Brad Prager has collected together a world-class and diverse group of scholars to map out with great lucidity the complex interconnectivity of Herzog’s equally diverse oeuvre.”
Paul Cooke, University of Leeds

“Werner Herzog towers as one of world cinema’s most engaging, energetic, and enigmatic directors. A Companion to Werner Herzog charts the career of an extraordinary artist whose only predictable feature remains his unpredictability.”
Gerd Gemünden, Dartmouth College

“Contrary to his self-presentation, Werner Herzog is a filmmaker profoundly influenced by the history of film, art, and literature and an integral part of the spatial imaginaries and aesthetic sensibilities of the postwar period. It is the main achievement of this anthology, expertly put together by Brad Prager, to highlight these connections with rich and insightful articles on Herzog and painting, photography, opera, geography, documentary, and the essay film. And at last, we understand the strange power exerted by the chicken in Stroszek…”
Sabine Hake, The University of Texas at Austin

Continually blurring the line between fiction and reality, Werner Herzog has made a career of crossing boundaries and reinventing himself. Since his early emergence as a leader in the New German cinema, Herzog is now widely recognized as one of the most accomplished and innovative filmmakers of the modern era—as well as one of its most controversial and enigmatic figures.

A Companion to Werner Herzog presents more than two dozen original scholarly essays that probe deeply into various aspects of Herzog’s career and eclectic body of cinematic work. Contributions from internationally recognized film scholars and Herzog experts offer fresh perspectives on such topics as Herzog’s engagement with music and the arts, his self-styled role as a global filmmaker, the director’s Bavarian origins, and even his visionary collaboration—and love–hate relationship—with the late actor Klaus Kinski. Filled with illuminating insights, A Companion to Werner Herzog offers a long-overdue exploration of the life and artistic contributions of one of the true giants of international cinema.

Brad Prager is Associate Professor of German and an active member of the Program in Film Studies at the University of Missouri. He has authored two monographs: Aesthetic Vision and German Romanticism: Writing Images (2007) and The Cinema of Werner Herzog: Aesthetics Etaay and Truth (2007). His articles have appeared in New German Critique, Studies in Documentary Film, Art History, and in the Modern Language Review. Most recently he has co-edited the collections The Collapse of the Conventional: German Film and its Politics at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century (2010) and Visualizing the Holocaust: Documents, Aesthetics, Memory (2008).

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Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Film Directors

The Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Film Directors survey key directors whose work constitutes what is referred to as the Hollywood and world cinema canons. Whether Haneke or Hitchcock, Bigelow or Bergmann, Capra or the Coen Brothers, each volume, composed of 25 or more newly commissioned essays written by leading experts, explores a canonical, contemporary and/or controversial auteur in a sophisticated, authoritative, and multi-dimensional capacity. Individual volumes interrogate any number of subjects – the director’s oeuvre; dominant themes, well-known, worthy, and under-rated films; stars, collaborators, and key influences; reception, reputation, and above all, the director’s intellectual currency in the scholarly world.

Published
2. A Companion to Alfred Hitchcock, edited by Thomas Leitch and Leland Poague
3. A Companion to Rainer Werner Fassbinder, edited by Brigitte Peucker
4. A Companion to Werner Herzog, edited by Brad Prager

Forthcoming
5. A Companion to Pedro Almodovar, edited by Marvin D’Lugo and Kathleen Vernon
A Companion to Werner Herzog

Edited by
Brad Prager
Contents

Notes on Contributors viii
Acknowledgments xiv
Werner Herzog’s Companions: The Consolation of Images 1
Brad Prager

Part I Critical Approaches and Contexts 33
1 Herzog and Auteurism: Performing Authenticity 35
Brigitte Peucker

2 Physicality, Difference, and the Challenge of Representation:
Werner Herzog in the Light of the New Waves 58
Lucía Nagib

3 The Pedestrian Ecstasies of Werner Herzog: On Experience,
Intelligence, and the Essayistic 80
Timothy Corrigan

Part II Herzog and the Inter-arts 99
4 Werner Herzog’s View of Delft: Or, Nosferatu and the Still Life 101
Kenneth S. Calhoon

5 Moving Stills: Herzog and Photography 127
Stefanie Harris

6 Archetypes of Emotion: Werner Herzog and Opera 149
Lutz Koepnick

7 Coming to Our Senses: The Viewer and Herzog’s Sonic Worlds 168
Roger Hillman
Contents

8 Death for Five Voices: Gesualdo’s “Poetic Truth” 187
   Holly Rogers

9 Demythologization and Convergence: Herzog’s Late Genre Pictures and the Rogue Cop Film in Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call—New Orleans 208
   Jaimey Fisher

Part III  Herzog’s German Encounters 231

10 “I don’t like the Germans”: Even Herzog Started in Bavaria 233
   Chris Wahl

11 Herzog’s Heart of Glass and the Sublime of Raw Materials 256
   Noah Heringman

12 The Ironic Ecstasy of Werner Herzog: Embodied Vision in The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner 281
   Roger F. Cook

13 Tantrum Love: The Friendship of Klaus Kinski and Werner Herzog 301
   Lance Duerfahrd

Part IV  Herzog’s Far-Flung Cinema

Africa, Australia, the Americas, and Beyond 327

14 Werner Herzog’s African Sublime 329
   Erica Carter

15 Didgeridoo, or the Search for the Origin of the Self: Werner Herzog’s Where the Green Ants Dream and Bruce Chatwin’s The Songlines 356
   Manuel Köppen

