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Beneath the surface: On the significance of the underground and underwater landscapes in selected documentaries by Werner Herzog

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Abstract
Werner Herzog's films grow out of landscapes. The frames opening his works very often present landscapes whose role goes beyond illustrative or informative functions. Analyzing films such as *Encounters at the End of the World*, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, and *Into the Inferno*, the text reconstructs the meanings inscribed in Herzog's underground and underwater landscapes. The journey beneath the surface of spaces dominated by nature usually constitutes an equivalent of the journey into culture in the director's works. In a sense, they are films laced with reflection about experiencing landscapes. What is more, Herzog undertakes his reflections in the realm of documentary cinema, which is firmly entangled with the category of truth. Entering a landscape is therefore a way of reaching truth for the director—however, not objective but "poetic" and "ecstatic" truth, which, according to the creator, has a much more significant quality than mundane facts.

Key words:
Documentaries, Werner Herzog, film, landscapes

Werner Herzog's films grow out of landscapes. This is evidenced not only by many analyses and interpretations of his works, but also by the words of the author who made his relationship with landscape one of the elements of his own biographical legend. The director tells stories about, for example, how he precisely imagined landscapes in which he was supposed to shoot *Aguirre, Wrath of God* (*Aguirre, der Zorn*

Gottes, 1972) although he had never been to Peru before; and then, when he arrived there, he discovered that everything looked exactly the way he had expected: "It was as if the landscapes had no choice: they had to fit to my imagination and submit themselves to my ideas of what they should look like" (Cronin 2002, 81). He is also keen to present the landscape as one of the distinguishing features of his original concept of cinema. For example, when comparing himself to Ingmar Bergman, he observes that the starting point for his films was the human face whereas for himself it is "a landscape, whether it be a real place or an imaginary or hallucinatory one from a dream" (Cronin 2002, 83).

As Matthew Gandy concludes, "for Herzog, landscape is itself a cinematic protagonist" (Gandy 2012, 540). It is difficult to disagree with him given the fact that most of Herzog's films—including the most famous ones: *Aguirre …*, *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (*Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle*, 1974) or *Fitzcarraldo* (1982)—begin with shots of landscapes, and some of the works—such as *Fata Morgana* (1971) or *Lessons of Darkness* (*Lektionen in Finsternis*, 1992)—are almost entirely built of landscape shots. A classification once proposed by Emmanuel Carrère seems relevant to a certain extent—he wrote about a "landscape" trend in Herzog's output in the context of, *inter alia*, *Fata Morgana*, and juxtaposed it with a "humanistic" trend including films such as *Stroszek* (1977), focusing on the relationships between an individual and society (Carrère 1979, 57). However, the boundaries between the categories are not strict: after all, even in *Stroszek* the empty landscapes of the Midwestern United States fulfil a major role going beyond an illustrative or informative function—the director himself is reluctant to treat film landscapes as mere backgrounds of action (Cronin 2002, 81) and claims that landscapes are the souls of his films, while characters and plot often "come afterwards" (Cronin 2002, 83).

A lot has been written about the importance of landscape in the director's flagship feature films, such as *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (*Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht*, 1979) (Wojnicka 1991, 129-143). Nonetheless, the role of landscape in Herzog's documentary films seems to me more intriguing, as they are involved in the discussion the director carries out according to the idea of documentalism and qualities stereotypically assigned to it, such as the pursuit of objectivity and truth. Although it is true that entering the landscape is a way of approaching the truth in Herzog's documentaries—it is a special type of truth defined by the director as a "poetic" or "ecstatic" truth which, in his opinion, is much more significant than mundane facts. There is a close relationship between the way in which Herzog perceives landscape and his well-known aversion to *cinéma verité*—a trend he venomously criticizes and consistently repeats that he would like to dig its grave. In the same way, he does not accept reducing documentalism to presenting facts on the screen; he also opposes understanding landscape as "just a representation of a desert or a forest" (Prager 2007, 11). "A true landscape … shows an inner state of mind," he claims

