

Playing with the Fire of Creation – Werner Herzog

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Abstract: *The paper is a critical survey on how the self-analysis of the struggle between artist and creator, at the border between fiction and reality, is made in “Herzog on Herzog”, edited by Paul Cronin. I used content analysis as a method of research and that of breaking down the very roots of Werner Herzog's ideology on the act of creation. In addition to the above-mentioned book, further materials were included on which the same method of analysis was applied: 4 interviews with the unstoppable director, 6 films and one essay written by Herzog – “On the*



Absolute, the Sublime, and Ecstatic Truth”. The chosen interviews seemed to be the most relevant for the subject, and the films chosen for analysis are: “Fitzcarraldo”, “Grizzly Man”, “My Best Fiend”, “Fata Morgana”, “Into the Inferno” and “Encounters at the End of the World”. I have chosen the last five as they are narrated by the director himself and, thus, his opinions on the limits that human nature is daring to break seem even more pertinent. For “Fata Morgana”, I analyzed the original film as well as a version commented by the director himself. One idea seems to obsess the author: how far do you push the limits but especially what for?

Keywords: *Werner Herzog, film directing, Herzog on Herzog – Paul Cronin, Klaus Kinski.*

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The actor taking over the filmmaker

Towards the end of the *Grizzly Man* documentary (Herzog, 2005), German director Werner Herzog reveals to us a tantrum of Timothy Treadwell¹. The man is cursing an imaginary enemy which, in this case, was the park service of the natural bear preservation hosting him. During this tantrum, Grizzly Man does not forget to fix his hair for one of the takes (as he was trying to pull more alternatives of the episode), managing to let himself be

¹ The name of the protagonist of Werner Herzog's documentary *Grizzly Man*.

permeated, each time, by the same intensity of feeling. At 01:24:00, Werner Herzog describes Treadwell's rage as "almost incandescent, artistic" and follows with a commentary of significant value for the analysis of the director's creative mind: "The actor in his film has taken over the filmmaker. I have seen this madness before on a film set". Knowing that Timothy is the actor/the artist/the lead and also the "filmmaker" of his own documentary materials, Herzog's comment becomes even more interesting. Given the relationship between Herzog and "his best fiend", the actor Klaus Kinski², you could easily conclude that Timothy could remind Herzog to some extent of his old friend. Perhaps even more interestingly to analyze is, in fact, what trait of the actor/character "Werner Herzog" in any of his film, what concealed (or not) detail of his mind had determined him to state that this was not the first time he had seen the "artist" possessing the filmmaker. Is it possible that you would be able to empathize with Treadwell's or Kinski's fit of rage without having a similar seed in you? Therefore, is it likely that in some way Herzog also feels that in his creative acts the artist has exceeded the filmmaker's duties? One of the clues that can help answer this question is the ship from *Fitzcarraldo* (Herzog, 1982). I generated a list of the first 150 most used words in "Herzog on Herzog" and the leading place in the Bavarian author's film titles category is occupied by "Fitzcarraldo" with 87 mentions, 17 of which appear in the author's questions, 7 in references and the rest of 63 are used by Herzog. The same title occupies position 36 in the list of the 150 most used words in the book. Around two million results are given in Google engine if you search for: "Werner Herzog ship mountain interview" (Werner Herzog, ship, mountain, interview). But no more than 5 of these results send you to relevant interviews with Herzog on this topic:

- "The outlaw as revelator" – a conversation between Werner Herzog and Eric Weinstein – *The Portal Podcast Episode 3, by Eric Weinstein* (5 out of 7 occurrences) (Eric Weinstein, 2019)
- "On the Absolute, the Sublime, and Ecstatic Truth" ("On the Absolute, the Sublime, and Ecstatic Truth | Arion," n.d.), speech/essay by Werner Herzog -the text was originally delivered by Werner Herzog as a speech in Milano, Italy, following a screening of his film *Lessons of Dark-ness* on the fires in Kuwait (4 out of 4 occurrences)
- "Werner Herzog has never thought a dog was cute" (Marchese, 2020), by David Marchese, in *New York Times Magazine* (1 out of 4 occurrences)
- "Werner Herzog: 'The world reveals itself to those who travel on foot'" ("Werner Herzog: 'The world reveals itself to those who travel on foot'" n.d.) by Peter Gwin in *National Geographic* (0 out of 2 occurrences)

² The actor with whom Herzog worked for various productions including *Fitzcarraldo* and *Aguire, the Wrath of God*

- “The Last Word: Werner Herzog on the Beauty of 'Winnie the Pooh' and His Trump 'Fascination'” (Newman and Newman, 2020) by Jason Newman in *Rolling Stone* (1 out of 1 occurrence)

In relation to the word “madness” used in Herzog's commentary on Timothy, I will briefly mention that derivatives of the word “mad”, at least 23 in count, are found in the book and even more often in articles and interviews regarding the director in one degree or another. They are used by both the authors of the articles and the director himself, which suggests that there is a tendency to constantly perceive Herzog's actions as similar to acts on the verge of madness.

