



# VISIONS OF DARKNESS: THE REPRESENTATION OF NATURE IN THE FILMS OF WERNER HERZOG

*Matthew Gandy*

I think in the movies we have a possibility to go beyond our own existence in our collective dreams, in our nightmares. We can somehow reach beyond, and we can look through a window into entire new worlds and see ourselves elevated and stylized.<sup>1</sup>

The study of the representation of nature and landscape in cinema has until recently been a neglected field of academic inquiry. A poorly understood area is the relationship between nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideas about nature and their presence in European cinema. In this paper I examine the symbolic significance of nature in the cinematic sublime of the German film director Werner Herzog. I show that Herzog's depiction of landscape finds echoes in romanticist and existentialist strands of European thought, displaying a tension between pantheistic conceptions of nature as a source of spiritual unity and existentialist portrayals of nature as a hostile other. I argue that a critical reading of Herzog's work allows us to see how political and imperial ideologies drawn from the nineteenth-century remain extant within his imagery, yet are disguised within his use of the cinematic sublime to convey a romanticist cosmos of universal values which transcend time and space.

The increasing political and economic influence of Germany in the 1990s has heralded a renewed interest in the romantic tradition in European thought, what Iain Boyd Whyte defines as 'the aesthetic and emotional engagement with the intangible, the unrepresentable and the unknowable' and the attempt in art to capture 'ideas or visions that transcend our powers of imagination'.<sup>2</sup> The political issues raised by the renewed interest in romanticism are rendered all the more pressing in the current context by the disintegration of the postwar liberal consensus in Germany and a rightward shift in intellectual and cultural thought, as figures such as Günter Grass and Jürgen Habermas have been displaced by a new generation of right-wing thinkers eager to draw on the contemporary resonance of nineteenth-century romanticism as a basis for German identity. It is with these broader contemporary political

developments in mind that I shall explore some meanings of romanticism in the films of Werner Herzog, which, according to the film critic David Robinson, embody an 'innate and authentic romanticism' marked by 'their overwhelming assertion of the ego'.<sup>3</sup> Herzog's work provides a uniquely rich illustration of the tensions and complexities of the romantic tradition and its relationship with twentieth-century modernity. In particular, his films allow us to examine the status of aesthetic representations of nature in the constitution of political and cultural life, yet his work has received comparatively little attention in the Anglo-American academic literature.<sup>4</sup>

The cinema of Werner Herzog is perplexing and extraordinary, provoking extreme reactions in critics and audiences alike. Herzog is often placed in the new German cinema alongside Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Hans Jürgen Syberberg, and Wim Wenders.<sup>5</sup> His work has hitherto not attracted much critical interest outside the fields of film studies and literary criticism, yet his films explore central issues in our understanding of the relationship between nature and culture. His collaborations with the cinematographer Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein have attracted particular attention for their stunning visual quality, variously described as 'mesmerizing', 'hypnotic', and 'haunting'.<sup>6</sup> It is my sense of unease over the uncritical adoration from some quarters and my desire to explore what lies behind Herzog's 'privileging of vision'<sup>7</sup> as the primary source of meaning in his work that have led me to write this paper.

Werner Herzog was born Werner Stipetic in Sachrang, southern Bavaria, in 1942. His first major success was with *Signs of life*, which was awarded the Silver Bear at the 1968 Berlin Film Festival. Since that time he has made over twenty feature films, of which the best known include *Aguirre, the wrath of God* (1972); *Nosferatu, the vampire* (1978), and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982). In addition to feature films, he has made numerous highly acclaimed documentaries on a variety of topics including the lives of the deaf-blind (*Land of silence and darkness*, 1970), Emperor Bokassa's reign of terror in the Central African Republic (*Echoes from a sombre empire*, 1990), and the environmental impact of the Gulf War (*Lessons in darkness*, 1992).<sup>8</sup>

