Encounters at the End of the World: A Collection of Essays on Werner Herzog

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Encounters at the End of the World: A Collection of Essays on Werner Herzog

“I am my films”

Michael Mulhall
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Werner Herzog is one of the most well-known European art-house directors alive today (Cronin viii). Born in 1944 in war-torn Munich, Herzog has been an outsider from the start. He shot his first film, an experimental short, with a stolen camera. He has infuriated and confounded countless actors, producers, crew-members and studios in his lengthy career with his insistence on doing things his own way. Due to this maverick persona and the specific “adventurous madman” mystique he has cultivated over the past forty years, Herzog has attracted a large following worldwide.

Herzog is perhaps best known for the lush but unforgiving jungles of Aguirre: Der Zorn Gottes (1972) and Fitzcarraldo (1982) and his contemplative musings on the structures of society in The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser (1974) and Stroszek (1977). Though he has never been a huge commercial success in terms of theater receipts, he has had a relatively impressive recent run at the box office, including the much-heralded Grizzly Man (2005) and his long awaited return to feature filmmaking, Rescue Dawn (2006).

Herzog is held in high esteem among his peers. Legendary directors Milos Forman and Francois Truffaut were both noted fans of Herzog. He is adored by critics, including Roger Ebert who has long championed Herzog’s work (rogerebert.suntimes.com).

Yet despite all this support and acclaim, there is a notable dearth of formal literature written on the director. Of course this could be explained by the simple fact that his career is not yet over, and his future films could potentially discount any current analyses of his oeuvre. However, the mountains of books devoted to living filmmakers of the same era, like Jean-Luc Godard or the scores of studies done on Ingmar Bergman,
Robert Altman and Michelangelo Antonioni while they were alive are the obvious immediate counter-arguments.

Herzog usually finds himself lumped in with the filmmakers of the *Neue Kino*, the New German Cinema of the 1970s. It seems that to an extent the academic film community has overlooked this entire movement on the whole. The work of Herzog, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Win Wenders and Volker Schlondorf are not given the same treatment afforded to the French *nouvelle vague*, the Italian neo-realisists, or even their own German predecessors, the expressionists. It seems that the greatest appreciation for this movement was in the years immediately following its apex. A number of books on the New German Cinema were released in the early 1980s but there has been a noticeable lack since.

This brief collection of essays humbly attempts to take a renewed look at the films and career of Werner Herzog. As was mentioned earlier, he has developed a sort of aura of mystery and adventure over the past forty years. The way he prefers to do things naturally (and perhaps intentionally) results in a number of wild rumors and misconceptions. These essays will also attempt to dispel these rumors in some cases and verify them in others.

The first essay, titled “Herzog’s Cultural Framework: Real and Perceived,” looks at three intellectual, artistic and historical movements that are widely believed to have had strong influences on Herzog’s work: Expressionism, Romanticism and Fascism. Herzog, who thrives in his outsider role, vehemently denies a connection to all three. While this is true to an extent, there are unmistakable connections to one of these movements.
The second essay, “Herzog the Auteur,” suggests the director should be considered part of an exclusive class of filmmakers. The Auteur Theory, first outlined by French critic-turned-director Francois Truffaut and later popularized in America by Andrew Sarris, argues that an elite class of directors transcends the traditional role and creates films that qualify as very personal art. In Truffaut’s and Sarris’ introductory essays on the theory, they outlined specific criteria for acknowledging auteurs. In this essay Herzog is held up to the requisites to see if he qualifies.

The third essay, “Herzog/Kinski,” examines the relationship between Herzog and his most well known collaborator, actor Klaus Kinski. Many of the wild rumors about Herzog mentioned earlier are the result of on and off-set spats with the emotionally volatile actor. Despite their obvious troubles, this essay argues that while they were obviously self-destructive, their relationship was quite symbiotic. Kinski’s wild tantrums and megalomania contrasted well with Herzog’s understated style of self-promotion. It is argued that Kinski was Herzog’s avatar, a warped on-screen extension of his self.

Finally the fourth essay, “Blurring the Line,” is a study of the relationship between Herzog’s documentaries and his feature films. He has a tendency to blend the styles together, leading to a unique hybridized feel in many of his films. Of course this liberal application of fiction to otherwise factual documentaries has garnered its fair share of criticism. Despite some similarities, Herzog declares himself to be at odds with the cinema vérité filmmakers, accusing this style of finding only “an accountant’s truth.”

Ultimately it can be said that Herzog has been one of the more unique characters in this whole affair known as cinema. His refusal to sign the Oberhausen Manifesto or to join any organized group of filmmakers resulted in his status as a perpetual outsider.
While not as technically polished as some of his contemporaries, he has a way with the camera, creating a tension of space and emptiness, doubt and optimism, and truth and fiction unseen in other films. He asks us to reexamine our relationship with nature, and warns of its maddening power. He sees culture and society as a necessary evil, but an evil nonetheless. We may not see another filmmaker like Werner Herzog for quite a long time.
Chapter 1: Herzog’s Cultural Framework: Real and Perceived

“I never had a choice about becoming a director” (Cronin 1).

The first director to emerge from the New German Cinema of the Seventies and achieve international acclaim, Werner Herzog has been creating films in his very unique and personal style for close to forty years. Despite, or perhaps because of his notoriety, Herzog believes himself to be woefully misunderstood (32). As a director hailing from Germany, which since the 1930s has not been an international filmmaking hotspot, Herzog’s films face a slew of stereotypes and preconceptions. According to Herzog, foreign critics usually see his films as being in response to three things with deep roots in German history: Nazism, Romanticism and Expressionism. Are these labels warranted or are they, as Herzog argues, merely the result of critical laziness?

Herzog believes these preconceptions to be an effect of Germany’s tepid film industry from 1933 until the 1970s (24). As the birth of the French New Wave in the late 1950s ushered in a new era of film criticism, Germany’s film industry was mainly producing shiny, happy-ending melodramas much in the style of the Italian ‘White
Telephone’ pictures of the early 1940s. These films were pure escapism, with little artistic merit. The New Wave critics simply glossed over German Cinema until the 1970s, with the rise of Herzog, Wenders, Fassbinder and the rest of their contemporaries. However, as a result of decades of mediocre pictures, foreign critics were hesitant to acknowledge the legitimacy of New German films, and in turn, were quick to label the first waves of these films as simple introspective responses to Nazism.

Herzog has obviously attempted to resist such typecasting and rise up as his own independent force. However, it is easy to see where those in the “Herzog’s films are responses to Nazism” camp are coming from. Herzog grew up in the wake of fascism. As is understandably the case with Germans even to this day, the era of the Third Reich is a highly sensitive subject that is never far out of mind. Herzog has even said that insecticide commercials make him a little uneasy, as he views the process as “one step from genocide” (93).

Understandably then, critics have written about the anti-fascist themes in some of his films including Aguirre and Fitzcarraldo. To these critics, a character like Aguirre is seen as an authoritarian, fascist leader. He wrestles control of his regiment after convincing them to join him in an absurd quest that will ultimately lead to their downfall. However it becomes difficult to extend this metaphor any further. What causes Aguirre’s downfall? In the film, he first appears as a calculating tactician with a clear, though impossible, dream of capturing personal wealth and glory. His journey ends when he is driven mad by the jungle. How can this connect to fascism? Hitler was certainly more than a selfish conquistador.
Some have gone even further than suggesting that Herzog’s films stem from a response to fascism. After the release of the odd *Even Dwarves Started Small* (1969), Herzog was accused of being a fascist himself (Cronin 55). The wonderfully strange film deals with a prison uprising where a band of inmates try to break free from their captives on a small African island. The film is most notable for its unusual cast, which was made up entirely of midgets. Their revolution, however, is not entirely successful. Due to conflicting interests and a lack of communication between the rebels, the group is not quite able to escape their prison.

 Allegedly this made Herzog a fascist, but it seems more like this was merely a symptom of the times (55). The film was released in the late 1960s, during a very tumultuous time both in Germany and abroad where protests against the status quo were not uncommon. In showing a revolt that failed, Herzog incurred accusations of fascism, something he certainly did not intend.

 It seems more likely that *Dwarves* questions the constructs of contemporary society, something completely in line with what those accusing Herzog believed themselves. The midget cast was hindered and eventually defeated by their surroundings, which were all regularly sized. In the film, the midgets represent the whole of mankind, and the largeness of their surroundings (perhaps the best image in the film is one particularly small actor trying to ride a motorcycle) makes one question the absurdity of society as we have created it.

 While Herzog certainly directly approaches the subject of Nazism in his weak later film, *Invincible* (2001), he insists that Nazism is simply not addressed in his earlier works and in the vast majority of his films (Cronin 93). It truly seems that while Nazism
is certainly something that remains on the minds of all German people to this day, foreign critics are simply too quick to describe Herzog’s films as dealing with the sensitive subject.

However, Nazism is just one example of something Herzog is often accused of being influenced by. The most well known German film movement, even to this day, is Expressionism. Reaching its apex in the late 1920s and continuing until Hitler took power in 1933, Expressionism was arguably the first noteworthy film movement in the world to extend filmmaking beyond simple story-telling. Expressionist films achieved dark and somber moods through chiaroscuro lighting, creative mise-en-scène and innovative art design.

