

Ethics and Politics in Some of Werner Herzog's Films

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In the course of Herzog's films, we can recognize a philosophical investigation for the meaning of being human and the borderland between human and nature, reason and sensation, and normality and madness. In this article, after revising this in some of Herzog's films, it will be shown that he makes a conclusion for the mentioned investigation and proposes a new definition of human being and his relationship with the world. In this definition human culture is not separated from the nature and the reason is not separated from the sensation. Therefore, we have a definition of human subject who is different from the modern rational subject. It is recognized with madness from the point of view of current community. This necessitates a new definition of human community considering the new subject. So it will be assigned an ethics to this subject that is not an Aristotelian or Kantian, but a Stoic-Nietzschean, and derive a politics of the future that is affirmative and not dialectical and negative to the present situation.

1. Herzog's Way of Film-Making

As a paradigmatic experimental film maker, Werner Herzog tried to get rid of the presuppositions about the meaning of the reality and being human. He made both documentary and fictional films, but as he remarked in several interviews, his documentaries are completely fictional and his fictional films are somehow documentary. If documentary deals with the reality, Herzog in both types of his films constructs reality for filming. In fact, he transforms the illusion into the reality. The well-known history of moving a ship over a hill by the film-makers in *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) and refusing to use the special effects is a good example of documentation in fictional cinema. Another example is *Stroszek* (1977), which is Herzog's imagination of the real life of Bruno Schleinsteine. Herzog follows his imagination, but making movie out of the imagination means realizing the imagination. The film maker is not a passive sensor before the reality, but he makes the reality in his films. And that reality is a new, imaginative reality. He creates a world. Gilles Deleuze describes this relation between reality and imagination with the terms of *the actual* and *the virtual*. He says 'A life contains only virtuals. It is made up of virtualities, events, singularities. What we call virtual is not something that lacks reality but something that is engaged in a process of actualization following the plane that gives it its particular reality. The immanent event is actualized in a state of things and of the lived that make it happen' (Deleuze, 2001, 31). In his account the virtual is the thing that gives rise to the actual. The virtual is the power of the process of actualization. And the actual is a reduction of the virtual. This is exactly that which governs the relation between imagination and reality in the cinema. These two terms are mixed in the process of making a movie. The cinema is a good example of unification of the virtual and

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the actual. And Herzog in this view is at the heart of the cinema. We in our metaphysical and technical everyday life suppress and overlook the virtual. Our life is based on reasonable facts that can fit with the norms of being real; being real means being reasonable. So the cinema should destruct the normal order of things. In the following we try to show this destruction in the films of Werner Herzog.

2. Kaspar's Way of Thinking

The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser, a 1974 Herzog's film, is a cinematic version of the real story of a boy who lived the first seventeen years of his life in a cellar, and had no contact with humans except a man who feeds him. This man teaches Kaspar a few phrases and writing and the way of standing and walking, and then takes him out in seventeen. This is his first contact with the world outside and social human life.

What is salient in Herzog's version of this story is the different and interesting movement of Kaspar's head and body when he speaks or pays attention to something. Herzog uses Bruno Schleinstein, who had not any acting experience, as Kaspar Hauser. Bruno S. who spent much of his youth in psychiatric hospitals was a perfect person to play this role. Herzog uses the movement of his body to merge the thinking and acting.

