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Author(s): Paul Sheehan

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# Against the Image: Herzog and the Troubling Politics of the Screen Animal

*Paul Sheehan*

Late in 1968, while students in the European capitals were still dreaming of revolution, another version of it was being enacted several thousand miles away. The instigator was West German filmmaker Werner Herzog, directing his second full-length feature on the island of Lanzarote, in the Canary Islands. Entitled *Even Dwarfs Started Small*, the film describes the discontent brewing among a community of dwarves in an institution on the island, and the insurrection they launch against their keepers. The revolt is by turns, farcical, incompetent and destructive – setting fire to various objects, smashing windows and crockery, and killing a pig. In the grotesque climax to the film, a monkey is tied to a cross and symbolically “crucified,” then paraded about in a nightmarish caricature of a victory march.

It is not hard to detect here a response to the *événements* of the previous spring. The student radicals are intellectual midgents, Herzog seems to be saying, mounting an ill-considered charade whose pretensions mask the sheer futility of the exercise. As Thomas Elsaesser notes: “The film issued a challenge to the German Left about what Herzog saw as the impossibility of combining political revolution with radical subjectivity” (1989: 157). But even though Herzog denies that the film was specifically alluding to May 68 and its aftermath, he admits that he was unmoved by that particular historical moment. “I knew the revolution would not succeed,” he says, “because it was rooted in such an inadequate analysis of what was really going on, so I did not participate” (2002: 56). Years later, when Herzog is making *Fitzcarraldo* in the Peruvian jungle, stories of exploitation and maltreatment appear in the German press, and a makeshift “tribunal” is set up to try him in absentia. Again, the filmmaker is dismissive of his critics. The tribunal, he says, was just a “group of doctrinaire left-wing ideologues, another sad leftover of 1968” (184).

Following *Fitzcarraldo*, Herzog’s international stock dwindled, as he concentrated more and more on documentary filmmaking. His return to public attention came in 2005 with *Grizzly Man*, a portrait of the self-

styled “kind warrior” Timothy Treadwell. Herzog’s method was to provide a context and commentary for Treadwell’s footage of the thirteen summers he spent in the Alaskan wilds—living in the proximity of bears, as their supposed “protector,” and subsequently perishing at the claws of a particularly savage grizzly, in 2003. As the film’s title—and indeed, its ostensive message—indicate, Treadwell’s fate is a cautionary tale of human-animal relations: respect the boundary between the two, it tells us, or suffer the consequences.<sup>1</sup> Yet Herzog is just as critical of Treadwell’s attempted “activism,” his claims to be siding with nature against poachers and federal authorities. The real boundary, implies Herzog, is not only the unbridgeable gap between human beings and animals, but also the disparity between Treadwell’s political posturing on behalf of the grizzlies, and any objective benefit presumed to derive from it.

Herzog’s antipathy to overt political discourse is well documented. “[B]ecause I have never been into using the medium of film as a political tool,” he says, “my attitude really put me apart from most other filmmakers” (2002: 56). The position Herzog has consistently adopted since he started making films has been that of the counter-revolutionary. His concern is not so much with systems of injustice or oppression as with the suffering, isolated individual, whose alienation is existential rather than political, and for whom the only “cure” is ecstatic release or visionary excess rather than a reconfiguring of social relations. Too pessimistic for genuine social critique, Herzog’s films depict situations in which myth displaces politics, and the irrational takes precedence over the analytical. Elsaesser sums this up as Herzog’s “mystical romanticism,” and suggests that it manifests itself through “his unusual visual style, his unconventional narratives, his outsiders, recluses, madmen and outcasts, his love of excess, exhaustion and extremes” (1989: 292).

Yet despite his disavowal of direct political involvement, Herzog’s obsession with marginal figures lines up with his abiding interest in animals; and this, in turn, leads him into the terrain of politics. For Herzog’s animals are, in a real sense, politicized. The ways they are used in his films have implications for the cinema as a medium, and for the changes that it is currently undergoing—changes that threaten to eliminate the uniquely unsettling qualities conveyed by the cinematographic animal. In the discussion that follows, I seek to show how Herzog’s deanthropomorphized screen animals exemplify a pressing, acute politics of animal being, one that both reveals and puts into question the cardinal tenets of a medium that is founded on the metaphysical privileging of human beings over animals.

## Troubling Animals: Between Documentary and Dreams

The cinema is born with the movement of animals—a horse jumping, a seagull in flight, some fish swimming in a tank, a cat licking its paws and drinking from a bowl. The acknowledged pioneer in the field is Eadweard Muybridge, and the animal studies he began in the early 1870s. To capture the movement of a galloping horse, Muybridge set twenty-four cameras up side-by-side along a track, attached threads to the shutters, and stretched the threads across the field crossed by the horse. The threads thus acted as trip-wires, activating the shutters in split-second succession. The images were then developed, copied by hand onto glass cylinders, and loaded into Muybridge's "zoopraxiscope," a kind of prototype movie projector. Though technically the images were painterly rather than cinematic, film critic and theorist André Bazin nevertheless deems the galloping horse experiment to be "the first series of cinematographic images" (2004: 18).

