

Francesco Cattaneo

## Diving in the Sanctuary Scientific knowledge and the representation of scientists in Werner Herzog's films

### Abstract

*The overwhelming presence of scientists is one of the most striking feature of Herzog's recent "documentaries". This would be all but normal, were we talking about plain documentaries. However, as Herzog has repeatedly pointed out, there is no difference, in the filmmaker's body of work, between fiction films and documentaries. What is at stake is, according to Herzog, "ecstatic truth". From this point of view, the way in which scientists are portrayed is particularly relevant. Herzog is deeply interested in their emotions, in their life-experience, in their aims and dreams; in other words, in what lays at the foundation and drives their scientific work. In Herzog's films science is no abstract knowledge, it is always embodied, it is depicted as something genuinely human, connected to the ability of seeing and feeling imaginatively.*

### Keywords

*Ecstatic truth, Embodiment, Scientific knowledge*

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francesco.cattaneo4@unibo.it

### 1. *Documentary as a genre in Herzog's cinematography*

The main feature of Herzog's cinema and of his artistic work in general is probably its visionary character, which is epitomized in dramatic fashion in one of his best known films, *Fitzcarraldo*. It's hardly surprising that Herzog considers a quote from Hölderlin's *Hyperion* particularly close to his heart: "Man is a god when he dreams, a beggar when he reflects" (Hölderlin 2019: 9).

The aforementioned visionary character is, at first sight, at odds with one of the most striking and disorienting features of some of his more recent films: the large presence of scientists, which is, if not the pillar, at least a very significant element of those films. Besides, scientists are present mainly within the format of interviews, a format typical of the rhetoric and communicative strategies of traditional documentaries, that aim at transmitting information through the use of an expert, of a qualified person. Overall, this feature corroborates the ideas expressed by Eric Ames in his book *Ferocious reality: documentary according to Werner Herzog*, where he correctly points out that Herzog's films presuppose a specific codification of documentary as a genre and that they imply it both positively and negatively:

The difference between [Herzog's] documentary output and that of other filmmakers is less extreme than scholars have yet to acknowledge. Herzog may blur the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, but he also trades on the cultural capital and authority that have historically accrued to documentary, always to his own advantage. [...] All claims to the contrary notwithstanding, the context of documentary circumscribes much of his work, providing the very forms, conventions, rituals, and taboos that he both refuses and engages in his films. (Ames 2012: 5)

To those that try to draw a too clear-cut and rigid demarcation line between Herzog's movies and the documentary genre on the basis of the fabrications and stylisations performed by the German filmmaker, Ames eloquently replies:

Although it is tempting to claim that Herzog intervenes provocatively (even perversely), it is important to remember that intervention occurs more or less in all documentaries. A similar provision needs to be made for *stylization*, a term that encompasses the aesthetic effects of filmmaking, the translation of a director's perspective on the world, and his involvement with the film's subject as well. After all, Herzog's documentaries become staged, stylized, and discussable as such through the prevailing discourse of documentary. On another level, we

need to recognize that there can never be any representation without style, indeed, to recognize and accept that techniques of stylization are integral to documentary filmmaking and not necessarily opposed to it as some commentators would seem to assume. (Ames 2012: 5-6)

From this point of view Ames interestingly points out that Herzog “exploits documentary’s indeterminate and generic epistemological status at every turn” (Ames 2012: 6).

