davidson writes, Herzog’s attraction to catastrophe and his aestheticization of his subjects inadvertently “offers a context to the virtual reality of the evening news.”<sup>41</sup>

Herzog’s manifesto also contains three points that refer not to the nature of documentary film but to nature itself. Herzog writes, “The moon is dull. Mother Nature doesn’t call, doesn’t speak to you.” He continues, “We ought to be grateful that the Universe out there knows no smile.” Nature’s indifference to the concerns of man is a recurring theme in Herzog’s films, and provides another link to his 1977 documentary *La Soufriere*, about the town whose inhabitants fled under the threat of an erupting volcano, except for one man who stayed behind. The man was a drifter who spoke of giving himself over to God’s will, of allowing fate to decide whether he lives or dies. But the volcano in that film never erupted, much to the chagrin of Herzog and his film crew. In voiceover at the film’s end, Herzog says his film now seems “pathetic” and “embarrassing,” insisting that never in geological history has there been a volcano that has given so many clear signs of impending eruption but did not erupt. And now, he says, over images of the quieted volcano and triumphant Wagner on the soundtrack, that his film has become “a report on an inevitable catastrophe that did not take place.” William Van Wert says the use of this piece of music is ironic, that it is Herzog being humorous and highlighting his own folly.<sup>42</sup> And while there is

indeed an ironic effect to Herzog expressing embarrassment at his failure to the tune of triumphant Wagner, the effect is more complex than simple irony when one shifts the focus of the music to nature rather than Herzog. The music represents nature's triumph, which is, at the same time, Herzog's failure.

In some sense it could be argued that *Lessons* is Herzog's attempt to rescue that film (and his vision) from the tyranny of nature's indifference. It may not necessarily be a conscious attempt on his part, but clearly something attracts him to images of catastrophe and to what they might represent in a universal, poetic sense – indeed, the images of the smoking volcano are similar to the landscape images found in nearly every Herzog film, narrative or documentary, including *Lessons of Darkness*. Nature's whim turned *La Soufriere* into a film about man's humbling (specifically Herzog's) before the raw power of nature, and it seems with *Lessons* that Herzog found in man-made destruction the story of apocalypse that an uncooperative nature would not conspire with him to tell.

But there is a flip side to this – as Herzog writes in his manifesto, nature is not a place of solace for human beings but “a vast, merciless hell of permanent and immediate danger.” Evolution, he continues, was man's attempt to escape this hell, to crawl out of the primordial ocean and onto solid land, “where the Lessons of Darkness continue.” Nature is a “merciless hell,” while civilization provides nothing but “lessons of darkness.” Neither nature nor civilization are

safe havens for humans, as the “permanent and immediate danger” of nature is only reproduced by man – by oil fires, by war, by progress and industrialization.

The concept is evident in Herzog’s work even as early as his 1969 *Fata Morgana*, which tells the story of Creation, of the Gods’ failure to create Paradise and a race of perfect beings. The film’s story of Creation, which is a mix of Guatemalan myth, Judeo-Christian scripture, and Herzog’s own script,<sup>43</sup> is laid over images of industrial wasteland in the Sahara desert. It is the Sahara desert corrupted by technology and industrialization, complete with the wreckage of a crashed plane in the sand, burned-out cars used as domestic shelter, picked-over animal carcasses, and bizarre interviews with the desert’s inhabitants that all come together to provide an image of humanity as wasteland. God’s failed creation in *Fata Morgana* culminates in *Lessons of Darkness*; Man’s flawed nature brings about his own destruction. Herzog himself has commented on the “religious rage” that is contained in *Fata Morgana*, calling it “a rage over the absurdity of the universe, over these blunders, these shortcomings implanted from the cradle.”<sup>44</sup>

The film is a near twin to *Lessons of Darkness* in style and structure, and likewise fits well within the tenets of his manifesto, if retroactively. Indeed, a review of the film by Amos Vogel in 1970 provides a description that evokes Herzog’s own language in his manifesto, and which could just as easily be applied to *Lessons of Darkness*: “Working solely with the materials of reality,

Herzog, in a cosmic pun on cinema verite, has recovered the metaphysical beneath the visible."<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

Werner Herzog has often been quoted as saying his narrative films are “unmediated life, filmed on the spot.”<sup>46</sup> *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* may be a fictional story created by Herzog but in some sense it is also a documentary of the making of that film – Herzog and cast and crew actually did make the trek over the mountains and through the jungle, and one man actually died along the way.<sup>47</sup> Likewise the dragging of a steamboat over a mountain in *Fitzcarraldo* actually took place, without special effects and despite the strong objections of engineers who told Herzog the feat would be too dangerous, not to mention near-impossible. The steamboat, then, is a metaphor not only within the film but within the reality of the filmmaker’s life as well. Herzog *is* Fitzcarraldo. He *did* travel to the jungle and live there for months with the aim of bringing art (his film), he *did* deal with hostile natives (a war among native tribes broke out during filming), and some might say that ultimately the final product, his film, is as much a failure as was Fitzcarraldo’s failed attempt to bring opera to the jungle. Meanwhile, when asked whether his fiction films could be considered documentaries about their star, Klaus Kinski, Herzog replied, “If you use the term documentary with very wide margins, yes. ... The line between documentary and fiction film is obviously blurred for me. They bear such an affinity to each other that I can’t really distinguish that easily.”<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, Herzog's documentaries cannot make the same claim to being "unmediated reality" that he claims for his narratives. Some might say his fiction films are *more* truthful than his documentaries (in the ethical rather than poetic sense outlined in his manifesto) because they contain the same balance of fiction and reality as his documentaries but are at least *labeled* as fictional. His documentaries, meanwhile, contain just as much fiction as his narratives but do not reveal those deviations from reality. Ultimately the two forms seem to meet somewhere in the middle—his fiction films are as documentary as his documentaries are fictional, and the common ground seems to be the expression of a "poetic, ecstatic truth" rather than an objective, realistic, factual one.

