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Constructing an Immanent Sublime: Ecosophical Aesthetics as "Ecstatic Truth" in Werner Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* (1992)

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Abstract

On its release in 1992, Werner Herzog's quasi-documentary, Lessons of Darkness*, was heavily criticised for 'aestheticizing' the ecological devastation of the First Gulf War by combining dream-like images of the Kuwaiti oil field fires with an overly romanticized soundtrack dominated by Wagner's operas. Herzog's response was that he was striving to move beyond what he calls 'the accountant's truth' of Cinéma Vérité and achieve instead an 'ecstatic truth,' a term derived from Longinus which categorizes the sublime as a combination of immanent terror and delightful horror that strives not to persuade or educate the viewer but to entrance them, thereby attaining a higher form of truth, much like Nietzsche's definition of art as 'the highest power of falsehood,' whereby 'the will to deception is turned into a superior ideal.' The essay then applies this form of ecstatic sublime to Félix Guattari's ecosophical strategy, outlined in* The Three Ecologies*, where the usual dialectic between subject and object/nature, virtual and actual, fiction and documentary is dissolved in favour of nonhuman, interactive singularities, which act as a dynamic intersection for a series of autonomous vectors that radically transform ecology (and its associated activism) as we know it.*

Keywords: *Herzog; Sublime; Ecosophy; Deleuze; Guattari*

Introduction

Audiences with an understandable expectation that Werner Herzog's 1992 quasi-documentary, *Lessons of Darkness* would focus explicitly on the first Gulf War and the ecological devastation of the Kuwaiti oilfields by Saddam Hussein's retreating Iraqi army are in for both an ideological and an aesthetic disappointment. This unexpected misconception is perhaps reinforced by the film's title, where the use of the word 'Lessons' suggests a hermeneutic and didactic approach that will ground the film in an exploration of Desert Storm's historical and geographical context, with a view to expressing the long-term ramifications of environmental despoliation. Similarly, its division into thirteen sub-sections (marked by title cards) seemingly encourages us to read the film objectively and analytically rather than get caught up in war's seductive spectacle, for as Paul Virilio pointedly reminds us, 'the force of arms is not brute force but spiritual force' (Virilio, 1989, p. 5).

As it turns out, Herzog defies convention, for as the film's opening five minutes shows, he is far more concerned with constructing an 'ecstatic truth' as opposed to a political or scholarly exegesis. 'Ecstatic truth' is derived from a seminal philosophical treatise entitled *On the Sublime* which, according to classical scholars, dates from the first century AD. Although the actual

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author is unknown, the work has been variously attributed to later writers such as Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Cassius Longinus, and, rather enigmatically, 'pseudo-Longinus.' For the sake of convenience, most critics – including the essay's English translator, T.S. Dorsch – simplify the name as Longinus which, following Deleuze and Guattari, acts as a kind of 'conceptual persona' (not unlike 'Socrates' for Plato) for the work's broader historical importance (see Longinus, 1965, p. 24). The key point is that Longinus defines *hypsos* less as a rigid structure of accepted rhetorical practices and more as an aesthetic, *immanent* sublime. Immanence is a philosophical ontology, rooted in Spinoza's *Ethics*, which enfolds transcendental thought into a more sensation-based, somatic reality based on powers of being, whereby the power to think is directly linked to the power to exist or act (i.e. it is an intrinsically *practical* philosophy). Spinoza's ethics are thus directly related to what affects we are capable of and also the discovery of what our body can do, both actively and passively. An immanent sublime therefore has far more to do with limitless emotion such as terror, horror, dream and hallucination than an Enlightenment Kantian sublime, which reduces the infinite to a transcendental idealism based on a rational, language-based 'painful truth' grounded in the limitations of human subjectivity.

Spinoza's ethics has a direct association with ecological concerns via Félix Guattari's notion of ecosophy. In his *The Three Ecologies* (first published in 1989), Guattari defined ecosophy as an alternative to the extremely limited, technocratic response to all-pervasive industrial pollution by the IWC (Integrated World Capitalism) through an alternative, de-localized and rhizomic mental ecology built on heterogeneity and deterritorialization. As he puts it, 'only an ethico-political articulation – which I call *ecosophy* – between the three ecological registers (the environment, social relations and human subjectivity) would be likely to clarify these questions' (Guattari, 2008, pp. 19-20). As is well known, Guattari's three registers are themselves derived from the English anthropologist and cyberneticist, Gregory Bateson (1904-80), who broke down ecology into three interconnected trajectories: the material (ecology, the biophysical); the social (cultural and human); and most importantly for our discussion of Herzog, the perceptual, which treats the mind as an interactive *system* (as opposed to an exclusively rational apparatus) built on metacommunicative play and fantasy (see Bateson, 2000, pp. 177-93). This system is characterized by a fluid exchange of information – images and sounds, gazes and audibilities – which are transmitted within and between the intra- and extra-filmic worlds. This by-play between audience and apparatus allows us to transform the ecological into a machinic, decentered vector that accentuates the role of cinema as an agency of ecosophical aesthetics, creating a transverse, non-hierarchical relationship between ecology, ethics and art that is far more future-oriented than historical or topical.