16 A March into Nothingness: The Changing Course of Herzog’s Indian Images 371
   Will Lehman

17 The Case of Herzog: Re-Opened 393
   Eric Ames

18 The Veil Between: Werner Herzog’s American TV Documentaries 416
   John E. Davidson

19 Herzog’s Chickenshit 445
   Rembert Hüser

20 Encountering Werner Herzog at the End of the World 466
   Reinhild Steingröver
Part V  Toward the Limits of Experience
Philosophical Approaches 485

21 Perceiving the Other in the Land of Silence and Darkness
Randall Halle 487

22 Werner Herzog’s Romantic Spaces
Laurie Johnson 510

23 The Melancholy Observer: Landscape, Neo-Romanticism,
and the Politics of Documentary Filmmaking
Matthew Gandy 528

24 Portrait of the Chimpanzee as a Metaphysician: Parody
and Dehumanization in Echoes from a Somber Empire
Guido Vitiello 547

25 Herzog and Human Destiny: The Philosophical Purposiveness
of the Filmmaker
Alan Singer 566

Filmography 587
Compiled by Chris Wahl
Index 611
Notes on Contributors

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Werner Herzog’s Companions

The Consolation of Images

Brad Prager

I should be all alone in this world
Me, Steiner and no other living being.
No sun, no culture; I, naked on a high rock
No storm, no snow, no banks, no money
No time and no breath.
Then, finally, I would not be afraid any more.

Text on the screen at the end of Herzog’s
The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner (1973)\(^1\)

It moves through you like a flash and forever enlightens your entire existence.
Sometimes from across the centuries you find someone who feels like a brother. In one
illuminating instant you know that you are not alone. […] It was as if a stranger
had reached out his arm to me from across the depths of time and placed his hand on
my shoulders so that I would no longer be alone.

Herzog, on the landscape painter Hercules Segers (1983)\(^2\)

At the end of The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner, Werner Herzog’s unconven-
tional documentary about a ski-jumping woodcarver, the above ode to isolation
appears written across the screen. Herzog acknowledges that these words, altered
slightly to fit the context, are lifted from “Helbling’s Story” by the Swiss author
Robert Walser. The story consists of the reflections of a man, who by his own
account does not have the mind for serious work, only pretends to read books of
interest, and admits that he is nothing special. At its conclusion, Helbling, without
much fuss, declares himself deficient and unfortunate, and resolves that he would
be better off alone. He sees his misery as the fault of others and wishes that all his

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companions would vanish, taking the world along with them. Although the most stunning compositions in Herzog's documentary depict Walter Steiner, an athlete and craftsman, isolated from the sports fans below and floating in freedom against an empty background, the connections between Steiner and Walser's Helbling are by no means self-evident. Why would Herzog, who seems to like and even admire his athletic protagonist, conclude his film with these particular lines?

The inclusion of these lines at the film's end has more to do with Herzog's approach to Walser than with his views about Steiner. Herzog's work—in this case a film about an athlete who is, at times, at odds with his public—takes up a dialogue with other works of art, and although Herzog notoriously eschews the rhetoric of influence and avoids sustained comparisons, he embeds his own filmmaking within a long cinematic and literary history. In studying his body of work, one is confronted with an artist who has had an extraordinarily varied career, both as a writer and as a filmmaker, and who is in the habit of interpreting his own works for us. What, then, can be accomplished by considering the affinities, or, to say it differently, the moments of literary and cinematic companionship, where Herzog's work is concerned? Haunting a project such as the present one is the idea that Herzog, who presents himself to the public as a solitary wanderer, perhaps needs no companions, and that his work can be better assessed in isolation. This collection of essays, which operates from the assumption that Herzog's writings and films benefit from exploring their points of contact with others' ideas, is devoted to an investigation of interconnections. It presumes that the study of the director's writings and films, in its past, present and future modes, gains from expanding horizons, even if that examination sometimes strays from the directions in which Herzog points us.

At every phase of his storied career Herzog has declared and even insisted on his distinctiveness. Beginning with early press coverage that labeled him an "individualist among outsiders" (Plula 1971: 58) and a well-known interview where he allied himself with "eccentrics" (Borski 1973: 6), through to public conversations nearly four decades later, Herzog has asserted that his work and his worldview are unlike those of others. The claim is, of course, irrefutable: there is no Herzog but Herzog. And beyond that simple fact his reputation for unpredictability and for constant reinvention has been well earned. However, for someone who insists on his own incomparability, he is also acutely attentive to the long heritage with which his work aligns itself. His writings and films are part of a self-conscious and oft-revisited lineage, one that he perpetually reinforces through his own passionate appreciation of art. At the end of The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner Herzog adapts Walser's reflection on isolation, calling upon Walser as one would call upon a companion and including him among that vast assemblage of artists and outcasts whom he identifies as having reached out to him from across the span of time. In that group Herzog also includes the seventeenth-century Dutch painter Hercules Segers, about whom he expressed a similar admiration in 1983, ten years after the completion of Steiner. Although Herzog inclines toward isolation, asserting that
he is a solitary wanderer and that his work stands apart from all others, he draws his inspiration from a bounty of aesthetic interlocutors including Walser, Segers, and scores of others whose names he has mentioned over the course of countless interviews.

