

## REWATCHING AGUIRRE, THE WRATH OF GOD: ATHLETICISM, CINE-TRANCE AND THE LEGACY OF WERNER HERZOG'S ANTI-ETHNOGRAPHIC 'COSMIC' ETHNOGRAPHY

REASSISTINDO AGUIRRE, THE WRATH OF GOD: ATLETISMO, CINE-TRANCE E O LEGADO DA ETNOGRAFIA 'CÓSMICA' ANTI-ETNOGRÁFICA DE WERNER HERZOG

RE-VISIONNER AGUIRRE, THE WRATH OF GOD: ATHLÉTISME, CINÉ-TRANCE ET L'HÉRITAGE DE L'ETHNOGRAPHIE 'COSMIQUE' ANTI-ETHNOGRAPHIQUE DE WERNER HERZOG

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**ABSTRACT:** The article discusses the legacy of Werner Herzog's film *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of its release. As the first of three epic history films in which Herzog explores the encounter between the Western Man and the Other, *Aguirre* opens up a confrontation with a set of film practices that could be defined as 'ethnographic'. Like ethnographers, Herzog set up his productions in a substantially ethnographic ground—the wilderness of the world far from modernity, through fieldwork and on-site negotiations with the local communities. Herzog is also known for his insistence on pushing his crew into a real 'ethnographic' adventure, adding to the demands for 'athleticism' to make the film. But is it just the context that Herzog and ethnographic filmmakers choose to shoot in the only thing they have in common? In a certain sense, the genealogy of Herzog's idea of 'ecstatic truth' can be traced back to the notion of 'cine-trance' of Jean Rouch, ethnographer and pioneer of ethnocinema. And yet, Herzog breaks with the humanistic methodological frameworks of ethnographic cinema, hence reducing any sort of distance possible between the filmmaker, the crew and the context of the film.

**Keywords:** Werner Herzog, ethnographic cinema, Jean Rouch, cine-trance, colonialism.

**RESUMO:** O artigo discute o legado do filme de Werner Herzog *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) por ocasião do cinquentenário de seu lançamento. Como o primeiro de três filmes épicos da história em que Herzog explora o encontro entre o Homem Ocidental e o Outro, *Aguirre* abre um confronto com um conjunto de práticas cinematográficas que poderiam ser definidas como 'etnográficas'. Como os etnógrafos, Herzog montou suas produções em um terreno substancialmente etnográfico – a natureza selvagem longe da modernidade, o trabalho de campo e as negociações com as comunidades locais. Também conhecido por sua insistência em estimular sua equipe a uma verdadeira aventura 'etnográfica', somam-se às exigências de Herzog a ideia de 'atletismo' para a realização do filme. Mas será que a única coisa que têm em comum Herzog e os cineastas etnográficos é o contexto? Em certo sentido, a genealogia da ideia de "verdade extática" de Herzog pode ser rastreada até a noção de "cine-trance" de Jean Rouch, etnógrafo e pioneiro do etnocinema. No entanto, Herzog rompe com as estruturas metodológicas humanistas do cinema etnográfico, reduzindo assim qualquer tipo de distância possível entre o cineasta, a equipe e o contexto do filme.

**Palavras-chave:** Werner Herzog, cinema etnográfico, Jean Rouch, cine-trance, colonialismo.

**RÉSUMÉ:** L'article traite de l'héritage du film *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) de Werner Herzog à l'occasion du cinquantième anniversaire de sa sortie. Premier des trois films épiques de l'histoire dans lesquels Herzog explore la rencontre entre l'homme occidental et l'Autre, *Aguirre* ouvre une confrontation avec un ensemble de pratiques cinématographiques que l'on pourrait définir comme "ethnographiques". À l'instar des ethnographes, Herzog situe ses productions sur un terrain

essentiellement ethnographique - la nature sauvage loin de la modernité, le travail de terrain et les négociations avec les communautés locales. Connu également pour son insistance à pousser son équipe à vivre une aventure véritablement "ethnographique", Herzog ajoute à ses exigences l'idée d'un "athlétisme" pour le cinéma. Mais la seule chose que Herzog et les cinéastes ethnographiques ont en commun, c'est le contexte ? En un sens, la généalogie de l'idée de "vérité extatique" d'Herzog remonte à la notion de "ciné-trance" de Jean Rouch, ethnographe et pionnier de l'ethno cinéma. Cependant, Herzog rompt avec les structures méthodologiques humanistes du cinéma ethnographique, réduisant ainsi toute forme de distance possible entre le cinéaste, l'équipe et le contexte du film.

