

Kant and Burke's Sublime in Werner Herzog's Films: The Quest for an Ecstatic Truth¹

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Abstract:

The German filmmaker Werner Herzog controversially associates “truth” and “reality” in film with Kant’s notion of the sublime by explicitly treating the sublime as a key element in developing his notion of *ecstatic truth*. I critically examine Herzog’s interpretation of Kant’s sublime and the relations he establishes between the sublime and his own key aesthetic notion of ecstatic truth. I examine how the sublime in Herzog’s films arises from encounters with the overwhelming force and power of nature experienced by his characters in the feature films and participants in the documentaries. I question whether Kant’s conception of the sublime is the one that best aligns with Herzog’s aesthetic aims and I contrast Kant’s transcendental sublime with what I describe as the physiological sublime of Edmund Burke. I draw some conclusions about the moral dimension of the sublime in the context of the relationship between humans and nature within the frame of contemporary ecological concerns.

Keywords: Herzog; sublime; Kant; Burke; ecstatic truth; nature.

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Timothy Treadwell is the protagonist of Werner Herzog's documentary film *Grizzly Man* (2005) and he presented himself as an environmental activist and "bear protector" who, during thirteen successive summers, travelled to the *Katmai National Park* in Alaska, a grizzly bear territory, to camp in the wilderness and trying to "bond" with the bears, which he considered to be in danger. In addition to being a "bear protector" Treadwell was also a documentarist. He had shot over 100 hours of video footage showing the bears and himself often in a very danger proximity. A key element that stands out from this footage is Treadwell's aim to try and show that he could raise above fear and, in doing so, he would become as ferocious and undaunted as the wild animals. Treadwell seems to believe that, simply by showing no fear and trying to establish contact with the wild animals, he could obtain the bears' respect and even befriend with them. Says Treadwell talking directly to the camera, while some grizzly bears stand on the back:

They challenge everything including me, goes with the territory. If I show weakness, if I retreat, I may be hurt, I may be killed. I must hold my own if I'm going to stay within this land, for once there is weakness, they will exploit it, they will take me out, they will decapitate me, they will chop me into bits and pieces, I'm dead ... so far, I persevere, I persevere. Most times I'm a kind warrior out here. Most times I am gentle, I am like a flower, I am like a fly on the wall, I'm serving, noncommittal, non-invasive in any way. Occasionally I am challenged and in that the kind warrior must, must, must become a samurai, must become so (pause for effect) so formidable, so fearless of death, so strong that you will win you will win. Even the bears will believe that you are more powerful and in a sense you must be (smile) more powerful if you are to survive in this land with the bear.

And he continues,

I will not die at their claws and paws, I will fight, I will be strong. I am one of them, I will be the master.

Treadwell's words, and attitude, at a first glance, seem to embody Kant's notion of the sublime (especially the dynamic sublime), as described by the philosopher in his *Critique of Judgement*:

We may look upon an object as *fearful*, and yet not be afraid of it, if, that is, our estimate takes the form of our simply picturing to ourselves the case of our wishing to offer some resistance to it and recognizing that all such resistance would be quite futile. (Kant, 2007, § 28, p. 91)

In fact, Kant's ideas about the sublime overlaps Treadwell's behavior: he believes that his humanity and rationality could grant him a position of control and safety and, most importantly, he acts as if the simple act of acknowledging the threat, but not succumbing to fear, could keep him safe and even reinforce his moral superiority. In this sense, Treadwell's attitude towards the sublime forces in nature is a very Kantian one: he seems to fully rely on his moral abilities and faculties to face threats and to defeated danger. His courage and moral strength, as well as his deep ethical sense, puts him in a privileged position to refute nature's claim to dominion over humans. All this echoes Kant's perspective that maintains that, in the face of the sublime in nature, we have two options: we can simply be crushed by fear and retreat to ensure our well-being and safety (although this would be to react as if we were sensuous beings alone, and entirely subject to natural causalities), or, as Crowther argues, we can, "against our natural inclinations, transcend fear and face destruction courageously – thus acting on the basis of the principles of moral conduct that demonstrate our true vocation to the rational supersensitive beings" (1989, p. 111).

Unfortunately, Treadwell's confidence did not prove to be sufficient in face of the danger. During what might have been just one more shooting session, something terrible happened. We were left only with audio register of what has occurred, since the camera lens were covered by the caps, but the reproduced sound did not leave room for doubts: Timothy and his partner were attacked and eaten by one of the animals they were trying to "bond" with, an adult bear, in whose digestive system were later found remains of human flesh and clothing.

Treadwell's terrible death and his final fusion with nature, however, not only represent a setback in Treadwell's aims and believes, but also raise important questions to Kant's notion of the sublime. For Kant, nature is sublime because it elevates the imagination to the exhibition of cases in which the mind can be made to feel the sublimity, even above nature, that is proper to its vocation (Kant, 1790/2007, § 28). Sublimity, writes Kant,

does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind, so far as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus over nature without us (as exerting influence upon us). Everything that provokes this feeling in us, including the *might* of nature which challenges our strength, is then, though improperly, called sublime. (1790/2007, § 28 p. 94)

This kind of sublimity belongs to human freedom,² which is (by definition) unassailable to the forces of nature. As Clewis notes, “the sublime reveals freedom in the sense of the transcendence of nature (metaphysical freedom)” (2009, p. 29). This conception of freedom as being outside the order of nature, but demanding action upon that order, is the core of Kant’s theory and of Treadwell’s endeavor. If this is true, however, it is also true that Treadwell’s death and the outcome of his sublime encounter with bears raises deep questions about the intimate connection between the sublime, nature, and the superiority of our moral faculties.