In an essay partially devoted to reflecting on the sublime sensations associated with his own films Herzog again transcribed his version of Walser’s words. Most of that essay is devoted to Longinus, the Greek philosopher thought to have authored the treatise *On the Sublime*. After commenting on Longinus Herzog reproduces Walser’s slightly amended lines as part of his explanation about how a film’s spectator completes the sublime experience. Building on Immanuel Kant’s idea that “the sublime is not to be sought in the things of nature, but in our ideas” (2003: 134), Herzog asserts that sublimity is an effect; its truths are located in the spectator, rather than on the screen. For this reason, one can infer, the connection between his film and Walser’s prose is left open, and the ecstatic charge strikes the viewer when he or she completes the circuit. Akin to his observations about Segers, the part of that essay that deals with Longinus is an ode; he praises the Greek philosopher and refers to him as a “good friend” (2010a: 11). Herzog is aware that there is ambiguity about the authorship of *On the Sublime*, and that it is widely acknowledged that it may or may not have been written by a person named Longinus, yet he enthusiastically proclaims his affinity for that text’s author, who, like Segers, has reached out to him from across the span of time. His words of praise echo those he expresses for the French filmmaker Jean Rouch, whose film *The Mad Masters* (1955) features performers in a trance-like state. Herzog says that in making *Heart of Glass* (1976), a film in which he hypnotized his cast, Rouch’s film was a source of courage, and it was as if he had someone “like an older brother, who was giving me support, giving me advice” (Herzog 2007). For Herzog the works of the philosopher Longinus, the artist Segers, the author Walser, and the filmmaker Rouch each incline toward that “ecstatic truth” he associates with “illumination.” The truth is, in this case, unconnected to political or ideological standpoints and must always be disentangled from what he has called the “truth of accountants,” which “creates norms” (Cronin 2002: 301). Following from such influences Herzog’s cinema inscribes itself into a history of truth-illuminating images.

Referring the reader to the word’s etymological origins Herzog notes that for the Greeks “truth,” or *aletheia* comes from *lanthanein*, which means, “to lie hidden or unseen.” Truth, as that which is unhidden, reveals what is concealed and is thus the product of an “act of disclosure” (Herzog 2010a: 11). He adds that this disclosure is, “a gesture related to the cinema, where an object is set into the light and then a latent, not yet visible image is conjured onto celluloid, where it first must be developed, then disclosed” (2010a: 11). Cinematic images are thus the product of a relation: they are captured by one person in the sealed space of the camera, revealed by another in the developing process, and reach yet a third in the darkness of the movie house. Cinema takes place between interlocutors, and it appears as
the result of an exchange; found by one, its ecstatic truth must be sought by another. One can surely clear away the etymological arguments, which for some readers may echo those of Martin Heidegger, and rather note that in Herzog’s scenario the addition of light, first upon the celluloid and then in the theater, is indispensable to truth’s revelation. Every one of the metaphors in his essay on Segers is likewise bound up with light’s appearance. Herzog describes its influx alternately as illuminating, enlightening, and akin to a flash. Franz Kafka, who loved the cinema, formulated matters similarly, writing, “art flies around the truth, but with the definite intention of not getting burnt. Its capacity lies in finding the dark void, a place where the beam of light can be intensely caught, without this having been perceptible before” (1991: 39). Truth thus emerges at a point of contrast: the darker the space, the more dynamic the beam that bisects it. Cinema draws its strength from darkness.

From this perspective cinema’s truth is transferred illumination. This is one consequence of defining cinema in the language of disclosure. A less mystifying account, however, would underscore how art is at its most fascinating when it is illuminating art. Rather than waiting for the illumination of truth from a work that is deemed to be independent of all others, it may be constructive to think along other lines and ask which part of the truth Herzog claims for art is concerned with works illuminating one another. The image whereby one artist reaches out to another across time suggests a method of interpretation that aims to close a gap between the past and the present. Herzog’s relentless references to art’s history—the closing of the fissures that divide, say, a 32,000-year-old cave drawing, a dance by Fred Astaire, and a screen performance by Klaus Kinski—can be seen as an effort to find continuities and rebuff the distinctions brought on by the forward motion of time. Herzog’s Signs of Life (1968), for example, which is about a soldier driven mad owing to the remoteness of his post, stands alongside Segers’ desolate seventeenth-century imagery. The well-known shot in Herzog’s first feature film of a windmill-covered landscape takes its inspiration from the Dutch artist, whose paintings and etchings of windmills were ciphers for more than only the air’s quiet movement. They bespoke the human encroachment on the landscape as well as the hazards of having an overly deliberative mind. Yet one has to acknowledge that it is not only Segers who alters Herzog, but that Herzog likewise alters Segers. One returns to the paintings subsequent to viewing Signs of Life and sees their pathos relative to a maze of interconnections between madness and isolation.

The history of Herzog’s work contains a multitude of such reciprocal disclosures. In order that viewers not miss them, Herzog takes it upon himself to recommend a ceaseless stream of works. He has a habit of intoning his recommendations such that one is made to feel that even if one has read the book or watched the film in question, one has not looked at it hard enough or seen its truth through the darkness. With this degree of gravitas Herzog offers a reading list to those who plan to attend his Rogue Film School, a place where one supposedly also learns
how to pick locks and steal cameras. The reading list seems like a practical joke intended to discourage his devotees: he endorses only the most unwieldy books including Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel* novels, a cycle of sixteenth-century works that add up to more than a thousand pages, and he also suggests reading *The Warren Commission Report*, which is 880 pages long. This latter recommendation seems particularly counterintuitive. At first glance this account of the Kennedy assassination is the very materialization of what Herzog would describe as the accountants’ truth; it provides only provable facts rather than illuminating something that is generally hidden from sight. The book is, however, not without its ecstatic moments. It includes unlikely details such as the extent to which Jack Ruby was fond of dogs, how he referred to them as his children, and “became extremely incensed” when he witnessed their maltreatment (1964: 804). Is Herzog being unserious, or does he see a moment of truth-illuminating disclosure in this collectively authored report? Does *The Warren Commission Report*, either because of its strange and unlikely set of details, or because of its notoriously contested facts, have something ecstatic about it?

