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Finding the "Truth"
Rhetoric and Actuality in the Documentary Tradition

Cutting the "Dull Bits" – A cinematic rhetoric:

Alfred Hitchcock famously describes film as "life with the dull bits cut out".[1] Yet, despite their "dullness", these forsaken "bits" contain a richness of subjective experience that defines our identity as embodied and enworlded beings (Sobchack, 1992). The strategically constructed nature of film thus comes at a cost – a distinct filmic lack. Film theorist Bill Nichol's (1991) highlights the necessary incompleteness and inadequacy of representation, which he addresses in his discussion of "questions of magnitude", through which he makes the case that the re-presented image is always partial, secondary, vicarious, and of a lesser order than the primary or direct encounter. The audience must therefore be *persuaded* to overcome the excess of unrepresentable "magnitude" and engage the fractured filmic world as complete, at least to the degree necessary for the narrative to function. Insofar as rhetoric relates to the strategic ordering and manipulation of fact, in the service of persuasion, it is the rhetorical job of cinema to account for and overcome filmic lack by employing the mechanisms of cinematic illusion. Further, the evidentiary role of facts in Aristotelian rhetoric is necessarily mediated by the

[1] Quote attributed to Alfred Hitchcock.

"artistic proof", through which representation advances the voice and intent of the author (Nichols, 1991, p. 134).

Though documentary, by definition, deals with the audio-visual "documenting" of events, the rhetorical articulation of these filmic events is not so straightforward. Early theorists and filmmakers argued passionately for the transcendence of the camera and the filmic capacity to re-imagine the world of actuality and generate fresh perceptive possibilities. Dziga Vertov identified the transcendent potential of motion pictures in his 1923 Manifesto: "I am kino-eye – I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you a world such as only I can see… My mission is the creation of a new perception of the world. Thus I decipher in a new way a world unknown to you" (Barnouw, 1993, p. 58). Yet, for all of its poetic potential, and despite the best efforts of seminal documentarians such as John Grierson, the popular association of documentary with other discretely "factual" modes of filmic representation has assumed dominance.[2]

Brian Winston (2000) traces the conflation of documentary and journalism through a series of social and technological movements, the totality of which culminate in the rise of Cinéma vérité and Direct Cinema as dominant modes of documentary production.[3] However, Winston contests the notion that this

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[2] In 1933, pioneering documentary filmmaker John Grierson defined documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality". Grierson further promoted a uniquely poetic mode of documentary filmmaking, which relied heavily on the use of metaphor and narrative manipulation. (Winston, 2000, p.19)

[3] Cinéma vérité and Direct Cinema, though often confused, actually refer to two distinct traditions, both intent on achieving filmic objectivity. Direct Cinema imposed strict regulation on filmic manipulation, including prohibitions against commentary and interviews. The style is most commonly known as the "fly on the wall" approach to minimal invasiveness. By contrast, Cinéma vérité does not aspire to non-invasiveness. Rather, through self-reflexive use of technology, the filmmaker attempts to reveal the constructed nature of the filmic manipulation, allowing the audience to determine the truthful or untruthful nature of content. Unlike Direct Cinema, Cinéma

tendency toward 'objectivity' reflects the foundational intent of documentary, pointing out that Grierson carefully distinguished documentary "from other sorts of factual cinema, such as the newsreel, the travelogue or the scientific/nature film" (2000). For a variety of reasons, "the classic documentary was never popular enough to overcome the hostility of the exhibitors and regularly command space in commercial cinemas." (Winston, 2000, p. 40) Instead, documentary filmmakers turned to journalism and public service broadcasting (PSB, as means of securing operational funding. Invested heavily in 'truth' claims, both institutional journalism and PSB thereby came to commodify factual reports as a currency of exchange, often with the government or other invested entity serving as the arbiter of authenticity. (Potter, 1996)

