

**What Is It like to Be in the Land of Silence and Darkness?  
Werner Herzog and the Paradox of Representing the Unrepresentable**

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**Abstract:**

Although *Land of Silence and Darkness* is a film that explores fundamental themes of Herzog's cinema, it has thus far received relatively little critical attention. Drawing on the few previous studies dedicated to it, the aim of this paper is to show how this film addresses a central philosophical question: is it possible to experience the other's otherness? In particular, Herzog engages with the question of the extent to which it is possible for a sighted person to imagine what it is like to be deaf and blind. The following defends the thesis that, although the experience of deaf-blindness is incommunicable and inaccessible to sighted people, and although all representations of it are inadequate, both Herzog, through the cinematographic medium, and Fini Straubinger, through metaphorical and poetic language, attempt to convey certain aspects of this experience.

**Keywords:** deaf-blindness, representation, language, isolation, haptic images

Modern and contemporary philosophy are characterized by a radical awareness of the fact that our experience of the world is profoundly subjective. According to the young Nietzsche of *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense*, «insects and birds perceive a quite different world from that of human beings» and «the question as to which of these two perceptions of the world is the more correct is quite meaningless, since this would require them to be measured by the criterion of the *correct perception*, i.e. by a *non-existent* criterion»<sup>1</sup>. Nietzsche's critique of the correspondence theory of truth (there is no adequate expression of an object in the subject) developed over the years into a radical perspectivism, according to which it is hopeless to attempt to figure out what it would be like to perceive the world through a different sensory apparatus from our own<sup>2</sup>. Thomas Nagel reached a similar conclusion in his well-known paper *What Is It like to Be a Bat?*. According to Nagel, I can imagine what it would be like for *me* to behave as a bat behaves, but I cannot imagine what it is for a *bat* to be a bat. Indeed, in trying to imagine this, I am restricted to the inadequate resources of my mind provided by my own experience<sup>3</sup>. Note that both Nietzsche's and Nagel's scepticism is not limited to interspecific relations but extends to intraspecific ones. As Nagel puts it: «The problem is not confined to exotic cases, however, for it exists between one person and another. The subjective character of the experience of a person deaf and blind from birth is not accessible to me, for example, nor presumably is mine to him»<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> F. Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense*, in Id., *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> As Nietzsche puts it in the fifth book of *The Gay Science*, «we cannot look around our corner: it is a hopeless curiosity to want to know what other kinds of intellects and perspectives there *might* be» (F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 239).

<sup>3</sup> T. Nagel, *What Is It like to Be a Bat?*, in «The Philosophical Review», 83 (Oct., 1974), no. 4, p. 439.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibi*, p. 440. Philosophers have often referred to blindness in order to address epistemological problems. A well-known example of this is Locke's discussion of Molyneux's problem in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (bk. II, ch. ix, §8), later debated by other philosophers.

Werner Herzog's 1971 documentary film *Land of Silence and Darkness* (German: *Land des Schweigens und der Dunkelheit*) addresses precisely this philosophical problem by focusing on the way in which deaf and blind people experience life and communicate with each other and with sighted people. In particular, Herzog follows Fini Straubinger, who, having lost her sight and hearing as a teen due to a terrible fall, devotes her life to reaching out and helping other blind and deaf people. Although this film explores fundamental themes of Herzog's cinema, such as human perception, communication (or failure to communicate), language, solitude, and social isolation, it has received relatively little critical attention. Drawing on the few previous studies dedicated to *Land of Silence and Darkness*, my aim is to show how this film engages with the following question: to what extent is it possible for a sighted person to imagine what it is like to be in the land of silence and darkness? In order to answer this question, I will consider the way in which both Herzog and Fini Straubinger represent the condition of the deaf and blind. To this end, I will pay special attention to Straubinger's metaphorical language, on the one hand, and to Herzog's use of filmic images and sounds, on the other. With regard to the former aspect, it should be noted that little to no attention has been paid in previous studies to the original German language in the film, the richness of which is distorted in the English subtitles. In a film in which language is a main theme, it is of fundamental importance to pay careful attention to the language used in it – be it spoken, signed or filmic.

Before turning to the analysis of *Land of Silence and Darkness*, however, it is necessary to consider an obvious problem originating from the contrast between the nature of the filmic medium and the nature of the experience of the deaf and blind. As Randall Halle puts it: «how do you use the audio-visual medium to convey experience that is exactly outside the audio-visual?»<sup>5</sup>. One could in fact claim that this problem does not arise given that, as Getrud Kock argues, Herzog is not interested in translating the empirical-sensory condition of the deaf and blind into filmic images and sounds<sup>6</sup>. I will consider whether this is really the case in sections 4 and 5 below. At this stage, I would instead like to bring attention to a fundamental distinction. Even if Herzog is not interested in translating the empirical-sensory condition of the deaf and blind into filmic images and sounds, this does not *ipso facto* mean or imply that he does not make any attempt to explore or convey certain aspects of their experience – that is, of what it is like to be in the land of silence and darkness. On the contrary, what I want to suggest here is that not only is this precisely Herzog's intention, but in trying to do so he faces a central paradox that emerges in all attempts to represent that which, for different reasons, cannot be represented.

## 1. Representing the Unrepresentable: A Paradox

There is little doubt that the unrepresentable lies at the heart of the history of Western art and aesthetics. Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* is perhaps the most famous example of pictorial representation of the unrepresentable *par excellence*: God the Father, who according to the Pauline

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<sup>5</sup> R. Halle, *Perceiving the Other in the Land of Silence and Darkness*, in B. Prager (ed.), *A Companion to Werner Herzog*, Blackwell, Oxford 2012, p. 495. The same question is posed by Emmanuel Carrère in slightly different terms: «How can you shoot a film (which is audio-visual by definition or in any case by necessity) on characters who have been deprived of their sight and hearing without remaining a stranger to them [sans rester purement extérieur]?» (E. Carrère, *Werner Herzog*, Edilig, Paris 1982, p. 25; my translation).