The sublime in Herzog’s work is a complex and extremely rich subject – one that simultaneously reinforces the Kantian view, but at the same time defies it. In considering this tensional relationship between Herzog and Kant regarding the sublime, I will here address two feature films, adding to the documentary form we find in *Grizzly Man: Aguirre, The Wrath of God* (1972) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), both of which were shoot in the depths of the Amazon rainforest.

Independently of depicting a fictional, historical or a documentary action, all these films portray, question, and even *embody* the overwhelming experience of the sublime and the tremendous consequences to humans when facing it. And they do it in several interconnected layers. At the first level, Herzog works with the events that had occurred or are being depicted. In *Grizzly Man*, it is Timothy Treadwell’s self-documented story of his encounter with the bears and his death; in *Aguirre*, the true story of a group of Europeans, led by Don Lope de Aguirre who, in the 16th century, venture into the depths of the Amazon jungle in search of the legendary El Dorado; and, in *Fitzcarraldo*, the irrational enterprise of a European whose main desire is to build an opera house in the middle of the jungle in Peru. Herzog, in a voice-over at the beginning of *Grizzly Man*, stresses an idea that applies to any of the three films

I discovered a film of human ecstasies and darkest inner human turmoil. As if there was a desire in him to leave the confinements of his humanness and bond with the bears, Treadwell reached out seeking a primordial encounter. But in doing so, he crossed an invisible borderline.

On top of this first layer, Herzog builds one other that has to do with the filmmaking process itself, with the encounter with sublime nature on site,

2 On the issue of the relationship between freedom and the sublime in Kant, see Clewis (2009).

in the overpowering locations where the works were filmed. In this sense, the “primordial encounter” to which Herzog refers also applies to the very act of representing, and filming, to the camera encounter with the sublime features of nature. Focusing on this latter aspect, Alan Singer (1986) contends that “irony” is the fundamental issue of Herzog’s sublime (p. 193). What Singer tries to demonstrate is that Herzog’s sublime is “committed to history as a vital form of cultural production” (p. 184) and, therefore, is more focused on temporality and history than on transcendence or the limits of human mind, offering a response to the transcendental bias that most scholars attribute to the sublime, placing Herzog as a direct heir of Romanticism and German Idealism.³ However, I neither endorse Herzog’s similarities to Romanticism, nor Singer’s view of the “ironic sublime” as a historical and cultural production.⁴ Rather, I discuss Herzog’s sublime in relation to his notion of ‘ecstatic truth’, his convergences and divergences with Kant’ and Burke’s, in order to try and draw some conclusions upon issues of truth, morality, human and non-human interactions, and humanity’s current relationship to nature. In defence of his notion of ironic sublime, Singer argues that:

if the Kantian sublime may be described as an overparticularization of the sensuous world and the Burkean sublime as a departicularization of the sensuous world - both convergent in the eliding of temporal contingencies - it may make sense to speak of the unique *mise-en-scene* of Herzog’s films as constituting a reparticularization of the sensuous. (p. 186)

Singer’s idea is that by reparticularizing the sensuous world, representation creates a rational ‘ironic’ distance, placing the sublime experiences within a cultural temporality and order that eludes the non-temporal perspective of the sublime and its liaisons with the idea of transcendence that he finds present in both Kant and Burke. The issue of the Kantian and Burkean sublime relationship with the sensuous will be addressed later. For now, I would merely like to stress that, contrary to Singer’s perspective, I believe that Herzog’s profound focus in the empirical and the physical corresponds to a total merging with material world and that this material world encompass either the physiological body of the characters, the physicality of the landscape

3 See, for instance, Peucker (1984), Eric Rentschler (1986); Prager, Brad (2003); Johnson (2016).

4 A discussion on Singer’s concept of the “ironic sublime” and Herzog’s relationship with the postmodern sublime, see Carter (2012).

and the materiality of film itself. As Richard Eldridge (2019) stresses: “The films themselves are often driven by a sense of an encounter with possibilities of meaning that are afforded by exorbitant images of temporality unfolding natural processes, despite the hostility of nature” (p. 60). This triple material dimensions constitute the primordial encounter that opens the path towards reaching an ecstatic truth. This ecstatic truth, thus, is neither transcendent, nor ‘ironic’. It springs from the primordial encounters of the characters’ actions on the one hand, and from the very act of filming and representing, on the other. In this sense, the films’ encounter with the sublime in nature makes them as permeable to the primordial forces in question, as the characters themselves and their actions. Let us see this aspect in some detail.

