Herzog, Landscape, and Documentary

Eric Ames

Abstract: This essay explores Werner Herzog’s approach to landscape as a site for performing his notion of documentary as a repudiated mode of filmmaking. What emerges from this ironic performance is an alternative documentary epistemology, one that refers primarily to the inner world of affect and to forms of embodied knowledge.

Werner Herzog has often rejected the distinction between fiction and documentary as an illicit one, but the German-born filmmaker has also traded on the authority of documentary for more than four decades.1 Recently, he has even made a kind of second career for himself as a documentarian, reaching wider audiences than ever before, while exploiting new markets via cable television, DVD sales, and the Internet.2 He has also developed his own interpretation of documentary, with particular emphasis on its contested relationship to knowledge.3 Most of his documentaries claim to visualize the inner world of the emotions, the psyche, and the soul—vast areas of human experience that are not in themselves visual, and therefore tend to be either overlooked or neglected by scholars of documentary. Nevertheless, at least one critic has identified Herzog’s “unique contribution to the documentary tradition” as arising from “his desire to confront that which lies past man’s understanding, to suggest through what may be captured on screen that which resides just beyond the visible.”4 While I agree with this early assessment of Herzog’s achievement as a documentarian, I want to complicate it by adding that he also stages this “desire” in a deliberately ironic context, as evinced by his use of landscape. Other scholars have observed the vital importance of landscape to Herzog’s narrative features, yet little has been said about the documentary mode, which has increasingly come to define his practice. Instead, most commentators simply echo the director’s repeated claim that the boundaries between fiction and documentary are blurred throughout his work. Herzog and his critics even seem to share certain assumptions about documentary as a repudiated mode of filmmaking, owing to its historical association with reportage, its institutional identity as a branch of journalism, and its discursive claims to “truth,” “reality,” and “authenticity.”

Eric Ames is an assistant professor of German at the University of Washington, where he teaches courses in film, literature, and cultural studies. His research monograph, Carl Hagenbeck’s Empire of Entertainments, is forthcoming from the University of Washington Press. Currently, he is preparing a book manuscript on Werner Herzog.

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What interests me, by contrast, are the many ways in which Herzog has creatively and insistently performed documentary as a repudiated practice. In this essay, I want to concentrate on one of them—namely, Herzog’s use of landscape as a site for appropriating and revising documentary as a key form of imaginative knowledge. What is at stake here is not the filmmaker’s artistic vision, but rather the larger domain of documentary epistemology. I contend that Herzog has developed an approach to documentary that is anti-referential for an effect. The referential world does not disappear from Herzog’s documentaries; it remains visible (even dazzling), but its apparent presence creates an occasion for irony. Landscape provides the physical setting, the visual form, and the “cultural power” for a documentary practice that cleaves to the referential world as an ironic strategy for overcoming it.5

The different terms of my argument—documentary, landscape, interiority, and irony—can be briefly illustrated by a scene from The Dark Glow of the Mountains (1984), a portrait of the elite mountain climber Reinhold Messner. On one level, the film bears witness to an unprecedented (and, since then, unparalleled) event—namely, the attempt by Messner and his partner to climb two of the world’s tallest peaks in succession, without returning to base camp in the interval. On another level, the film concerns the very ratios of emotional and physical intensities that not only distinguish such climbers, but also connect them to other people. As Herzog puts it, in one of his signature voice-over commentaries, “We weren’t so much interested in making a film about mountain climbing per se, or about climbing techniques. What we wanted to find out was what goes on inside mountain climbers who undertake such extreme endeavors? What is the fascination that drives them up to the peaks like addicts? Aren’t these mountains and peaks like something deep within us all?” While Herzog speaks, the camera actively scans the horizon of the Himalayas, as seen from a distance of several kilometers through a powerful telephoto lens, panning and tilting in a long, continuous movement, which traces the jagged outline of the peaks. The lens and camera movement flatten out the pro-filmic scene, transforming the physical environment into a graphic pattern, re-signifying the depicted mountains and ravines as the “highs” and “lows” of an inner world, which the camera seems to register like the moving stylus of an automatic instrument. This method of surveying and displaying physical terrain—the film’s key visual strategy—is also the way in which Herzog charts an inner movement traversing desire, fear, passion, dependence, and fascination, across some of their various phases. The strategy relies for its effect on the spectator’s powers of visualization and projection, so that the cinematic landscape also becomes a site for eliciting emotions from the audience. At the same time, however, the telephoto lens also marks off the extreme distance at which the audience is situated vis-à-vis the documentary subject, for it is only from such a remove that an exterior landscape of this magnitude can serve double duty as a screen for projecting the inner world of the spectator.

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Emotional Cartography. For a filmmaker who has worked on every continent and in as many as twenty different countries, Herzog approaches the physical environment with striking uniformity of vision. Combining a passion for landscape views with an insistently inward movement, his documentaries render a cinematic terrain that is largely detached from the referential world and oriented toward the inner world, instead. Herzog’s ephemeral vistas open up a paradoxical space of imagined interiority, which is also a representation of the physical world that we inhabit. The practice of aestheticizing the psychological interior by means of landscape has an extensive history in German art, literature, and cinema, but it is unusual in the context of documentary film. Herzog is clearly aware of this history, and stakes a certain claim to it: “For me, a true landscape is not just a representation of a desert or a forest. It shows an inner state of mind, literally inner landscapes, and it is the human soul that is visible through the landscapes presented in my films, be it the jungle in Aguirre, the desert in Fata Morgana, or the burning oil fields of Kuwait in Lessons of Darkness. This is my real connection to Caspar David Friedrich, a man who never wanted to paint landscapes per se, but wanted to explore and show inner landscapes.” Here, indeed, we can identify Herzog’s connection to the German aesthetic tradition, acknowledging his debt not only to Romanticism, but also to Expressionism in film, as suggested by Lotte Eisner. While Herzog scholarship has been greatly enriched by these categories—Romanticism and Expressionism—they have also had the inadvertent effect of restricting the frame of analysis, so that the interrelationship of landscape and emotion, for instance, becomes either totally overdetermined or seemingly self-evident. In this context, it would be helpful to experiment with a different analytical framework, one that allows us to explore some of the ways in which affective experience is not merely referenced, but staged and activated by the films. This is especially true of Herzog’s documentaries, whose truth claims rest on forms of embodied knowledge (such as ritual, memory, trauma, displacement, spirituality), which are often articulated in terms of an intensely physical involvement with landscape. The task is to open up a broader view of Herzog’s landscape pictures, beyond the categories of Romanticism and Expressionism, while at the same time accounting for the idiosyncrasies of the filmmaker’s style.