Many Expressionist directors, such as FW Murnau, GW Pabst and Fritz Lang came to Hollywood around the time of the Nazi takeover and interwove their Expressionist sensibilities with Hollywood polish and funding. While in most cases this was not quite a match made in heaven, their impression was strongly felt, and their influence led to the American film noir movement and impacted the course of film history forever.

The rise of Nazism quashed this creativity and eliminated almost all artistic merit of German Cinema, as Goebbels ushered in a new era of escapist melodramas and manipulative propaganda. As was mentioned earlier, German Cinema did not immediately bounce back after 1945, which was understandable, as the film industry, much like the rest of the country, was decimated by the war. Until the appearance of Herzog in 1969 and his colleagues shortly after, German Cinema was all but non-existent.
Of course, much like the case with Nazism, it is easy to see where some critics could be quick to say that there is an Expressionist influence in Herzog’s films. As the first internationally well-known German filmmaker since the 1930s, it would make sense that his films would owe a great debt to those of the early era.

The blindingly obvious connection between Herzog and the Expressionists is *Nosferatu* (1979). Originally an expressionist classic filmed by FW Murnau in 1922, Herzog directed his own version of the vampire story in 1979. He does not consider his film to be a re-make but rather a different telling of the same story, much in the same way that Robert Bresson and Carl Theodore Dreyer both directed films about Joan of Arc (155). Murnau’s film was a watershed moment in the film world, as it fleshed out the concepts of Expressionism while serving as a direct influence to the Universal horror films of the 1930s. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922), along with *Metropolis* (1927), *M* (1931), and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), are surely the most celebrated of all the Expressionist films.

The dearth of worthy German Cinema for nearly forty years after the abrupt end of the Expressionist era left the New German Filmmakers with a heightened sense of respect for these early films. Herzog does not see this respect as coming from a sense of nostalgia but rather as from a form of nationalistic admiration (156).

He refers to the idea that his generation, those born from the 1940s to the 1950s in Germany, is fatherless (151). This notion is true to a point on a literal level, as over seven and a half million Germans were killed during World War II. The vast majority of these deaths were men serving in the military. When all was said and done, fully one-fifth of all German men were killed as a result of the war (Reichling).
This idea is also true on a more symbolic, cultural level. In Herzog’s own words: “The father generation had either sided with the barbaric Nazi culture or was chased out of the country” (152). Those who sided with Hitler were, in a way, disowned by the following generation, while only a percentage of those who fled the country returned. This left Germany in the cultural depression that was referenced earlier. As was also previously mentioned, critics both at home and abroad were slow to acknowledge the returning ‘legitimacy’ of German Cinema.

When the nation was finally ready to reemerge from the post-war artistic doldrums, it had to look to what Herzog terms its “cultural grandfathers” for guidance (152). For the New German filmmakers, these grandfathers were the Expressionists. And while the themes and visuals of this new wave of German films were quite different from those of their ancestors, the old masters were always held in the highest of esteem.

Herzog’s films up to and after Nosferatu are difficult to classify. That is, they are not genre films in most respects. Weak cases can be made that Aguirre is an adventure film, but it is no more than The Bicycle Thieves (1948) or Pickpocket (1959) are crime stories. The question then becomes, why would Herzog make a film like Nosferatu that is so entrenched in one genre? It seems most likely that the film is meant to serve as the symbolic link between the Expressionists and the New German filmmakers. Nosferatu was released in 1979, after the New German Cinema had already achieved what Herzog refers to as “legitimacy.” It had been recognized by critics, most notably Lotte Eisner, for creating worthwhile and respectable films. This accomplishment was significant for Herzog and his colleagues, as the stereotypes of German films as mindless melodramas
had hindered their international success. *Nosferatu* is meant to fully realize the bond between the Germans directors of the day and the great Expressionists of the past.

In reality, Herzog’s films do not exhibit much of a connection to those of the Expressionists. The Expressionist films are noted for having highly stylized visuals and gothic motifs, something his films are lacking. The only obvious connection, *Nosferatu*, is a symbolic gesture that is not in any way representative of the remainder of his films. The tendency of critics to discuss Herzog’s films as ‘Expressionist’ stems mainly from the same stereotypes that lead them to describe the films as responses to fascism.

Are these critics right in any sense? Herzog has complained that his films are quickly labeled as responses to Hitler. He rightly protests this. He complains that his films are quickly labeled as Expressionist. Again, he rightly protests this. He complains that his films are quickly labeled as Romantic. He protests, but is he correct for a third time?

Herzog has often discussed the inclination of critics to describe his films as being part of the legacy of the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century (135). He mentions a six-month period of time after a large exhibition of paintings by German Romantic Caspar David Friedrich was on display in Paris in which he felt overwhelmed by French critics’ questions about how his films were based in Romantic virtues (135). He has stated on multiple occasions that he does not consider himself an intellectual and that he pays no heed to so-called philosophical considerations (Corrigan 124). In this case, however, the overwhelming evidence may be on the side of the critics.

Romanticism is notoriously difficult to fully explain in a few brief soundbites. However, most can agree that a defining characteristic of the art of the movement is a
respect for nature approaching adoration. To even the casual observer this is obviously a
constant in Herzog’s films. The jungle itself is cast as a key foil to the heroes and anti-
heroes of La Soufrière (1977), Little Dieter Needs to Fly (1997), White Diamond (2004),
Rescue Dawn, and the aforementioned Aguirre: Der Zorn Gottes and Fitzcarraldo. The
magnificent rolling plains and spectacular mountain peaks of Bavaria in Herz aus Glas
(1976) and Jeder für Sich und Gott Gegen Alle (1974) do a lot more than provide eye-
pleasing backdrops to the action on screen. Furthermore, Herzog’s desert films, Fata
Morgana (1971) and Lessons of Darkness (1992), paint the Sahara as a harsh but sacred
and important place.

Romantic painters were not only known for revering nature, but for often giving it
human features. Nature seems to act as its own force while simultaneously providing a
mirror for the human subjects of the paintings that they share. This is exemplified in
Thomas Cole’s 1840-1841 series of paintings known as “The Voyage of Life.” This
four-painting series depicts the “Childhood,” “Youth,” “Manhood” and “Old Age” of
one man. In each, the subject is in a boat on a river, surrounded by richly detailed
landscapes, verdant and leafy in the first two eras of life, craggy and treacherous in
“Manhood,” and barren and serene in “Old Age.” It is often suggested that the transition
from the paradise of “Youth” to the menacing terrain of “Manhood” is representative of
man’s loss of innocence as he reaches adulthood and begins to learn more about himself.
While once he sat confidently in his boat on a tranquil river, he now stands on guard,
uneasy with the inner workings of his own mind.
Herzog certainly portrays nature in a similar way. The appearance of the landscape around his protagonists almost always can be used as a barometer of his subject’s inner state. How far does Herzog go in his anthropomorphization of his landscapes? He admits he “likes to direct [his] landscapes like he does actors and animals” (83). It definitely seems that Herzog, exactly like the Romantic painters, uses nature as a mirror to reflect the inner workings of his characters with whom he so deeply associates.
For example, in *Aguirre*, the jungle becomes more and more unwelcoming and feral the deeper Kinski and his conquistadors travel down the Amazon. Likewise, in his remake of Murnau’s *Nosferatu*, the audience is first introduced to the semi-protagonist Jonathan Harker (the legendary Klaus Kinski’s Count Dracula becomes the focus as the film moves on) in his idyllic hometown of Wismar, with its sleepy town square and tranquil canals. He is sent on an expedition to Count Dracula’s Transylvania castle (which may or may not actually exist) to sell him some real estate in Wismar. The backdrop of the craggy Carpathian Mountains and fast-running rivers of Transylvania reflects Harker’s decent deeper into his psyche in a manner almost exactly parallel to Cole’s depiction of man moving from youth to adulthood.

It should be noted that Herzog seems to approach nature with a little more apprehension than did the Romantics. While the brutal terrain of “Manhood” does acknowledge the wicked power of the wilderness, it seems that the more idyllic depictions, like in “Youth,” are more common. Furthermore, in the bleaker Romantic depictions of nature, there is often the presence of a more serene area somewhere in the frame. In “Manhood,” for example, the man can find some solace in the calmer dusky region in the center of the canvas. However, Herzog seems to see nature in a slightly more pessimistic light. In addition to the power of nature shown in works like *Aguirre*, Herzog provides a passionately cautionary tale in his recent *Grizzly Man* (2005).

In the film, Herzog criticizes Timothy Treadwell, the subject of the stylized documentary, for treating nature too much as if it were human. Viewers are introduced to Treadwell as a nature enthusiast who spends an extensive amount of time living with dangerous Grizzly Bears in Alaska during the summer months. He, in what is clearly a
recurring theme that will be addressed later, descends into what some might call madness over the course of the film, finally making the decision to live full-time with the bears. Almost as soon as this choice is made, Treadwell is mauled and eaten by a bear.

Was he in error to embrace nature as fully as he did? Herzog says so. Treadwell’s error was not in embracing nature, something with which Herzog seems to sympathize, but in his failure to recognize the untamable and deadly essence of the wild. Treadwell totally immersed himself in nature, and this was his undoing. Here Herzog’s sentiments appear to be most similar to the writers and artists of the early 20th century, the first Modernists, who themselves owed a great debt to the Romantics.