**Mots-clés:** Werner Herzog, cinéma ethnographique, Jean Rouch, cinéma-trance, colonialisme.

**RESUMEN:** El artículo analiza el legado de la película de Werner Herzog *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) con motivo del cincuentenario de su estreno. Como primera de las tres películas épicas de la historia en las que Herzog explora el encuentro entre el Hombre Occidental y el Otro, Aguirre abre una confrontación con un conjunto de prácticas cinematográficas que podrían definirse como "etnográficas". Al igual que los etnógrafos, Herzog sitúa sus producciones en un terreno sustancialmente etnográfico: la naturaleza salvaje alejada de la modernidad, el trabajo de campo y las negociaciones con las comunidades locales. Conocido también por su insistencia en embarcar a su equipo en una aventura verdaderamente "etnográfica", a las exigencias de Herzog se añade la idea de "atletismo" en la realización de la película. Pero, ¿lo único que tienen en común Herzog y los cineastas etnográficos es el contexto? En cierto sentido, la genealogía de la idea de "verdad extática" de Herzog se remonta a la noción de "cine-trance" de Jean Rouch, etnógrafo y pionero del etnocine. Sin embargo, Herzog rompe con las estructuras metodológicas humanistas del cine etnográfico, reduciendo así cualquier tipo de distancia posible entre el cineasta, el equipo y el contexto de la película.

**Palabras-clave:** Werner Herzog, cine etnográfico, Jean Rouch, cine-trance, colonialismo.

## 1. Introduction

Werner Herzog's film *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* turns 50 years old in 2022. Not only one of the director's best known works, it was the first of three fiction films shot in a context that could be substantially defined as 'ethnographic'—the Other of Western modernity, and the first of three epic history films in which Herzog orchestrates his cinematic spectacle on various scales of the encounter between the Western Man and the Other: depicting in *Aguirre* the first encounter at the dawn of colonization as a still primitive and savage encounter at both ends, followed by *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Amazon basin characterized by more complex resource exploitation and waterfront economies, approximately 300 years after the events of *Aguirre*; whereas by the end of this hypothetical trilogy in *Cobra Verde* (1987), the film based upon Bruce Chatwin's 1980 novel *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, the encounter takes place in an advanced colonial world of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century wherein the economic life of overseas empires is organized around trans-continental slave trade.

*Aguirre* is one of Herzog's most mysterious films, and was one of the most difficult to make. Before the filming Herzog travelled to South America for location hunting in the Peruvian jungles, sailing on his own through several Amazon river's tributaries to scout the right locations and cast to realize his visions.<sup>2</sup> The majority of the non-professional actors and extras, most of whom were politically aware members of a locally-based socialist co-operative and well conscious of their past and contemporary struggles, were recruited in the mountain areas surrounding the chosen locations. Herzog convinced them that the film project would be an opportunity to gain visibility for their cause. For the duration of the shooting everyone would live on a moving encampment made of rafts which Herzog shifted from one location to the next across various tributaries of the Amazon river for about 1600 Km. Herzog has recalled he had to sell his belongings to buy food during the six weeks of shoot (Cronin, 2002: 83-84). The film was originally shot in English, the only common language to the multinational crew and cast. The original production sound was recorded on location, however the whole film was later dubbed into German.

The film plot can be briefly summarized as follows: in 1560 a brigade of Spanish *conquistadores* under the command of Pedro de Ursúa undertakes an expedition through the dense jungles of the Amazon basin in search of the mythic El Dorado, a golden city believed by 16<sup>th</sup> century European explorers to exist somewhere in the remote reaches of the South American continent. Soon enough, Spanish official Lope de Aguirre (Klaus Kinsky) takes the lead of the troop after ousting his superior Don Ursúa. As they adventure further into the jungle, the brigade experiences all kinds of psychological breakdowns while its forces are gradually decimated by hunger and

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<sup>2</sup> As Catherine Russell put it, Amazonia is "a long-standing chronotope of exploration cinema, from the silent period (*Matto Grosso*, 1931) to the anthropological work of the 1970s by Napoleon Chagnon and Timothy Asch, to the epic features of Werner Herzog" (2021: 238).

the persistent attacks of invisible tribesmen hiding in the wilderness. The soldiers are one by one engulfed by the jungle, yet Aguirre is more and more driven by a ruthless ambition culminating in his decision of betraying the Spanish empire with the aim of establishing his own kingdom in El Dorado.

## **2. Locating Aguirre, the Wrath of God**

Since the beginning of the filming, the cast and crew were put through the wringer. For the opening sequence, Herzog employed around 450 people including the actors, extras and crew, alongside an unspecified number of llamas, pigs and horses, all set against the majestic backdrop of the misty mountain ridge of Machu Picchu. To get the shot, Herzog had to bring the troupe through a mountain trail where everyone fell debilitated due to the elevation and extreme conditions. Herzog insisted on making things hard for his collaborators so that the film would reach “an intensity that you do not find in movies of the entertainment industry where nature is always something artificial” (Cronin, 2002: 83). With a crew numbering less than ten, Herzog decided to shoot the film chronologically, in the attempt of creating an authentic experience of surviving the jungle. Most of it was filmed on a hand-held camera for he believed that “the physical contact the camera had with the actors was one of the keys to the look of the film” (Cronin, 2002: 93). In its bold confrontation with nature the production faced various misadventures which were often incorporated into the film itself. Cast and crew members were hence led into the epic adventure of filming, in a certain sense, just as were the *original conquistadores* in the actual search expedition for the El Dorado.