In light of these examples of reciprocity comments Herzog made early in his career about the filmmakers Satyajit Ray and François Truffaut can be explained. Herzog contends that earlier films, when seen next to his work, “learn from him.” That the statement is hyperbolic seems to be a deliberate provocation. How can films produced prior to his “learn from him”? The sentiment expresses something about Herzog’s companions and about the productive nature of affinities. He does not like to feel that other films influenced him, yet reciprocal illumination may be entirely distinct from the discourse of influence. Although Herzog frequently presents himself as a solitary pilgrim, his art itself gravitates toward the companionship of other works, and leans toward interconnections with other artists. Despite the proposition’s seductive appeal, art is at no point independent from art, and the interaction between texts and films may even be the engine of their sublimity insofar as that interaction throws the sublime experience of synthesis back upon the spectator.

Among Herzog’s cinematic companions he frequently mentions trailblazing filmmakers such as D. W. Griffith and Tod Browning. Herzog’s feature film *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972), to choose another example from early in the director’s *oeuvre*, echoes what at first seems to be an unlikely source: Charlie Chaplin’s *The Gold Rush* (1925). Chaplin’s film opens with a sequence that depicts the Chilkoot Pass in Alaska. A trail of prospectors proceeds up a mountainside, each of them tiny as ants. Chaplin then cuts to a high-angle shot, and we see the prospectors’ backs and shoulders as they, one after the next, ascend the mountain and nearly bump up against the lens. Herzog’s *Aguirre* begins with a strikingly similar image, and its proportions resonate unmistakably with Chaplin’s. That single shot may still be Herzog’s best known, and although he had made feature films before *Aguirre*, for many viewers this striking tableau set his international career in motion: a snaking trail of Spaniards and their indigenous servants is reduced to the smallest
conceivable scale, almost lost amid the lush green verdure. Herzog’s gold rush, the search for El Dorado, is here transposed from Chaplin’s Alaska, and the works of the two path-breaking independent filmmakers can be linked. Seen in this way—in the light of inverse influence—we might now view both films differently. For example, in one of the subsequent sequences in *The Gold Rush*, Chaplin depicts his lone prospector stalked by a bear. It is a poignant moment in which Chaplin’s preoccupied figure is unwittingly shadowed. Illuminated by Herzog’s work this Alaskan bear becomes something that can only be described as a stirring fore-echo of Herzog’s *Grizzly Man* (2005). Although it was, in that latter film, expressed as recklessness, Treadwell’s intrepid spirit was simultaneously American and pioneering. Both of these Alaskan figures remain unaware of the extreme danger that awaits them. Chaplin’s prospector, because he is so decidedly sympathetic, shares a common pathos and depth with Treadwell, especially once his footage has been presented and framed by Herzog.

In what follows I consider how Herzog’s work is connected with other approaches, including German writers and filmmakers, prewar filmmakers, and tendencies in American independent cinema. The contributors to this volume have not been asked them to restrict themselves to single films; Herzog’s works hang together, and they reward attempts to see them in this light. It is a pitfall of thinking in auteurist terms that every work by a given director is of a piece with the whole, yet so many themes recur that such thinking is inevitable, and, insofar as art is its own companion and film can illuminate other films, it is desirable. The twenty-five essays in the present volume—whether approaching the matter in connection with French film, Dutch painting, or American poetry—seek to illuminate not only key moments within individual films, but also the approach of the filmmaker as a whole, examining his language and his images with respect to their composition, historicity, and context.

New Images

During the 1970s and into the early 1980s Herzog was commonly associated with the New German Cinema, whose representatives were largely independent filmmakers, though they each also profited from the group’s wider recognition. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wim Wenders, and a few other leading lights defined them. Timothy Corrigan notes that cultural-historical context rather than a collective stylistic signature identified that set’s higher profile filmmakers, observing that they shared a “common zero ground,” and gathered around “the machinery of filmmaking” as a means of “freeing themselves from the suspicions of their native language” (1986: 6). Referring to Truffaut’s famous fictional figure from *The 400 Blows* (1959), a young man in France who rebuffed all authority, Corrigan called the cohort of postwar filmmakers, who were rendered fatherless because of the war,
“Antoine Doinels” (6).4 Herzog’s decision not to trouble himself with film school, but rather to continue as an autodidact and a student of the world, can be linked to his decision not to participate in signing the group’s political manifestos. Akin to Wenders and Fassbinder, Herzog was feted at Cannes where he was awarded the Grand Jury Prize in 1975 for The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser (1974). Throughout this time he consented to precious few collective affiliations, yet his refutation was not always absolute. As late as 1979, after he completed his transnational production of Nosferatu—The Vampyre (1979), which starred Kinski and the Swiss actor Bruno Ganz alongside the French actress Isabelle Adjani, Herzog participated in a group interview for the magazine Der Spiegel. In the company of young directors Uwe Brandner, Reinhard Hauff, and Hark Bohm, all of whom were, like Herzog, born during World War II, Herzog boasts, “we dominate the cinema with our films; we are German film. We are not the young-film movement or something like that.” By the end of the interview Herzog has emerged as the dominant voice. Careful readers can already detect intimations of tensions with Bohm that would grow into conflicts over Herzog’s South American film Ballad of a Little Soldier (1984) (see Bohm and Zimmer 1984), yet Herzog was clearly, at this point, willing to sit together with other filmmakers and, more important, to use the word “we.” Despite his professions of isolation, Herzog produced a number of identifiably German films in the 1970s, including The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser, Heart of Glass (1976), Stroszek (1977), and Woyzeck (1979), and he was, in some measure, himself produced by the German film industry over the course of that decade. His filmmaking, regularly supported by the public television station ZDF, emerged out of a specific cultural context. Whether or not he considered New German Cinema’s filmmakers to be his companions, he benefited from the growth of and the attention given to the German film industry.

