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# ***Werner Herzog: Filmmaker and Philosopher*, by Richard Eldridge. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 221 pp.**

Dominic Lash

Even as his films are, perhaps, less frequently discussed than was once the case, Werner Herzog's place in the general cultural consciousness seems as secure as ever. This is true whether one is thinking of "popular", "mainstream", "low" culture or of "serious", "high" art. (These scare quotes are intended to acknowledge the enormously problematic nature of any of these labels as much as the difficulty—perhaps the impossibility—of doing without some such distinction.) At one end of the scale, if it is a scale, Herzog has recently been much discussed on social media as a result of his appearance as an actor in Disney's *Star Wars* spinoff series *The Mandalorian* (2019–), and his fondness for its "heartbreakingly beautiful" baby Yoda (Gemmell). And at the other, Fitzcarraldo Editions, a small London-based arthouse publisher of novels and essays—that now boasts two Nobel laureates on its roster, Svetlana Alexievich and Olga Tokarczuk—takes its name from what is still one of Herzog's most notoriously heroic, or hubristic, endeavours, namely the hauling of a steamship over an Amazonian hill. What links both these phenomena is their interest in Herzog, the personality and the heroic filmmaker, over and above any specific qualities his films themselves may possess.

Some scholars greatly lament the way Herzog, as personality and myth, tends to eclipse his films. Lúcia Nagib argues that "Herzog, as a person, is a media phenomenon, whose writings and opinions hardly ever surpass the level of self-help literature or New Age esotericism" (60). The project of Richard Eldridge's *Werner Herzog* is explicitly to challenge this kind of claim, as its subtitle—*Filmmaker and Philosopher*—indicates. Eldridge tells us at the very outset that one of his guiding assumptions is that "Herzog's written thoughts about his life and work [...] are themselves a work of significant literary and philosophical value" (xiii). Thus, any charge that Eldridge's book concentrates too heavily on Herzog's own pronouncements at the expense of close analysis of the films would misrepresent its project, which is precisely to treat seriously Herzog's films together with his spoken and written thoughts. Alongside long quotations from Herzog's published writings and interviews, *Werner Herzog* also includes, therefore, extended passages of descriptive analysis of a great number of Herzog's films, together with similarly extended quotations from a wide range of both secondary sources on Herzog and primary philosophical texts, from Nietzsche and Hegel up to Wittgenstein, Cavell, and beyond. Eldridge is Professor of Philosophy at Swathmore College and his fluency with a very broad range of Western philosophy (mostly what is still, to my mind regrettably, referred to as "continental" philosophy, but also including "analytic" figures such as P. M. S. Hacker) is continually in evidence.

*Werner Herzog* is divided into four parts: an introduction entitled "Images and Contemporary Culture", and three chapters called, respectively, "Nature", "Selfhood", and

“History”. The introduction serves largely as a thorough literature review, as well as a survey of relevant pronouncements by Herzog himself. Having said this, the texture of the introduction is not substantially different from that of the remainder of the book; I am ambivalent about whether to regard this as a virtue, as I discuss below. Eldridge aligns himself with a developing—and, I think, largely commendable—tendency in the philosophical study of film (as well, perhaps, as the filmic study of philosophy?) when he claims that

The films as I read them do not merely illustrate one or another bit of philosophy. Instead they take up, develop, and worry at the problems of human life that motivate the philosophies, as the films think creatively and in images about exactly what these problems are and how to address them. (4)

Although he does not quite say so explicitly, it seems that Eldridge—to put it bluntly—does not believe Herzog when he claims that he “can’t crack the code of Hegel and Heidegger”; in his lecture “On the Absolute, the Sublime, and Ecstatic Truth”, for example, Herzog “is directly drawing on Heidegger’s discussion of truth as unconcealment” (3, 17). The introduction serves well as a useful survey of some of the most pressing issues in the interpretation and evaluation of Herzog (the role of the Herzogian persona; the sharply contrasting interpretations of the visual sublime that his films have generated; etc.), but a clear and punchy statement of Eldridge’s own stance remains elusive. For example, he claims that, in the contemporary situation, “[o]ne must somehow find a stance that yields meaningful orientation in life, in a self-sustaining way, against the grain of commercial and consumptive business as usual, but without the hubris of implausibly claiming privileged metaphysical knowledge” (10). Immediately afterwards, however, Eldridge begins to discuss Herzog’s pronouncements on “the Absolute”; is he, perhaps, recommending the pursuit of *plausible* metaphysical knowledge?

The next chapter, “Nature”, begins with rather familiar-sounding material on the problem of how we might “express our active powers and achieve meaningful life, housed, as we seem to be, within an implacably purposeless nature” (50). Eldridge investigates what he sees as Herzog’s exploration of this theme by means of films including *Fata Morgana* (1971), *Aguirre (Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes)*, 1972), and *The White Diamond* (2004), concluding that at their most successful, certain sequences in Herzog’s cinema “enable us to bear obscure perceptual witness to the fact that cathartic, resolute meaning is at least intermittently available within life in nature” (98). Eldridge’s prose is usually clear and can be stylish, but it can also slip into an inelegant murkiness, as it does for me here with “obscure perceptual witness”—is this as distinguished from “pellucid cognitive witness”, perhaps?—and “resolute meaning”; not to mention his fondness elsewhere for the unlovely adjective “agentively”.