Although I quote directly from Herzog a number of times in this paper, I do not take his words simply at face value. Indeed, a central purpose of this paper is to repudiate responses to his work as a body of images inherently beyond criticism or analysis. I show that his aesthetics can be located within a series of historical and political discourses relating to the relationship between nature and culture, the place of the romantic sublime in German national identity, and the emergence of existential ideas reflected in expressionism and the cinematic macabre. The analysis of Herzog's work reveals a variety of possible stances ranging from neostructuralist to cultural materialist. I argue here that a materialist position can most effectively tackle the tension between romanticism and existentialism in his work, within the broader context of colonial iconographies and the development of ecological politics.<sup>9</sup> Where appropriate, I have drawn on critical readings of Albert Camus and Joseph Conrad in order to elucidate these conflicting themes of romanticist unity and existential alienation. I have tried to uncover the imperialist aspects of Herzog's work and show how he has masked economic and political processes by the artificial exclusion of culture from nature, along with the portrayal of historical sentiments and social relations as natural and transcendent features. Through the recurring themes of geographical exploration and heroic self-sacrifice I trace the linkages between the 'galactic ambitions' of western cultural and economic expansionism and the 'dichotomous iconography' of

the imperial mind, embodied in the tension between primordial nature as source of innocence and as object of terror.<sup>10</sup> Although I draw widely from Herzog's work in this paper, I have focused my discussion on the five films which best illustrate the themes I wish to explore: *Aguirre, the wrath of God* (1972), *The enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974), *Nosferatu, the vampyre* (1978), *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), and *Cobra Verde* (1988).

It is necessary initially to examine the meaning of the sublime in European thought, and how nature and landscape emerged as central to the aesthetic vision of the romantic movement. I have used the theme of nature in two main ways to refer not only to perceptions of wilderness or 'first nature' but also to notions of the essential nature of existence, the idea of a natural human nature beyond the distortions of history and culture.<sup>11</sup> I then illustrate how 'wilderness' landscapes take a central symbolic significance in Herzog's portrayal of the relationship between nature and culture. I show how the Kantian idea of the sublime as a 'full and complete primordial experience of spatio-temporality' links directly to the romanticist fascination with nature and wilderness.<sup>12</sup> In the third part of the discussion I turn to Herzog's presentation of individual struggle as part of an existential rebellion against nature itself, thus extending his world beyond a spiritualized romanticism to a more gloomy assessment of the human condition. Finally I examine how the Herzogian sublime's insistence on an autonomous realm of aesthetic experience is predicated on a denial of the historical and cultural context within which his work is both created and experienced by us, the audience.

### Sublime nature in European thought

The idea of the sublime is central to our understanding of the relationship between Herzog's work and the German romantic tradition. We can identify how the sublime intersects with the analysis of Herzog's films in three main ways: first, through the historical relationship between philosophical concerns with the experience of sublimity and the emergence of the romantic tradition in European art; secondly, the simultaneous focus of the sublime on spatio-temporal transcendence and the experience of nature; and finally, the contemporary interest in the sublime through the appropriation of Kantian aesthetics within various neostructuralist interpretations of late twentieth-century modernity.<sup>13</sup>

Within western intellectual traditions it is usually the writings of the late classical scholar Longinus who is credited with the recognition that 'aesthetic pleasure could be stimulated not only by the awareness of beauty but also by a more mysterious and elating experience known as the "Sublime"'.<sup>14</sup> Yet it was only in the early nineteenth-century that the experience of the sublime conveyed by European poets, artists, and philosophers began to be 'almost exclusively a certain sort of natural scene or a certain way of viewing natural scenes, or even Nature itself'.<sup>15</sup> Prior to the nineteenth century, landscape painting, for example, had been regarded as one of the 'lesser genres', but the increasing emphasis on the study of nature allowed a shift 'away from descriptive painting towards the communication of pure visual experiences', a development culminating in the emergence of abstract art in the early twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> Social and economic developments in the nineteenth century facilitated this change of emphasis in two main ways: first, the increasing autonomy of the artist was assisted by a growing middle-class audience and the freeing of artistic

expression from the confines of private patrons; secondly, the impact of industrialization and the growth of cities contributed to the importance of landscape and nature as a superior subject matter to the artificial and manufactured environments of modernity.<sup>17</sup> The study of landscape and particularly 'wilderness' thus contained a sense of artistic reaction against the destruction of nature coupled with new freedoms in artistic expression.