In her recent study, Atlas of Emotion, Giuliana Bruno outlines a theory of film as a form of cartography that is highly and particularly sensitive to the inner world of affect. Part of a larger challenge to the psychoanalytic bias in film theory and its emphasis on the disembodied “gaze,” Bruno’s model of film as affective mapping foregrounds the corporeal experiences of spatiality and movement, their emotional dimension, and the ways in which this dimension is simulated and stimulated on screen. By cartography, Bruno understands not a visual instrument for dominating foreign places and cultures, but a means of self-discovery. If maps and movies function similarly as visual forms of virtual travel, they can also be used to explore intimate, subjective, and imaginative spaces, putting the spectator in relationship
to a private domain of embodied knowledge, which is based on subjective experience. From this perspective, Bruno suggests, moving pictures evoke both an inner world of emotion and an embodied response to geographical place. Art scholar Jill Bennett has likewise focused on “the motility of affect,” its power of active movement—a point that widens the parameters of affective response, and its theorization beyond the usual focus on narrative and character identification. Rather than inhabit a character, “one inhabits—or is inhabited by—an embodied sensation,” as it is simultaneously roused by and registered in a given film. This is especially true of documentary representations of place that resonate internally, even in the absence of story and character. Whereas Bennett refers to film, movement, and place in order to theorize affect in relation to specific concerns of contemporary art, Bruno charts a history of correlations between virtual travel and sensitivity to subjective states, which, of course, predates the cinema and is integral to various modes of cultural production.

If Bruno’s theory of affective mapping offers a helpful framework for analysis, Herzog’s documentaries provide a fascinating test case (albeit one that Bruno does not explore), for several reasons that are worth noting. First, Herzog is known for making highly “optical” films, and the visual aspect of his work has usually been the focus of discussion. Now that this idea is firmly entrenched within the scholarship, it becomes interesting to reconsider his films in terms of affect and cartography, to see what a shift in emphasis might bring. Second, the spectator in Bruno’s theoretical model is explicitly gendered female, and the voyage of discovery is offered as a feminist project, whose wider implications are suggestive, but implicit. Whereas Herzog’s films once seemed to identify with, and give expression to, marginalized social figures, women have rarely been featured in his fifty-some films, the major exceptions being the documentary portraits of Fini Straubinger (Land of Silence and Darkness, 1972) and Juliane Koepcke (Wings of Hope, 1999). Even in light of these exceptions, it would probably be too much of a stretch to associate his work with a feminist project of any kind. Nevertheless, Herzog has claimed to infuse his images with “a new form of ‘emotionality,’” which at the very least indicates that he is intrigued by the idea, and that it has a live function in his filmmaking practice. Third, Bruno’s model is theoretically interesting, because it requires a more subtle, active, and exploratory relationship to the image than that which is usually assumed by Herzog’s critics, one that allows for a spectator who responds to the image in an embodied way, through the senses, without simply dismissing such a response as regressive. Fourth, the case of Herzog demonstrates that it is not necessary to soft-pedal issues of power in order to chart an emotional cartography, as Bruno would seem to do. Finally, as we shall see, Herzog’s “inner landscapes” are permeated by a sense of irony, creating a set of interpretative conditions that are left unexamined in Bruno’s study. Herzog’s documentaries bring all these issues to bear.

