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Brad Prager: The Cinema of Werner Herzog. Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth

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Brad Prager: The Cinema of Werner Herzog. Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth

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One of the recurring metaphors in the films of German director Werner Herzog is that of a circle. A repeated long shot in *Fata Morgana* (1970) shows a jeep driving about in circles over a dry lakebed. The surviving conquistador of *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) ends his linear trek toward the gold of El Dorado aboard a raft,

stalled on a deadly river as the camera spirals around him. In *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), the eponymous protagonist returns to the (to his mind) culturally-deprived South American town from which he began, having failed in his grandiose mission to construct an opera house in the Peruvian rain forest. One of Herzog's more recent films, *Wheel of Time* (2003), depicts some of the practices of Tibetan Buddhists on their path towards enlightenment and escape from the earthly cycle of birth and rebirth. In some ways, a circle has come to represent scholarship's work on Herzog's oeuvre as well. That is, very little new has been written on the subject, most journal articles and books simply recirculating observations and analyses made during the heyday of New German Cinema in the 70s and 80s, creating a kind of interpretive centrifugal force. Brad Prager's new book, "the first in over twenty years devoted entirely to the work of Werner Herzog" (back cover) proves very much to be bound within a conventional orbit.

In an introduction, Prager gives a brief biography of the director and outlines the concerns of his study. Specifically, he states that he will examine the "role of sense perception or 'aesthetics' as a bodily experience in Herzog's works" (S.2), offer readings of the films that "work against the grain of Herzog's ideas, disentangling the ecstasies from the truths where called upon to do so" (S.7), and "scrutinize more closely the inter-filmic relationships" (S.18) among the director's works and those of other filmmakers. Prager then analyses Herzog's films in six chapters based on well-trodden themes.

The first chapter, "Madness on a Grand Scale," for example, takes up the obsessions and "world-annihilating will common to Herzog's most visionary protagonists" (S.21). Prager devotes most of the pages to *Aguirre* (1972) and *Fitzcarraldo*, films that have already caused their fair share of scholarly ink to be spilled, but only a handful of paragraphs to lesser-known earlier works such as *Herakles* (1962), a 12-minute documentary about bodybuilding, and *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner* (1973), about ski-flying in general and one of the sport's most famous exponents, Walter Steiner, in particular. Concerning these latter films, however, the reader finds only banal observations. One learns that Herzog has neither love nor respect for pumping iron—the physical results of which he considers to be narcissistic deviations—but a great deal for the purported ecstasy of jumping to great heights and lengths from an icy ramp (an activity arguably no less self-indulgent and self-glorifying than that of bodybuilding). The third chapter concerns Romantic influences and the relationship of man to nature in *Heart of Glass* (1976), *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1978), *Scream of Stone* (1991), and *Grizzly Man* (2005), among others. Here, Prager somewhat follows a scholarly path less taken by examining *Grizzly Man* at length, pointing out certain similarities between Herzog and the film's ill-fated subject, Timothy Treadwell. Both are "truth-seeking," self-promoting, independent documentary filmmakers who prefer natural settings while often staging behavior before the camera. (Treadwell and a female companion were eventually attacked and eaten by a grizzly bear.) But

Prager's analysis rarely penetrates more deeply than these surface comparisons. Such remarks may be made about further chapters on Herzog's representations of religious faith, war and trauma, and Africa, wherein the author notes similar scenes and images among the director's films, cites Nietzsche or Benjamin, and moves on. Indeed, the last chapter – on Africa – ends (shame on the editor or printer) in mid-sentence.

Part of the difficulty in saying anything new about Herzog may lie with the director himself. Over the decades, he has given countless interviews, the most extensive set comprising Paul Cronin's *Herzog on Herzog* (2002), from which Prager draws heavily. (Indeed, hardly a page of his study lacks a quote from this collection.) Moreover, the advent of DVD technology has allowed filmmakers to revisit their works, to comment upon (truthfully or otherwise) their construction, meaning, and implications, thereby also influencing the direction of scholarly interpretations thereof. Herzog has provided hours of such commentary, to which Prager frequently turns. Still, comprehensiveness ensures neither depth nor originality. *The Cinema of Werner Herzog: Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth* may serve as a reasonable introduction to Herzog's fifty-odd films for the student of German cinema. But one might do just as well by reading Cronin's aforementioned book, along with Timothy Corrigan's 1986 collection of essays by various film scholars, *The Films of Werner Herzog: Between Mirage and History* (not as dated as one would think, given the director's limited thematic scope), and, universal remote in hand, switching on the "director's commentary" feature found on many of Herzog's recently-released DVDs.

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