

A Form of Proto-Cinema

Aesthetics of Werner Herzog's Documentary Essayism

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Looking at the thirty-thousand-year-old drawings found in the Chauvet Cave, Werner Herzog, in his *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), guides the audience with his voice-over to imagine the Palaeolithic period. He presumes that “the play of light and shadow” from torches had an effect on these images. He also reflects on the aura of the cave by sharing with the viewer that his team “were overcome by a strange irrational sensation as if [they] were disturbing the Palaeolithic people in their work [...] It felt like eyes upon [Herzog and his team].” Rather than pursuing an objective documentary truth, Herzog, throughout the film, questions how to contain the Chauvet cave visually by using film as medium. Early in the film, he points out that these animal figures were drawn with eight legs, suggesting movement: “For them, the animals perhaps appeared moving, living [...] almost a form of proto-cinema.” For Herzog, these drawings felt like “frames from an animated film.” This statement reflects the filmmaker’s attempt “to expand cinema beyond its historically developed language and modes of looking”, which, as Koepnick suggests, “complicate[s] what we today should consider an image in the first place.” We borrow Herzog’s use of the term “proto-cinema” to refer to his pristine, unique, original form of essay filmmaking that centres on his cinephilic, performative engagement with documentary as genre.

This discussion capitalizes upon the various aesthetic aspects embedded in Herzog’s filmmaking – from the on-screen (re)presentation³ of his documentary subjects’ urge to create and re-invent, to his off-screen interventional address at the filmed material. We discuss the ways in which Herzog turns the seemingly factual things he documented into questions and uncertainties through a

series of artful acts and “proto-cinema” gestures. What make this transformation possible especially in the films *Grizzly Man* (2005), *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007) and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010) are the filmmaker’s persistent interventions – both as director and as participant observer – in the pro-filmic events as well as his stylised touches to the narratives during post-production including his editing decisions, use of sound and voice-over narration. The subject matters that these documentaries originally deal with multiply and turn into remote questions that are not merely voiced by the filmmaker’s on- and off-screen comments, but also implied through his aesthetics of filmmaking. Rather than reinforcing a documentary truth claim, Herzog’s subjective interventions in each film create an alternate narrative of questions and uncertainties that challenge and co-exist with these otherwise participatory documentaries. The story of Timothy Treadwell’s passionate bonding with grizzly bears in *Grizzly Man*, the encounter with the travellers and inhabitants of Antarctica in *Encounters at the End of the World*, and the pro-filmic enactment of witnessing the Palaeolithic drawings of the Chauvet Cave (and its enthusiasts) in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* go beyond documentation in Herzog’s narration. The filmmaker’s essayistic approach here transforms documentary spaces and settings into sites of cinephilic encounters and explorations.

Recalling the “formal-essayistic modes” that Timothy Corrigan identifies in his quasi-historical survey of the essay film – namely (i) “expressive portrayal,” (ii) “travel/ogue,” (iii) “diaries,” (iv) “editorial” and (v) “refractive cinema [as filmic interrogation]”⁴ – we argue that Herzog’s filmmaking relates to these modes in an oblique – if not ambivalent – way. Despite Herzog’s insistent refusal of such distinctions between documentary and fiction, the wider context of

these films' circulation as documentaries also reflects this ambivalent position. In this paper, we explore the aesthetic intricacies of Herzog's documentary essayism and argue that it is primarily Herzog's subjectivity as a filmmaker and as a cinephile that defines his essayistic approach. Demonstrating characteristics from each of Corrigan's modes but not fully identifying with any of them, Herzog's subjectivity, we contend, emerges as impersonal and distant, which is an authorial approach unique, if not contradictory, to essay film.⁵ Moreover, we argue that this impersonal subjectivity produces a paradoxical position for Herzog, allowing his viewpoint to be interpreted in conflicting ways.

Our main aim in this piece is to provide a critical account of Herzog's three films, namely *Grizzly Man*, *Encounters at the End of the World* and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*. These films are shot and edited as "open texts"⁶ yielding multiple interpretations, mainly achieved by the recurring patterns in Herzog's essayistic approach to his documentary subjects including the people interviewed, the places visited and the themes explored. Through a critical reading of these patterns, we aim to focus on the operation of Herzog's subjectivity as a filmmaker and a cinephile, to question the impersonal mode in his authorial style and to lay out the potential paradoxes of interpretation in these three essay films. The following discussion explores Herzog's essayism in three headings: (i) directorial interferences; (ii) cinephilic gestures, and (iii) recurring themes within the intersectional treatment of characters and landscapes. Although these headings are overlapping and inconclusive, we choose to group the most visible elements together to construct a critical framework in which to discuss the various aesthetic aspects of Herzog's essayism.