The travelogue films, which constitute the majority of his documentaries, provide rich ground for rethinking the role of landscape in Herzog’s work. If
travelogues are “nonfiction films that take place as their primary subject,” as one scholar has suggested, Herzog’s contribution to this tradition is to steer it away from locale or place in the geographical sense, and toward the inner world of affect.\textsuperscript{14} No example surpasses that of \textit{La Soufrière} (1977), with its spectacular footage of an explosive volcano on the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe. There is an obvious temptation to frame this film in terms of the Sublime, which is a standard theme of Herzog scholarship.\textsuperscript{15} Yet it can also be read in Bruno’s terms as an instance of affective mapping, eliciting and charting a sense of awe, fear, boredom, fascination, excitement, amusement, frustration, disappointment—all of which register on a visceral level that is interesting in its own right. (From this perspective, the Sublime might even be understood as an inherited mapping that Herzog in turn mobilizes and revises through the cinema.) The sheer audaciousness of volcano hunting as a project makes \textit{La Soufrière} a key film in Herzog’s body of work, because it sealed the myth of the director as risk-taker. The resulting film, however, offers us an ironic and highly self-conscious performance of the documentarian as failure. \textit{La Soufrière} begins with the portentous sound of rumbling and the image of smoke rising from the open fissures of a mountain. First, the film’s title is superimposed onto the landscape, and then the subtitle, “Waiting for an Inevitable Catastrophe” (Figure 1). While the film takes its title from the mountain’s name, it also evokes the word \textit{souffrir}, whose connotations of enduring something with a felt sense of pain or annoyance resound across the film’s subtitle, as well. The latter creates a sense of representational tension not only between the signifying image and the event signified, but also between the cinematic landscape and its narrative framework. Indeed, after thirty minutes, the documentary ends abruptly with an interesting show of embarrassment. Since the film premiered the following year on West German television, most historical spectators—those who followed the news story, at least—knew that the volcano never actually exploded. Nevertheless, in a dramatic reversal of the film’s subtitle, the program closes with the voice of Herzog apologizing to the audience for a “pathetic” and “embarrassing” result: that is, “a report on an inevitable catastrophe that did not take place.” The filmmaker’s apology is spoken over images of the volcano belching smoke and ash, and accompanied by the tragic chords of the funeral march from Wagner’s “Twilight of the Gods.” Ultimately, the flow of documentary leads the audience to the brink of laughter (or the felt need to suppress it), which results from comparing what the film purported to show, the putative reality of “an inevitable catastrophe,” to what was actually shown. The use of irony here is dramatic, indeed, for it rescues the footage from certain disaster. For Herzog, that is, the “ultimate” catastrophe is not the event of a volcanic explosion (which would have been bad enough), but a historical practice of observational documentary—namely, \textit{cinéma vérité}—and its blatant claim to truth. Indeed, this is precisely what Herzog would “suffer” for an effect. \textit{La Soufrière} stages a typical scenario of \textit{cinéma vérité}, which places the filmmaker in a situation of waiting hopefully for a crisis to emerge, as a way of parodying it from within. The filmmaker’s show of embarrassment is neither
serious nor disingenuous. Rather, it is a provocative performance of a document-
ary mode that he has relentlessly dismissed. Yet, it is only the crisis situation (and
not the film as a whole) that denotes “vérité,” leaving ample space for Herzog to
rehearse and combine other historical styles of documentary elsewhere in the film.

The most interesting alternative to vérité can be found in Herzog’s treatment
of Basse-Terre, a town of forty-five thousand inhabitants located at the base of
the volcano. Although the entire population had been evacuated shortly before
Herzog’s arrival, the urban landscape provides the physical setting for visualizing
the inner terrors and desires of those who fled in haste. In this context, Herzog
flaunts the creative intervention of the filmmaker on the scene, as opposed to tak-
ing an observational stance. Curiously, what begins as a volcano-hunting expedition
turns into a far-flung city travelogue. The result is a bizarre clash of historical doc-
umentary styles for the sake of soliciting an emotional response from the audience.

Herzog renders Basse-Terre in a manner that is strongly reminiscent of early travel-
film genres—“scenics,” “foreign views,” panorama films, and urban travelogues—
that proliferated at the turn of the twentieth century. As Bruno has shown, the
camera in these films typically “practiced circular pans, up-and-down tilts, and for-
ward, vertical, and lateral tracking motion, offering a variety of vistas across the
city space, from panoramic perspectives to street-level views. In this way, the genre
reproduced the very practice of urban space, which involves the public’s daily ac-
tivity and circulation.”16 Herzog’s camera rehearses many of these movements, but
it does so in the absence of any public, creating an effect that is doubly uncanny.

Figure 1. “Waiting for an Inevitable Catastrophe,” La Soufrière (Werner Herzog
In one passage, a camera is mounted on the front of an unseen car, which seems to move unimpeded through deserted city streets. This simulation of movement not only recalls the “phantom ride” films of early silent film, but also infuses the depicted space with drama and narrative in the absence of social actors. The sole force of movement in this abandoned city, the moving camera renders a contradictory urban panorama that is conspicuously devoid of inhabitants, yet seemingly filled with emotion. Visual signs of former presence, such as a blinking traffic light, make palpable a sense of fear and panic around the moment of mass departure. Cutting abruptly from one shot to another, the street modulates into an aerial view. “We flew over Basse-Terre by helicopter,” Herzog says in a hushed and tense voice. “During the flight, we got the impression that these were the last hours of this town and the last pictures ever taken of it.” Voice-over commentary plays an important role in dramatizing space as well as in creating a narrative structure of crisis and intensification. At the same time, the aerial changes the angle of view and adds a sense of scale, producing a grid-shaped image of the town, with the enormous volcano looming ominously in the background. In *La Soufrière*, however, it is not the volcano that invades space and transforms it, but the simulated movement of the camera, instead. Through aerials and traveling shots, Herzog mobilizes uninhabited landscapes as a strategy for coaxing emotions out of the spectator, as if to “fill” the depicted absence on screen.

The point can be made more vividly by comparing the use of archival images and the treatment of historical landscape pictures (Figure 2). By the same token, this material also indicates that the filmmaker’s itinerary is an ironic one, veering away from *La Soufrière* as a strategy for approaching it indirectly. When the volcano fails to explode, Herzog makes a narrative detour to the nearby island of Martinique, where another volcano, Mont Pelée, erupted in 1902, destroying the town of Saint-Pierre. In this case, which is generally considered to be the worst volcanic disaster of the twentieth century, the town’s residents ignored all warnings of a potential catastrophe, resulting in the deaths of more than thirty thousand people. Historical photographs seem at first to provide the sort of images that Herzog had anticipated but never found on the island of Guadeloupe. (In a sense, the entire film unfolds in a series of “before” shots without “after” images.) It is almost as if the documentarian needed to compensate for contingency, to make up for the mountain’s refusal to perform, by referring to an earlier event. Ultimately, however, historical documents fail to provide that which exceeds mere observation, for the “found images” that Herzog displays turn out to be equally elusive. Filming in a local history museum, the camera pans across a series of archival photographs, all shown in extreme close-up, zooming in and out on selected details, and thereby mimicking the very fetishism of conventional television documentaries that Herzog claims to despise. Indeed, the use of the zoom shot here is so extraordinary that it calls attention to itself as a documentary trope. Typically, it is used to render poignant a still image, while drawing the spectator “closer” to the material—indeed, to “history”—by slowly magnifying and perusing certain details of the
scene. In this case, by contrast, the effect produced is a double movement, the conspicuous use of zoom being an unexpected corollary to Herzog’s more characteristic use of telephoto to distance spectators from the documentary material by emphasizing its status and mediation as an image.18 If the zoom represents a hackneyed technique for manipulating the spectator’s affective experience, Herzog employs it against convention, as a strategy for mocking and blocking the emergence of feeling.