<sup>6</sup> G. Koch, *Blindness as Insight: Visions of the Unseen in Land of Silence and Darkness*, in T. Corrigan (ed.), *The Films of Werner Herzog. Between Mirage and History*, Methuen, London and New York 1986, p. 77. According to Koch, Herzog is rather interested in re-sacralising the aesthetic sphere by returning to a neo-Benjaminian para-sacred aura. Herzog's primary concern is not «to give sensual expression to the inner world but to realize the elevation to the "spiritual"» (p. 78). Accordingly, «all manifestations of sensual perception end in the sphere of transfiguration into the spiritual» (*ibid.*).

tradition can only be known *per speculum et in aenigmate* (“through a mirror and in enigma” or, to use the English translation of Bergman’s 1961 masterpiece, “through a glass darkly”; 1 Co 13:12). Also well known is Kant’s depiction of the sublime as formless, and therefore as unrepresentable. As Kant puts it in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*: «what is properly sublime cannot be contained in any sensible form, but concerns only ideas of reason, which, though no presentation adequate to them is possible, are provoked and called to mind precisely by this inadequacy [*Unangemessenheit*], which does allow of sensible presentation»<sup>7</sup>. Attempts to represent the unrepresentable are also typical of the seventh art, especially but not exclusively of what Paul Schrader has defined as *transcendental art*, «art which expresses the Transcendent in the human mirror»<sup>8</sup>.

Since the Second World War, the unrepresentable has been increasingly associated with the Shoah. In this case, the gulf between what is to be represented and its representation is considered unbridgeable not for metaphysical reasons, as in the case of God the Father, but rather for moral and/or epistemological reasons. This association has become so common and so frequent that it is now possible to call it a *trope* – together with that of the unspeakable, the unthinkable, and the unimaginable<sup>9</sup>. In this context, Adorno’s claim that «to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric» is often quoted, although frequently decontextualized<sup>10</sup>. Claude Lanzmann is also invoked as an authority. In an article published in *Le Monde* in 2005, Lanzmann explained that in the eleven years that it took him to complete his documentary film *Shoah* (1985), he was unable to even decide on a title for his work. There was no possible name for what could not be named (*l’innomable*)<sup>11</sup>.

The alleged (moral and/or epistemological) impossibility of representing the Shoah has been called into question in the last twenty years in particular by authors such as Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière, and Georges Didi-Huberman, among others<sup>12</sup>. While this is not the place to discuss these views, I will nonetheless highlight interesting aspects of the debate on the unrepresentable character of the Shoah that are relevant to my analysis of Herzog’s *Land of Silence and Darkness*.

In trying to narrate their experience, survivors of the camps were caught in a paradox: on the one hand, they felt that what they had experienced exceeded the bounds of what could be put into words; on the other hand, they felt a compelling need («an immediate and violent compulsion», as Primo Levi puts it<sup>13</sup>) to share their experience with those who had not experienced the horrors of the camps. We find a clear expression of this paradox in the following lines, written by Robert Antelme in 1947:

Two years ago, during the first days after our return, I think we were all prey to a genuine delirium. We wanted at last to speak, to be heard. We were told that by itself our physical appearance was eloquent enough; but we had only just returned, with us we brought back our memory of our experience, an experience that was still very much alive, and we felt a frantic desire to describe it such as it had been. As of those first days, however, we saw that it was impossible

<sup>7</sup> I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, p. 129.

<sup>8</sup> P. Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film. Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, University of California Press, Oakland 2018, p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> E. Alloa, The Most Sublime of All Laws: The Strange Resurgence of a Kantian Motif in Contemporary Image Politics, in «Critical Inquiry», 41 (Winter, 2015), no. 2, pp. 368-369.

<sup>10</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Cultural Criticism and Society*, in Id., *Prisms*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1983, p. 34. Less well known is Adorno’s partial revision in his late work *Negative Dialectics*: «Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems» (T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Routledge, London and New York 1973, p. 362).

<sup>11</sup> C. Lanzmann, Ce mot de “Shoah”, in «Le Monde», February 25, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> See G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive*, Zone Books, New York 1999; J.-L. Nancy, La représentation interdite, in «Le Genre humain», 36 (2001), no. 1, pp. 13-39; J. Rancière, S’il y a de l’irreprésentable, in «Le Genre humain», 36 (2001), no. 1, pp. 81-102; G. Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All. Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Preface to the Italian edition of Levi’s *If This Is a Man*. See P. Levi, *Se questo è un uomo & La tregua*, Einaudi, Turin 1989, p. 9.

to bridge the gap we discovered opening up between the words at our disposal and that experience which, in the case of most of us, was still going forward within our bodies<sup>14</sup>.

As this passage makes clear, the problem for Antelme is that of *inadequacy* (that is, the impossibility of providing a linguistically adequate representation of the experience). In this sense, he is in good company, for the inadequate character of representation is stressed, in different contexts, not only by Lanzmann but also by Kant, Nietzsche and Nagel. This should not be surprising. Indeed, at the root of the moral prohibition against representing the Shoah lies a problem that is epistemological in nature, namely the unbridgeability of the gap between the (extreme) experience of the camps and the (limited) means available for representing it. In this sense, any attempt to bridge this gap runs the risk of betrayal, reduction, distortion, and exemplification – in a word, *falsification*.

Central to the debate on the impossibility of representing the Shoah is the contention that those who have not gone through this extreme experience do not have access to it of any kind. Although this can be said *a fortiori* of the experience of the Shoah (because of the radical nature of its evil and suffering), the same can be affirmed of any extreme experience, as is clearly pointed out in Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima, mon amour*, in which, in response to Emmanuelle Riva, who maintains that she has seen everything in Hiroshima, Eiji Okada famously replies: «Tu n'as rien vu à Hiroshima [you saw nothing in Hiroshima]».

