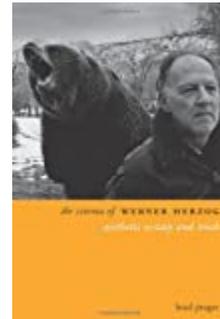




Brad Prager. *The Cinema of Werner Herzog: Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth.* London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007. viii + 224 p. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-905674-17-6.



Reviewed by Claudia Pummer (Department of Cinema and Comparative Literature, University of Iowa)

Published on H-German (June, 2008)

The Burden of Herzog's Ideas

The cover photo depicts an odd couple: filmmaker Werner Herzog in the foreground, looking off-screen right, while the impressive figure of a full-grown brown bear looms directly behind him, mirroring Herzog's pose by facing the opposing left frame of the image. This well-known photograph is, of course, a counterfeit, a publicity still for one of Herzog's most recent documentary features, *Grizzly Man* (2005), about the life and tragic death of the self-proclaimed "bear-savior" and amateur filmmaker Timothy Treadwell. In this image, Herzog conspicuously replaces Treadwell as the film's principal character and in doing so underscores a theme that has long functioned as a mythic credo for his entire body of work: the (film-)artist as an explorer of bestial and "indifferent" nature.

Published as part of Wallflower Press' "Directors' Cuts" series, this cover image of Brad Prager's *The Cinema of Werner Herzog: Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth* prefigures an inevitable problem: the difficulty of sustaining a unique critical perspective when dealing with a subject like Herzog, whose widely publicized "omnipresent commentary ... casts a long shadow over most attempts

at interpretation and critique" (pp. 1-2), as Prager wisely acknowledges in his introductory remarks. Both in- and outside of his films, Herzog has eloquently articulated himself in regard to the recurring topics and themes, artistic influences, and theoretical underpinnings that inform his work, despite his "overall distaste for scholarly analysis" (p. 2). Given the fact that Herzog himself functions as his most eloquent critic, Prager aims to "work against the grain of Herzog's ideas" (p. 7), an important intervention and compelling goal the author is unfortunately not always able to maintain over the entirety of his study. However, Prager's book is one of the few comprehensive, scholarly monographs that engages with Herzog's entire body of work within an Anglo-American context. It provides the reader with an impressive examination of over thirty-five of the nearly fifty films written, directed, and largely produced by Herzog over the course of half a century.

One of the most refreshing aspects of this study is that Prager avoids situating Herzog solely in the context of the New German Cinema, taking into account that the director has long established himself outside this

outmoded historiographical and national category. Another merit of this book is that the author refrains from a strict chronological organization of the film-texts. Each chapter focuses instead on five to six films of various lengths and genres (fiction and documentaries), produced in various countries, and during different periods of Herzog's career. The six chapters are, furthermore, organized around themes like "Madness," "Faith," or "War and Trauma." Prager aims to highlight how each of these subject-categories appears recurrently in Herzog's work and, in doing so, give rise to a larger aesthetic complex, which Prager terms "ecstatic truth" (p. 7). The assumption that a film-author leaves certain formal and thematic traces in his texts, which are then deciphered by the critic in order to subsume a director's entire oeuvre under a unifying aesthetic category is, of course, an established methodological feature in cinema studies, known as auteur criticism.[1] It is rather unfortunate, however, that Prager never reflects critically on this particular methodological approach, since it seems to challenge his major argument of defining Herzog's work as a mode that defies the very conventions of a unifying aesthetic principle.

In the first two chapters, Prager illuminates how Herzog's human protagonists embody a kind of "madness" that strikes either on a major scale (for example, Kinski's notorious "larger-than-life" performances) or on a "minor" scale (the "underdogs" Kaspar Hauser, Woyzeck, or the dwarfs in *Even Dwarfs Started Small* [1970]). What appears strikingly unrecognized in this account is Prager's avoidance of discussion of the role that gender plays in this specific view of (anti-)heroic "madness" and in Herzog's overall work (which is conspicuously dominated by male protagonists).[2] Chapter 3 identifies "nature" as a principal character in Herzog's work. This identification is not surprising, given the fact that most of Herzog's films are widely recognized for their impressive cinematographic compositions of rural landscapes and wildlife. Chapter 4 focuses on the depiction of faith and religious motifs, while concluding chapters 5 and 6 deal with more historical and geo-political themes, discussing respectively war and trauma in regard to the German National Socialist past and the Holocaust, on the one hand, and Herzog's "post-colonial" representations of the African continent on the other. Prager is undeniably most compelling when his own readings come to the foreground, as in his analysis of *Invincible* (2000), one of Herzog's lesser known films and the only one in which he deals explicitly with the historical aspects of German National Socialism, antisemitism, and eastern European Jewry.