Here, as in *The Dark Glow of the Mountains*, Herzog’s landscapes move inward by pulling back from the referential world, observing and representing it from a position of ironic detachment, which is also the position from which his performance of documentary needs to be seen. The affective dynamic which is internal to Herzog’s documentaries involves not only the evocation of emotion, but also its diminishment by an encroaching sense of irony.

**Landscape and Irony.** Landscape represents for Herzog both a point of departure and a destination, but it is not necessarily located in a geographical place. “The starting point for many of my films is a landscape,” he states, “whether it be a real place or an imaginary or hallucinatory one from a dream, and when I write a script I often describe landscapes that I have never seen. I know that somewhere they do exist and I have never failed to find them.”19 Strangely, Herzog describes the natural, phenomenal world as if it were in total obedience to his imaginings, despite all evidence to the contrary.20 Equally peculiar is the “physical” approach

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Figure 2. A “found image” of Martinique in 1902, *La Soufrière* (Werner Herzog Productions, 1977).
to landscape that he claims to take. It is strongly reminiscent of location scouting, the practice of finding in the world actual settings that already seem to embody the filmmaker’s vision. Of course, there is nothing remarkable about this practice in the making of narrative features. In the context of documentary, however, it would seem to be anathema. What makes the analogy of location scouting even more interesting in regard to Herzog’s landscapes is their attenuated relationship to place. Traditionally, landscape has served to convey a sense of locale, creating in turn a meaningful site where individual and social identities are formed. It also embodies aspects of cultural memory, as Simon Schama has amply demonstrated. One can easily imagine developing similar arguments (with all the necessary modifications) for the cinema. Indeed, one commentator has even suggested that “Herzog’s films are, in great part, limned in memory by their landscapes.” It is a thorny problem, then, to realize that the filmmaker travels to far-flung locations in search of particular landscapes, but the resulting images tell us little if anything about their referential contexts. Instead, they confront us with a paradoxical space, at once de-territorialized and sensuous, imaginary and physical.

Having said this, I hasten to add that Herzog describes his approach to landscape in terms that are deliberately hyperbolic and misleading. As other scholars have argued, landscape per se can neither be “found” nor “discovered,” as if it simply existed in the phenomenal world. On the contrary, it is created by cultural modes of perception, shaped and reshaped by distinct practices of representation, and surrounded by historical discourse. This is obviously true of Herzog’s landscapes, as well. Some of them are inspired by traditional framed images (in interviews, the filmmaker repeatedly mentions such names as Bosch, Goya, and Friedrich, among others). As cinematic views, all of them are mediated by technological recording and supplemented by sound and movement. Significantly, Herzog employs interviews to highlight the representational quality of his landscapes, offering up previously unknown details about the staging and blocking of particular settings. What emerges from such contradictory evidence is the extra-filmic basis for an ironic performance. In making this observation, I do not mean to imply that performance is inherently ironic; the point, rather, is to acknowledge that Herzog is extremely skilled in the art of saying one thing as a way of doing another. One effect of this extended performance has been to divert attention away from the premise on which his documentaries are based: that is, the very idea of apprehending the world as a cinematic landscape.

The world according to Herzog is rife with representation. In one of the most important statements on Herzog’s practice, Timothy Corrigan points out that, crucially, Herzog addresses the world as a physical or material image. This is also the sense in which he claims to “discover” landscapes. It seems to me, however, that this approach can also be understood as literalizing for an effect what Martin Heidegger called “the world picture.” Part of a larger argument about the emergence of modern life from a metaphysical perspective, the “world picture,” as Heidegger defines it, “does not mean a picture of the world but the world
conceived and grasped as picture.” This intellectual move implies a shift of historical consequence. “The world picture does not change from an earlier medieval one into a modern one, but rather the fact that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age.”28 For Heidegger, the world picture is a metaphor for what he understands to be the primary structure of modern thought and experience. For Herzog, by contrast, the natural world has been actually reified and thus transformed into a picture. The act of violence implied by this transformation also plays out in strikingly literal terms. Documentary images of the natural world bear witness to the ecological destruction wrought by industrial modernity.29 In other words, they show what Herzog frequently calls “the embarrassed landscapes of our world.”30

It is important to stress, however, that the world according to Herzog is also shot through with irony.31 Although seldom acknowledged (much less explored) in the literature, the central importance of irony as a condition of Herzog’s films has in fact been emphasized by a few scholars, whose work is worth mentioning. Thomas Elsaesser, for one, identifies an “irony of document,” which is particularly relevant. For Elsaesser, Herzog is “a director who heightens the documentary stance to the point where it becomes itself a powerful fiction.”32 More recently, Brad Prager has cited this dynamic as evidence of Herzog’s affinity to Romantic irony, not only in the philosophical sense of a human condition or predicament, but also in the “formal” sense of emphatic self-referentiality and self-contradiction as a principle of aesthetic unity.33 Building on a psychological concept, Timothy Corrigan has identified in Herzog’s work a “regressive irony,” which works to position spectators in a “hypnotic” relationship to images as a way of apprehending the world, and to confront them with the “childlike” or regressive nature of this position, at the same time. As Corrigan points out, however, there are many different kinds of irony operating within the director’s body of work. Indeed, he suggests, any assessment of Herzog’s films will ultimately depend on the role that one assigns to the action of irony and the way in which one defines it.34