"Is this a great moment?":

Directorial interferences

Bazin once referred to Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (1957), as "an essay documented by film." Perhaps a more appropriate term for Herzog's films we discuss here would be "an essay narrated by a documentary." Through the documented encounters of places and people, Herzog selects what he finds fascinating and he weaves a story. Thus, Herzog's formal choices in filmmaking turn these films into "[films] of affective experience"⁸ contesting the generic index of documentary. These choices operate as stylistic interferences against the documented encounters, which, as Steingröver also suggests, helps Herzog construct "an affective experience for the spectator through carefully constructed characters that highlight the themes of mystery and tragedy, effective musical choices, and skilful montage of archival and current footage."⁹ We will start our discussion by exploring the ways in which the filmmaker constructs and contests his chosen documentary settings.

In *Encounters at the End of the World*, Herzog witnesses a random conversation between two marine biologists about three new species that they have just discovered under the ice. From behind the camera, he unexpectedly intervenes, in an attempt to grasp an evidence of obsession and/or desire found within the depths of this discovery: "is this a great moment," he asks. The scientists stop speaking and turn their head around towards the camera, to where he is standing off-screen. Herzog's question punctuates the narrative in the manner of a climax; yet, the moment looks nothing like a climax from a fiction film: an ordinary office dominated by pale yellow walls and two expressionless men muttering in a low voice. Looking for the right words, one of the scientists hesitantly replies to Herzog and confirms that it is a great moment indeed, but the dull tone in the scientists' voices and their choices of words imply otherwise, that moments like these are trivial in their profession. Herzog's insertion to a naturally developing conversation is significant in many ways. He is seemingly dissatisfied with where the dialogue is going and the form with which it is held. Moreover, his unhesitant manner indicates his entitlement. As a director he can recount, divert or even fictionalize at his own will. Yet, Herzog's presence in this scene and his impulsive style is as natural as the conversation between the two scientists. This abruptness is one of the key features that define Herzog's subjectivity, which prioritizes *not the personal but the directorial*. This moment reveals Herzog's directorial management of the style and the subject of performance and dialogue in the film. As he shifts from being a participant observer to a filmmaker in moments like these, the film becomes a documentary in the process of being narrativized into an essay.

The sequence from *Encounters*, which we touched upon above, is one of Herzog's many other directorial interferences that include especially his interviews and voice-over narrations. There are interrupted, underlined, or edited and even re-voiced moments in these films. In *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, he steers the conversation away from a scientist's thoughts about the cave paintings and directs him to talk about his past in a circus as a juggler. Talking about his "main goal to create stories about what could have happened in that cave during the past," the scientist/archaeologist is interrupted by Herzog: "it is like creating the phone directory of Manhattan, four million precise entries but do they dream? Do they cry at night? What are their hopes? What are their families? You will never know from a phone directory." Such directorial interventions are to provoke the interviewed subjects to reveal their personal investments rather than merely report their professional opinion and knowledge. In *Encounters*, for example, an unexpected off-screen comment about a geologist's old-fashioned costume overrides the subject of volcanoes. Having shown footage from an expedition that took place in Antarctica

thirty years ago, Herzog's commentary, as Steingröver also suggests, treats the geologist's "anachronistic British tweed jacket [as a signifier] of the relative calm of modern scientific methodology" when compared to what Herzog considers as "the thrill of past dangerous adventures."¹⁰ The voice-over commentary in *Grizzly Man*, on the other hand, runs like a professional filmmaker's criticism of a novice's recordings from time to time. These interruptions express Herzog's subjectivity more than anything else; his domineering presence emerges mainly as a director delineating the focus and the scope of his narratives, controlling performances and evaluating filming styles. The repetitive emphasis on his subjectivity as filmmaker allows the films to be interpreted as works of fiction in which he is also a lead performer, albeit invisible most of the times. His voice (generally lacking a visible body on screen) makes him omnipresent; he can be behind the camera, in the editing room or seemingly sitting next to you in the movie theatre.

Referring to Jeong and Andrew's Bazinian argument that Herzog's *Grizzly Man* provides the spectator with a space "to think about the unthinkable,"¹¹ Corrigan suggests that such thematic focus on the unintelligible mobilizes the essayistic voice-over to "pinpoint the limit of language and voice in the articulation of experiential space."¹² What is at stake in the use of voice-over here, according to Brigitte Peucker, is "not the referential dimension of language, but rather its affective, lyrical function: Herzog is present in this text as a voice that haunts it, that produces affect."¹³ The filmmaker's voice subverts the documentary setting by dramatizing his subjects' inhabitation of it. Similarly, Steingröver argues that Herzog's use of the voice-over is one of the key formal strategies to contest the "commercial cable channel aesthetic [from within]," and to sustain and dramatize the complexity of his subjects' desires rather than to contain these in naming them.¹⁴ Not "encourag[ing the viewer] to ignore, in the name of seamless narration, possible discrepancies between a speaker's account and accompanying visual evidence," Herzog's approach, as in Paul Arthur's discussion on the role of commentary in essay film, "tend[s] to exploit rather than smooth over such contradictions."¹⁵