It's also important to note that, moving beyond Bateson, Guattari makes a point of basing his 'eco-philosophy without borders' on non-human *singularities* rather than active thinking subjects, for as Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton argue in their 'Introduction' to *The Three Ecologies*, 'Singularity is not individuality, although it is about being singular. It operates at a pre-personal, pre-individual level [...] The resingularization of subjectivity, the liberation of singularities that are repressed by a dominant and dominating mass-media subjectivity, has nothing to do with individuals' (Pindar & Sutton, 2008, p. 8). Instead Guattari focuses on fluidity and movement between singularities that are always in a state of immanent becoming-other. 'Vectors of subjectification do not necessarily pass through the individual, which in reality appears to be something like a "terminal" for processes that involve human groups,

socio-economic ensembles, data-processing machines, etc.' he argues. 'Therefore, interiority establishes itself at the crossroads of multiple components, each relatively autonomous in relation to the other, and, if need be, in open conflict' (2008: 25). This is not unlike Adrian Ivakhiv's concept of "The Zone" of cinema, for as he puts it, 'The Zone […] can be taken to refer to the meeting ground of images and sounds, as they are organized for us by cinema, with the dense texture of perceptual response, bodily affect, and the multiple layers of memory, desire, and the interpretive capacity that we bring to viewing a film or artwork' (Ivakhiv, 2013, p. 17). Ivakhiv draws his main inspiration from Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979), which '…represents a journey from the everyday world into a Zone that may be the zone of cinema, or of dreams, of hope and imagination, or of an affective connection with the Earth that subtends both cinema and dreams' (2013, p. 17).

The affective and oneiric (as opposed to rational) basis for Herzog's approach is clear from the opening shot – a black screen accompanied by the sinister, low register chords taken from Wagner's *Rheingold*. Suddenly, we see a text in white on a black background that reads: 'The collapse of the stellar universe will occur like creation – in grandiose splendor.' The epigraph is attributed to Blaise Pascal (1623-62), the seventeenth-century physicist, mathematician, and religious philosopher. This foreshadowing of 'an apocalypse to come' seems perfectly apt considering the environmental catastrophe of the Gulf War, but it turns out that the attribution is a lie: the words were actually written by Herzog himself. However, as the director admitted in a lecture following a screening of the film in Milan, Italy:

> Pascal himself could not have said it better. This falsified and yet, as I will later demonstrate, not falsified quotation should serve as a first hint of what I am trying to deal with in this discourse. Anyway, to acknowledge a fake as fake contributes only to the triumph of accountants. Why am I doing this, you might ask? The reason is simple and comes not from theoretical, but rather from practical, considerations. With this quotation as a prefix I elevate [*erheben*] the spectator, before he has even seen the first frame, to a high level, from which to enter the film. And I, the author of the film, do not let him descend from this height until it is over. Only in this state of sublimity [*Erhabenheit*] does something deeper become possible, a kind of truth that is the enemy of the merely factual. Ecstatic truth, I call it. (Herzog, 2010, p. 1)

The film's first actual images of the war consist of monolithic oil towers silhouetted against a blazing red sky with connecting wires across the upper background and a reassuringly 'decorative' line of lights below. Far from grounding us in the visceral reality of death and annihilation, the images seem otherworldly, reinforced by Herzog's deadpan voice-over, which contextualizes the shot as 'A planet in our solar system.' We then pan right across hazy grey and white mountain peaks to the accompaniment of resonant horns from Wagner's *Rheingold*. 'White mountain ranges, clouds, a land shrouded in mist,' states Herzog, which turns out to be yet another 'creative lie,' for as Herzog later explained in an interview with Paul Cronin, 'What I actually filmed were little heaps of dust and soil created by trucks as they drove through the desert. Those mountain ranges were no more than a foot high. Like many things in my films this isn't a lie, just an intensified form of truth' (Cited in Cronin, 2014, pp. 292-3).