Wayne C. Booth’s now-“classic” study of rhetorical irony develops a model of ironic reading as “reconstruction,” a term he borrows from the domain of engineering, because it implies “the tearing down of one habitation and the building of another one on a different spot.”35 Herzog’s documentaries would seem to require a similar interpretive process; they are not meant to be read straight. Rather, landscapes serve to conjure unseen worlds of affect and spirituality, even as they represent the physical world that we inhabit. There is, however, an important difference that needs to be made explicit. The principal structures of meaning in these films, such as landscape pictures, can be mentally broken down, but resist all attempts to reconstruct them (as Booth would have us do). In other words, they invite an ironic reading without, however, offering the comforts of rhetorical irony—i.e., the unspoken rules and absolute notion of truth that allow us to understand the speaker’s intended meaning. Rather, Herzog maneuvers to either suspend or
block understanding by deploying a circle of familiar and self-referential gestures, which may afford Herzog aficionados a certain pleasure of recognition, but only obtains as a type of fetish.36 That Herzog very clearly enjoys dismissing the very distinction between documentary and fiction makes the act of reconstruction all the more difficult. Add to this his well-known penchant for sublimating absurdities into mysteries, and a broader movement comes into view. It is when the action of irony is multiplied without end that “we finally lose all sense of stability,” according to Booth, “and sink into the bogs of unstable irony.”37

Indeed, this is precisely where Herzog seems to thrive (all claims to the contrary notwithstanding). An early and particularly important example is Fata Morgana (1970), a film that the director describes as having “crystallized” his audience at a pivotal moment in his career.38 It began as a side project, filmed parallel to The Flying Doctors of East Africa (1969), as Herzog and his crew scouted numerous locations in the Canary Islands and across the South Sahara for the narrative feature Even Dwarves Started Small (1970). At the time of production, Herzog described Fata Morgana as a “land inspection” (Landbeschau), as if it were part of an official geographical survey.39 Ultimately, however, the film constructs a shifting, contradictory, and ephemeral landscape. It is first introduced by the film’s title, which refers to a type of mirage. A physical phenomenon that is transient in nature, a fleeting landscape that is unattached to place yet originating in the material world, the mirage represents for Herzog a cinematic landscape par excellence. In this regard, Fata Morgana represents not an African travelogue, but an exploration into the paradoxical nature of the cinematic image, which confronts the spectator with a space of referentiality that is also fleeting and inaccessible. To this effect, Herzog uses visual analogy and extremely long takes. In one passage, for example, the camera performs a 180-degree pan, as if it were slowly moving along a cinematic continuum, from the seemingly solid ground of a rock formation to the shimmering mirage of a desert lake. Another passage, shot from a fixed camera position, creates a similar continuum by compressing it into a single frame, with the interval here extending from the foreground to the horizon by means of deep focus (Figure 3). The paradox is clear: by “holding” on the physical world that appears before it, the camera renders a shifting landscape picture that appears to lose its referentiality in the course of its depiction.

The film’s significance lies in the dominance of landscape motifs over narrative development, of which there is almost none. Fata Morgana consists of a series of sweeping vistas, featuring aerial views, traveling shots, and 360-degree panoramas of mostly uninhabited landscapes. It replays cinematically the Romantic fascination with ruins, as the camera lingers on traces of industrial detritus (abandoned factories, oil drums, plane wrecks, and so on), which are strewn about the land. If the film creates travel images, then they have been radically detached from any sort of context. Where did these things come from, and why are they “here” in a desert? The image track begs the question, but the sound track answers back with
escalating uncertainty. Instead of historical or political analysis, *Fata Morgana* creates a quasi-mythological framework that is “deliberately inadequate and highly ironic.”

Structurally, the film is divided into three parts: “Creation,” “Paradise,” and “The Golden Age.” Each part features a different voice-over narrator and a different “mythical” source, ranging from the sacred (excerpts from the Mayan creation myth, *Popol Vuh*, as read by Lotte Eisner) to the absurd (original texts written by Herzog). Rather than promote understanding by creating a sense of narrative cohesion, the framework generates dissonance and semantic chaos. Multiple narrators and nonsensical discourse (a male voice states matter-of-factly, “While you are sleeping, acids gnaw and leeches suck at the tuna fish”) combine to parody the authority of “voice-of-God” narration in expository documentaries. The pseudo-mythical framework, in turn, promotes an ironic interpretation of the image track. Thus, “Creation” can be understood as a litany of colonial violence, “Paradise” a postapocalyptic landscape of ruination, “The Golden Age” an era of inescapable destitution. Yet this is only one possibility, and there is no secure referential structure to support any one interpretation as opposed to another. “In paradise,” the narrator repeats, “there is landscape even without deeper meaning.” The refusal of other meaning is also true of the film itself.