As far as Herzog’s body of work is concerned, the very presence of interviews with scientists appears to legitimate that same label of “documentary”, and that same distinction between fiction films and documentary films that the filmmaker has constantly tried to avoid or overcome by shooting movies whose unclassifiable character constitutes one of his most interesting and stimulating contributions to the history of cinema, both from an aesthetic and a theoretic point of view. If Herzog, therefore, has always tried to steer clear of the mainstream linguistic codes of the documentary genre, how are we to explain the use of the absolutely standard and widespread method of interviews with scientists? Is it some sort of weakness, or senile failure? Is it a change of perspective, a disavowal of the propositions of the *Minnesota declaration*, or at least a mitigation of their radicalism? In terms of the Hölderlin quote referred to above, has Herzog possibly given up on being a god and settled for being a beggar? Or has Herzog perhaps stayed true to himself, reworking creatively even in this case the canonical forms of the documentary? To answer these questions we must take into consideration how Herzog stages the interviews and how he incorporates them into his films, making them an integral part of a coherent artistic vision. Only afterwards will we be able to explain, within the framework outlined by Ames, the meaning of the discontinuity introduced by the extensive use of interviews with scientists – a discontinuity all the more striking in relation to a unitary aesthetic project that aims at challenging the dividing line between fiction and documentary.

## 2. *The stylization of interviews*

In documentaries interviews with scientists have the primary function of transmitting content that has the superior sanction of an acknowledged authority, one able to guarantee their reliability and trustworthiness. For this very reason, when scientists are shown, there must always be a

subtitle with their name and more importantly with their professional qualification, their *status*. Otherwise the desired effect would be reduced or nullified and spectators would be left in uncertainty, wondering who is talking to them and how reliable that person's utterances are. Herzog exploits this immediately recognisable and understandable convention, but he reshapes it in a very free, subtly ironic and ultimately unsettling way.

A very clear example of what I'm saying here is the interview with biologist Sam Bowser in *Encounters at the end of the world* (2007). While talking with Herzog, the scientist, who studies the life forms housed beneath the Antarctic ice sheet, announces his intention to make his last dive before handing over the baton to the next generation. Confirming Herzog's remarks, he states the "horribly violent" life conditions of the underwater world. The words used by the interviewer and the interviewee are almost identical with the ones written by Herzog in the twelfth and last point of the *Minnesota declaration* (Herzog 2014: 477), which has been described as his "documentary epistemology" (Ames 2012: 3). As Eric Ames has underscored, "Herzog thus takes a point of the manifesto, encapsulating his characteristically grim vision of the natural world, reframes it as a point of biological fact, and puts it in the mouth of an expert witness. More than just a humorous scene parodying the conventional use of scientific authority, it rehearses and restages a part of Herzog's manifesto, now in the form of a documentary film" (Ames 2012: 2). What appears to be a sheer documentary account slides almost inadvertently into fiction, more precisely into the staging of a section of Herzog's famous rant against *cinéma-vérité*. Herzog displays a blatant taste for paradox: the very use of interviews that could have testified to a departure from the positions of the *Minnesota declaration* and from the kind of cinema that puts it into practice, becomes the vehicle of that same *Declaration* and so it turns out to be a coherent transformation of the previous films. Fiction and documentary overlap to the point that they become indistinguishable. Sam Bowser is a true scientist and is portrayed as such, but at the same time he turns into an *alter ego* of Herzog right before our eyes: the connection between the two involves age, the desire to "hand the baton", and the aforementioned words from the *Minnesota declaration*.

Herzog's approach is particularly subtle and destabilizing, because he refuses to make an explicit parody of documentary language and, therefore, to immediately distance himself from it. At first glance, actually, the interview seems to come straight from a full-fledged documentary.

But, at another level, it's rather clear that it is contaminated by fiction. Documentary and fiction overlap almost perfectly, they merge together. *Encounters at the end of the world* proves thereby a point made by influential critic Roger Ebert in a letter written to Herzog: "The line between truth and fiction is a mirage in your work. Some of the documentaries contain fiction, and some of the fiction films contain fact" (Ebert 2017: 164). What is Herzog aiming at through this effect? Does he want us to become conscious of the possible manipulations carried out by documentarists and of the rhetorical strategies they adopt and try to hide? Or does he want to completely erase the distinction between fiction and documentary, as though there were no difference left between deception and reality and everything was the result of perspectivism and linguistic construction? The answer to these questions cannot be rushed.