Aguirre's delirious ambitions grow relentlessly until by the end of the film he is left as the only surviving Spanish conquistador on the raft among the cadavers of his soldiers, this time alone and on the brink of madness. Surrounded by the wild Amazonian landscape, he dreams of initiating a new pure lineage which he will conceive with his dying daughter to give birth to a new mythic civilization. But what we see is that Aguirre is left to rule over only a huge horde of cannibalistic monkeys who have leapt over on to the raft to devour the dead bodies and also Aguirre, we presume. But, of course, this being a Herzogian universe we are well advised to cast aside conventional readings of film endings and imagine Aguirre miraculously finding a rationality of his own to rule over the monkeys as well as take forward his plan to re-founding humanity on the platform of incest or, more likely, bestiality: Herzog/Aguirre is well capable of imagining the possibility of sexual coupling of humans and monkeys to produce a new species of hominids. Throughout the film Aguirre is shown to be more animal, and in his stopped demeanour that shows him being organically closer to the earth he does resemble an ape-like creature. We need to take such possibilities of directorial imagination seriously to properly understand the ethnographic impulses in Herzog's cinema, how and where it sharply deviates from the primarily humanistic methodological frameworks of ethnographic cinema.

Scholarship is neither unanimous nor categorical in defining ethnographic film practice. One may argue that ethnographic films “closely adhere to a set of genre conventions established by a certain kind of anthropological writing” (Crawford & Turton, 1992: 122), given that ethnography is not an absolute term but “rather it is a cultural construct, a product of the society which produces the very discipline of anthropology” (Crawford & Turton, 1992: 128). Haider notes that “ethnographicness” is “a continuously variable property of many films” (2006: 3) provided that in an ethnographic film “film is the tool and ethnography is the goal” (2006: 3). Whilst the fascination towards the ethnographic Other in the eye of the Western watcher can be traced back to the visual representation of native peoples in the pre-cinematic 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the advent of cinema profoundly recast the ontology of the encounter with the ethnographic Other, making audiovisual techniques integral part of the research methods for pioneer anthropologists (Griffiths, 2002). And, indeed, there is a longstanding connection between ethnographic films and experimental film practices (Russell, 1999), and an equally long history of deploying an “ethnographic spectacle” in the representation of the non-Western indigenous peoples in film, from documentary to Hollywood’s spectacular cinema to the scientific film (Tobing Rony, 1996).

Hence there could be a number of genre conventions that mark the ‘ethnographicness’ of a film off another, for instance the resort to indexical realism, everyday ordinary and anthropological structures that inform the approach to the people being studied. In some senses, Herzog set up his productions in a substantially ethnographic ground, through fieldwork, research and on-site negotiations with the local communities. In fiction films such as *Aguirre, Fitzcarraldo* and *Cobra Verde*, thus, is it just the site that Herzog and ethnographic filmmakers choose to shoot in—the wilderness of the world far from modernity, the only thing they share? Is the logic of their cinemas profoundly different? Similar questions can be posed with respect to a number of smaller documentary projects Herzog carried out from the late 1980s onwards<sup>3</sup>, at a moment when it had proved difficult for him to fund large-scale epic films along the lines of *Fitzcarraldo* or *Cobra Verde*. At first glance, even in this period Herzog shot various films with an anthropologically meaningful outlook including *Wodaabe: Herdsmen of the Sun* (1989), *Jag Mandir* (1991), *Bells from the Deep: Faith and Superstition in Russia* (1996), *Lord and Laden: Christ and Demons in New Spain* (1999), *Pilgrimage* (2001), *Ten Thousand Years Older* (2002) and *Wheel of Time* (2003). This coincidence of the ‘look’ of the films coming from such diverse practices has befuddled many who, not without reason, have seen Herzog tramp the same ground as *cinema vérité* or documentary filmmaking—something that Herzog denies on both

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<sup>3</sup> Although a distinction between his fiction and non-fiction films is considered to be irrelevant according to the German director. In this respect, Thomas Elsaesser also notes a high degree of ambiguity between fiction and non-fiction as a feature of New German Cinema as a whole (1989, p. 133).

counts, notably in his 1999 Minnesota Declaration<sup>4</sup> (Cronin, 2002: 301-302), in which he overtly criticizes *cinéma vérité*, the cinematic style developed by Jean Rouch (along with Marxist sociologist Edgar Morin) once the ethnographic gaze was turned from the colonies to the metropole to film *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961). When Paul Cronin asks whether his work can somehow be regarded as ethnographic or anthropological, Herzog answers that his films are “as anthropological as the music of Gesualdo and the images of Caspar David Friedrich, [...] only in as much as they try to explore the human condition at this particular time on this planet” (Cronin, 2022: 213-214).