and explains that "it is the human soul that is visible through the landscapes" presented in his films (Ibidem, 11). The origins of such an understanding of landscape are usually traced back to Romanticism. Despite the fact that the director himself, with his characteristic contrariness, often rejected the possibility of this identification, arguing that he was named a German romanticist in "Playboy" magazine (Bachmann 1977, 4), the leading experts in Herzog's output—such as Brad Prager or Laurie Ruth Johnson—have no doubts that the output is romantic *par excellence*; although—as Joanna Sarbiewska rightly observes—this diagnosis is not sufficient to conclusively determine the specificity of the works (Sarbiewska 2014, 10).[1]

At this point, I would like to turn to the meanings inscribed in Herzog's underground and underwater landscapes. They are relatively rare in the films by the director: most of them can be found in *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007) shot in the Antarctic and in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010) which presents the prehistoric Chauvet Cave; earlier they had also occasionally appeared in *The Wild Blue Yonder* (2005) and in *La Soufrière* (*La Soufrière — Warten auf eine unausweichliche Katastrophe*, 1977) shot while waiting for a volcano to erupt, and then they significantly returned in *Into the Inferno* (2016) which was also devoted to volcanoes. As Gandy aptly notes, Herzog has a clear tendency to portray space from a bird's eye view: shots of a jungle, a desert, or mountain peaks recorded from the deck of a helicopter give the impression of looking at the landscape from the position of an omniscient and all-knowing subject (Gandy 2012, 531). Taking this into account, it seems even more interesting to me to investigate how landscapes whose recording does not allow for such an almost divine point of view—spaces which not only restrict mobility and exploration, but also constrain the view—function in Herzog's works.

I share Sarbiewska's view that Herzog is actually a director who believes in reality, and the aesthetics of his films can be related to the category of realism, even though in his documentaries the director significantly interferes with the world presented on the screen. For example, he does not hide that he convinced the deaf and blind protagonist of *Land of Silence and Darkness* (*Land des Schweigens und Dunkelheit*, 1971) to give a poignant monologue about a ski jump which, in fact, she had never seen. In *Bells from the Deep* (*Glocken aus der Tiefe — Glaube und Aberglaube in Rußland*, 1993), the pilgrim attentively crawling on a frozen lake in order to see a city sunken at its bottom was not actually a soulful wandered but a local alcoholic hired for the purpose of the shot, whereas the quote assigned to Pascal at the beginning of *Lessons of Darkness* was fabricated by Herzog himself, who openly announces that he was often willingly and confidently going as far as to the edge of untruth to expose a more intense form of truth (Pflaum 1979, 59-86). After all, fabrication, imagination, and stylization—categories accentuated in the

1 For more on the subject of the romantic sources of Herzog's output, see Kempna-Pieniążek (2013, 43-147).

only artistic manifesto of the director so far, *Minnesota Declaration* (1999)—are set against trivial facts as appropriate tools for insight into the essence of things. In short, Herzog believes in reality but he does not believe that the truth about it is contained in the superficial phenomena of the physical world. Herzog's realism is, as Sarbiewska writes, metaphysical realism, realism of substance or deep realism directed towards "disclosure of hidden source layers of being by means of mechanical recording" (Sarbiewska 2014, 17-18). Sarbiewska notes the relation of this attitude to André Bazin's concepts and concludes that the realism of Herzog's "landscape" films "is disclosed mainly in comprehensive, essential, totalitarian shots of reality, usage of staging in depth, and elimination of fragments and randomness, 'stream of life'" (Ibidem, 118). Yet, immediately afterwards, the author adds that "some of the director's films, however, are—in terms of aesthetics—close to realism of the Kracauer type: while extracting areas invisible to the 'naked eye' from material reality, Herzog's camera often focuses on a particular fragment of the physical world and records its autonomous existence" (Ibidem, 118).