The three films begin with a clear distinction between humans and nature (or the cultural order and natural forces) with the protagonists and the camera aiming to prevail over nature, trying to demonstrate the superiority of their faculties in the face of the non-human environment. Treadwell is overconfident of his human capacities and of his moral superiority, Aguirre is arrogantly defying the landscape, aiming at reaching the *El Dorado*, for the purpose of extracting natural resources to his own benefit. Fitzcarraldo is sure that the human sublimity of the opera will reveal superior to the wild sublimity of the jungle. In the same vein, the outstanding opening sequence of *Aguirre* begins with a long shot, the camera amongst the midst, looking at a distance at the vastness and might of the peaks of the Andes. The haunting music by Popol Vuh adds an ominous presence that moves upwards, towards the peaks of the mountains in the opposite direction of the downward movement pursued by the long line of people. The score is grandiose, transcendental, in its raising above the almighty green of the jungle bellow. However, as the films unfold, things begin to complexify. What seems to be a clear, self-possessed, and almost arrogant belief in the superiority of human faculties in the face of wild nature gives way, as the action progresses, to a gradual blurring of the distinction between humans and nature, with the latter becoming progressively all-encompassing. In this sense, the camera, and the shooting itself seem to accompany the characters’ initial aim and self-confidence, their departure point for action and their subsequent descend into a claustrophobic almighty presence of the all-pervading green of the jungle. In the inaugural scene of *Aguirre*, the camera movement accompanies that descend and, in several shots in succession is steadily, relentlessly downward, following an odd queue of humans, that seem dwarfed, and made insignificant by the scale of the mountains. We are now going beneath the clouds, immersing in the rainforest. As the films develop in the direction of getting closer to nature “the protagonists

lose their rationality and begin to exhibit strange, weird behaviors, in some cases appearing insane – as if they have raised themselves to a dimension that was identical to the vast, virgin forests in *Aguirre* and *Fitzcarraldo*, or to the forces and power of the grizzly bears in *Grizzly Man*” (Castello Branco, 2021: 23) –, but also, the camera angles, its perspectives and shots, begin to abandon the normal human point of view. In *Aguirre*, particularly, we are progressively plunging into odd camera angles and perspectives, faced with strange camera movements and close shots that embody claustrophobic circles. These formal features are reinforced by the appearance of dreamlike and surreal images (such as the shot of a raft on top of a gigantic tree in *Aguirre*, or the images of a gigantic steamship climbing a mountain in *Fitzcarraldo*). The films’ aesthetics, and the very act of filming, seem to embody the very same encounter with the sublime as it is experienced by the characters, with the filmmaking comprising some of the most hard and dangerous on-location shooting experiences in film history, even risking the life and sanity of the director, the actors and the crew.⁵ Johnson (2016) stresses how in Herzog’s images “there is something that exceeds our grasp, exceeds the boundaries of the frame that restrict our vision, and was prior to human activities and human ‘states’.” (p. 147) The protagonists and the camera’s attempts to ‘dominate’ or to totally grasp nature, ultimately culminate by displaying that such aim is simple unreachable and even represents a real menace to our cultural and human condition. In this sense, Herzog’s films initial confidence in the moral capacities of human and artworks to “rise above nature” lead, not to the reinforcement of their humanity as Kant would have believed, but to pure ecstasy, which is, almost paradoxically, accompanied by a feeling of terror, and ultimately, by the character’s annihilation and death, on the one hand, and the reinforcement of the films’ permeability to the very same forces.

And so, the films’ ecstatic encounters with nature result in a total merging with the sublime: its characters, and its footage (where perhaps the most poignant example is the recording of Timothy death in *Grizzly Man*) not only experience the sublime in external objects seen at a distant, but they become, themselves, sublime experiences, embodying all the overpowered sublime features of the overwhelming natural landscape. What is in display in these works, then, is an *ecstatic* experience of the

5 On the making of *Aguirre* and *Fitzcarraldo* as an experience of the sublime see, the documentary films Les Blank. (1982). *Burden of Dreams*; Herzog. (1999) *My Best Friend*; and Herzog. (1978). *I Am My Films – A Portrait of Werner Herzog*. See also Herzog (2002).

sublime that is absorbed and embodied in the action, in the characters' body and, in the films' own body and endeavors.

Herzog and the Kantian Sublime

Traditionally, the sublime has been associated with awe-inspiring objects and is grounded in the magnitude of their size/height/depth; force (a storm); or transcendence (our idea of God). Kant divides the sublime into two kinds: the mathematical and the dynamical. In the former, we are confronted with such magnitudes that, even if they overwhelm the imagination or our capacities to understand them, they reinforce reason's superiority over the imagination or over nature because through them we experience this superiority (1790/2007, §25 and §28). Kant's examples of the mathematical sublime include the vastness of the heavens, seas, and mountains, but he also mentions St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and the Pyramids in Egypt (§26, 82). In the case of the dynamical sublime, Kant refers to the power of nature when we experience nature as fearful. Kant's examples include overhanging cliffs, storm clouds, volcanoes, and hurricanes (§28, 91). For Kant, in sublime experiences, the imagination fails to aesthetically understand the vastness or might, and this failure awakens in us the feeling of a suprasensible faculty. The senses and imagination are pushed to the limits of their capacities when confronted with the overwhelming. The moment the imagination fails to apprehend the sensitive details of such vast quantities, we become aware of the ability of our suprasensible faculties to rise above nature.

Herzog's films, thus, embody both the mathematical and the dynamical sublime, his protagonists encountering "larger than life" milieus (Deleuze, 2004, p. 184), represented both by the landscapes in which they find themselves, and by their own actions and states of mind: "For me", Herzog says,

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. (2002, p. 136)

Note that Herzog's relation to the landscape involves searching for an encounter between an external overwhelming presence and our suprasensible faculties (to use Kant's terms). This notion of an encounter with the landscape extends beyond the three films discussed in this essay: the African desert in *Fata Morgana* (1971), the integration of the technological sublime with the natural sublime in *Heart of Glass* (1976),

the burning oil fields of Kuwait in *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), or the vastness of distant temporality in *The Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), just to name a few, all embody the idea that sublime experiences of vastness (in space or time) and of overwhelming forces giving rise to sublime experiences, which ultimately trace back to encounters between an external power and inner states of mind and artworks.