Herzog praised many of his fellow filmmakers, especially Fassbinder,6 and he now and again worked with Wenders, stepping more than once before the latter’s camera. In a staged encounter in Tôkyô-ga (1985), Wenders’ feature-length documentary about images, simulacra, and the cinema of Yasujiro Ozu, Herzog appears to fortuitously bump into the documentarian Wenders in Japan. Herzog there describes his willingness to climb 8,000 meters or travel with NASA on Skylab in search of what he describes as “new images.” At the Cannes Film Festival a few years earlier Herzog had similarly spoken directly into Wenders’ camera for the documentary Room 666 (1982). At that festival in May 1982—a year in which Herzog’s Fitzcarraldo (1982) and Wenders’ Hammett (1982) were both in competition—a number of filmmakers, including Michelangelo Antonioni, Steven Spielberg, and Fassbinder, who died only a few weeks later, all answered questions about the fate of cinema relative to the looming shadow of television. As in Tôkyô-ga Herzog shows a willingness to collaborate and even to have a bit of fun: he is the only one of the various filmmakers who shuts off the droning television that Wenders has left on in the background as a bit of documentary mise-en-scène, and Herzog also takes off his shoes as he responds to Wenders’ written talking
point. This last act may have been playful self-citation on Herzog’s part: he would perhaps rather avoid being put in the position of having to eat his shoes, as he had done in front of the director Les Blank’s camera shortly before, in Berkeley, California in 1979, to settle a wager with Errol Morris. In his answer to Wenders Herzog offers a bit of optimism: he concludes, “I’m not all that worried,” noting that television may have its uses, and that we might one day do our banking or choose groceries with such an item, but that television will not replace the experience of cinema.

Comments related to those Herzog made in Wenders’ Tôkyô-ga can already be found in much earlier interviews in which he argues that his goal is “to show images, which have not been seen yet in cinema.”

Herzog wants to reveal something altogether new, yet he deliberately introduces tendentious and much discussed topics into his films such as the history of war, colonial exploration, and the exploitation of the earth. Insofar as his films are about looking—at war-torn landscapes, at the slave trade, or at the faces of the colonized themselves—they are also reflections on the history of images. Herzog expresses his rhetoric in evolutionary terms when he, in Blank’s Werner Herzog Eats his Shoe (1980), maintains that we were going to “die out like dinosaurs” if we do not develop adequate images. In seeking to present us with a view of our fate, or in pursuit of a standpoint from which we might otherwise see ourselves, we can understand Herzog’s fascination with animal and alien perspectives. A flock of flamingoes in Fata Morgana (1969), for example, is meant to be perceived only fleetingly as an impression of movement that challenges our sensitivity to form, or as a means of seeing the world as representatives of an alien civilization would see it (a theme to which he returned in The Wild Blue Yonder (2005)). There is always the intimation that we should seek an “outside” to how we perceive the world, regardless of the fact that we are unlikely to find it. To listen to him speak in Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe, the “inside” we inhabit is defined by advertising, capitalism, and television shows such as Bonanza; in a film such as The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser, that inside consists of those limitations defined by language; and in Fata Morgana, it is primarily our human (and specifically, western) perceptual apparatus that defines it.

The concept of the “new image,” however, presents a dilemma—one that is related to the problem of companions—insofar as images are within rather than external to history. Herzog for the most part declines to make explicit statements of advocacy, and his images are undeniably chosen in accord with his claim of autonomy; he wants his films subordinated to no extant discourses and prefers to avoid political speech. After his return from an earlier Cannes Festival, in 1968, Herzog responded to the question of whether he intended to be part of the political protests that were brewing in connection with the upcoming Berlin Film Festival. He had left his short film Last Words (1968) in that year’s competition at Oberhausen, where others had withdrawn their entries, and he hoped his films would be evaluated on an unpolitical basis. In a short essay that bears the title “Howling with the Wolves” Herzog expresses regret that in times of political tension one does not
have a right to expect to be understood in a nuanced way; sides are chosen, and those who do not howl with the wolves will be counted among the lambs (1968: 460). For this reason, Herzog explains, he has stated that *Signs of Life*, which is about World War II but takes place in Greece and is freely adapted from a story by the German Romantic writer Achim von Arnim, was unpolitical. The imagery on which Herzog draws, with its reference to lambs and wolves, is surely biblical, yet it also can be seen to refer to Heinrich von Kleist’s “St. Cecilia or the Power of Music: A Legend” (1810).¹⁰ In that story, which was also written during the Romantic era, iconoclasts come to the city of Aachen to destroy a cathedral and are reduced to a trance-like state by the beauty of religious music; they find themselves only capable of howling like wolves. One interpretation of Kleist’s story is that the power of music, that is, the power of aesthetics, trumps political rebellion and reduces politically motivated revolutionaries to making braying, animalistic sounds. It brings out what Herzog sees as a truth about political speech. The nature of their collective action is animalistic; they howl like madmen, and thus lose control of their self-expression. An ecstatic performance triumphs over politically motivated violence, and art saves the cathedral.