*Fata Morgana* initiates a process of mythologizing the landscape as an internal space, which is also emphatically a documentary representation of the material world. If Herzog approaches the world as a cinematic landscape picture, he does
so without providing a stable framework for preconceived understanding. Mythologizing the landscape becomes a strategy for implicating spectators in the play of irony by inviting them to ask interpretative questions of meaning and simultaneously scuttling any attempt to draw consequences from the depicted world. The audience is offered a stake in the affective register that Herzog then deconstructs through the action of irony. Nevertheless, the very filmic techniques that serve to create distance and dissonance also generate an affective resonance, which has nothing to do with meaning or interpretation. Even when the condition of irony is made explicit, there remains an intensity that wells up in the spectator when confronted with Herzog’s landscapes (as will be clear to anyone who has tried teaching this material on the undergraduate level). Over time, this excess of feeling has itself become internal to Herzog’s project, especially in the context of documentary, and through the growing number of films concerning sacred landscapes and the tremendous journeys that they inspire.

Sacred Spaces. The idea of sacred landscape has emerged as a major topos of Herzog’s work, one that he has mainly explored in the documentary mode (an early exception being *Where the Green Ants Dream*, 1984). It is also a topos that other scholars have yet to address, perhaps because it might seem to be merely another version of the sublime (which it is not), but more likely due to its affinity for the mystical and the supernatural. Of course, this affinity is exactly what interests Herzog, as evidenced by the documentary shorts *Bells from the Deep: Faith and Superstition in Russia* (1993) and *Christ and Demons in New Spain* (1999), by the compilation film *Pilgrimage* (2001), and by the feature-length *Wheel of Time* (2003). One of the connections among these different films is the idea of visualizing the sacred. Asked about the motivation behind *Wheel of Time*, Herzog answered with bravado, “I had a physical curiosity to depict spirituality, and it can be done on film.” The strategy in each case is to focus on places where the sacred is thought to manifest its presence in landscape, such as historical sites of pilgrimage. What all these places and lived spaces have in common is the belief that each represents a juncture of the material and the immaterial, the exterior and the interior. Herzog’s project is to observe and represent what takes place at this intersection, while positioning the spectator in a certain relation to it. The act of visiting shrines and being intensely (even physically) engaged in a landscape may be embodied by pilgrims on the move, but such passionate feelings can also be stirred and felt to some degree by spectators who embark on virtual voyages. In various ways, Herzog exploits the affective response to the embodied experience of sacred landscapes on screen. To explore this topos of Herzog’s work means to add yet another dimension to Bruno’s model of film as a “cosmography that draws the universe in the manner of an intimate landscape.”

A sacred landscape is a thoroughly paradoxical space, which is also what makes it a challenging subject for documentary film. In his important study on the image of Tibet in Western travel writing, Peter Bishop theorizes the sacred landscape as
an “imaginary geography.” Drawing on the work of Mircea Eliade and Victor Turner among others, Bishop observes that “sacred space has been defined in terms of its separation from the profane world, by the limited access accorded to it, by a sense of dread or fascination, by intimations of order and power combined with ambiguity and paradox. Sacred places also seem to be located at the periphery of the social world.” At the same time, however, they are historical destinations for travel and meaningful centers of social activity. In this case, he argues, Western travelers did not “discover” Tibet, but rather created it—visually, historically, discursively, socially—as sacred landscape. To elaborate this idea, Bishop makes a crucial distinction between sacred places and utopias as two different kinds of imaginary constructs. Utopias, by definition, lie outside of time and space (they are designed to accommodate future dwelling, not regular visits by actual pilgrims, for example), whereas sacred landscapes are grounded in geographical place and situated in time. Moreover, utopias serve to resolve and eliminate contradictions, instead of emphasizing their mysterious incommensurability, as sacred spaces tend to do. It is from this perspective that Herzog can also be seen to employ documentary as a means of exploring sacred landscapes (not as a quest for utopian images) and the ways in which people traverse them. Traveling around the world, he visits and records actual places that are widely regarded by others as sacred.

My signal example is *Wheel of Time*, for it revolves around the idea of sacred landscape while approaching it from several different angles. The film takes place at three separate locations. Its original occasion was the making of the Kalachakra mandala, also known as the wheel (or cycle) of time. The sand mandala is carefully assembled over a period of two weeks, viewed by masses of pilgrims, and then ritualistically destroyed. In 2002, the ceremony was convened by the Dalai Lama himself in Bodhgaya, India, only to be postponed a few days later on account of his deteriorating health. It was reconvened the following year in Graz, Austria, which is home to the largest Buddhist community in Europe. Herzog is again present, and this time he conducts a brief interview with the Dalai Lama, who describes his wish for a politically and environmentally harmonious world. As the film unfolds, the two ceremonies serve to frame a third and otherwise unrelated event, which marks the film’s symbolic and structural center—namely, a ritual pilgrimage around Mount Kailash in Tibet.

*Wheel of Time* does more than just refer to the special relationship between the venerated mountain and the sand mandala; it mimics that relationship in the context of documentary. As Herzog has noted, “the focal point of the Kalachakra Initiation is a highly symbolic and complicated sand mandala which is laid out around the symbol of Mount Kailash, the centre of the world. The mountain itself is not only a very impressive pyramid of black rock with a cap of ice and snow on its top, it immediately strikes the voyager as something much deeper—an inner landscape, an apparition of something existing only in the soul of man.” If the Kalachakra mandala serves to visualize consciousness during the initiation, this
“inner landscape” is all that remains after the painting has been destroyed, its sand scattered in the wind. Herzog’s Wheel of Time explores this ancient idea and gives it a new twist, flaunting the spatial, kinetic, and apparitional qualities of the film medium and the assertive stance of documentary in particular. Structurally, the entire film is organized around the rhythmic creation and destruction of landscape pictures (with the fleeting images of Mount Kailash at its center), and the powerful feelings they arouse in the viewer as “voyager.” Iconographically, the mountain provides Herzog with a potent visual metaphor for his project (Figure 4). Here is an exterior landscape that already inspires and models an interior one.