I have just spoken about the reuse of the twelfth point of the *Minnesota declaration* in *Encounters at the end of the world*. The implication is that *Encounters* implements creatively the *Declaration*. The intertextual game of displacement, relocation, adoption and reshaping is nonetheless more complicated. As a matter of fact, the twelfth point of the *Declaration* overlaps with the passage of *The conquest of the useless* dated "Camisea, 12<sup>th</sup> of April 1981". Herzog writes:

The jungle, existing exclusively in the present, is certainly subject to time, but remains forever ageless. Any concept of justice would be antithetical to all this. But is there justice in the desert, either? Or in the oceans? And in the depths? Life in the sea must be pure hell, an infinite hell of constant and ever-present danger, so unbearable that in the course of evolution some species – including *Homo sapiens* – crawled, fled, onto some clods of firm land, the future continents. (Herzog 2010a: 171-2)

This passage and point twelve of the *Minnesota declaration* are clearly identical twins, the only difference between them being the final addition that occurs in the latter, according to which even on solid land "the Lessons of Darkness continue" (Herzog 2014: 477). "Lessons of Darkness" is a key formula: it happens to be both the subtitle of the *Minnesota declaration* and, before that, the title of the 1992 film that Herzog shot in Kuwait in the aftermath of the Gulf War. The formula expresses in a very incisive and concise way Herzog's emphatically anti-romantic vision, according to which nature is burdened with conflict and agony and appears unreconciled, unredeemed, refractory to every attempt to define it or to take control of it – features that emerge emblematically

in locations such as the underwater world and, on dry land, the jungle (for a convincing discussion of the role of nature in Herzog's films, see Eldridge 2019, chapter 2). The passage I have just quoted demonstrates that within Herzog's artistic output there is a significant and illuminating *intertextuality*, as if between his works there were porous boundaries, echoes, mirror tricks, or even as if they formed an organic and coherent whole. The dates of the aforementioned works seem to suggest that the origin, the matrix of those words on the underwater world would be *The conquest of the useless* (the journal entry traces back to 1981). However, one must consider that the first edition of the book was published only in 2004: "For reasons that escape me," explains Herzog in the Preface, "I simply could not make myself go back and read the journals I kept during the filming of *Fitzcarraldo*. Then, twenty-four years later, my resistance suddenly crumbled, though I had trouble deciphering my own handwriting, which I had miniaturized at the time to microscopic size" (Herzog 2010a: 1)<sup>1</sup>. Could it be that Herzog, in the midst of his decryption effort, has modified or integrated this text – this written *document* – with that same freedom with which he is used to creatively staging and editing the materials of his pseudo-documentaries, in order to achieve a deeper layer of truth? After a quarter of a century doesn't the act of reading transform itself almost inevitably into an interpretation, into a rewriting? Has Herzog intentionally left a trace of the *process* attached to a new encounter with his former self, and so with himself altogether? If this were in fact the case, Herzog's acts of *falsification* would reveal here a trans-media consistency: they would be performed not only on visual documents, but also on literary ones. His goal is to achieve a "deeper strata of truth", a "poetic, ecstatic truth", that is "mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylisation" (Herzog 2014: 476).

A similar procedure comes up in another clip that happens to be very relevant for our analysis and that belongs to *Cave of forgotten dreams* (2010), the documentary that, on the basis of the discovery of the Chauvet cave in France (1994), discusses the questions of anthropogenesis and hominization. At a certain point Herzog shows the reproduction – in millions of dots – of the inside of the cave: "Today scientists have mapped every single millimetre of the cave using laser scanners. The

<sup>1</sup> Herzog describes the process that led to the publication of *The conquest of the useless* in Herzog 2014: 201, where he openly admits some kind of editing ("I ended up cutting the text down from a thousand pages to three hundred").

