

Brad Prager.

The Cinema of Werner Herzog: Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth.

London: Wallflower, 2007. Pp. 219.

Brad Prager's book refreshingly fills a gap in Herzog scholarship that had been growing for more than a decade, and it will undoubtedly be *the* academic reference on Herzog for the foreseeable future. In this study, Prager tackles the enormous task of showing Herzog's oeuvre, consisting of upwards of fifty works, as "all of a piece" (18), tied together not only by an intense intertextuality and thematic reverberation, but also by each work's engagement with Herzog's trademark concept of "ecstatic truth." This is, of course, not to say that Herzog can be completely contained in his complexity—Prager himself claims that Herzog's expanding body of work tends toward making less sense rather than more (202)—but that it makes sense to try to understand each of Herzog's films within a larger context—something that Herzog himself often fails to do.

Herzog is (in)famous for his eagerness to comment on his own films, both through interviews and extensive commentary on DVD tracks. His strong and sometimes conflicted opinions are often met academically with equally strong condemnation, not only of his problematic aesthetics but also of the notoriously dangerous conditions surrounding his production. Prager thus navigates a difficult path between these poles, giving neither Herzog nor his most fervent opponents the last word.

Despite his obvious admiration for Herzog's craft, Prager's resistance to the filmmaker's attempts to both thwart academic analysis and eschew any talk of influences in his work is evident in the introductory chapter. Here Prager shows Herzog's philosophical concerns and "intuitive" aesthetic decisions to be in dialogue (perhaps unconsciously) with a long and specifically German cultural, philosophical, and literary history, spanning from Kant to Goethe, Nietzsche, Caspar David Friedrich, Heidegger, and Adorno. These connections form the starting point of what constitutes one of the most interesting questions addressed in the book, namely, the extent to which Herzog can be considered a German filmmaker at all. Prager convincingly argues that Herzog's many years as a United States resident render any attempt to label him simply as a German filmmaker highly problematic. Further, he points out that few of Herzog's most recent works (with the notable exception of *Invincible* [2001]), have anything to do with the country of his birth. Indeed, Herzog's developing preference for high-

profile Hollywood actors (including Christian Bale and Nicolas Cage) and his increasing reliance on American producers lend credence to Prager's treatment of Herzog as a *U.S.* (yet nonetheless still not quite an *American*) filmmaker.

Prager's expert treatment of Herzog's much-discussed relationship to German Romanticism, covered in the introduction and touched upon in later chapters as well, is one of the most intellectually sophisticated discussions of the matter to date, in that it calls on the reader to consider not only the complexity of the filmmaker, but also the (often overlooked) contradictory trajectories within Romanticism itself. Thus Prager's argument moves from that of Herzog's critical reception as a Romantic or an anti-Romantic to a more nuanced and productive discussion of how certain Herzogian leanings relate to particular tendencies in Romanticism.

Another invaluable contribution that Prager's book makes to Herzog studies—and indeed to film studies as a whole—is his especially detailed discussion of Herzog's myriad “stylizations” (read “stagings” and “fictionalizations”) that pervade even the most “documentary” of his films. For his part, Herzog wants us to dispense with our reliance upon the factual “accountant's truth” and accept his embedded fictions (if we are even aware of them) in the interest of approaching a higher, mysterious, and perhaps even unreachable truth, the proximity to which is attended by a feeling of ecstasy. While Prager points out many Herzogian moments that could be described as ecstatic, he also continually seeks to “haunt” these ecstasies with “reality, history, and other terms associated with accountability” (7).

This comprehensive study offers critical readings of more than thirty Herzog works, including the recent films *Grizzly Man* (2005), *The Wild Blue Yonder* (2006), and *Rescue Dawn* (2007). It is organized thematically rather than chronologically. The first chapter, titled “Madness on a Grand Scale,” is followed by “Madness on a Minor Scale,” “Mountains and Fog,” “Faith,” “War and Trauma,” and “An Image of Africa.” While the chapters' titles reveal the main thematic thread connecting the films being discussed, there are significant areas of overlap: several films, for example, are mentioned in every chapter. This is not only unavoidable, but seems to reflect a conscious decision fully in keeping with the author's stated goal of “com[ing] to terms with the whole body of the director's work so far” (18). Thus, the book is perhaps not as well suited for complete newcomers to Herzog as it might be for those already familiar with at least a few of his films. As

Herzog's fans tend to be a faithful, perhaps even fanatical bunch, it is not too much to expect that an average reader will be sufficiently pre-informed.

