Producing Herzog: from a body of images

Timothy Corrigan

We have to articulate ourselves, otherwise we would be cows in the field.

Werner Herzog

Enigmas, flying doctors, ecstasies, fanatics, dwarfs, sermons, woodchucks, and phantoms: the perverse menagerie of images and abstractions that form the body of Werner Herzog's mesmerizing and exasperating films. Eating one's shoe: the raw emblem of a critical response to filmmaking, offered by a filmmaker who hopes to rescue the world with images, while claiming that "film is not the art of scholars, but of illiterates" (Greenberg et al., 1976, 174). Indeed, the last surprise should be that Herzog and his films, perhaps more than the films of any other contemporary director, suffer from the very excessiveness which distinguishes them and their histrionic director, distorted equally by extreme adulation and extreme condemnation.

In many ways, the most demanding challenge of these films is therefore not their purported density or idiosyncrasies but the difficulty of negotiating and mediating the extremities that they represent and provoke. Fascinated by images of outsiders, iconoclasts, and strange other worlds, various audiences on university campuses and beyond have, since the early 1970s, turned to Herzog as the latest freedom from the dull round of commercial cinema. Yet, as part of that difference and distinction, these audiences have also discovered the guilty trace of a shared regression to adolescence and childhood. Along with the startling rebellion Herzog's images represent for many, these same films carry the aura of romantic naïveté and self-absorption which tends to
mark them as little more than Hollywood fantasies disguised as high seriousness and to prompt an equally reactionary dismissal of them. As Eric Rentschler has recently remarked, critics "have, by and large, not found a way out of this hermeneutical impasse – nor have they begun to perceive it as a problem worth their attention" (Rentschler, 1984, 87).

That this critical impasse exists in such opposed terms is, it seems to me, neither an accident nor an unusual position in the reception of a filmmaker or film today – Hollywood or otherwise. Rather, Herzog's monolithic performance of himself and his films is entirely consistent with commercial filmmaking of the last two decades, whether one points to the career of Michael Cimino or the person of Francis Coppola. At least since 1970, commercial movies have primarily been an occasion to make the real the ingenuous, to let history begin at the box-office, to discover singular genius in the most innocent ability to see things, and to play and play again the pleasures of regression and youth. For all their differences, The Cotton Club, Das Boot, and Rambo have shared a sense that history is fundamentally a star's spectacle which reveals itself through the immediacy of images; contemporary movies, from Star Wars to The Never Ending Story, have increasingly become narratives which map a course back to the future and toward the massive teenage audience outside the theater. With typically little awareness, the movies today have transformed that traditional tension between physical reality and formative image into the resolved equation of physical reality as celluloid image. More importantly perhaps, distinctions between so-called art cinema and the commercial movies start to become, at best, academic and, at worst, politically useless: Godard plans a version of King Lear with Hollywood producers Golan and Globus, and in Germany the Bavaria Studios can easily accommodate both Moscow on the Hudson and Berlin Alexanderplatz.

Presented with these terms, a critical spectator's ability to distinguish or debate what must present itself as self-evident has become a treachery or pomposity equivalent to asking a child "why?" when the only answer can be "because." A self-dramatizing athlete, Herzog is a romantic artist, in short, only that he is, by chance or design, a totally contemporary moviemaker: all is image, and the density and flamboyancy of those images have established themselves as the only vehicle for significance. The resistance that Herzog thrives on thus may be not so much the physical world that he so often celebrates but the physical body of images that define the world for him. In these terms, measured
debate or discussion has been and usually must be usurped by pre-linguistic exclamations of glee or disgust.

From Stipetić to Stroszek

Born Stipetić on September 5, 1942, "Herzog" is as fictional as his pseudo-documentary characters – contradictory, deliberately evasive, and layered. His own history is a construction of legends, more or less connected to truth: his mystical Bavarian childhood; a first script at 15 and a projected film on penal reform at 17; his exotic travels while still in his teens; Munich as a steelworker; Duquesne University and Pittsburgh on a Fulbright scholarship; television work under the auspices of NASA in 1966; his renowned theft of his first 35mm camera to use for his first shorts; and the variety of strange and violent adventures and misadventures with governments and actors as he struggled to make his movies.¹ Obviously, a key difficulty here, as with the films, is where to locate such an intentionally chimerical and contrary figure whose character has come to depend more on the substance of the images he projects than on any so-called factual substance. Indeed, an indicative irony is his claim that I Am My Films (the title of a documentary-interview about him, Was ich bin, sind meine Filme). For, as Herzog means it, this claim becomes fully the contrary of the auteurist position that it seems to suggest: for Herzog, he is his films only as a medieval artisan, the figure who disappears into that work and is ultimately dwarfed by the larger weights and energies it testifies to. This author becomes most real in his industrial and artistic projections, and the most effective way to preserve that aura of the auteur is to make him the concrete work of images, not personality.