position of every feature in the cave is known”, says Herzog’s voice over. From a technical perspective, that high definition map is the most faithful representation achievable and it has become the basis for all the scientific projects related to the site. Discussing it with archaeologist Julien Monney, Herzog points out that assembling such a huge amount of data is like “creating the phone directory of Manhattan”. And he adds: “Four million precise entries... But do they dream? Do they cry at night? What are their hopes? What are their families? We’ll never know from the phone directory”. This is definitely a very important dialogue. The only way to fully understand its meaning is to consider its inter-textual character. Herzog had declaimed the *Minnesota declaration* for the first time on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April 1999 at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, during a question-and-answer session led by Roger Ebert. In 2017, on the occasion of the 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Declaration* – its coming of age, we might say – the Walker Art Center asked Herzog to add a supplement to it and he wrote a six-point appendix. The second point states: “Facts cannot be underestimated as they have normative power. But they do not give us insight into the truth, or the illumination of poetry. Yes, accepted, the phone directory of Manhattan contains four million entries, all of them factually verifiable. But do we know why Jonathan Smith, correctly listed, cries into his pillow every night?” (the appendix to the Minnesota Declaration is available here: <https://walkerart.org/magazine/werner-herzog-minnesota-declaration-2017-addendum>). This situation is the opposite of the one we described earlier: if in the previous case a passage of the *Declaration* was staged in a movie, in this case the dialogue of a movie is included in the appendix of the manifesto. Or, in other terms: in the previous case what the *Declaration* says is put into practice cinematically by quoting the *Declaration* itself; in the second case the cinematographic representation, through the power of its evidence, becomes the starting point for a new program manifesto.

The questions asked by Herzog offer a very promising hermeneutic indication, provided that we are able to understand the reasoning at their basis. Herzog reiterates the fundamental distinction between *fact* and *truth* that he had outlined in the *Declaration*. The meaning of that distinction becomes pretty clear in this context. *Facts* are the recording of the external and superficial look of things, of their consolidated structures, that are supposed to be “objective”. Truth, instead, delves deeper into reality: it is about sensing the origin of the shapes that reality assumes each time anew. Truth deals with a different layer of reality that, in a first approximation, we could qualify as *existential*, and that has to

do with the problem of meaning. Herzog's image offers a very useful and effective explanation: information related to a certain individual can be reported *accurately* and *correctly* in the phone directory, but this *abstract precision* isn't able to let us understand *who* that individual is. A common idiom turns out to be very fitting here: through the *facts* listed in the phone directory we never come to know that individual *as he lives and breathes*. It's in his flesh and in his bones that both his hopes and his cries are engraved.

### 3. *The incorporation of knowledge*

Scientific research is itself carried on by people who *live and breathe*. As much as it strives for formalization, scientific knowledge is, like every other human knowledge, *incorporated* – something that Nietzsche had already stressed in the *Gay science* (see, for instance, aphorisms 11 and 110) and twentieth-century phenomenology has repeatedly pointed out (like in Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty). The incorporation of knowledge – what today we would call embodiment or embodied cognition – is a crucial point for Herzog's cinema, a starting point rather than a point of arrival, as demonstrated by the fact that each and every phase of the production of his films is handled so that its primacy is recognized. To understand scientific research in this perspective, therefore, it is necessary to make a shift from the dimension of results (again: the *facts*) to the dimension of motivations, of those fundamental *e-motions* (*Grundstimmungen*, in Heidegger's terminology) that set us in motion, that give a direction and orientation to our action, or better disclose a horizon of meaning. What moves the scientist? In order to answer we have to identify the ways through which, in the interviews filmed by Herzog, the transition from *fact* to *truth* is performed. As far as the content of the interview is concerned, Herzog deploys two main strategies. The first strategy is to ask the scientist questions that we may qualify as *personal*, so that the knowledge he transmits gets directly connected with his story and acquires a superior legitimacy and deepness. In his interviews Herzog is simultaneously interested in giving cutting edge information and in telling the story of the interviewed.