If we analyze the context of the 63 “Fitzcarraldo” used by the director, we will notice that most of them are used in paragraphs in which he motivates the importance of carrying out the act of creation to the end by assuming all risks. In the articles listed above, the context remains the same. Some of these risks seem to outweigh any code of ethics in the film industry, but most of the times Herzog succeeds to evade public reproach bringing more than valid arguments while sometimes, in doing so, he loses track of his own theories about what does or doesn't become valuable in the creative act. Probably the best examples can be discovered in his film *My best fiend*.

The birth of the unlimited creator and Fata Morgana

“‘Signs of Life’ seemed to pave the way for what happened in *Fata Morgana* and *Fitzcarraldo* and other films. *Signs of Life* started very unfortunately, [...] before we started shooting there was a military coup d'etat in Greece.” (Herzog and Cronin, 2002)

For *Fata Morgana* Herzog wanted to shoot a Science Fiction about extraterrestrials who arrive on a deserted Terra and instead, he himself culminated as an alien in the middle of the desert during the production of his own film. *Fata Morgana* does not have a conventional narrative structure and, as he admits, it is rather a collage of images that he felt he had to film and whose narrative thread was born in the editing studio. Herzog states that the movie does not intend to impose ideas or point something out but that out of all of his films this is clearly the one that needs the audience's additions the most. Hence, immediately after editing, he didn't even feel the need to show it to the world. The movie was, in fact, submitted in secret to Cannes by Lotte Eisner³ and Henri Anglois and was extremely well received by a fair segment of the audience, composed of youngsters hooked on or casually using narcotics. What the film came to be is, however, in total contrast to the experiences he and the film crew went through in order to capture those images, experiences that, he claims, have traumatized him for life and whose images frighten him to this day. It is probably for the first time we witness the artist taking over the director. In the African desert, Herzog was struck by the indifference of the universe and nature towards

³ The feminine voice narrating on the background of *Fata Morgana*

man, and that of man towards values – concepts in which the director strongly believes, and that are often mentioned in his documentaries as well as in interviews.

Nonetheless, the actors in *Fata Morgana* have taken control of the horror that the director had to face outside of the “film set” and it seems like the result throws us straight into the organicity of our own emotions reminding us of the oblivion of human creation. Yet, who are these actors in *Fata Morgana*? The man becomes an element of the image and the element becomes man, a perspective reinforced only by the viewer's perception. In *Fata Morgana*, as in the majority of his feature films, the man is at the root of the two elements that comprise the image: philosophy and eroticism. Herzog (or maybe the African desert, one of the two at least) manages to attribute human forms or feelings to elements of the desert and nature. As for eroticism, it is born organically in relation to anthropomorphism. The need for expression from a philosophical stance is found through verbalization.

Before watching the version commented by the director, I watched the original *Fata Morgana*. In the 7th minute, we can see a beautiful long shot with sand dunes that are discovered in motion. Before I was even made aware of the director's own perspective, my initial perception about that shot - a perception not yet perverted by any rational thought, was one closely related to the concept of sensuality. Later, watching with the added comments, the author's words confirmed my sensation: “There was something so feminine about this landscape.” (Herzog, 1972) In his characteristic delicacy, Herzog calls eroticism “feminine”, matching the forms of the dunes to those of a human being, only this time the human being is, at last, a woman. And yet, any viewer would let their sight be aroused at the unveiling of the sand dunes resembling such a voluptuous succession of curves of the female body. Intentional or not, an image, a dune, a sign becomes a symbol of the erotic human. Anthropomorphism is born organically. The question is which came first: the egg or the chicken? The author or the viewer? Herzog does not say. He only states that it was an image they struggled to shoot for several days so that they can imprint on the camera movement the same smooth rhythm found in the images. In *The Function of Film*, Elie Faure signs the essay entitled “Tintoretto's Prediction” in which he draws an excellent parallel between the rhythm of the fine art Paradise and cinematography explaining that “...the background actively participates in the movement of forms, while, without ceasing, the movement of forms enters into the tragedy of the background...” (Faure, 2015) Furthermore, the critic encourages cinematography to strive for the same rhythm because “Tintoretto does not seek these balances of movement, but senses them.” Herzog also sensed the erotic and feminine rhythm of the dunes! How simple was the transfer of perception from him to the viewer! But who's playing this woman? Can we say that the actress is the African desert? Or that the planes in the first sequence are signs of the male erotic symbol that enters the African desert to break through the barriers of *Fata Morgana* and to proceed to the erotic act? Are airplanes, therefore, the main actors of the scene? Herzog seems to disregard this interpretation as he begins to verbalize the philosophical approach, he envisioned through the voice of Lotte H. Eisner, who quotes from the *Book of Counsel* passages from the creation