Herzog, in other words, is both more and less than an auteur, his person and image crystallizing in many ways the problem with auteurism in today's film culture. As Michel Foucault has observed, the whole notion of an author of a text or film must obscure "the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine, and articulate" it; regardless of the holistic center it tries to project, it cannot "refer, purely and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and a series of subject positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy" (Foucault, 1977, 130–1). Whereas this illusion of a singular, controlling presence has traditionally been naturalized quite effectively into the personality of the director holding a camera-stylo, with Herzog the density and stability of that
position frequently seem the function of mirrors or unmistakable exaggeration, removed from the abstractions of the writer as individual and rebuilt as a dense body of work. The institutional systems that might underline the ruptures and inconsistencies in the fragile position of the traditional auteur are reassembled through Herzog as part of a thicker, less personal body. Somewhat paradoxically, the spiritual or intellectual unity with which a John Ford might connect a group of films becomes a physical density which identifies the Herzog motif with the assaulting face of Kinski, the uncontainable body of Bruno S., or the massive trials of production itself: the singular and opaque image of bodily struggle. In this way, the necessary deconstruction of the machinery that an auteur's presence disguises is waylaid since that presence is now, in a sense, the physical machinery itself. Herzog, the Munich soccer player as auteur, is thus nothing like a Kurosawa or Bergman but something like a Woody Allen: the auteur is less an abstraction than an assemblage of material quirks and physical moves (even when they appear as interviews) which, perhaps unwittingly, parody the very pose of an auteur.

His relation to the New German Cinema of Fassbinder, Wenders, and a large variety of less renowned colleagues is a telling example of this position. One might describe this group as a collection of post-auteurs who, unlike their French counterparts, rose not from the literary self-consciousness of the Cahiers du Cinéma but the fatherless childhood of Germany in the 1950s. What has identified these Germans as a common group has become not so much the differences of a personal style but a common zero ground where, in the 1960s, they gathered around themselves the machinery of filmmaking as a way of freeing themselves from the suspicions of their native language. From the beginning, names were less important than a state subsidy system, film schools, an expanding international economy, and an unusually receptive television system. For the Germans, the freedom of Arriflex signature was less significant than the theft of a 35mm camera, since the latter immediately aligned the owner with the bulk of an industry: these Antoine Doinels instantly became their own fathers.

In a very telling manner, directors like Fassbinder, Herzog, and Wenders seem to have adapted the auteur tag primarily as a convenient label and effective marketing strategy; yet especially on filmmakers like Herzog and Wenders that label often appears too bombastic and fictionalized by their work to interpret as much more than a business card. If Herzog consciously turned away from the film school or academic background that laid the foundation for other auteurs, he more importantly learned to work the mechanisms of production and
distribution as well as the best of them in their struggle for international recognition. In 1963, for example, he managed to win the Carl Mayer Prize (10,000 DM) for the script that was to become *Signs of Life*, and in 1966 he received another 300,000 DM for that project (which later won a Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival). Besides the early assistance of the state subsidies system, he has benefited considerably from the unique television system in Germany which has helped finance and distribute Herzog films that, in a less supportive climate, may have remained visionary images never finished or never seen. One has only to compare Herzog’s notoriety with virtually unknown but highly influential filmmakers like Werner Schroeter or Herbert Achternbusch to realize how effectively – and unromantically – Herzog has learned and used the business of the movie industry and the business of auteurism.