In particular, Herzog seems to be deeply influenced by Joseph Conrad’s 1902 novella “Heart of Darkness.” There is a recurring theme in his films that suggests Conrad’s vision of civilization and the constructs of society as a thin sheet of ice tenuously holding up mankind over a sea of chaos. This bedlam is part of the deep recesses of the mind, which is at the same time something intrinsically human and yet so disturbingly feral that it seems inhuman. When his characters shrug off or leave their culture for whatever reason, they are left with nowhere to go but nature. Treadwell gives up on everything related to society and tries to completely become one with nature. Nature, however, is simply too brutal for him, and he is quickly killed.

Similarly, as Aguirre commands his troops into the Amazon, his culture is abandoned. This is shown quite literally when he sets up a puppet king and renounces his Spanish regent. He claims the jungle as his new home. Again, Aguirre is simply a man and is unable to survive alone in nature. At the close of the film he has become insane
and is responsible for the death of all his men. He drifts down the Amazon waiting to for his own death.

Likewise, Fitzcarraldo refuses to pay heed to the opinions of those around him as he plans to lift his steamship over the mountain. His journey becomes more and more surreal the closer he gets to his destination. He accomplishes his goal by becoming a god-figure to the denizens of the jungle. Just as Conrad’s Africans represent an original undomesticated form of humanity, Fitzcarraldo’s South American Indians are the missing link between the anthropomorphized jungle and the protagonist. They are the human embodiment of the wild, a mirrored version of man seen in the jungle.

Very much in the tradition of the Romantics, the film, like all of Herzog’s work, is not a parable about man’s ability to control and conquer nature. On the contrary, after the boat clears the mountain, Fitzcarraldo realizes the destructive nature of the Indians, as they try to sacrifice the steamship to the jungle by sending it towards the deadly rapids. It is surely more by blind luck than cunning or talent that Fitzcarraldo makes it back to his home alive. It is even possible to interpret the last scene of the film, with Fitzcarraldo sailing triumphantly into his small jungle town surrounded by the opera stars he loves so dearly, as a hallucination, and to argue that the jungle claimed Fitzcarraldo just as it did Aguirre.

So, while Herzog’s anthropomorphization of nature is clearly akin to that of the Romantics, he seems to be more in line with Conrad’s notion of the jungle as a dark, deadly force lurking inside each of us.

Despite his early protests against being associated with Romanticism, Herzog concedes what he believes to be a small connection. He refers back to the paintings of
Friedrich and his propensity to paint landscapes. Friedrich, according to Herzog, did not paint landscapes for solely aesthetic reasons, but to explore “inner states of mind” (136). Herzog then goes on to admit that his intentions are in the same vein. The foggy dales immediately following the climax of The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser are not included just for their aesthetic beauty but also to explore the labyrinth of the human psyche. Can we ever come close to understanding ourselves? This clearly is not as small a concession as the director believes, as this inner-looking gaze is critical to both his works and those of the Romantics.

While Herzog’s films appear to have a connection with the works of Romantic painters in terms of their ethos, they also have some visual similarities that should not be ignored. The opening shot of Aguirre depicting the Spanish conquistadors marching down a precariously rocky path on a breathtaking mountain shrouded in fog seems to more than subtly evoke the same awe for the verdant as seen in Friedrich’s “Wandering above the Sea of Fog” (1818).
This image of a mysterious solitary figure, gazing pensively into a foggy countryside with his back to the audience, once again appears with the title card in the beginning of *Herz aus Glas* and in another scene in *Nosferatu* when Harker’s wife awaits his return.
Herzog shares even more with his Romantic brethren. Romantics are characterized by their deriding of the exclusive use of pure logic that defined the Enlightenment thinkers of the century prior. Romanticism was based more on emotion and sentiment than reason. In the words of early modern poet Charles Baudelaire, “Romanticism is precisely situated [not in] exact truth, but in a way of feeling.”

This definition fits the films of Herzog quite well. Throughout his career Herzog has often spoken of his disgust with films that try to encapsulate what he refers to as “the accountant’s truth.” These are the films born out of the tradition of cinéma-vérité, those that seek “truth” through a combination of ‘fly-on-the-wall’ direct cinema and stylized and scripted scenes.

Herzog finds himself more concerned with what he refers to as ‘the ecstatic truth,’ something that transcends the conventional vérité notion. This concept is not straightforward. He quite often refers to his early short film Die Große Ekstase des Bildschnitzers Steiner (The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner) (1974) to help viewers understand what he means by this term. “Look at faces of the ski jumpers as they fly through the air,” he says, “That is the ecstatic truth” (156).
It seems that there is a good deal of evidence suggesting that the Romantic movement has influenced Herzog’s films. While this does not seem to be a conscious decision by the director, the combination of his affinity for nature, the unmistakably similar aesthetic choices, and the preference for communicating through raw feeling rather than objective fact seem to indicate that Romantics have influenced Herzog in many ways. The critics that label Herzog’s films as Expressionist, responses to fascism, or fascist in-and-of-themselves, are misguided, but those who argue the link between the Romantics and Herzog have a strong case.
Chapter 2: Herzog the Auteur

“I dislike intensely even the concept of artists in this day and age” (139).

The previous chapter discussed many commonly perceived falsehoods about Werner Herzog, reaching the conclusion that Herzog is the spiritual successor of German Romanticism, but not Expressionism or Nazism as some have argued. This is important to keep in mind while trying to gain insight into Herzog’s films.

Yet to those who support a notion of authorial intent, even more important is to understand how Herzog views himself. Perhaps the most notable fact in this regard is how he consistently refuses to refer to himself an artist, or to even acknowledge that his films are works of art (Cronin 139). He has, on multiple occasions, stated that he is closer to a medieval cabinet-maker than a painter or writer. Herzog’s view of filmmaking is collaborative, without one omnipotent creative force orchestrating a film’s creation.

More specifically, the one detail that gives the most insight into Herzog’s views of his own work and of filmmaking in general is his distrust of the popular auteur theory. The French critic-turned-director Francois Truffaut first popularized the theory in its
(Truffaut 16). He explained that a director stakes his claim as an auteur through consistent use of settings, themes, and style, while imbuing his films with his personality. More simply, an auteur is a director who imprints some of his own thoughts and being onto each of his works. A film from a prototypical auteur is unmistakably his own. To followers of the theory, auteurs make up an upper echelon of filmmakers, and may be seen as the only ones making “legitimate cinema,” a somewhat elitist philosophy of cinema.

It would be something of an understatement to say that Herzog is not a believer in the auteur theory. When asked whether he considers himself an auteur, Herzog emphatically responded, “I am not an auteur and never have been” (Cronin 135). This ties directly in with Herzog’s refusal to acknowledge himself as an artist, or his films as art.

Herzog also holds a negative view of the filmmakers who most exemplify auteurism, specifically those coming out of the French New Wave. The archetypal French auteur is almost undoubtedly Jean-Luc Godard. Herzog is unambiguously not an admirer of Godard’s. Among other barbs, Herzog has described the films of the Frenchman to be “intellectual counterfeit money” (Cronin 138). To Herzog, the works of Godard are nothing more than indulgent over-stylization and pretentious self-promotion. One can further sense his distaste of the French auteurs when he discusses some directors he seems to admire, such as Andrei Tarkovsky. While Herzog appreciates the “beauty of [Tarkovsky’s] images,” he accuses the Russian of consciously altering his filmmaking approach to satisfy the French critics (139).
Yet ironically, there is more than a tenuous argument to be made that Herzog himself is an auteur. Here it would be worthwhile to flesh out our definition of just what an auteur is. Andrew Sarris, the film critic who is most responsible for the introduction of the auteur theory to America, laid out three requisites for a director to be considered an auteur in his 1962 essay “Notes on the Auteur Theory” (37).

First and least difficult to satisfy of the three is a possession of general technical filmmaking competence. All auteurs must have at least a basic mastery of the craft for obvious reasons.

Second, an auteur’s films must be instilled with a director’s personality. In other words, an auteur makes films in his own image, whether consciously or not. For example, the films of Jean-Luc Godard are very often described as cheeky, irreverent and sometimes self-important. It would not be surprising to see the director described in a similar manner. The late Robert Altman’s films are ubiquitously referred to as cynically witty, as was the director. It should come as no surprise to learn that both directors are unanimously considered auteurs.

Finally, Sarris argues that an auteur’s films must have a consistent subtext, or as Sarris terms it, an “interior meaning” (37). Two examples of directors who are well known for this consistency are Robert Flaherty and Frank Capra. The message of Flaherty’s documentaries (which almost certainly have served as an influence to Herzog) can best be summed up in the phrase “Man struggling with and triumphing over nature.” Capra’s feature films are characterized by a constant presence of an uplifting spiritual humanism. Not coincidentally, both directors are members of Sarris’ original pantheon of great auteurs (Sarris 10).
This brief discussion of auteurism begs another question: are all great directors auteurs? Academic film critic Lesley Brill says no. His primary example in this argument is John Huston (Brill 1). Huston, director of such classics as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *The African Queen* (1951), and *Asphalt Jungle* (1950), is as close to revered a name in filmmaking as there is. Yet Brill, among others, fails to award Huston the coveted title of auteur (Sarris 156).

