
On the Absolute, the Sublime, and Ecstatic Truth

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(Translated by Moira Weigel)

[This text was originally delivered by Werner Herzog as a speech in Milano, Italy, following a screening of his film “Lessons of Darkness” on the fires in Kuwait. He was asked to speak about the Absolute, but he spontaneously changed the subject to the Sublime. Because of that, a good part of what follows was improvised in the moment.]



The collapse of the stellar universe will occur—like creation—in grandiose splendor.

—Blaise Pascal

THE WORDS attributed to Blaise Pascal which preface my film *Lessons of Darkness* are in fact by me. Pascal himself could not have said it better.

This falsified and yet, as I will later demonstrate, *not* falsified quotation should serve as a first hint of what I am trying to deal with in this discourse. Anyway, to acknowledge a fake as fake contributes only to the triumph of accountants.

Why am I doing this, you might ask? The reason is simple and comes not from theoretical, but rather from practical, considerations. With this quotation as a prefix I elevate [*erheben*] the spectator, before he has even seen the first frame, to a high level, from which to enter the film. And I, the author of the film, do not let him descend from this height until it is over. 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.

After the first war in Iraq, as the oil fields burned in Kuwait, the media—and here I mean television in particular—was in no position to show what was, beyond being a war crime, an event of cosmic dimensions, a crime against creation itself. There is not a single frame in *Lessons of Darkness* in which you can recognize our planet; for this reason the film is labeled “science fiction,” as if it could only have been shot in a distant galaxy, hostile to life. At its premiere at the Berlin Film Festival, the film met with an orgy of hate. From the raging cries of the public I could make out only “aestheticization of horror.” And when I found myself being threatened and spat at on the podium, I hit upon only a single, banal response. “You cretins,” I said, “that’s what Dante did in his *Inferno*, it’s what Goya did, and Hieronymus Bosch too.” In my moment of need, without thinking about it, I had called upon the guardian angels who familiarize us with the Absolute and the Sublime.

The Absolute, the Sublime, the Truth . . . What do these words mean? This is, I must confess, the first time in my life that I have sought to settle such questions outside of my work, which I understand, first and foremost, in practical terms.

By way of qualification, I should add at once that I am not going to venture a definition of the Absolute, even if that concept casts its shadow over everything that I say here. The Absolute poses a never-ending quandary for philosophy, religion, and mathematics. Mathematics will probably come closest to getting it when someone finally proves Riemann’s hypothesis. That question concerns the distribution of prime numbers; unanswered since the nineteenth century, it reaches into the depths of mathematical thinking. A prize of a million dollars has been set aside for whoever solves it, and a mathematical institute in Boston has allotted a thousand years for someone to come up with a proof. The money is waiting for you, as is your immortality. For two and a half thousand years, ever since Euclid, this question has preoccupied mathematicians; if it turned out Riemann and his brilliant hypothesis were not right, it would send unimaginable

shockwaves through the disciplines of mathematics and natural science. I can only very vaguely begin to fathom the Absolute; I am in no position to define the concept.

THE TRUTH OF THE OCEAN

FOR NOW, I'll stay on the trusted ground of praxis. Even if we cannot really grasp it, I would like to tell you about an unforgettable encounter I had with Truth while shooting *Fitzcarraldo*. We were shooting in the Peruvian jungles east of the Andes between the Camisea and Urubamba rivers, where I would later haul a huge steamship over a mountain. The indigenous people who lived there, the Machiguengas, made up a majority of the extras and had given us the permit to film on their land. In addition to being paid, the Machiguengas wanted further benefits: they wanted training for their local doctor and a boat, so that they could bring their crops to market a few hundred kilometers downriver themselves, instead of having to sell them through middlemen. Finally, they wanted support in their fight for a legal title to the area between the two rivers. One company after another had seized it in order to plunder local stocks of wood; recently, oil firms had also been casting a greedy eye on their land.

Every petition we entered for a deed vanished at once in the labyrinthine provincial bureaucracy. Our attempts at bribery failed, too. Finally, having traveled to the ministry responsible for such things, in the capital city of Lima, I was told that, even if we could argue for a legal title on historical and cultural grounds, there were two stumbling blocks. First, the title was not contained in any legally verifiable document, but supported only by hearsay, which was irrelevant. Second, no one had ever surveyed the land in order to provide a recognizable border.

To the latter end, I hired a surveyor, who furnished the Machiguengas with a precise map of their homeland. That was my part in their truth: it took the form of a delineation, a definition. I'll admit, I quarreled with the surveyor. The

topographic map that he furnished was, he explained, in certain ways incorrect. It did not correspond to the truth because it did not take into account the curvature of the earth. *In such a little piece of land?* I asked, losing patience. *Of course*, he said angrily, and pushed his water glass toward me. *Even with a glass of water, you have to be clear about it, what we're dealing with is not an even surface. You should see the curvature of the earth as you would see it on an ocean or a lake. If you were really able to perceive it exactly as it is—but you are too simple-minded—you would see the earth curve.* I will never forget this harsh lesson.