In this regard, one of the mystic Herzog’s shrewder business strategies has been his use of the Hollywood and international marketplaces. France, of course, has always been a special friend to Herzog: the Cannes Festival being an early and regular showroom for Herzog’s films and Paris frequently transforming ignored Herzog films (such as *Aguirre*) into instant cult movies. The connection with the Hollywood circuit and the audiences it controls throughout the world is, moreover, a crucial dimension not only of Herzog’s work but of the entire New German Cinema. As much as its filmmakers were nurtured by their strained relation with their prewar forefathers like Lang and Murnau, the historical and economic roots of contemporary German film were formed during the postwar 1950s when American occupation of West Germany fostered a peculiarly displaced relation between the two cultures. Certainly Herzog testifies to his own national heritage in his use of expressionistic tropes or his remakes of German classics like *Nosferatu* or *Woyzeck* and most recently in his evocations of the mountain film tradition. Yet, for many, this heritage appears as if filtered through a past that begins in 1945 and becomes displaced through Hollywood culture: for many of these filmmakers, history returns to their own personal childhood, and the terms of this new beginning are fundamentally more commercially, theatrically, and imagistically determined than any notion of a true historical beginning. For Fassbinder in *Lili Marleen*, the black hole of World War II is best represented by a song; the confusion of Germany’s economic miracle by the remaking of *Sunset Boulevard* as *Veronika Voss*. For Herzog, the dark foreboding of Murnau’s *Nosferatu* would be transformed into a sexual thriller about renewed rebellion, brought to light by international stars Bruno Ganz and Isabelle Adjani.

Contemporary German film is certainly not solely constituted by
American friends, Academy Award winners, French cinéastes, and revamped Hollywood genres, but these figures and strategies have played a crucial and conscious role in establishing the reputation of Herzog and other leading lights of this otherwise disconnected group. Born in the middle of World War II, Herzog was born into a culture in crisis, and he as much as any German filmmaker realized that the terms of culture and individuality had to be adjusted to a new society in which both were redefined through commercial constraints. Herzog and Fassbinder may not have been speaking to each other by 1980, yet while ignoring each other at Cannes they seemed to have missed the irony of the shared reason for being there: their mutual ability to translate a tradition of individuality and art into consumer goods.

One might gloss this strained and contradictory relation with Hollywood circuits in Herzog's *Stroszek*, a somewhat bitter characterization of America as a land of dreams and disappointments. The film tells of the trials of Bruno S., the primitive non-communicative wild child who also stars in *The Mystery of Kaspar Hauser*. Frustrated and frightened by life in postwar Germany, Bruno and two equally alienated friends (a prostitute and an old man) leave for Wisconsin and a new life; once there, however, they soon discover that this land of opportunity is as constricted and commercially trivialized as any tourist sight in Germany. In one sense, this film is a marvelous dark parody of what images of America (made largely through Hollywood) represented to Herzog's generation and how their lure with open vistas was a false and destructive mirage. In another, it tells of the inevitable transformation of an old world into a new world where the commerce of materiality necessarily absorbs all. In *Stroszek* the chief source of resistance is the blank and awkwardly physical body of Bruno S., always misplaced in the cowboy hat or before a television set. Since language here has already been coopted as an auctioneer's babble, physical presence itself must battle material culture. From the German soldier Stroszek to the American Friend Stroszek Herzog's figure regresses from a mad visionary into a man maddened by materialism.

*Stroszek*, the story of a war child in America, might thus be allegorized as the tale of Herzog, the auteur who has chosen to engage contemporary movies as they are: as a body of images which has no anterior reality and which resists the posterior designation of language; as the body of an auteur who does not so much focus or disguise the institutional layers of the movie industry but parody a situation that remains the prominent commercial tactic in the movie industry today.
Producing Herzog

As an extreme version of Hollywood distribution tactics, Herzog's films precede themselves, established as their own origins even before they have begun. From the reports out of the jungles about personnel and production scandals to the pre-opening interviews and appearances at Telluride, Herzog hawks and hyps his movies in a manner merely more personal than Hollywood's (more like his friend and supporter Francis Coppola than Steven Spielberg). But where the hype of those more commercial products must necessarily disappoint if they are first to attract the largest of audiences, Herzog's movies assimilate, build on and complicate those preview images, forcing that audience to elide or forget the difference between the seeming and the real, the transparent and the opaque. Instead of disappointing an audience's desires when illusion falls before a flat reality, a Herzog movie attempts to sustain that pressure by never promising an object except as it becomes the impenetrable luxury of images. If the movies always produce themselves as obscure objects of desire which quickly fade into fairy tales, Herzog makes the continuing production of that desire in a solid reality the perverse terms of his films. Sometimes explicitly (La Soufrière), sometimes implicitly (Aguirre, Nosferatu), a Herzog film engages a viewer as a fellow producer of a staged world whose framework paradoxically only blocks that spectator's desire to see more.