Kaspar in the film is someone who experiences everything, and has not anything essential and innate before him. Therefore, his thinking is not distinct from sensation and experience, and arises immediately from his experiences. He thinks with touching and sensing. This makes Kaspar an interesting figure among people of his new city, because he does not repeat mechanically the way of walking, touching and thinking of the others. He himself experiences them. He does not think with his mind, but with his body. This is why his thinking is so creative. He can find a way to solve the problem that is totally out of human logic and people's imagination. There is a force in him, the force of life. These aspects differ the Herzog's version of this history from, for example, Truffaut's version, *Wild Child*. In *Wild Child* the teacher, who played by Truffaut himself, tries hardly to make the boy to repeat the way of speaking and thinking. In this film, thinking is not something creative, but only needs a good memory, some perfect physiological instruments, and a power of repetition. So the boy could think only if he could repeat the normal way of human life and behavior. Truffaut's movie is about instruction and focuses on the early phase of learning the words, but Herzog's movie is about experience and creativity and focuses on the more advanced phase of learning. The power of repetition is not enough to be a human. In Truffaut's version, unlike Herzog's, the teacher is the main character. Kaspar is totally different from the wild child. He has his own way of thinking even before being socialized, unlike the wild child who is an animal before being socialized. The thinking does not have to repeat the rules of normal community.

There is a conversation in the movie that Kaspar speaks about what is in him. He says 'I have only my life. There is nothing else in me'. There is no meaning or intention in him. The power of life makes him to think and experience. This is the thing that the boy has when he is pre-socially in jungle. This is his pre-social way of thinking. His thought is not the reflection

of a transcendent reason. There is no distinction between faculties in his mind, and also no distinction between his mind and his body. He wonders ‘why I can not play the piano just like I breath?’ And actually his playing is not repeating mechanically what Mozart dictates. He blows his soul, his pneuma, to the piano, or to the horn in Stroszek to express his sensation about United States. In fact Kaspar is a Spinozian, and not Cartesian, *res cogitans*. He is not a subject or human, but a body. Spinoza writes in *Ethics* ‘We don’t even know what the body can do...’ (Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part 3, Proposition 2, Note on 2). He is a body, a thing that thinks, a living thing, an active, and not passive, thing, and we need a philosophy of life to analyze him, a philosophy like Nietzsche’s philosophy who says ‘There exists neither ‘spirit,’ nor reason, nor thinking, nor consciousness, nor soul, nor will, nor truth: all are fictions that are of no use’ (Nietzsche, *the Will to Power*, sec 480). Or ‘we stand amazed before consciousness, but the truly surprising thing is rather the body’ (ibid, sec 659). This is the meaning of immanence in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze who borrowed this manner of thought from Spinoza and Nietzsche. Body is dark and enigmatic, like Kaspar’s pre-social cellar, and the question of ultimate origin should remain an enigma. Kaspar thinks about his origin but he just has an uncompleted story about that: A caravan with a blind man as the guide who has a bizarre way to conduct the caravan. With this story Kaspar want to say that these questions about origin are so difficult but humans have always simple answers for them, whether religious or scientific. But mystery should remain mystery. What is absent does not present with our devotion.

3. Aguirre: The Dark Side of the Nature

What Herzog is after in *Aguirre: the Wrath of God* is a change in the relationship between the human and the nature. It is the story of a Spanish soldier, Aguirre, who leads a group of people to Amazonian jungle in search of promised city of gold, El Dorado, and then propel them and at last himself to death. But this film is first of all a film about the nature, about the endlessness of the nature, and the nature of being human.

The nature here and in other Herzog’s films is not a landscape for human eyes. It is infinite and horrific. It is not under human control, but beyond his comprehensive power. There is a battle between human and nature, or a battle inside the nature. There is the struggle of someone who does not want to die, but the nature will swallow him. Aguirre and his people dissolve inside the Amazonian jungle.

Besides, the nature here is not reducible to any definitive meaning. Nature is something nonsense. It is outside of our understanding and cognitive faculty. This is the thing that joint Aguirre to Kaspar. Kaspar belongs to this peculiar nature. British duke attends a romantic and sentimental nature in Kaspar, like the landscapes of Greece, But Kaspar disapointes him. The duke can not stand his peculiar nature.

