Werner Herzog
A Guide for the Perplexed

Conversations with
Paul Cronin

FABER & FABER

Visionary Vehemence
Ten Thoughts about Werner Herzog

"Life is about oneself against the world."
Paul Bowles

"Assiduity is the sin against the holy spirit.
Only ideas won by walking have any value."
Nietzsche

"An artist is a creature driven by demons. He doesn't know
why they choose him and he's usually too busy to wonder why."
William Faulkner

"The only way to stop smoking is to stop smoking."
Werner Herzog

I met Werner Herzog for the first time in the plush sitting room of a stylish central London hotel. We spent a couple of hours circling each other, in discussion about collaboration on an interview book. I returned the following morning, to continue our chat over breakfast. Would Herzog go for the idea? "All things considered," he said slowly but firmly, before carefully placing his buttered toast onto his plate, pausing for half a minute, taking an unhurried mouthful of coffee, and looking me squarely in the eye, "it's best I co-operate with you." A sigh of relief. "But there is one thing I want to do while I'm in town this week."

"Anything."

"I want to see Arsenal play."

The next day I enter new territory, wander down some dark alley, and scalp a handful of tickets. A week later I am in a pub in Upton Park drinking Guinness with Werner and Lena, his wife, having just seen West Ham play the Gunners (I don't remember who won). "Number 26 is a very intelligent player," says Werner. "Who is he?" This is not a question I am able to answer, so Werner turns to the portly, slightly inebriated gentleman and his mates standing next to us, and asks again. "That's Joe Cole," we are told. "One of the best there is. Only eighteen years old." "Yes," says Werner.

"He really knows how to use the space around him, even when he doesn't have the ball. He'll be playing for England soon." Which goes to show that Werner's understanding of football runs just as deep as that of all things cinematic: not long after this match Joe Cole was, indeed, playing for the national team.* A few weeks later, one bright early morning, Werner and I are sitting in the living room of his modest, airy Los Angeles home, tucked away in the Hollywood Hills, watching Bayern Munich play AC Milan on television. It's a crucial match for both. Tension is high. Werner chain-smokes nervously and we snack on Doritos. Munich equalise with the last touch of the game. It bodes well for the first of our conversations that will become this book.

It isn't easy to say if the following – the closest we'll get to a Herzog autobiography – does Werner's life and work justice. I have often thought about how this book might read if I had interviewed him every couple of years from the start of his career (practically speaking, not possible, since I wasn't born until about a decade in). How differently would Werner appear on paper? Memory being what it is, would these pages be filled exclusively with anecdotes about filming amidst this or that landscape rather than, as many usefully do, focusing on perennial ideas and principles? Does the distance that time has given Herzog from much of his work (it's more than fifty years, sixty films and a handful of books since *A Lost Western*) make for a more contemplative overview?

I can definitively say two things. First, Werner's memory is a good one. His most conspicuous acting job, and one of his most recent, was in the 2012 Tom Cruise shoot-'em-up *Jack Reacher*, filmed in Pittsburgh. One afternoon during production, Werner rented a car and took the time to drive several miles out into the nearby countryside where, fifty years earlier, he spent a few months. Despite not having been in the city since the early sixties, and though it involved a complicated route from downtown, he immediately found the house he was looking for. "I recognised it all," says Werner, "to the point where I was struck by

* Herzog's favourite British player of all time: Bobby Charlton, "a genius who brought football back to its basic simplicity." Glenn Hoddle – "an earthquake in a stadium" – comes a close second.

a new configuration of concrete stairs that curved down to the garage." Herb Golder, professor of classics at Boston University and trusted confidant on several Herzog films, recalls a production meeting for *Wings of Hope* at a hotel in Lima. "Werner drew from memory a map of the territory that pertained to the story, an area of the densest jungle imaginable, which he hadn't seen in twenty-seven years, including the crash site and the Pachitea tributary, snaking off to the Sungaro and Shebonya, feeding the Yuyapichis. When we compared Werner's map with an actual map the next day, we discovered that his reconstruction of the topography was almost perfect. I still have that sketched map of his, and look at it now and again, as I consider it a blueprint of the feeling for landscape and sense of space necessary for great filmmaking."