It is interesting that Herzog invokes these names dear to the Romantic tradition to answer a provocative question about film objectivity posed from a social sciences perspective. In Les Blank’s film exploring the production of his later work *Fitzcarraldo*, Herzog overtly says that his film should not end up as a documentary about the Campas tribe or an ethnographic film (Blank, 1982): as if ethnographic filmmakers have lacked of imagination in their pedantry of methods, an imagination that Herzog himself in his own cinema connects up with ideas of fabrication and stylization, the former pointing towards the incredible efforts Herzog makes to create the conditions of his work and the latter his epic filmic methods and spectacular aims of cinema. Not by chance, even when the characters appearing across his filmography are scientists, engineers, anthropologists and other ‘men of reason’, they all share with Herzog a Romantic spirit of madness and passion; and Herzog himself has had a lifelong dream of joining the NASA to film from the outer space (Cronin 2002: 67) and he continues to dream of a ‘cosmic’ consciousness until his more recent films. In this vein, Herzog damns ethnographic cinema of either intellectualism or naïve conventional notion about the ‘goodness’ of things: the last few points of the Minnesota Declaration are entirely about this—men of science do not begin with any intellectual or affective assumptions about the universe. Similarly for Herzog, any belief in a psychological sort of positivity assumed by the filmmaker on behalf of the site of filming ‘simplifies’ the filmmaking process; taking history, nature and the cosmos as fundamentally indifferent to humanity would instead allow for the production of resistance that would then have to be broken through with the attainment of an ‘ecstatic truth’. His main belief is that “there are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth [that] can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization” (from the Minnesota Declaration, quoted in Cronin, 2002: 301-302).

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<sup>4</sup> The Minnesota Declaration is a film manifesto penned by Herzog in 1999—a statement of rules concerned with the ways in which reality is conveyed and documented in film. Herzog provocatively claims that it was after watching hardcore pornography in a Minnesota hotel room that he realized that there was more ‘truth’ in that kind of film than in traditional documentary films (Cronin, 2002: 239).

*Aguirre* moves on mainly through a very physically direct and intense conveying of the 'reality' of bodies struggling against harsh conditions of passage and human and natural depredations. The myth of the jungle—and not the one of El Dorado chased by the colonizers, is the actual constructive idea perpetuated through the whole film. The bearers of the Western civilization, the Spanish conquistadores, are completely overwhelmed by the wild nature. Many of the soldiers vanish into the jungle. The same destiny befalls the mixed race woman Doña Ines de Atienza who walks into the wilderness as if in a sort of trance, and even a horse gets thrown out of the raft to then disappearing in the jungle without a trace; both metaphorically returned to nature from civilization.<sup>5</sup> In *Aguirre*, the ethnographic Other—the fictive tribesmen hidden in the jungle whose presence is never at the forefront of any scene, is at one with nature, and participates in its elemental violence, killing one by one the conquistadores with arrows, lances and traps. The very idea of (Western) civilization seems irreconcilable with the wild savagery of the natives. For most of the film, the only South Amerindians we see from close distance are the Hispanicized subalterns attached to the expedition. But Herzog himself seems not to consider them as 'authentic' indigenes. In fact we see these 'civilized' natives get weak and die easily throughout the expedition, succumbing to maladies as trivial as common cold.

Herzog's legendary cruel treatment of his cast and crew here takes on an epistemic dimension in his project to re-imagine the first encounter of Westerners with the primordial savagery of nature; as well as an experiential dimension in teaching modern human beings (including himself) a lesson in the actual stakes of human life. On the one hand, the re-enactment of the Spanish imperial experience in modern times through the making of the film highlights the degrading effects of the original colonial venture; and in a certain sense in making the actor Klaus Kinski an alter-ego for himself and the central protagonist of all three films *Aguirre*, *Fitzcarraldo* and *Cobra Verde*, Herzog acknowledges that both Kinski and him belong in a certain sense to the genealogy of these 'fallen angels' of colonialism. On the other hand, it compels the White Man to deconstruct their civilized self in an encounter with primordially savage and cosmically vast nature. But the actual experience of working in hostile ecologies also very literally increases the load of labour on the director and actors and crew who regress back to simple modes of transport to be historically accurate or eat in a similar way as early colonials did and thereby adds to the demands for 'athleticism' to make the film. The colonial encounter with the cosmos was epic exactly because it was less materially advanced and therefore had to confront nature in very difficult 'athletic' ways. Just as the civilizational has been progressively disappearing throughout the expedition, the film ends with a solitary Aguirre now

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<sup>5</sup> Returning to/blending with nature continues to be a topical issue across Herzog's filmography, one which perhaps reaches its culmination in *Grizzly Man* (2005), with the protagonist, Timothy Treadwell, being eaten up in his attempts of living among Alaskan wild bears and becoming 'one of them'.

coming to terms with nature; as if the discovery of new cosmic scales of sensory experiences in the wilderness would cure humanity of its alienation from nature. There is an ironic lesson we are left with at the end of *Aguirre*—while the tribes of the Amazon basin are well in line with nature’s ways, the modern human being would have to dig deeper into the personal savage unconscious to survive; and perhaps become some kind of an ancestor godhead in the world of the monkeys.