These directorial interferences are not only limited to Herzog's guiding of how and what his subjects want to communicate, his tone of voice and choice of words; they can also be found in his style of editing, sound, music, cinematography and *mise en scène*. One of the most striking examples here is Herzog's use of camera, light and sound in *Cave*. Exploring the modes of embodied spectatorship in Herzog's editing and cinematography in *Cave*, Roger Cook suggests the filmmaker's use of camera light "reproduces the effect of torches [which] enables Herzog to include shots from different chambers in the cave without breaking continuity [owing to] the intervals of darkness from the shadows passing over the walls

... serv[ing] to mask the cuts and mak[ing] the sequence appear to be one continuous shot."¹⁶ The sense of continuity and immersion Herzog generates here is further dramatized by his use of sound, voice-over and music. By using simulated hearbeats in the soundtrack, Herzog reanimates the archaeologist Jean Clottes's earlier invitation in the film to "listen to the silence ... and perhaps even our own heartbeat" in the cave. The four-minute sequence revealing the drawings in shadow and light is followed by Herzog's voiceover: "Is this their heartbeat or ours?" In his treatment of the cave as the microcosm of cinema, Herzog's voice followed by long takes of the drawings "spurs a strong sense of co-presence with the early cave-goers."¹⁷ Through Herzog's formal choices and interventions, the documentary subject turns into a site of embodied experience and of the filmmaker's audiovisual statement on civilization, evolution, aesthetics and cinema.

Herzog's meticulous design of the *mise en scène*, suggestive of a fiction filmmaker, is apparent in many scenes. Choices of locations where he likes to film people as well as the ways in which he diverts attention to props and costumes using his voice and camera evoke figures of speech in writing. The details in the layout of the scenes add a sarcastic or humorous tone to his commentary, enhancing the layers of meaning in the film and alluding to his personal viewpoint as a filmmaker. One such controlled scene is in *Encounters: The South Pole* scientists that we witness doing their jobs solemnly just a few scenes back, are now enjoying a film in front of a small computer screen. In one long take, the camera enters their cabin, and slowly approaches the row of five scientists on chairs at the back, revealing another one lying on a stretcher. Before it turns towards the screen, we hear a voice from the film: "Science has agreed that unless something is done and done quickly, man as the dominant species of life on Earth will be extinct within a year." Then, Herzog's voice-over interferes as the camera shows the scientists in close-up sipping their drinks, looking to the screen. He explains that the lead scientist there likes to show science fiction films to the group, and reminds us that many of these researchers believe that life on this planet is under threat due to environmental change. "Nature, they predict, will regulate us," Herzog says. Meanwhile the camera turns towards the screen to show the title credits of the Gordon Douglas film *Them!* (1954). In *Them!*, there is a similar narrative; the saviours of the planet are the good scientists who are brave enough to take every action to clear the Earth from the attack of the giant ants. Unlike the researchers' previous scenes in front of the camera where they seem comfortable, all eyes are fixed on the screen, apparently being told by Herzog not to ever look at the camera this time.

A detailed look at this scene will reveal other controlled *mise en scène* elements. *Them!* actually plays



Encounters at the End of the World

on a new MacBook Pro that is connected to the old Compaq screen, visible only for a few seconds when the camera enters the cabin. Perhaps Herzog just enjoys the Compaq's framing of the film aesthetically, or he makes a connection between the worn out screen and the film's old-fashioned narrative. Why are the South Pole scientists so hypnotised by this film when its serious dialogue and horror/sci-fi subject matter is laughable at times? Moreover, this is not actually *Them!*'s opening sequence that they are watching, but a custom-made trailer, which seemingly bears the dialogue and characters that Herzog finds significant to his own narration. Herzog's carefully crafted encounter between *Them!*'s scientists and the South Pole researchers creates a sarcastic tone in the film, which can be interpreted both as a joke or a mockery depending on the spectators' viewpoints, as the filmmaker's own intention of such a controlled scene is unclear, even from his voice-over narration.

Herzog's subjectivity as the filmmaker is made evident through his voice, through the way he captures people and landscapes on camera, through his choices of selecting and eliminating what images and sounds to use, all of which emphasize an obvious control of the subject matter. Herzog approaches his "documentary subjects" with specific directorial intentions, just as a fiction film director approaches actors, props or sets. The personal

that emerges from these directorial interferences is only a personal interest and tendency in similar subject matters and/or characters. Otherwise, Herzog's presence does not reveal his "self." His commentary is neither autobiographical nor personal; in fact he avoids intimacy and preserves a certain distance. In other words, there is a Herzog present in all these films, but his subjectivity is confined to his being a filmmaker. His voice is not "self-interrogatory" as Lopate marks for a "true essayist,"¹⁸ nor "self-searching."¹⁹ Perhaps the personal operates only to the degree of finding a personal truth about his selected themes via possibilities of filmmaking. Needless to say, Herzog pronounces the words "I," "my" and "me" in his voice-over, but only to refer to himself as a director. This usage does not resemble an essayistic voice that exclaims, "I am myself the matter of my book,"²⁰ nor does it "strongly implicate a 'you' [...] to participate and share the enunciator's reflections."²¹ Herzog is not expressive; his search is not directed inwards, but outwards. People he interviews are more expressive than Herzog ever is of himself. He is bending the "fact" in the documentary image to reach a "truth." In addition to curiosity, manipulation and sense of humour embedded in the interventions we explored above, cinephilia is key to understand Herzog's presence in these films.