For most audiences, this action means confronting Herzog's desire to transform the world into an impenetrable body with their own desire to assume or acquire that "obscene" body, not necessarily as a sense or significance but at least as a transitory, symbolic position. The production of most commercial films means creating an erotic phantom body that can never possibly materialize – no matter how many incarnations it promises (e.g. Rocky). Herzog's movies produce themselves as a singular, repeatedly created and destroyed body whose imagistic density and lack of a center (spread from the Canary Islands to Wisconsin) make them, to put it simply, extremely difficult to designate. They appear only as a perspective (his and ours) always producing itself and refusing the position it produces. If Hollywood films are basically childish adults who produce the child-in-us-all, Herzog's films become fully matured children who refuse to grow up but insist on regenerating themselves in the power of paternal desire. Even dwarfs start small, and Herzog's audience is constantly being asked to produce themselves as and against that same fully yet partly formed and deformed body.

The chronology of Herzog's films provides some of the best evidence
of how a body of gaps and inconsistencies forces this kind of irritatingly active and unsatisfied response. A classical filmmaker like Hitchcock could locate his audience through a fairly consistent use of character and genres which stabilize the innovations and difficulties of those films. Contemporary directors like Godard, even in his dramatic shifts from film to video, can develop a kind of intellectual subtext which allows for a modicum of predictability: viewers familiar with his work usually have some sort of articulated aesthetic or system of ideas to refer to and to base their judgments on. With Herzog’s films, however, the genres, characters, and images seem to present and contradict themselves with such a seemingly unmotivated opacity or naïveté, developing and taking their form from geography or physical coincidence, that viewers have difficulty pinpointing stable ideas or perspectives on which to base expectations. Like the carnivalesque side-show in *Kasper Hauser*, Herzog’s films display themselves like a dense microcosm presented by a master of ceremonies who, with each new show, forces the audience to stand back.

Certainly one can identify repeated motifs, such as the madman-manchild pairing of Klaus Kinski-Bruno S. or the opacity itself. Yet, like his use of the *Heimatfilm* tradition in *Heart of Glass* or his meticulous remake of a classic horror film as his *Nosferatu*, these motifs and traditional patterns appear usually only as red herrings, overdetermined MacGuffins without a referential structure to contain and resolve them. Most of Herzog’s films appear like Kasper Hauser in the town square: blank and immobile, looking askance, and carrying only the contradictory and impenetrable desire of wanting to recreate that original power of the father in the person of a fatherless son, wanting to be “a gallant rider like my father was before me.” These films aim at disassociating themselves from the very tradition that generates them and that they are generating; they stand aggressively innocent, taunting audiences to attempt to appropriate them. Thus, the audiences of the New York Film Festival which raised the first major exploitation charges against Herzog and *Even Dwarfs Started Small* in 1970 had to reverse themselves five years later to hail *Kasper Hauser* as a major work which would temporarily revise much of the initial distaste for this odd German filmmaker. Thus, the virtual disappearance of *Aguirre* and *Kasper Hauser* the very moment they appeared in their homeland could become the prelude for their later return to popular acclaim—after these films had successful European and American tours and established Herzog as an international director. Thus Herzog’s combative decision to make *Ballad of the Little Soldier*, a film about the oppression of the
Miskito Indians in Nicaragua, shortly after he had already infuriated leftists over charges of exploiting the natives used for *Fitzcarraldo*.