Brill’s primary issue with Huston is his lack of consistent themes and settings. According to Brill, from *Fat City* (1972) to *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951) to *Moby Dick* (1956), there is really not much in the way of unifying themes holding Huston’s films together. So, while it has been established that many consider Herzog a great director, he is not automatically an auteur. He must, of course, still satisfy Sarris’ three criteria.

Though this essay will attempt to objectively analyze Herzog’s potential auteurhood, this feat obviously is impossible in the truest sense. All of Sarris’ criteria are subjective. Even the ‘easiest’ to judge, a director’s technical competence, is in the eye of the beholder. Just what is technical competence? To the untrained eye, a film like John Cassavetes’ *Shadows* (1958) seems woefully amateurish. Yet Sarris, while not totally embracing the actor-director, refers to Cassavetes’ directing “talent” (209).

Furthermore, since film and art in general are so open to personal interpretation, it may not be fair to fail anyone for his first requisite. Of course there are standard conventional filmmaking rules, such as the 180-degree rule and the theory of continuity editing, but widely acclaimed directors have been breaking these since the day they were
established. I am not sure anyone could argue that Stan Brakhage or Maya Daren did not have a mastery of the craft despite their at-best casual application of these rules.

So it may seem fruitless to judge directors on this criterion. But instead of just abandoning Sarris’ first benchmark, it could prove worthwhile to give it a bit of refinement. For reasons already stated, “technical competence” is not exactly the most appropriate term. It would seem better to ask whether a director was successful in transferring his vision from a theoretical idea to a fleshed out celluloid film. If a director has enough skill to bring his ideas to life as he intended them, he can be considered a technical master of the medium. Of course, this is not a perfect tool, but it is certainly more accurate than Sarris’ original proposal. It might even be the case that this is what Sarris originally intended, though he could have been more specific.

Are Herzog’s films proper representations of his original visions? Herzog has stated that Aguirre, the Wrath of God was the first film he tried to make for a wide commercial audience (Cronin 76). While upon initial release the film was a commercial failure, this seems to have been due more to poor studio planning than any fault of Herzog’s. The film was shown on a German television network in its entirety on the same night of its theatrical release, which is not quite the best business model for getting audiences to see a movie in theaters. However, today Aguirre is seen as one of Herzog’s most accessible films, which is exactly what he intended, while still following the principle of art for art’s sake (77).

It is perhaps a bit difficult to analyze how well Herzog’s vision translated onto the screen in an aesthetic sense, something that would be quite easy for a more visually-obsessive director like a Lynch or a Godard. For one, it is impossible to determine just
what Herzog’s original visions ever were, as he uses no storyboards, and has left behind very little pre-production notes outside his original scripts. Furthermore, Herzog attests that he is completely unconcerned with aesthetic stylization (107).

Therefore, to see if Herzog’s vision transfers to the screen, we must rely on his own statements. Without beating around the bush, he has directly stated that he has not been disappointed with the way any of his films has turned out (299). Not a perfect test to be sure, but we must take this to say that Herzog generally believes his films are, at the least, decent representations of his original intentions.

Adding further evidence, and further confounding Herzog’s statements against auteur theory is the title of Erwin Keusch’s biographical film of the director, titled *I am My Films* (1979). Herzog’s connection to his films runs so deep that he equates them with his own being. This is not a sentiment he later altered. He recently uttered a slightly revised version: “People know me by my films” (302).

We now move to Sarris’ second criterion, regarding the personality of an auteur’s films. Herzog clearly passes this test. From watching only a handful of the director’s films, an audience would have a good understanding of Herzog’s worldview. One could conclude that despite Herzog’s claims of not understanding the term, he has a rich sense of irony, a general mistrust of civilization and an undying optimism.

As is not uncommon among filmmakers, Herzog projects a part of himself onto each of his protagonists. Herzog calls this relationship one of “sympathetic understanding.” The almost complete lack of female protagonists in Herzog’s films is a result of these projections. This character-director relationship reached its apex, on a few levels (one of them almost literal), with the character of Fitzcarraldo.
When Herzog began production on *Fitzcarraldo* in the late seventies, he originally cast two-time Oscar-winner Jason Robards for the title role of Brian Sweeney “Fitzcarraldo” Fitzgerald. However, after a few weeks of filming, Robards became dangerously ill and had to return to America. When Robards’ doctors forbade his return to the Peruvian set, the entire film was in jeopardy.

It was at this point that Herzog seriously considered taking on the character of Fitzcarraldo himself. Herzog considers himself a capable actor, and he has appeared in very significant roles in some of his documentaries, notably *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner* and *Grizzly Man*. The story of Fitzcarraldo can be read as an allegory for Herzog’s entire mindset and career, so the director playing the role would not have been a stretch by any means. After much deliberation, Herzog offered the role to his legendary partner and foil, Klaus Kinski. While Kinski was extremely excited about his reunion with Herzog, it came as something of a surprise, as both parties had sworn not to work together after well-publicized spats on set during their first three collaborations.

While the plot of *Fitzcarraldo* is a bit convoluted, as two-and-a-half-hour epics usually are, the message is ultimately very simple. Fitzcarraldo, a down-on-his-luck opera aficionado wants to tap high-yielding rubber trees in a dangerous area of the Amazon in order to raise funds to build an opera house in his adoptive jungle city. However, the unclaimed rubber is surrounded by deadly rapids, and the only way Fitzcarraldo is able to access it is to pull his gargantuan steamship over a small mountain between two rivers.
Fitzcarraldo’s obsession drives him to extraordinary, seemingly impossible lengths to achieve his goals. Herzog is exactly the same. Fitzcarraldo obsesses over opera, Herzog over finding new ‘images.’

There is even more evidence to support the hypothesis that Fitzcarraldo is Herzog’s on-screen avatar. The obvious analogy suggests that what moving the steamship over the mountain is to Fitzcarraldo, Herzog’s daredevil filmmaking is to the director. Yet we need not even be so abstract.

After Herzog’s relative mainstream successes of the seventies, Twentieth Century Fox was quite interested in producing *Fitzcarraldo*. However, they were set on using a model boat for the pivotal scene, and film portions of the movie on a sound stage, something Herzog completely refused to do (172). For the production of the film, despite the stern warnings from studio executives, producers, and even engineers, Herzog insisted on the Herculean task of hauling Fitzcarraldo’s ship over the mountain.

Though Herzog would be more likely to attribute his success to “the weightlessness of dreams against the burden of reality,” he managed to pull the boat over the mountain through careful planning, a large cheap labor force of natives, and a good deal of luck, creating one of the most powerful and lasting cinematic images of the decade (175).
Herzog establishes deep connections with his protagonists in each of his films, and Fitzcarraldo is just one example. His films are admittedly autobiographical in many ways (69). Recognizing this, long-time collaborator and cameraman Jorg Schmidt-Reitwein has gone so far as to (only half-joking) say that Herzog should skip the stressful casting process and just play each of his protagonists himself (69).

Herzog’s heroes and anti-heroes have run the gamut from a never-say-die prisoner-of-war to a nineteenth-century slave trader to a mystic soothsayer to a tortured vampire. Yet despite these surface level differences, there are a few threads that connect all these characters. The most unifying aspect uniting every single Herzogian character is their shared sense of isolation from mainstream society.

Aguirre is a friendless and solitary conquistador, thousands of miles from his homeland and all civilization. Nosferatu is a vampire. Stroszek is a simple German living in America, where he cannot communicate with the locals. Cobra Verde is the
only white man for thousands of miles and is a slave trader, someone not warmly welcomed by the African tribes around him. Fini Straubinger, the wonderful subject of *The Land of Silence and Darkness* (1971), is a woman blind and deaf since her childhood. Herzog has described Straubinger as a reference point not only for his work but his approach to life. One of the more extreme examples of the protagonist as outsider is Kaspar Hauser, a man-child raised in complete seclusion from culture and language in a tower before being released, alone, into the late nineteenth-century world.

This sense of separation is a clear projection of Herzog’s own background. Herzog is a true outsider filmmaker. His styles and techniques obviously do not fit in with mainstream Hollywood or even the standard conventions (which certainly do exist) of the art house circuit. He is even hesitant to call himself a New German Filmmaker (Cronin 32). Herzog sees himself as independent of this camp, and he did not sign and does not subscribe to the Oberhausen Manifesto, the doctrine loosely governing the movement. According to Herzog, he has always been an outsider, even in childhood (Cronin 7). Though he had some close friends, he preferred to spend his time alone, exploring the wilderness around him.

Herzog’s films take on his personality in other ways as well. As was mentioned earlier, despite his protests that he has no idea what the term means, he is noted for his rich sense of irony. To quickly cite a few examples of irony in his films, Aguirre proclaims that he is the lord and master of the jungle and of nature as he is being decidedly unraveled by it. Stroszek, the protagonist from Herzog’s 1977 collaboration with Bruno S., is left for dead, penniless in the richest nation in the world. Finally, the
entire cast of *Even Dwarves Started Small* are defeated by their own creations, grotesquely sized everyday objects.