Despite the moral and epistemological considerations that speak against the possibility of representing the Shoah, however, writers, poets, artists, and filmmakers have always sought to represent and somehow convey the experience of the horror of the camps. Indeed, if on the one hand there is a moral prohibition against representation, on the other hand there is an equally, if not even stronger moral imperative commanding the preservation of memory from silence, oblivion and forgetfulness. It is precisely to this moral imperative that Didi-Huberman's famous "in spite of all"<sup>15</sup> (French: *malgré tout*) alludes: in spite of Auschwitz, in spite of our inadequate understanding of it, in spite of the radical character of the experience of the Shoah, in spite of the gap between this experience and its representation, and in spite of the limits of human language. Reformulating the expression coined by Didi-Huberman, we could thus say: representations in spite of all.

## 2. Metaphors in Spite of All

Despite the radical differences between their experiences, survivors of the camps and the deaf and blind seem to have one thing in common: as much as they try to convey their experience, it is doomed to remain uncommunicable. In other words, the representation of their experience cannot but be *inadequate*. This clearly emerges from a passage in Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life*.<sup>16</sup> Asked why she is impressed by the wonders and beauties of Niagara Falls (because of her condition, she can neither see the cascading water nor hear its roar), Keller replies that although the waterfall means everything to her, she is unable to properly put into words why this is so: «I cannot fathom or define their meaning any more than I can fathom or define love or religion or goodness»<sup>17</sup>. This passage clearly testifies to Keller's inability to give adequate linguistic

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<sup>14</sup> R. Antelme, *The Human Race*, The Marlboro Press/Northwestern, Evanston (IL) 1992, p. 3. I owe this quote to Alloa's paper, mentioned above (see footnote 9).

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 12.

<sup>16</sup> Helen Keller was born on June 27, 1880, in Tuscumbia, Alabama. At nineteen months old, she contracted an acute illness that left her deaf and blind. Anne Sullivan tutored her, and Keller eventually graduated from Radcliffe College. She was dedicated to helping the blind and the disabled and wrote several books, among which is *The Story of My Life*, her autobiography, which was later adapted by Arthur Penn as *The Miracle Worker* (1962).

<sup>17</sup> H. Keller, *The Story of My Life*, Bantam, New York 2005, p. 52.

expression to her inner states and thoughts. Because of this inability, her experience seems to be irremediably inaccessible to us.

As in the case of survivors of the Shoah, however, this inadequacy does not lead to a refusal to attempt representation. On the contrary, in spite of the awareness of these difficulties, Helen Keller repeatedly attempts to convey her experience to the reader through metaphorical language. Particularly significant is her description of her condition before she learned tactile signing:

Have you ever been at sea in a dense fog, when it seemed as if a tangible white darkness shut you in, and the great ship, tense and anxious, groped her way toward the shore with plummet and sounding-line, and you waited with beating heart for something to happen? I was like that ship before my education began, only I was without compass or sounding-line, and had no way of knowing how near the harbour was.<sup>18</sup>

Given the impossibility of providing an adequate picture of her empirical-sensory condition, Helen Keller opts for a metaphorical and poetic representation, using a scenario (a ship at sea in a dense fog) with which the reader is likely to be familiar, or at least able to easily understand and conceive.

The pressing need to share one's experience, that is, to communicate what it is like to be in the land of silence and darkness, leads Helen Keller to search for adequate metaphors for her condition. Equally metaphorical is Fini Straubinger's depiction of the fate<sup>19</sup> of those who are deaf and blind in the following central scene of Herzog's film:

If I was a divinely gifted painter, I would depict the fate of deaf-blindness in the following way: Blindness as a dark stream, which flows melodically, slowly but steady, towards a slope. On the left and right there are beautiful trees with flowers and lovely singing birds. The other stream coming from the opposite direction would have to be totally clear and transparent [*durchsichtig*]. Also this stream would have to flow slowly, but silently downwards. And then at the bottom would be a dark and deep lake. At first there would be rocks on both sides where the two streams flow into the lake, on which the water painfully hits and foams and whirls, after which slowly and cautiously flows together into this dark basin. And this water would be totally still, and would have to drizzle from time to time: this would have to represent [*darstellen*] the power of the soul of deaf-blindness.<sup>20</sup>

Like Helen Keller, Fini Straubinger is well aware of the limitations of her *Darstellung* (representation) of deaf-blindness. At the end of her vision, she acknowledges that there is a gap between the experience of deaf-blindness and its linguistic depiction: «I cannot represent it differently», she says, «It is inside, but one does not quite manage to put it into words»<sup>21</sup>. Exactly like Helen Keller, however, Fini Straubinger does not abandon the aim of conveying her experience through metaphorical language. In both cases, the logic of Nietzsche's *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense* is reversed. While for the young Nietzsche the adequate expression of an object in the subject is made impossible by the metaphorical and poetic character of human language<sup>22</sup>, for Helen Keller and Fini Straubinger metaphorical and poetic language is precisely what makes possible, if not an adequate expression of their experience (something that is deemed impossible),

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<sup>18</sup> Ibi, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Translated in the English subtitles as "condition", the German word *Schicksal* actually means fate, destiny, lot. This word is repeatedly used by Fini Straubinger to describe her companions-in-fate. Else Fehrer is described as a *Schicksalsgefährtin* (a companion-in-fate; *Gefährte* literally indicates the one who takes a journey with another person) and *Schicksalsschwester* (a sister-in-fate), whereas Joseph Rittermeier is referred to as a *Schicksalskamarad* (comrade-in-fate). The use of the word *Schicksal* has a strong existential, almost metaphysical connotation.

<sup>20</sup> I here follow André Fischer's translation, which is much more faithful to the original German than that of the film's English subtitles. See A. Fischer, *Deep Truth and the Mythic Veil: Werner Herzog's New Mythology in Land of Silence and Darkness*, in «Film-Philosophy», 22 (2018), no. 1, pp. 53-54.

<sup>21</sup> Ibi, p. 55 (slightly modified translation).

<sup>22</sup> In this posthumous writing, Nietzsche famously defines truth as «a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration» (F. Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense*, p. 146).

then a symbolic representation of their inner thoughts and feelings that can be communicated to and understood by the addressee. It is not difficult to see how this attempt to communicate through poetic and metaphorical language appealed to Herzog, who similarly used the filmic medium to convey what he later defined in his *Minnesota Declaration* as a «poetic, ecstatic truth»<sup>23</sup>.