By framing the images of Mount Kailash in this way, Wheel of Time partakes of the Western fascination with Tibet as a “visual display,” which, according to Bishop, is precisely what distinguishes this area from other, predominately textual constructions of the Orient. Tracing its distinctive visuality through a range of media (including travel writing, painting, and cartography), Bishop shows that landscape images gave Tibet its imaginary coherence throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—ending in 1951, with China’s invasion and the resulting exile of the Dalai Lama. Since then, it is no longer landscape that has served to organize Western fantasies of Tibet, but rather its esoteric religion.50 This history of travel images also informs Wheel of Time. Herzog travels down well-trodden paths in depicting sacred landscape as he does on screen.

Significantly, however, the film as a whole both exemplifies and complicates this trajectory from landscape to religion. On the one hand, the framing sections concentrate on the physical practice of Buddhism outside of Tibet, which is totally in keeping with Bishop’s account. The Austrian section is particularly interesting (this being only the eighth time in history that the Kalachakra ceremonies have taken place in a Western city), because it gives voice to the political agenda of Tibetan exiles and their efforts to exert pressure on China through outside channels (which is probably the reason why the Dalai Lama’s office invited Herzog to film this event in the first place). On the other hand, Wheel of Time is emphatically not a documentary about either Buddhism or politics. Instead, the film recalls and extends the earlier tradition of apprehending Tibet as a sacred landscape. The historical shift from landscape to religion is momentarily reversed.

The ceremonies may provide the occasion, but the landscape (literally) provides the ground for Herzog’s project of “filming spirituality.” In a BBC interview, Herzog says of Mount Kailash, “This, we have to believe, is not just a sacred, symbolic cosmography like the mandala, but it has to do with a landscape that is felt to be sacred for the Buddhists and the Hindus and others, as well.” The presumption that Herzog makes, and asks us to make with him—“we have to believe”—could also be used to describe the film’s assertive stance toward the cinematic landscape as a moving image of consciousness. Here, once again, is Herzog: “It was a deep curiosity to show a truly sacred landscape. This was one of the reasons why I wanted to shoot Mount Kailash by myself. I was my own cinematographer for these sequences.”51 Emphasizing his control over the camera implies an
especially close—indeed, physical—connection between the sacred landscape and the cinematic image. It further reduces the imagined distance between the viewer and the site of pilgrimage as mediated by the body of the filmmaker.

The use of multiple lenses and angles of view serves to highlight different aspects of Mount Kailash, which elicit in turn an equally wide range of affective responses. In some passages, the mountain appears in isolation as a solemn, monolithic peak; in others, it is shown as part of a larger panoramic grouping. Sensuous images of Lake Manasarowar, a sacred landscape in its own right and the mountain’s legendary “female consort,” are rhythmically interspersed with images of Kailash. The result is a cinematic ensemble, in which landscape elements are mythologized as figures that seem to silently interact with one another. The intensity of their imaginary engagement is only enhanced by images of pilgrims circumambulating the mountain, especially those who travel in prostrations. We witness their excruciatingly slow, deliberate, and recurring movement, as well as the remarkable toll that it takes on their bodies over time. The movement of pilgrim bodies in space, like the film’s movement from place to place, has the effect of foregrounding the haptic and the kinetic—conditions that are central to Bruno’s theory of film—rendering passionate feelings with a tactile force that is particular to the film medium. Indeed, Wheel of Time offers a “positive” example of affective mapping extended to the domain of spirituality. Rather than undercut the sensation that arises out of the emotional intensity of pilgrims and their physical involvement with the landscape, Herzog lets it escalate for the film viewer to experience through the mind as well as through the senses.
By sharp contrast, the sense of irony that pervades his other travelogues is noticeably diminished in *Wheel of Time*. For example, the use of telephoto shots and voice-over commentary—key devices that Herzog typically employs to generate estrangement, disrupt identification, and destabilize interpretation—here serve to intensify feelings of spiritual ecstasy. It is worth adding that other sections of the film, which shift the focus of visual interest to social actors and ceremonial performances (as opposed to landscapes), include scenes that have been actively staged for the camera, as Herzog is wont to do—a contested practice in documentary, where it always carries the possibility of disruption. In this context, however, even the staged scenes work to engage the viewer on an emotional level, instead of creating an interpretive impasse. Significantly, the film’s ultimate image returns from Austria back to Tibet. In a long, single take, we see the sunlight as it flickers and pixelates on the surface of Lake Manasarowar, creating a view that is strongly reminiscent of the desert landscape in *Fata Morgana*. Unlike that film, however, no commentary is added or used to take away from the landscape in *Wheel of Time*. Here, the stress lies on the evocation of affect and emotion, and not on the action of irony. It appears that the sacred nature of the landscape is the crucial characteristic in explaining the shift of emphasis. Herzog’s treatment of sacred landscape demonstrates not a different approach to landscape and documentary altogether. It merely exhibits a different ratio and manifestation of the same set of relations between affect and irony that distinguish his work as a type of emotional cartography.

Throughout Herzog’s documentaries, as we have seen, landscape pictures serve not merely to project the filmmaker’s subjectivity into space. They position the spectator vis-à-vis the depicted world in ways that foreground the production of affective experience and its mediation by image-making technology. Most notably, Herzog’s documentaries mythologize the landscape as depicting an internal space, which is also an indexical image of the external world. Even in documentary, they suggest, we cannot identify clear and fixed boundaries between exterior and interior spaces of representation. Underlying this cinematic terrain is documentary’s unstable and constantly shifting relationship to knowledge. As I have suggested, Herzog’s landscape offers a site for performing his notion of documentary as a repudiated mode of filmmaking. What emerges from this ironic performance is a revised and revitalized notion of documentary epistemology, one that is fundamentally based on and devoted to the visibility of affective experience and other forms of embodied knowledge.