Only stories, with their imaginative and creative power, can aspire to grasp a broader and humanly richer truth. The poetic-cinematographic narration as a whole becomes the most insightful

kind of “interview”, one able to identify, explore and hold together the prismatic variety of dimensions that, in their coexistence and interaction, build up our experience<sup>2</sup>. That’s clearly visible, for example, in a film like *The white diamond*, in which the narration aims, among other things, at an all-round outline of the personality of scientist Graham Dorrington. That is, it aims at letting us meet him as a human being and appreciate the roots of his research: his yearning after lightness (the dream of flying) and, as its polar opposite, the sense of oppression, heaviness and even guilt stemming from the sacrifices and sorrows connected to that dream and representing the indelible shadow it projects. Once more Herzog recognizes in the interviewee an *alter ego*: they both share the same aspiration to fly, to break free from gravity, or at least to oppose to it a valid resistance before the inevitable fall. Herzog has tackled all these themes in that manifesto on flying that is the film *The great ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner*. Walter Steiner, by the way, is another *alter ego* of Herzog, who himself practised ski jumping when he was young. We can try to depict someone else’s inner being only through the palette of our feelings and of our emotions<sup>3</sup>.

The second strategy is to ask bizarre and imaginative questions – we could call them “limit-questions”. Their extravagance has a maieutic function in that it tries to push the scientist out of his *comfort zone* and to force him to *improvise*, to work with his imagination and so to give a more *personal* contribution. A nice and amusing example of this is the question asked more than once in *Lo and Behold*: on the basis of a pseudo-quote<sup>4</sup> from Carl von Clausewitz, who, accord-

<sup>2</sup> On the role of an “intermedial imagination” in the process of (cinematographic) *authentication* of images, see Montani 2010: XI-XVII.

<sup>3</sup> The fact that in his “documentaries” Herzog shows himself and uses his voice for the voice-over, that he often deals with episodes of his life, and finally that many of the protagonists appear to be his alter egos, all this happens to be perfectly in line with the most experimental trends of contemporary documentary cinema, in which filmmakers give up the naïve idea of objectivity in favor of self-reflection, i.e. the performative representation of the role of their subjectivity and experience in the construction of meaningful images. See Nichols 1994, Dottorini 2017 and Bertozzi 2018.

<sup>4</sup> In a question-and-answer session in Bologna (2019) Herzog admitted that he might have made up the quote. This would be nothing new for him. We can recall, for example, the opening quote at the start of *Lessons of darkness*, that is said to be from Blaise Pascal: “The collapse of the stellar universe will occur – like Creation – in grandiose splendour”. Herzog clarifies that “[t]his may sound like Pascal, but it was invented by me. [...] I have a joy of invention, and this Pascalian pseudo-quote helps

ing to Herzog, said that sometimes war dreams of itself, the filmmaker asks if the internet dreams of itself, provoking the initially surprised and perplexed reaction of his conversational partners.

In addition to the two content-related strategies we have outlined, there is another relevant strategy worth mentioning that has to do with form. It is a rather minimal strategy, almost imperceptible, but very telling. If we pay attention, it turns out that, when an interview has already ended, Herzog often keeps on shooting for a couple seconds: during the resulting extensions the camera lingers over a face or an apparently marginal detail, building up suspended moments that destabilize the normal flux. These moments are subtly incongruous, a bit dysfunctional in relation to the mechanics of dramatization and of argumentation. They definitely come across as “downtime”: what needed to be said, was said; what needed to be shown, was shown; but the camera keeps on rolling and staring, as if it were whispering to us to look beyond the surface, beyond the immediate meaning of images and words. That’s precisely where the most important challenge lies, the challenge of exploring and testing boundaries, margins, borders, limits – all places where Herzog’s vision finds the right habitat to proliferate. From the perspective of a rational and efficient information transmission, those extensions are imperfections, a mere loss of time, if not lack of editing skill. But Herzog wants to give space and voice to an excess: the flesh and blood presence of the interviewed himself. The extension of the take is an exhortation to keep on looking, and especially to look better, more deeply, to try and consider that the words and concepts that have been expressed belong to a sentient and desiring being, to his *story*.