Second, a complete understanding of the irrepressible Werner Herzog is only possible if one has (a) regularly climbed inside his head to see exactly where his ideas come from, then observed him at close quarters as he makes a number of consecutive films (fiction and non-fiction); and (b) stood in his garden, *Weissbier* in hand, watching him, aproned-up, frying a lamb chop on the barbecue, or supping with him and his wife Lena on her Siberian mushroom soup as Fats Domino, their corpulent cat, roams. Regret to inform I have done only one of these things, and have yet to meet anyone who has experienced both, which leads to my own verdict on *A Guide for the Perplexed*: it's the best we've got.

Whenever Werner Herzog deploys his abilities, we can expect the unexpected, a matchless, coruscating take, those lapidary turns of phrase. The interview presented here attempts to capture his exaltation of the landscapes, objects, books, art, poetry, music, literature, cinema, ideas and people that surround us, alongside his own pastimes, convictions and judgements, with "agitation of mind" as shorthand for what this book hopefully delivers. While Hölderlin transmuted the world around him into words, Herzog has consistently transformed his experiences into sounds and images. It is, however, incidental that the subject of this book is an indispensable man of cinema. More important for our purposes is that he is an edifying and transformative conversationalist.

1 INTUITION

Over the years this book – the first iteration of which appeared in 2002, as *Herzog on Herzog* – seems to have contributed in a small way to the construction of Werner's public persona, and has become something of an eccentric self-help volume. People tell me how weighty, invigorating and (Herzog dislikes the word, feeling it makes him sound "too much like a preacher") inspirational they find it. One fellow called the book "scripture," while *Newsweek* raved, calling it "a required text for every film school in the country." We do, of course, have plenty to learn from Werner about cinema. A lifetime of filmmaking means that when it comes to the logistical battles of production, he is able to point out in which directions lie the paths of least resistance, to show us how best to minimise our weaknesses and play to our strengths. But you won't learn much about focal lengths, lighting and story structure from these pages. Werner's explication of film grammar, for example, doesn't involve details of film stock, shot size and editing techniques, rather a pithy commentary on why cowboys never eat pasta. Nor does what follows include intricate theoretical analysis that might inspire the ever-increasing number of academics aiming their eyes and brains at Herzog's work. Werner has always resisted interpretation (Hölderlin: "Man is a god when he dreams, a beggar when he reflects"), and from the start I knew better than to ask. Instead, with clarity and elegance, he describes his process, making clear that any competent investigation of his films has to be rooted in an understanding of how and where they were made, under what conditions, and by whom.

During one of our final sessions together when preparing this book, Werner called my attention to several paragraphs, all of which were comprised of material where (presumably during moments of weakness) he offered up vague explanations of his films. As we worked through the manuscript, Werner intuitively zeroed in on these lines and – as if they threatened to contaminate the entire book – trimmed. So uninvolved is he in what his films and the characters that populate them might "mean" that when Herb Golder once showed him a full-length published study of his work, Werner quickly deposited the book into the nearest dustbin, announcing, "This has nothing to do with me." On his shelves sit a host of

art books (Hieronymus Bosch, John Martin, Albrecht Altdorfer), alongside select texts by the small number of authors important to him (Hölderlin, Kleist, Kuhlmann, Montaigne, Thucydides, Virgil), plus twenty volumes of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and Anderson/Dibble's multi-volume edition of the *Codex Florentino*. He has copies of some of his own books. He has none of the books about his work.

Werner told me he once met a champion ski jumper from Norway who one season beat all his adversaries. "He was also an architecture student and the following year wrote his thesis on the construction of ski ramps. He thought so much about those damned things that during the next season he lost every competition he entered." For Herzog, the moment such meditation enters the equation, when he delves too deep and starts explaining himself, imbalance sets in and creativity is forced aside, or at least clouds over. As far as he is concerned, cinema – like music – is more deeply connected to imagination than pure reason, and though indubitably respectful of the rationalists of the world, unadulterated intuition is a brighter guiding light for Werner than analysis will ever be. In other words, the new film always takes precedence over talking about old work. "Interviews make very little sense," he said in 1979. "They are not helpful, either to the audience or to myself. I prefer audiences that take a very straight, clear, open look at what they see on the screen." I am sometimes asked by colloquium organisers if Werner would attend were they to assemble a round table to discuss his films and praise him for past glories. There's a slim chance, I say, so long as he isn't working that day.