### 3. Communication vs Isolation

In order to convey her experience, Fini Straubinger makes use of both metaphorical, poetic and non-metaphorical, descriptive language. Having described how she became deaf and blind and how this condition led her to spend nearly 30 years in bed, Straubinger makes the following clarification:

People think that deafness means complete silence. Oh, no! That's wrong. It's a constant noise in one's head, from the faintest humming, perhaps like the noise of sand trickling, to cracking sounds, to a steady droning, which is the worst. You never know which direction you should turn your head. It's a great agony for us. [...] It's the same thing for blindness. It's never complete darkness. You often see rather peculiar tones. Black, grey, white, blue, green, yellow. It depends.<sup>24</sup>

As has already been pointed out by previous studies, the designation “land of silence and darkness” (used by Fini Straubinger on the occasion of her fifty-sixth birthday party) does not characterize the empirical-sensory condition of the deaf and blind, but rather symbolically alludes to the condition of social isolation caused not so much by their disability as by the inability of the society they live in to address and cope with the problems that derive from their condition<sup>25</sup>. It is revealing that Fini Straubinger uses the metaphor to refer not to her deaf and blind companions-in-fate, but rather to Mrs Meier, who is not completely blind. Straubinger urges Mr Forster, Mrs Meier's companion, to always translate what is being said, adding: «This group as well must be taken care of [*betreut*], so they are not suddenly pushed into the land of silence and darkness [*in das Land des Schweigens und der Dunkelheit hineingestoßen werden*]»<sup>26</sup>. This sentence is particularly significant for various reasons. By applying the metaphor of the land of silence and darkness to a different group than her own, Straubinger seems to imply that this fate is not limited to the deaf and blind but can also be shared by other outsiders – as *Handicapped Future*, Herzog's film about physically disabled children in Munich, clearly shows<sup>27</sup>. Furthermore, the use of the passive form of the verb *hineinstoßen* (to push into) indicates that the land of silence and darkness is not a

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<sup>23</sup> W. Herzog, *The Minnesota Declaration. Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema*, in P. Cronin, *Werner Herzog – A Guide for the Perplexed. Conversations with Paul Cronin*, Faber and Faber, London 2014, p. 476. For a detailed analysis of the relation between representation and metaphor, see E. Cornell Way, *Knowledge Representation and Metaphor*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 1991. On the relation between cinematic metaphor, experience and affectivity, see C. Müller, H. Kappelhoff, *Cinematic Metaphor. Experience – Affectivity - Temporality*, de Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2018.

<sup>24</sup> My translation.

<sup>25</sup> G. Koch, *Blindness as Insight: Visions of the Unseen in Land of Silence and Darkness*, p. 77. See also R. Halle, *Perceiving the Other in the Land of Silence and Darkness*, p. 499: «It is not being born deaf and blind that generates silence and darkness, rather it is isolation and this is a repeated lesson of the film».

<sup>26</sup> My translation.

<sup>27</sup> *Handicapped Future (Behinderte Zukunft, 1971)* is a kind of predecessor to *Land of Silence and Darkness*. Despite their several differences, both films pay attention to the feelings of isolation and solitude experienced by disabled people. A scene in *Handicapped Future* features a teacher showing how these feelings emerge in some of the children's drawings, in which prison is a recurring motif. As Herzog points out, at the time, the feeling of being isolated from society was common to many disabled people (see P. Cronin, *Werner Herzog – A Guide for the Perplexed. Conversations with Paul Cronin*, p. 88).

permanent condition (that derive from one's particular handicap), but rather a temporary one into which one can be pushed if denied proper *Betreuung*, that is, care and assistance<sup>28</sup>.

If one can be pushed into the land of silence and darkness, however, one can also be helped to find a way out of it. This is precisely why Straubinger spends her adult life seeking to establish contact with other deaf and blind people and to communicate with them, constantly searching for their hands. Maintaining hand contact means proximity and solidarity; breaking hand contact means distance, marginalization and isolation: «When you let go of my hand it is as if we were a thousand miles apart», reads one of the film's intertitles. Randall Halle rightly points out that «in *Land* there is an inversion of the existentialist dictum that hell is other people. Certainly other people can make life hellish, however, it is only through other people that we can feel ourselves to be human, that we can realize our humanity»<sup>29</sup>.

Isolation and loneliness can be broken through communication and language: this is the main lesson that Herzog's *Land of Silence and Darkness* teaches us. Noël Carroll's claim that in Herzog language «is associated with practical and instrumental reason, with science and bureaucracy, with religion and civil society»<sup>30</sup> thus seems to overlook the fundamental role that language plays in fighting social marginalization and seclusion, a role that Herzog himself emphasizes<sup>31</sup>. This holds both for *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974) and *Land of Silence and Darkness*, the two films on which Carroll's analysis of Herzog's view of language mainly focuses. In the first case, it is not language *in its entirety* that is being refused («the theme of the film is unmistakable – language is death», Carroll claims<sup>32</sup>), but rather a *specific kind* of language: the mendacious and pretentious language of the circus director, the theological language of the pastors, the logical and scholastic language of the professor, the artificial and pompous language of Lord Stanhope, and the bureaucratic and technical language of the scribe. On the other hand, however, language is also what allows Kaspar to break out of his condition of solitude and isolation, to express his inner feelings and thoughts, to describe his dreams, to write his autobiography, and even to pass judgment on his existence («Well, it seems to me that my coming into this world was a terribly hard fall!», Kaspar confesses to Daumer).

In *Land of Silence and Darkness*, Carroll maintains, language is viewed in a better light, as a cohesive force in the deaf-blind community and as a means of communication. Nevertheless, one cannot avoid feeling «an irrepressible sense of alienation»<sup>33</sup> and recognizing the disparity and otherness of their phenomenological experience of the world. In other words, Carroll concludes, «language remains serviceable between us and the deaf-blind, but when it comes to the thoughts and feelings, or better, the associations attending such discourse, we sense a radical problem of translation»<sup>34</sup>. With that said, it is also possible to interpret the film as revealing

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<sup>28</sup> This is precisely what happens to Fini Straubinger. Her seclusion from society begins when her teacher tells her to go home because she cannot see well enough. It then continues when people promise to visit her but do not come, or when they come and do not interact with her. When she tries to interact with them, her mother tells her to be quiet and says that she will tell her later, thus preventing her daughter from accessing life, «from grasping something of life [*etwas vom Leben erfassen*]», as Straubinger herself puts it (my translation).