Around the same time as Muybridge's "photographic investigation," the French scientist Étienne-Jules Marey published a book entitled *La Machine animale (Animal Mechanism [1873])*. Following Muybridge's example—his photographs were published in 1879—Marey developed a technique of animated photography known as "chronophotography," a contribution to animal studies that involved recording a whole series of movements on one photographic plate (including, most famously, a dozen images of a seagull in flight [see Braun 66]). In addition to birds, Marey took chronophotographic images of dogs, horses, elephants, fish and various insects.<sup>2</sup>

As these examples indicate, by the time Auguste and Louis Lumière were recording their actualities—non-fiction films that document an event, or place, or thing, and are not incorporated into a larger work—there was a tradition of using animals to demonstrate cinematographic technology. Continuing the tradition, the Lumières' first catalogue of actualities includes the works *La Voltige* (also known as *Horse Trick Riders*), *Aquarium*, and *Le Déjeuner du chat* (See Fieschi et al. 14-17).

Why should animals be so important for early filmmakers? Although the movies exist primarily to show *movement* of all kinds, those aspirant cinematographers Muybridge and Marey hit upon ways of arresting motion. Thanks to both their efforts, the mysterious dynamism of animal locomotion—in which movement is conceived of as a form of inscription, or "automatic writing," carried out by nature—could first of all be fixed, and then deciphered. François Dagognet (1992) refers to this kind of movement as a "trace," and sees Marey's achievement as lying in making

it visible, in revealing to the naked eye what otherwise lies beneath the threshold of human perception. So just as Muybridge proved incontrovertibly that a galloping horse does, indeed, have all four hooves on the ground at a particular point in its stride, Marey solved the mystery as to how a cat, when dropped from any height, long or short, always lands on its feet.

The kinetic animal, then, is an entirely fitting subject for nascent cinematography. Kineticism is associated with *life* – the vitality of animate, sentient life. Exploring this association, Akira Lippit proposes a congenital link between animals and film technology: “Cinema is an animal, animality a form of technology, technology an aspect of life. A life forged in the radical reanimation of the conditions of vitality as such” (2002: 20). This evocative, compressed formulation is supported, paradoxically, by the fact that early cinema was also concerned with documenting animal *death*—as Thomas Edison’s notorious 1903 actuality, *Electrocuting an Elephant*, amply demonstrates.

From the early 1880s, Edison had been waging a marketing war against his rival, George Westinghouse, over electric power distribution. Edison’s innovation was DC (direct current), which he argued was safer and more efficient than Westinghouse’s AC (alternating current). To further his interests, he mounted a propaganda crusade highlighting the dangers of AC, in the hope it would be outlawed by government regulation. Theory or statistics alone could not win public support, so Edison opted instead for high-profile public demonstrations, using AC to electrocute stray cats and dogs.<sup>3</sup> *Electrocuting an Elephant* could be seen as the *coup de grâce* of his campaign, arresting proof that even a five-ton sentient mass cannot resist the lethal effects of Westinghouse’s electrical system.

Edison’s sixty-second film shows the elephant moving into the foreground of the shot and shuffling its feet, which then begin to smoke, as the electrical current is switched on. In quick succession the animal falls, briefly quivers, and is still. The no-longer-kinetic animal has undergone a grim, perturbing change. For to say that it is “no more,” and that the film merely documents its death throes, is not quite true. As Lippit notes, an uncanny transference has taken place, through the recording of the actuality, which has illuminated a “spectral metaphysic of technology.” The film recording, as it were, “transfers the anima of the animal, its life, into a phantom archive [...] The animal survives its death as a film, as another form of animal, captured by the technologies of animation” (2002: 18, 19). The congenital link between animals and cinema persists, even in the face of on-screen expiration.<sup>4</sup>

But the prevalence of screen animals nevertheless undergoes a downturn once these early-cinema actualities are overtaken by the industrial might of the feature-film industry.<sup>5</sup> The emphasis shifts from *documentation* to *dreams*, from recording the world in its actuality to probing the dream-life that lies beneath or beyond that world—whether it be the idealized products of Hollywood’s “dream factory” or more unsettling oneiric explorations that are the provenance of art cinema. The shift is formalized in a well-known adage: “Never work with children or animals.” Though attributed to the actor W. C. Fields, famous for his misanthropic temper, the maxim has since become the slogan for a certain economic logic.

As the costliest of the arts, film is also the riskiest, requiring stricter controls over its production outlay than any other medium. The quest to control and make purposive everything that is put into the frame, to eliminate as much as possible the aleatory and unplanned, renders children and animals potential rogue elements in an economically rationalist operation. This imperative also conditions our relationship with the screen, issuing in an unspoken axiom: if film is the most planned of the arts, then every aspect of a *mise-en-scène* must be the outcome of conscious deliberation.

The stringency of this axiom, however, is alleviated to some extent by the tension underpinning the filmic image. Because “reality” is the material for filmmaking, the received belief that everything is deliberate and purposive is accompanied by a resolute, but less insistent *disbelief*, an incredulity that this might not always be the case; i.e., that spontaneous elements (imported by, say, children or animals) might escape the director’s controlling hand and show up on the screen. So although feature filmmaking seems to be founded on the expulsion of chance, accident and error from the image, there is always an incipient breach where such contingencies might appear. Animals, I want to suggest, are one of the chief vehicles for this appearance, in the challenges they pose to the formal and financial controls exerted by the medium. If they are “anti-cinema,” it is because they thwart the techniques of manipulation and control that are the chief operating principles of feature-film production.