Herzog continues the deceit by cutting to the silhouette of a fire shield, with an observation window framing two firefighters against the fire-red sky. Far from pinpointing the country of

origin of the firefighters and highlighting their sacrifice and bravery, Herzog instead paints them as aliens from another planet: 'The first creature we encountered, tried to communicate something to us,' he says, as one of the firefighters, covered in protective clothing, moves left towards another fire shield, waving his arm and pointing to the ground as if speaking in a strange form of sign language. We then see the same oil fire blazing through the second observation window, which frames an odd-looking silhouette, vaguely resembling a Halloween pumpkin. Can this get any weirder?

Well yes it can, for as Herzog argues, 'There is not a single frame in *Lessons of Darkness* in which you can recognize our planet; for this reason the film is labeled "science fiction," as if it could only have been shot in a distant galaxy, hostile to life' (Herzog, 2010, p. 2). Indeed, at the film's premiere at the 1991 Berlin Film Festival, the film was met with a barrage of hate and outraged abhorrence, largely because Herzog seemed to be aestheticizing both political and ecological horror instead of critiquing its ideological basis in colonialism, capitalism and neo-liberalism. One is immediately reminded of Walter Benjamin's seminal distinction between the Nazis' tendency to aestheticize politics (epitomized by Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*) and the Soviets' contrasting dedication to politicizing aesthetics (as in Dziga Vertov's metacommunicative Kino-Eye experiments, which later became a major inspiration for Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's post-May '68 collaborative projects). As Herzog recalled, 'when I found myself being threatened and spat at on the podium, I hit upon only a single, banal response. "You cretins," I said, "that's what Dante did in his *Inferno*, it's what Goya did, and Hieronymus Bosch too." In my moment of need, without thinking about it, I had called upon the guardian angels who familiarize us with the Absolute and the Sublime' (2010, p. 2).

Herzog intensifies this debate by deliberately manipulating both time and space in the film so that it is almost impossible for the audience to construct a coherent, historically grounded narrative. Part of this strategy is in response to the media-saturated coverage of the war, particularly by CNN (whose green-tinted, night-scope shots of air attacks on Baghdad make up the bulk of the brief – 40-seconds – second part of the film, entitled 'The War'). The media's tabloid-style reportage, using short snippets of burning oil wells as a convenient (and economical) signifier for a far more complex ecological conflict, inured the viewing public to the real, visceral horrors of the war, turning Desert Storm into an interpellating spectacle, for as Guy Debord famously stated in *Society of the Spectacle*, 'The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images' (Debord, 1983, parag. 4). In contrast, states Herzog, 'I was seeking images of another kind, something very different, something longer lasting. I wanted to see these shots play out in long, almost endless takes. Only then could the images reveal their true power' (Cronin, 2014, p. 293).

Thus, in the first section of the film ('Eine Hauptstadt' – 'A Capital City'), which consists of aerial shots of Kuwait City against the sonic backdrop of a religious call-to-prayer, Herzog's voice-over refuses to contextualize the images in terms of the actual Gulf War (thus Saddam Hussein is never mentioned by name) so that they, in effect, become eternally uniform and abstract, part of an ecosophical Zone that deliberately mixes up historical time and place to create an eternal, more cosmic sense of Being. According to Herzog,

> There was never a need to name Saddam Hussein and the country he attacked. If people watch *Lessons of Darkness* in three hundred years' time, it still wouldn't be necessary for them to know the historical facts behind the film. War has no

> fascination for me beyond its absurdity and insanity, and *Lessons of Darkness* consciously transcends the topical and the particular; this could be any war and any country. The film is about the evil that human beings are capable of, which is why it will never age. It is precisely because Iraq and Kuwait aren't named that humanity will always respond to these sounds and images. (Cited in Cronin, 2014, p. 294)

Instead, Herzog continues his science fiction deceit: 'Something is looming over the city. The city that will soon be laid waste by war. Now it is still alive, biding its time. Nobody has yet begun to suspect the impending doom.' Of course, in reality the war has already ended, so Herzog is deliberately misleading his audience in terms of chronology, and instead of foregrounding the fact that the footage has been shot after the fact from a helicopter by his crew – Paul Berriff, Simon Werry and Rainer Klausmann – Herzog 'fictionalizes' the sequence as if it consisted of found footage captured from an alien spacecraft. As the sequence ends by segueing into the CNN war footage, the scenes are linked aesthetically by excerpts from Edvard Grieg's *Peer Gynt* Suite, which give them a plaintive, abstract quality, as if a timeless, proleptic affect has replaced the specific immediacy of the images themselves. As Nadia Bozak argues,