There is an argument that the boundaries of documentary and of the truth-claim of the photographic image *need* to be explored and interrogated and broken down. But while Herzog would likely agree with this position, his films' violations of the documentary truth-claim are not motivated by it. He may intentionally disengage his images and subjects from their specific context, but his intention is not to comment on referent vs. reality. Post-modernism can provide a defense of his tactics, but it does not provide motivation for them. It could be said that Herzog's films operate on a level that assumes the post-modern debate over the status of the image is already settled, a given, a moot point.

And in Herzog's cinematic world, all images and subjects become tools for him to use to express *his* vision, *his* truth. It is fitting, then, that the title of his recent documentary about Klaus Kinski, *My Best Fiend*, was originally titled "Herzog's Kinski." Indeed, the film does not describe Kinski's background or personal life, which Herzog says "never interested me." The film "is as much about me as it is about him...I believe his character becomes somewhat evident, of course, as seen through my eyes and his deeds."<sup>49</sup> The same could be done with the titles of all his documentaries: Herzog's Deaf-Blind, Herzog's Wodaabe, Herzog's Gulf War. The lives of his subjects first and foremost provide *him* with the vocabulary to express *his* own poetic truth. Post-modernism may be able to defend his loosening of the image from reality, but it can't really firm up the shaky ground he treads when he appropriates a subject's story for his own purposes, erasing the specificity of a story in order to express a "universal truth."

But fortunately for Herzog, he is not bothered by such concerns and sees his humanist artistic intentions as transcending the importance of sociopolitical specificity. When the audience at a screening of *Lessons of Darkness* harshly criticized Herzog's aestheticization of the burning oil-fires and his use of a classical music score, he replied simply: "I don't care if you like the music, I want it that way."<sup>50</sup>

There has been very little scholarship in the area of Herzog's documentaries, and some might say the reason for this is simply that the films

are inferior to his narrative films. While many of his documentaries are indeed “minor” (Michael Atkinson described *My Best Fiend*, perhaps rightly, as “little more than a doodle”<sup>51</sup>), even the artistic failures offer insight into Herzog’s other works and into his creative imagination. Perhaps critics are approaching the films in the wrong way, viewing them as examples of documentary cinema rather than as part of Herzog’s personal creative expression. As Herzog uses his subjects to express himself rather than the subject’s specific stories, the films will always be seen as failed documentaries if approached in that way. These “lesser” films are more interesting as counterparts to or explorations of the themes presented in his narrative films than as the actual stories of their subjects. Indeed, Herzog himself insists that an understanding of his documentaries is essential to an understanding of his fiction films. His documentaries are “almost always neglected by the public,” he says. “And yet for me they are just as important as my feature films. There is something in *Land of Silence and Darkness* that is almost like a part of me.”<sup>52</sup> A more pointed and pithy version of the same concept is the Herzog quote that ended up as the title of Christian Weisenborn and Erwin Keusch’s 1978 documentary about the filmmaker: “I Am My Films.”