Tied in with this is the phenomenology of performance that has developed through the dominant acting tradition of the West. The theatre revolution inaugurated by Henrik Ibsen, and inherited by the cinema, is one in which, as Peter Szondi puts it, “truth is that of interiority” (16), and its locus is the vital, imperishable core of the self. When an actor performs on screen, we do not just see a human being reciting lines and playing out actions. We impute to these things a history of behavior and

experience, of which the scene or shot before us is but a cross-section in time, i.e., to use the language of phenomenology, we “intend” these things. The actor thus implicitly carries within himself or herself a rich inner life, conveyed as motivation, purpose, intention. This means that when we witness a “performance,” we read it as an expression of psychological concentration projecting beyond itself.

A generation after Ibsen, Konstantin Stanislavsky declared the “spiritual” or “inner” life to be the actor’s supreme goal. All great actors achieved distinction, writes Stanislavsky, by labouring mightily to show that “[t]heir bodies were at the call and beck of the inner demands of their wills” (1962: 463). Philip Auslander affirms the force and reach of this overdetermined connection:

Theorists as diverse as Stanislavsky, Brecht and Grotowski all implicitly designate the actor’s self as the *logos* of performance; all assume that the actor’s self precedes and grounds her performance and that it is the presence of this self in performance that provides the audience with access to human truths. (2002: 54)

By these lights, the onus is placed on the performer to manifest *more* than just the performance, to extend beyond the visible and into the inferential realm of subjectivity and the implication of a complex inner world.

“Animals are ‘anti-cinema’”: this statement does not just mean that animals confound the notion of cinema as control and manipulation of the image. It also means that they are anti-performance, at odds with the metaphysics of identity implicit in the screen logic that separates human actors from animal “performers.” Screen animals do not possess *histories*, as such, and can only “perform” in the sense of being trained (or perhaps rather compelled) to carry out certain tasks for the camera. Unlike with human performances, the repetition of these tasks does not connote the visible outline of an interior activity. Screen animals are, to borrow Heidegger’s expression, “poor in world,” if by “world” we mean the inner life projected by human actors. But because animals cannot occupy this purposive world, they bring a kind of indeterminate *otherness* into the frame, the otherness of the non-manipulable. Animals in feature films are thus always to some degree “troubling,” as they break through the falsely protective aura of the image, the aura that rules out the accidental and the unintentional.

The alterity of animal being is something that feature filmmakers have, since the dawn of the sound era, tried to suppress. The traditional means of doing this is through the repertoire of anthropomorphic techniques. Patrick Tort succinctly sums up this repertoire, which consists of:

anthropomorphism of description (and its reverse effect, the reduction of the human to the animal), finality of explanation, projection of conscious intentionality on behavior that is instinctive, appreciating the “miraculous” process of adaptation, generalization of technological metaphors, accentuation of “similarities” between animal and human, and, above all, between communitarian forms of animal existence and characteristics of human society. (Fieschi et al. 33; my translation)

Though far from complete, this catalogue nevertheless makes clear the compulsory inner life that screen animals are required to bear, along with their screen human counterparts—a process that takes place on both sides of the screen. Animals are trained to appear comprehensible in human terms, to give their actions meaning and substance; and when this falls short of the mark audiences, for their part, are “trained” to read human characteristics into the most recondite behaviour. Yet the combined work of both dispositions cannot bring the process to full fruition.

Jonathan Burt notes, in his study of *Animals in Film*, that “the animal image is a form of rupture in the field of representation” (2000: 11). Because animal imagery is susceptible to a wide variety of metaphorical uses, ambiguities proliferate, making such representations impervious to definitive analysis. Akira Lippit makes a similar claim when he says that “the figure of the animal disturbs the rhetorical structures of film language. In particular, animals resist metaphorization” (2002: 13). The kinds of rupture and disturbance animals provoke on screen make any succession of feats, no matter how accomplished, something less than a *performance*. The recalcitrant actuality of animal being inevitably stymies all attempts at complete anthropomorphosis.

### Screen Animal Ontology: Bazin, Godard, Bresson

The broad claims made above about the alterity of the cinematographic animal are covertly supported by André Bazin, whose writings inspired the New Wave filmmakers of the 1960s. As a theorist of the “real,” Bazin sees the cinema as fundamentally dealing in *objectivity*, in revealed reality (hence his criticisms of montage theory, pioneered by Sergei Eisenstein, which tries to manipulate reality through editing). In his most important theoretical work, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1952), Bazin argues that film is more than just a medium of correspondence, striving to be equal to some predetermined state of affairs in the world. Film, rather, manifests a more fundamental reality that is *consubstantial* with that state of affairs. He writes:

No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction. It is the model. [...] Viewed in this perspective, the cinema is objectivity in time. (2004: 14)

The difference between documentary and fiction is then dissolved, because all film is documentary, in the sense that to switch on a camera is, inevitably, to document *something*. As a theorist of the “real”—as opposed to conventional “realism”—Bazin is a proponent of the non-manipulable. His claims are paralleled by the assertions I have been making about animals on the screen: putting an animal in a feature film means documenting that animal, in a direct and fundamental way.