Herzog – Boundaries and Transgression

Werner Herzog's quest for "new images" and never before witnessed sights has taken him to deserts, jungles, abyssal depths, and forsaken wastelands in every corner of the world. His work speaks to a pervasive interest in boundaries and limits, or at least the transgression thereof. *Lessons of Darkness* (1992) and *Encounters* at the *End of the World* (2007) explore the limits of man's frailty in the face of elemental extremities, invoking cinematically the mechanical and dynamic aspects of the Kantian sublime. *Aguirre – The Wrath of God* (1972) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) navigates the boundaries of sanity, mapping the transgressive obsession and madness of Klaus Kinski's compellingly tragic characters onto the physical violation

vérité does allow for staged or controlled (but not scripted) sequences. Both styles, however, rely on such conventions as hand held camera, natural light, and location sound.

of hostile landscapes and natural borders. Yet, arguably his most profound exploration is not narrative or geographical, but artistic – a traversal of the liminal spaces, taboo regions, and perceived limits of the otherwise bounded confines of cinematic representation. Perhaps more overtly than any other contemporary filmmaker, Herzog actively transcends, contests, and subverts the physical and rhetorical frames of cinema. Themes of boundedness and transgression, both internal and external, figure prominently in *Grizzly Man* (2005) and *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcutter Steiner* (1974), but these "documentaries" (as Herzog qualifies them) also navigate playfully within, beyond, and at the site of traditional limits of the documentary tradition.

Throughout his substantial oeuvre Herzog challenges long-standing and often vigorously defended associations of fact and "truth", in pursuit of a deeper "ecstatic truth", which Herzog (1999) compares to poetry, explaining in his infamous "Minnesota Declaration": "There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth". Herzog does acknowledge the "strange and bizarre power" of facts, but clarifies that "truth" is of a superior order. A dogmatic obsession with actuality, argues Herzog, "reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants"; it "confounds fact and truth, and thus plows only stones". Accordingly, facts function in the service of "truth", which is itself "mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization". Provocative and revolutionary in the context of documentary film, Herzog's commentary speaks to an even more fundamental

discourse of rhetoric and representation that harkens back to the inception of photography and cinema.

From the earliest pseudoscientific motion studies to the rise of the news reel and Cinéma vérité, the documentary tradition speaks to a dynamic of *visual fetishism*, by which the viewer recognizes "truth" as corresponding to that which is seen or witnessed (Braun, 1994). Investment in the "authority", "authenticity", and "actuality" of the photographic image gives rise to what Linda William's (1989) refers to as the "frenzy of the visible" – a contextual frame that informs our engagement with the filmic or photographic representation. In his discussion of "vivification" and "questions of magnitude", Nichols (1991) details the strong functional dependence of documentary film on claims the indexicality and authenticity to the referent. Yet, Herzog rejects the rhetorical and functional frames of documentary "actuality", in attempt to liberate "truth" from what scientific sociologist Jonathon Potter (1996) calls the "Web of Belief" – a system of self-valorizing reification, through which new "facts" gain authority based on their participation within a network of pre-formative expectations and understandings.

For clarity, I must note that the primary "facts" of cinema manifest in the represented actions of the filmic characters. From a phenomenological standpoint, cinema expresses life *with* life; experience *with* experience. Lived action becomes the semantic "stuff" of cinema – the very language through which narrative is structured and expressed. Film scholar Vivian Sobchack (1992) qualifies lived-body experience and the embodied existence of the film as central to the capacity of cinema to signify: "Indeed, the cinema uses modes of embodied existence (seeing,

hearing, physical and reflective movement) as the vehicle, the 'stuff,' the substance of its language" (p. 5). However, these "modes of embodied existence" function in the service of signified "structures of direct experience (the 'centering' and bodily situating of existence in relation to the world of objects and others) as the basis for the structures of its language" (Sobchack, 1992, p. 5). Referring to the work of Eadward Muybridge, renowned for his seminal work in chronophotography and photographic motion studies, Marta Braun elaborates on the construction of cinematic illusion – the process by which the viewer's investment in the authenticity of the cinematic experience gives rise to the illusion of *movement*: "What Muybridge produces with his camera seems real and familiar to us, to such a degree that even when he shows us phases of movement never seen before, the authority of the camera makes them acceptable" (1994, p. 254).[4]