By most accounts Herzog’s films aspire to reach beyond the bounds of prosaic language and inspire in the viewer an experience of sublimity. The sublime has, however, a unique function; following Burke and Kant it tends to be defined in asocial terms, especially when compared with the sociability generally linked to beautiful representations. Beauty is gentle, its experience is predicated on universal agreement, and its appearance affirms the presence of a larger (typically divine) plan. The sublime, however, is challenging and is viewed as the acknowledgment of the solitary subject’s lonesome struggle to impose categories, concepts, and meanings on grandiose or terrifying objects. Perhaps for this reason, owing to this specter of solipsism, Herzog’s filmmaking has always been shadowed by sublimity. It is, in other words, not the images themselves, but the sum of the figure cut by the director taken together with his work that causes us to examine his images under the sign of the sublime. Yet genuine isolation—the confrontation with truly new images—is inconceivable insofar as the perception of cinematic images is always already social; the act of viewing is invariably embedded in context, in history, and in language. This, then, is the source of an ever-present tension in engagements with Herzog’s work: his images point toward an isolation, an autonomy and a *sui generis* status that they cannot claim. Corrigan aptly identifies the movement of the director’s films as one “between a language of some sort (history, literature, politics, etc.) and the hypnotic substance of images” (1986: 16). Alan Singer, who describes the director’s sublime visions as always embedded in self-reflective irony, articulates this back and forth movement similarly, writing: “Herzog’s vistas are deliberately not a release from the rigors of contemplation that is the seductive pleasure of the sublime, but are ever more engrossing visual situations that compel attention to their unique formal determinations. By contrast with the pleasure of sublimity, these determinations might even be described as the exigencies of an
inescapable historical will/knowledge insofar as the traces of their production are integral to their compositional order and intelligibility" (1986: 188).

For all his consciousness of the hazards of contemplation, Herzog is not in the tradition of Bertolt Brecht, and he is not primarily concerned with undercutting our aesthetic absorption. The juxtapositions in his films take a distinctive shape, and his most ecstatic moments are purposefully set in opposition to the historical determination of vision. They are held up against the history of the image in the form of Richard Wagner (in *Fitzcarraldo* [1982] and *Lessons of Darkness* [1992]), Leni Riefenstahl (in *Scream of Stone* [1991] and *Cobra Verde* [1987]), and even, now and again, a figure such as Karl May (in *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* and *Ballad of a Little Soldier*).11 Although Herzog professes little interest in Riefenstahl and May, he incorporates into his work what Singer describes as an “inescapable historical will/knowledge,” a will and knowledge that are inescapable on two levels: the associations that follow from them are inevitable, especially for his German audiences; and they are also mesmerizing. They are compelling, and are for this reason deliberately laid aesthetic traps. To vary Marshall McLuhan’s famous formulation: the mystification is the message. Herzog is an enchanting magician, yet he is also a modern critic of beguiling practices, and he thus reflects our stupefaction back at us. The history and historicity of his images—their “uses”—are always incorporated into and repurposed in his works.

Having excused himself from associations with New German Cinema and delinked himself from most major art historical trends, Herzog sometimes stylizes himself in accord with a Romantic “forest isolation” (Waldeinsamkeit). Jan Christopher Horak describes the director’s stylization as that of the prophet-artist, who remains “apart from the temporal problems shared by most mortals” (1986: 31).12 This image—the self-stylization as literary figure in search of solitude—recalls figures such as Christopher McCandless, the subject of Jon Krakauer’s 1996 nonfiction book *Into the Wild*, who undertook to separate himself wholesale from society, as well as Byron’s Childe Harold, who, while roaming in foreign lands, learns from solitude the lessons of death (2004: 136). Herzog’s published diary, *The Conquest of the Useless* (2009), where he documents the difficulties that beset the production of the film *Fitzcarraldo*, contains many such images of the self in Romantic isolation. His journal is full of language and sentiments associated with Waldeinsamkeit, where the Wald in question is the Amazon. His stylized self-reliance is illustrated in his description of a soccer game in Lima, where the director found himself confused as to which players were on which team. He concludes: “I knew the only hope of winning the game would be if I did it all by myself […] I would have to take on the entire field myself, including my own team” (2009: 8). Even more characteristic is a curious incident from around the time Herzog was isolated by the burden of his dream of enacting Fitzcarraldo’s vision of hauling a steamship over a mountain. Coming to terms with the fact that no one would help him realize his plan, he writes: “In the evening I finished reading a book, and because I was feeling so alone, I buried the book on the edge of the forest with a borrowed spade” (2009: 244).
The incident is curious: for whom does Herzog want us to believe he is leaving this message? For what future reader? Is he setting the book aside for posterity or is he burying it once and for all?