In terms of the metaphysics of performance—the process whereby actors make visible on screen the contours of subjectivity—Bazin’s theory provides ballast for attempts to disrupt or bypass that logic. Perhaps no filmmaker has striven more to achieve this than Jean-Luc Godard. In his recent study of the director, Colin MacCabe describes Bazin’s theory of the image as “the ‘axiom’ from which all of Godard’s theorems derive” (62). The most notable of these theorems is the belief that film and reality are co-extensive of each other. In Godard’s conception of cinema, film does not represent reality, as such; rather, it becomes part of the reality itself. In MacCabe’s words: “For Godard there is no cinematic language which can represent reality. This would suggest two separate registers of being. What cinema, or the camera, does is to allow the possibility of representing reality, of seizing it in a language which is continuously variable” (79).

Originally a critic, Godard put theory into practice when he made *À Bout de souffle* (*Breathless*) in 1960; and then put practice back into theory when he described the finished film as a documentary about Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg, the two lead actors. It is not too fanciful, then, to see Godard as an (anti-conventional) “realist” filmmaker, in the Bazinian sense: someone for whom film exists primarily to capture the real. A key technique for achieving this is his way with actors. In a very early (1962) interview, he said: “I always use a written script, though it may often be written only two or three minutes before shooting.” In his view, the less time his actors have to prepare, the better. “I like to sneak up on an actor from behind, leaving him to fend for himself, following his groping movements in the part, trying to seize on the sudden, unexpected, good moment which crops up spontaneously” (1998: 7).

Insofar as Godard’s cinema involves “subjectivity,” then, it has nothing to do with actors. It originates, rather, on the *other* side of the

screen—in the point of view imposed by the camera. MacCabe writes: “The spectator of a Godard film ... is always aware of a shot as a shot, as a particular angle on reality, and of the characters as characters, that is to say as patterns of behavior which cannot be unified under some notion of a subjective psychology” (155). Godard himself expresses this in his belief that “[t]he one who describes is part of the description” (1998: 192), from which he derives his reflexive working method, which could be summed up as “to show and to show myself showing.” To film animals then is always, applying the Godardian yardstick, to film the performer rather than the performance, to present a refractory screen appearance rather than a relay for implied subjectivity. An animal on screen documents the real world in a direct way, capturing the movement of a creature that is what it is: a creature devoid of simulated interiority.

Godard shows how Bazin’s theory plays out on the screen, and how the compulsion for subjectivity can be countermanded. Before Godard, Robert Bresson, too, was dedicated to the “real” —to the non-manipulable, the accidental, the unknown. In Bresson’s cinema, even human beings are deanthropomorphized. He insisted on his actors performing with mechanical delivery of lines and gesture, to inhibit them from “acting,” from presenting the kind of histrionic display that, he believed, originated in the theatre and had been carried over to film, with disastrous consequences. Early on in his career he dispensed with professional actors altogether, preferring to work with non-actors, or what he referred to as “models.” Consistent with this belief, Bresson never used the same non-actors twice, lest they “learn” from their roles and start performing like professionals. His unbending commitment to the real meant the rejection of psychology, symbolism and spectacle; what remained, when all these had been cleared away, was what he called “the bewitched real” (1977: 33).

Towards the end of his career, Bresson produced a compact book of epigrams, entitled *Notes on Cinematography*, containing (in fragments) his theory of cinema. The title refers to the sharp distinction Bresson draws between what he calls “cinema films,” i.e. filmed theatre, and “cinematography films,” a more creative kind of filmmaking composed of, he says, “Images and sounds in a state of waiting and reserve” (1977: 33). Bressonian “cinematography” is an art that shuns the artifice of drama, that avoids analysis and explanation, the kind of art that “recomposes” (3). Central to Bresson’s method of “recomposure” is capturing the unknown; as he states, “I require from a shot something I am not fully conscious of when photographing” (59).

Where actors in “cinema films” can only convey seeming, Bresson’s models strive for being; only they are “capable of eluding their own vigilance, capable of being divinely ‘themselves’” (36). In confronting the problem of the implied inner life that is the essence of “performance,” his solution is to suppress “intentions” in his models (8). “The thing that matters is not what they show me but what they hide from me and, above all, *what they do not suspect is in them*” (2). Bresson wants, as it were, to hollow out that “richness of world” the actor is trained to bring to a role, and to a film. But in making his actors “poor in world,” he does not turn them into surrogate animals as such; rather, he uses them to explore a more enigmatic kind of film presence.<sup>6</sup> As Keith Reader puts it: “Psychology, for Bresson, intrudes between surface and soul, between matter and spirit, seeking to explain what can only be shown” (1990: 140). Bresson thus thwarts the imperious demands of selfhood in order to open pathways to the spiritual, to something larger and more mysterious than subjective being. In a mystical more than religious register, this objective could be seen as the starting-point for the cinema of Werner Herzog and its strivings for the sublime.