How we can conceive of the nature if our cognitive faculty is useless? Certainly, we should banish our consciousness and conceive the nature with the power of the life in us. In fact, Aguirre is not detached from the nature. He is one of the forces of the nature, and the nature is the battle of the forces. Aguirre says ‘I am the wrath of God’. The evil and the ruin in the nature are not from another power, but they belong to the same power that donates the grace and the mercy. And Aguirre is the wrath of God. He is the ruinous power of the nature. Like Heraclitus who says ‘war is inherent of every things and the battle is justice’, Aguirre says

‘The world doesn’t survive without the wrath of God’. El Dorado, the paradise, is on the earth, so God is not a transcendent entity. God is the nature itself, but not the nature that we know and enjoy. The nature is beyond our human cognitive mind. It is beyond the galaxies and nebulas that we know about their existence. It is infinite.

Here we are also in the realm of immanence. This is the infinite without transcendence, the infiniteness of the nature. The nature is not here against the culture or something else. There is no duality in this view toward the world. This is the view that Nietzsche finds in Heraclitus:

Heraclitus...denied the duality of totally diverse worlds... He no longer distinguished a physical world from a metaphysical one, a realm of definite qualities from an undefinable ‘indefinite.’ And after this first step, nothing could hold him back from a second, far bolder negation: he altogether denied being. For this one world which he retained...nowhere shows a tarrying, an indestructibility, a bulwark in the stream...Heraclitus proclaimed: ‘I see nothing other than becoming. Be not deceived. It is the fault of your short-sightedness, not of the essence of things, if you believe you see land somewhere in the ocean of becoming and passing-away. You use names for things as though they rigidly, persistently endured; yet even the stream into which you step a second time is not the one you stepped into before (Nietzsche, 1962, 5, pp. 51–52).

So the world is the infinite and ever-living fire, a fire that ignites from fire, a fire that ignites itself, a cause of itself. Aguirre is a Heraclitian philosopher, a river man, who believes to the life as a flow, as a trip to infinity. When we are in an infinite trip, considering it as a progress or a straight line does not help in conceiving it. It’s hard to conceive. Maybe the eternal recurrence helps. When there is no joint in the time or ‘the time is out of joint’ one can only imagine a crazy loop. Imagination of an infinite straight line is out of our ability. We should accept the tragic nature of our self, of human being. This is the result of priority of becoming over being in Nietzsche. A river man cannot simply be. He vacillates between to be or not to be. He is in the realm of becoming. Or as Deleuze and Guattary write in *Thousand Plateaus*, Aguirre says: ‘I’m the only traitor here. No more deception, it’s time for betrayal. What a grandiose dream! I will be the last traitor, the total traitor, and therefore the last man’ (Deleuze and Guattary, 1987, 126). To be a river man, one should betray to the existing structure of the world, that is the world itself, a betrayal to the world, from the inside of it, a Shakespearian figure.

4. Manufacturing the Illusions

Fitzcarraldo, like Hamlet, deals with the illusions. He asks ‘what is an illusion?’ He does not know the difference between the reality and the illusion. He knows that his illusion about making an opera in the Amazonian jungle is more real than the nugatory existence of the real things. He says ‘stay, illusion!’ And the events in *Fitzcarraldo*, such as moving the ship from the mountain to perform the opera among the Amazonian jungle, are something else than illusions? However, we know that these events really happened, really in the external world. They are illusions in the external world, and not hallucinations. If the cinema is real, so there are the real illusions, the powerful illusions, more powerful than reality. And our world is full of these kinds of illusions: arts, media, machines, cities, and in short technology...

This is the difference between ‘ontology’ and ‘hauntology’ in Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*. Ontology deals with the beings, the dead things, but beyond also Heidegger’s transcendental ontology, *hauntology* deals not with Being, but with illusions, the things which are between to be or not to be. We can see here an immanent attitude in Derrida’s thought, the thought in which *hauntology* is more important than ontology, because we live between words and traces, not nonsense objects.

What is the difference or the relationship between the nature and the culture? Herzog responds together with Derrida: There is no opposition here. The culture is the illusion in the nature, is the productive power of life in the nature, and this power makes the nature illusionary. This is a creative power in the nature that makes it endless and nonsense. So they are not in two different worlds. We have just one world, one infinite world. We can call it nature.