The *mise en scene* and film editing do not produce a narcissistic identification of the spectatorship with the adventurers, typical of Hollywood’s spectacular productions. Instead, the audience is supposed to participate in the boom and bust of a spectacularly corrosive nature alternating with calm expansive immersion interrupted from time to time by dramatic action or dialogue often connoted by Herzog’s trademark buffoonery and absurdism which however has little role in character development. Characters either speak in very distanced ways or are disinterestedly cantankerous with one another or resort to blatant rhetoric all of which distance us from them. We do not comprehend what really is at stake for the adventurers. What we get is characters placed along a line between two kinds of trance-like states—a depressive trance-like state that most of the conquistadores seem to have descended into and a psychotic trance for a hyper-organic liveliness in Lope de Aguirre. Lead actor Klaus Kinski’s gesturing and his way to enter and occupy the frame stand in stark contrast with the static acting of the others—many of whom were non-professional actors, seemingly under some sort of hypnosis. Kinski’s is the only character ‘coming alive’ in the Amazon forest, with the rest of the troops dying off in their shock of encountering the vast turbulent scales of nature. Nature is an active force—the actual Other and antagonist character of the film; and the invisible tribesmen hiding in the jungle are the only ones who show ability to blend with the cosmos.<sup>6</sup> In the only sequence where we (and the Spanish troops) can see the Other in proximity (on the raft mid-river) we can read Herzog’s subtextual criticism against both cultural and military colonialism. If there is a real ‘savage’ there must be the colonizers who entrust themselves to a book, the Bible, in the name of which they brutally murder the indigenes. The Western subject is deconstructed down to a brute survival in menacing nature and therefore approaching the conditions of ‘primitive’ indigenes, the ‘ethnographic’ subject, but having none of the cultural systems that the locals have invented for themselves to cope with the savagery of nature. If the conquest of the Amazon by Spanish imperialism had to become myth precisely in order to hide the savagery of the experience of colonialism then Herzog dispels the myth by setting the colonial adventure in the original location of the Amazonian jungle

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<sup>6</sup> According to Richards, presenting the wilderness as synonymous with the indigenous would be a symptom of Herzog’s exoticism (2006: 62), one which seems to point to a reification of the Other: for instance, when he likens the tribesmen he was working with in *Fitzcarraldo* to ‘lions’ (Blank, 1982), something unacceptable according to the tenets of ethnography. And yet for Herzog these ‘lions’ are not just ethnographic subjects to be studied but central reference points for his life in the Real.

as *such* and letting the force of nature take away all romantic stylization of the presentation of the event. In Herzog's scheme of things El Dorado is not a myth as used by popular adventure cinema again and again but a very real delusion that could be harboured by all three lead players in the game—Lope de Aguirre, Klaus Kinski and Herzog himself.

### **3. The anti-ethnographic epic ethnography of Werner Herzog**

A very important dimension of the challenge Herzog poses to the practices of ethnographic cinema in *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* would be lost if we missed the insistence of Herzog on pushing his crew into a real ethnographic adventure following the very possible 'reality' of the delusion of El Dorado within the 'inner circle' of the film. In a certain sense Herzog's famous use of hypnotism on the cast of his later film *Heart of Glass* (1976) would precisely achieve this—the belief in all cast in the mad quest that the glassmaker central character of the story is possessed by. Herzog has always insisted on his collaborators having an absolute belief in all the fictions that his physical athletic quests for a huge encounter with the cosmos were set within. For Herzog, the madness of El Dorado dissolves in the struggle with nature but in turn transfers its intensity to a visceral struggle with natural forces and human war leading to a deeper understanding of the natural basis of the ethnographic. A suicidal delirium to become one with nature it seems would be a necessary preliminary step if at all the experiential terrain occupied by ethnography—the human being in nature, is to be investigated for its mysteries. Herzog, sets out his 'cosmic history' and 'cosmic ethnography', wherein the camera and the transformative qualities of cinema assume a central role in reformulating the relation structure/event where the structure is traversed savagely by the event called 'Aguirre' culminating in the eventuation of that event in the last scene at an inhuman scale of perception. Undermining the centrality of rationality, Herzog, like his German Romantic forbearers, would marvel at the irrational heroism of life against conditions that are life-destructive—an heroism entailing a regression to an elemental confrontation with nature in all its cosmic glory. Cinema would be the elected mode of such confrontation.

The notion of athleticism of filmmaking is certainly not a new idea in the history of cinema. It suffices to think of Dziga Vertov and his *Man with the movie camera* (1929) to get a sense of foundational workings of such an idea. On countless occasions, Herzog has underlined the use of 'athleticism' in his films to the point of fetishization, a viewpoint built as an irritable almost visceral reaction to directors working with 'profundity' of emotions or ideas or institutional ideologies. Methodologically too, Herzog believed that a certain kind of punishing physical 'athleticism' of the filmmaking process was necessary to access the 'ecstatic truth' in the human touching the cosmic: the weight of artifice that the costuming, recreation of the colonial past in the most exacting of ecological conditions and construction of devices such as rafts and steamboats (as in *Aguirre* and *Fitzcarraldo*, respectively) or

orchestrating grand historical events as a tribal war (as in *Cobra Verde*), all made the filmmaking process that much more athletic and therefore exerted the human being that much more beyond habit to reach out to grander scales of sensory perception. Hence for Herzog the limits of ethnography are therefore reached at the moment of Act, the Event that ruptures the fabric of the everyday irretrievably towards the transcendental.