Despite their similarities, however, and as above-mentioned, the unfolding of Herzog's films raises deep questions about their relation to the Kantian sublime. It is debatable whether Herzog's characters reinforce our belief in human suprasensible faculties or, on the contrary, they demonstrate the vanity and impossibility of such a belief. Is the terrible fate of their entanglement with nature in a strong physical sense a direct consequence of their choice to abandon the security of their rational, suprasensible faculties? Or is it simply a product of their arrogant faith in human capacities and faculties? Is Kant's trust in the superiority of reason over nature and the sensible what explains the sublime aesthetic experiences at the core of Herzog's films?

Let us consider these issues in further detail.

The Physical and the Body

In Herzog's films the sublime experience arrives not only from a display of the incommensurability of natural forces, nor from a perception of its magnificence and force, but also, and on the contrary, from his characters' total immersion and fusion with the sublime landscape. His films depict and explore the bodily and physical merging of the central character (and indeed of the film) with natural overwhelming forces and vastness. Klaus Kinski's strong physical performances in *Fitzcarraldo* and *Aguirre*, for instance, stress the importance of the primordial bond between the body of the hero and the body of the landscape, with the former eventually being completely absorbed by the latter. Kinski limps and creeps, his body becomes progressively distorted and unbalanced, twisted, staggering and grotesque, functioning as the place where the forces of human individuation and of nature collide. His movements seem to mirror the forces that pass through him: he moves as if he were being crushed or pulled into the heart of things, trying to resist the overwhelming force that pulls him down. Kinski's body seems to be progressively invaded by the natural forces that rule the jungle, to the point where he embodies the very same sublime characteristics he encounters in the milieu: his bodily postures, rhythms, movements, and expressions become sublime, bizarre, as terrifying as the natural

environment.⁶ These elements are reinforced by the camera's odd angles, strange perspectives and, as said above, also by its own spiral movements, as occurs in *Aguirre's* final scene: "A spiral is not a closed circle, but something that implies circumvention and pushes the individual upwards, in the direction of infinity, vastness and boundless." (Castello Branco, 2016, p 36)

The spiral movements of the camera are alternated by close, claustrophobic shots. Likewise, Treadwell's horrifying final physical merging with the bears (where he is literally digested and becomes part of their flesh) embodies this idea. However, although it is true that in the three films the sublime arises from the greatness of the objects and the greatness of human actions, this greatness is experienced primarily in the characters' body (in which the individuals and the landscape merge) and in the process of filmmaking, and not through the protagonists', nor the camera's technological suprasensible capacities.

While Kant also describes feelings of exaltation in the face of sublime objects and situations, he believed, as pertinently highlights Shaw (2006), that "with the judgment of taste [...] the mind is liberated from its dependency on sensuous intuition: an aesthetic judgment is 'pure' precisely because it is not implicated in anything beyond itself" (p. 77). From Kant's perspective, we pass through an initial phase where the sublime "appears to frustrate judgment [...] and is presented as an affront or 'outrage', to our powers of comprehension" (78), but we soon experience the superiority of reason over the limitations of the senses, and so, "the sublime is on the side of mind" (p. 80).

By contrast, Herzog's radical gesture of abandoning his characters to natural forces results in a tremendous sense of annihilation of the self. These characters are subject to a progressive fusion with nature, one that is clearly mirrored in Klaus Kinski's progressively twisted body, but also in Treadwell's horrendous death and his final physical merging with the bears. Through the process of digestion, the bear transforms Treadwell's body, making him one with the bear, at which point he becomes a bear-man: a *grizzly man*.

Despite Herzog's own claims about the proximity of his films to Kant's sublime, I believe that this pivotal focus on the physical aspects exemplifies Edmund Burke's emphasis on the physiological as a central element of aesthetic experience. In both cases, the experience of the sublime is the result of an encounter with powers and forces that are

6 On the issue of Kinski strong physical performance and his spider movements see Castello Branco, 2016, 31–36.

greater than anything the individual can reasonably conceive. These powers are embodied in the characters and the natural landscape taking the form of a sensory agitation, a physical disturbance and imbalance – terror. In this sense, Herzog's films share important characteristics with the “physiological sublime” as described in Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757/1990).⁷

Burke and Kant in Herzog's Films

Burke's main aim is to understand the aesthetic experience, by drawing up a distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, inspired by the concept suggested by the unknown author of *On the Sublime* (attributed to Longinus, 1st c. CE) who addressed the issue in nature and artworks, mainly in literary works. What I would like to stress in Burke's formulation is his focus on the sensorial effects provoked by the sources of the sublime. The aesthetic experience of the sublime is an overall sensorial involvement and Burke describes the causes of the sublime with reference to all the senses. He writes: “The eye is not the only organ of sensation, by which the sublime passion may be produced...in the case of vision, the color and brightness are responsible for the feeling of the sublime. But the sounds are in the process enormous power, as in most other passions” (1990, p.75). In this case, the sensations of absolute silence or extremely loud sound may be responsible for the sublime, as can, Burke adds, smell and taste, with their sensations of bitterness or malodour (p. 78). The sublime is the result of an agitation, or physical distress, caused primarily by the senses. In addition, Burke maintains that the sublime always necessarily includes something that is terrible since it reveals the overlap between pain and pleasure. And this this terror at the heart of the sublime is a passion that, “always produces delight when it does not press too close” (Burke, 1990, p. xxi). This distance is what makes the sublime tolerable in artistic representations.