In gravitating toward total isolation Herzog becomes a character akin to those that grace his films. His travel diary Of Walking in Ice—a chronicle of his journey on foot from Munich to Paris in the winter of 1974—is filled with hyperbolic valorizations of solitude. It includes customary Herzogian declarations such as “when I move, a buffalo moves. When I rest, a mountain reposes” (1980a: 8). In such passages its tone has everything in common with the power fantasies of Kinski’s Lope de Aguirre, who declared that the earth quaked beneath him when he walked. To read with Horak, who is a remarkably close reader of Of Walking in Ice, one might think of this as “posturing” (1986: 37), or even as messianic fantasy (35). Herzog is a character in his own ongoing film, and the dedifferentiation of documentary and features, for which he has become famous, contributes to the blurring of the lines: the real Timothy Treadwell, the quasi-fictional Aguirre, and the lyrical wanderer Herzog—their dreams gravitate toward isolation, and toward shaping the world to accommodate their singular vision. The enthusiastic naturalist, the visionary yet diabolical conquistador, and the German filmmaker each create their own worlds. The grander the vision, the more expansive and varied the inner landscape. Yet these characters and their visions exist in language and in history. The self, like the work of art, can never be truly isolated.

Herzog’s Writing

There are ample writings by Herzog apart from Of Walking in Ice and Conquest of the Useless. The trail of texts is long, and the German novelist and scholar W. G. Sebald is one example of a writer who acknowledged his authorial affinity with Herzog. He generally wrote about Herzog in a context in which writers such as Walser, Wittgenstein, and Nabokov more frequently appeared. Indeed Herzog emerges as an influence in more than one of the author’s novels.13 Sebald, who died in an auto accident in 2001, was nearly the same age as Herzog (he was born in 1944, Herzog was born in 1942), and was from a region of Germany close to the one in which Herzog was raised. In a 2001 essay entitled “Moments Musicaux” Sebald indicates that he felt spoken to by the scene in Fitzcarraldo in which the protagonist, played by Klaus Kinski, believes that Enrico Caruso is acknowledging him from the stage of a Brazilian opera house during a performance of Giuseppe Verdi’s Ernani.14 In Herzog’s film, Kinski believes he has been swept up; having been made part of the production he swoons ecstatically. The incident comes early in the film, and the encounter with the stage bespeaks the confusion of reality and fantasy that becomes the film’s major theme. Sebald writes that upon seeing the production of Ernani in Herzog’s film, he recalled having seen that same opera as
a child in a town identified as “S.” The letter likely indicates the town of Sonthofen in the Bavarian Alps, which lies only 130 miles from Herzog’s own “S.,” that is, Sachrang, where the young film director was simultaneously growing up. In Sebald’s essay, he writes that the local upholsterer and tobacconist played the lead roles in the production, and Herzog’s cinematic scene becomes a cipher through which Sebald replays moments from his own past. He too is transported as if onto the stage.

At a subsequent point in Sebald’s essay he recounts how he had a ticket to see a production of Verdi’s *Nabucco* (1842), at the Bregenz Festival when it was staged there in 1993–4. He grew concerned that the treatment of the persecution of the Jews in this opera would be vulgar, and he found himself, for this reason, prepared to part with his ticket. At this point, he explains, a woman who asked him whether he might have a spare ticket approached him. In what is clearly an evocation of one of the initial moments of *Fitzcarraldo*, we are informed that she—like Kinski and Claudia Cardinale in Herzog’s film, who have traveled by boat to see Caruso—has “come a long way” (2005: 195) and that she is disappointed that there are no tickets available. Sebald notes that this woman likely approached him because he “looked like someone let down by his companion” (195). One can surmise that here, owing to his suspicions about how the festival was putting Verdi to use, he felt let down, and for this reason he heads home where he takes comfort (or refuge) in his books.

Herzog is of the same generation as a cohort of postwar writers, which includes Sebald, but also more widely known ones such as Peter Schneider and Peter Handke. Herzog once praised Schneider’s *Der Mauerspringer* (*The Wall Jumper*) highly in a published review, describing the novel as both good and urgent (*dringlich*) (1982: 213), but he would surely protest against such comparisons. He has never been directly affiliated with Schneider or Handke, nor does he think of himself as specifically German (he prefers to describe his origins as Bavarian). He has doubtlessly walked a path quite different from such writers, and it would be a mistake to include him in that category without underscoring the many caveats, yet in examining the work of his early years there is also cause to consider the connections. Herzog’s interest in the historical figure Kaspar Hauser, for example, links his projects with those of Handke, who was, like Herzog, born in 1942. Handke and Herzog are an unlikely combination insofar as Handke is more commonly connected with Wim Wenders. Those two collaborated on a number of films and share a common mood characterized by protagonists who drift from place to place, and by their joint attempt to articulate their disaffection negatively through the absence of affect. Such tendencies are generally associated with the so-called new subjectivity of the West German 1970s, a literary movement that appears to have spoken little to Herzog.