#### 4. *Science and dreams*

If Herzog in his so-called documentaries gives more and more space to scientists, that’s because science – or rather techno-science – is the cru-

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elevate audiences to a higher, almost sublime level before they have even seen the first image of the film. We’re immediately in the realm of poetry, which inevitably strikes a more profound chord than mere reportage. Audiences have been lifted to a level that prepares them for something momentous; they are instantaneously immersed in the cosmic. Pascal himself couldn’t have said it better” (Herzog 2014: 292).

cial event of our time. To understand the world around us and to deal with it, we cannot just avoid science and the *facts* it sets forth. The second point of the appendix to the *Minnesota declaration* clearly states that “facts cannot be underestimated as they have normative power.” Herzog, therefore, neither ignores facts nor bypasses them through a backward-looking nostalgia or a flight into the irrational. Instead, he tries to go back to the source of these facts and thus to rediscover, much like an anthropologist, their uniquely *human* imprint. Through the use of imagination, he aims at catching a glimpse of the “other side” – the hidden side – of facts<sup>5</sup>. Facts, as such, assert themselves as being immediately manifest entities. But with Heidegger we could ask: what is it that lets something be a manifest entity, a *fact*? What is the essence of manifestation? Poetry is most enlightening, most able to look into the heart of truth, not when it breaks away from facts, but when it explores their reverse. Considered in this way, dreaming doesn’t escape from reality, but strives to penetrate the visible to the point where it structurally intertwines with the invisible, as we explicitly see, for example, in *The white diamond*. This is the kind of dream that’s really worthwhile dreaming – the kind of dream that makes us *human*. A comment by the historian Vigo to the Anarch Martin Venator in Ernst Jünger’s *Eumeswil* applies to this kind of dream: “A dream comes true in each of our great transformations. You know this as a historian. We fail not because of our dreams but because we do not dream forcefully enough” (Jünger 1993: 380). *Fitzcarraldo* and *The conquest of the useless* are a hymn to the power of dreams, a torn hymn, that claims the need to continue dreaming one’s dreams even when everything seems to conspire against them – and in some ways cannot but conspire against them.

Does the scientist dream? It would sound reasonable to answer that he dreams as a human being, but not as a scientist. Isn’t this, however, a simplistic and dualistic view? Considering the way Herzog stages scientists, it seems that he draws a clear connection between *science* and *dream*. Undoubtedly it is possible to find in Herzog’s films many examples of sinister characters, of “experts”, that turn out to be the watchdogs of the *status quo* and exert a subtle but nonetheless terrible violence (the commandant in *Woyzeck*, Van Helsing in *Nosferatu*, the priest Caraval in *Aguirre*, the scribe in *Kaspar Hauser*). The scientist, however, considered on the basis of the pure origin of his vocation, is animated by

<sup>5</sup> In this regard we can understand why science in Herzog is frequently mixed with its “imaginative” double, science-fiction (see Lino 2019).

the *desire for knowledge*. It's this very same desire for knowledge that makes us open our eyes wide, that makes us wander through things with a sense of adventure and with an expectation of discovery, that encourages us to challenge dominant mindsets and views, in order to bring forward interconnections and patterns that are not immediately manifest. In his interviews Herzog mainly deals with those scientists in whom he senses the fundamental *passion* that spurs the desire for knowledge<sup>6</sup>. In the light of Greek philosophy, and particularly of Plato and Aristotle, we could identify this *arché* of knowledge with *thaumázēin*, wonder. It triggers what Herzog would call an "agitation of the mind" (Herzog 2014: 177)<sup>7</sup>. In his limitless wonder at the world, in his ceaseless research, the scientist himself is in his own way a dreamer, like the poet – something that Nietzsche has understood and condensed in the character of the "free spirit"<sup>8</sup>. As twentieth century epistemology has stressed, when a scientist thinks big, when – in the terminology of Thomas Kuhn – he is able to trigger a *paradigm shift*, he is not just calculating and progressively increasing knowledge: he is somehow seized by an illumination, by a vast and comprehensive vision that is able to explain phenomena in a new and unexpected way, and that determines a dramatic break with past theories. Poets and scientists (and philosophers) don't fight each other as enemies, neither do they ignore each other like strangers who don't have anything whatsoever to share; on the contrary, they have both "[fallen] in love with the world," as Stefan