On a few occasions, however, this external knowledge—much of which is supplied by Herzog himself—seems to become dangerously central to the author's reading. When he interprets a quick glimpse of Herzog's hand in *Aguirre* (1972) or his foot in *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) as a possible attempt on the director's part to establish his authorship of the film, Prager derives meaning from what is essentially a production error, which might well have gone unnoticed had Herzog himself not drawn attention to it. This "error" at least is actually part of the film; however, when Prager explains how we derive pleasure from knowing that the crawling ice-pilgrims in *Bells from the Deep* (1995) are actually just local drunks, or that our intuition of authentic violence in *Stroszek* stems from the fact that the bullies in the film are actually violent, real-life criminals, he implicitly suggests that our knowledge of these extra-filmic facts somehow adds to the meaning we derive from the work. In the sense that meaning itself is constituted by our experience of the films, he is of course correct. Yet there is a real possibility that a viewer's potential experience of a moment of "ecstatic truth" during these scenes is somehow compromised by this profusion of what are essentially "accountant's facts." If indeed Herzog wants to give us a hint of ecstatic truth by removing us from the false *verité* of everyday life, then he underserves his own goals by showing the often rather unecstatic and commonplace physical truth (which he sometimes labels "authenticity") behind the image. And once we know these facts, we cannot then un-know them.

Prager attempts to address this issue by elucidating Herzog's tendency to "break open the cinematic frame" (8). Drawing on Derrida, Prager argues that Herzog's cinema deliberately challenges the distinction not only between fact and fiction, but also between the reality of the film and the reality of its production. I do not doubt that Herzog is indeed breaking the frame in exactly this way, but I also do not believe that his intention is to do so. Rather, he wants to have it all: he wants to show us (and insist on) the authentic ecstasy in Timothy Treadwell's accidental footage or in the face of ski-jumper Walter Steiner, while at the same time claiming that truth cannot be attained without fabrication. Prager's attempt to make sense of these conflicting aims is thus itself heroic, and one has the sense that he succeeds in spite of Herzog, rather than because of him. The true success of

Prager's work is not so much that it can convince a fan that Herzog is a bigger genius than previously suspected, but that it can persuade a skeptic to give the filmmaker another audience.

WILL LEHMAN

Western Carolina University

Hermann Bernauer.

**Zeitungslektüre im „Mann ohne Eigenschaften.“
Musil-Studien Band 36.**

München: Wilhelm Fink, 2007. S. 170.

Der zu Lebzeiten unterschätzte Dichter Robert Musil gehört seit den achtziger Jahren unbestritten zu den wichtigsten deutschsprachigen Schriftstellern des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts. Heute zählt sein Werk zu den größten Herausforderungen an die Literaturwissenschaft, deren Methodologie am philosophischen Anspruch und an der Komplexität des umfangreichen Oeuvres nicht selten stumpf wird. An dieser Musil-Renaissance sind die Musil-Studien des Wilhelm Fink Verlages durch die Publikation einiger der bedeutendsten Studien und Sammelbände – beispielsweise Alexander Honolds *Die Stadt und der Krieg* von 1995 – nicht unwesentlich beteiligt gewesen. Hermann Bernauers Buch *Zeitungslektüre im „Mann ohne Eigenschaften“* fällt innerhalb der Reihe zunächst durch die Bescheidenheit seines thematischen Anspruchs positiv auf: Ähnlich wie im Fall des Autors W. G. Sebald zeichnen sich gute Bücher über Musil oft dadurch aus, dass sie weder direkt den komplexen Selbstinterpretationsofferten des Werkes nachgehen, noch ihren thematisch marginalen Beitrag zwanghaft mit dessen Kernanliegen verwechseln. Mehr als an der Hypostasierung des eigenen Themas zum Zentrum der Musilschen Poetologie ist Bernauer daran gelegen, die Relevanz seines beschränkten Themas für Sinn- und Deutungszentren des Musilschen Werkes zu erarbeiten. Dies gelingt ihm auf beispielhafte Weise.

Das Augenmerk des Buches richtet sich jedoch weniger, wie der Titel zunächst nahelegen scheint, auf thematische Zeitungslektüren im Roman: obwohl vermerkt wird, dass Ulrich, Clarissa wie auch andere Figuren des Romans Zeitung lesen und dass die Zeitung eine zentrale Rolle in der Entfaltung der Handlung spielt – etwa indem sie die Parallelaktion ins Rollen bringt – interessiert das Buch vor allem die „implizite