Eldridge next tackles “Selfhood”. After an interesting survey of the development of notions of selfhood in the modern philosophical tradition (Herzog is not mentioned at all for the first ten pages of the chapter), we get an exploration of films including *Huie’s Sermon (Huie’s Predigt)*, 1981), *Stroszek* (1977), and *The Great Ecstasy of the Woodcarver Steiner (Die große Ekstase des Bildschnitzers Steiner)*, 1973). These films show us that it is possible to achieve “at least some measure of fuller selfhood” (165), though the direct connections between this and the discussion that opens the chapter are left to us to draw. The final chapter is about “History”, in which we learn that Herzog’s “interests in filmmaking are on the whole more existential, ontological, and transfigurationally normative than they are descriptive, sociohistorical, and oriented toward local political problems”; I am afraid I remain unsure what

exactly Eldridge means by “transfigurationally normative” (171). Films discussed in this chapter include *Gesualdo: Death for Five Voices* (*Tod für fünf Stimmen*, 1995) and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010); Eldridge argues that despite what might appear an apolitical stance (supported by a number of the director’s own statements), the issue with Herzog’s films is in fact “what sorts of unusual political concerns [...] are present in them by way of stylization” (173). Central to his answer to this question is the idea of barbarism.

Throughout *Werner Herzog*, Eldridge mixes philosophical exposition, often very long passages from Herzog and his critics (which are frequently discussed only fleetingly—at times suggestively, and at times frustratingly), and some lengthy passages of descriptive criticism of particular films and sequences within them. I must admit to finding this method rather limiting. Eldridge often puts his finger on fascinating topics that cry out for sustained investigation, but neither extended philosophical nor sustained critical examination seem to be the book’s objective. Eldridge’s treatment of some of the more controversial issues involved in discussion of Herzog is a case in point. He will often acknowledge the existence of some challenging accusations, admit their legitimacy, but then drift away into a less-focused account of mitigating factors that rarely takes these challenges head-on. The book’s final paragraph is a perfect example: it begins by announcing that “[s]ome will find some of Herzog’s films sentimental or narcissistic”, or think that “his emphasis on individual heroism in extreme circumstances [is] too insensitive to genuine possibilities of adventure and meaning in more ordinary life, including the spheres of family life, occupation, and political citizenship” (209). Eldridge’s response to this daunting range of charges is simply to claim that “finding meaning is not a matter of simple, automatic givens” (did anybody claim that it is or should be?) and to assert, in closing, that Herzog’s films “include some of the highest achievements of art in its sensuous presentation of who we are and might be” (209). Comparably anodyne remarks occur throughout the book. See, for example, the remark, with reference to *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (*Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle*, 1974), that “[t]he mysteries of the human, if they are to be captured at all, have dramatic itineraries that must be represented narratively, as in this film, not in scientific reports” (139). Or the aforementioned claim that “[o]ne must somehow find a stance that yields meaningful orientation in life, in a self-sustaining way, against the grain of commercial and consumptive business as usual” (10). At times Eldridge even drifts into the crudest form of anti-scientific “humanism”, referring to “the physical human sciences, where the very idea of self-consciously undertaken and recognized adventure has no place”, a picture of the physical sciences that would not be accepted by any scientist that I know (207).

And yet the book also contains genuinely suggestive critical and evaluative remarks that seem full of potential for further investigation, such as the claims that “Herzog’s films succeed most spectacularly when the attention of the viewer is modulated expertly among moments of absorption in either nature or significant natural–physical action and moments of breakdown”, that in a number of key moments in Herzog’s oeuvre “[t]here is no particular center of the shot or object on which to focus”, or that Fleischmann’s experiences at the end of *Land of Silence and Darkness* (*Land des Schweigens und der Dunkelheit*, 1971) act “as a metaphor for our viewing experience and vice versa” (38, 60, 149). It is the “vice versa” in this last example that I think is particularly intriguing, providing a fascinating twist to what initially seems to be the kind of announcement of reflexivity that still all-too-often stands in for “sophistication” in film studies. I would have loved Eldridge to have expanded on these insights with sustained arguments, but others may find *Werner Herzog*’s focus on suggestion rather than demonstration to be more productive, and it is to be hoped that it will stimulate future research and writing on the director. It may, incidentally, be significant that I found more of

these suggestive remarks in the material concerning the films rather than in the discussions of Herzog's pronouncements, although I think Eldridge does enough to, at the very least, strongly challenge Nagib's dismissal of this material out of hand.

Certainly, Eldridge is no uncritical admirer of Herzog's cinema—he is quite prepared to say when he finds the films to fall short—and the range of films discussed is excellent, avoiding the over-familiar concentration on the output of the 1960s and 70s. And yet it is hard to avoid the sense that Eldridge sees Herzog's failures as the price to be paid for his success as a visionary. He is the explorer who finds images so that we can share in them, striking out alone for the sake of a shared humanity. These images are, apparently, “neither records of Herzog's experience alone, nor depictions of what is simply given apart from human experience, imagination, and desire, but instead collective dream images of encountered meaning” (28). Both Herzog-acolytes and Herzog-heretics might accept such a description, the one group positively, the other negatively. If, however, we are to move beyond seeing Herzog in terms of dichotomies of heroism versus hubris, visionary adventurer versus semi-comic personality, I think we need fewer intriguing gestures and more sustained applications of critical pressure.

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