Within the European tradition we can distinguish two main bodies of thought on the meaning of the aesthetic sublime in the period up to the late nineteenth century, derived from the thought of Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke. The Burkean sublime is based on the opposite of beauty: an aesthetic experience which is terrifying in its enormity, darkness, or infinite extension.<sup>18</sup> For Burke, the terror of the sublime was linked to fears for one's own safety in an individualized aesthetic experience not far removed from the burgeoning self-interest espoused by the late eighteenth-century political economy of Adam Smith.<sup>19</sup> I shall return to the discussion of Burke's work later in this paper in order to expose the gendered aspects of romanticist aesthetics. It is in the work of Kant, however, that we find a more sophisticated treatment of the experience of sublimity and the clearest exposition of the relationship between nature and the aesthetic sublime, a connection which was crucial to the emergence of European romanticism.

The Kantian sublime is concerned with the mind's limit, a threshold of transcendent knowledge derived from our experience of nature which reminds us that our imaginative abilities are finite, something which may 'appear to oppose our judgement [*zweckwidrig für unsere Urteilskraft*], to be inadequate to our power of representation'.<sup>20</sup> For Kant, the limit to our powers of imagination [*Grenze der Einbildungskraft*] has the potential to provoke both fear and creativity; the scope of the human mind is 'stretched and extended to encompass new conceptions of space and time, and the power of reason generates visions of the world that extend to the limits of fiction'.<sup>21</sup> Kant distinguishes between the 'mathematical' sublime derived from the effects of scale and magnitude on the imagination and the 'dynamic' sublime engendered by the experience of power, which through the nineteenth century became increasingly associated with machines, cities, and bustling urban life rather than natural phenomena.<sup>22</sup> The scale and power of nature offered the early romantics a sense of insight into the human spirit, and the opportunity to link the individual soul and the universal spirit, the fear of disorder giving way to a renewed conviction in the existence of a transcendent order. It is in Kant's third critique, *The critique of judgement*, that the experience of sublimity is most closely associated with nature, yet the sublime experience can also extend to human artifice.<sup>23</sup> The extension of the sublime to include human artifice is significant, since representations of nature in painting, film, and other media can engender a 'harmonious tension between what is perceptually overwhelming and what is nevertheless known to be artifice'.<sup>24</sup> What we find in the cinema of Herzog is the attempt to reconstruct the experience of sublimity through a reworking of the romanticist representation of nature in which the audience is invited to respond as if it were actually experiencing the images firsthand.

It is important to note that although the sublime has proved a formative idea in European thought, it transcends any particular historical tradition, and the experience of sublimity is known across all human cultures. Indeed, much western intellectual thinking on this subject has drawn its inspiration from other cultures; both

Hegel and Schopenhauer, for example, were influenced by Indian art forms. In the German context, the suffusion of the romantic sublime with pantheistic spirituality in the writings of Goethe and Morgenstern drew on a growing European fascination with the Orient.<sup>25</sup> More recently, writers such as Albert Camus and Georges Bataille introduce sublime discourse as an existential focus on nothingness, that which lies beyond the distortions of various religious and metaphysical belief systems as 'the more obscure apprehension of the unknown; of a presence which is no longer in any way distinct from an absence'.<sup>26</sup> The existential tradition in European thought can be traced to the thought of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and is rooted in the disconcerting emphasis on the difference between the ephemerality of human life and the type of existence possessed by inanimate objects.<sup>27</sup> In Herzog's cinematic sublime we encounter an unusual combination of these aesthetic traditions, a juxtaposition of nineteenth-century romanticism with twentieth-century existentialism; and it is the tension between these different strands which I explore in the next section.