### Herzog’s Bestiary: The Politics of “Pure Seeing” and Control

In his reflections on the world of perception, Maurice Merleau-Ponty uses the term “animal life” to connote at least four categories of being: animals, children, so-called “primitive peoples” and madmen. All creatures of nature, Merleau-Ponty calls them “extreme or aberrant forms of life and consciousness” (2004: 70). “Animal life,” in this four-fold sense of the term, defines Herzog’s cinema since its inception. His career could be seen as an ongoing attempt to dramatize ethnography, to show the violence and poetry of human incursions into the natural world. The place allotted to animals in this schema is thus a considerable one, and it provides a nexus of sorts for Herzog’s most urgent concerns.

“Please do not ask me to explain,” said Herzog in 2001, when queried about the ubiquity of animals in his works.

Sure, I like to use animals in the films, and I find it interesting to work with them. ... But the last thing I have is an abstract concept to explain how a particular animal signifies this or that. I just know they have an enormous weight in my films. (2002: 98)

As a starting-point for establishing what those unstated reasons might be, I suggest that animals help to shield Herzog’s work from those who profit most from “abstract concept” explanations. For the director’s antipathy to political dogma is matched by his distaste for academic analysis (“Film is not the art of scholars, but of illiterates,” claims Herzog

[Greenberg 1976: 174]). Michael Peterson proffers an explanation as to why animals have, until recently, been inimical to such forms of analysis. He writes: "Animals often function in Western performance as bearers of fluid, ambivalent, or reversible cultural capital. The presence of animals in performance can signal its 'low' or popular appeal. ... Intuitively, animals would seem to move cultural products down-market" (2007: 40). From his own comments, "down-market" is precisely where Herzog imagines his ideal audience to reside.

But what does his actual audience receive, for its attentiveness? Thomas Elsaesser defines it through a telling distinction. On the one hand, he says, there are politically *engagé* filmmakers whose films target women or working-class audiences, and who believe that cinema can be used to boost "militant self-awareness and self confirmation." On the other hand, there are those *cinéastes* (like Herzog) for whom film exists to provide a "refuge from self-consciousness and self-awareness, [and] the search for a kind of post-ideological space, attracting spectators to an experience of 'pure being as pure seeing'" (1989: 5). That such an experience may not be attainable need not concern us here; Elsaesser's remark addresses an aspiration, not an outcome.

Seeking a hallowed state of "pure being" does not, however, mean the avoidance of all artifice and contrivance. To the contrary, Herzog introduces what he calls "stylizations" into his films, both fictional and documentary. As he remarks, "since my very earliest days as a filmmaker I have to a certain degree worked in a similar way by transforming things that are physically there into more intensified, elevated and stylized images" (2002: 259). Such methods, normally out of bounds to documentary filmmaking, include showing a subject's "dreams," coaching him or her in what to say, and attaching imaginary epigraphs to a film ("My films," he admits, "are about as anthropological as the music of Gesualdo and the images of Caspar David Friedrich." [213]) Animals, however, resist such stylization, and I suggest that this resistance is crucial to the singular effect Herzog seeks with his films.

The basis of this effect lies in Herzog's beliefs about the image. For him, an image is an occult thing, possessed of a numinous, quasi-mystical power. We ignore this at our peril, he implies, in a 1977 interview: "For such an advanced civilization as ours to be without images that are adequate to it is as serious a defect as being without memory" (Kent 1977: 19). His use of the word "adequate" here is philosophically suggestive. It invokes a definition of truth known by its Latin tag, *Adequatio intellectus et rei* (adequacy or correspondence between mind and reality,

perception and object). This so-called “correspondence theory of truth” goes back to the thirteenth-century writings of Thomas Aquinas, and *Quaestiones disputatae de veritatem* (*Disputed Questions on Truth*). Herzog is, then, adhering to a tradition of truth whose roots lie in mediaeval theology, a connection he maintains by identifying with the anonymous artisans and “master craftsmen” of that era. (See Herzog 2002: 139-40)

How does “adequacy” work in the context of the cinematographic animal? The question is a fraught one because animal images *per se* are often seen as a kind of mendacity. Jonathan Burt, for example, writes: “Even notions of authenticity are problematized because of the sense that the naturalness of the animal is always going to be corrupted in the process of becoming an image. ... [A]ny form of representation will be either a fiction or in some way falsely motivated” (2002: 166). Herzog, by contrast, believes—and wants his audience to join him in this—that the image has a privileged relationship to reality, that it can convey more than just a second-hand gathering of signs by “outwitting,” as it were, the *diktats* of representation. Pivotal to the experience of “pure seeing,” animals work to counteract what Herzog calls the “accountant’s truth”—rational, logical, technocratic—which, as we saw earlier, is subtended by the ideology of control, both formal and fiscal.

And yet, in loosening himself from that ideology, Herzog has not so much escaped it as introjected it. Richard Eder indicates the lengths to which he goes in obtaining his images: “[Herzog] uses camera and laboratory work, an extraordinary eye and a more extraordinary patience, waiting days for the proper quality of fog” (1977: 26). His direction of actors, too, is no less exacting. Seen in this light, Herzog’s assault on the metaphysics of performance situates him closer to Bresson than to Godard. In *Heart of Glass* (1976), however, he goes further than Bresson—who often wore down his “models” until they were incapable of mustering any technique—by putting his cast under hypnosis, to obtain an even more intense display of other-worldly distraction. Herzog is equivocal about this aspect of his reputation. “I like to direct landscapes just as I like to direct actors and animals” (2002: 81), he says, addressing the myth that he alternately fuels and disdains.