The question of hearsay had a deeper dimension and required research of an entirely different kind. [Arguing for their title to the land] the Indians could only claim that they'd always been there; this they had learned from their grandparents. When, finally, the case appeared hopeless, I managed to get an audience with the President, [Fernando] Belaúnde. The Machiguengas of Shivankoreni elected two representatives to accompany me. [In the President's office in Lima] when our conversation threatened to come to a standstill, I presented Belaúnde with the following argument: in Anglo-Saxon law, although hearsay is generally inadmissible as evidence, it is not *absolutely* inadmissible. As early as 1916, in the case of *Angu vs. Atta*, a colonial court in the Gold Coast (today Ghana) ruled that hearsay could serve as a valid form of evidence.

That case was completely different. It had to do with the use of a local governor's palace; then, too, there were no documents, nothing official that would have been relevant. But, the court ruled, the overwhelming consensus in hearsay that countless tribesmen had repeated and repeated, had come to constitute so manifest a truth that the court could accept it without further restrictions. At this, Belaunde, who had lived for many years in the jungle, fell quiet. He asked for a glass of orange juice, then said only *Good god*, and I knew that we had won him over. Today the Machiguengas have a title to their land; even the consortium of oil firms

that discovered one of the largest sources of natural gas [in the world] directly in their vicinity respects it.

The audience with the President granted yet another odd glimpse into the essence of truth. The inhabitants of the village of Shivakoreni were not sure whether it was true that on the other side of the Andes there was a monstrously large body of water, an ocean. In addition, there was the fact that this monstrous water, the Pacific, was supposedly salty.

We drove to a restaurant on the beach a little south of Lima to eat. But our two Indian delegates didn't order anything. They went silent and looked out over the breakers. They didn't approach the water, just stared at it. Then one asked for a bottle. I gave him my empty beer bottle. No, that wasn't right, it had to be a bottle that you could seal well. So I bought a bottle of cheap Chilean red, had it uncorked, and poured the wine out into the sand. We sent the bottle to the kitchen to be cleaned as carefully as possible. Then the men took the bottle and went, without a word, to the shoreline. Still wearing the new blue jeans, sneakers, and T-shirts that we had bought for them at the market, they waded in to the waves. They waded, looking over the expanse of the Pacific Ocean, until the water reached their underarms. Then, they took a taste of the water, filled the bottle and sealed it carefully with a cork.

This bottle filled with water was their proof for the village that there really was an ocean. I asked cautiously whether it wasn't just a *part* of the truth. No, they said, if there is a bottle of seawater, then the whole ocean must be true as well.

THE ASSAULT OF VIRTUAL REALITY

FROM THEN on, what constitutes truth—or, to put it in much simpler form, what constitutes *reality*—became a greater mystery to me than it had been. The two intervening decades have posed unprecedented challenges to our concept of reality.

When I speak of assaults on our understanding of reality, I am referring to new technologies that, in the past twenty

years, have become general articles of everyday use: the digital special effects that create new and imaginary realities in the cinema. It's not that I want to demonize these technologies; they have allowed the human imagination to accomplish great things—for instance, reanimating dinosaurs convincingly on screen. But, when we consider all the possible forms of virtual reality that have become part of everyday life—in the Internet, in video games, and on reality TV; sometimes also in strange mixed forms—the question of what “real” reality is poses itself constantly afresh.

What is *really* going on in the reality TV show *Survivor*? Can we ever really trust a photograph, now that we know how easily everything can be faked with Photoshop? Will we ever be able to completely trust an email, when our twelve-year-old children can show us that what we're seeing is probably an attempt to steal our identity, or perhaps a virus, a worm, or a “Trojan” that has wandered into our midst and adopted every one of our characteristics? Do I already exist somewhere, cloned, as many *Doppelgänger*, without knowing anything about it?

History offers one analogy to the extent of [change brought about by] the virtual, *other* world that we are now being confronted with. For centuries and centuries, warfare was essentially the same thing, clashing armies of knights, who fought with swords and shields. Then, one day, these warriors found themselves staring at each other across canons and weapons. Warfare was never the same. We also know that innovations in the development of military technology are irreversible. Here's some evidence that may be of interest: in parts of Japan in the early seventeenth century, there was an attempt to do away with firearms, so that samurai could fight one another hand to hand, with swords again. This attempt was only very short-lived; it was impossible to sustain.