<sup>29</sup> R. Halle, *Perceiving the Other in the Land of Silence and Darkness*, p. 507.

<sup>30</sup> N. Carroll, *Herzog, Presence, and Paradox*, in Id., *Interpreting the Moving Image*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 288.

<sup>31</sup> A similar reading is also defended by Richard Eldridge, according to whom «Herzog equates communication with convention, bureaucracy, routine, and administered order, against which he poses subjectivity as a locus of unexpressed powers, owing to handicap, victimization, madness, or narcissism» (R. Eldridge, *Werner Herzog. Filmmaker and Philosopher*, Bloomsbury, London 2019, p. 113). Although Eldridge is certainly right to point out that in Herzog communication is often equated with convention, bureaucracy, routine, and administered order, like Carroll he seems to overlook the fact that communication is also what can allow for the expression of one's subjectivity, especially the subjectivity of marginalized members of society.

<sup>32</sup> N. Carroll, *Herzog, Presence, and Paradox*, p. 289.

<sup>33</sup> Ibi, p. 291.

<sup>34</sup> Ibi, p. 292.

precisely the opposite: in spite of the irreducible phenomenological difference between our experience of life and that of the deaf and blind, and notwithstanding the inevitable limitations of attempts to represent the condition of deaf-blindness adequately, language is what makes it possible to break down the barriers that confine the deaf and blind to the land of silence and darkness. Or, to put it differently: without language (metaphorical or non-metaphorical, linguistic or non-linguistic), the limited access we have to the otherness of the deaf and blind would be permanently shut.

This is not to deny the several difficulties that are inherent in attempts to communicate with the deaf and blind, especially with those who have been deaf and blind from birth. As the teacher of Harald and Michael (two young boys born deaf and blind) explains, it is extremely difficult (although not impossible) to teach them abstract concepts. This is done by way of practical examples (*kleine Geschichte*). In order to explain the moral concept of “good”, for instance, the teacher says: «Harald gets up, Harald learns, Harald helps Sabine, Harald is good», whereas in order to explain the opposite concept, he says «Harald hits Sabine, Harald pulls Sabine, Harald takes something away from Sabine, Harald is bad [*böse*]». It is admittedly difficult, if not impossible, to know what kind of moral concepts of good and bad Harald and Michael will end up forming through these examples. Still, it is thanks to the communication that the teacher has established with them that Harald and Michael may some day learn such complex and abstract concepts as moral concepts.

#### 4. Breaking Barriers

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, according to Getrud Kock, Herzog is not interested in translating the empirical-sensory condition of the deaf and blind into filmic images and sounds. His primary concern is rather elevation to and transfiguration into the spiritual<sup>35</sup>. Carroll places a similar emphasis on the «indescrivability and inexpressibility of the experience of the deaf-blind»<sup>36</sup>. Likewise, André Fischer argues that «with the exception of the first frame, Herzog is not trying to find direct visual expressions for the deaf-blind experience and shows instead the deaf-blind as deprived of their senses and relying on touching»<sup>37</sup>. What these interpretations have in common is that they read Herzog’s *Land of Silence and Darkness* as not being *primarily* concerned with the representation of the condition of the deaf and blind. The representation of this condition instead serves as an opportunity for Herzog to realize the elevation to the spiritual (Koch), to convey an experience of presence (Carroll), or to create new primal and mythic imagery (Fischer). In order to show that Herzog is not *primarily* interested in representing the fate of the deaf and blind, these authors place emphasis – in different ways and to different extents – on the radical difference between our experience of the world and that of the deaf and blind. This latter experience is so different from our own, so indescribable and inexpressible, as Carroll puts it, that Herzog does not attempt to mediate or convey it (because of the abovementioned «radical problem of translation»<sup>38</sup>). Although I do not deny that a concern for the spiritual and the metaphysical may *also* underlie *Land of Silence and Darkness* (as is common in Herzog’s films), in the last part of this paper I would like to show that the representation of the fate of the deaf and blind is not a secondary issue for Herzog. On the contrary, in spite of his awareness of the radical difference between *their* and *our* experience of the world, Herzog nonetheless attempts, through the cinematographic medium, to reduce this gap

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<sup>35</sup> G. Koch, *Blindness as Insight: Visions of the Unseen in Land of Silence and Darkness*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>36</sup> N. Carroll, *Herzog, Presence, and Paradox*, p. 292.

<sup>37</sup> A. Fischer, Deep Truth and the Mythic Veil: Werner Herzog’s New Mythology in *Land of Silence and Darkness*, p. 52.

<sup>38</sup> N. Carroll, *Herzog, Presence, and Paradox*, p. 292.

and to convey to the viewer particular aspects of how the deaf and blind experience, understand and relate to reality.

*Land of Silence and Darkness* begins with the repeated juxtaposition of a vision narrated by Straubinger (we hear her voice against a black screen) and the subsequent translation of her words into images. The four sequences – black screen+voice over (1), image (2), black screen+voice over (3), image (4) – are connected by music, Boccherini's *Cello Concerto No.2*<sup>39</sup>. Straubinger's first vision (supposedly a memory from when she could still see) is of a path that leads across a continuous field with clouds floating quickly by in the sky. As mentioned above, this vision is related against a black screen, which not only places the viewer, although only momentarily, in a position of visual impairment (like that of the protagonists of the film), but also prepares the audience for a "different" sensorial experience, in which vision goes along with hearing and, as will be shown, with touch<sup>40</sup>. The vision is followed by its visual transposition, an image in sepia tones, the use of which may have a symbolic function, representing the fading of a distant memory or the gap between the narrated memory and its filmic representation. As Randal Halle points out, this image only partially restores the viewer to a normal state of vision, for the representation is a stylization, and the golden brown sepia tones of the image are unusual<sup>41</sup>. The quality of the film is poor, and visual elements such as grain and scratches give a peculiar texture to the image, thus recalling a condition of visual impairment.