2 PERSEVERANCE

Although his place in film history is assured, Werner's work has always been a by-product of his furious "extra-cinematic" inquisitiveness and infatuations. He has forever been nourished by a wondrously eclectic range of interests that might have propelled him equally in the direction of mathematics, philology, archaeology, history, cookery, ant wrangling (see page 260), football or (as the Afterword by Lawrence Krauss suggests) science. The fact that it's cinema the multifarious Herzog has involved himself with is, to a certain extent, irrelevant to our tale, one of dedication, passion and

determination. This book is the story of one man's constant and (almost) always triumphant confrontation with a profound sense of duty to unburden himself, and for that reason alone it's worth our attention.

Werner's work ethic and drive, impressive decades ago, remain formidable, and his ability to maintain creative integrity and generate new ideas is exhilarating. There is a wonderful moment in *Conquest of the Useless*, the published version of his journal, written – Walser-like – in microscopic script during production on *Fitzcarraldo*. While playing in an imaginary football match in Lima, Werner struggles to distinguish between players on his team and his competitors. When the referee refuses to halt play so one side can exchange its jerseys for those of a less confusing colour, Werner concludes that "the only hope of winning the game would be if I did it all by myself . . . I would have to take on the entire field myself, including my own team." When it comes to his films, this energy is perpetually generated by, as he calls them, "home invaders," those ideas that steal inside his head, to be wrestled to the ground in the form of a screenplay, film or book. Herzog's film-making has never given him consolation as such. It's a blessing and a burden. He never has to worry about whether a good idea for the next film will reveal itself because, like it or not, the throb is there long before the one at hand is complete. When Herzog writes that the image of a steamship moving up the side of a mountain seized hold of him with such power it was like "the demented fury of a hound that has sunk its teeth into the leg of a deer carcass," we presume there isn't a project he has involved himself with over the past fifty years that has taken hold with any less urgency. As David Mamet has written, "Those with 'something to fall back on' invariably fall back on it. They intended to all along. That is why they provided themselves with it. But those with no alternative see the world differently."

Nearly fifteen years ago, when I started work on this project, Werner hadn't attained the godlike status the world now accords him. For the past twenty years he has lived on the West Coast of the United States, most recently a few miles from Hollywood, where he is his own master. While some folks wait bleary-eyed for calls from their agent, Werner rarely picks up for his own ("For decades I didn't even have an agent and even today don't really

need one"), and has forever preferred the company of farmers, mechanics, carpenters and vintners to filmmakers. In California he is free from European rigidity, even if he still feels a powerful intellectual and emotive connection to his homeland. In 1982, a year before her death, Herzog's mentor Lotte Eisner wrote that Werner is

> German in the best sense of the word. German as Walther von der Vogelweide and his love poem "Under the Lime Tree." German as the austere, fine statues of the Naumburg cathedral, as the Bamberg horseman. German as Heine's poem of longing "In a Foreign Land." As Brecht's "Ballad of the Drowned Young Girl." As Barlach's audacious wood statues, which the Third Reich sought to destroy. And as Lehmbruck's "Kneeling Woman."

Today, studio executives adventurous enough to try and entice Werner into more conventional enterprises show up at his door, though the issue, as Anthony Lane has written, "is one not of Herzog selling out but of Hollywood wanting to buy in." Werner's comrade Tom Luddy, co-founder of the Telluride Film Festival (where the Werner Herzog Theater opened in 2013), describes him as a "pop icon." Having outlived countless trends, Herzog has moved into the primary currents and is celebrated worldwide, as he suggested would happen. "I think people will get acquainted to my kind of films," he said in 1982. Werner feels no shame in admitting that the respect of those he respects somehow keeps him going, or, at least, temporarily lessens the burden. But his belief in his abilities has never seriously wavered, which means details of the peaks and troughs of his career – which essentially speak to his treatment at the hands of professional reviewers and the ticket-buying public – are barely touched on throughout the pages of this book. Herzog pays little attention to the chorus. And why should he? It isn't antagonism he feels towards such folk so much as indifference. His ferocious need to make films and write books will forever trump everything, regardless of the obstacles.