At this point, it is important to recap some ideas: first, Burke distinguishes the beautiful from the sublime by associating the latter with a “delightful terror” that completely occupies the soul, and the former with a disinterested contemplation that produces a state of calm. Second, Burke claims that the sublime depends on images and sensations that produce terror, and that originate a state of strong bodily tension. Hence, the sublime can never result from a purely rational idea, as in Kant's view. Thirdly, Burke's physiological sublime has the potential to

⁷ On the issue of Herzog's relationship to Burke's “physiological sublime” and comparisons to Kant and Longinus, see Castello Branco (2016 & 2020).

invoke a vastness that is beyond the mere self. The sensations of terror and pain establish an encounter that implies the existence of forces that play on the sensations of humans.

This association of the sublime with an overwhelming natural force is, however, not original. It was first maintained by Longinus's *On the Sublime*, which was an admitted influence on Burke and Kant. Longinus asserts that the sublime manifest itself in what is sufficiently disturbing to cause bewilderment, astonishment and even fear. The evident influence of Longinus on Burke's conception extends also to Longinus' description of the sublime as a primordial aesthetic value, stressing the power and the violence in its overcoming of the intellectual or rational. Longinus claims that the sublime does not persuade but rather leads us to ecstasy, an idea that will be crucial for understanding Herzog's work, in a process that totally dominates freedom and reason. Longinus writes,

A lofty passage does not convince the reason of the reader but takes him out of himself. That which is admirable ever confounds our judgment, and eclipses that which is merely reasonable or agreeable. To believe or not is usually in our own power; but the Sublime, acting with an imperious and irresistible force, sways every reader whether he will or no. (1890, section I):

Working within this tradition, which stresses the forceful power of the sublime, Burke identifies objective sources of the sublime and relates them to corporeal and bodily sensations, including terror, obscurity, power, deprivation, emptiness, vastness, the infinite, succession and uniformity, difficulty, magnificence, light, colour, sound and silence, animal screams, bitterness, bad odours and pain. Burke, therefore, associates the sublime experience with physicality, putting great emphasis on emotions and on the bodily effects of sublime experiences.

Unlike Kant, Burke's "physiological sublime" is primarily centred on sensations and emotions. Vanessa Ryan stresses that,

Burke's aim is to show that the fundamental effect of the sublime is to exclude the power of reason and that the experience of the sublime is thus limited to sensation and to emotion arising from a tension in the nerves. (2001, pp. 270–271)

In considering Burke's sublime and relating it to Herzog's films, some important conclusions can be drawn. Both address the idea of a loss of boundaries between humans and greater natural forces; both put great stress on the feeling of terror; and both acknowledge the immanence of the sublime, portraying it as a physical, emotional force. Equally, they

both emphasize the physical and bodily responses that occur in sublime experiences. This is a break with Kant's views, which, even when acknowledging that the sublime is subject to empirical contingency and that we are embodied creatures with sensibility and feeling - and therefore still part of the natural world - believe, nonetheless, that we have the rational capacity to be independent of natural causality.

Herzog's approach to the sublime is even more radical, however. His films' immersion in the sublime tears down the boundaries between the human individual and all-encompassing nature even at the level of their physical limits. The physical and the emotional erupt with a tremendous vitality in each of the films, which revel in disaster.

We can now ask: Do Herzog's films portray reason's inability to deal with nature's overwhelming power? Or, on the contrary, do they depict and reflect the consequences of totally abandoning reason and surrendering to natural forces, thus reinforcing Kant's notions? A close analysis of the films shows that the protagonists ultimately display delusional behaviours; their irrationality is entangled with their feelings in the face of the overwhelming power of the landscape. The shattering of the boundaries between the rational and the moral self on the one hand and nature on the other, results in Treadwell's horrifying death in *Grizzly Man*; in *Aguirre* and *Fitzcarraldo*'s final moments, with death imminent, symbolizing the absolute brutal force of nature. The characters are annihilated by their experience of the sublime and face dissolution. Both Kant and Burke acknowledge the dangers of getting too close to the sublime forces of nature. Burke's response is to suggest that when it involves being exposed to terror and pain from a position of safety, the horror we experience in the sublime is attenuated and can be accompanied by delight. For Kant, by contrast, although we may acknowledge that an object or force has the capacity to destroy us, we can, from a position of security, imagine ourselves as morally resistant even in the face of destruction. Both Kant and Burke emphasize the extent to which those who experience the sublime stand in a position of security, as opposed to being overwhelmed by nature. Herzog's characters' absorption by nature, leads us, on the contrary, to a progressive awareness of human limits, and results, not in the strengthening of our humility and sympathy, as in Burke, nor in the reinforcement of our suprasensible capacities, as in Kant, but in hallucination, delusion, and annihilation.