The nature is haunted, in this view, by the specters of the culture. So we should pass over the romantic view toward technology. It is not contrary of the nature. In Derrida’s view, for him technology is always tele-technology, there is also a positive meaning of technology. He writes in *Specters of Marx*:

But also at stake, indissociably, is the differential deployment of *tekhne*, of technoscience or tele technology. It obliges us more than ever to think the virtualization of space and time, the possibility of virtual events whose movement and speed prohibit us more than ever (more and otherwise than ever. For this is not absolutely and thoroughly new) from opposing presence to its representation, ‘real time’, to ‘deferred time’, effectivity to its simulacrum, the living to the non-living, in short, the living to the living-dead of its ghosts. It obliges us to think, from there, another space for democracy. For democracy to- come and thus for justice (212).

The technology helps us to virtualise the state of being of things. So the presence is not opposed with the representation, and so on. This is not the binary world of the beings, but the world of the ghosts, and illusions. And as Derrida mentioned, this is a political problem, the problem of staying with the current state of things, or being open to the essence of the future.

This is interesting that Derrida in a footnote for this part refers to Bernard Stiegler who in *Technics and Time* speaks about the repression of technicity in the history of philosophy from Socrates to Heidegger and Habermas, and introduce the originary technicity, a completely Derridean reading of history (It is the text that deeply influenced from Derrida, especially from chapter three of *Grammatology* and then influences on Derrida in *Specters of Marx*).

5. Dieter Dengler’s Stoic Ethics

What we should do when we know this about the nature? What kind of knowledge is this? How this knowledge can affect our life? How we can continue our life in such an infinite and cruel nature? Is it by being in accord with the nature? By acting as if we are part of the nature?

In *Rescue Dawn* we confront also with a man who has nothing inside but the power of life. He feels no fear and no guilt. Dieter Dengler, a U.S. Navy pilot, is shot down over Laos during Vietnam War. He survives and captures by the villagers and they take him to a prison camp. There he meets some other captive American soldiers. After a while he escapes with them but just one of them (Martin) stays with Dieter. Martin and Dieter start a long trip in Laos's jungles without any food or facilities. Martin is killed by the villagers and Dieter is rescued by a helicopter. This film is also a cinematic version of a real event, and like Kaspar Hauser, we can see that how Herzog infuses his soul into the real personalities.

Dieter in this film is a hero that in every situation can rest strong-minded. In every situation, including death, he confronts directly with the problem, without any appeal to a deceptive way or bypassing the problem. He is the only one who madly gorges the worms, continues his way in the endless jungle, and finds his food in the heart of cruel nature. He actively accommodates himself with the situations. He is a dice-player who would not wait for a pair of 6. He plays seriously with his chance, no matter what is in his hands. What is important is that he tries his best no matter what would be the ultimate result. This is the only way for him to win, the only way to continue his way in the infinite nature. He is happy in all situations, even when he is angry. There is no hate in him. To ones who betrayed him, he has just forgetting. He lives and enjoys, and has no regret, because there is no qualm and greed in him. He ecstatically satisfies his instincts, even when there are no facilities to do that. Eating and evacuating are the elements of our existence, and so is death. This is the only way to being in accord with the nature. They joyful science obtains when we accept the tragic truth of the world, which is the world is infinite and we are limited. The pleasure here comes with the activity that is in accord with the nature. The instinct and the nature are synonym. This belief leads to a completely affirmative, not dialectical, ethics. This ethics does not double the world. This does not divide the world into two types of the forces. The nature is not the realm of concept. It is not an alienated spirit. The nature and the culture are not two distinct realms. Saying yes to all situation have nothing to do with the dialectical negativity. So a rock, the human soul, the society and the social contracts, all belong to the nature. Dieter knows this truth about the world (of course as a practical, not a theoretical knowledge). So there is no resistance against the nature in him.