Figure 9. One of the most effective visual examples of the absurdly large objects from Herzog’s *Dwarves*

It certainly seems then that Herzog’s films are projections of his personality. His characters span every imaginable location, temperament and background, but they are united by their shared sense of not being part of their larger community. His frequent use of irony depicts a dimension of Herzog’s personality.

This takes us to Sarris’ third criterion, the necessity for an auteur’s films to possess consistent “interior meaning.” The level of difficulty in determining an auteur’s ethos from his films varies greatly. It is difficult to summarize a 40-year film career in a few sentences without being reductive, so of course there will be exceptions to each of these generalizing statements. Yet it seems fair to say that Herzog’s films exude a sense of 19th century naturalism and dry cynicism.

However, the ultimate subtext seems to rest in an uncompromising obsession with obsessions. From Fitzcarraldo to the woodcarver Steiner, Herzog’s characters exist only
in and for their obsessions, and derive their existence from them. The clichéd phrasing of what Herzog ultimately seems to be saying is “follow your dreams.” Yet this is a bit troublesome, as Herzog’s characters are rarely in a positive state by the end of their films. Aguirre and Stroszek (of Signs of Life) are insane, Fitzcarraldo and Stroszek (the titular character from the 1977 film) are broke, Nosferatu and Kaspar Hauser are dead, and so on.

Yet to Herzog, they seem to have made the right choices. To have not immersed themselves in their obsessions would have been to not exist at all, or to just wade in a shallow existence not even worth living.

Herzog’s personal obsession, and another subtext of his works, is his insistence on “finding new images.” He sees society’s current batch, those seen on our postcards and billboards, as inadequate and hackneyed. To continue with these images would doom us to “die out like the dinosaurs” (66).

But just what are these images that Herzog wants to capture? Harkening back to the subject of an earlier essay, Herzog seeks to film “the ecstatic truth,” that which transcends a normal objective understanding. This seems to be most exemplified in the emotions and expressions of those obsessive characters at the pinnacle moment of their passion. Steiner during his ski-jumps and Fitzcarraldo leaping and celebrating as his steamship slowly starts to move up the mountain are two obvious examples. To Herzog, images of this experience are woefully underrepresented in our culture. Because of the concept’s extremely transcendental nature, it is difficult to explain it much further. However, the important thing here is that he has a unique, clearly-stated and obvious goal that ties his films together.
From this brief analysis it certainly seems that Werner Herzog qualifies as an auteur. His technical mastery of the craft certainly will not place him as one of the all-time greats in this respect – a disenchanted crew-member on Rescue Dawn referred to his filming style as “hasty and amateurish”– yet his filmmaking is competent enough to allow him to clearly project his unique vision to the screen, which is a truer test of auteur-ship (newyorker.com).

Herzog’s films not only do a great job of reflecting his vision, but also his unique personality. One could watch a handful of Herzog’s films and have a better personal sense of the director than someone who has watched an hour-long interview with him. This is another true mark of an auteur.

Finally, Herzog has a clear goal that unifies all of his films. His obsession with what he calls “the ecstatic truth” has led him to craft films that yearn to capture his transcendental vision of what it is to be human. He finds the current crop of images that society uses and reuses ad nauseam to be at best hackneyed and at worst completely meaningless. Through his films Herzog hopes to create lasting images that go beyond simple storytelling. Again, Herzog passes this test for being an auteur with flying colors.

Of course there is no objective test to measure if a director is an auteur or not. The term is highly controversial and debates on whether this or that filmmaker is an auteur often seem to be based on arbitrary judgments. It would not be completely out of line to also suggest that such debates are completely meaningless, as of course it makes no real difference whether a director is an auteur or not. However there is no dispute that the theory truly does grant a unique insight into the unifying themes of a given director’s oeuvre. By treating Herzog as an auteur, his obsession with “the ecstatic truth” becomes
visible, and we are able to get close to a first-hand view of what really makes the director tick.
“Kinski and I completed each other in a strange way” (288).

It is impossible to discuss the films of Werner Herzog without mentioning the infamous Klaus Kinski. Their legacies will forever be entwined, as Kinski starred in Herzog’s first big international hit, *Aguirre: Der Zorn Gottes* and what is now arguably his most well-known film, *Fitzcarraldo*. Though Kinski appeared in over 180 films, he will undoubtedly be best remembered for his five collaborations with Herzog. Part of this fame and infamy stems from the quality, range and epic scope of the films. However, at least an equal part of Kinski’s legacy stems from his almost mythical temper and his well-publicized disputes with Herzog.

In short, though he was an extremely powerful and effective actor, Kinski was a flamboyant egomaniac prima donna, who broke dozens of film contracts in the midst of shooting (Cronin 291). Herzog’s self-obsession has always been more subtle, preferring an understated form of self-promotion. There are cases to be made that both men were at least slightly insane.¹

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¹ To this day Herzog is fond of declaring his clinical sanity in interviews.
Their was not a relationship that should have lasted, and on multiple occasions both men swore to never work with one another again (284). Yet it seems that despite their on and off-set spats, both realized the importance of the other and what they could manage to accomplish together. As Roger Ebert put it, “[Herzog and Kinski were] two men bound together in love and hate…who created extraordinary work” (Lawson).

Kinski, eighteen years Herzog’s elder, was born in the Free City of Danzig, a predominantly German-speaking autonomous city-state surrounded by Poland and bordering the Baltic Sea, in 1926. After the Nazis annexed Danzig along with Poland, the young Kinski was conscripted into battle. Records of his military service are contradictory, though it appears that he was not fighting wholeheartedly with the Nazis as he deserted and sought out British forces to surrender to in the Netherlands in 1944 (My Best Fiend).

His time spent in the military seemed to make a strong impression on the actor, as many of his early films had strong anti-war sentiments. Ironically, he usually seemed to be cast as the characters that embodied all he despised about war, often playing the strict by-the-book officer with more concern for the rules than human life.

More than a decade after the war, Herzog and his family returned to the city of his birth, Munich. There they rented a small room in a run-down boarding house. Another tenant of the building was none other than Klaus Kinski. As seen in My Best Fiend (1999), shortly after the Stipetics (Herzog’s surname at birth) moved in, Kinski threw one of his legendary tantrums. As part of his finale, he locked himself in the floor’s only bathroom for two full days. When he finally emerged, the toilet and sink were
completely pulverized. Kinski had smashed them with his bare fists. “You could sift through the remains with a tennis racket,” Herzog recounts in the film.

Though Herzog was only a teenager, he knew his future from that moment on. “I knew it was my destiny to make films and his to act in them” (*My Best Fiend*). Like all Herzog quotes, there is really no assurance he ever said this. Regardless, the authenticity of the quote matters very little, as it encapsulates their relationship so well.

The personal and working troubles between Herzog and Kinski were, as mentioned, well documented. Kinski was known for his wild, erratic and self-obsessed behavior. As rumor has it, once, after performing in a stage play, Kinski threw a lit candelabra into the crowd, burning down the theater. His motivation? He did not believe he had received enough applause for his “epochal” performance.

Herzog has been accused of some self-obsession himself (such as his quote in Les Blank’s *Burden of Dreams* (1982), “We all seek new images, the difference is that I can articulate them.”), and perhaps it is justified, but his narcissism was always much more subtle and reserved than Kinski’s. If Herzog had been more of an active egotist their relationship would most likely have been too volatile to last as long as it did. As it was, the quiet, focused Herzog and the eccentric, tempestuous Kinski got into their share of notable feuds.

Perhaps the most famous of these conflicts was on their first set, in the heart of the Amazon, during *Aguirre*. As was an extremely common occurrence according to Herzog, Kinski showed up on set one morning without knowing any of his lines. As was also Kinski’s normal course of action, he attempted to blame his troubles on a scapegoat. Kinski found a low-level grip and complained to Herzog that he was making noise and
distracting him. Kinski then insisted Herzog fire the grip. Due to crew solidarity, and the fact that the grip did not actually do anything wrong, Herzog refused. Kinski exploded (88).

His tirade took him to a small canoe the crew had been using to haul their equipment. Kinski got in the boat and said he was abandoning the film. Knowing Kinski’s reputation, Herzog knew there was a very real chance the actor was actually leaving. It would have been impossible to find a replacement, as they were hundreds of miles from anything resembling civilization. In perhaps the defining moment of their relationship, Herzog took action. He threatened to shoot and kill his actor before turning the gun on himself. “[I told him] he would only make it as far as the next bend in the river before he had eight bullets in his head. The ninth would be for me” (91).

Later Herzog insisted he did not even have a gun on set. Whether he was telling the truth or was merely trying to do damage-control, their relationship reached nearly murderous apexes on several other occasions. Herzog claims that shortly after the shooting of Woyzeck (1979), their third film, he traveled to Kinski’s house with the intention of burning it down with Molotov cocktails only to be turned away by Kinski’s massive German Shepard. When they next met face to face, at the 1980 Telluride Film Festival, Herzog told Kinski about the incident, expecting him to throw a trademark tantrum. According to Herzog, Kinski appeared surprisingly calm and even seemed a bit relieved. He then admitted he came close to hiring goons to kill the director (My Best Fiend).