myth of the Mayan civilization, *Popol Vuh*. (Edmonson, 1977) This post-Columbian bible tells of the countless attempts of the deities to create an evolved being, who has the ability to know, understand but especially worship the creators. Are Herzog's images therefore deliberately erotic or philosophical? Since he emphasizes his philosophical approach through verbalization and music, we can answer that the director wanted, rather, a kind of exposition of a religious philosophy. Still, by placing man in the center, even through anthropomorphism, he fails to escape the exposure of the most organic engine of creation: eroticism.

In Herzog's works, the man as the main character in the act of creation is replaced by signs and symbols in images, the "human" actor is replaced by the "element of nature" actor. Purposely or not, Herzog challenges you to search. Herzog invites you to listen to a story and become inquisitive about the act of creation. He placed the focus, intently or else, on eroticism and aimed for a philosophical approach, at least in post-production. This actor takes over the director and instills in him the courage to push the search for the artistic act to its fatal limits. The clarification is given in Herzog on Herzog by what may be the first reference to the way in which the mind of the director can be monopolized by that of the artist, in this case, the mirage. The mirage becomes the artist who takes over the filmmaker. Commenting on how the conventional narrative thread and the initial script had perished from the first day of filming, Herzog adds:

"The mirages that had taken hold of me and the visionary aspects of the desert landscape were so much more powerful than any single idea for the film I had previously had, so I junked the story, opened my eyes and ears, and just filmed the mirages of the desert." (Herzog and Cronin, 2002)

Perhaps this first contact of the director with the "demon of creation" in this instance, the mirage, was achieved not through a human actor but through the nature-actor, so as to pave the way for an extremely daring director whose creative endeavors have reached limits that often came close to the violation of any moral rules or even death itself although never crossed them. Herzog often pushed his team and his creative passion to the extremes, but somehow, he managed to go just as far as to not cross beyond the irremediable slander of his work.

A conscious fortitude to test the limits and ends of the world

Having reached maturity, Herzog has learned with every feature film or documentary to go as far as the red line but never to cross it, not even to lightly step on it. Whether he filmed on the edge of an active volcano, in Antarctica (Herzog, 2008), in the African desert or in a park where Grizzly man was devoured by his dearest bear, Herzog's obsession has always been the edge of human courage but especially what it represents: a step in the evolution of knowledge or simply the unconsciousness of a mad man lacking respect for values? It was not curiosity that pushed him in these directions, but rather, a

feeling of empathy with these characters who, in these instances, happen to be represented by people.

The way he structures his ideas and even the tone of his voice prevents you from believing that Herzog manages to be impartial in any of the 4 documentaries, yet he does not seem to want that. He expresses his emotions and opinions without hesitation and challenges you to analyze every time if exceeding the limits means the courage to research or simply an unhealthy obsession of the explorer to achieve a goal at any cost. This obsession is sanctioned on occasion by the universe so ignorant of the needs of man to search and discover. In *Grizzly Man*, Herzog observes a creator not just obsessed with his own beliefs about nature, but also manipulated by his own emotions, unable to look at them objectively or justify them. We see a Timothy who strongly believes in a communion of man with nature, which he perceives in a sort of romantic and religious view as an almost spiritual parent whose harsh realities he refuses to acknowledge. More than once the director expresses his own opinions about nature, opinions that do not seem to be detached or cold or observational but rather in opposition to those of his hero. ("On the Absolute, the Sublime, and Ecstatic Truth | Arion," n.d.) Herzog's lack of objectivity seems to start from the same place where Timothy's subjectivism starts. However, they seem to sit on opposite ends. If Timothy is convinced that nature embraces man, Herzog is convinced that man is an intruder in any of nature's representation and that, in turn, nature is not only indifferent but downright aggressive with the one who tries to conquer its mysteries and unknowns. Herzog's quotations, be them either his own or slightly modified ("On the Absolute, the Sublime, and Ecstatic Truth | Arion," n.d.), about nature and the universe but especially about man's relationship with the two are already famous and, in one form or another, prevalent in almost all of his interviews. (Marchese, 2020) It is not just Timothy who seizes control, but also Herzog, who, often impressed by the drama of the stories, prefers to stress the man's negative relationship with nature or at least to document it as the main reason for human error.