Indeed, this same sort of taunting contrariness and resistance might be located in the structure of his narratives which in themselves and as an opus consciously muddle that classic distinction between narrative and non-narrative form. While admitting the precariousness and artificiality of such oppositions as commercial cinema versus non-narrative or experimental film, the point here is that most viewers and critics implicitly recognize and employ them to situate themselves vis-à-vis a particular movie: to distinguish, for example, their expectations for the films of Hollis Frampton from those of Martin Scorsese or, closer to Herzog's home, the work of Werner Nekes from that of Volker Schlöndorff. With Herzog, however, this line and opposition wavers in practice as well as reception. Almost all the shorter films have, compared to the more commercial narrative, such a radical look and bizarre execution that, even when reviewed by the *New York Times*, no one would seriously attempt to align them with mainstream cinema. To try to categorize these same films within a tradition of ethnographic cinema does not, moreover, help much, resulting in bewilderment or, more often, outrage at the supposed brutality and manipulation of his subjects, be they preachers or auctioneers. In nearly all Herzog feature films, similarly, there is only the phantom of narrative and character, for this structure which so commonly provides the substance for the critical discussion and audience identification in most feature films here becomes almost invariably a shadow, a lure, or mere material for the film's larger argument. Audiences expecting more conventional direction often find themselves abandoned in non-narrative perspectives, just as fans of the experimental easily become annoyed with the sometimes grossly commercial trappings of the films. A telling juxtaposition of this confusion of realms is *Fitzcarraldo*. Thought by some to be one of Herzog's most prosaic movies, it nonetheless opens with an extraordinary sequence made in collaboration with Werner Schroeter, that marginalized experimenter with new narrative forms and a radically uncommercial artist whose work regularly informs much of the visionary excess of Herzog's films. Here the material luxury of the opera haunts and in some ways dwarfs the Hollywood stars that might otherwise anchor this movie. As an opus, in brief, this body of films seems to regress and progress without a real logic of development, unpredictably moving back and forth between putative experimental forms (associated with youth) and the fully developed narratives (of maturity).
Perhaps the most volatile and thorny issue when attempting to figure Herzog and his work is not, however, so much these formal questions but the ideological text and political reality that stubbornly display themselves in his films and practice. At least since Herzog's use of Bruno S. in *Kasper Hauser* and *Stroszek* (apparently moving him almost directly from an institution to a movie set and then letting him return to his factory job), Herzog has been under fire from various groups who have accused him of ruthlessly exploiting his subjects, of sanctimoniously hiding behind a poet's cape while using and discarding people and cultures as carelessly as a Hollywood production. Doubtless the most spectacular incident of this type occurred, amidst the debacle of problems that accompanied the shooting of *Fitzcarraldo*, when a local Indian tribe attacked Herzog's camp and burned it to the ground. Although both Herzog and Les Blank (who, along with Maureen Gosling, chronicled the making of the film in *Burden of Dreams*) claim innocence for the filmmaker, and although Amnesty International's investigation suggests that the political climate in the area and the resulting catastrophe were much too complex to assign blame simply to Herzog, the incident remains an emblem, for many, of Herzog's egomaniacal exploitation through film.

This single event has, for example, directly or indirectly inspired two filmic responses: Nina Gladitz's short film *Land of Bitterness and Pride* and John Boorman's slick and self-righteous *Emerald Forest*, where that caricature of Herzog (as a German photographer) is ritualistically slaughtered. While not wanting to minimize the concern, I believe that clichéd perceptions such as Boorman's or distortingly tendentious and historically naive accounts such as Gladitz's (equating Herzog's imbroglio with the local natives and Leni Riefenstahl's criminal exploitation of gypsies from concentration camps during the making of *Tiefland*) seem to do little but substantiate the worst implications of Herzog's aesthetic: even the accusers' truth is reduced to the material presence of the image. No one, I expect, would deny the many serious questions connected with Herzog's unusual film practices. No one could fail to recognize that the recent short on the Sandanistas' persecution of the Miskito Indians was begging for a political scandal. Yet, to isolate Herzog as some political perversion of film practice seems to me to be more romantic than any of Herzog's claims. Herzog's is a practice aimed unmistakably at calling attention to itself, mimicking an industry's tactics for self-promotion and representation; and, tragically, these tactics have often meant acting out, from *Greed* to *Apocalypse Now* or *The Battle of Chile*, the very standard and traditional
performance of film's struggle to conquer and capture another reality through the material of the medium. This is hardly meant to be an excuse for Herzog, but rather to claim that his practice must be seen in terms of a larger problematic that involves the manipulation of cinematic formulas of production and distribution. Those formulas have indeed been and are notoriously brutal toward their subjects on every level - the recent *Twilight Zone* fiasco is unusual only in the courtroom publicity; and Herzog's most dangerous and vulnerable position may be in extending his fiction of self and film into one of the most ethically reprehensible dimensions of commercial filmmaking.