This nature in him makes Dieter a madman. There is no hate and greed in him, and in the modern society someone who is not neurosis is doubtless psychosis. Dieter with the power of life as a nature in him is like the other madmen in Herzog's movies, someone like Kaspar, Aguirre, Woyzeck, Nosferatu, Stroszek, Timothy Treadwell in *Grizzly Man*, Terrence McDonagh in *The Bad Lieutenant*, and Brad McCullum in *My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done?*. They are mad or in the exact meaning of the word insane. They don't know the difference between the guilt and the virtue, only they know the nature and the life.

6. From *Logos* to *Ethos*

This view can change our view toward the ethics. There is a Hegelian difference between *Moralitat* and *sittlichkeit*, morality and ethics. *Moralitat* is the Kantian morals, the Kantian Imperative that rule the conscious to decide truly. But *sittlichkeit* is the ethnological ethics, an unconscious decision of the body. Our actions in most situations follow our race or historical and geographical traits. These actions are also the problems of ethics and not morality.

In Nietzsche, we can find this unconscious attitude toward ethics. His philosophy is a passage from *Moralitat* to *sittlichkeit*. He tried to constitute a description of human being in which he is not a conscious subject. His philosophy is totally against consciousness. He tried to invert the metaphysical primacy of consciousness over instincts. He defended from the innocent human instincts.

Nietzsche in his first book, *the birth of tragedy*, introduces Socrates as a first person who prioritized consciousness over instincts and constituted the history of metaphysics. Socrates in the age of Hellenic culture that was in Nietzsche's eyes the culture of the forces, act, and the instinct of life, defended from the rationality and *theoria* to suppress the instinct and the living forces of unconscious. In fact, Socrates suppresses the present ethics because he was a poor man in Hellenic *ethos*. To do that, he totally denied this apparatus and tried to install a new hierarchy in which he was at the top as a wise man. Wisdom was valued because Socrates was not powerful or beautiful, the values of Hellenic culture. So in the place of doing his best and accepting what the dice brings for him, he destroyed the game.

Socrates claims that his rational view is a disinterested view, but Nietzsche shows that his view is profoundly interested. After Socrates, philosophy tended toward this disinterested view, a tendency that we call metaphysics. Metaphysics is the domination of *logos* over *ethos*, disinterestedness over interestedness, reason over instincts, and consciousness over unconscious. But from Nietzsche's view, one cannot be detached from his *ethos*. *Ethos* is the set of beliefs, thoughts, physiological traits, race, *physis*, and anything that connect the person to his *ethnos*. Regarding this concept, even when a person thinks, he acts ethnically and his thought is part of his ethics. So, despite Socratic metaphysical logo-centrism, the thinking is not disinterested. The thinking is an ability of human body. It is in the side of habits and even physiological traits. But logo-centrism tries to discern the *logos* from *ethos*. *Logos* is a prospect independent from this or that nation, and independent from historicity of physiology. *Logos* is the *theoria* and rationality. And Nietzsche announced a movement from *logos* to *ethos*. In *the Birth of Tragedy* he writes:

In this totally strange character instinctive wisdom reveals itself only in order to confront the conscious knowledge now and then as an impediment. Whereas in all productive men instinct is the truly creative and affirming power, and consciousness acts as a critical and cautioning reaction, in Socrates the instinct becomes the critic, consciousness becomes the creator (sec. 13, p. 48).

Whereas our Socratic tradition merges with the suppression of unconscious instincts, Nietzsche speaks of instinct as the creative force of man. In his view the creativity of consciousness is a perversion. Rationality with the chant of equality and justice is a trick of the means for defeating the more powerful rival. And the dialectics was the instrument of this rationality. But the unconscious ethics, or namely the life, are lost in this dialectics. In *Twilight of Idols* he asserts:

About life, the wisest men of all ages have come to the same conclusion: it is no good. Always and everywhere one has heard the same sound from their mouths — a sound full of doubt, full of melancholy, full of weariness of life, full of resistance to life. Even Socrates said, as he died: 'To live — that means to be sick a long time: I owe Asclepius the Savior a rooster. Even Socrates was tired of life' (p.1).