Landscapes in Herzog's documentaries are subject to the Bazin-Kracauer concept of realism—on the one hand, they present themselves as essential and total in their own way, on the other hand, they are explored in search of what is invisible to the naked eye. In this context, underwater and underground landscapes are an extreme variant of Herzog's approach to landscape, a specific test of his concept. As such, the landscapes are subjected to the rigor of deep metaphysical realism. This happens even when they are images borrowed in a way—not recorded by Herzog or his full-time cinematographer Peter Zeitlinger but, for example, by Henry Kaiser working as one of the divers in Antarctica or seen through the cameras of the volcanologists observing the activity of Mount Erebus. Herzog does not assign himself the authorship of these photos, however—faithful to the principle saying that landscape can be directed—arranges their presence in his films in accordance with the idea that they should represent something more than just the bottom of the Ross Sea or the interior of a volcano. These landscapes are burdened with hidden symbolism in the spirit of "extraction of inner, spiritual truth from the in-depth study of nature" deriving from Romanticism (Ibidem, 73-74). Although, as Sarbiewska writes, "the truth of being is for Herzog the truth of 'the inexpressible'," it constitutes itself "in the visible reality," and the film camera is to unveil it (Ibidem, 23).

Hence in *Encounters at the End of the World* the underwater shots of the depths of the Ross Sea are accompanied not only by the director's reflections about the place of man in the universe, but also by Orthodox church music which creates an atmosphere of metaphysical mystery or even a religious concentration. A similar musical counterpoint appears in *Into the Inferno* when the camera eye looks into the crater interior filled with pulsing lava. The mystery of nature and the romantic sublime, however, are only one side of these landscapes; the other is their radical

strangeness. It is said, with some justification, that Herzog's landscapes have elements of lunar landscapes. Johnson notes that the underwater depths depicted in *Encounters at the End of the World* are as unfriendly and devoid of any landmarks as the surface of Antarctica stretching out over them (Johnson 2016, 83); on the other hand, Gandy writes about landscapes of the science fiction type and equates the director's perspective to that of an alien from another world (Gandy 2012, 531). In the essayistic *The Wild Blue Yonder*—having the significant subtitle *A science fiction fantasy* and being a reflection upon life on Earth from the point of view of an alien—the underwater scenery "plays" the role of the protagonist's native planet located somewhere in the Andromeda Galaxy, and the figures of divers captured in the frame are presented as astronauts. Similarly, in *Encounters at the End of the World* Herzog—for many acting as the narrator of his documentaries—uses analogous comparisons: he sees the divers swimming under the ice as astronauts examining an alien world and forces one of his interlocutors to reflect upon the horrors of underwater life, in which, as we hear, microscopic organisms function in a world resembling the one of monster movies. Moreover, the director recalls here an almost direct quote from his *Minnesota Declaration*, in which we can read the following: "Life in the oceans must be sheer hell. A vast, merciless hell of permanent and immediate danger" (Herzog 1999).

Herzog's contemplation of nature never involves the idea of returning to mother nature. The beauty of the underwater shots or spectacular shows taking place in the interiors of craters do not alter the main message of *Encounters at the End of the World* and *Into the Inferno*, in which the director speaks about the inevitable end of humanity. Herzog does not idealize nature, he rather declares that "nature … has only the meaning we give it" (Johnson 2016, 84). However, as Johnson notes, the director's films also include the belief that "the images we produce of nature are generated in real encounters with an objective reality whose truth we can only approximate, via the continued creation of images" (Ibidem, 84).