Much more important and debatable, I believe, are the politics of the films themselves, for it is there that Herzog's dense play with the material of fiction at least becomes its own referent. These ideological dimensions of the Herzog text are explored in more detail by several of the contributors to this volume, but here I will at least signal some of the salient points. Specifically, the romantic quest which proves so inflammatory in Herzog's film practice is also the textual demon that even Herzog's most ardent admirers must confront: these are films and characters whose Quixotic megalomania often appears to promote such a disregard for history and society that both seem placed on a stage like building blocks for a child-man to construct and tear down. Most sophisticated viewers would not, without the very careful distinctions that are made by some of the contributors to this volume, equate Herzog's expressionistic roots and operatic flare with the fascist period that supposedly spawned Hitler from Caligari. Besides its lack of any historical sense, this point of view dismisses, perhaps too quickly, the possible irony in Herzog's narratives and visual tropes, an irony which may historicize the text in ways that are central to the politics of his vision. Other structures and positionings, though, seem less equivocal and more troublesome. For instance, however one might defend the revolutionary stance of Herzog's central characters in relation to the conventional, bourgeois society that surrounds them, the significance and the articulation of their radical ways of seeing become dependent on a kind of death, failure, or expulsion. Hence, the fatalism and moribundity that negatively attach themselves to Herzog's redemptive vision.²

Ultimately, I believe, how one answers these and other textual questions - about the films and the man - must lie in the significance and weight one gives to the action of irony in Herzog's work and in a definition of that irony. As an act of viewing or reading, irony traditionally depends, implicitly or explicitly, on contrasting contexts,
categories, perspectives, or interpretative levels (of reality, textual reference, etc.). In the 1920s, a Griffith film was normally not ironic, the captivated perspective of the spectator matching the perspective of the movie and both, ideally, reflecting a vision and ideology of the social world outside the theater. With some adjustment, the same generalization could apply to many Hollywood films today where there is frequently, in a movie like *Rambo*, a frightening coincidence of textual fiction and audience perspective. When filmic irony became more evident in the 1930s, the perceptual instability within a film, such as *The Thirty-Nine Steps* or *The Grand Illusion*, would usually be resolved by the formation of a different but normative perspective at the film’s conclusion. The 1950s and 1960s are, of course, the grand age of cinematic irony, when movies generated images of uncertainty and ambiguity that could usually only be resolved by the audience’s recourse to extra-cinematic contexts: the politics behind the semiotic and social reverberations that a Godard film might put into play; or the figure and language of the auteur that might circumvent and limit the wide-open spaces of *L’Avventura*. In these modernist forms, technical and textual actions destabilize significance within the film, and the ironic force of these actions demands that a spectator relocate a new significance outside the film. Traditional or modernist irony is thus usually a symbolic gesture in which images and the desires that encompass them are stabilized through some binary relation of one sort or another: between perspectives within a film, between a movie and the constellation of ideas surrounding an auteur, or between a filmic image and its audience’s attempt to designate that image.

With Herzog, however, irony may very well subvert any binary distinctions. Unlike that of a so-called materialist cinema (which is basically about language), this kind of irony would align Herzog with other contemporary directors like Terrence Malick, Chantal Akerman, or Nagisa Oshima who each in their very different ways have attempted to move beyond the literate irony of Godard and others using irony to reconstruct images as significance. Unlike those sophisticated ironists of language (whose politics nonetheless proved out of line with a naive medium), the narratives of these other filmmakers ironically juggle and undermine a variety of points of view, human and non-human alike, so that the stability of any perspective gives way to the indeterminant point of view of the physical image in and of itself. These images become entirely overdetermined images; and the narratives that vaguely contain them are appropriately often about children, forms of prostitution, and dehumanization through commercial and industrial repression. In
these films, setting so many materialized mises-en-scène against one another or subjecting the image to endless repetition that calls attention to the fabric of the image refuses the spectator the satisfaction of a homocentric perspective, while still positioning that spectator in narrative desire. The difficult irony implicit in this action is that it forces perceptual desire to confront its real object — the unsocialized acquisition of the world as material image, not language.

Like a child’s sense that the physical world is all an imagistic extension of self, this narrative and imagistic irony becomes a “regression” in that the material presence of the image moves to usurp the symbolic, socially determined distinctions of any single perspective. Irony operates here only as the consciousness of a desire for material luxury, where the desire for sense gets confused with the pleasure of the senses. If film without irony pretends to be history written in lightning, the history of cinema may thus have countered with three ironic variations on that writing as documentary: the normative irony that one finds in films like Buñuel’s *Land Without Bread*; the unstable irony that resolves itself in an articulate spectator, such as in Resnais’ *Night and Fog*; and the regressive irony of movies like Herzog’s *Ballad of the Little Soldier*, where the annoying lack of a perspective tells of the material consumption of children by the politics of image-making.