Grizzly Man (2005) – Inverting the nature documentary

Herzog, like Muybridge, Marey, and Renault before him, takes full rhetorical advantage of the narrative power of represented action and the "truth" associations of the (seemingly) indexical image. *Grizzly Man* (2005) explores the life and death of filmmaker and wildlife activist Timothy Treadwell, predominantly through the appropriated footage shot by Treadwell prior to his death. Herzog, however, repurposes Treadwell's material, and constructs a narrative from precisely the content that Treadwell would otherwise have omitted. In the tradition of the "objective" nature documentary, Treadwell's intent was to relate a factual

[4] Here, Braun refers to the illusion of physical movement, though the same process of pre-formulation and presupposition facilitates the illusion of affective movement.

accounting of his experiences with wild bears. Invoking the Direct Cinema tradition, Treadwell claims, "Most times I am gentle… I am like a flower… I'm like a fly on the wall… Observing, non-committal, non-invasive in any way" (*Grizzly Man*, 2005). Of course, Herzog quickly points out that there is no "truth" to be found in Treadwell's *intended* film. Rather, the 'objective' façade, carefully cultivated and meticulously constructed through Treadwell's use of editing, multiple takes, and staged sequences, speaks only to an obsessive delusion that would (were it not for Herzog's intervention) have remained beyond and outside of the cinematic frame. Herzog skillfully demonstrates the artifice behind the all too familiar illusion of "fly-on-the-wall" documentary filmmaking. Through careful manipulation, he transforms Treadwell's original content, constructing a compellingly inverted narrative; a foray into a filmic world that lies between, beyond, and outside of the originally intended and institutionally expected documentary content. Ultimately, Herzog repurposes the remnants of Treadwell's romanticized filmic vision, telling a very different tale in the process: "in all the faces of all the bears…I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy. I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature".

Utilizing candid outtakes and eliminating the devices of cinematic transparency, Herzog places Treadwell's idealized (imagined) world in conflict with the filmic world, and thereby introduces identity crisis not only on the part of Treadwell, but also for the active audience, who must now reconcile this fracture of the embodied and enworlded filmic character as an extension of embodied self (Sobchack, 1992). During one such moment, Treadwell breaks down upon discovering that a both a young cub and a fox have been killed by a mature bear.

Herzog notes Treadwell's emotional turmoil and fracturing sense of identity: "Once in a while Treadwell came face to face with the harsh reality of wild nature. This did not fit into his sentimentalized view that everything out there was good, and the universe in balance and in harmony." In the tradition of Herzog's tragic characters, Treadwell's inability to reconcile the harsh world to his romantic idealism reflects a state of intense identity crisis, a realization that would not have found its way into Treadwell's intended nature film. In the closing sequence of *Grizzly Man* (2005), Herzog summarizes:

> What remains is his footage. And while we watch the animals in their joys of being, in their grace and ferociousness, a thought becomes more and more clear; that it is not so much a look at wild nature as it is an insight into ourselves, our nature. And that for me, beyond his mission, gives meaning to his life and to his death.

***The Great Ecstasy of Woodcutter Steiner* – Documentary Beyond Journalism:**

Another iconic Herzog film, *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcutter Steiner* (1974), offers an intimate portrait of Walter Steiner, a world champion "Ski-flyer", against the backdrop of an international competition in Yugoslavia. Featuring familiar event coverage, direct-to-camera narration, and several relatively traditional interview setups (in the style of conventional journalism) *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcutter Steiner* blurs the line between journalistic documentary and Herzog's iconic "fabrication and stylization". Whereas Herzog self-reflexively highlights his inversion of Treadwell's intended rhetorical approach in *Grizzly Man* (2005), *The*

Great Ecstasy of Woodcutter Steiner offers no direct point of contrast. Though the film employs many of the conventions of news coverage or documentary journalism, what ultimately emerges is a stylistic and thematic inversion of these familiar modes. Subtly, the audience is transported to the marginal and excluded cinematic spaces that exceed the confines of "objective" reportage. We witness the onslaught of cameramen and journalists as they crowd Steiner for sound bytes. We share in the private moments and mundane indulgences that would be efficiently cut from a "news" edit. Perhaps more significantly, we are invited to penetrate the public façade of Steiner, rather than celebrate or revel in it, as we would expect from more conventional journalistic coverage.