After this image, the viewer is again plunged into darkness, and Straubinger's voice relates another memory. When she was a child and could still see and hear, she watched a ski-jumping competition. This, she says, and especially how the ski jumpers floated in the air, is a recurrent memory («*dieses Bild kommt mir immer wieder in den Sinn*», in the peculiar German phrasing). She paid special attention to their faces, Straubinger explains, and concludes by hoping that the viewer («*Sie*») will also have the chance to see it some day. In so doing, she inverts her relation to the sighted viewer; it is the latter who lacks the particular *Erlebnis* (that is, the direct experience) of ski jumping. Right from the beginning, a philosophical point is thus made: while the deaf and blind can only have mediated access to the world of sighted people, the opposite is also true – both lack unmediated experience of the other's otherness.

The viewer can only have a mediated experience of ski jumping, that is, through its representation on the screen. This representation consists in a filmic image, this time in full colour, of a memory-image (Straubinger's *Bild*, German for image). We are thus presented with montage of ski jumpers floating in the air, which directly calls to mind Herzog's later documentary film *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner* (1973). In reality, although the viewer is led to believe that the filmic image is a translation of a memory-image, the truth is that Straubinger never saw the ski jumpers, and the whole sequence is a pure invention. It was Herzog who wrote the lines that Straubinger speaks<sup>42</sup>, in full accordance with his conviction that «the boundary between fiction and "documentary" simply does not exist»<sup>43</sup> and that a deeper truth can be reached through fabrication, imagination, and stylization<sup>44</sup>.

Koch interprets the image of the ski jumpers as a means of transportation into the spiritual<sup>45</sup>. Similarly, Fischer claims that Straubinger's vision «connects her to the realm of the supersensible

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<sup>39</sup> See A. Fischer, Deep Truth and the Mythic Veil: Werner Herzog's New Mythology in *Land of Silence and Darkness*, p. 51.

<sup>40</sup> It is not an irrelevant detail that the viewer becomes acquainted with the main protagonist of the film first by hearing her, and only after by seeing her.

<sup>41</sup> R. Halle, *Perceiving the Other in the Land of Silence and Darkness*, p. 496.

<sup>42</sup> See P. Cronin (ed.), *Herzog on Herzog*, Faber and Faber, London 2002, pp. 240-241.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibi*, p. 240.

<sup>44</sup> See W. Herzog, *The Minnesota Declaration. Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema*, p. 476.

<sup>45</sup> G. Koch, *Blindness as Insight: Visions of the Unseen in Land of Silence and Darkness*, p. 78.

or metaphysical, which remains invisible to us»<sup>46</sup>. While it is certainly true that this image presents the viewer with a moment of intensified truth, Herzog actually chose to add it to his film because he felt «that the solitude and ecstasy of the ski-jumpers as they flew through the air was a great image to represent Fini's own inner state of mind and solitude»<sup>47</sup>. Likewise, the line quoted at the end of the film and attributed to Straubinger («If a world war were to break out now, I would not even notice») is something that Herzog wrote in order to encapsulate «how someone like her might experience the world»<sup>48</sup>. In both cases, the emphasis is thus not so much on the spiritual or metaphysical dimension, but rather on the possibility of conveying to the viewer particular aspects of the deaf-blind person's inner state of mind and experience of reality.

The four sequences described above are followed by an intertitle, which reads: «It is such a shock [*Erschrecken*] when somebody touches me. Years go by in waiting». The intertitle, an oxymoron of sorts, summarizes the existential condition of the deaf and blind, who fear unexpected contact with the other on the one hand, while on the other hand, yearning for this contact, which for them means the possibility of communication and a break from isolation. The emphasis on touch (the German verb used in the intertitle is *berühren*) introduces the following scene, in which Straubinger and her friend Julie relate their personal impressions of a visit to the zoo. The fact that the scene opens with a close-up of Straubinger's and her translator's hands (one of the several close-up shots of hands in the film) leaves no doubt about the central importance of hands in *Land of Silence and Darkness*. Indeed, it is through hands that the deaf and blind communicate with each other and with sighted people (through tactile fingerspelling, the so-called Lorm alphabet) and primarily experience the world. Thus, Straubinger's account of her experience of the zoo is based on tactile sensations: the skin of the roebuck was wonderful; the hares were jumping and sitting, which one could feel (*abtasten*); the beaks of the birds and the feathers of the pheasant were long. The focus is therefore shifted from vision (the sense we tend to use most often in zoos) to touch.

That Herzog gives special attention to the way in which the deaf and blind have access to and experience the world is also shown in the next scene. This begins with Julie and Straubinger touching the plane, on which they will soon take their first flight. When Straubinger's arm stretches to the rudder, the music, Bach's *Air on the G String*, sets in, and the next shot is taken from inside the plane, which is already high in the sky, the wing in the foreground and the snow-covered Alps in the background. According to Koch, this sequence clearly illustrates Herzog's interest not in mediating the sensual experience of the deaf and blind, but rather in breaking away from the earthly dimension into the spiritual: «When the camera sets free the gaze that blind are debarred from, when the soundtrack switches over to music, then the viewer is carried off to an unreal realm, in which he hears and sees what the individuals on the screen cannot hear and see»<sup>49</sup>. Although Koch is right to underscore the emphasis that Herzog puts on the ecstatic joy on Straubinger's and Julie's faces, her analysis seems to overlook the fact that most of the two-minute sequence focuses on the women's hands and on the way they use them to communicate with each other. The viewer is thus not carried off to a metaphysical realm but remains inside the plane, watching how Straubinger and Julie experience their first flight.