Cinephilic gestures

Herzog once explained that “since [his] very earliest days as a filmmaker [he has] to a certain degree worked in a similar way by transforming things that are physically there into more intensified, elevated and stylized images.”²² One of his definitive statements about cinema is his rejection of a separation between documentary and fiction, but his insistence on the distinction between fact and truth. In “The Minnesota Declaration”²³ (1999), which is also titled as “Truth and fact in documentary cinema,” Herzog criticizes *cinéma vérité* directors for confusing fact and truth in claiming that “poetic, ecstatic truth [...] can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization.”²⁴ In this sense, Herzog’s documentaries become essays of his own search for truth that is not only about his screen subjects but also about filmmaking.²⁵

Analyzing Herzog’s essayism, Corrigan states: “If Herzog’s subjects typically act out the strain between the theatrics of desire and the resistant surfaces of the world, his voice becomes the supportive, mediating and interfering intellect that, in its wonderful reticence, does not and cannot resolve that tension.”²⁶ We argue that Herzog’s enactment of “[the voice of] the interfering intellect” which seems to also enjoy its failure of narrative closure reveals an agency that is not autobiographical or self-reflexive in its conventional sense. The “expressive subjectivity” here is Herzog-the-filmmaker. However, the experience that is supposed to “test” this subjectivity is not primarily Herzog’s personal exchange with his eccentric characters on-screen nor their ecstatic experience but Herzog’s experience of the aesthetic (and cinematographic) challenge posed by his chosen documentary subject.

We argue that the core aspect of Herzog’s essayism

in these films is filmmaking itself. Herzog makes meaning of the world through films and filmmaking. This is a mode of cinephilia, especially evident in *Grizzly Man* where he delivers a cinematic “reading” of long takes of nature from Treadwell’s camera almost in a Bazinian celebration of realism. Moreover, he criticizes Treadwell for having missed these beautiful images “in his action movie mode.” In the same film, Herzog also comments on Treadwell’s performance, and through Treadwell’s recordings he tries to extract a personality for him:

Timothy used his camera as a tool to get his message across. Sometimes his approach was very playful. [...] But as a filmmaker, he was methodical – often repeating takes 15 times. With himself as the central character, he began to craft his own movie something way beyond wildlife film. [...] In his action movie code, Treadwell probably didn’t realize its seemingly empty moments had a strange secret beauty. Sometimes images themselves develop their own mysterious stardom. Beyond his posings, camera was his omnipresent companion. But increasingly it became something more. He started to scrutinize his innermost being, his demons, his exhilarations. Facing the lens of the camera took on the quality of a confessional.

Herzog delivers a criticism of film and performance in the manner of a lecturer, emphasizing the most notable moments. This commentary is also exemplary of the distance he maintains between himself and the audience. The tone and the address is authoritative rather than personal or intimate, echoing the voice-over commentaries in conventional nature/wild-life documentaries.

In both of the films *Encounters* and *Cave*, Herzog chooses to insert sections from other films to comment on his own images. The questions that arouse his curiosity about making a film in the South Pole in *Encounters* seem to be prompted by his cinephilia. Over images from old cowboy films, Herzog's voice asks: "Why is it that human beings put on masks or feathers to conceal their identity? And why do they saddle horses and feel the urge to chase the bad guy?" Even the drawing of a chimp at the end of this scene that shows him on a goat "riding off into the sunset" reminds us of a typical ending in the Western genre. Similarly, during his conversation with the archaeologist Geneste on the Palaeolithic drawings in Chauvet Cave and the mythological origins of "the creative desire, the mankind's response to its self-image and its invention of figuration", Herzog cuts to the "Bojangles of Harlem" sequence from George Steven's film *Swing Time* (1936), where Fred Astaire is tapdancing with his three enlarged shadows on the wall. Herzog's cut here, as Lutz Koepnick also argues, is to "define [and emphasise] the proto-cinematic aspects of cave art".²⁷