A couple of years ago, I came to grasp how confusing the concept of reality has become, in a strange way, through an incident that took place on Venice Beach in Los Angeles. A friend was having a little party in his backyard—barbecued

steak—it was already dark, when, not far away, we heard a few gunshots that nobody took seriously until the police helicopters showed up with searchlights on and commanded us, over loudspeakers, to get inside the house. We sorted out the facts of the case only in retrospect: a boy, described by witnesses as around thirteen or fourteen years of age, had been loitering, hanging around a restaurant about a block away from us. As a couple exited, the boy yelled, *This is for real*, shot both with a semi-automatic, then fled on his skateboard. He was never caught. But the message [*Botschaft*] of the madman was clear: this here isn't a videogame, these shots are for real, this is reality.

AXIOMS OF FEELING

WE MUST ask of reality: how important is it, really? And: how important, really, is the Factual? Of course, we can't disregard the factual; it has normative power. But it can never give us the kind of illumination, the ecstatic flash, from which Truth emerges. If only the factual, upon which the so-called *cinéma vérité* fixates, were of significance, then one could argue that the *vérité*—the truth—at its most concentrated must reside in the telephone book—in its hundreds of thousands of entries that are all factually correct and, so, correspond to reality. If we were to call everyone listed in the phone book under the name “Schmidt,” hundreds of those we called would confirm that they are called Schmidt; yes, their name is Schmidt.

In my film *Fitzcarraldo*, there is an exchange that raises this question. Setting off into the unknown with his ship, Fitzcarraldo stops over at one of the last outposts of civilization, a missionary station:

Fitzcarraldo: *And what do the older Indians say?*

Missionary: *We simply cannot cure them of their idea that ordinary life is only an illusion, behind which lies the reality of dreams.*

The film is about an opera being staged in the rainforest; as you'll know, I set about actually producing opera. As I did, one maxim was crucial for me: an entire world must undergo a transformation into music, must *become* music; only then would we have produced opera. What's beautiful about opera is that reality doesn't play any role in it at all; and that what takes place in opera is the overcoming of nature. When one looks at the libretti from operas (and here Verdi's *Force of Destiny* is a good example), one sees very quickly that the story itself is so implausible, so removed from anything that we might actually experience that the mathematical laws of probability are suspended. What happens in the plot is impossible, but the power of music enables the spectator to experience it as *true*.

It's the same thing with the emotional world [*Gefühlswelt*] of opera. The feelings are so abstracted; they cannot really be subordinated to everyday human nature any longer, because they have been concentrated and elevated to the most extreme degree and appear in their purest form; and despite all that we perceive them, in opera, as natural. Feelings in opera are, ultimately, like axioms in mathematics, which cannot be concentrated and cannot be explained any further. The axioms of feeling in the opera lead us, however, in the most secret ways, on a direct path to the sublime. Here we could cite "Casta Diva" in Bellini's opera *Norma* as an example.

You might ask: why do I say that the sublime becomes accessible to us [lit. "experience-able"; *erfahrbar*] in opera, of all forms, considering that opera did not innovate in any essential way in the twentieth century, as other forms took its place? This only *seems* to be a paradox: the direct experience of the sublime in opera is not dependent on further development or new developments. Its sublimity has enabled opera to survive.

ECSTATIC TRUTH

OUR ENTIRE sense of reality has been called into question. But I do not want to dwell on this fact any longer, since what moves me has never been reality, but a question that lies be-

hind it [beyond; *dahinter*]: the question of truth. Sometimes facts so exceed our expectations—have such an unusual, bizarre power—that they seem *unbelievable*.

But in the fine arts, in music, literature, and cinema, it is possible to reach a deeper stratum of truth—a poetic, ecstatic truth, which is mysterious and can only be grasped with effort; one attains it through vision, style, and craft. In this context I see the quotation from Blaise Pascal about the collapse of the stellar universe not as a fake [“counterfeit”; *Fälschung*], but as a means of making possible an ecstatic experience of inner, deeper truth. Just as it’s not fakery when Michelangelo’s *Pietà* portrays Jesus as a 33-year-old man, and his mother, the mother of God, as a 17-year-old.

However, we also gain our ability to have ecstatic experiences of truth through the Sublime, through which we are able to elevate ourselves over nature. Kant says: *The irresistibility of the power of nature forces us to recognize our physical impotence as natural beings, but at the same time discloses our capacity to judge ourselves independent of nature as well as superior to nature . . .* I am leaving out some things here, for simplicity’s sake. Kant continues: *In this way nature is not estimated in our aesthetic judgment as sublime because it excites fear, but because it summons up our power (which is not of nature) . . .*

I should treat Kant with the necessary caution, because his explanations concerning the sublime are so very abstract that they have always remained alien to me in my practical work. However, Dionysus Longinus, whom I first came to know while exploring these subjects, is much closer to my heart, because he always speaks in practical terms and uses examples. We don’t know anything about Longinus. Experts aren’t even sure that that’s really his name, and we can only guess that he lived in the first century after Christ. Unfortunately, his essay *On the Sublime* is also rather fragmentary. In the earliest writings that we have from the tenth century, the Codex Parisinus 2036, there are pages missing everywhere, sometimes entire bundles of pages.