> Herzog's strategy sees the war framed in a future tense. By refusing to submit to the context of 1991 politics, Herzog exploits the spectacle of Kuwait's oil spills and burning wells on behalf of exploding the idea of war, this new 'speed of light' war that is not war; the war of deterrence, deference, non-aggressive aggression, and bloodless, body-less victims. An environmental war, a war waged against the no-man's-landscape, Herzog's film was thinking through the consequences of Gulf War I before they were manifest. (2006, p. 22)

Herzog's commitment to a poetic, ecstatic truth in cinema, which 'can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization' (Cronin, 2014, p. 476) formed the crux of his famous manifesto, 'The Minnesota Declaration: Truth and fact in documentary cinema,' published by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis on April 30th, 1999. His chief scapegoat is 'Cinéma Vérité,' epitomized by the work of D.A. Pennebaker, Robert Drew and Richard Leacock, which 'reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants. […] Filmmakers of Cinéma Vérité resemble tourists who take pictures amid ancient ruins of facts' (Cronin, p. 476). Taking his lead from more self-reflexive, ironizing directors such as Chris Marker, Errol Morris and Jean Rouch – specifically *Les maîtres fous* (1954), where Rouch claimed that his 16mm camera itself was drawn into a state of ecstasy, an immanent sublime that dissolved the difference between director, apparatus and trance-like subject matter – Herzog seeks a deeper, inner truth that moves beyond superficial bureaucratic, political and mathematical correctness (i.e. the very elements that exploit cinema's seemingly mimetic and indexical qualities), towards a playful manipulation and fabrication of the 'facts.' 'In order to reach a really deep inner truth, you have to invent,' he argues. 'So I work with my imagination. I have made "documentaries," always with quotation marks, in which every single shot is invented, scripted, staged – in which almost every detail is fabricated. And yet, overall, it reveals a very deep truth about the person who's the subject of the film' (Cited in Sponsel & Sebenig, 2014, p. 141).

As we shall see, this aesthetic, ecosophical strategy is inherently Nietzschean in its construction of an *immanent* sublime, for as Gilles Deleuze points out in his analysis of the

inherent enfolding and unfolding of the lie and art in Nietzsche, '…art is the opposite of a "disinterested" operation: it does not heal, calm, sublimate or pay off, it does not "suspend" desire, instinct or will. On the contrary, art is a "stimulant of the will to power," "something that excites willing"' (Deleuze, 1983, p. 102). Obviously, this runs counter to Kant's disinterested conception of both beauty and the sublime, replacing it with an active becoming that supersedes the distinction between subject and object, virtual and actual, present and future, and, most importantly for our purposes, fiction and documentary. In short, notes Deleuze, '…art is the highest power of falsehood, it magnifies the "world as error," it sanctifies the lie; the will to deception is turned into a superior ideal' (1983, p. 102).

The latter objective would seem to run counter to Deleuze's own montage-based taxonomy of cinematic concepts and their related types of image-signs outlined in *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (first published in 1983). According to Deleuze, there are three basic types of movement- image that progress from an acentered state of things to an indeterminate *centered* perception. Inspired by Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* (1896), he thus begins with the perception-image, the 'set [*ensemble*] of elements which act on a centre, and which vary in relation to it' (Deleuze, 1986, p. 217). Any given thing is expressed as a specific image, both as it is in-itself and as it relates to all other images via action and reaction. As Deleuze puts it, 'The perception of the thing is the same image related to another special image which frames it, and which only retains a partial action from it, and only reacts to it mediately. In perception thus defined, there is never anything else or anything more than there is in the thing: on the contrary, there is "less." We perceive the thing, minus that which does not interest us as a function of our needs' (1986, p. 63). In other words, the material moment of subjectivity is always *subtractive* because we always edit out the components of the aggregate of images that are not required to exercise any given action. This is the first avatar of the movement-image.