By offering up the background to each of his films and how they were made, Herzog offers details of form, structure and – indirectly – meaning. As he articulates his techniques, ideas and principles in the conversations that follow, his way of looking at the world

is made clear. His "credo," as he puts it, "is the films themselves and my ability to make them." Truffaut once explained that making a film is like taking a boat out to sea, the director at the helm, forever attempting to avoid shipwreck (in his Hitchcock book he describes the process as a "maze of snares"). Being tossed about on the waves is the very nature of filmmaking, a state of affairs only an amateur would whine about. ("I'm not into the culture of complaint," Herzog says. To his fictional son in *julien donkey-boy*: "A winner doesn't shiver." Physicist Lawrence Krauss: the universe doesn't exist to make us happy.) In short: you're always asking to be sunk. Or, per Herzog, who describes himself as a product of his cumulative humiliations and defeats, filmmaking "causes pain." In discussing the day-to-day experiences and hard graft of the cinema practitioner, in stressing how vital it is for each of us to follow our own particular channel, in acknowledging that the name of the game is faith, not money, *A Guide for the Perplexed* furnishes the reader with an oblique ground plan to help navigate the rocks and manage the daily calamities.

Not coincidentally, these are the same ideas that underpin and flicker steadily throughout the three days of Herzog's extemporizing at his irreverent and sporadically executed three-day Rogue Film School. Nietzsche tells us that "All writing is useless that is not a stimulus to activity." Similarly, Herzog declaims that his ultimate aim with Rogue is to be useful rather than explicitly didactic, something I suspect he succeeds in, much to the delight of all those youthful, awestruck participants. His rousing description of the filmmaker and how he needs to move through the world, confronted at every turn by obstructions, paints him as an ingenious, brazen, indefatigable problem-solver, with forgery and lock-picking as metaphor. "This man has no ticket," says Molly in the opening minutes of *Fitzcarraldo*, as she and Brian crash into the lobby of the opera house in Manaus after having rowed for two days and two nights from Iquitos. Yet, insists Molly, Fitzcarraldo has a moral right to enter the auditorium, see his hero Caruso in the flesh, and hear him sing. In this spirit, Herzog believes, the natural order would be disrupted if a misdemeanour didn't occasionally intrude into the life of a working filmmaker. To help jump the hurdles, he suggests, purloin that which is absolutely necessary. It has always been Werner's own particular long-term survival strategy.

Over the Rogue weekend, as Herzog responds to his audience, telling story after story from memory, a repository filled with decades of filmmaking tales, this idea becomes ever clearer. I find in my handwritten notes, taken at Rogue in June 2010, the following: "Raphael talks about some rule he broke when filming at Chernobyl. Werner exclaims: 'That was a very fine and Rogue attitude.'" It might all have something to do with the exquisite Herzog line recorded by Alan Greenberg on the set of *Heart of Glass*: "There is work to be done, and we will do it well. Outside we will look like gangsters. On the inside we will wear the gowns of priests." What I can decisively say is that Herzog and the Rogue participants I met have been mutually forgiving of each other, considering the former is wholeheartedly dismissive of traditional film schools, and the latter a self-selected group which, if truly Herzogian in temperament, would gently throw the offer of a place at film school back in their hero's face.

Rogue – where the emphasis is more on surveying one's own "inner landscapes" than anything else – is a strong stimulant, the pedagogic equivalent of being doused with ice water. It affirms that Herzog's stupendous curiosity and love of the world, his explorations into uncharted territory across the planet, his insatiability for inquiry and investigation, his voracious appetite and intensity of belief, his attraction to chaos in its many iterations, have never been stronger. With his makeshift film school, a summation of many years' work, Werner has seized hold of ideas that appear in interviews stretching back forty years, acknowledged their contemporary relevance, then recalibrated and brushed them down. By doing so, he has left behind previous incarnations. The stalwart of New German Cinema has long been displaced. The accused of any number of *Fitzcarraldo* controversies is in the past. The director of five features with Klaus Kinski (the last one made more than a quarter of a century ago) is more or less gone. What remains is the resourceful, optimistic filmmaker, still going strong, shepherding us into action, showing us how to outwit the evil forces, leading by example. "I have fortified myself with enough philosophy to cope with anything that's been thrown at me over the years," says Herzog. "I always manage to wrestle something from the situation, no matter what."