Since film does not have the privilege of literature which might, in its destruction or absorption of its linguistic vehicle, allow for the final establishment of a totally emptied, no point of view (such as with Beckett) or universal body (such as with Joyce), the context or controlling perspective that this irony demands must remain teetering on the commercial and critical apparatus of film itself. The extra-human perspective of the film aligns with either its producer’s (the auteur Herzog’s) or its audience’s, which is the necessary commercial recipient of the film. The problem with the first, however, is that the conventional auteurist stability may simply not be available with the Herzog character, unless one is anxious to construct motivation beyond the fictional figure of that character. From that figure one can get only gymnastic images creating a mise-en-abyme from the very commerce of auteurism, that is, an imagistic father who is above all else a child of the movies. If irony is to situate itself with the audience, on the other hand, this implies usually the larger perspective of a language or some other articulation removed from the hypnotic grip which Herzog’s cinema seems to struggle to maintain. A third option, however, might be the production of a position beyond the irony of the auteur or the extra-textual perspective of the audience, where what is being located
is finally the interpretative limits and capacity of a pre-linguistic viewer. This would be a regressive irony in that it works to place the spectator on the edge or at the brink of an acquisition of the world through images themselves: to make, in short, a fatherless child of a spectator standing before a contemporary art that is increasingly defined as the commerce of childhood.

This kind of regressive irony is, however, always a dangerous game. At its best, it forces a viewer to participate, as a producer, in a mimicry of his or her own desire for substantial images. At its worst, it resists any consciousness of those desires or any allowance for the social and political variety implicit in them. In Herzog’s cinema, the tension in this danger commonly appears in the guise of a struggle between humor and death or, more revealingly, between a literate subtext and an inarticulate Other. His characters, like his films, are again and again drawn to the powers of language as a vehicle for dramatizing, producing, and communicating their desires, but, at the same time, they are revolted, like Kaspar Hauser before Lord Stanhope, before language’s murderously reductive properties. At its best, the irony of Herzog’s cinema maneuvers its audience to where it would enunciate and articulate its regressive relation to modern images in the substance of images themselves. At its worst, that irony can never admit an articulation and ultimately allows that audience little response except some version of leaping into cacti.

In a sense, each of the essays in this volume engages and dramatizes this annoying tension attached to a regressive irony, a tension that moves between a language of some sort (history, literature, politics, etc.) and the hypnotic substance of images. In their very different ways, each confronts to what extent an articulate subtext might or might not make Herzog’s project more than just a teutonic mimicry of Hollywood. Although the range of styles and approaches represented here is quite broad, all the chapters go well beyond the inarticulate exclamations of most journalistic reviews (“mesmerizing!”, “pretentious!”) where even negative opinions seem to pay homage to Herzog by adopting the poetically empty idiom of How Much Wood Would a Woodchuck Chuck. No one eats their shoe here, and each achieves much more than reproducing Herzog’s films in their own image.

These are, first and foremost, productive readings; and if this kind of literate response runs counter to the spirit of Herzog’s images, it can, I believe, ironically only benefit them. Herzog has made a practice of assimilating language and commentary with the structures of cinema: films about his films; cross-references within films; narrativizations of
scripts; interviews as performances; and so on. In contrast, these writings aim to locate points of view outside that cinematic perspective, to fragment the monolithic spectacle of images which has generated the critical impasse sheltering and obstructing Herzog's films from any articulate focus on them. The organization and structure of the book move from the fictions of Herzog the auteur (Horak) to larger questions about Herzog's heritage and philosophical underpinning. This ordering does not, of course, imply that the analysis of Herzog's portrait or the "readings" at the heart of the volume are not equally "arguments." It is in part, rather, a pedagogical strategy that evolves from more focused to more general – and sometimes more abstract – arguments, from questions about the historical conditions of viewing a Herzog film (Vogel) to questions about Herzog's place in a tradition of German idealism and its romantic ideology (Rentschler and Singer). Whereas the last two chapters, with a common focus on Heart of Glass, crystallize some of the major contentions about Herzog's cinema, the preceding chapters engage, in the context of a single film often, a variety of other pertinent and resonant issues: the relation of the short films and longer narratives (Van Wert), Herzog's connection with an avant-garde (Koch), thematic and formal developments within a singularly consistent aesthetic (Benelli), the place of language and literature in these films (Peucker), questions of sexual representation (Mayne), and the difficulty of Herzog's comic mise-en-scène (Elsaesser).