The second avatar is the action-image – the 'reaction of the centre to the set [*ensemble*]' (1986: 217) – where we pass imperceptibly from perception to action. In Deleuzian terms, critics of *Lessons of Darkness* would thus pinpoint Herzog's failure to make this necessary step, to trigger a critical (even revolutionary) response to the destructive spectacle that dominates the perception-image in the film as a whole. Instead, Herzog stresses the interval *between* the two avatars, for as Deleuze argues, 'There is inevitably a part of external movements that we "absorb," that we refract, and which does not transform itself into either objects of perception or acts of the subject; rather they mark the coincidence of the subject and the object in a pure quality. This is the final avatar of the movement-image: *the affection-image*' (1986, p. 65). Affection is a motor tendency on a sensible nerve – a motor effort on an immobilized receptive plate, 'that which occupies the gap between an action and a reaction, that which absorbs an external action and reacts on the inside' (1986, p. 217). In this way, the plane of movement-images – mobile sections of a universally becoming-whole of space-time – divide into three interconnected varieties when related to a centre of indetermination. The question then becomes, how do we rediscover the movement-image as it is in-itself – as an acentred variety of movement and variation protected from all centres, whether determinate or indeterminate, and thus get closer to Herzog's immanent sublime, his ecstatic truth?

Deleuze accomplishes this by undertaking what he calls 'the reverse proof,' a movement backwards from the action-image and perception-image to a discovery of pure affect. As he argues:

> …the cinema perhaps has a great advantage: just because it lacks a centre of anchorage and of horizon, the sections which it makes would not prevent it from going back up the path that natural perception comes down. Instead of going from the acentred state of things to centred perception, it could go back up towards the acentred state of things, and get closer to it. Broadly speaking, this would be the opposite of what phenomenology put forward. Even in his critique of the cinema Bergson was in agreement with it, to a far greater degree than he thought. (1986, p. 58)

Interestingly, Deleuze finds his perfect model in Samuel Beckett's *Film* (1964), starring Buster Keaton, whose character, 'O' attempts to escape the trauma of self-perception (represented by the camera, 'E') by retreating from the panoptic situation of the street (the action-image) to the more subjective confines of his mother's apartment (perception-image) to a direct confrontation with his own gaze (affection-image) as he sits in his mother's rocking chair and discovers that 'E' is actually his own self-perceiving face (see Deleuze, 1997). Instead of the perception and affection images serving the narrative thrust of the action-image, 'We are in the domain of the perception of affection, the most terrifying, that which still survives when all the others have been destroyed: it is the perception of self by self, the *affection-image*. Will it die out and will everything stop, even the rocking of the rocking chair, when the double face slips into nothingness? This is what the end suggests – death, immobility, blackness' (Deleuze, 1986: pp. 67-8).

One could viably argue that *Lessons of Darkness* expands Beckett's process of self-annihilation and extinction, destroying the action-, perception-, and affection-images in order to discover the luminous plane of immanence that underlies them – what Deleuze calls 'the mother of movement-images' – where all distinction between subject and object, mankind and nature disappears. In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari relate this independent self-positing of matter to the role of art (including cinema) as an independent sensate entity in and of itself: 'What is preserved – the thing or the work of art – is *a bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects*' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 164). In this Spinozist, immanent state, where sensations exist to affect and be affected in turn, 'Percepts are no longer perceptions; they are independent of a state of those who experience them. Affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them. Sensations, percepts and affects are *beings* whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived' (1994, p. 164). Herzog's ecstatic truth thus acts as the trigger for the creation of a monument composed of percepts and affects – unhinged from narrative, chronology and subjective perception: a vector to the discovery and creation of more percepts and affects, both within and outside the Zone of the film. In short, '*Affects are precisely these nonhuman becomings of man*, just as percepts […] are *nonhuman landscapes of nature*. Not a "minute of the world passes," says Cézanne, that we will preserve if we do not "become that minute." We are not in the world, we become with the world; we become by *contemplating* it. Everything is vision, becoming. We become universes' (1994: 169).

This is an excellent summary of Herzog's conception of the immanent sublime that pervades both the sounds and images of *Lessons of Darkness*. Herzog himself has often acknowledged the influence of the German Romantic painter, Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), in particular his *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), which depicts a lone figure, viewed from behind as he stands on a promontory, gazing out onto a swirling landscape enveloped in an

indistinct expanse of mist that softens the edges and outlines of all the rocks and trees. Similarly, his *Monk by the Sea* (1808) dwarfs the solitary figure in a mass of indiscernible vapour and mist, creating an abyss-like void that seems to extend to infinity. Not surprisingly, Friedrich's work has been used to reinforce Kant's position that both beauty and the sublime are judgments of reflection, and therefore of understanding and reason: 'The sublime ... is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it boundlessness is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought. Thus the beautiful seems to be regarded as the presentation of an indefinite concept of understanding, the sublime as that of a like concept of reason' (Kant, 1951, p. 82). In this sense Friedrich's figures act as a compositional foregrounding of subjective reason coming to grips with a boundless sublime that is as much terrifying as it is conceptually invigorating.