As with *Grizzly Man* (2005), *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcutter Steiner* (1974) relates a tale of identity crisis. There are, however, clear distinctions. For instance, Walter Steiner (dangerously) transcends the constraints of the world around him, whereas Timothy Treadwell is ultimately consumed by the delusion of his capacity to do so. Early on, Herzog establishes Steiner as an elite athletic specimen, capable of nearly superhuman feats. It is Steiner's superiority to other "ski-flyers", and the inability of the audience and judges to fully comprehend his skill, which places him in physical danger and underlies his eventual identity crisis. The film departs from a traditional journalistic model in the rhetorical "artistic proof", by which Herzog transforms the indexical action of Walter Steiner's performances into a highly personalized Herzogian commentary on identity crisis, transcendence, and "ecstatic truth".

Despite a certain journalistic aesthetic, Herzog employs cinematic and

rhetorical strategies that challenge modes of "objective" accounting. Most notably, the iconic shot of Walter Steiner, hovering ambiguously in mid-flight, mouth agape, speaks to a vicarious encounter of affective movement that lends to an experience of vivification. We feel Steiner's awe and ecstasy, or at least some tangential sense of it, as we give in to the filmic manipulations at hand. In contrast to the visual conventions of the journalistic documentary or newsreel, Herzog positions the camera in a way that abstracts Steiner from the space, rather than contextualizing him within it. We are deprived of the spatial and depth cues, as well as the on-screen distance markers, that would allow us to track and verify Steiner's performance. Herzog recounts these details later (actually measuring them out in comical fashion on-camera), yet this visual information of the indexical context of Steiner's jump is lost to the cinematically controlled image. The motion of the sequence is also slowed, such that we additionally lose any point of reference for speed or velocity. Instead, we are liberated from the underlying actuality, and thereby freed to focus on Steiner's facial expression and the surreal quality of his flight. Of course, we are not "free". To the contrary, Herzog has artistically manipulated the cinematic performance of fact (however indexical in origin), such that we are presented with one primary option – to indulge in the "ecstatic truth" of Walter Steiner's transcendence. This leads us to another profound departure from the "objective" journalistic tradition: Herzog's directorial *enunciation*. In contrast to expression, which may be ignored, enunciation implies an overwhelming power, an irresistible engagement of the captive viewer/listener (Guerlac, 1985). Though by no means free of bias, traditional documentary journalism lacks the totalizing authoritarian

voice that pervades *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcutter Steiner* (1974) in particular and Herzog's films in general. Through "fabrication and imagination and stylization", Herzog directs the audience to a vicarious encounter with identity crisis, through which Steiner must reconcile internal and external boundaries and transgressions. We are not simply shown, as would be the case in a journalistic report, that Steiner has exceeded the "safe" jump distance of the course. Factual as such a report may be, there is no deeper inherent "truth" value. Instead, Herzog taps into the same persuasive investment that Noel Carroll (1990) describes as central to the functioning of affect in horror films: "these beliefs (and thoughts) are not just factual—e.g., there is a large truck coming at me—but also evaluative—e.g., that large truck is dangerous to me" (p. 26). The representation of Steiner's identity crisis is facilitated not by a factual recounting of his previous fall, but by the "evaluative" threat that this and other factual evidence stands as proof of a more profound risk – Steiner's very life.