### In search of the 'unembarrassed' landscape

Herzog explores the limits of representation and meaning through the use of the sublime to denote the threshold of human comprehension. This is conveyed cinematically by presenting the central characters as visionaries struggling against nature itself, often involved in hopeless quests and narratives with anticlimactic endings. In emphasizing both the incomprehensible and the frightening aspects of the sublime in combination with an emphasis on the individual aesthetic experience, Herzog's work embodies aspects of both the Kantian and Burkean romantic traditions. Yet his aesthetic vision reaches beyond romanticism and the striving for spiritual unity with nature to encompass existential readings of nature as something morally empty and indifferent towards human life.

Herzog has been described as a 'director of landscapes', with human life frequently presented as an insignificant presence in his imagery.<sup>28</sup> His films are marked by a fascination with the creation of original cinematic experiences found in the search for 'new landscapes, new images, things that have not been seen before',<sup>29</sup> and 'this sense of the physicality of nature, of its material reality, and of man's position within it, yet apart from it, seems central to Herzog's personal universe'.<sup>30</sup> The search for the wilderness of 'first nature' is a recurring theme in Herzog's work, in his use of what he has termed 'unembarrassed' landscapes to form the setting for his films: an unblemished natural backcloth against which his allegorical narratives can be played out.<sup>31</sup> The idea of wilderness 'as the repository of transcendent truth and ultimate reality' forms the metaphysical underpinning to the use of landscape in Herzog's work, often using the narrative of a journey to symbolize a descent into a primordial past.<sup>32</sup> Herzog's depiction of nature can be characterized as premodern in the sense that nature is portrayed as an overwhelming and inimical force, in contrast with the twentieth-century concerns with the destruction of nature as a fragile biosphere. In this important respect Herzog's reading of nature is at odds with the contemporary environmental movement, though I show later in this paper that there are strong areas of congruence between his antipathy to modernity and the ecological critique of modernity.

Very few of his films include features drawn from contemporary urban society, and

nature is depicted as a largely separate realm from human activity rather than as part of an integral nexus of relationships whereby landscapes are created and transformed by human societies. The film *Heart of glass* (1976), for example, was produced at remote settings in the west of Ireland, Bavaria, and Alaska, in order to provide wilderness imagery. Herzog's own account of walking from Munich to Paris in 1974 presents a landscape which is oddly deserted of people, a premodern scene, within which his own life takes on the guise of a romantic visionary prepared to undergo any hardship in order to experience 'the rarity of true aesthetic vision'.<sup>53</sup> Herzog reveals his antipathy to urban life and what he sees as the artificiality of modern culture in contrast to the authenticity of nature, this nature-culture polarity forming a recurring focus in his work.

Herzog's films provide many familiar symbols from the classic era of German romanticism. In *The enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974) his imagery can be linked to the Biedermeier period of early nineteenth-century German romanticism exemplified by Caspar David Friedrich, Heine, Schiller, Schubert, and Schumann.<sup>54</sup> A typical example drawn from this period is Friedrich's *Winter landscape* (1811) (Figure 1), where we find a combination of the aesthetic and metaphysical sensibilities of the romantic tradition: the depiction of primordial nature through the darkness of the trees; the fascination with the aesthetic sublime depicted by snow in twilight; and the presence of religious imagery lending a spiritualized dimension to the aesthetic experience. In



**Figure 1** ~ *Winter Landscape* (1811) by Caspar David Friedrich. A typical romantic image from the early nineteenth century combining nature with religious imagery. (The National Gallery, London)