When a reputation such as this (“megalomania” is the epithet of choice for Herzog’s detractors) is coupled with an aversion to direct political engagement, and a quasi-medieval belief in the power and truth of images, one could easily conclude, as Eric Rentschler does, that the “virulent fatalism” of the films betrays a deeply “undialectical view of things” (1982: 30). Its polar opposite might be seen in the critical urgency

of a Godard film, where almost every cut is a form of intervention, forcing the viewer to confront the exigencies of his or her position in relation to the flow of images and sounds. In obtaining the kinds of images that he deems “adequate for our civilization,” Herzog does not provide a space for counter-argument, or for any kind of reflexive spectatorship.<sup>7</sup> The only fitting responses to the “pure seeing” experience are awe, disquiet and abandonment. (Herzog, not surprisingly, dismisses Godard as “intellectual counterfeit money” [2002: 138].)

However, I suggest that there *is* a dialectical moment in Herzog’s filmmaking praxis, and that it turns on the wider historical shift alluded to above, from documentation to dreams. In broad terms, Herzog’s ambitious poetic quest—to uncover the “ecstatic truth” of existence through the stylized heightening of intractable reality—demands the kind of technically precise disciplinarian methods that he practices. But it is the documentary elements, the irreducible actualities embedded in each *mise-en-scène*, that divest the resulting transfixing aura of its severity and inflexibility. Crucial to this effect is the artless presence of animals, evading the directives of the controlling hand, inassimilable to its purposive procedures. As indicators of the stubbornly materialistic background world upon which Herzog mounts his visionary quests, animals delineate the boundaries of his dreaming and temper its rhetorical excesses.<sup>8</sup>

When Herzog’s animals interact with human beings in his films—as, for example, when they behave as “witnesses” to human affairs—there is a principle of exchange at work, along the border of human-animal difference. The principle is best summed up in Jacques Derrida’s famous “working hypotheses” on animal alterity:

The animal ... can allow itself to be looked at, no doubt, but also—something that philosophy perhaps forgets, perhaps being this calculated forgetting itself—it can look at me. It has its point of view regarding me. The point of view of the absolute other, and nothing will have ever done more to make me think through this absolute alterity of the neighbor than these moments when I see myself seen naked under the gaze of a cat. (2002: 380)

A threshold is formed through the relationship between *nakedness* (*nudity*) and *non/knowledge*. To be “naked without knowing it” (373), as animals are, is not to be naked at all; in contrast to this is specular, self-knowing nudity, which issues in a “reflected shame, the mirror of a shame ashamed of itself” (373). The unclothed philosopher thus both is and is not “reduced” to his animal being, when confronted by (and returning) his cat’s gaze.

This threshold moment of intimacy and exposure is paralleled by those encounters of violence and death in Herzog's films that demonstrate similarly aporetic—impossible, yet nonetheless real—vacillations along the axis of the human-animal threshold. In *Heart of Glass*, for example, two peasant characters are shown assaulting each other in a bout of escalating violence; they next appear in an unconscious heap on the floor of a barn. But before one of the servant-girls catches sight of the corpse-like bodies they are “discovered” by a cat, tentatively scrutinizing the scene, showing curiosity and caution, and then withdrawing. The cat's gaze here, and its “absolutely other” point of view, as in the philosopher's bathroom, quickens the index of animality, creating a rent in the scene. The belligerent peasants, though not beasts of the field, nevertheless end up on a bed of straw; their possibly fatal brawl was not a fight for survival, but the outcome of a prophecy. The self-evident “explanation” of the situation—that the two are simply victims of their aggressive animal instincts—is complicated by the cat's enquiring gaze. As a principle of exchange, it is central to Herzog's animal vision, through which different forms of resistance are manifested. The scenes discussed below, all from the 1970s films that secured Herzog's international reputation, exemplify some of these forms of resistance.

*Against anthropomorphosis.* The simplest and most self-evident form of animal containment-through-imagery is turned against itself in the fairground scene in *Woyzeck* (1979). The ringmaster reveals to the audience a “mathematical” horse, which either nods or stamps a hoof in response to the kind of question—yes/no or numerical—that is put to it. Yet the horse is anything but a compliant beast, bridling when its reins are pulled, visibly resisting the preposterous routines to which it is being subjected. The horse's forcibly exhibited “anthropic” qualities are thus belied by its stubborn animality, which cuts through one layer of illusion (the fairground performance) and disturbs another (the film in which the first is embedded).

*Against anthropocentrism.* In another scene, *Woyzeck* himself is called upon to participate in a demonstration: catching hold of a cat that has been thrown from a window. The demonstrator is a doctor, who tries to show a group of medical students how the cat's “centre of gravity” relates to its “instinct” (animal motion as such, *à la* Muybridge and Marey, is merely the means, not the object of the enquiry). After *Woyzeck* catches the cat, it promptly urinates on him—a reflexive response to its unexpected plunge, which nevertheless causes the doctor to declare: “Gentlemen, this animal has no scientific instinct.” However, the real subject is not the defenestrated cat but the soldier who catches him.