Film critics have long debated the nature of this strange relationship. Though Herzog/Kinski is just one in a long line of legendary director/actor tandems
(Kurosawa/Mifune, Scorsese/De Niro, Hitchcock/Stewart, Ford/Wayne, Costa-Gavras/Montand, etc), their pairing is extraordinary because their relationship was so consistently tumultuous. For every single Herzog/Kinski production, one can read about an absolutely mind-boggling number of Kinski explosions or Herzog threats.

Herzog and Kinski were perfectly symbiotic at their best, completely self-destructive at their worst. Neither “needed” the other, per se, though without a doubt both benefited from their collaboration. An actor known to virtually no one outside of Germany and a director known by even less, Kinski and Herzog produced *Aguirre* in 1972, catapulting them to new levels of notoriety.

Herzog and Kinski’s partnership went beyond a typical director and actor pairing. Herzog fully projects himself on-screen with Kinski as his avatar. While this could possibly be said for many directors and their actors, Kinski’s madmen and bandits paralleled Herzog’s life in quite astounding ways. It could be said that Herzog used Kinski as his on-screen doppelganger, to explore his demons and find those new images he treasured so dearly. Naturally, Herzog denies this notion, saying that while he considers himself close to Kinski’s characters, they are no more his alter egos than those of his other films (289).

This is a tough sell. While Herzog may feel a connection to the anti-heroes of *Even Dwarves Started Small* and Bruno S. in *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* and *Stroseck*, for example, these characters seem to more closely espouse the troubles and difficulties created by our society. They simply seem much less personal to Herzog.

The question that needs to be asked is, with all the strife and turmoil these two put each other through, why did they remain a working partnership? One could easily
imagine the two breaking it off after the *Aguirre* gun incident, or the admitted double-attempted homicide. Yet the two had a magical chemistry, something that is becoming increasingly rare in today’s filmmaking world.

While to John Ford, the Duke was the quintessential cowboy, the morally ambiguous tough guy, and Mifune was Kurosawa’s worldly and wise samurai, one gets the impression that Kinski was not just a consistent character to Herzog. This is not to say that there are no bonds linking Aguirre to Nosferatu to Woyzeck to Fitzcarraldo to da Silva. For example, all five of Kinski’s characters were outsiders; in the most extreme example, Nosferatu wasn’t even human.

Furthermore, all five had impossible dreams. Aguirre declared the majority of South America, “New Spain,” to be his kingdom, and sought to capture the mythical city of El Dorado. Nosferatu wanted no more than to regain his humanity, or at the least, to be able to die. Woyzeck struggles with the oppression of poverty and fights unsuccessfully to rise above the mockery of the bourgeoisie. Fitzcarraldo is one of the few Herzog/Kinski characters to experience a measure of triumph, as he hauls his steamship over the mountain, though he is unable to build his opera house. Finally, da Silva wanted not just to survive under impossible circumstances, but to conquer the African kingdom around him.

Yet these connections are not the fullest extent of the Herzog/Kinski character relationship. While of course the characters will forever be associated with Kinski, they are also the children of Herzog. Not simply because he, in two instances, *Aguirre* and

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2 Despite the ongoing disdain between Herzog and Godard, when thinking about Nosferatu’s dreams one has to be reminded of Jean-Paul Belmondo’s line in Godard’s *Breathless*, “[My dream is] to become immortal, and then to die.”
Fitzcarraldo, wrote the characters\(^3\), but because of the way all directors, and Herzog in particular, relates to his subjects.

Herzog once said he could not make a film about someone with whom he did not feel any connection (289). This seems to be especially true with the Kinski characters. By analyzing any of Kinski’s characters in these films, one is given a unique perspective into the workings of Herzog’s psyche.

Despite the more than two decades since the blow-ups on the set of Cobra Verde (1987), Herzog still seems a bit hesitant to completely embrace his memory of Kinski. Just the title of his documentary on Kinski, Mein Liebster Fiend, translated to My Best Fiend, grants remarkable insight into the posthumous state of Herzog/Kinski relations.

While Herzog still harbors some ill will towards his late star, deep down he does not seem to regret working with Kinski. In a recent interview Herzog was asked whether he missed Kinski. If Herzog’s goal is to find new images, his mantra is to deny everything. He brusquely stated that “[his] relationship with Kinski ended years before his death [in 1991]” (293). In a move not unlike the one perfected by Herzog’s friend and protégé Errol Moris, the interviewer remained silent and did not pose a follow-up question. Herzog continued to talk. After several dozen stream-of-consciousness style sentences, Herzog eventually admitted to what the interviewer was looking for: “Maybe I do miss him. Yes, now and then I do miss him.”

Irrelevant to their personal relationship, the connection between Kinski’s on-screen characters and Herzog’s life are very real, and, in some cases, impossible to

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\(^3\) Nosferatu was obviously originally the brainchild of Bram Stoker, later adapted by Murnau, Woyzeck was from Georg Buchner’s similarly titled play and da Silva was based on a Bruce Chatwin novel. Aguirre was a real conquistador, though the film and his character are highly fictionalized.
ignore. Obviously, the first and foremost example has to be Brian Sweeny Fitzgerald, or as he was known to the South American city folk, Fitzcarraldo.

*Fitzcarraldo* is an obvious metaphor for Herzog’s career. The aspiring rubber baron’s dream is to build an opera house in the jungle city Iquitos. He strives to bring a new form of art to a society that has never experienced it. In addition to Herzog’s own love of opera⁴, his stated goal is to provide the world with new images of culture. Fitzcarraldo hopes opera will be illuminating to the people of Iquitos, just as Herzog hopes Western culture will be revitalized by his new images.

![Herzog mirroring Kinski’s on-screen pose in *Fitzcarraldo*](image)

Fitzcarraldo and Herzog share obvious connections in the obstacles that they face and the way in which they tackle them. Those who knew of Fitzcarraldo’s plan to haul his ship over the mountain mocked him. Likewise, in Les Blank’s *Burden of Dreams* he interviews the original engineer of *Fitzcarraldo* who quit the project after realizing Herzog fully intended to realize his plan of shooting the scene without using special effects or modern machines. “I am not going through with this…[I’d say] there’s a seventy-five percent chance everyone dies.”

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⁴ At the request of Wagner’s grandson, Herzog has directed operatic forms of some of his overtures.
The connection between the character of Fitzcarraldo and Herzog was more fully fleshed out in the previous essay. In the same way that Herzog established the direct link between himself and his films he also links himself and Kinski. This of course extends beyond *Fitzcarraldo*. While Fitzcarraldo is most likely intended to be seen as a positive character, one whom audiences can ‘root for,’ some of the other Herzog-Kinski characters were clearly not.

Nosferatu is the obviously ‘evil’ example. A millennia-old vampire who kills the strapping, brave, young businessman to whom audiences had the first half-hour of the film to relate, and who subsequently stalks the protagonist’s wife, is quickly and justifiably written off as a simple villain. So to follow the idea that Kinski was a medium for Herzog raises some puzzling questions. While Herzog of course denies all claims that Kinski is his on-screen double, the story behind the production of *Nosferatu* is rather revealing.

*Nosferatu* was released in 1979, after the recognition and embrace of the *Neue Kino* movement by cinephiles worldwide. It was addressed earlier how Herzog intended the film to be a symbol of German Cinema’s re-found “legitimacy.” Criticized, and rightfully so, for the bland melodramas made for decades after the rise of the Nazis, the German Cinema’s resurgence was embraced by critics worldwide with one notable exception.

Herzog once told of an event at the 1982 Cannes Film Festival, after the premier of *Fitzcarraldo* (37). There was an official celebration of the German Cinema Renaissance being held in the Palais, the main theater at the festival, with film clips being
shown, speeches given and so on. As he was a prominent star of the movement, Herzog was in attendance.

Shortly after the start of the event, Herzog said he heard loud booing coming from the back of the theater. He turned to find the detractors to be none other than the German film critics. This odd form of national self-loathing seems to have influenced Nosferatu. Of course, while this incident at Cannes happened three years after the release of Nosferatu, it is perfectly representative of German critics’ hesitancy to embrace their new domestic filmmakers.

![Figure 12. Kinski as Nosferatu as Herzog.](image)

So what does this have to do with Herzog supposedly projecting himself into this most quintessentially evil character? Herzog’s Nosferatu must be viewed in the context of Murnau’s classic expressionist version. Murnau’s is one of the best examples of the original German Expressionist Cinema movement. It is lauded by many, including Herzog, as being the greatest German film of all time (151). Essentially, the story of Nosferatu is distinctly German.

It seems possible that Herzog is re-telling the tale not through his own perspective but through that of Germany. This may help account for the fact that the film is so highly stylized in the expressionist-horror genre, something quite uncommon for Herzog. In this
reading, the “director” and the audience immediately vilify Nosferatu as a sickening monster. Yet by the film’s end, the audience feels more sympathy than disgust or hatred, as the vampire is seen to be a lonely victim of his nature. He kills not out of sport or bloodlust, but merely out of a will to survive.