Still, in line with Burke and Kant's perspectives on the safety of the subject in the experience of the sublime, Herzog introduces an important nuance that relates to the difference between his characters' encounters with nature and the experience of *representing* the sublime. This issue

leads us directly to another: What is the difference between experiencing the sublime in nature and experiencing it in works of art? *Fitzcarraldo* addresses this issue in a very direct way. The protagonist's action has two components: he simultaneously experiences the sublime of the rainforest *and* responds to it through his obsession with opera. His efforts are a human response to the experience of nature's sublime forces, through the affirmation of a human form of sublimity: opera and music. Fitzcarraldo seems to believe that the only possible response to the sublime in nature is through the sublime in art. Therefore, we can say that in *Fitzcarraldo* we witness a kinship or, possibly, a competing relationship between the sublime existence of the jungle and the sublime experience of human artworks. Can the opera, in this case (or at least in Fitzcarraldo's mind), compete with the sublime of the jungle? Is there a difference between art and nature regarding the sublime? Is Fitzcarraldo challenging nature through his insane obsession with constructing an opera house in the depths of the Amazon rainforest? In what sense can the opera be compared to the film itself in this regard?

In Herzog's films, sublime experiences embody two related aspects: the proximity of the film's characters to sublime natural forces, and the sublime recorded and represented in film. This double experience of the sublime also captures the difference between sublime encounters in nature and sublime aesthetic experiences. Note that the latter also entails physical stress, emotional states and "a tension in the nerves", as described by Burke, which reinforce a sense of humility. In Kant, rational cognition of sublime objects can be achieved either by direct contact with the sublimity of nature (a desert, vast mountains, or even a storm) or via the mere appearance or depiction of such vastness and power, which leaves open the possibility of experiencing the sublime through works of art (see Crowther, 1989, p. 149). Kant's solution is in fact much more radical: the vastness and the overwhelming power of the sublime object, whether encountered directly or depicted in a work of art, is not the real object of the sublime; instead, the sublime is the idea of reason which encompasses the concepts of absolute totality and absolute freedom. However vast the object, however powerful the natural force, it is fragile, and minor compared to the idea of absolute rationality and freedom. Burnham observes,

The sublime feeling is therefore a kind of "rapid alternation" between the fear of the overwhelming and the peculiar pleasure of seeing that overwhelming overwhelmed. Thus, it turns out that the sublime experience is purposive after all – that we can, in some way, "get our head around it". (Burnham, n.d.)

The Sublime and Morality

In all their complexity, Herzog's films thus raise a deep philosophical question: does the experience of the sublime and the overwhelming power of nature – in its infinity, vastness, absence of boundaries – affirm and elevate our human existence, strengthening our sense of existence as subjects, our moral sense, or, rather, does it annihilate it? Ryan raises the same question regarding Burke's perspective on the sublime:

In his distinctive refiguring of the sublime, Burke identifies its significance with the way it confronts us with our finitude. From the confrontation with finitude and limitedness there arises a strong sense of humility and sympathy that in turn animates our actions. Rather than leading us to an experience of self-presence or self-exaltation, Burke's sublime overpowers the self and our instinct to self-preservation motivates us to relieve our pain by relieving that of others. (2000, p. 277)

This aspect of humility, deriving from our confrontation with our own finitude, allows Burke to affirm the redemptive dimension of artistic representations of sublime experiences, for example in Greek tragedies. In the context of Kant's transcendental philosophy, however,

these two forms of the sublime [the mathematical and the dynamical] are not narrowly circumscribed aesthetic experiences. Rather, each in its own way puts us in touch with our moral capacities, and reveals to us, through sensible experience, our capacity for freedom. (Brady, 2013, p. 59)

As noted above, in Herzog's films, sublime experiences are not that simple. Aguirre, Fitzcarraldo and Treadwell do not experience redemption, nor are they put in touch with their moral capacities to reveal a special capacity for freedom. And what of the filmic experience? Do Herzog's films prompt a feeling of humility, reinforcing our rational moral capacities? What do they tell us about our relationship with nature?

Herzog's views on nature are polemical and strange from our contemporary ecological perspective. In an interview during the filming of *Fitzcarraldo*, Herzog observes:

Nature here is violent. I would see fornication, and asphyxiation, and choking. And fighting for survival, and growing, and just rotting away. Of course, there is a lot of misery, but it is the same misery that's all around us. The trees here are in misery. The birds are in misery. I don't think they sing, they just screech in pain. (*The Burden of Dreams*, Les Blank, 1982)

These statements assume that the wilderness is violent, ruthless, cruel, that it is disturbing and menacing, horrible and terrible. In making such

statements, however, Herzog is describing, as a filmmaker trying to shoot a film in the rainforest, his own immersion in the sublime power of nature and its overwhelming indifference to human aims, desires and morality. As Les Blank himself wrote of the project: “I’m tired of it all and I couldn’t care less if they [...] finish the fucking film” (1982). To Herzog, however, the difference between the experience of the sublime in artworks and its relationship to moral issues is even more complex. In part because in film, and particularly in Herzog’s films, reality is recorded on site, and there is no necessary imitation of the sublime in nature, represented from a distance or imagined, as occurs in the artworks that Burke and Kant could have in mind in the 18th century. But the important complexity of this relationship between the sublime in nature and in aesthetic experiences arises, neither from the fact that viewers can experience equivalent emotions and feel similar physical reactions (as in Burke), nor because judgements of sublimity do not presuppose to know whether the object is real, in addition to being overwhelming, vast and overpowering (as in Kant). The main reason for Herzog’s disregard for the distinction between the sublimity of nature and the sublimity of art is that both lead to a fundamental ambition in his work: the encounter with *ecstatic truths*. Herzog seems to believe that, independently of whether they occur in nature or in filmmaking and film viewing, sublime experiences have the potential to put us in contact with ecstatic truths.