In Nietzsche's view this Socratic anti-life philosophy was dominant over the history of the west, but now it is condemned to destruction because it neglects the tragic reality of human beings, the reality of our conditionality, of our being creature. We are mortals and our knowledge is limited to the sensual experiment. The rationalists deny this reality and expect something other than life. This groundless belief is the principal cause of being deconstructed of the history of metaphysics. This history of logo-centrism is touching its end and the new world is beginning, the world of artistic thought instead of metaphysical thought, the world of being affirmative to the life. This is an ethical, and ethnical, and not theoretical change. We cannot decide consciously to be affirmative to the life. We need a different nation, a different world to be such like. So this is not a problem of morality, but a problem of ethics, that is a political problem.

This is the dominant attitude in the post-Nietzschean Continental philosophy. The thinkers of this attitude always claims that their work are not consist of theories or methods, but strategies and acts. For example Jacques Derrida always repeats that *deconstruction* is not a theory or a systematical method, but an event. It is something in process, and so something possible, even impossible, not necessary. Like in the in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other* which he writes: 'deconstruction loses nothing from admitting that it is impossible... For a deconstructive operation, *possibility* is rather the danger, the danger of becoming an available set of rule-governed procedures, methods, accessible approaches' (p. 15). And as Heidegger thought us, the necessary and methodic are less valuable. Something that is and is not is more real than something that merely is, because the latter only 'theoretically' is, but the being of the former is practical.

7. A Nietzschean Left?

This worldview has a romantic political meaning. The logo-centric view to the world is still dominant over the communities. Nietzsche foresees the end. He was in the dawn of the last day, the dawn of rescue. His crow was early. By now still we share a logo-centric community, the community that represses someone who acknowledge the life. It condemns him to the madness and controls his forces. It produces hate and greed. So we need a new community that does not have to be dialectical, that need not only the slaves.

Returning to Herzog's movies, Kaspar Hauser who represents a different way of thinking is an answer to these two questions: What is before the conceptual and categorical thought? And: what is after the conceptual and categorical thought? Jacques Lacan has an answer to the first question: 'The Real order'. And to the second question, we should refer to Martin Heidegger and his announce of the end of metaphysics: Heidegger's dream was passing away of techno-metaphysical way of thinking and living. But what comes after metaphysics? Is it a romantic return to prehistoric epoch? But no return is possible.

We can pose such a question with regard to Lacanian psychoanalysis: What comes after a successful psychoanalysis course? Is it a romantic return to The Real order? This is a question that we should deal with elsewhere.

Dreaming a new world and a new ethics was so prevailing in modern thought. There are several versions of this in modern ages. The Marxist one is more that others widespread, but

we can also mention a Nietzschean one, a Heideggerian one, and even a psychoanalytic one. They all want to cure the modern society. We can call all of these versions *Left*. Now I want to suggest that the attitude of Herzog's movies is a Nietzschean left, a left attitude without any hostility to the other part of the world, without figuring any division in the world. We can be hopeful to the future and dream a better world without any hatred to the present. In this view, the present is a fact, an opportunity that we have, and a situation in which we are. The protagonists of Herzog's movies, Dieter for example, have affirmative attitude to the present, but do their best to construct the better future. They are dreamers but not idealists. They are dealing with virtual reality. They choose between their options, and realize their dreams out of their real situations. They are not dream viewers, but creators.

This is Herzog's response to the Heideggerian question that we mentioned above: what comes after metaphysics? In this view, this is a political question: What is our choice between the left attitudes? How we can conquer over the present situation? The Herzog's Protagonist's response is: through the present situation. We have only the present to conquer the present, an immanent attitude.

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