Notes

I am grateful to Marianne Hirsch and to *Cinema Journal*’s anonymous readers for their helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. By documentaries, I mean “films of presumptive assertion.” This definition, which I borrow from Noël Carroll, underscores the assertive stance (toward what is shown) that both the viewer and the filmmaker expect each other to adopt. It also recognizes that
documentaries may lie. “That is, they are presumed to involve assertion even in cases where the filmmaker is intentionally dissimulating at the same time that he is signaling assertoric intention.” Such is the case with Herzog’s documentaries, as will be shown. Noël Carroll, Engaging the Moving Image (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 208.

2. All the films discussed in this essay have been “indexed” (designated for distribution and marketing) as documentaries by Herzog’s production company, a practice that not only reinforces the very distinction that he dismisses in public, but also shapes the conditions of reception, as Herzog is well aware. On indexing, see Noël Carroll, “From Real to Reel: Entangled in the Nonfiction Film,” *Philosophic Exchange* 14 (1983): 5–45.

3. For a key statement, see the manifesto that Herzog delivered at the Walker Art Center in 1999, the so-called “Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema,” which is readily accessible on the filmmaker’s official Web site, http://www.wernерherzog.com (accessed September 13, 2006).


11. To support her theory, Bruno develops an alternative history of the cinema and its precursors through an older tradition of what she calls “emotion pictures.” Madeleine de Scudéry’s Carte du pays de Tendre (Map of the Land of Tenderness, 1654), which was published to accompany her novel Céline, provides a key example and what proves to be a useful guide to “moving pictures” through the centuries.


18. Voice-over commentary enhances the effect. As the camera pans across an extremely blurry image of Saint-Pierre taken after the volcano’s explosion, Herzog remarks, “it is an actual photo, not a painting.” The gesture here is to the sense of historical “authenticity” that is commonly associated with photographic reportage. Ironically, however, “the effect is not the immediacy of ‘reality,’ but rather the distancing of art.” Kent Casper, “Herzog’s Quotidian Apocalypse: La Soufrière,” Film Criticism 15, no. 2 (1991): 33.

19. Cronin, Herzog on Herzog, 83; original emphasis.

20. La Soufrière gives the lie to Herzog’s claim, for “the mountain refuses to perform.” Tom Cheesman, “Apocalypse Nein Danke: The Fall of Werner Herzog,” in Green Thought in German Culture: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives, ed. Colin Riordan (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 293.


26. The key example is Herzog on Herzog, edited by Cronin; see especially chapter 8, “Fact and Truth.”


29. If the filmmaker and the philosopher have anything in common, it is the German tradition of Zivilisationskritik. For Herzog’s part, see the interview conducted by Lawrence O’Toole, “I Feel That I’m Close to the Center of Things,” Film Comment 15, no. 6 (November–December 1979): 40. For an important statement on Herzog’s critical project, see Cheesman, “Apocalypse Nein Danke.”

30. See, e.g., O’Toole, “I Feel,” 48; Cronin, Herzog on Herzog, 47–48. In German, Herzog employs the term beleidigt, meaning “offended,” which is also one sense in which he uses the English word “embarrassed.” Both words attribute anthropomorphic qualities to landscape, a move that is commonly discussed in terms of Expressionism.

31. I say this being well aware that the filmmaker has often identified himself as “someone who takes everything very literally.” He claims, “I simply do not understand irony,” as if relishing his own supposed shortcoming. This move, which is also a good example of Herzog’s penchant for self-contradiction, can be seen as part of a larger repertoire, which the filmmaker has rehearsed almost verbatim throughout his long career. For a recent example and the source of this quotation, see Cronin, *Herzog on Herzog*, 26.


42. Prager’s study is unusual and noteworthy for its emphasis on “faith” as a theme of Herzog’s work, but it does not explore the idea of sacred landscape and the particular issues that attach to it. See chapter 4.


44. Herzog’s well-known claim to offer up “the ecstatic truth” is certainly relevant in this context, but it lacks theoretical purchase. The phrase is often cited and recycled in the press, mainly in relation to the theme of the filmmaker as visionary. Rather than try to elaborate his peculiar conception of truth, I would simply note that the usual language of Herzog criticism is largely beholden to him.


46. Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La: Tibet, Travel Writing, and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 10. Here it should be noted that the cinema itself has been imagined as a modern form of sacred space, which not only is separate and special, but also produces a feeling of awe and mystery. See on this point Rachel O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).


48. Herzog often has compared the practice of filmmaking to the act of making a pilgrimage, espousing the nomadic idea of walking as a lost way of life. See, e.g., Cronin, *Herzog on Herzog*, 14–15, 50, 279–82.
49. Werner Herzog, Introduction to Pilgrims: Becoming the Path Itself, by Lena Herzog (London: Arcperiphus, 2004), 11. The sand mandala “should be visualized as a pyramid with its tip resting on the summit” of Mount Kailash, extending the idea of the mountain as axis mundi, a physical connection between heaven and earth (20).

50. Bishop, The Myth of Shangri-La, 244.

51. Herzog, BBC; emphasis added.

52. The playful scene in Wheel of Time, in which a lone bodyguard stands watch over an empty room, is admittedly staged (Herzog, BBC). Here it should be noted that Bells from the Deep is replete with professional performers—an exorcist, a faith healer, and a Jesus impersonator—and staged scenes, all of which go unmarked (see Cronin, Herzog on Herzog, 251–53). In many instances, however, the camerawork in effect distances the documentarian from his subject, as the subtitle, Faith and Superstition in Russia, would already seem to suggest.