Werner's fine-tuned sympathies are those of a thoughtful, exacting and studious polyglot poet who, when translating his work and that of others, is aware of the delicate nuances of one word over another, not just in German, but also English and other languages, including ancient Greek. Herbert Achternbusch has written that Herzog has an "addiction to words," and Werner himself wonders in this book whether "I might be a better writer than I am a filmmaker." This is the same Werner Herzog who, during a 1988 public conversation at the National Film Theatre in London, spontaneously told his audience, after rejecting the more ludicrous claims about the production of *Fitzcarraldo*, "If you don't believe me, we can go out into the street and fight it out. I have no proof but my physical body." Werner's approach to everything is that of a fearless pioneer, an intrepid seeker who, as he explained in a 1982 interview, doesn't "want to live in a world where there are no lions anymore." At the age of seventy he remains extraordinarily agile, and gallops rather than strolls. All things tactile and corporeal are pre-eminent. His engagement with the world is experiential, not ideological. For Herzog, film is athletics, not aesthetics. (Cameraman Ed Lachman: "What is strongest is the content of the images, not a formalistic attitude about what an image is.")

Never has Herzog lived vicariously through others. The sedentary life has never been for him. Ready to pack his bag at any moment, he usually doesn't know where he will be next month. A joy of geographical inquiry has forever characterised his existence, even before he ever picked up a camera. This is something the Germans have a word for: *Fernweh*, which could be translated as "a yearning for distant lands." (Herzog may be right in claiming to be the only person to have filmed on all seven continents.) Remote peoples and faraway places, however inhospitable, are a crucial source of inspiration, and there is no reason to doubt Werner when he says that if a one-way journey of exceptional exploration were offered, if the opportunity arose to leave the stratosphere and go in search of untainted images, he would jump at the chance. With his ability to sniff out the lyrical and extraordinary, which is usually there for all to see ("We thank NASA for its sense of

poetry," Werner tells us at the end of *The Wild Blue Yonder*, perhaps laying to rest once and for all the notion that irony is beyond him), the visceral experiences are imbibed, after which the stories, characters and scenarios take shape, and the images pour out with an exactitude and urgency that make Herzog more a transcriber than an author per se. The scripts – often unconventional in format, part of Werner's quest to establish a new form of literature – are prepared only for the purpose of fund-raising. Their author has never needed them to realise his ideas. Wrote Wagner of his process: "The detailed musical treatment is more of a calm and considered finishing-off job, which the moment of real creation has preceded."

The legend is that in his travels, the never-tentative Herzog seeks the strongest currents and most treacherous waters ("That slope may look insignificant," says Fitzcarraldo, "but it's going to be my destiny"). His long-time cameraman Peter Zeitlinger insists that "Werner never takes the paved road, always the dirt track," adding that he has, "probably from mid-puberty, been trying very hard to die a grand, poetic death." According to Zak Penn, who has directed Herzog as an actor in two films, "Werner fulfils the important role of a physical adventurer. We live vicariously through him, wishing we had his courage and nerve. He's a paragon, a mythic hero." (Pauline Kael's description: a "metaphysical Tarzan.") It's up for debate whether the unflappable Herzog is being truthful when insisting he is no reckless risk-taker, but what we can be certain of is that he seeks what Robert Walser called a "very small patch of existence," a non-hierarchical and self-governed land without profanity, absolutism, servility, mendacity, sorcery, demagoguery, dogma, ossification and unnecessary rules and regulations, devoid of repressive political manipulation and slavery, free from rampant, gratuitous commodification, welcoming of poets and contrarians, with a minimum of bureaucracy, where self-determination, inquiry and pluralism can flourish, and a secular community is offered the chance to thrive under its own humane guidelines. "To be honest," he told me last year, "I wish I didn't have to travel so much these days, but if you want to make a film in Antarctica, you have to get on an aeroplane."