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- <sup>1</sup> For a full discussion of this debate see Michael Renov's *Theorizing Documentary* (New York: Routledge, 1993) or Brian Winston's *Lies, Damn Lies and Documentary*. (London: BFI Press, 2000)
- <sup>2</sup> Herzog, Werner, *Images at the Horizon*.
- <sup>3</sup> Renov, Michael. *Theorizing Documentary*.
- <sup>4</sup> Renov
- <sup>5</sup> Letter from Herzog to ZDF
- <sup>6</sup> Rice News. "Film Director Werner Herzog Talks About 'Lessons'" by Philip Montgomery
- <sup>7</sup> Interview With Werner Herzog, [home.earthlink.net/~tedbern/wernerinterv1.htm](http://home.earthlink.net/~tedbern/wernerinterv1.htm).
- <sup>8</sup> Cineaste interview
- <sup>9</sup> Herzog, Werner. [http://www.wernerherzog.com/index\\_frameset.htm](http://www.wernerherzog.com/index_frameset.htm)
- <sup>10</sup> Barnouw, p. 255
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> Rabinovitz, Lauren. *Points of Resistance* (Chicago: Illinois U. Press, 1991) p. 113
- <sup>13</sup> Winston, Brian. *Lies, Damn Lies and Documentary*. (London: BFI Press, 2000) p. 22
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p.10
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p.16
- <sup>16</sup> Winston, p. 145
- <sup>17</sup> manifesto, [www.wernerherzog.com](http://www.wernerherzog.com)
- <sup>18</sup> *Images at the Horizon*, p.4
- <sup>19</sup> conversation with Herb Golder, John Gianvito
- <sup>20</sup> *Images at the Horizon*, p.6
- <sup>21</sup> interview
- <sup>22</sup> Silverman, Kaja. "Werner Herzog's Kaspar Hauser," *New German Critique* No. 24-25, Fall/Winter 1981-2, p.80.
- <sup>23</sup> *Images at the Horizon*, p. 4
- <sup>24</sup> *Images at the Horizon*, p. 10
- <sup>25</sup> *Images at the Horizon*, p. 8
- <sup>26</sup> *Images at the Horizon*, p.7
- <sup>27</sup> McDougall
- <sup>28</sup> Loizos, p. 14
- <sup>29</sup> facets catalogue
- <sup>30</sup> *Journal of Film and Video*, 43.4, Winter 1991, <http://www.temple.edu/anthro/ruby/gardner.html>
- <sup>31</sup> email from Herb Golder
- <sup>32</sup> Adams, John. "Representation and Context in Ethnographic Film," *Film Criticism* 4, No. 1 (Fall 1979):89-100.
- <sup>33</sup> Lopate, Philip, "In Search of the Centaur", in Charles Warren ed., *Beyond Document*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996. p.244
- <sup>34</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> Hauntingly Herzog: Legendary filmmaker Werner Herzog isn't crazy, but likes to explore the mysteries of our human existence. Salt Lake City Weekly, April 27, 1998 By Mary Dickson "I try to articulate new images. We are surrounded by worn out images. " "We need to develop a language of images adequate to our civilization."
- <sup>36</sup> Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensees Edited, Outlined and Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 13, 189.

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- <sup>37</sup> Rice News, 10/31/96, "Film Director Werner Herzog Talks About 'Lessons'".  
Vassun.Vassar.edu/~cecurran/Herzog-text.html
- <sup>38</sup> Rice interview
- <sup>39</sup> James Houston translation of Pensees. *Mind On First: A Faith for the Skeptical and Indifferent* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), p.96
- <sup>40</sup> Cineaste, sept.1999 p.32
- <sup>41</sup> Davidson, John E. "As Others Put Plays Upon the Stage: Aguirre, Neocolonialism, and the New German Cinema." *New German Critique*, p. 130
- <sup>42</sup> Van Wert, William, in Corrigan, p.70
- <sup>43</sup> Corrigan p. 186
- <sup>44</sup> Corrigan, p.75
- <sup>45</sup> vogel, in Corrigan, p. 46
- <sup>46</sup> Koch, Gertrude, "Blindness as Insight: Land of Silence and Darkness," in Corrigan, p. 76.
- <sup>47</sup> Davidson, John E., p. 105, 115
- <sup>48</sup> Cineaste Sept. 1999, p. 32
- <sup>49</sup> Cineaste, Sept. 1999, p. 32
- <sup>50</sup> Davidson, p. 129
- <sup>51</sup> Atkinson, Michael. "Ghost in the Machine: Speculating on the Dark Heart of Cinema," in *Film Comment* Jan. 2000.
- <sup>52</sup> *Images at the Horizon*, p. 4

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## APPENDIX

### MINNESOTA DECLARATION: Truth and fact in documentary cinema Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota April 30, 1999 Werner Herzog

#### LESSONS OF DARKNESS

1. By dint of declaration the so-called Cinema Verité is devoid of verité. It reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants.

2. One well-known representative of Cinema Verité declared publicly that truth can be easily found by taking a camera and trying to be honest. He resembles the night watchman at the Supreme Court who resents the amount of written law and legal procedures. "For me," he says, "there should be only one single law: the bad guys should go to jail."

Unfortunately, he is part right, for most of the many, much of the time.

3. Cinema Verité confounds fact and truth, and thus plows only stones. And yet, facts sometimes have a strange and bizarre power that makes their inherent truth seem unbelievable.

4. Fact creates norms, and truth illumination.

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

6. Filmmakers of Cinema Verité resemble tourists who take pictures amid ancient ruins of facts.

7. Tourism is sin, and travel on foot virtue.

8. Each year at springtime scores of people on snowmobiles crash through the melting ice on the lakes of Minnesota and drown. Pressure is mounting on the new governor to pass a protective law. He, the former wrestler and bodyguard, has the only sage answer to this: "You can't legislate stupidity."

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9. The gauntlet is hereby thrown down.

10. The moon is dull. Mother Nature doesn't call, doesn't speak to you, although a glacier eventually farts. And don't you listen to the Song of Life.

11. We ought to be grateful that the Universe out there knows no smile.

12. Life in the oceans must be sheer hell. A vast, merciless hell of permanent and immediate danger. So much of a hell that during evolution some species - including man - crawled, fled onto some small continents of solid land, where the Lessons of Darkness continue.

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