Throughout the book, Prager makes numerous references to (film-)theoretical, art historical, or philosophical concepts, many of which remain untheorized or uncontested. Questions of cinema's "bodily" or tactile qualities in the first two chapters, the psychoanalytically-oriented notion of "trauma" in chapter 5, or the critical category of ethnographic film practices and postcolonial discourses in chapter 6 are merely alluded to. Their elaboration may have offered new and important insights to particular films as well as to Herzog's work as such. Instead, Prager highlights thematic aspects and formal characteristics that have long dominated the discussion of Herzog's films or that derive largely from the subject-matter of the films themselves (for example, the notion of "faith" is applied to films that deal explicitly with religious culture and motifs). More importantly, despite the author's initial awareness of the fact, Prager's readings disappear under the burden of Herzog's own ideas and statements. Entitled "Mountains and Fog," the third and most comprehensive chapter in the book epitomizes some of the shortcomings of this critical stance. Herzog's visual aesthetics of rural landscapes are set into the context of German Romanticism; he references in particular Herzog's artistic and literary influences: Caspar David Friedrich, Achim von Arnim, and Friedrich Hölderlin. Prager relies here too heavily on Herzog's own words, in particular by using extensive quotations from Paul Cronin's interview edition *Herzog on Herzog* (2002). Thus Herzog, not Prager, seems to determine the aesthetic categories and their interpretation. Additionally, Prager relies too heavily at times on prior studies of Herzog's work (in this particular case, on Brigitte Peucker's studies of Herzog's Romantic visual and literary references).[3] The author's intriguing assertion that "Herzog is certainly not a Romantic in any conventional sense of the word" (p. 82) remains, therefore, rather unexplored. Prager merely concludes that Herzog's images counteract and expose the Romantic category of the "beautiful" through the depiction of nature's "overwhelming indifference" (p. 85). Aside from being a common mantra voiced by Herzog himself, this categorical opposition does not necessarily challenge the Romantic tradition and, in fact, belongs instead to the very conventions of Romantic aestheticism. At moments like these, Prager's initially powerful goal—to discuss Herzog's work in regard to singular thematic or formal motifs—loses momentum, because instead of deriving the aesthetic concept from Herzog's filmic representations, he applies them according to already existing and fixed art historical and philosophical paradigms. Following this strategy, the author forecloses the possibility of broadening and reconfiguring an aes-

thetic approach expressed in Herzog's rural iconography and, in doing so, fails to attest to the uniqueness of an aesthetic conceptualization of nature that could, for instance, include other remarkable "Herzogian" landscapes that have no place in the German Romantic tradition of "mountains and fog"; for example, the shots of "desolate landscapes" in *Where the Green Ants Dream* (1984) (p. 137) or the shots of "sand dunes" in *Fata Morgana* (1970) (p. 176), which Prager references as illustrations in another context. Thus, rather than reading Herzog's work as a form of expression that could challenge and invent new aesthetic categories, Prager establishes his notions of "aesthetic ecstasy" and "ecstatic truth" predominantly on the basis of Herzog's own words (as Prager points out, both terms have been used by Herzog in and outside of his films) and without challenging their meaning within philosophical and art historical conventions. This seems insofar unfortunate, since Prager argues conclusively that Herzog's work proposes "an aesthetic standpoint" that defines "truth as elusive" (p. 198) by encouraging us to "view ourselves 'as if' we were standing outside," as if we were "to view the world ... through eyes other than our own: eyes of the alien or the animal, for example" (p. 199). One could object, however, that the oppositional categorization of "animal versus human," for instance, is at its core already a conventional conceptualization of "otherness" and, therefore, despite Prager's claim, not suited to offer "explanations that go beyond the prosaic and the rational ... means of experiencing the world" (p. 198) he finds expressed in Herzog's work.

Prager proposes, nevertheless, two compelling (albeit not entirely novel) thematic trajectories in order to scrutinize how the aesthetic category of "ecstatic truth is established," first, "the exchange of prosaic facts and aesthetic fictions" to challenge the notion of "truth" (as in Herzog's "staged" and "scripted" documentary practices)

and second, the motif of the physical, sensual, or "sensing body" that renders the "ecstatic" in terms of "the deliberate abandonments of the body ... by way of our bodies" (p. 6) (for example, the overt physicality of the performers or the physicality of the camerawork). Prager traces intersections of both trajectories throughout the book while each chapter's specific thematic outline functions as an effective overall guideline that allows Prager to conduct a variety of concise textual analyses. The extensive account of a variety of films contain a substantial amount of information about the films themselves and their making, including classics like the Kinski vehicles *Aguirre, Wrath of God* (1972) or *Fitzcarraldo* (1982); lesser-known shorts like *Herakles* (1962) or *God's Angry Man* (1980); and one of Herzog's most recent Hollywood productions, *Rescue Dawn* (2006). Although Prager could have spent less time on already mythic anecdotes, often created by Herzog himself (such as the notorious Herzog-Kinski feud), the book offers a comprehensive introduction to Herzog's work as well as a review of the available scholarly literature and interview material.

Notes

[1]. On the method of "Auteur Criticism" or "Auteur Theory," see Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (London: BFI, 1997).

[2]. For a critique of Herzog's construction of gender and sexuality, see Judith Mayne's "Herzog, Murnau, and the Vampire," in *The Films of Werner Herzog: Between Mirage and History*, ed. Timothy Corrigan (New York: Methuen, 1986), 119-132.

[3]. See, for example, Brigitte Peucker, "Werner Herzog: In Quest of the Sublime," in *New German Film-makers: From Oberhausen Through the 1970s*, ed. Klaus Phillips (New York: Friedrich Ungar Publishing, 1970), 168-194.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Claudia Pummer. Review of Prager, Brad, *The Cinema of Werner Herzog: Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14631>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.