Herzog and Ecstatic Truth

Herzog explains why the idea of *ekstasis*, which he borrows from Longinus, is central to his work (Herzog, 2010). Longinus links the sublime both to aesthetic experiences, such as the Greek tragedies, and to nature. To him, the sublime is grounded in a strong and enthusiastic emotion (*pathos*), a particular way of constructing figures, a form of noble expression, and the composition of dignified and elevated words. He describes how the sublime relates to magnitude and large things, explaining its elevating and expansive effects on the audience and its association with strong expressions and intense emotional responses. In fact, Longinus argues that the first two sources of the sublime depend on nature, but art also involves mastery of artistic technique.

Herzog attributes fundamental relevance to Longinus’ conception of the sublime by the effect it has on audiences – *ecstasy*, which derives from “ekstasis, a person’s stepping out of himself into an elevated state – where we can raise ourselves over our own nature – which the sublime reveals “at once, like a thunder bolt” (Herzog, 2010). This idea is pivotal to Herzog’s notion of ecstatic truth and its “illuminating effect”.

Kant and Burke in Werner Herzog's Films

Herzog directly addresses his ideas on the fundamental relation between the sublime and ecstatic truth: “We also gain our ability to have truly ecstatic experiences through the sublime, through which we are able to rise above nature.” (2010). This idea appears to echo Kant’s belief regarding our suprasensible capacities as a way of rising above nature. But Herzog’s conclusions are not straightforwardly derived from Kant:

Fact creates norms, and truth illumination. There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization. (Herzog, 1999)

Confronted with this affirmation, several questions arise: In what way, from Herzog’s perspective, can the experience of the sublime lead to truth? How does Herzog’s account of the relation between truth and sublime experiences relate to Burke’s or Kant’s conceptions? Herzog provides clues for answering some of these questions:

Only in this state of sublimity [*Erhabenheit*] does something deeper become possible, a kind of truth that is the enemy of the merely factual. Ecstatic truth, I call it [...]. In the fine arts, in music, literature, and cinema, it is possible to reach a deeper stratum of truth – a poetic, ecstatic truth. (2010)

Herzog’s perspective on truth as an ecstatic experience is, in fact, one of most debated and polemical issues in his work. Much has already been said on this idea, particularly in discussions on documentary film (see Prager & Brad (2007); Ames (2012); Van Wert (2014); Austin (2008)). Herzog does not distinguish between documentary and fiction, however, and the notion of ecstatic truth is equally important to both his documentaries and his feature films. Herzog observes:

It is hard to me to accept the categories of “documentary” and “fiction”. All of my documentaries are stylized. In the name of a deeper truth, a more ecstatic truth – the ecstasy of the truth – contains made up parts. Sometimes I can say that these are fictions in disguise. (2008)

The phrase *ecstatic truth* was first developed in his 1999 manifesto *Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema*, which was mainly dedicated to challenging the *cinema vérité* documentary style and philosophy. Broadly speaking, *cinéma vérité* adherents believed that subjectivity in filmmaking could, and should, be prevented. They also naively assumed that, by merely presenting “facts”, “truth” would naturally arise. Herzog emphatically rejects this, asserting that “facts

create norms, and truth illumination". Facts are the truth of accountants, whereas in cinema we can reach a "deeper strata of truth [...] an ecstatic truth" (Herzog, 1999). Against *Cinéma Verité*, Herzog takes a singular position on the relationship between cinema as an aesthetic experience and truth. Beyond mere "facts", he argues, there is a much deeper truth, an *ecstatic truth*.

Herzog relates this ecstatic truth very closely to the sublime: this proximity to the sublime allows us to experience moments of enlightenment, producing illumination. Ecstatic truth "is mysterious and can only be grasped with effort"; as Herzog observes, it is "a kind of truth that is the enemy of the merely factual" (2010) and that can be transmitted when one is in a sublime state. It arises in film as a searching that is placed "at the intersection of the imaginary and the factual" (Herzog, 2002, p. 240).

Herzog does not simply propose the abolition of facts. Instead, his notion of ecstatic truth takes the form of an encounter between facts and perceptions, between inner visions and the material world, between personal experiences and the objects of the world. The pro-filmic world in his documentaries does not simply disappear: facts, realities, are a component of the *ecstatic experience* that must be related to "vision, style, and craft" (Herzog, 2010). This idea of truth as an encounter between the individual, the outside material world and illumination does not signify, however, that films should be an expression of personal interpretation. Ecstatic truth arises from the encounter between the world and the subject. It is a surplus of meaning that only occurs in ecstatic states, an opening up to significance, a clearing, *un-concealment*, *unveiling*. *Fitzcarraldo* is a film about an opera staged in the rainforest. As Herzog describes it, "it is about the entire world undergoing a transformation into music [...] what happens in the plot is impossible, but the power of music enables the spectator to experience it as true" (2010). In the documentary *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner* (1974), Walter Steiner, "a Swiss sculptor and repeat world champion in ski-flying, raises himself, as if in religious ecstasy, into the air. He flies so frightfully far, he enters the region of death itself" (Herzog: 2010). The religious ecstasy that Steiner experiences, due to raising himself into the air and facing death, is a sublime experience in which he glimpses the eternal birth-death cycle of nature.