<sup>6</sup> As Reinhold Steingröver aptly points out, in many Herzog "documentaries" (especially in *Encounters at the end of the world*) scientists epitomize human exploration, and in this regard they are close to pilgrims: "Herzog's fascination with pilgrims and explorers is grounded in his desire to depict the enduring passion of extraordinary humans pursuing their dreams against all odds and often at a great price" (Steingröver 2012: 469).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Eldridge has pointed out that Herzog's films try to increase our attention to the world and to the meaning of our lives, and to intensify our experience. By developing a more conscious relationship toward ourselves and the things around us, we can build an alternative to the lack of conviction, "the paleness and half-heartedness of action within modern industrial-commercial routines" (Eldridge 2019: 176). Without this kind of "energetic authenticity, we risk being 'stark naked' in reducing ourselves to little more than fungible units of production and consumption of standardized commodities" (Eldridge 2019: 176-7).

<sup>8</sup> In this respect aphorisms 54 and 107 of the *Gay science* are particularly relevant. For a detailed assessment of the topic, see Gentili 2017 and Cattaneo 2018. Herzog's approach could be put in relation with what has been called Nietzsche's "fictional realism" (see Gori 2019).

Pashov says (the philosopher-forklift driver of *Encounters at the end of the world*, another Herzog *alter ego*<sup>9</sup>). Poetry and science have in common the experience of the world's astonishing irreducibility and the desire to account for it, to *name it*, as Virgil does in the *Georgics*. Before setting out for Antarctica to shoot *Encounters at the end of the world*, Herzog explained to camera operator Peter Zeitlinger: "We'll do it like Virgil in his *Georgics*. He never explains anything, he just names the glory of the land. Let's do the same" (Herzog 2014: 383). The film, according to Herzog, is "an invocation of all that is wonderful on the planet, an articulation of my amazement and wonder at the Antarctic landscape, a celebration of the continent. Virgil gave me great consolation while I was there, which is why at the end of the film I use music from a Russian Orthodox church choir with a basso profundo, one octave lower in pitch than a regular bass, an incredible voice that establishes the glory of one saint after another merely by naming them" (Herzog 2014: 383-4).

There's no essential incompatibility between science and art, because, as Goethe put it, they both try to grasp the physiognomy of nature. For Goethe it was of paramount importance to look beyond the mechanism and determinism of Newtonian science and to "save" the genuine unfolding of phenomena. A famous Goethe-maxim says something Herzog would agree to: "Everything factual is already theory: to understand this would be the greatest possible achievement. The blueness of the sky reveals the basic law of chromatics. Don't go looking for anything beyond phenomena: they are themselves what they teach, the doctrine" (*Maxims and reflections*, n. 575 [Goethe 1998: 82]). In Goethe's view the phenomenon escapes mathematical abstraction as well as the opposition between subject and object; it has to do, instead, with the fulfilment of human experience as part of nature. Human experience, from this perspective, becomes the point of reference: "Man in himself, in so far as he is using his sound senses, is the greatest and most exact 'physical', i.e. scientific apparatus that can be imagined, and this, precisely, is the most disastrous aspect of modern physics: that experiments have been, as it were, segregated from the human factor and that nature is to be recognized only by the evidence of artificial instruments and in this way limits what nature wants to achieve and prove" (n. 706 [Goethe 1998: 97]). In conformity with Goethean phenomenology and its "delicate form of empiricism" (n. 565 [Goethe 1998: 80]), Her-

<sup>9</sup> Herzog clearly states that Pashov's words are equally true for his life and for his films (see Paganelli 2008: 50-1).

zog too tries to bring scientific knowledge back to man's "sound senses".