Reminding that Herzog documents the researchers' astonishment with the Chauvet Cave by situating their experiences as embodied spectatorship, Cook suggests that Herzog fashions the cave "as a return to the source of cinema and, in doing so, takes on the role of a cinematic shaman, performing for his viewers much the same function as the ceremonial masters of the Palaeolithic might have done in their time."²⁸ What Cook sees in Herzog's exploration of "how the cinematic image may fare as a conduit leading back to the inner vision of the Palaeolithic cave-goer"²⁹ could be interpolated, we contend, to the filmmaker's cinephilic investment in the explorers of the South Pole in *Encounters* and his admiration of Timothy Treadwell's urge to film and document his companionship with the grizzly bears in *Grizzly Man*. Commenting on Treadwell's footage, Herzog admits that Treadwell "captured such glorious improvised moments the likes of which the studio directors with their union cruise can never dream of." Amazed by the surprising arrival of two foxes into Treadwell's frame and his improvisation in the footage, Herzog continues: "Now the scene seems to be over but as a filmmaker sometimes things fall into your lap which you couldn't expect, never even dream of ... there is something like an inexplicable magic of cinema." While Herzog treats the cave-goers of Palaeolithic period primarily as artists and image producers, he approaches Treadwell as a filmmaker. In both *Grizzly Man* and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, Herzog's voice of "the interfering intellect" becomes a subject (or the "first-person" voice of his own essay) when addressed as a cinephile and a filmmaker who discovers the "inexplicable magic of cinema" in landscapes and his characters' passionate inhabitation of them.

Corrigan formulates essay film "as a testing of expressive subjectivity through experiential encounters

in a public arena the product of which becomes the figuration of thinking or thought as a cinematic address and a spectatorial response."³⁰ Similarly Nora Alter writes, "the essay film can be grasped as an audiovisual performance of theory and criticism executed within and by the filmic text."³¹ Corrigan's and Alter's focus here on "the cinematic address" while conceptualizing the essay film seems to resonate with what Herzog's films are enacting through their cinephilic mode.

Recurring Themes: Pursuits of inner and outer landscapes

In one of his interviews, Herzog explains that he "like[s] to direct landscapes just as [he likes] to direct actors and animals."³² In an early example, *Aguirre, Wrath of God* (1972), the Peruvian Amazons are presented as uncanny and scary, almost in partnership with Klaus Kinski in the lead role. The abandoned shopping mall in the science-fiction mockumentary *The Wild Blue Yonder* (2005), in terms of its colour, location and shape, is in disharmony with the surrounding vast desert, symbolising the human beings' conflicting existence on the planet. The fake alien in the film, Brad Dourif, claims that one of the biggest sins of humanity is to climb on top of the mountains just for the fun of it, destroying their sublimity and dignity. In Dourif's observations lie some of the essential questions that Herzog repeatedly seeks answers for. "What is the fascination that drives [mountain climbers] up to the peaks like addicts," he asks in *The Dark Glow of The Mountains* (1984), "aren't these mountains and peaks like something deep within us all?"³³ In all the three films that we explore here, Herzog uses landscapes with direct references to the inner visions of the characters, which also support the main themes that emerge in his essayism.

Over the image of the glaciers of the Alaskan peninsula in *Grizzly Man*, the voice-over remarks: "This gigantic complexity of tumbling ice and abysses separated Treadwell from the world out there. And more so, it seems to me that this landscape in turmoil is a metaphor of his soul [...] What drove Timothy into the wild?" The roots of his passion and obsession about the grizzly bears is what Herzog is after, and throughout the film, the images of the Alaskan landscape with its natural inhabitants shot from Treadwell's camera, appear as a warning sign to him. Along with the commentary, Herzog portrays a man in delirium, editing together the shots that show him in close encounters with the bears while they are hunting and fighting. His presence in the bears' territory, for Herzog, signifies a crossing of boundaries. Even though Treadwell frankly speaks in front of the camera explaining how much he has learned to respect the bears and that this land is his land, Herzog introduces the landscape as an unwelcoming host and concludes in his voice-over commentary that Treadwell



“left the confinements of his humanness.” The choice of shots showing his solitude in the vast fields, his moments of extreme rage and his conversations with the animals all support Herzog’s viewpoint and prepare the spectators for the anticipated death.

Likewise, in *Encounters*, his primary interest is to uncover the reasons why people end up in a remote place like this. In the film’s opening scene, he asks, “who were the people I was going to meet in Antarctica at the end of the world, what were their dreams?” In one scene, he films a scientist silently observing the penguins on their territory from afar. He is a reticent man, as described by Herzog, who does not give satisfactory answers to Herzog’s questions about “homosexuality or insanity among penguins.” Turning his camera to a so-called deranged penguin that heads towards the mountains instead of the sea, the filmmaker asks “but why” as if to emphasize the desire to know and the unlikely possibility to obtain a definite answer while suggesting through the imagery the extraordinariness of the landscape that cannot be contained even on film.