Once we have traversed the terrain of Herzog's 'athleticism' of filmmaking in order to reach an 'ecstatic truth' through the process of making a film, the contrasts with the methods and goals and aims of ethnographic cinema begin to become clear. While working in the same context of classical ethnographic cinema—the Other of Western modernity, Herzog has entirely different methods and artistic aims. Unlike Herzog, the ethnographic filmmaker is never allowed to believe that he or she might have become one with the context of work; even when challenging the non-interventionist approach of ethnography by using stylization, fictionalization and reflexive methods or announcing its constructed-ness, as it occurs in the modernist ethnographic cinema of Jean Rouch. Rouch himself distinguishes the trance state of the filmed subjects from the cine-trance of the filmmaker by claiming "because I made films, I have never been possessed" (Russell, 1999: 219) and hence alluding to an existing distance between the ethnographer and the people being studied. Of course, the very goals of Herzog's cinema are absolutely the opposite of ethnographic cinema's—a certain ethical dimension of epistemological labour for the latter maintained throughout as a sustenance of various orders of difference that emerge between filmmaker and site while making the film; and irrational cosmic experiences in the former by defeating the orders of difference through an 'athletic' cinema. If in an ethnographic film the senses of a film lie somewhere 'in between' the subjects filmed and the filmmaker's experience then with Herzog we are supposed to physically swept across the experience of the film without any sort of 'in-betweenness' possible between us, the filmmaker and the context of the film. Even the most poetic of ethnographic cinema will yield a stubborn residue of the intellectual when measured up against the 'ecstatic' method of Herzog's. Ethnographic cinema when well practiced leave us with a potential history emerging between various worlds in contact and in the end make us 'think' about this potential history recovered from an intersubjective unconscious produced during the making of the film. Herzog on the other hand would resist the idea of the thinking about his films wanting his audiences to instead experience his films as intense physical drama that redeems an alienation from nature. Finally, while ethnography seeks to make authorship intersubjective, Herzog is not interested in such things at all—his films are very clearly an artist's personal quest for the 'ecstatic truth'.

*Aguirre, the Wrath of God* began a new chapter in the ongoing dialogue between Herzog and ethnographic cinema, a more intense one both in terms of the Non-

Western context he chose to shoot in and the increasingly 'live' participatory manner in which he shot the films on a very personal note as well as the dangers he courted in doing so. In *Aguirre* it seems Herzog renounces distance from the ethnographic terrain altogether and immerses himself and his crew in it. The film could be read as an elaborate pantomime where everyone else dies in the attempt to come to terms with the very ground of the 'context' for ethnographic cinema, nature itself, leaving only one survivor—Lope de Aguirre/Kinski/Herzog. It is as if in surviving the shoot Herzog feels he gains the right to enter the domain of the ethnographic with apt credentials. *Aguirre* seems to be a recce for what is to come but with full participatory athleticism in the real to come to terms with the ground of action. If there is any ethnographic subject in the film it is Aguirre in the last scene at home amongst the monkeys mid-river—the White Man curiously suspended between absolute historic defeat and a primordial and absurd kingship in the wild. Herein lies the ambiguity of Herzog's filmic incursions in various phases of the colonial experience (*Aguirre*, *Fitzcarraldo*, *Cobra Verde*): is the White Man deconstructed for his savage colonial violence, in the past as in the present, or is he shown up in precisely this violence as a savage form of energy purer and in some senses prior/foundational to the non-Westernized peoples? This might have been so for, if in *Aguirre* the subjects of ethnographic cinema—the 'real' indigenous people are invisible, then in *Fitzcarraldo*, the next outing in Amazonia with Klaus Kinski playing the director's evil twin once more, we shall see a head-on collision between the White Man and the ethnic in what would turn out to be the most controversial film in Herzog's career and his most spectacular intersection with the practices of ethnographic cinema, particularly the dangerous sequences shot in the rapids of Pongo de Manique and the one of the huge steamboat being dragged from one river tributary to the other by the physical action of local tribesmen; whereas in *Cobra Verde* (shot in Ghana, Colombia and Brazil) Herzog resorted to explicitly ethnographic-style imagery, recreating rituals and dances performed for the camera in front of an actual African royal, King Nana Agyefi Kwame II and his 300 actual courtiers, by the subaltern bodies of local non-professional actors recruited in post-colonial Ghana. Against the almost mute encounter between the conquistadores and the indigenes in *Aguirre*, we have in *Fitzcarraldo* and *Cobra Verde*, a more complex interaction between the two, where the White Man and the Other can do things together through some kind of intelligibility of each others' intentions—although the circumstances of their production made both projects more ethically ambiguous<sup>7</sup>, with Herzog receiving accusations of exoticism, primitivism, paternalism and tyranny towards the subjects of his films (for example, see Richards, 2006: 55-64, Russell, 2021: 237).

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7 In this regard, of great interest are the films *Burden of Dreams* (Blank, 1982) and *Location Africa* (Gruber, 1987) documenting the production of *Fitzcarraldo* and *Cobra Verde*, respectively.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

From *Aguirre* onwards, Herzog's films would make more and more prominent the one element of ethnographic cinema that the ethnographic hides—the glorious cosmic beauty of nature itself, the epic sublime. It introduces taboo words like 'beauty' and the 'sublime' that the ethnographic would avoid at all costs, in addition to words like 'epic', 'spectacle' and so on. If the 'ethno' of the ethnographic tied the cinematic form of the discipline to human life and society, then Herzog would over time increasingly make human beings irrationally at the mercy of a vast but beautiful natural universe where the only thing that counted first and last was the heroic gesture to survive and not structuralist games of clan and territory. Herzog's cinema asks ethnographic cinema questions about the avoidance of the universe's and nature's epic scale defining human life on behalf of the lives of the people it caught on camera.