However, almost every elocution about his experiences with the ends of the planet or with the less welcoming corners of nature he seems almost unaware that in order to document such acts of recklessness he himself appeals to acts of courage close to the edges of recklessness – whether we see him within a second of being touched by a “drop” of volcanic magma, whether he ventures with all the precautions into the heart of the glaciers, Herzog brings, not only himself but the whole film crew in proximity to danger. Fortunately, what is very important to be specified is that he indeed almost always stops at the very limit and does not exceed it. Maybe just once, when he pointed his gun at Kinski in the last attempt to convince him to stay put and meet his contractual deeds. He does admit this rumor to be real.⁴ But how do you know exactly where the limit lies when it becomes so volatile when sitting on the edge of a volcano, for example?

⁴ In *My best fiend* Herzog admits to have pushed the limits to far in his relationship with Klaus Kinski

Each time Herzog justifies his actions by making our acquaintance with his heroes who are slightly more adventurous than him and even seems to suggest that he, unlike these heroes, has learned to carefully explore the limits of the universe and man. In the 18th minute of *Into the Inferno* (Herzog, 2016), well dressed and with the joyful attitude of two children who just succeed to steal some apples from the forbidden fruit tree, Herzog and Clive Oppenheimer, a volcanologist from Cambridge University, sit at the edge of the fire chewing volcano (that occasionally spits reddish pieces out its mouth) while carrying the following dialogue:

Herzog: "For me, there is no personal excitement to go down. There's a curiosity, yes, I would love to see it from a close-up. But since it is too dangerous it would be silly

Clive: We have in a way similar... (views) [...] and you ask yourself: 'Well is it worth dying to get this measurement. And the answer is no if you look at it in those terms.'"

These last words specified by Clive are a clue of the dialogue and the so lustful laughter of the two.

Clive: "But you always have to evaluate how far are you going to take this risk. Even here the volcano could explode now and we could all be hit by one of these five-meter bombs."

Alas, there is a danger that Herzog is warned about just a few seconds after claiming that it would be silly to go even deeper into the volcano, and yet his reaction can only be that of a creator in love with his work. However, Werner in his next line of dialogue insists on obtaining from Clive the assurance that he is not crazy, and even more so, that he is the only filmmaker in contact with reality.

Herzog: "I'm the only one in filmmaking who is clinically sane, taking all precautions."

And Clive responds by alluding to the dangers to which Werner and his heroes have been exposed to in the past:

Clive: "Oh, absolutely. I mean you would not still be here if you were insane. You would have been consumed long ago by a pyroclastic current or a gas flare or a grizzly bear. So it's quite clear that you're healthy."

The sane/insane antonyms appear so many times in such a short but so necessary dialogue to demonstrate Herzog's need to justify his actions, actions already justified by his creative genius. And the dialogue can only end with the return of the two to their first meeting, when immediately after Herzog claims that it would be silly to do something that would endanger his life, the volcano drops a firebomb and their dialogue overturns all the feeling of security they had created before:

Herzog: "That's a good swoosh."

Clive: "We're very blasé about all of this."

Herzog: (and his heartwarming childish smile): “Yes, but let it come at us. We’ll face it and step aside.”

We could easily conclude from this dialogue that ironically but also absurdly Herzog dares to talk about caution while sitting in the proximity of death but we must not forget the fact that he is the author of this scene, thus the message that Herzog sends us might rather be: be careful, even now when we thought we had taken all the precautions and that we can be safe, nature can contradict you and then kill you. Immediately after this dialogue, Herzog introduces us to two other dramatic characters, for whom he shares the same respect and love that he shared for Timothy, thanks to the ounce videos they left behind: the couple Katia and Maurice Krafft, two French volcanologists who managed to capture “incredible images” with the moments of volcanic eruptions and are known for being the people who came closest to a river of lava.

You recognize Herzog’s love for this story because he surrounds it in classical music like every time greatness meets drama in his films. The moment ends on Giuseppe Verdi’s *Recordare Jesu Pie* when Herzog reveals how the two perished, on the background of a collage of monumental images in which you see the French couple just a few meters from volcanic waves or ash eruptions, accompanied by the stamp of his passionate old grandfather like voice, that whispers to you a secret of the world: “They were both instantly killed by a pyroclastic flow in Japan together with 41 other people.” (Herzog, 2016) The two are killed by an avalanche of overheated gases that has a speed of over 100 miles per hour and whose dramatic footage could easily be devoid of acoustic accompaniment. However, this is not a dramatic pleonasm but an artistic exposition of the whole being of the director.