In the 2004 'mockumentary' *Incident at Loch Ness*, Herzog, playing a stylized caricature of himself, reiterates his concept of "ecstatic truth":[56]

> I've always sensed that there's something like a deeper truth. It exists in cinema, and I would call it the ecstatic truth. It is somehow the same thing like in poetry. When you read a great poem, you instantly would know in your heart, in your guts, that there is a deep inherent

[5] As standard practice, it may seem inappropriate to quote from the character dialogue of a 'mockumentary'. However, I received confirmation of the validity of this quote from Herzog himself, during a post-screening discussion at the 2007 IDFA. Furthermore, due to the performative nature of Herzog's mythologized persona and his similar declaration of "ecstatic truth" in the Minnesota Declaration, there seems to be no significant functional distinction between Herzog's documented commentary and his 'mockumentary' testimonial in *Incident at Loch Ness* (2004).

> truth, an ecstatic truth... It has to do with our collective desires, our collective dreams…

Here, Herzog links the three critical dynamics that facilitate “ecstatic truth”: poetics (creative treatment), vivificaiton (affective movement), and fantasy (desires/dreams). Nichols (1991) suggests that the call for vivification is an attempt to reconcile the *incongruity,* as described by Sobchack (1992), between the experience of the viewer and that of the filmic “other”: “What calls for vivification, therefore, is not the sound and fury of spectacle, not the empirical realities of facts and forces, but the experiential awareness of difference that, in the social construction of reality, has been knotted into contradiction." (Nichols, 1991, pg. 235) That is to say that, in our recognition of the "contradiction" between our expectation of the completeness of “real” experience and the mimetic incompleteness of indexical re-presentation, we long for resolution, even if that resolution demands the suspension of disbelief, and the participation in narrative or receptive fantasy.

In the case of *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcutter Steiner* (1974), Herzog constructs a narrative mythology that reconciles his own auteur themes with the indexical representation of Walter Steiner’s actions, thus subverting the experience of filmic lack. Boundaries, transgression, obsession, identity crisis, and transcendence all *seem* to emerge necessarily from the indexical accounts of Steiner’s experiences. Through action, narration, and dramatic scenes, we come to recognize the physical boundaries of the ski jump course as manifestations of Steiner’s personal struggle with transcendence. He cannot risk jumping at full

strength, as the standard competition ramps are optimized to enhance the performance of lesser athletes. Ultimately, in what Herzog refers to as "a moment of crisis", Steiner determines to defy both the expectations of the crowd and the authority of the officials. Rather than beginning his run from the top of the jump platform, he assumes a starting position two sections below the other competitors. Steiner later explains that limiting his jump is the only way that he can "feel safe"; he consequently avoids the very real possibility of eminent death.[7] As intimated by the closing sequence, only in a world devoid of limits may Steiner come to a full realization of self: "I ought to be all alone in the world… Just me, Steiner, and no other living thing… No sun, no culture… Myself, naked on a high rock…no storm, no snow, no banks, no time, no money, no breath. Then, at least, I wouldn't be afraid".

It is precisely in these poetic expressions of rhetoric that Herzog taps into the fictive or mythologizing potential of filmic representation - the ability to narrativize the actual in the service of a deeper and more profound "truth". Speaking to the long-standing interconnectedness of fact and fiction, Williams (1989) clarifies that "what began as the scientific impulse to record the "truth" of the body quickly became a powerful fantasy that drove cinema's first rudimentary achievements of narrative diegesis and mise-en-scene" (p. 41). Read as such, Herzog's rejection of the distinction between documentary and fiction and his strategic implementation and reinterpretation of various documentary styles (e.g. nature documentary, journalism, etc.) may be seen as a critical return to the origins of the documentary mode. *Grizzly Man* (2005) inverts the rhetorical framework, and allows Herzog's

[7] Earlier in the film, Steiner experiences a bad fall, through which Herzog implies the very real danger of death.

"artistic form" to function in the service of a unique and unintended (at least by Treadwell) narrative. *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcutter Steiner* (1974) co-opts the style of documentary journalism, and builds upon and around the familiar conventions, in order to relate a more nuanced encounter with "ecstatic truth". Taken together, these films effectively demonstrate the paradox of Herzog's controversial style – a simultaneous rejection and deployment of documentary conventions and associations that conflate fact with "truth".

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