Herzog's challenge to ethnographic cinema would be radical in its emphatic critique of the intellectual legacy informing Rouch and the ethnographic cinema that followed—the Enlightenment, modernity, structuralism Marxism, postcolonial guilt, etc.—and instead rooting oneself in the legacies of the aesthetic practices of anti-modern aestheticians of the irrational. In the denial of history as the limit of aesthetic work and its fundamental assumption of an emancipatory collective drive and in championing the arbitrariness of survival through an irrational act, Herzog was going against everything that ethnographic cinema was setting out to do. And it is precisely in the total withdrawal of the rational from the scene of cinema that nature and cosmos can emerge in their full scale. The chatter in structure and communication has been withdrawn towards a final confrontation of nature and a singular will (which could in practice be a collective under the trance of the filmmaker). History would be something to be traversed towards something more transcendently foundational of life. In Herzog's cinema (let us think of his very first feature *Signs of Life* where the soldier Stroszek goes crazy while watching a vast plain with over 10.000 spinning windmills) madness begins as soon as human beings seek to know the world in rational ways; rationality or the expectation of any stability to intersubjectivity between individual and the world for Herzog is a form of madness.

A matter that remains open is whether and how Herzog's ethnographic impulses could be linked with the cinema of Jean Rouch, Maya Deren or Glauber Rocha who all innovate filmmaking by practising a combination of anticolonial politics with West African possession rituals sometimes termed as "trance-modernism" (Shohat & Stam 2012: 36-37, Stam et al. 2015: 246-251). Indeed, much of Herzog's early filmmaking has a very direct link with the project of ethnocinema as proposed by his pioneer, Jean Rouch (Rouch & Feld, 2015). A trained civil engineer who first went to French West Africa to supervise onsite construction projects, Rouch began his film practice guided by his training in the social sciences, very specifically in structural anthropology and ethnography (Paris was at the time not only the 'metropole' of a

colonial empire but also the centre of a new ethnographic wave being developed by the likes of Marcel Mauss, Marcel Griaule, Michel Leiris, Claude Lévi-Strauss, among others). The relationship between Herzog's cinema and the project of ethnographic cinema is a complex one and increasingly turns negative with mutual suspicion on either side over the passage of time, particularly ever since the Anthropocene hypothesis has made humanity more aware of the environmental risks of its actions. At least from Herzog's side, there seems to be a downright disdain for conventional ethnographic cinema, perhaps only surpassed by his disregard for mainstream Hollywood. Yet, when Herzog had begun his career he had admired Jean Rouch's *Les maitres fous* (1955) and had relentlessly tried to emulate and foster it as a method for his own cinema. *Les maitres fous* shows a ceremony of a West African religious sect, the Hauka, whose entranced members are possessed by various spirits associated with the Western colonial powers, producing a cunning critique of the reality of colonialism. Herzog would directly reference the Rouch film and his fascination for possession rituals in *Heart of Glass* (1976) for which he claims he collectively hypnotized the actors to reach a sort of trance-like state. *Fata Morgana* (produced in 1969 and released in 1971) probably looks the closest to Rouch's cinema and its notion of 'cine-trance', particularly for it was shot in Africa and saw Herzog in trance filming landscapes and people who too seemed to be in some kind of trance. But immediately after that, with *Aguirre*, Herzog takes a turn towards a new kind of fiction filmmaking that explicitly links the realm of the ethnographic with the epic scales of the colonial experience. Why? Well, perhaps for Herzog the global scale of colonial history always remains the most expansive, albeit delusional, scale of the cosmos that human beings sought to experience in life on earth.

The interesting thing to note here is that all such projects, from Rouch's ethnocinema to Herzog's fiction and non-fiction films, share a set of common idealistic goals—the need to understand a new world order in which cultures were being brought into a single frame of reference in an emerging collective global consciousness by the onset of modernization in the postcolonial world and to critique the telos of progress that was also causing great harm to non-modern societies. The fact that Herzog, like many other filmmakers of that time both in the West and the so-called third world, was taken up by the Rouch's moment and then moved on to make the films he made from the early 1970s onwards shows how no ideological telos can be attributed to the legacies of Rouch's ethnographic cinema. Herzog would get fascinated with the human-nature interface in Rouch's cinema and take that towards different horizons, well beyond the historicism defining Rouch and the cinema it inspired, despite all disavowals of historicism in the guise of structuralism. And today Herzog's 'ideological' legacy for contemporary environmentalist thinkers and theorists of the Anthropocene does indeed become an ironic one on many counts, being the 'anti-intellectualist' Herzog often acclaimed by the leading progressive

thinking of a historical era and his cinema as being ‘ideologized’<sup>8</sup>; whilst his *modus operandi* in earlier films such as *Aguirre, Fitzcarraldo* or *Cobra Verde* (undoubtedly problematic on several counts) would be now seen largely in a negative light. As a matter of fact, it may be argued that the ideas popularized by the advocates of the Anthropocene theory alongside the ethnographically tinged criticism of Herzog’s epic films such as *Aguirre, Fitzcarraldo* and *Cobra Verde* probably were a very important reason why funding dried up for Herzog’s big cinema projects from the late 1980s onwards, leaving him to mostly undertake smaller-scaled projects financed as products of ‘high’ culture by a mix of public and private sources largely by virtue of his reputation and symbolic capital.

