

Richard Eldridge (2019) *Werner Herzog: Filmmaker as Philosopher*, London: Bloomsbury, 221 pp.

In the fifty-seven years it took for the wunderkind director of *Herakles* (West Germany, 1962) to become the wizened cine-master that François Truffaut referred to *en route* as “the most important film director alive” (see Patterson 2009), much blood, sweat, tears, bile and ink have been spilled over Werner Herzog’s films. Characteristically, the taciturn director has expressed utter disdain for the latter form of effluence, especially when penned in the academic grain. The best outcome for such “impenetrable nonsense,” Herzog has fumed, is to end up in the trash (see Cronin 2014, p. 177). Well aware of this directorial distaste, the “working philosopher” Richard Eldridge has fashioned another academic monograph to add to the groaning shelves covering the films of this loveable German rogue. So what might this book have to offer that previous Herzog publications haven’t already covered?

One appeal of Eldridge’s *Werner Herzog: Filmmaker as Philosopher*, might be that it doesn’t just deal with the most famous Herzog films that have invariably been written about countless times before. For, Eldridge surveys nearly all of Herzog’s work, namechecking the obscure and marginal films alongside the household names and art cinema favourites. Another unique point is that each chapter maps out how Herzog’s images and characters make a *mêlée* of philosophical ideas, positions and concepts both perceptible and graspable, while also sketching out the perimeters of a Herzogian philosophical world-view.

Beginning his book autobiographically, Eldridge speaks of first encountering Herzog’s work in Chicago during the 1970s, where he immediately became aware of seeing “something extraordinary – paradigm instances of the powers of art” that materially expressed a kind of urgency regarding “the problems of human life they address” (p. 3). These encounters stayed with Eldridge, who worked on Herzog over the next forty or so years as he became a Professor of Philosophy – now boasting publications on German philosophy, the aesthetics of art and literature, and the philosophy of language.

In his latest monograph, Eldridge frames Herzog’s cine-work as a form of philosophical expression. Which is to say, Eldridge believes that Herzog’s films share some of the same concerns and issues that have traditionally enraptured the (typically Germanic) thinkers and philosophers he now professes upon, and who include, but are not limited to Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, G.W.F. Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer. Key French

philosophers with something of a cinematic persuasion – such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze – also make the cut, with Eldridge exploring what their work and concepts bring to our enjoyment of Herzog’s films and vice versa.

Eldridge initially claims to be sympathetic to Herzog’s dislike of ivory tower intellectualism, re-stating that for Herzog a “badge of honour is to fail a film theory class” (Cronin 2014: back cover). However, while acknowledging the director’s preference for poetry over philosophy, Eldridge also believes that he has “ready to hand” an important set of synergistic philosophical vocabularies that can help readers better to appreciate Herzog’s films (p. 4). For Eldridge – and by extension anyone else interested in teaching philosophy through film – the enduring value of Herzog’s work can ultimately be located in the fact that they “make various philosophical thoughts more plausible and available in experience, while at the same time modifying and inflecting them in various ways through images” (p. 4). Structurally, the book offers three overlapping entry points into Herzog’s *œuvre*, which gravitate thematically around his treatment of Nature, Selfhood, and History. Throughout, Eldridge also puts the ideas of an unruly parliament of thinkers and philosophers into mutual interaction with Herzog’s films, characters, and celebrity persona.

In the first chapter on Nature, for example, Eldridge illustrates how Herzog’s films formulate artistic spaces through which viewers can glimpse aspects of the Absolute. However, in this chapter, as remains the case throughout the book, much of the “philosophical” insight and ideas emerge courtesy of fragments of now familiar directorial statements and interviews. As such, many of the book’s philosophical insights appear indebted to already existing Herzog books, especially Paul Cronin’s touchstones *Herzog on Herzog* (2003) and *Werner Herzog – A Guide for the Perplexed* (2014). At times it can feel as if Eldridge is essentially thickening a choice selection of curated Herzog interviews with his own viscous stock of boiled-down philosophical knowledge. Indeed, in the History chapter – and without making recourse to extant *Film-Philosophy* publications that have examined Herzog’s work (see, for example, Mitcheson 2013; Fischer 2018) – Eldridge argues that Herzog “sees himself more as a Jeremiah-like prophet-poet critic than as someone who is directly intervening in local political problems,” and he professes that the director’s “stance in filmmaking is closer to Nietzsche’s remark that ‘we are unknown to ourselves, we knowers: and with good reason. We have never looked for ourselves – so how are we ever supposed to find ourselves?’ than it is to any directly documentary-political intention” (p. 172).

With this passage in mind, we can see how the book's overarching style is, to my mind, less film-philosophy than an American form of "philosophy through film" à la Mary M. Litch and Amy Karofsky (2015) – a style that acknowledges but only infrequently explores how it is that films materially philosophise or might actually "do philosophy" (Martin-Jones 2016, p. 6). An interesting exception to this rule involves Eldridge zooming in on the Herzogian cine-fingerprint of raw desert, mountain or jungle landscapes that often appear alive with dynamic mirages, moving clouds, or tendrilled mists. In interviews, the director discusses these as a form of inner landscape that somehow speaks to and communicates with the viewer in a primal fashion. By such token, even when Eldridge acknowledges Herzog's preference for imagistic modes of communicating over linguistic ones, the book relies heavily upon extant director discussions and ideas of authorial intent. Which is to say: rather than simply trusting the art, Eldridge entrusts the artist to signal and legitimate the art's philosophical worth.

Other chapters adopt fresher philosophical approaches. Chapter 1, for example, contains a thought-provoking take on Herzog's active, physical and intuitive manner of filmmaking, which is mediated through discussions of the director's athletic mind-set and his experiences of being absorbed in sporting activities, such as football and ski jumping. What is more, the most gripping passages appear in the final chapter, where a consideration of *Gesualdo: Death for Five Voices* (Germany, 1995) leads to the director's own voice, ethics and aesthetics being forced into dialogue with the life and work of the infamous aristocratic composer and murderer, Carlo Gesualdo (1566–1613). Again drawing on interview material, we discover that the eponymous subject of Herzog's favourite "documentary" spoke directly to the director across the chasm of time via his compelling music. Benjamin and Nietzsche are here made to resonate as Gesualdo is described (like many of Herzog's subjects) as being at once out of step with, but also somehow ahead of, his time. It is little surprise, then, that this lesser-known German TV film, which the director previously described as running "amok" (p. 193), is here re-framed as being strangely close to Herzog's heart in a different way.

Structurally, the book lacks a conclusion to draw the tapestry of discussions back together. However, the work and ideas contained within the introduction and the philosophical triptych remain lucid and accessible, with complex modern concepts being explained in a way that makes understanding achievable for undergraduate and postgraduate readers alike. Beyond appealing to the Herzog aficionados, then, the book will also no doubt make for a useful addition to many film and philosophy modules, offering students an accessible way to get to grips

with a range of challenging concepts such as Heidegger's notion of unconcealedness and Nietzsche's will to power.

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