In an attempt to imagine the people that inhabited the Chauvet Cave thousands of years ago, Herzog raises similar concerns: “but do they dream? Do they cry at night? What are their hopes?” He and the scientists he films in and outside the cave imagine what life was like in

this landscape. Being pristine, sublime, and untouchable, the paintings in the cave trigger in all the people involved a desire to tell stories about them. Through his questions during the interviews, Herzog brings out identities other than scientists in an attempt to steer the conversation from scientific facts to how they understand and make meaning out of the cave in different ways. From Herzog’s narration, it can be inferred that the shared passion to understand “what constitutes humanness”³⁴ is what brings people into the cave. Landscape, in Herzog’s filmmaking, becomes a thematic tool that triggers a cinephilic sensibility for Herzog to speculate on the “inner landscapes” of his characters dead or living. As Gandy also argues, “landscape emerges as a dramatic provocation for Herzog and his cinematic protagonists: an existential motif for mortality that contrasts the ephemerality of human life with the indifference and infinitude of nature.”³⁵

Most of the questions that Herzog asks are unattainable; nevertheless, within the durations of the films they are tested against the backdrop of the landscapes both as places that people visit or inhabit and as cinematic locations. The Alaskan landscape that Timothy Treadwell lives for many summers is the home of grizzly bears; the South Pole is “the end of the world” and “it sometimes feels like [the moon];”³⁶ Chauvet Cave has been

sealed for thirty thousand years and now it has restricted entry. Filming in these extraordinary locations, Herzog does not only document their specificities, but uses landscapes as conflicts, metaphors, subjects or even characters, which play constitutive roles in a mode of essayism that at least indirectly and partially reflects the director's position.

Treadwell's transgression of the boundaries between human and animal – which Herzog finds “anti-nature” – and his moments of madness and ecstasy are similar to the South Pole scientists' obsession with understanding and containing nature by finding facts in *Encounters*. On the other hand, the anthropologists, art historians and geologists of the Chauvet Cave in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, who try to make meaning out of these pristine cave paintings and “write stories” with them are not that different from the director himself. Herzog's films are pursuits of a truth – not facts, as criticised in his Minnesota Declaration – of inner and outer landscapes of characters, especially through instances of madness, ecstasy and obsession, which are themes that Herzog is fascinated with in his entire career as a filmmaker (of both documentaries and fiction films), along with religion, science, nature, philosophy and spirituality. All these themes are intertwined and reveal themselves through the complexity of characters and landscapes, which ultimately signal a pointlessness in human endeavour.

Roger F. Cook calls this search for inner landscapes a “motif” recurring in many of Herzog's films, and writes that Herzog “concedes that we will never be able to reconstruct a picture of their inner lives.”³⁷ Ultimately, there are considerable parallels between Herzog's filmmaking practice and his characters' inner and outer landscapes, their desires to understand, rationalize and contain the physical world to the point of transgression.³⁸ The same themes surface in the exposure of his cinematic desire that pushes him to film inside the Chauvet Cave, under icebergs in Antarctica and on top of active volcano mountains. Timothy Corrigan analyzes *Grizzly Man* as a travel essay, a category which *Encounters* and *Cave* seem to resonate with. He writes, “since the essayistic subject is a self continually in the process of investigating and transforming itself, one of the experiential encounters that most generally test and reshape that subject are, naturally and culturally, the spaces of the world.”³⁹ In relation to how Herzog's cinematic desire shows parallels with his documentary subjects' desires, his choices of landscapes are significant. It is not only Herzog that travels “elsewhere” and creates an essay out of it; the people he chooses to interview share the same experience with him as being “temporary visitors.”

“[E]ssayists,” Corrigan writes, “have explored that elsewhere across new and familiar lands, travelling natural and unnatural geographies and temporarily inhabiting small and large places. Through this process of being elsewhere, that self becomes another and a

different self, and the travel essay in particular has been a notable literary and cinematic practice that has discovered complex ideological and psychological significance through the journey, the walk, or the exploration.”⁴⁰ The transformation of the self, a characteristic of the essay, is something that Herzog shares with his documentary subjects who are also travellers or explorers foreign to these lands. Alaskan landscape is a character in *Grizzly Man*, which will refuse human adjustment and will only accommodate the animals in their natural surroundings. No matter how much Treadwell thinks he is in harmony with this landscape, it will not surrender to him, steering the narrative to its main conflict. Meanwhile, Herzog's interviews on location are limited to the side characters. Just as Treadwell has no control over the national park, Herzog struggles to write his essay with footage shot by his protagonist. The South Pole and the Chauvet Cave are as mysterious and uncooperative as the park in Alaska in the sense that they neither provide clear answers, nor easily accommodate the people who arrive within their boundaries.⁴¹ Experiencing similar hardships with his characters, Herzog's transformation emerges as a philosophical essay centred on his favourite themes rather than the documentation of these lands and their people.

The inner landscapes of Herzog's interviewees are also disclosed and emphasized through the details of their costumes, mementoes, bodily gestures, faults or perfections. Most of these people have multiple identities revealed with subtitles on the screen: the cook in *Encounters* is also a filmmaker; the driver is a philosopher. One of the archaeologists in *Cave* was a circus juggler once, another a musician. These people are re-presented by Herzog, rather than documented on film. The complexity in “their humanness” is what interests him, rather than a single profession attached to their being. Even though Herzog does not indicate this verbally, there are long scenes that he includes in the films, the images of which speak for themselves. What seems to be routine or normal for characters in unique landscapes are made into absurd, extraordinary or even surreal through Herzog's emphasis. A scientist in *Encounters* puts on a show at a bar, zipping herself up into a small suitcase. Another from *Cave* dressed up like a cave man in furs, plays the U.S. national anthem using his reconstructed primitive flute. What Corrigan terms as “expressive subjectivity”⁴² is available in Herzog's essayism, but not as a direct autobiographic or self-referential outlook in his commentary. Looking for a truth in the outer and inner landscapes of the characters, he chooses to deliver partially, if not bypass wholly, his own inner visions. Instead, he uses his directorial interferences and cinematic references, as discussed in the previous sections, to reveal his subjectivity as a filmmaker.