Herzog's *Nosferatu, the vampyre* (1978) the silhouetted rocks rising before the ascent to Dracula's castle are reminiscent of Friedrich's *The cross in the mountains* (1808). Another example is Herzog's *Cobra Verde* (1988), where the bandit da Silva is depicted in the classic romantic pose of contemplating nature as we see his back turned towards us, inviting the audience to look with him out onto the sea, a familiar image in a number of Friedrich's later paintings such as *Moonrise over the sea* (1822). Herzog's choice of music in his films and documentaries also draws heavily on the nineteenth-century romantics; Beethoven, Brahms, Mahler, Wagner, and Grieg have all featured prominently in his work.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to more spiritually infused early nineteenth-century romantic influences, we can also find a more disturbing imagery in his work, drawn from late nineteenth-century European artists such as Arnold Böcklin, Ferdinand Hodler, and Edward Munch. In Böcklin's *Self-portrait with death the fiddler* (1872) and Alfred Rethel's *Death as assassin* (1851) there is a self-conscious abandonment of the pantheistic tradition, invoking both the Renaissance idea of the artist as melancholic and also the medieval theme of the Dance of Death. In Herzog's *Nosferatu, the vampyre* (1978) we find Lucy (played by Isabelle Adjani) wandering in the market place of the port of Delft surrounded by strange scenes of death and ecstasy, her Nazarene image of repose and pre-Raphaelite beauty contrasting with the trance-like dancing of the dying citizenry. The imagery of *Nosferatu* forms a bridge between the spiritualized romanticism of the early nineteenth century and the increasingly macabre preoccupations of the late nineteenth century. These aspects of Herzog's work bring him within the twentieth-century expressionist doctrine of ecstatic creation based on visions, which drew its historical inspiration from the *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress) movement of late eighteenth-century German romanticism, emphasizing both artistic autonomy and aesthetic transcendence, and featured widely in the German expressionist cinema of the 1920s through the work of Fritz Lang and Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau.<sup>36</sup>

Herzog's landscapes take on a more enigmatic and disturbing quality than the spiritual representations of nature in the English pantheistic tradition of William Wordsworth and John Ruskin, or American writers such as Walt Whitman, John Muir, and Henry Thoreau. Herzog effectively breaks free from the spiritualized 'nature philosophy' of Schelling, which had held such a strong influence over the nineteenth-century German romantics.<sup>37</sup> From this different perspective, nature becomes something alien and threatening to human life, as in the 'terrifyingly cold, empty and vast' Canadian landscape described by Northrop Frye.<sup>38</sup> In Herzog's work the depiction of extreme and threatening landscapes (deserts, open sea, impenetrable forest) provides a better metaphor for his exploration of modern life and human isolation than the bucolic scenes typical of the spiritualized romantic tradition.<sup>39</sup>

### To be a stone among stones

In Herzog's films the sublime is presented as the innate materiality and transience of human life juxtaposed with a natural time and space transcending history and culture. In other words, the Herzogian sublime is experienced at the point where culture ends and nature begins; where the agency of nature itself is revealed in its overwhelming of human frailty. Examples include the scenes of death wrought by

drought depicted in the opening minutes of *Cobra Verde* (1988), set in early nineteenth-century Brazil, and the succumbing of humanity to mortality with the arrival of the plague in the port of Delft in *Nosferatu, the vampyre* (1978).<sup>40</sup> In the opening frame of Herzog's portrayal of a doomed expedition of Spanish conquistadors in *Aguirre, the wrath of God* (1972), the insignificance of human life is clearly emphasized by a 'simulated split frame between sky, earth and man ...

In the left we see the almost vertical drop of a vast mountain; on the right, wispy clouds drifting across; in between, barely discernible to the eye at first we see a seemingly unending line of ant-sized men descending.<sup>41</sup>

Herzog's vision can be termed existential inasmuch as it dramatizes the contrast between human existence and the kind of existence possessed by natural objects.<sup>42</sup> The individual can break free of society, but never from nature, never from the ultimate irrationality of mortality itself. Like Camus, Herzog is not very interested in what Teilhard de Chardin termed the biosphere of living organisms, but is more fascinated by the very physicality of the inanimate earth: its 'rocks, sand, sea, wind and mountains'.<sup>43</sup>

Where natural organisms do appear, as in the tangled and impenetrable jungles of *Aguirre* and *Fitzcarraldo*, these represent an 'earth-force, a manifestation of the natural elements which obliterate the constructions of man'.<sup>44</sup> The documentary of the making of *Fitzcarraldo*, Les Blank's *Burden of dreams* (1984), reveals Herzog's profound sense of alienation from Amazonian nature:

It's an unfinished country, it's still prehistoric ... It's like a curse weighing on an entire landscape, and whoever goes too deep into this has a share of this curse ... It's a land that God, if he exists, has created in anger.<sup>45</sup>

For Camus, the natural world differs from the human world primarily in its enduring being, in contrast to the ephemerality of human life. Yet this disparity between the human world and the natural 'other' necessarily entails a tragic vision. Like Herzog, Camus aspires to this intense communion with nature but 'complete union escapes his grasp; he desires to abdicate his selfhood, to become a stone among stones, but his individuality intrudes; he feels intensely that such experiences belong to a state of innocence, not so much a return to such a state, but a primal state of innocence in which man knew not good and evil'.<sup>46</sup> Given the intensity of Camus's experiences it seems to him 'a ludicrous scandal that man should nevertheless be mortal', but any attempt at self-loss or transcendence is bound to be transient because world rejects human life: the fundamental otherness of the world is inescapable.<sup>47</sup>

Even though many of my films take place in the Sahara Desert or the jungle, I'm not one of those nature freaks or nature lovers – I have great reservations. There's too much gone wrong in creation itself. Nowadays you see it everywhere as if return to nature or natural food would increase human harmony – as if there was any harmony in nature at all! It just gives me pain in my stomach when I think about it. We simply have to wrestle some sort of dignified existence away from the evil of the universe, of nature.<sup>48</sup>

The essential difference between Herzog and Camus's conception of nature is that, for Herzog, not only is nature an irreconcilable other but it is also imbued with a moral vacuity, a mocking hostility towards human endeavour. In *Aguirre*, the familiar colonial themes of unsaved souls, uncharted lands, and slave labour are gradually dis-



titled into an unrelenting conflict between primordial nature and a doomed and self-deluding fragment of western civilization. The last sequence of *Aguirre* shows the conquistadors' raft drifting in circles on a vast, slow-moving river and invaded by hundreds of monkeys. This final image providing dramatic symbolism that the failed expedition has reached the end, the simian invasion marking the last boundary between nature and culture.<sup>49</sup>

### The politics of vision

Having explored Herzog's representation of the boundary between culture and nature, I turn now to the political significance of Herzog's aesthetic vision. There is an implicit holism within Herzog's imagery, where the overall effect is greater than the multiplicity of its parts, transcending the notion of an individualized linguistic construction of reality. Indeed, a recurring theme in Herzog's work is a central element in the sublime experience: the inability of language to communicate effectively. Herzog's work seeks to apprehend the incomprehensible in terms of the cosmic ordering of nature or the human condition at a level which transcends specific historical or cultural constructs. Yet it can also be placed within intellectual traditions which display a profound ambiguity towards modernity: urban anomie and western consumerism in *Stroszek* (1976), the destruction of aboriginal culture by multinational uranium mining corporations in *Where the green ants dream* (1984), and the human and ecological impact of war in *Lessons in darkness* (1992). Herzog's cinematic images often use a variety of unusual perspectives and lighting to intrigue the audience. In his documentary about the aftermath of the gulf war, *Lessons in darkness*, the ravaged landscape is presented to the viewer as both aesthetically and intellectually incomprehensible. One sequence of the film is titled *Satan's national park*, likened by one reviewer to Max Ernst's apocalyptic painting *Europe after the rain*, where nothing is recognizable and all is disintegrating.<sup>50</sup> What are we to make of these landscapes? Do their unusual aesthetic characteristics place them beyond historical precedent or critical analysis, as Herzog would have us believe?

