Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth

By John Bradburn

Werner Herzog may easily be one of the mythologized, or even self-mythologized, directors of the modern era. From his roots somewhere on the edges of the New German Cinema of the 1970s he has maintained a visceral, focussed and impassioned personal cinematic aesthetic. A world view that has out lasted even his most talented peers who rose out of the 1970s he has maintained a visceral, focussed and impassioned personal cinematic aesthetic. For all of his almost four decades of prolific cinematic production Herzog has seemed to have avoided any serious and scholarly full-length enquiry into his work. Brad Pager’s tight and delightfully well researched new book from Wallflower press - The Cinema of Werner Herzog: Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth - concentrates over 30 years of academic work on Herzog and not only positions the director within a lineage of moving image makers but also inside a history of Germanic philosophers from Heidegger and Kant through to Nietzsche.

Herzog may have avoided a scholarly study for so long due to the wealth of anecdotal material that circulates about him. Prager mentions this in the introduction to his book. He discusses the problems that come in distinguishing the stories about the films from the films themselves. Herzog is a great self mythologizer and many of the infamous stories about his obsessive risk taking methods spring from the director himself. Herzog positions himself as a man searching for the ‘ecstatic truth’, the truth at the very core of reality. Herzog refuses the truth of cinema verite ‘the truth of accountants’ and firmly states that greater truths can be gained from fabrication and artifice. This can prove problematic for any study upon the documentary works that seem fabricated and the undoubtedly authentic moments (such as pulling a steam ship over a hill in Fitzcarraldo) that invade his fiction work.
Much of the book frequently has to deal with this liberal delineations between documentary and fiction. Prager skillfully deals with the idea and also the idea of Herzog the mythologizer vs. Herzog the film maker. He does this square by letting the films speak for themselves and collates a dazzling and wide variety of academic, philosophical and textual enquiry.

From the introduction onwards Prager clearly outlines his attempt to place Herzog within a continuum of Germanic thought. He frequently returns to Alan Singer’s idea of the ‘tragic sublime’ when looking at Herzog’s position against both Kant and Heidegger’s notions of the sublime and ecstasy. Prager looks at the bulk of Herzog’s seemingly period film work and suggests that he is adhering to a notion of the sublime that advances Kant’s idea and positions the sublime as not outside of history but places one in a position to fully explore and reflect upon the very illusion we have transcended. This idea of both an understanding of the historical process but also an authentic and essential experiential experience of the moment becomes key to Prager’s view on Herzog as conflicted between Romanticism and a Neitzcchean view of humanity. All of these areas combine in Herzog’s much repeated maximal of ‘ecstatic truth’ where fabrication and fiction can lead to a greater ‘truth’ than any adher-ence to historical facts. Prager does all of this in a beautifully controlled and simple English that makes all of his many references both easy and compelling to read without ever feeling as if the reader is being denied salient but ‘difficult’ information.

Prager breaks his book into 6 main chapters - Madness of a Grand Scale, Madness on a Minor Scale, Mountains and Fog, Faith, War and Trauma and An Image of Africa. Within these 6 thematically diverse areas the author manages to get to the heart of Herzog’s work without recourse to the oversimplified public image of Herzog. Prager is one of the first academic writers to give solid consideration to the many varied approaches to Herzog’s treatment of faith and religion within his work. The book artfully deals with accusations of both mysticism and romanticism within Herzog’s body of work and contrasts this with the directors much publicized statements against such readings. In chapter four Prager discusses the little seen Herzog short God’s Angry Man (about Televangelist Gene Scott) at length. He discusses the tension between Herzog’s obvious ambivalence to this kind of religious expression but does accept that it does appear to contain some kind of ‘ecstatic’ experience.

Frequently Prager depicts the very core of Herzog to be a faithless man searching for a great truth, a great ecstatic truth, that ironically he may not even believe is there. Prager argues that this is a Neitzchean tendency to Herzog’s subjects who attempt to bow the world to their will. The degree to which the will of these characters is successful or not (especially in the case of the Kinski characters) does not matter. It is their force of will in making the world their own which is important. Maybe this ecstasy that Herzog searches for is not the ecstasy of the witness to the world but the very moment that reality and maybe God bends to the will of man.

The centre of this excellent book deals with Herzog as a man of faith in the will of man against an indifferent and cold nature. Prager quotes Fini Straubinger towards the end of the book when she says “she does not know how to get it out in words.” This resonates beautifully with Pragers deconstruction of the doomed character of Kaspar Hauser when he feels boxed in by the Professor of Logic’s definitions of the world. Herzog’s specifically cinematic enquiry frequently reaches this point seemingly outside of the boundaries of language and touches a purely cinematic form of meaning creation. As an attempt to translate these nonlinguistic moments of ecstatic truth Prager succeeds over and over again by never trying to tie Herzog down to any answers but by allowing Herzog to still exist as a artist that is on a quest for understanding. Prager’s clear and concise book is not only a great introduction to Herzog but a great introduction to many areas of philosophy, art, religion and ultimately the unanswerable mysteries of life.
The Cinema of Werner Herzog; Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth by Brad Pager is available now from Wallflower Press.

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