Although there has been no attempt to cover every Herzog film in detail, each argument does, I believe, extend through Herzog's entire opus. Ideally, these essays are disseminations whose occasional oppositions to Herzog's films and to each other are the center of the book. If Herzog's films offer the pleasures and visions of a man-child made through images – like Kaspar Hauser and Nosferatu, before and beyond historical age – these essays are quintessentially an effort to return Herzog to writing, history, and the aesthetic determinants that he and his characters sometimes seem to reduce to toys. For better or worse, Herzog's cinema must stand the test of all cinema: can it survive its productions through history and language; can it sustain and produce a body of work outside itself?

A patriarch of flowers

Rainer Werner Fassbinder often portrayed himself in his films as a sleazy, underworld figure, on the edge of the main drama which he both supported and subverted; his mother occasionally appeared as the
fitting familial counterpart in those films. With his daughter as his
dfimetic reflection in Hitler, a Film from Germany, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
has postured himself like a messianic general whose industrial war-
machine becomes the mammoth operatic films with which he attempts
to conquer bourgeois complacency. To a certain extent, these are
neatly appropriate self-images of two German filmmakers with tenden-
cies similar to Herzog’s: one, an obsessively brilliant participant in the
industry and culture of images he so much needed to transform; the
other, a visionary experimenter who claims to battle film history and its
audiences by making dense projections of a child’s mind. Herzog has
much of both images in his operatic persona and cinema, equally
cought in the bind of wanting to revolutionize a medium whose heri-
tage may be too populist. Yet, the key image for Herzog is not found in
any self-dramatized cameo, auteurial exaggeration, or even in his own
disembodied narrative voice, but in a reverse-angled performance, out
of context, highlighted as the remembered father in Paul Cox’s Man of
Flowers.

In this Australian movie about an aged recluse whose pleasures are
the sensual imagination — fetishized, decadent, and transformative —
Herzog appears as the dream-memory of a mute and oppressive father.
He is the essence of patriarchal discipline which bars the son from his
incestuous desires in order to safeguard the father’s own lofty Victorian
image. In the midst of this inbred, luxuriant film, Herzog rises briefly
like a ghost, promoting and anchoring the ephemeral pleasures of the
images that surround the son or, more precisely, of the images that
embrace an old father-figure’s memory of himself as son. Herzog, the
father of the child: a fiction constructed both within the film and by the
film; the imagistic father of another patriarch who, like a child, builds
aesthetic objects out of the violence of a society’s images of itself.
“Herzog” becomes the lost source of personal narratives, a fleeting
mirage that seems not to participate in history but to create it for
others. Like both the father he plays and the son he oversees, Herzog
as the father of the father, the original patriarch, becomes, in the
narcissism of this relationship, also the child as father to the child. His
silence in this sequence is that of the simultaneous father and child of
film history.

If Herzog shares Fassbinder’s contradictory position within the film
industry, he seems to do so without the social guilt. If he tends toward
Syberberg’s megalomania, it is in the guise of the personal and idio-
syncratic rather than the cultural spectacle. Comparatively, Herzog is
the unsocialized and narcissistic son. His films are exotic flowers,
fetishized by and through him as the auteur-father who constructs himself from his position within the game of the film industry. For Herzog, the cinema is a circus; the spectators all children; the politics fundamentally a function of narcissism. At this circus, he is, I think, no Caligari and the spectacle he invokes is no Cesare, since both of these had and have already been constricted too much by a naturalized and overdetermined history. The challenge and difficulty of Herzog may be simply that he is the essential fatherless child of contemporary cinema: where politics and history tend to vaporize in the substance of the images which represent them and where the critical viewer is always and only threatened by his or her own fantasies.

Notes


3 In this sense, one might point to a variety of cinematic children: Gates of Heaven, Perfumed Nightmare, Burden of Dreams, and even perhaps Apocalypse Now.

Works cited


Greenberg, Alan, Herbert Achternbusch and Werner Herzog (1976) Heart of Glass, Munich, Skellig.