This, in a somewhat abstract way, parallels Herzog’s approach to filmmaking. He has said that from the first time he saw a movie he knew he was going to be a filmmaker, and that he could not now picture himself in any other occupation (Cronin 3). He is driven to make films by his very nature. While his filmmaking has not killed anyone, his disruptive and obsessive approach certainly seem to rub some the wrong way.

Since his early films like *Even Dwarves Started Small*, Herzog has had his critics in Germany. Herzog sees their main complaint to be about his unwillingness to conform to the conventions of either Hollywood or *Neue Kino*. He explains, “[German critics] are always coming towards my work with plans for certain sorts of ‘prefabricated houses’ already in their minds, and for some reason they expect that my work should follow exactly the pattern of those prefabricated mobile homes which they happen to have sticking somewhere in their brains” (Corrigan 122).

One of the other more common complaints lobbied against him is that he is a fascist, and not just in the sense that he is a difficult director to work with. This, as has been analyzed in a previous essay, is not the case. Mirroring the way Herzog is often unfairly misunderstood, the audience begins *Nosferatu* with a hatred of the title character. By the film’s end, the audience may not like Nosferatu, but they at least seem to have a

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5 Though, arguably his filmmaking indirectly killed Kinski, and there have been unsubstantiated claims that some natives died on the set of *Fitzcarraldo*, I stand by my claim.
better understanding of him. In this reading, it seems possible that Nosferatu was intended as a plea to German critics to reduce their vilification of the director.

Cobra Verde, Herzog and Kinski’s final collaboration, is often slighted as the worst of their five films. Though the film lacks the cohesiveness and polish of Aguirre or Fitzcarraldo, it is certainly not lacking in Kinski’s intensity or Herzog’s eye for powerful imagery. After the unnecessarily long and clumsy first act, Kinski’s da Silva, a notorious Brazilian bandit nicknamed “Cobra Verde”\(^6\) is sent to his presumed death after he is forcibly conscripted into becoming a slave trader on the west coast of Africa. This was to be an especially difficult task for da Silva, as Brazil had outlawed slave trading years before.

![Kinski attacking Herzog on the set of Cobra Verde](image)

Figure 13. Kinski attacking Herzog on the set of Cobra Verde

Again, one can draw some parallels between da Silva and Herzog’s career. Just like da Silva, Herzog was a maverick, well known and not without his enemies in his home country. Da Silva was forced out of a normal livelihood and made to make an unconventional living, one that involved a bit more risk than the rewards of the lifestyle

\(^6\) In their five films, only once, in Woyzeck, did Kinski play a German. He was Spanish in Aguirre, Transylvanian in Nosferatu, Irish in Fitzcarraldo and Brazilian-Portuguese in Cobra Verde.
would dictate. Herzog similarly refuses to work within any sort of system, be it Hollywood or Cinéma Vérité or the mainstream German mode.

His obsession with capturing the disruptive power of nature has led him to shoot his films in a way that is much more difficult than what other filmmakers would deem necessary. Of course this refers to the steamship in Fitzcarraldo, but also other films, such as La Soufriere, a documentary about imminent and unavoidable disaster. Herzog insisted on shooting on the all but evacuated island of Guadalupe in order to find the one man who refused to leave it after all experts pointed to an impending eruption of the island’s large volcano. While the volcano eventually did not erupt, if it had, it is extremely likely it would have been Herzog’s final film.

Herzog and Kinski’s relationship was obviously an unusual one. Despite their nearly fatal feuds, they “completed each other” as Herzog put it (288). While Kinski was a medium for Herzog to project his passionate personality on-screen, the late actor was also able to infuse his characters with his own essence, creating some of the more intriguing anti-heroes ever seen. Pushing the boundaries of cinema from their first film to their last, the duo will forever be remembered as one of the more compelling and exciting in film history.
“For me, the boundary between fiction and ‘documentary’ does not exist; they are all just films” (240).

Werner Herzog is somewhat unique as a director in that he has created not only the fictional feature films for which he is best known, but also many documentaries. One of the more common general assessments of his work overall is that he “blurs the line between documentary and fiction film” (Cronin 238). While, as we have already seen, most truisms and one-liners about Herzog tend to be false, this one is quite spot on. Going even further, it can be said that Herzog’s films tend to blur the line between fiction and reality.

Most tend to point to the post-Kinski era of Herzog’s career as the time in which he turned to documentary filmmaking. In reality, Herzog had been creating off-beat documentary shorts since the 1960s, almost as early as he began directing. After his first film, *Herakles* (1962), an experimental short without dialogue, and *Spiel im Sand* (1964), a film about chickens that allegedly only Herzog himself has seen, his next films were *Die Beispiellose Verteidigung der Festung Deutschkreuz* (1967) and *Letzte Worte* (1968).
The former is a forgettable story about boys breaking into an abandoned fortress and playing war. However, *Letzte Worte* is a compelling tale of an old, crazed Cretan man who refuses to speak, except to remind others that he refuses to speak.

In terms of subject, editing, feel and tone, *Letzte Worte* seems to be the first real “Herzog” movie. The short is mesmerizingly odd, with many characters repeating their lines ad nauseam. “We found him over there, we brought him back. We found him over there, we brought him back,” and so on. Herzog and cameraman Thomas Mauch shot the film in a distinctly documentary style. The only shots in the fourteen-minute short are the aforementioned talking head style interviews, footage of the subject playing the lyre and stunning photography of a decaying abandoned island village that the man used to call home.

Herzog often talks about the dangers of searching too hard for meaning in films, his and otherwise. The power of films sometimes exists as an indescribable force that is difficult to break down into easy to digest symbols and meanings. On this note, *Letzte Worte* seems to lack a pointed significance, but the haunting shots of the island village, combined with the repeated dialogue and the man’s hypnotic lyre playing, make the film Herzog’s first noteworthy achievement. It also laid the groundwork of his approach to documentary filmmaking.

*Letzte Worte* was made in 1968, around the apex of the Cinéma Vérité movement and its manipulated documentary style could lead some to call the film a Cinéma Vérité film. However, and Herzog would be the first to point this out, there is notable reason to exclude the film from the movement.
Vérité films, though often manipulated, attempt to convey, on their surface level, truth. It could be said that the motto of Cinéma Vérité is “truth through agitation.” Vérité filmmakers would often stage interviews and set-ups in their films. They would intentionally provoke their subjects in an effort to find what they believed to be their true states. A quintessential film in this style is Shirley Clarke’s controversial *A Portrait of Jason* (1967). For nearly two hours, and through only one stationary camera set-up, Clarke interviews (though “interrogates” might be a more appropriate word) and berates her subject, Jason Holliday. What begins as an intimate question and answer session soon progresses into a full-on mental breakdown.

Herzog, among others, takes issue with this style of filmmaking. He specifically refers to Cinéma Vérité as the search for “the accountant’s truth” (301). It seems his critique lies in the notion that Vérité fails to capture what its subjects are like in reality. Even a more passive form of Vérité known as Direct Cinema fails in this regard. When a camera is introduced and put before a subject, he or she is going to act differently than he or she would without the camera. We see not how people behave, but how they behave in front of a camera.

The agitation and provocation of Cinéma Vérité takes this even further. If all Direct Cinema gives us is a view of how people act in front of a camera, all Cinéma Vérité can give us is a view of how people act after being provoked and rattled in front of a camera.

The conclusion here is that it is impossible to truthfully film something’s nature if it knows it is being filmed. Short of a hidden voyeuristic approach, all that can be done is to fictionalize what is shot. If Vérité’s motto could be “truth through agitation,” Herzog’s
motto is “truth through fiction.” By juxtaposing standard documentary footage and style with fabricated story elements and staged interviews, Herzog believes he is able to attain what he calls “an ecstatic truth.”

This poetic notion supposes that through fictionalization one can bypass the problems of Vérité and Direct Cinema. The filmmaker is no longer trying to merely capture the truth of a subject, but to create it. Of course this can be very dangerous and in some cases could lead to a hideous ersatz mutation of truth. Yet, in the hands of Herzog, this vision comes to life.

At times his manipulations are obvious, such as the repeated dialogue in Letzte Worte. At other times, such as in The Land of Silence and Darkness, they are much more subtle. This film tells the story of Fini Straubinger, a deaf and blind woman who communicates through a fascinating tactile method. Words and ideas are conveyed to her by touching one’s finger to her palm and “spelling” out what is one wishes to say. Fini spends her days traveling throughout West Germany meeting with other deaf, blind and deaf-blind people. Despite her hardships she is a buoyant, inspiring woman with an unsinkable spirit. This amazing story is completely factual, and to the extent that a film can be unmanipulated, is not manipulated.

However, Herzog and Fini falsify their story slightly in the film’s introduction. Fini describes her early youth, when she had vision and hearing. She tells of a family outing when she saw a ski jumper flying though the air, mouth agape in joy. Fini describes this as a defining moment in her life, and what she sees in her mind whenever she feels satisfied.
Herzog aficionados might find Fini’s vision conveniently similar to the subject of an earlier Herzog documentary *Die Grosse Ekstase des Bildschnitzers Steiner*. This film follows a world-class ski jumper during an international competition and features stunning slow-motion shots of the athlete mid-jump, mouth open.