The rigor of deep realism requires striving for precision in constructing. The desire to explore the sphere invisible to the naked eye—mentioned by Sarbiewska—is manifested in the motif of technology in the works discussed here. "For me there is no personal excitement to [entering the crater]. There's curiosity," Herzog says in *Into the Inferno*, "yes, I would love to see it from close-up." Possibilities offered by media come to the aid of this desire. In *Encounters at the End of the World*, the director informs the viewers which images were recorded by volcanologists' or divers' modern equipment, and in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* he comments on the difficult working conditions in the cave with its being under strict protection and shows the effort of recording a part of the rock paintings inaccessible to the public. Because Herzog is a creator believing not only in reality but also in—as he admits—celluloid, he believes in the ability of the camera to see things which elude human perception.

Cave of Forgotten Dreams was distributed as a 3D film. One might wonder why the director chose technology which is now associated with Hollywood blockbusters. In the light of the difficult conditions on the film set—the crew consisting of just four people who were only allowed to move along a strictly designated two-foot-wide sidewalk—the decision to do so seems almost ridiculous. Or is it something more than just Herzog's irony? According to the director, the Chauvet Cave is not only an area of archaeological research but also an art gallery. With the exception of fragments taking place outside the cave, Herzog's film resembles visiting an exhibition presenting prehistoric artists' achievements. At the end of the film, the director compiles the cave paintings in a long sequence which enables contemplation. Moreover, less than fifteen minutes into the film, the director calls the Chauvet Cave a proto-cinema in which the ancestors of today's humans watched their paintings in the glow of torches not only on flat walls but also on rock formations enabling them to indicate the three-dimensionality of the presented animals, which were often painted with extra limbs, probably to signal that they were on the move. Despite appearances, in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, 3D is not merely used to impress the viewers by showing them that they can access interiors of the cave otherwise not open to visitors and that they are taking part in a prehistoric "film screening." Johnson is convinced that this technology is not presented here as a form in any way greater than Paleolithic painting. It should rather be seen as its extension, reflecting what three-dimensional cave paintings have already achieved (Johnson 2016, 28). This is one of the bridges which Herzog tries to build over the abyss of time separating us from the ancient Chauvet Cave users—it is a form of stating that we, just like them, strive to depict reality in the way we perceive it, that is, in three spatial dimensions and one temporal dimension.

In fact, in Herzog's films looking into the depths—under water or under the Earth's surface—is associated with the concept of time. In short, the director is much more interested in the temporality of the spaces than their geography. The hidden symbolism of the underwater and underground landscapes refers mainly to the problem of passing, whereas penetration and contemplation of these landscapes is the equivalent of a journey through time—mainly to the past but also to a potential future. In the films, the long life of nature is juxtaposed with the ephemeralness of not just individual existence but also of the whole human species. The form of the film is subject to reflection on the following issue: underwater shots are long and not much happens in them, scenes showing the interior of the Chauvet Cave are also stretched in time; in both cases the camera is not static, however, it tries to imitate a careful, contemplative look. The goal of the above is to be at least a little bit closer to capturing "the eternal time functioning beyond daily, present, specific reality, the non-fabular time liberated from the course of events, situated as if in the recorded universal being" (Sarbiewska 2014, 20). Sarbiewska calls this type of time—quoting Jan Białostocki—the time of pure being, filled

with the "continuous existence of objects or people that do not do anything, that do not move" (Ibidem, 20). We actually know that Kaiser's shots present divers exploring the bottom of the Ross Sea in search of, *inter alia*, previously unknown species of micro-organisms, and that people exploring the Chauvet Cave are scientists who intensively work on understanding and protecting traces of prehistoric culture. Both the former and the latter are granted a considerable amount of screen time with Herzog frequently interviewing them. Despite this, when captured on the background of the landscape, like characters from Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, they seem to plunge into stillness, as in one of the scenes in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* where all of the people in the cave are asked to stop and listen to the sounds of the cave and to the beating of their hearts.