Herzog uses exactly the same music later in the film when Harald, one of the boys born deaf and blind, is asked by his teacher to walk alone through the swimming pool and to plunge his face into the water (Herzog explains that Harald was deathly afraid of water and that it took a year for him to trust his instructor enough to step into the pool). This suggests that in both cases, Herzog wants to emphasize a similar aspect, namely the opening of the human soul to a new experience, be

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<sup>46</sup> A. Fischer, *Deep Truth and the Mythic Veil: Werner Herzog's New Mythology in Land of Silence and Darkness*, p. 52.

<sup>47</sup> P. Cronin (ed.), *Herzog on Herzog*, p. 241.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibi*, p. 240.

<sup>49</sup> G. Koch, *Blindness as Insight: Visions of the Unseen in Land of Silence and Darkness*, p. 79.

it a first flight or the overcoming of a mortal fear of water<sup>50</sup>. The act of opening oneself to a new experience is itself a universal experience shared by every human being, and it is precisely for this reason that the flight sequence (and that of the swimming pool) is one of inclusion, not exclusion, as Koch argues.

## 5. Haptic Images

Herzog's attempt to explore and convey the experience of the deaf and blind is most patent in the extreme attention he gives to hands throughout the film (a sequence is even dedicated to the explanation of the tactile alphabet). Hands are so important within the economy of the film that *Land of Silence and Darkness* can be placed alongside Bresson's *Pickpocket* when it comes to the prominence of touch in the film, as Deleuze points out in *Cinema 2*<sup>51</sup>. At the film's premiere at the Mannheim Film Festival, Herzog himself referred to it as «a monograph on the hands of a deaf-blind woman»<sup>52</sup>. A brief comparison with a sequence from *Handicapped Future* can help to make clear how Herzog's attitude towards the tactile is much more "engaged" in *Land of Silence and Darkness*. This sequence features an interview with Monika's mother. In the interview, Monika, a little girl with no arms, brushes her doll's hair with a comb held between her toes. The sequence is particularly interesting because it shows how Monika relates to the world with her feet (a following sequence shows her drawing a picture with her foot). During the whole sequence, which lasts about two and a half minutes, the camera closes up on the doll and Monika's feet for only a few seconds, leaving them outside the frame for thirty seconds.

*Land of Silence and Darkness* gives a completely different form of attention and importance to hands, which are often placed by the camera operator, Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein, in the centre of the frame or in the fore with close-up shots. The frequent act of zooming in on hands (among other subjects) becomes an essential way to approach and draw near to the other's alterity. Eric Ames rightly points out that «acts of translation are absolutely central to the film»<sup>53</sup>. As already mentioned, as long as (tactile) communication is maintained, the deaf and blind are not pushed into the land of silence and darkness. This is why Fini Straubinger is constantly shown looking for the hands of her sighted companions and communicating with her companions-in-fate. Conversely, her sighted companions continually make an effort to translate what they see or hear through the tactile alphabet, as occurs, for instance, in the case of the concert that follows the president's speech, when Straubinger's companion *translates* the music for her (its rhythm, the variations in its intensity). The concert sequence is a clear example of the emphasis that Herzog and his camera operator place on hands: the camera passes from the musicians (1), to Straubinger's and her companion's hands (2), and then back to the musicians (3) without any cuts. The shot in the middle (2) is held for

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<sup>50</sup> According to Koch, «the swimming pool scenes disagreeably call to mind those unfortunate German traditions of physical training, Prussian toughness, tests of courage and initiation unto death» (G. Koch, *Blindness as Insight: Visions of the Unseen in Land of Silence and Darkness*, p. 82). The description of the scenes she gives is oriented toward lending support to her thesis: the swimming pool is «gloomy», the teacher wears «Spartan black bathing trunks», the ideals behind the «program» are «macabre», and, above all, the water is «cold». As Halle points out, however, water therapy sessions are usually conducted in warm water, since «the goal generally is to create a safe environment for the development of neglected motor and cognitive skills and not cold shower "hardening" of the temperament» (R. Halle, *Perceiving the Other in the Land of Silence and Darkness*, pp. 502-503).

<sup>51</sup> G. Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1989, pp. 12-13. Deleuze refers to Carrère's study, mentioned above. According to Carrère, Herzog attempted to approach tactile sensations by depicting characters touching and caressing objects so intensely and intimately that we are not far from experiencing the sensations they feel (E. Carrère, *Werner Herzog*, p. 25).

<sup>52</sup> See E. Ames, *Ferocious Reality. Documentary According to Werner Herzog*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2012, p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> Ibi, p. 27.

thirteen seconds, and one is given the impression that the whole sequence is included in the film precisely because of the importance of this peculiar act of translation.

Acts of translation are not limited to the characters in the film. As Ames points out, Straubinger's on-screen presence is «a constant reminder of the work of translation that the film itself is doing»<sup>54</sup>. The most evident example of this can be found in the sequence depicting a visit to the botanical gardens, during which the deaf and blind are encouraged to touch the plants. At the end of the sequence, Schmidt-Reitwein wanders freely with the camera through the dark green ferns and palm leaves, which brush up against the lens. The viewer is made to feel disorientated and completely immersed in the lush vegetation; indeed the mimetic movement of the camera is so powerful and realistic that the viewer is tempted to stretch out his or her arms to brush the branches aside. This also holds for other scenes in which the camera closely follows hands that touch, explore, communicate, and caress – above all in the closing sequence, when Herr Fleischmann gently touches, almost embraces, the branches of a tree. As Ames puts it: «The entire film works to elicit bodily responses to the image that implicate the viewer so that the boundary between the film and the viewer begins to collapse»<sup>55</sup>.