Woyzeck has been participating in the doctor's scientific experiments, subsisting on a diet of peas for three months ("You can feel his irregular pulse," the doctor tells his students). He is, then, an ill-fated scapegoat for (among other things) the medical establishment, suffering the burden of a pitiless ideology in which the desire for knowledge takes precedence over the sanctity of life. The other side of the mildly pernicious illusionism of the circus huckster is the virulent technocracy of the doctor's pseudo-science. What each figure shares is a commitment to enforcing traversals of the human-animal threshold, and a violent disregard for the species compelled to participate in these crossings.

*Against metaphorization.* Woyzeck the scapegoat is complemented by Stroszek the underdog, who suffers the travails of the modern age (*Stroszek*, 1976). Though the title character is (barely) able to scratch out an existence in the shadows of the Berlin underground, when he travels with his two companions to the backwoods of America, the brutalizing glare of capitalist usury eventually defeats him. The film's closing scene features the infamous "dancing chicken"—a creature confined to a cage in a slot machine, in which the floor is electrified, and a coin activates the current. Since Stroszek's last act is to short out the fuse-box, the current cannot be switched off. The chicken's fate is somehow more horrific than the electrocuted elephant's, whose corporeal end and ghostly transference at least describe a clear-cut temporal schema. The dancing chicken is an electric animal of a more disturbing variety, compelled to "perform" in eternal stasis, unable either to desist or die.

Yet despite the scene's (apparently) allusive, symbolic quality, it cannot "stand in" for Stroszek's fate. The substitutive logic that would permit him to be construed as a helpless animal, compelled to perform for cruel brokers, is missing. The scene's relevance to what has gone before lies in its oblique condemnation of a system in which money can buy pain, through the intercession of technology—a system whose disregard for every kind of difference is so comprehensive as to cross the species barrier. Though Stroszek is *not* the dancing chicken, suffering on demand, by the rationale of late capitalism he may as well be.

*Against choreographed order.* Blows are dealt to the aesthetics of animal movement in two key instances. The first is Aguirre's histrionic last stand, in *Aguirre, Wrath of God* (1972). The Spanish conquistador leads an expedition across the Andes to find El Dorado in the late sixteenth century. By the film's end his followers are nearly all dead, yet Aguirre does not give up his dreams of conquest, nor his desire to "produce history as others produce plays." The remnant of his makeshift "kingdom"—a broken raft, adrift in stagnant waters—is abruptly besieged by monkeys,

crawling frenziedly into every nook and crevice. The finite space of the raft is thus rendered unstable and precarious, giving the sense that an implosion is at hand. Aguirre then directs his climactic monologue ("I am the wrath of God. Who is with me?") to a monkey he holds in his hand, a gesture that is both knowingly theatrical (Hamlet's "address" to Yorick's skull) and steeped in Darwinian irony—the self-deluded commander, "caught in the deathly circles of the camera and his own madness" (Koepnick 135), gazes at his distant ancestor, even as he still sees himself as an incomparable *Übermensch*.

Another terminal scenario, and another instance of agitated, unruly animal motion, is staged in *Nosferatu* (1979). Bleaker than either the F. W. Murnau silent film on which it is directly based, or the more distant Bram Stoker source novel, Herzog's rendering ends with a vision of apocalyptic excess. The northern European town of Wismar, where the vampire's coffin has been transported, is inundated by 10,000 grey rats, in the filmmaker's most elaborate use of animals. The locals respond to this threat with a plunge into decadence and dissipation. Open-air tables laden with food and wine are overrun by the rats, though the townspeople barely notice, lost in a kind of delirium of denial. But Wismar's unfortunate collapse does not just indicate the end of this particular narrative; the end-of-the-world scenario suggests the interruption of narrative itself and, implicitly, the breakdown of every kind of order. As with *Aguirre's* monkeys, animals thus figure as the undoing of all attempts at control, indicators of a dialectical counter-thrust to Herzog's directorial mandates.

As I have argued, the cinematographic animal is crucial to the experience of otherness on the screen—the otherness of the non-manipulable, which breaks with the aggrandizement of subjectivity that is the dominant mode of narrative cinema. But recent developments in the film medium have begun to change this. In the shift from the camera to the computer, from optics to code, all irregularities are, in principle, removable. No concession need be made to the uncertain or unknown when inadvertent elements can easily be expelled in post-production. Unlike real animals, computer-generated creatures can be fully manipulated, controlled and anthropomorphized. As Jean-André Fieschi writes: "La cyberbête accomplit le mythe de cinéma total" (30).

One of the ironies of the "cyberbeast" is that even the most sophisticated CGI manipulation must in some sense mimic the breakthroughs made in the nineteenth century. With *Jurassic Park* (1992), for example, Steven Spielberg decreed that the dinosaurs must be made

to look more *animalistic* and less *monstrous*. To fulfil this edict, his special effects team conducted intensive, frame-by-frame studies of the movements of birds, giraffes, rhinos and elephants. The object was not, however, to decipher the mysterious “trace” inscribed by animal motion, but to replicate it in the form of a computer-generated dinosaur—recoding into artifice, then, rather than decoding from nature (see Baird 1998: 92).