However, Herzog doesn't see it that way. As he stated to Paul Cronin, 'Friedrich didn't paint landscapes per se, he revealed inner landscapes to us, ones that exist only in our dreams. It's something I have always tried to do with my films' (Cronin, 2014, p. 142). In other words, Herzog's landscapes – including the devastated Kuwaiti oil fields – should never be read literally, just as his soundtracks, as we shall see, are never used as atmospheric background music but rather exist as independent emotive counterpoints to their accompanying images. This brings him much closer to Edmund Burke and Longinus's views on the sublime: a combination of both terror and ecstasy. In his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Burke argues that the sublime's ruling force was terror, a manifestation of the human mind's *inability* to frame and limit the vast awesomeness of natural forces. Thus, as he put it, 'Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling' (Burke, 1990, p. 36). Yet this terror can also be a source of delight, 'not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror; which as it belongs to self-preservation is one of the strongest of all the passions. Its object is the sublime' (1990, p. 123).

For Herzog, art is one obvious form of such self-preservation (through sensation, percept and affect) and in his essay, 'On the absolute, the sublime, and ecstatic truth,' he turns directly to Longinus as his main source of inspiration. Eschewing Kant's insistence on judging human reason as independent of (and therefore transcendentally superior to nature), Herzog instead appropriates Longinus's use of rhetoric as an elevated form of language beyond judgment and reason, citing the following passage from *On the Sublime*:

> For the effect of elevated language is, not to persuade the hearers, but to entrance them; and at all times, and in every way, what transports us with wonder is more telling than what merely persuades or gratifies us. The extent to which we can be persuaded is usually under our own control, but these sublime passages exert an irresistible force and mastery, and get the upper hand with every hearer. …a well-timed stroke of sublimity scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and in a flash reveals the full power of the speaker. (Longinus, 1965, p. 100)

Herzog is particularly taken by Longinus's concept of *ekstasis*, whereby the spectator is able to step outside of herself into an elevated state, where, in effect, she might be raised above her own nature. However, it's important to note that this giving up of one's subjectivity to a

sensate plane of immanence isn't an inherently passive act, for as Longinus explains, 'For by some innate power the true sublime uplifts our souls; we are filled with a proud exaltation and a sense of vaunting joy, just as though we had ourselves produced what we had heard' (1965, p. 107).

So how does this dream-like 'ecstatic sublime' play out in practice in *Lessons of Darkness* and what are its ramifications for furthering an ecosophical aesthetics based on the three ecologies? Firstly, in regards to the photographic image – particularly his use of landscapes – Herzog deliberately downplays its indexical function as documentary 'fact' in favour of highlighting its spectacular singularity, appealing directly to the imagination and the viewer's emotions rather than our role as critical witnesses. Thus in Part V: 'Satans Nationalpark' (Satan's National Park) we are presented with an aerial view of a blackened, glistening terrain that, like one of Friedrich's paintings, seems to defy a concrete topographical description until Herzog's voice-over explains that: 'This was once a forest before it was covered with oil. Everything that looks like water is in actuality oil. Ponds and lakes are spread out all over the land. The oil is treacherous because it reflects the sky. The oil is trying to disguise itself as water.' Then, as we fade to a 'lake' extending towards the horizon, he informs us that 'This lake here as well, like everything else, is black oil.' Eric Ames rightly calls this a form of 'demonstrative explanation,' noting how Herzog's combination of voice-over and non-delineated imagery 'attributes agency to the depicted surfaces (describing what they do), so that the reflexive verb "to disguise itself" becomes another way of asserting the subjectivity (even the sentience) of landscape' (Ames, 2012, p. 72). In this sequence, landscape plays multiple, often contradictory roles, the better to interact with the viewer in different ways. On one hand it acts as direct evidence of ecological disaster – the kind of objective witness exploited unquestioningly by CNN news broadcasts – but, like the best kind of art, it also obfuscates and misleads us. We therefore become all the more aware of our dependence on representation to place us 'on the scene' (as we can't be there in reality) but also how we can't trust it. The result is a combination of scepticism, imagination and dream, which in turn raises a number of issues about how the film functions. For Ivakhiv, the central question is: '*What is the Zone into which this film takes us?* For process-relational thinking, the *what* necessarily translates into a *how*: How are we taken into it, and how does that Zone feel to us when we are in it? What psychic and emotional imprints does it leave upon us, and how do those circulate in the world after we have left its immediate cognitive-affective field?' (2013, p. 283).