Longinus proceeds systematically; here, at this time, I cannot even start in on the structure of his text. But he always quotes very lively examples from literature. And here I will, again, without following a schematic order, seize upon what seems most important to me.

What's fascinating is that, right at the beginning of his text, [Longinus] invokes the concept of Ecstasy, even if he does so in a different context than what I have identified as "ecstatic truth." With reference to rhetoric, Longinus says: *Whatever is sublime does not lead the listeners to persuasion but to a state of ecstasy; at every time and in every way imposing speech, with the spell it throws over us, prevails over that which aims at persuasion and gratification. Our persuasions we can usually control, but the influences of the sublime bring power and irresistible might to bear, and reign supreme over every hearer . . .* Here he uses the concept of *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."¹ No one before Longinus had spoken so clearly of the experience of illumination; here, I am taking the liberty to apply that notion to rare and fleeting moments in film.

He quotes Homer in order to demonstrate the sublimity of images and their illuminating effect. Here is his example from the battle of the gods:

Aidoneus, lord of the shades, in fear leapt he from his throne and cried aloud, lest above him the earth be cloven by Poseidon, the Shaker of Earth, and his abode be made plain to view for mortals and immortals—the dread and dank abode, wherefor the very gods have loathing; so great was the din that arose when the gods clashed in strife.

Longinus was an extraordinarily well-read man, one who quotes exactly. What is striking here is that he takes the liberty of welding together two different passages from the *Iliad*. It is impossible that this is a mistake. However, Longinus is not faking but, rather, conceiving a new, deeper

truth. He asserts that without truth [*Wahrhaftigkeit*] and greatness of soul the sublime cannot come into being. And he quotes a statement that researchers today ascribe either to Pythagoras or to Demosthenes:

For truly beautiful is the statement of the man who, in response to the question of what we have in common with the gods, answered: the ability to do good [*Wohltun*] and truth.

We should not translate his εὐεργεσία simply with “charity,” imprinted as that notion is by Christian culture. Nor is the Greek word for truth, ἀλήθεια, simple to grasp. Etymologically speaking, it comes from the verb λανθάνειν, “to hide,” and the related word λήθος, “the hidden,” “the concealed.” Ἀ-λήθεια is, therefore, a form of negation, a negative definition: it is the “not-hidden,” the revealed, the truth. Thinking through language [*im sprachlichen Denken*], the Greeks meant, therefore, to define truth as an act of disclosure—a gesture related to the cinema, where an object is set into the light and then a latent, not yet visible image is conjured onto celluloid, where it first must be developed, then disclosed.

The soul of the listener or the spectator completes this act itself; the soul actualizes truth through the experience of sublimity: that is, it completes an independent act of creation. Longinus says: *For our soul is raised out of nature through the truly sublime, sways with high spirits, and is filled with proud joy, as it itself had created what it hears.*

But I don’t want to lose myself in Longinus, whom I always think of as a good friend. I stand before you as someone who works with film. I would like to point out some scenes from another film of mine as evidence. A good example would be *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner* where the concept of ecstasy already shows up in the title.

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: only a little farther, and he would not land on

the steep slope, but rather crash beyond it. Steiner speaks at the end of a young raven, which he raised and which, in his loneliness as a child, was his only friend. The raven lost more and more feathers, which probably had to do with the feed that Steiner gave him. Other ravens attacked his raven and, in the end, tortured him so frightfully that young Steiner had only one choice: *Unfortunately, I had to shoot him*, says Steiner, *because it was torture to watch how he was tortured by his own brothers because he could not fly any more*. And then, in a fast cut, we see Steiner—in place of his raven—flying, in a terribly aesthetic frame, in extreme slow motion, slowed to eternity. This is the majestic flight of a man whose face is contorted by fear of death as if deranged by religious ecstasy. And then, shortly before the death zone—beyond the slope, on the flat, where he would be crushed on impact, as if he had jumped from the Empire State Building to the pavement below—he lands softly, safely, and a written text is superimposed upon the image. The text is drawn from the Swiss writer Robert Walser and it reads:

I should be all alone in this world
 Me, Steiner and no other living being.
 No sun, no culture; I, naked on a high rock
 No storm, no snow, no banks, no money
 No time and no breath.
 Then, finally, I would not be afraid any more.

NOTE

1. ὕψος δέ που καιρίως ἐξενεχθὲν τὰ τε πράγματα δίκην σκηπτῶν πάντα διεφόρησεν . . . “Sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt” (1.4).