With this new development, the tension in the filmic image, which has hitherto conditioned all cinematic experience, is dispelled. The digital era—the age of technological reason—has thus precipitated a crisis of otherness. The cinematographic animal, as opposed to the electronic animal, is one of the last frontiers in safeguarding the screen from the kind of ‘boundaryless’ horizon predicted by acolytes of the new technology. Herzog resists this development, describing himself as a “man of celluloid” and averring that film “has its own depths and force which you do not easily achieve when you work with digital technology” (2002: 277).<sup>9</sup> The screen animal, it is clear, is crucial to the realization of these “depths” and “force.” Through its “documentary” incarnation, it signifies a node of resistance to the technological goal of complete image control.

Gilles Deleuze concludes his two-volume study of cinema with a meditation on the digital image. The seeds of the future, he argues, can be found in the recent past—in Godard’s cinema, where “the shot itself is less like an eye than an overloaded brain endlessly absorbing information” (1989: 267); and in the deportment of Bresson’s “model” (“a modern psychological automaton” [266]). But since both filmmakers were dedicated to *aesthetics* rather than *informatics*, Deleuze is hopeful that the cinema of the future might be effectively recast as a digital medium. Godard has, however, stood firm against the pressure to “go digital.” As demonstrated in his recent film *Éloge de l’amour* (2001), he prefers to modulate the video image by filming it off a monitor, rather than embrace computer-editing technology. And Bresson voiced the desire for an art “washed clean of art” (1977: 34), which for him meant shooting as many as fifty takes of a scene, until he had reduced it to its bare essentials and eliminated the “virtual” from the performance. As with Herzog’s resistant bestiary, these examples now seem like quaint forms of protest, remnants of a soon-to-be-forgotten way of intervening in—and transforming—the relationship between world and image. Animals on film are the most elemental of these interventions, and an enduring testament to the lost real that is slowly vanishing before our eyes.

*Macquarie University, Australia*

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### Notes

1. For an arresting recent examination of human-animal crossings-over in the cinema, see Rony 1996. In chapter 6, she uses *King Kong* as an archetype to trawl film history for traces of ethnographic monstrosity, miscegenation and hybridity (157-91).
2. Mary Anne Doane makes a compelling case for Marey's primary interest as lying not so much in movement as in "the desire to perfect a representation of time" (1996: 332). However, it is not clear why the pursuit of one project should necessarily have been to the detriment of the other.
3. Following Edison's lead was the "electrical consultant" Harold Brown, another staunch opponent of AC. Brown demonstrated incontrovertibly that whereas 1,000 volts of DC could only torture a dog, albeit cruelly and violently, a mere 330 volts of AC was enough to finish the creature off altogether. (See Jonnes 172-74) Brown's subsequent "experiments," as successful as the dog demonstration, involved two calves and a horse (176).

4. In *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (2000), Lippit shows that the fate of the animal in modernity is bound up with its representation as a filmic image, and with the ocularcentric ideology precipitated by the cinema.
5. Scott Curtis notes that after the abundance of non-fiction "animal pictures" in early cinema, animals were mainly used for "spicing up a story." Animal protagonists, as such, only returned in anthropomorphized form, once the studio system was established (2005: 25-6).
6. In his 1966 film *Au hasard, Balthazar*, Bresson takes the unusual step of conveying this spiritual dimension by means of an animal. Balthazar is a donkey, whom we follow from birth to death, and see pass from one owner to the next. As human beings use (and abuse) the animal, Bresson is scrupulous in not getting us "inside" the donkey, not suggesting that his inner world is in any way accessible. Balthazar remains inscrutable and, in this sense, is the ultimate Bressonian "model." See Godard and Merleau-Ponty's dialogical, meditative "testament" to/through the animal of the title, produced when the film was first released. See also Deleuze 1986: 114-16.
7. This question led to some fervent debates, in the period following Herzog's initial reception. Russell A. Berman, for example, makes the following critique: "The viewer is produced as the passive observer of images, not as an active reader of communicative symbols ... A non-comprehending fixation on the image is set as a privileged mode of experience, allegedly providing access to a more authentic perception than could a rational-discursive penetration" (1982: 504). A mini-debate on the subject is conducted in the pages of *The Cinema of Werner Herzog: Between Mirage and History* (1988). Eric Rentschler prosecutes Herzog for being a mystical reactionary, while Alan Singer defends him on the grounds of what he calls the "ironic sublime." See Corrigan 1988.
8. It is the fundamentally *incompatible* nature of the two elements that makes their juxtaposition so productive, countering John E. Davidson's criticism that "[t]he 'documentary' aspect of Herzog's work transcends mere objectivity into a higher level of vision" (1993: 115).
9. For *Fitzcarraldo*, Herzog famously chose to transport a steamboat over the Andes, rather than use models or special effects. In four decades of filmmaking, he claims to have filmed only one blue-screen shot—for a scene in his 2001 film *Invincible*, which demanded an explicitly illusionist effect (Herzog 2002: 104).