The dynamics of seeing and not-seeing functioning in these landscapes seems crucial. In *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, Herzog and his crew (and consequently the viewer) are informed that they will not be able to see everything because not all of the cave is accessible. Johnson (2016, 21) compares this situation to one of the threads from *The White Diamond* (2004) in which Herzog's crew tries to place the camera in a sacred grotto of the indigenous peoples of Guyana, a spot hidden behind a waterfall. Ultimately—out of respect for the people who believe that the place should not be disclosed—the director decides not to show it on the screen. Although the fact that the Chauvet Cave in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* cannot be presented wholly resulted from different factors, Johnson believes that the effect is basically the same: knowing about the incomplete landscape presented on the screen stimulates imagination, makes us reflect on what is inaccessible to the eye (Ibidem, 21). One might be tempted to add that perhaps new internal landscapes are born in this way.

Herzog is interested not only in the landscape itself or in how it can be read, but also in the ways in which it can be experienced. In *Encounters at the End of the World*, the director speaks about the divers' impressions of swimming under the surface of the ice as an experience resembling entering a cathedral and—although he previously called them astronauts—he now compares them to priests preparing for mass. Herzog directly discusses the relationship of man with the landscape in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, noticing sensitivity to the environment which evokes the ideas of Romanticism in the Chauvet Cave paintings. The director sees the cave paintings not as representations of elements of the physical world but as inner landscapes familiar to him, images of long forgotten dreams. While combining this fact with another hypothesis posed in the film—that in such places the modern human soul was born—one can come to the conclusion that, according to the director, the ability to transform views into landscapes lies at the heart of humanity. Although Johnson believes that the context in which Herzog uses the term "landscape" here is ironic (Ibidem, 26), it still serves as another bridge built over the chasm of time separating us from our prehistoric ancestors.

There is something puzzling in Herzog's relationship with underground and underwater spaces. It seems as though the director almost suffocates in them, is afraid of them, or dislikes them a little; therefore, he tries to expand them and tame them in different ways, for example through the use of 3D technology, listening to the myths associated with lands hidden in the interiors of volcanoes, or imagining a microscale of underwater life as a landscape in a science fiction style. He usually leaves such places rather quickly—both in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* and *Encounters at the End of the World* he juxtaposes claustrophobic, overwhelming underwater and underground shots with his favorite bird's eye view shots, indicating that the latter is much closer to him than the perspective of a fish or a mole. Nevertheless, these spaces are very important in his documentaries. They are spheres where time flows differently than on the surface, and that is reflected in the strange landscape. It is the birthplace of life and of modern man. It is a reservoir of knowledge about the past and a cradle of forgotten dreams. At the same time, however, their cosmic landscapes symbolize the horror of the radical strangeness of nature indifferent to human actions. Ultimately, these landscapes are in a way pre-apocalyptic. While staring into the blue depths of the Ross Sea and stepping up to the edge of a volcano, Herzog asks about the end of mankind. Will it come from the inside of the Earth, from depths full of hot lava lying beneath our feet? And what will be left? Only the underground tunnels built by researchers under the surface of Antarctica? The title *Encounters at the End of the World* seems to be deliberately ambiguous: it can be interpreted both in spatial terms (Antarctica as the proverbial end of the world) and temporal terms (the time of the encounters may be the time of the end of the world) (Ibidem, 83).

In the context of this film, Johnson writes about Herzog's characteristic dialectics of surface and depth: in the juxtaposition of underwater shots with fragments presenting the ice desert of Antarctica, the author sees a psychoanalytic-like belief that "surfaces … reveal a great deal about depths …, but not directly" (Ibidem, 81). Traces of the same dialectics can be spotted in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* where the depth of the Chauvet Cave and the landscape stretching above it with the well-marked Pont d'Arc correspond with each other, mutually illuminating their meanings. However, the opposition of surface and depth may also be related to Herzog's understanding of image and landscape: what can be seen at first glance is just the beginning; the truth is hidden below. And though it is highly probable that the truth can never be reached, through the effort of going beneath the surface, perhaps it can be approximated—even if just barely.

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