Once again, Herzog uses the reproductive properties of the camera to construct a more ecstatic, oneiric truth that resonates affectively long after the film is over. Ames rightly focuses on Susan Sontag's analysis of this *aporia* in her *Regarding the Pain of Others*, where she notes that, by conventional critical standards, 'Photographs that depict suffering shouldn't be beautiful, as captions shouldn't moralize. In this view, a beautiful photograph drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself, thereby compromising the picture's status as a document. The photograph gives mixed signals. Stop this, it urges. But it also exclaims, What a spectacle!' (Sontag, 2003, pp. 76-7). The important thing to note here is that Herzog's Zone is not governed by Guy Debord or Walter Benjamin's passively mediated spectacle but rather a Nietzschean becoming, whereby disaster is transformed into an aesthetic phenomenon that makes it all the more future-oriented as a transfigurable, ecosophical event-yet-to-come.

This strategy is further developed by Herzog's use of a variety of musical genres throughout *Lessons of Darkness*, most notably Grieg's *Peer Gynt*, Mahler's *Resurrection* Symphony No. 2, Arvo Pärt's *Stabat Mater*, Prokofiev's Sonata for 2 violins, Op. 56, Schubert's *Notturno*, Op. 148, Verdi's *Requiem*, and most importantly, Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, *Parsifal* and *Götterdämmerung*. To give one specific example, in Section III: 'Nach der Schlacht' (After the Battle), Herzog uses extracts from *Parsifal* to accompany a terrifying scene of almost primordial proportions as we see animal bones lying on charred black soil and then framed against oil fire smoke as it balloons skywards in the background. Herzog then cuts to a traveling shot along a dirt road, with Wagner's horns rising to a crescendo as we see piles of garbage and debris, gutted cars and trucks and a number of buses turned on their sides. We then fade to a moving aerial shot angled down on a barren orange/brown landscape with random tire tracks resembling human scar tissue. Herzog's voice-over reinforces the apocalyptic tone: 'All we could find were traces. Had human beings actually lived here? Had there ever been a city? The battle had raged so ferociously that afterwards, grass would never grow here again.' However, *Parsifal*'s general themes of salvation and transcendence paint a different affective picture, creating a powerful dialectic between what we see and what we hear/feel. Lutz Koepnick makes an excellent point when he argues that, 'Herzog's aim in using Wagner's music of redemption is to encounter traumatic events straight on, not in order to make us empathize with violence and destruction, but in order to make us learn how to overcome the petrification of post-traumatic time and hence re-animate its painful standstill. Herzog's strategy, in other words, is homeopathic: it seeks to beat traumatic arrests at their own game without failing to remember their original causes, their pain and brutality' (Koepnick, 2012, p. 162). Thus, while Herzog is fully aware of the 'pull of history' as a form of fatalism, his use of emotional and melodramatic extracts from *Parsifal* subverts any sense of calculated determinism so that we are encouraged to confront the trauma and horror of ecological annihilation head-on, all the better to embrace Guattari's more ecosophical praxes, where film (and other technologies) 'will lead to the opening up or, if you prefer, the unfolding [*dépliage*], of animal-, vegetable-, Cosmic-, and machinic-becomings' (Guattari, 2008, p. 26).

This strategy is typified by the extremely touching scenes featuring victims of the war who have lost their powers of speech, as if the intrinsic terror of the ecstatic sublime had to compensate for the limitations or literal loss of spoken language. As Herzog explained to Cronin, 'I located the people I filmed through various organisations that were working with torture victims, and specifically set out to find individuals who had lost the power of speech after being tortured. There's an imbalance to the film because I wanted to speak with more of these victims, but the Kuwaiti authorities were constantly scrutinising what I was doing and eventually expelled me from the country' (Cronin, 2014, p. 294). Nonetheless, the remaining scenes are extremely powerful. For example, in Section IV: 'Fundstücke aus Folterkammern' (Torture Chambers), Herzog pans across an array of torture instruments and blood-stained household appliances as if to associate the horrors of war and genocide in direct analogy to the banality of everyday objects. As Herzog's voice-over explains, 'We met a woman who wanted to tell us something. She had been dragged away by soldiers along with her two grown sons, and had to watch her sons being tortured to death before her very eyes. This caused her to lose her speech but she still tried to tell us what had happened.' The woman, accompanied by the plaintive tones of Prokofiev's Sonata for Two Violins, Opus 56, is forced to use hand gestures to compensate for her disability, kissing her palms, then placing her hand on her heart and on her face. As Matthew Gandy argues, 'Herzog presents this intensity of