In conclusion, let's take a ship to Herzog's creativity

On page 19 of *Herzog on Herzog*, Paul Cronin warns the director that he has a reputation as a risk-taker, someone who goes to extremes. The first film that Herzog mentions in his defense is his most criticized *Fitzcarraldo*. (p. 33)

The appearance of the word “Fitzcarraldo” more than 100 times cumulated in the book and his interviews are often just justifications in the face of the many accusations he has received over time, especially from the press but not only. From the punch he took in Munich for risking people’s lives during production, to the absurd accusations of the press or political propagandists that the director has a connection to the oppressive military regime in the Peruvian jungle, Herzog tries to justify every obstacle that arose during the filming and every risk he voluntarily took to endanger his or others’ lives. Herzog says he did not want to climb a boat up a mountain for the sake of realism. “There is a mysterious truth in what we did, and I wanted the audience in a position where they could trust their own eyes.” (Herzog and Cronin, 2002, p. 19)

During the shooting of *Fitzcarraldo*, he took decisions, and some led to accidents for which he was blamed by the press: they cleared a few meters of jungle, two of the locals who

were also figurative were killed by arrows by a group of tribal members, they forgot the director of photography on a rock for 24 hours and operated on an injured woman right at the shooting location because the nearest hospital was 150 kilometers away. He claims that he took every precaution every time and that he took into account the morality of his actions and decisions. From his stories, but especially from his obsession with mentioning Fitzcarraldo at every step, there is a need to justify something that seems to be an unassuming mistake, but it is perhaps the most intense moment in which “the actor has taken over the filmmaker” and this time Herzog has taken over Herzog: “I am a Conquistador of the Useless.” (Herzog, 2010) Herzog concludes his plea, which would later inspire the title of his book on the Fitzcarraldo experience.

3 ships climbed a hill with an inclination of 75%:

- the real ship, the one dismantled and transported between 2 rivers for the purely advertising purpose of the “robber baron” Carlos Fermin Fitzcarraldo in 1893,
- the ship from the fictional world of Brian Sweeney “Fitzcarraldo”, the character whose name also gives the title of the film directed by Herzog
- and last but not least the 3rd ship, Werner's ship that is easily confused with the other 2, a real ship that the director wanted to shoot on the same slope using a clever system of pulleys and refusing the help of special effects in the desire to create fiction while accurately preserving the facts of reality, an action that causes him to proclaim himself the “conqueror of the uselessness.”

During the shooting of the film, one of the team members set fire to his wooden house so as to take revenge for the madness of having 700 Indians pull a boat on the mountain, his friend Klaus Kinski was about to give up and leave the plateau and investors had almost withdrawn their funds. Herzog claims that together with the engineer (who also gave up in the end), they finally managed to create a pulley system with which they could have boarded the ship with one finger, but that the reality had to be kept for the sake of the truth that delights the public eye. This ship becomes the bridge between fiction and reality, between those who believe and those who doubt the powers or madness of the acts of creation, the bridge between the actor that takes over the filmmaker.

Yes, the word Fitzcarraldo in the title category is the most widely used title for any book or press article. Nevertheless, among the most frequent words in the most popular articles related to filmmaking are: “truth”, “real”, “film”, “life”, “sublime”, “world”. Also in *Herzog on Herzog* there are about the same words in the list of the most commonly used plus: “mountain”, “money”, “Kinski”, “important”.

In relation to the creative genius that is Herzog, these words speak for themselves. Moreover, the moments of risk that the director assumes or are not constantly confessed just out of a need to morally justify himself but especially in close connection with his main idea about making films, an idea that he formulates and reformulates as a valued piece of advice for young filmmakers:

“Go out to where the real world is, go work as a bouncer in a sex-club, a warden in a lunatic asylum or in a slaughterhouse. Walk on foot, learn languages, learn a craft or trade that has nothing to do with cinema. Filmmaking must have experience of life at its foundation. I know that so much of what is in my films is not just invention, it is very much life itself, my own life. [...] The failure of the others was very significant: it dawned on me that organization and commitment were the only things that started and finished films, not money. When it came to Fitzcarraldo, it was not money that pulled that boat over the mountain, it was faith.” (Herzog and Cronin, 2002, p. 26)

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