Herzog's passion for the search of a truth in his films resonates the characters' passions about their jobs or habitats. The philosopher-driver in *Encounters* says:



"There is many different ways for reality to bring itself forward... And dreaming is definitely one of those ways." Similarly, Timothy Treadwell confesses his love for the grizzlies and the land in many different ways, including touching the animal's excretion. Reflecting on the paintings in the cave, one archaeologist admits that "it was so powerful that every night [he] was dreaming of lions." He adds, "he is a scientist but he is a human being too." These are examples of repeating moments in these films when Herzog's actors share with the viewer/Herzog/camera a self-shattering beauty in their passionate attachments to places, landscapes, and nature. The parallels between the passionate characters in these films and Herzog's own (aesthetic) interests in terms of the pursuit for a truth, the very ecstasy (or madness, or obsession) within this pursuit lead us to storytelling. The desire to tell stories, as well as the style in which one lives a life, dreams of and desires for a truth: there is an overarching, philosophical and thematic focus here that reflects on the aesthetics of subjectivity; or in other words; the art of life.

Herzog's films cannot be readily called essay films, but they are documentaries in the process of becoming essays. His essayism is centred on a manner in which he refrains from verbally offering the audience a direct self-referential view about the subject matters that he introduces; nevertheless, it is a manner that allows the audience to scrutinize the filmmaker as he performs his own practice and to search for answers to his questions through this performance. In other words, the closest Herzog comes to in terms of delivering a personal expression is when he exposes his self as a filmmaker to the audience either by his on-screen interferences, his post-production decisions or his shooting practices on location. His thematic choices are significant in this sense

because these themes develop fully by the interchange between his documentary material and his filmmaker self. The parallels laid out between Herzog-the-filmmaker and his documentary subjects expand the themes that he dwells on and makes the audience engage in his thinking process.

Conclusion

Having uncovered and explored the main aesthetic qualities of Herzog's documentary essayism, we argue that the primary element that it is hinged on is his subjectivity as filmmaker. Herzog "documents" things, places and people in Alaska, France and the South Pole with certain thematic tendencies and questions in mind.

He finds and chooses his "characters" as though he is casting for a fiction film. He cues and leads them in his interviews, or alternatively comments upon the documented images through his voice-over narration. The expressive subjectivity that turns these documentary images into essay films is more directorial/cinephilic than personal/autobiographical.

Proto-cinema is a term that does not bear cinematic conventions, it suggests a form that tackles the issues in film relating to the concepts of truth and fact as well as reality and representation. The curiosity to see beyond and within human life is existent in Herzog's films. Just as early photographs and films reflected the possibilities and limits of the photography in motion, Herzog's films are surveys into the ontology of film. Herzog's relationships with films and filmmaking are the only personal and autobiographical aspects of these films.

There are three main issues that evolve from Herzog's essayistic approach in his films:

1. The difference between personal and impersonal is visible on the screen. The impersonality and distance we identified in Herzog's on-screen persona is strategically constructed and enacted, which seems to reflect his personal take on the documentary subject.
2. Through the documentary material, through documenting people and places, Herzog dwells into the possibilities of filmmaking. The way he criticizes his documentary subjects for being too aggressive about reaching facts at the expense of ignoring truth and crossing boundaries that he thinks exists in nature is something that he also performs

with his own filmmaking apparent in the way he works with landscapes and people – in terms of crossing boundaries, especially those which are reserved, confidential or restricted.

3. Herzog's performative engagement with the subjects produces paradoxes and ambiguities, which leads to multiple layers of meaning as well as difficulties in interpretation.