![Figure 15. Steiner in mid-leap.](image)

Herzog is often asked to explain his concept of the ecstatic truth. Harkening back to his warning about not over-analyzing and reducing films, he claims he cannot break down the term any further. It can only be vaguely described as being similar to the experience of ski jumping.

With this in mind, Fini’s description of the ski jumper supplements her warm spirit in a way that could not otherwise be captured on film. Despite her troubles she leads a full, satisfied life, and tries to bring this to others in her condition. Fini’s life and vocation are the ecstatic truth; Herzog’s interjection of the ski jumper story simply helps the audience appreciate this.\(^7\)

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\(^7\) It should be mentioned that Fini was completely complicit with Herzog and was not coerced or exploited as some might worry. Herzog explained what he wanted her to say and why and she was more than happy to oblige, feeling her story was more complete in this way (241).
Herzog has taken this approach of subtle manipulation in many other films, including the aforementioned *Die Grosse Ekstase des Bildschitzers Steiner*. In this film, Herzog, who begrudgingly appears on-screen to narrate the film, as was required of all German made-for-television documentaries at the time, embellishes the ski jumper Steiner’s feats to better convey the power of his actions.

Another example is *La Soufrière*, a documentary leading up to a supposed eruption of the titular volcano on Guadalupe. Herzog and a small crew risked their lives to travel to the island to interview a few men who had refused to evacuate.\(^8\) The film shows interviews with three different men, along with footage of the abandoned city and countryside.

While Herzog has not admitted to such, the men’s justifications for refusing to leave are so extreme that the audience has to assume manipulation. One man simply does not see the point in trying to escape death, as we will all die eventually. Another has taken it on himself to act as lord-protector of the wild animals of Guadalupe. Though refusing to evacuate will likely mean his death, he feels he must stay and maintain order. The third says he has given himself to God, and has no reason to fear death. The ecstatic truth here is each man’s solipsistic view of his place in the world. Completely at peace but entirely egocentric, these men are classic Herzogian anti-heroes.

While the addition of Fini’s ski jumper story, Herzog’s exaggerated claims in *Die Grosse Ekstase*, and the possibly staged interviews with the men of *La Soufrière* may make these films seem disingenuous, one must remember that Herzog was never trying to make accurate historical records. To Herzog, it is only ever permissible to stylize a fact

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\(^8\) Though they expected to find just the one man reported in the news story, they actually found three.
with the willingness of the subject (241). By shifting the audience’s perception of what is happening onscreen, and by presenting his stylizations as fact, he attempts to portray an authenticity of the world that cannot be captured with regular documentary or even Cinéma Vérité techniques.

In other instances, Herzog’s stylization and manipulation is much more overt. The most obvious examples of this are seen in Herzog’s desert films, *Fata Morgana* and *Lessons of Darkness*. The former was originally conceived to portray a record left by aliens after visiting our planet, while it seems that this idea was inverted for the latter film. *Fata Morgana* presents beautiful shots of the Sahara desert and its inhabitants, but in a very removed, very otherworldly manner. The film is broken into three distinct parts. The first is accompanied by a reading of the Mayan creation myth by Lotte Eisner, the preeminent German film historian.

![Fig. 16. One of the haunting images of *Fata Morgana*.](image)

Eisner tells us of a barren world, uninhabited by man or beast. The images on screen at first appear to back this up; all that is shown is a vast, formless desert. Yet soon after, the audience sees something seemingly floating on the horizon. Then the images

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9 For this reason *Mein Leibster Feind*, his film on Klaus Kinski, who was dead when Herzog made it, is one of Herzog’s most straightforward, linear films.
begin to contrast even more with Eisner’s narration. First we see wreckage of a downed plane, then a man walking far off in the distance. This serves to dissociate the audience from all preconceived notions. When the images and the narration match up, the audience is cut off from the modern world and is placed in a world at its genesis. Later, when the images betray this notion, the film appears to be showing a completely foreign and alien planet, only somewhat like our own.

The next two segments of Fata Morgana show either soliloquies by strange people, like a lizard wrangler who stalks his subjects for days, and an old, blind military man who hates radios, or grand tracking shots of desert villages and structures, accompanied by the sorrowful songs of Leonard Cohen. The result of this seemingly haphazard collage of sound and imagery is a truly exotic experience, taking the audience out of normal cinematic comfort zones and into an odd, profoundly alien place.

Herzog finally realized the ‘alien document’ concept with Lessons of Darkness. Shot in Kuwait in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War, the film presents more impressive shots of sweeping landscapes and extremely odd interviews in the minimalist style of Fata Morgana. Herzog’s narration alludes to the war, yet always maintains its alien perspective. According to the director, “not a single frame should be recognizable as our own planet” (248).

Lessons of Darkness opens with a quote attributed to Pascal: “The collapse of the stellar universe will occur – like creation – in grandiose splendor.” Yet the mathematician-philosopher never said it. The quote is entirely of Herzog’s creation (243). This pseudo-quote serves to elevate the film to a more poetic level. By opening with such a grand, cosmic prediction, the audience is put in a broader mindset. Though
the landscape of Kuwait is immediately recognizable to modern audiences, this quote and Herzog’s alien narration serve to take the film out of the realm of news reporting and into more ambitious territory, making a statement on the horrors of war and man’s destructive nature in general.

The keystone of the film is perhaps the shots of the oil derricks, still burning from the fighting only weeks earlier. In one particularly powerful scene, Herzog filmed two Western men relighting an extinguished derrick. According to the narration, they do so out of some inherent human drive for conflict. Their job was to put out the fires but once that was done, what were they to do?

*Fata Morgana* and *Lessons of Darkness* are some of the best examples of Herzog’s melding of fiction and documentary. The films are so stylized that while their manipulation is immediately obvious to the audience, they serve to alienate the locations and actions on-screen from their ‘real-life’ counterparts. This allows for Herzog to make films on a less topical level, while still shooting well-known places and events. Through this, his films strive for a more poetic goal.

Yet Herzog does not stop at infusing elements of fiction into his documentaries; he also adds components of documentaries into his feature works. Herzog claims that he does not make a distinction between documentary and fiction, and has referred to *Fitzcarraldo* as his best documentary (240).

Similarly, *Aguirre* is narrated as a historical film, a recreation of a real-life monk’s diary. It opens with a (fictionalized) informational card detailing the historical events leading up to the film. The first half-hour or so is told primarily from the monk’s perspective. It seems that Herzog hopes the audience will either forget this, or will not
care when the monk dies and the story continues. Despite the fact that both the monk, Brother Gaspar de Carvajal and Aguirre were real historical people, the events in the film are fabricated.

Herzog also appears to strive for a gritty documentary style in his critique of consumerist culture, *Stroszek*. A hard-luck story of a naïve German simpleton, played by the enigmatic Bruno S., who moves to America only to be cheated and swindled out of his possessions, the film’s grainy stock and harshly realistic story certainly seems like it could be straight out of the Direct Cinema movement.

Still, it initially seems puzzling that Herzog would classify *Fitzcarraldo* as a documentary. It has no obvious documentary characteristics like *Stroszek* and its historical background is even weaker than *Aguirre’s*. Yet *Fitzcarraldo* reaches documentary status (or at least Herzog’s definition of documentary status) through the process in which it was made.

In the early planning stages of *Fitzcarraldo*, when Warner Brothers caught word that the renowned director was going to make another epic with the legendary Klaus Kinski, they expressed interest in producing the film (176). Yet they stipulated that Herzog shoot the film’s central sequence, the steamship being hauled over the mountain, with a model on a soundstage. Herzog would have no part of this. To him, this would have been a pointless endeavor, and would have made *Fitzcarraldo* a completely worthless film. The power and majesty of *Fitzcarraldo* is in its reality. Everyone lined up to mock and doubt Herzog just as they do with Fitzcarraldo in the film. Yet both succeeded. Through this, and only through this, does the film capture exactly the “ecstatic truth” for which Herzog is eternally searching.
The films *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* and *Rescue Dawn* are particularly illuminating regarding Herzog’s approach to documentary and fiction. Both tell the same story, of German-born US Air Force pilot Dieter Dengler’s capture and subsequent escape from a Laotian prison camp. *Little Dieter* was the first production and was as close to a traditional documentary as any of Herzog’s films. The film consists of a lengthy interview with Dengler and recreations of some of the events. *Rescue Dawn* is a full-on action film starring Christian Bale and Steve Zahn and features more explosions than all of Herzog’s other films combined.

While at first glance these films appear to be quite different, they are of course telling almost the exact same story. Some shots in particular, like Dengler’s initial capture, or the pilot showing Herzog how he learned how to unlock his handcuffs using a nail, are adapted almost frame for frame in *Rescue Dawn*. This seems deliberate by Herzog, to show that, with very slight reimagining and a larger budget, his documentaries could easily be adapted to feature films. It would be just as possible for him to make a documentary version of one of his features.

Herzog is arguably better known for his feature films. Of course, to him, all his works are simply ‘films’ as he somewhat facetiously claims he makes no distinction between documentary and feature. He finds himself at odds with the vérité filmmakers and uses his own methods of manipulation and fictionalization to create the images and tone he seeks. His documentaries are incredibly important and are in a sense vital to understanding more about this ‘ecstatic truth’ for which he always longs to capture.
Works Cited