Herzog believes that film can reveal a deeper truth. Film can ultimately embody the sublime through terror, fear, and even death and annihilation, in Herzog's view, but always with the aim of facing humanity's own limits, revealing humankind's mental and corporal conditions and its irrevocable fate as finite and limited. In this sense, Herzog sees the

overwhelming power of nature (and of great art) as a way of revelling in our deepest truths about human existence. His work is dedicated to capturing small glimpses of truth in environments, landscapes and/or human behaviour that can produce sublime experiences, which are not only intellectual, but mainly physical and emotional. The encounter with the sublime – whether in nature or in artworks – can produce illumination, unveiling brief glimpses of truth beyond mere individual certainties and beliefs.

The Sublime Beyond Herzog

The account of the relationship between Burke, Kant and Herzog pursued in this article suggests potential future applications of Kant's aesthetics far beyond Lyotard's perspectives on the sublime and contemporary art and the possibility of relating it to contemporary fundamental issues, including not only the artistic dimensions of contemporary film, but also its ecological and moral repercussions. The relationship between nature, art and morality lies at the core of this essay and establishes a direct dialogue with such urgent present-day issues as the nature/culture divide, human/non-human interaction, the exceptionality of humankind, the limits of illuminist faith in rationality, and the importance of the body in aesthetics. Herzog and Kant are both concerned with ideas of human freedom and with the co-relations between the sublime and morality. In Kant, sublimity, especially the dynamic sublime, belongs to *human freedom*, which is excluded from the forces of nature. Freedom is outside the order of nature, but nevertheless requires action within it.

Thus, while for Kant there is an undeniable empirical element to the sublime, the one who experiences the sublime must also be confident in his or her rational capacities and consider morality a condition of freedom or, more generally, as a dimension of human beings that places them in an exceptional situation within nature and allows them to transcend it. The very same development occurs in Herzog's characters, who are fully armed with their own cultural, rational ideals, mirrored in Aguirre, Fitzcarraldo and in Treadwell's endeavours. In this sense, we can interpret Herzog's films as involving both faithful depictions *and* a deep questioning of Kant on the issue of whether the sublimity of our moral being arises fundamentally from our independence from the mechanisms of nature. In Herzog's films, we witness the characters' initial belief in their rational and moral superiority over nature, and, at the same time, as the films unfold, we observe the absolute superiority of nature over human ideas and freedom, reflected in their gradual abandonment of rational faculties and moral capacities. Herzog's films seem to draw on Kant's view that nature itself plays only a negative role in experience,

insofar as the sensible impulses of our natural being inhibit the workings of morality, culture and individual human existence. At the same time, Herzog finds in the sublime a way to attain something that is of pivotal importance to the filmmaker: the ability to encounter ecstatic truths.

And here lies another significant difference between Herzog and Kant. Although natural objects are central to Kant's theory, they do not themselves appear to be sublime. Sublimity is a suprasensible perception. In Herzog, however, nature is paramount and is indifferent to humankind, including humanity's illusionary belief that it can rise above nature. Herzog's characters are bodily and sensually invaded by the physiological and emotional aspects of sublimity, as in Burke's view. In Herzog's films, contact with nature's sublime dimensions causes the dissolution of the individual's rationality and freedom, especially if we come close to nature's power. For Kant, being human depends on the capacities of reason. Thus, Brady argues that the Kantian sublime is also humanistic and anthropocentric (2013, pp. 67–68). In this sense, Herzog's films add a contemporary complexity to the issue of anthropocentrism and excessive humanism regarding the contemporary relationship between humankind and nature. Despite sharing some of Kant's premises, Herzog's work on the sublime arrives at a radically different result. Herzog reveals the impossibility of reducing the idea of the sublime to human faculties and the vanity and illusion of believing in human superiority over nature. In Herzog's sublime experiences, moral and rational human powers are ultimately obliterated. His account of the sublime is closely related to the notion of ecstatic truth, an eminently aesthetic concept that does not fit in Kant's theory.

For all these reasons, Herzog's films provide an opportunity to reconsider the Kantian sublime in light of recent developments in philosophy and aesthetics: to rethink the anthropocentric modern approach to nature and to reject a conception of nature as a pure object placed before a suprasensible subject. In Herzog's films, experiences of the sublime can support and enrich our understanding and assessment of extraordinary natural phenomena, helping us to rethink our place in relation to art and the natural world. Drawing on Kant's approach to the sublime and developing it, Herzog's artistic aim is to produce encounters outside the human domain, *ecstatic* encounters. Perhaps this acknowledgment of ecstatic truth is more fundamental to the human condition in the current situation than an anthropocentric faith in human superiority over nature. Herzog's horrific experience in the jungle and his view of nature may be surprising to some, in an age of ecological consciousness-raising and growing acceptance of the need to rethink our relationship with the planet, where natural species and ecosystems struggle for

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survival. Could the sublime that Herzog portrays in his films be one of enlightenment, a prompt to rethink these issues? If there is one permanent and unstoppable drive on the planet, it is death and suffering. From mountains, to viruses, to predators, to parasites, Herzog's films demonstrate that nature will ultimately claim us all; attempting to fight it, like Fitzcarraldo, Treadwell and Aguirre, is pointless:

Fog-panting and exhausted [the trees] stand in this unreal world, in unreal misery [...]. I did not see God today. (Herzog quoted in Love, 2016).

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