What is interesting here is Herzog’s epic fiction cinema opening up lines of emancipation for the terrain of ethnographic cinema’s beyond its narrow definition by institutional framings, in some ways challenging ethnographic cinema maximally to go against its own grain, to confront its fundamental taboos and fetishistic disavowals that may crucially subvert *a priori* its own utopian goals. Indeed, this is not to dismiss the problematic nature of Herzog’s ventures but to point out that looking at his cinema from a very conventional point of view of institutional ethnographic cinema produces a simplification that misses the aims of his projects as well the opportunity to assess the question that Herzog asks of ethnographic cinema. In *Aguirre* Herzog attempts to pass through something that would be unimaginable for ethnographic cinema—the Real itself. Of course the very formulation of this would make Herzog’s cinema a suicidal one and suicide of course is never the goal of ethnographic cinema that remains on ‘this side’ of rationality even while suspending it in an intersubjectivity. And it is from this point on that the confrontation with ethnographic cinema begins which would culminate in the Minnesota Declaration of 1999 wherein Herzog would excoriate *cinema vérité* for its superficiality and its basis in ‘facts’ against his quest for the ‘truth’. Point 9 in the declaration announces, “the gauntlet is hereby thrown down” (Cronin, 2002: 301-302).

Of course, then and there the gulf between Herzog and the project of ethnographic cinema opens up around the word ‘truth’. If there is one word *against* which the entire critical exercise of ethnographic cinema is based it is this word. For truth is seen as the foundational sin of Western modernity, based on the doctrines of the Enlightenment, whereby the West appropriated all claims to ‘truth’ supposedly resulting from the methodological rigour of its epistemological exercises and used the force of this ‘truth’ to dominate the world. Ethnographic cinema’s aim of attainment of an ethical intersubjectivity is precisely aimed to suspend the idea of a

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<sup>8</sup> I think about films such as *Where the Green Ants Dream* (1984), *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), *The White Diamond* (2004), *The Wild Blue Yonder* (2005), *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007), *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), *Into the Inferno* (2016), *Fireball: Visitors from Darker Worlds* (2020) which have contributed to a sensitization towards the environmentalist discourse.

'truth', singular and located within a rational subject. And in invoking the term, Herzog then and there produces an irredeemable divide between himself and ethnographic film. In some senses, Herzog's aims and methods seem somewhat closer to his friend Bruce Chatwin's than to Jean Rouch's—an affinity he himself would point out in the 2019 film *Nomad: In the Footsteps of Bruce Chatwin*. And yet, his cinema continues to raise certain critical questions about the very definition of ethnographic cinema, its emancipatory project and the attempts made by generations of filmmakers to reel in the ethnographic into macro-historical considerations.

Herzog's cinema is in fact insistently about an 'other', whether is "the otherness of a landscape or a person" (Elsaesser, 1989: 118); and at times such 'otherness' is located on a similar terrain to that occupied by ethnography. In so doing Herzog propels us into a confrontation with an institutionalised model of visual anthropology built on distanced criticality (one can never claim absolute knowledge of the Other) and an implicit need for an ethical dialogue with the filmed subjects (the Other is culturally different from the filmmaker's whose ways of belief need to be respected on their own terms). As Johannes Fabian argued in his classic *Time and the Other*, the encounter between the anthropological Self and the ethnographic Other is often characterized by a "schizogenic use of time" that goes against the grain of intersubjective dialogue, particularly in the use of the "ethnographic present" tense—producing what he termed the "allochronism of anthropology", "the denial of coevalness" between the anthropologists and their object of study (1983). According to Fabian, the critical distance maintained by anthropology would hence not be solely a matter of spatial distance, but one which ultimately conceals the temporal dimension from the Other and perpetuates hierarchical patterns.<sup>9</sup> Herzog's films instead attempted to snatch the ethnographic away from the everyday serial continuity and micro-sensibilities of documentary ethnographic cinema—which amounts in some senses to Fabian's "ethnographic present" —while using certain other properties of the ethnographic itself towards other goals: a confrontation between ethnographic cinema and its big Other—epic cinema and more specifically, History with an H, in opposition to which ethnographic cinema and its parent discipline anthropology define their methodological rigour.

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<sup>9</sup> Though out of the scope of this paper, the relationship between anthropology and history has generated a longstanding theoretical debate over the last decades. Besides the seminal work by Fabian critiquing the anthropological enterprise as informed by the legacies of cultural relativism and structuralism, one could add the contributions by Bourdieu (1980), Clifford (1988) and Geertz (1990), with the latter being perhaps one of the most prominent advocates for a reconciliation between the two disciplines.

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