



## Werner Herzog's Ecstatic Truth

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**Abstract:** In his stimulating discussion of Werner Herzog's work, Richard Eldridge emphasizes that Herzog's films are truth-disclosing. At the same time Eldridge acknowledges that Herzog makes clear the presence of the filmmaker and the process of filmmaking. In this essay, I explore further how the emphasis upon interpretation and perspective that one finds in Herzog's films can be reconciled with Herzog's notion of ecstatic truth. Eldridge's move to relate Herzog's work to Pierre Hadot's discussion of spiritual exercises is key to resolving this apparent tension, because it allows one to better understand the relationship between the subject and truth. I argue that an understanding of truth is operative in Herzog's films that is comparable to Friedrich Nietzsche's understanding of truth; in which the practice of truth involves a gradual breaking of habits and a purification of false beliefs which is ultimately transformative.

**Keywords:** Herzog, Werner; Eldridge, Richard; Hadot, Pierre; Nietzsche, Friedrich; ecstatic truth; spiritual exercises; conversion; perspective.

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Richard Eldridge—steeped in both the details of Herzog's prolific oeuvre and the German philosophy that informs the cultural and intellectual legacy in which Herzog works creatively—ably and engagingly demonstrates the philosophical richness of Herzog's films. The various Herzogian themes that Eldridge picks out; nature, religion, the absurd, artistic practice, the cost of so-called civilization, selfhood, the human quest for meaning, the sublime, spiritual exercises, and the nature of truth, all intersect. It is the problem of truth that I wish to focus on in my response to this welcome study of Herzog's philosophical filmmaking.

Eldridge emphasizes that Herzog's films aim at a disclosure of a deeper truth than the banalities of the technological, capitalist, civilized world, writing of:

a disclosure of something fundamental—the whole of nature, the self-development of the Absolute, the fact

of the ocean—that surrounds and shapes everything we do, but that fails to present itself within the orbit of business as usual.<sup>1</sup>

Eldridge insists that "Herzog is interested in ecstatic truth disclosed by way of aesthetic images" (*WH* 171). When Herzog introduces the term ecstatic truth he suggests it is something inherently "mysterious and elusive" and also refers to it as a "poetic" truth.<sup>2</sup> Herzog thus seems to be suggesting that art works

<sup>1</sup> Richard Eldridge, *Werner Herzog: Filmmaker and Philosopher*, London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic 2019, p. 13. [Henceforth cited as *WH*]

<sup>2</sup> Werner Herzog, "The Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema," in *Herzog on Herzog*, ed. Paul Cronin, London, UK: Faber and Faber 2002, pp. 301-302, here p. 301. [Henceforth cited as *MD*]