A 1967 poem by Handke entitled “Fright” (“Erschrecken”) ends with the line “This desert is a Fata Morgana!” which, in denying the desert its dominance, may be meant as a reassuring conclusion to an ode to fear (1974: 149). As a word for “mirage” *fata morgana* occurs regularly enough in German, yet if one considers
Herzog’s own remarks as to how Africa has always left him frightened (Cronin 2002: 47), one might be tempted to picture a parallel between Handke’s anxious verse and Herzog’s excursion in the late 1960s, from which he returned with the film _Fata Morgana_. However, Handke’s play _Kaspar_, also published in 1967, sheds more light on concerns common to both. When we first encounter Kaspar in Herzog’s 1974 feature film he is in a state that one can describe as pre-lingual; the legendary Kaspar Hauser, who appeared in Nuremberg in 1828 was approximately 16 years old at the time he emerged, but here, played by the 42-year-old Bruno Schleinstein (a.k.a. Bruno S.), he is a full-grown adult, who has not yet acquired language. He has at least one word at his command, but no syntax, and to our knowledge he has seen little of the world beyond the dark cellar in which he has been held captive. He is in possession of a toy horse and repeatedly says the word “horse” while playing with it. At times he is visited by a man who feeds him and he is ultimately deposited in the city streets with a letter of introduction that includes a sentence he has rehearsed: “I want to be a gallant rider, as my father was before me.” Kaspar is cast into the world, and both Handke’s play and Herzog’s film draw attention to the painful, forced acquisition of language as the unavoidable entrée into a society that Kaspar, in all iterations of the story, comes to regret.

The authors’ respective Kaspars are used to illustrate social limits, and the cruel irrationalities of a society for which socialization is violence. The figures are a means of boundary testing, and Herzog relies on Kaspar to draw out a depiction of willfully brutal behavior, one that ends with his sympathetic main character on the coroner’s cold dissecting table. Both his story and Handke’s rely on their protagonists’ transgressions—his role as the clown who renders society’s coarse clownishness transparent—in order to depict inhumaneness. On behalf of his belief in the necessity of new images, Herzog similarly tests the social limits when he eats a shoe in _Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe_. While Herzog eats his own footwear—pieces of a sturdy looking work-shoe that Herzog has cooked in garlic and duck fat—he articulates his hope for change, noting that films may “change our perspective on things.” When he is asked about the social import of film Herzog says that in the long term it may be valuable, but he then adds, “there’s a lot of absurdity involved as well. As you see, it makes me into a clown. And that happens to everyone. Just look at Orson Welles, or look at even people like Truffaut. They have become clowns. […] What we do as filmmakers—it’s immaterial. It’s only a projection of light.”

Herzog’s shoe-eating feat took place in the United States, and although he eventually moved there, German authors in the 1970s tended to take a skeptical if not a cynical position vis-à-vis American freedom. This typically involved looking for an apparently more authentic America in places such as the Midwest, and in Herzog’s case, he looked to Wisconsin. The idea was to see beyond America’s self-representation, specifically in film, and in order to do that, writers and filmmakers had to venture beyond Hollywood. In _Stroszek_, Herzog looks at the United States through the eyes of a character again played by Schleinstein. America is harsh and
Stroszek, the protagonist, tries to emigrate there adventurously along with his two close friends and his mynah bird, who upon arrival falls victim to coldness and cruelty; the bird does not live to see Wisconsin. Owing to Stroszek’s status as an emigrant he is displaced, and because the film is focalized through him, the United States can be re-visualized as an alien landscape. Stroszek cannot make sense of his impressions at least in any conventional way, and he resists the logic of American capitalism just as Kaspar Hauser, Schleinstein’s comparable character, had resisted a professor of logic’s rational machinations in *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*. America’s instrumental reason remains opaque to Stroszek, and in this way he functions similarly to a number of Handke’s protagonists. In his inability to make sense of American nonsense, he is particularly akin to the unnamed narrator of Handke’s novel *Short Letter, Long Farewell* (1972). In the course of his road trip through the United States Handke’s protagonist can barely make sense of the stories he reads in the newspapers or out of a stage performance by Lauren Bacall. By the time he reaches the Midwest nearly every sign and gesture perplex him.

Throughout the 1970s Herzog wrote prodigiously, and his published screenplays seem to require their own genre: they are published as “film-stories” (*Filmerzählungen*). In the front pages of the published book that contains the film-stories of *Aguirre* and *Kaspar Hauser* (published under the translation of its German title, *Every Man for Himself and God Against All*), Herzog explains that the texts in that collection, apart from *Land of Silence and Darkness* (which can be described, relative to the other two films, as a documentary), have remained completely unchanged, that is, they are as they were prior to shooting. “The films themselves,” Herzog writes, “followed a very different evolution” (1980b: 5). His screenplays are not just similar to or parallel to literary writing, they are literature, and transforming them into visual images is a means by which Herzog expresses his awareness of the gap between media. Early in his career he won the prestigious Carl Mayer Prize for his screenplay for *Signs of Life*, which was inspired by Achim von Arnim’s novella “The Mad Invalid of Fort Ratonneau” (1818). Herzog had already begun, at that point, to help give the concept of *autorenkino* a new shape. It was not that the German language cinema of the 1970s would present the adapted works of great authors, nor was *autorenkino* an indication that directors, akin to Alfred Hitchcock and John Ford, would be the sole authors of their films. A new definition was emerging: the director was meant to be seen equally as a writer. Although it is true that Wenders’ adaptations (of Handke and of Nathaniel Hawthorne) and Fassbinder’s (of Theodor Fontane, Alexander Döblin, and Daniel Galouye) each display their director’s signatures and can be called reimaginings of literary works, these directors were simultaneously writing essays, plays, and short philosophical texts that stood independent of their films. Along these changing lines Herzog was defining himself as a writer-director who was equally a writer *and* a director. The new legitimacy of German cinema, to which he often referred at that time, came not entirely because his films—alongside those of Wenders, Fassbinder, Alexander Kluge, and others—were as artistic