What I've said in this regard gives us the opportunity to further elaborate on Herzog's reworking of the canon of documentary and specifically on the aforementioned circumstance that in the cinematographic experience of the filmmaker fiction and documentary overlap. If, according to Herzog, it's so important to recognize and respect the normative power of facts, it's not surprising that he exploits documentary conventions aimed at transmitting what the spectator is meant to perceive as objective information (see Ames 2012: 10). But the use of these conventions by Herzog happens within a different cinema project, so that they undergo a subtle but decisive transformation. Herzog, indeed, is not interested in looking only at what the mirror reflects: he wants to look behind the mirror<sup>10</sup>. From this point of view, he promotes "documentary as a form of imaginative knowledge" (Ames 2012: 16), able not only to report facts, but also to attain a mysterious and elusive *ecstatic truth* (see point 5 of the Minnesota Declaration, Herzog 2014: 476 and Paganelli 2008: 186-9).

The wonder towards nature that nourishes the scientist's research can intensify to the point that it turns into an experience of the sacred. In *Encounters at the end of the world* Herzog's voice-over comments on a sequence in which he shows first the scuba divers while they get ready and then their dive beneath the Antarctic ice sheet. What he points out is very interesting: "I noticed that the divers in their routine were not speaking at all. To me, they were like priests preparing for mass. Under the ice the divers find themselves in a separate reality where space and time acquire a strange new dimension. Those few who have experienced the world under the frozen sky often speak of it as going down into the cathedral". In these words there are multiple references to the sacred: the priests preparing for mass and the cathedral, obviously, but also the "separate reality where space and time acquire a strange new dimension". Herzog chooses to amplify even more the feeling of a hieratic experience by combining solemn coral music (the Bulgarian popular song "Planino stari planino mari") to the images of scuba divers that, like in a cavern, swim under the vault of ice. In Cronin's interview book, *A guide for the perplexed*, Herzog at a certain point makes a very relevant remark on religion:

<sup>10</sup> In Herzog's terms: "What moves me has never been reality, but a question that lies behind it: the question of truth" (Herzog 2010b: 8-9).

Religion is clearly an important part of our inner being. It offers consolation to many people and has a certain value to the human race, so I would never dismiss it out of hand, and having been baptised – which according to the dogma of the Catholic Church is an indelible mark on my soul – I will always be a Catholic. But ever since my close encounter with organised religion I have known it isn't for me, though to this day there is something of a religious echo in my work. The scientific basis of reality will always be more important. There should never be an ideology standing between us and our understanding of the planet. The facts are facts. (Herzog 2014: 3)

Herzog underlines once more the normative power of facts. But at the same time he acknowledges a religious echo in his work (on the role of religious experience in Herzog and on how he represents it, see Eldridge 2019: 116-27 and Poch 2019: 39-46). Rather than contrasting facts, this echo uncovers their depth. It doesn't have to do with an organized form of religion, but with the holy shudder for the terrible, unfathomable and incoercible majesty of nature. Here we can clearly perceive the "meta-physical" dimension of Herzog's output (see Cattaneo 2007: 49-56), a dimension that becomes particularly explicit in the title he gave to a text written in 1974 for the journal "Kino" in connection with some pictures of a pensive Jean Renoir: "Warum ist überhaupt Seiendes und nicht vielmehr Nichts?", "Why is there "being" at all rather than nothing?" (Herzog 1976; on the history of this question in Western thought, see Schubbe, Lemanski, Hauswald 2013). It's the fundamental question of metaphysics – one that conveys all the strangeness and wonder of being. Regarding this question Herzog himself has commented: "It's the question of questions. I can't give it a meaning, the question stays there, it resists, it has always remained alive and it has been revived by the existentialists. It's the mother of all philosophical questions, more so now than ever. [...] Yes, maybe it can be applied to my films, but it's a good thing that it has been put there [next to the pictures of Jean Renoir, like a poem]. I am not a philosopher" (Paganelli 2008: 72-3). The weirdness of being, though, might have less to do with abstract concepts than with the experience of a "poetic, ecstatic truth".

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