Notes

- 1 Herzog seems to be alluding here to the similarities between the works of Marey, Muybridge and Edison in the late 19th Century and the Palaeolithic drawings in their attempt to split and recreate movements of animals in the cave.
- 2 Lutz Koepnick, "Herzog's Cave: On Cinema's Unclaimed Pasts and Forgotten Futures," *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 88:3, 2013, 274.
- 3 Our use of the term "(re)presentation" is informed by the ways in which Herzog engages with, manipulates and transforms his documentary subjects, the details of which will become clearer in the text.
- 4 Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (London: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- 5 In their conceptualisation of essay film, scholars such as Timothy Corrigan (2011), Laura Rascaroli (2008) and Nora Alter (2007) refer to the "personal" in the essayistic, marking it as a definitive characteristic of essay writing.
- 6 Openness is one of "essay film's key markers" for Laura Rascaroli, who refers to Montaigne's idea of essay writing as "lay[ing] open [one]self" twice in her article. See Laura Rascaroli, "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments," *Framework*, 49: 2, 2008, 39.
- 7 Quoted in Jennifer Stob, "Cut and Spark: Chris Marker, André Bazin and the metaphors of horizontal montage," *Studies in French Cinema*, 12:1, 2004, 41.
- 8 Eric Ames, "Herzog, Landscape, and Documentary", *Cinema Journal* 48:2, 2009, 65.
- 9 Reinhild Steingröver, "Encountering Werner Herzog at the End of the World" in Prager, Brad (ed.) *A Companion to Werner Herzog* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 474.
- 10 Reinhild Steingröver, "Encountering Werner Herzog," 476.
- 11 Seung-Hoon Jeong & Dudley Andrew, "Grizzly Ghost: Herzog, Bazin and the Cinematic Animal," *Screen*, 49:1, 2008, 12.
- 12 Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 130.
- 13 Brigitte Peucker, "Herzog and Auteursm: Performing Authenticity" in Prager, Brad (ed.) *A Companion to Werner Herzog* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 36.
- 14 Reinhild Steingröver, "Encountering Werner Herzog," 477.
- 15 Paul Arthur, "Essay Questions: From Alain Resnais to Michael Moore," *Film Comment*, 39:1, 2003, 60.
- 16 Roger F. Cook, "Cinema Returns to the Source: Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*," *Film International* 61, 2013, 32.
- 17 Roger F. Cook, "Cinema Returns to the Source," 33.
- 18 Phillip Lopate, "In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film" in Warren, Charles (ed.) *Beyond Document: Essays on Nonfiction Film*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 248.
- 19 Paul Arthur, "Essay Questions," 59.
- 20 Montaigne quoted in Rascaroli, "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments", 26.
- 21 Rascaroli, "The Essay Film," 35.
- 22 Paul Cronin, *Herzog on Herzog* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 301.
- 23 For the full declaration, see Paul Cronin, *Herzog on Herzog*, 301.
- 24 Paul Cronin, *Herzog on Herzog*, 301. In a similar manner, "[Chris] Marker believes that reality cannot be captured objectively in photographs due to its incessant mutability. The only photographic objectivity possible is a self-reflexive subjectivity, one that declares its own processes of documentation and representation." See Jennifer Stob, "Cut and Spark," 43.
- 25 Herzog's definition of truth and his style of filmmaking is reminiscent of some essayists and filmmakers that Nora Alter writes about while discussing the definition of essay in literature and the later development of this form in filmmaking. For both Lukács and Adorno, Alter argues, "the essay is fragmentary, wandering, and does not seek to find absolute truths." See also Nora M. Alter, "Translating the Essay into Film and Installation," *Journal of Visual Culture*, 6:1, 2007, 47. Hans Richter claims that essay film is "a type of filmmaking that would "render visible what is not visible"" (50). Referring to the films of Kluge and Syberberg, Alter writes that, "Inherent to the meaning of these films is that the medium itself can never offer more than re-presentation, and that the veracity demanded by the documentary genre is ultimately unattainable" (52).
- 26 Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 125.
- 27 Lutz Koepnick, "Herzog's Cave," 275.
- 28 Roger F. Cook, "Cinema Returns to the Source," 28.
- 29 Roger F. Cook, "Cinema Returns to the Source," 28.
- 30 Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 30.
- 31 Nora M. Alter, "The Political Im/perceptible in the Essay Film: Farocki's "Images of the World and the Inscription of War"," *New German Critique* 68, Spring-Summer, 1996, 172.
- 32 Quoted in Paul Cronin, *Herzog on Herzog*.
- 33 See Eric Ames, "Herzog, Landscape, and Documentary," 65.
- 34 This is one of the questions that Herzog asks to an archeologist who works in the cave.
- 35 Matthew Gandy, "The Melancholy Observer: Landscape, Neo-Romanticism and the Politics of Documentary Filmmaking" in Prager, Brad (ed.) *A Companion to Werner Herzog* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 528.
- 36 From Herzog's commentary in the film.
- 37 Roger F. Cook, "Cinema Returns to the Source", 27.
- 38 Verrone argues that "Herzog's characters transgress because they seek transcendence." William Verrone, "Transgression and Transcendence in the Films of Werner Herzog," *Film-Philosophy*, 15:1, 2011, 179.
- 39 Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 104.
- 40 Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 104.
- 41 Treadwell and these other Herzog heroes want to transcend these spaces by following their own ideas of freedom, which partially stem from the need to transgress into a new, less confining space. See William Verrone, "Transgression and Transcendence," 199.
- 42 Expressive subjectivity is one of the key features that Corrigan (2011) formulates for essay film. But subjectivity, expression and point of view are some other concepts that scholars discuss along the same lines. See Alter (2007), Lopate (1992) and Rascaroli (2008).