human suffering as something beyond comprehension: a realm of cruelty and irrationality that cannot be explained' (Gandy, 2012, p. 533). In short, while Herzog presents his ecstatic sublime as deeply human(e) it is also, as we noted earlier, inherently nonhuman because all clear-cut distinctions between the human and nature have been dissolved in favour of a more totalizing and immanent will-to-power(s).

This 'ecstatic' blurring of the distinction between human will and the overwhelming forces of nature is expressed neatly by the film's penultimate sequence, Part XII. 'Leben ohne Feuer' (Life Without Fire), which opens with a medium shot of two firefighters standing to the right (one holding a lighted torch) as a gush of oil and smoke shoots vertically from the ground to the left. Herzog's voice-over adds suspense to the scene: 'Two figures are approaching an oil well. One of them holds a lighted torch. What are they up to? Are they going to rekindle the blaze?' Suddenly, the firefighter throws the torch into the oil and it explodes. The two men walk away. 'Has life without fire become unbearable for them?' asks Herzog, as we cut to another group of firefighters, smoking cigarettes, who proceed to do the same. 'Others, seized by madness follow suit,' explains Herzog. 'Now they are content, now there is something to extinguish again.'

For the uninitiated, this would seem to be an act of gross negligence, if not blatant sabotage, but it is of course regular practice to ignite limited and contained areas of oil and gas leaks in order to prevent the flames spreading to larger oil spills and causing environmental catastrophe. However, in the context of the film as a whole we could also read the firefighters' actions as a form of ecstatic sublime, their willful overcoming of their physical (human) limitations – 'even dwarfs started small,' to cite the title of another Herzog film – by transforming their individuality into singularity, by becoming one with the despoiled environment through 'shared vectors of subjectification,' what Guattari calls 'chaosmosis.' As he neatly puts it, 'The only acceptable finality of human activity is the production of a subjectivity that is auto-enriching its relation to the world in a continuous fashion' (1995, p. 21). Perhaps not surprisingly, the film's closing shots are accompanied by Mahler's *Resurrection* Symphony: obviously more is yet to come!

But how are we to realistically envisage this future? Firstly, it's important to acknowledge the fundamental importance of the global environmental movement and the awareness of cataclysmic climate change – Extinction Rebellion and Marina Silva's attacks on Jair Bolsonaro's environmental policy (as she puts it, Brazil is the 'exterminator of the future') are obvious examples. In this sense, the 'ecstatic truth' of Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* should be seen as a supplementary part of a broader solution rather than an exclusive alternative. In this sense the immanent sublime allows him to express the horror of extinction as an ethical (in Spinoza's sense) affective phenomenon as well as something to be analyzed rationally and practically. The two approaches must be harnessed in tandem so that the idea of the posthuman is 'ecohumanist' (in all its positivity) rather than negatively ahuman or abolitionist. Much of this is grounded in Bateson's idea of the 'included middle,' where binary extremes like black and white, logic and affect, reason and terror are indistinct, so that every form of sublimity is able to coexist outside of a totalizing subjectivity. As Guattari puts it, 'Gregory Bateson has clearly shown that what he calls the "ecology of ideas" cannot be contained within the domain of the psychology of the individual, but organizes itself into systems or "minds," the boundaries of which no longer coincide with the participant individuals' (2008, p. 36). In other words, Herzog's 'ecstatic sublime' is an expression of ecosophical singularity, not

subjectivity and it plays its role like a series of fragments within a-signifying chains, much like Schlegel's 'work of art': 'A fragment like a miniature work of art must be totally detached from the surrounding world and closed on itself like a hedgehog' (fragment 206 from *The Athenaeum*, cited 2008, p. 36). Unlike art in the modernist sense, where the work exists only in relation to its own formal properties, Schlegel's fragment (as hedgehog) is an ecological being that links humanity, nature and the cosmos in a future yet to come but presented in a present that is all too real with its intimation of apocalypse. The secret is to see this hybrid combination as a multiplicity of collectivist potentialities, not as a series of psychologically alienating and debilitating handicaps.

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