What Deleuze writes with reference to *Pickpocket*, namely that the eye's optical function is matched by a haptic one<sup>56</sup>, can be thus also said of *Land of Silence and Darkness*. In Herzog's film, the viewer's eye is transformed into an imaginary hand, and vision becomes “a palpation with the look”, to use Merleau-Ponty's words<sup>57</sup>. The images on the screen invite us to touch and feel what Straubinger and her companions and acquaintances touch and feel. This haptic function of the eye is widely recognized by scholars, who variously speak of «an attempt to approach tactile sensations»<sup>58</sup>, «seeing the haptic»<sup>59</sup>, «the haptic quality of the images»<sup>60</sup>, «touching images»<sup>61</sup>, «a type of bodily relationship to the image that can be best described as “haptic”»<sup>62</sup>, «connective seeing»<sup>63</sup>, and so on. The tactile or haptic character of the images, of which *Land of Silence and Darkness* is composed has fundamental relevance for the question of the possibility of sharing in the experience of deaf-blindness. Indeed, not only is touch the sense through which the deaf and blind primarily experience the world, but, as Ames rightly points out, it also remains «a shared sense and a potential means of communicating» between sighted persons and the deaf and blind<sup>64</sup>. This does not mean that the sense of touch gives us access to the world of the deaf and blind, but rather (and more modestly) that thanks to this shared sense we can have an idea of what it is like to primarily experience the world through it. It is in this sense that, as mentioned above, *Land of Silence and Darkness* fosters inclusion, not seclusion. Or as Ames puts it: «*Land of Silence and Darkness* becomes a site of encounter, indeed, a site of contact between disabled and nondisabled bodies»<sup>65</sup>.

## Conclusion

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<sup>54</sup> Ibi, p. 28.

<sup>55</sup> Ibi, p. 25.

<sup>56</sup> G. Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, p. 13.

<sup>57</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1968, p. 134.

<sup>58</sup> E. Carrère, *Werner Herzog*, p. 25

<sup>59</sup> R. Halle, *Perceiving the Other in the Land of Silence and Darkness*, p. 498.

<sup>60</sup> A. Fischer, Deep Truth and the Mythic Veil: Werner Herzog's New Mythology in *Land of Silence and Darkness*, p. 52.

<sup>61</sup> E. Ames, *Ferocious Reality. Documentary According to Werner Herzog*, p. 20.

<sup>62</sup> Ibi, p. 23

<sup>63</sup> Ibi, p. 25.

<sup>64</sup> Ibi, p. 25.

<sup>65</sup> Ibidem.

Herzog's *Land of Silence and Darkness* shows that it is impossible for a sighted person to *know* what it is like to be deaf and blind. The experience of deaf-blindness is so radically other that one would have to be a divinely gifted painter (*Gottbegnadeter Mahler*), as Straubinger puts it, to represent it. Either because the resources of language are inadequate or because the gap between the *Erlebnis* (the subjective experience) and its representation can never be bridged, the fate of the deaf and blind cannot be put into words – or at least Straubinger does not manage to do so. Even more desperate is the attempt to understand what those who are deaf and blind by birth, like Harald and Michael, feel and think (an attempt that becomes almost hopeless with the 22-year-old Vladimir Kokol, who, having never had any special training, sits on the floor blowing spit bubbles and hitting himself on the head with a stuffed soft ball). As their teacher explains, most of the time it is only possible to make conjectures (*Vermutungen*). The same holds for their understanding of abstract concepts: «What they actually understand as “ambition”, “hope”, or “happiness”, will always be a mystery to us [*wird uns immer verschlossen bleiben*]», Herzog remarks in the film.

To be sure, one could question whether this «radical problem of translation», as Carroll puts it, arises only between deaf-blind, and able-bodied persons. Indeed, how can we be sure that our experience of the world (*qua* sighted persons) can be *adequately* conveyed to other sighted persons? As Wittgenstein puts it in *Remarks on Colour*: «When blind people speak, as they like to do, of blue sky and other specifically visual phenomena, the sighted person often says “Who knows what he imagines that to mean” --But why doesn't he say this about other sighted people?»<sup>66</sup>. In other words, how can I *know* that other people have the same «private experience» of the blue sky as mine? Is this, above all, verifiable<sup>67</sup>? With these questions, we return to the initial point of this paper, namely to modern and contemporary philosophy's radical awareness that human experience and perception of the world are profoundly subjective. The above analysis has hopefully shown that this radical awareness is not Herzog's end-point, but rather his starting point. As much as the experience of the deaf and blind remains radically different from ours, Herzog (and Fini Straubinger with him) does not give up on trying to convey certain aspects of it to the audience. In doing this, Herzog achieves a typical yet paradoxical aim of art, or at least of certain art works: the representation of what is, for different reasons, unrepresentable.

*Land of Silence and Darkness* is not a sceptical film about human communication, nor does it aim to convey a pessimistic picture of the fate of the deaf and blind. Admittedly, many of the deaf and blind people visited by Straubinger (Else Fehrer, Joseph Riedmeier, Vladimir Kokol, and Heinrich Fleischmann) seem to be irremediably excluded by human society and cut off from the world<sup>68</sup>. Furthermore, the last minutes of the film seem to put emphasis on the unavoidable solitude to which the deaf and blind are subject (in the last scene before the final intertitle, Straubinger is left alone under a tree, a sad adagio stressing her loneliness). As incommunicable and inaccessible to us as the experience of deaf-blindness may be, however, and as inadequate as its representation inadequate must remain, Herzog's film attempts to convey at least certain aspects of this experience. The gap between the experience of the world of the deaf and blind and our experiences is thus reduced not only through metaphorical and poetic language, but also, and above all, through the cinematographic medium: black screen + voice over, the visual transposition of Straubinger's vision, the peculiar tones of the image, stylization, the invention of experience, intertitles, zooming

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<sup>66</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, Blackwell, Oxford 1977, p. 56.

<sup>67</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell, Oxford 1977, p. 95: «The essential thing about private experience is really not that each person possesses his own exemplar, but that nobody knows whether other people also have *this* or something else. The assumption would thus be possible—though unverifiable—that one section of mankind had one sensation of red and another section another».

<sup>68</sup> In his film, Herzog gives much attention to deaf and blind people who are secluded from society. This attention can be read as an indictment of society (which is unable to take care of them) rather than a sign of Herzog's scepticism about the possibility of establishing a connection with them.

in and close-up shots of hands, a shift of focus from vision to touch, haptic visuality, etc. Reducing the gap means breaking barriers. At a time when physical and social barriers are on the increase, *Land of Silence and Darkness* remains, after almost fifty years, a hymn to the discovery of the other's otherness.

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