In *The enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974), the narrative is based on a true story. On 16 May 1828 Kaspar Hauser, a youth of about 16, was found dazed in a Nuremberg square. He was almost incapable of speech and later claimed to have been kept in a dark cellar all his life. Looked after by people in the city, he fast became an international celebrity, only to be murdered in 1833 in a manner as strange as his appearance five years earlier.<sup>51</sup> In the film, Hauser takes the role of a 'natural man' without any social conditioning, to be challenged by bourgeois science and culture in a series of bizarre episodes. Hauser is pitted against the repression of institutionalized medicine and also a test of logic by a university professor. We see here the articulation of Herzog's empathy with a Foucauldian aversion to 'terroristic reason', and the implicit message that it is the town which is mad and not Hauser: 'Society, intolerant of otherness, of physical defects, and of uncontrollable psyches, denies these damaged individuals their humanity through bureaucratic institutionalization, persecution and simple neglect.'<sup>52</sup>

However, the link between the 'metaphysical revolt' of the individual and the transformation of society is problematic. Herzog's critique of bourgeois rationality never develops into a sophisticated political analysis of these systems of oppression

(capital, medicine, science, etc.), but, rather, leaves us with the ultimate futility and tragedy of these individual figures: hope persists simply in the form of perseverance in the face of hopelessness. This political ambiguity of Herzog's vision is revealed in the German title of the film, *Every man for himself and God against all* [*Jeder für sich und Gott gegen Alle*]. Jan-Christopher Horak draws a parallel here between Herzog's narrative and the existentialist marxist vision of Camus, a 'godless passion play, in which every man is for himself, and the universe against all', leaving us 'with an anarchistic, albeit humanistic vision of man'.<sup>53</sup> Similar criticisms can be levelled at Herzog's treatment of slavery and colonialism in *Cobra Verde*, which scarcely moves beyond the tortured psyche of the former slavetrader.<sup>54</sup> This film is based on Bruce Chatwin's 1980 novel *The viceroy of Ouidah*, describing the rise and fall of Francisco Manuel da Silva, alias Cobra Verde, a Brazilian bandit who in the early nineteenth century built a short-lived slave-trading empire in the African kingdom of Dahomey.<sup>55</sup> The empathy portrayed between da Silva and the African slaves can be characterized in the tradition of Conrad as a fantasy representation of the colonial universe, where the superficial representation of racial and ethnic solidarity belies a westernized cosmos based on a romanticization of imperialism embodying contradictory emancipatory and repressive ideas.<sup>56</sup>

Herzog has consistently resisted attempts to rationalize or explain his work, and in this sense he could be placed within the postwar critical reaction in the 1950s and 1960s towards the cold rationalism of high modernism. The insistence on an emotional reaction to art, what Sontag referred to as the need for an 'erotics of art' in the place of interpretation, was an influential strand in literary theory and aesthetics, and an important precursor to the emergence of neostructuralism in the 1970s.<sup>57</sup> In interviews, Herzog has rejected any easy categorization of his work into any particular period or historical tradition.<sup>58</sup> Many critics have endorsed Herzog's resistance to the analysis of his own work as thoroughly consistent with the subject-matter he presents to us, since the idea of a threshold of comprehension is embodied in the notion of the sublime in terms of the tension between rationalism and irrationalism.<sup>59</sup> Herzog has claimed that 'film is the art of illiterates, not of intellectuals' and has fostered the image of himself as a simple craftsman struggling to articulate his visions to a wider world.<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, some critics have endorsed this view of Herzog by linking his cinema with the phenomenological appeal of Husserl and Heidegger to simply 'let things speak for themselves' [*zur den Sachen*].<sup>61</sup> As with Conrad, there has been a tendency to see his work as an exploration of ontological issues and predicated on the 'symbolic representations of "transhistorical" realities', lying outside the mundanities of historical and political discourse.<sup>62</sup>

Yet for a sophisticated and commercially successful film-maker this eschewing of critical analysis is disingenuous. We can examine his work more closely, both in terms of the actual process of production and also in terms of the cultural and historical context within which the projects are conceived by the director and experienced by his audience. Herzog and his images cannot be separate from the world; he is no latter-day Hauser naïvely articulating the visual equivalent of primal innocence. In particular, his treatment of colonial representations of nature and wilderness cannot be held at a deferential distance on the basis of the director's historical circumstance, since he is a contemporary film-maker reworking historical themes. An exploration of these colonial iconographies is necessary in order to make sense of those processes which have defined the structure of the modern world, and which continue to char-