Werner offers counsel at his Rogue Film School, but I can't imagine he himself has ever asked anyone for advice. Errol Morris has spoken of a line from an interview with Gabriel García Márquez, who, after having read Kafka's *Metamorphosis* for the first time, said to himself, "I didn't know anyone was allowed to write things like that." It was the same line Errol muttered to himself upon exiting the Pacific Film Archive, having just seen Werner's *Fata Morgana* for the first time. We know what he means. In his 1977 review of *La Soufrière*, Amos Vogel described Herzog as "the most important director now working in Germany. One of the great film talents of our time, not even at the peak of his creative life, Herzog is a person who will not compromise, who deliberately remains 'unclassifiable,' hence attacked by those who must classify." Perhaps this is why Herzog's films, even those made forty years ago, don't appear to have aged one bit.

The stories in this book and Herzog's improvising at Rogue make clear that he has chased his deepest fascinations since his earliest days. Some films might have been adapted from literary sources or inspired by real-life events, but with their unique view of the world every one is created *ex nihilo*, predicated on his singular imagination. At a point in his career when many would have run out of ideas – a moment when accolades and retrospectives are flowing thick and fast – Werner has in the recent past become a beacon of hope for neophytes everywhere, looked upon by many as someone who has forever risen unblinkingly to the challenge. "I encourage myself, since nobody else encourages me," he wrote in 1974.

After working closely with a number of filmmakers – big and small, famous and unknown, living and dead – I feel confident in telling people there's no point in comparing Herzog to anyone. It isn't that he's a non-conformist, responding to his surroundings and actively setting himself apart. He just naturally is apart, which makes it foolish for anyone to try to emulate him. Rogue – where the concept is all his, where he maintains full control – is the result of his avoidance of institutions of any kind. While he isn't unhappy, throughout this book, to ally himself to a small number of people with whose centuries-old work he feels a vigorous concordance, Herzog really is his own startlingly original man, and his repeated

insistence that his films can't be categorised as part of the Romantic tradition reflect his disregard for any club that might have him as a member. For Herzog, there was never a question of film school or an apprenticeship. Instead, he burst upon us, fifty years ago, almost fully formed as a filmmaker, ready to share his personal fantasies at any cost. Werner is one of those few figures who have created a body of work worthy of sustained investigation, yet one so disassociated from the world of cinema around him – so "cut off from every web of film history," as Hans Schifferle has written – that knowledge of such things might actually get in the way of appreciating his films.

5 STORYTELLING

At the Opéra Bastille in Paris, during dress rehearsals for Herzog's 1993 production of *The Flying Dutchman*, the electronics malfunctioned. "The mammoth iceberg was drifting towards the orchestra pit and sometimes we couldn't even open the curtain," says Werner. "It turned out that all these problems were triggered by a special kind of signal, a taxi call frequency. If a cab drove past the opera house, this state-of-the-art computer equipment went haywire. I insisted we use more primitive techniques instead. Anything else was dangerously inadequate." For Herzog, analogue will almost always win out over digital. Although he has an abiding passion for every stage of the filmmaking process and is happy to experiment with the latest piece of equipment, technology has never been Werner's thing. He is a primeval sophisticate of great erudition who yearns nostalgically for a pre-literate, pre-electric (or post-literate and post-electric) existence, where the primitive wisdom of the uninstructed and those able to memorise stories and poems, then recite them free of all props, predominates.

6 THE HOLY FOOL

There are few filmmakers who don't tell stories of people in trouble, struggling to overcome obstacles, humiliated, wracked with anxiety and confusion, adrift, at odds with the world, called upon to fight against adversaries. The outsider and rebel is a dramatic trope that stretches back to the beginnings of storytelling. But Herzog's protagonists – extremists all – are of a particular persuasion. Amos

Vogel wrote that the Holy Fool inhabits the films, the figure who "dares more than any human should, and who is therefore – and this is why Herzog is drawn to him – closer to possible sources of deeper truth though not necessarily capable of reaching them." In his monograph on Herzog's *Nosferatu*, S. S. Prawer suggests there are two characters ubiquitous in Werner's world: "outsiders in a society where they can never feel at home, and which in the end destroys them; and rebels who try, by violent means, to realise what their lives refuse them, but also ultimately fail." The wide and colourful variety of these individuals, the sheer number in both his documentaries and fictions – represented always with empathy and compassion – make clear that they all somehow reflect their creator's innermost enthusiasms. It is never incongruous to see Herzog on screen, responding and interacting.

Some of these figures (Aguirre, Fitzcarraldo, Walter Steiner, Reinhold Messner, Francisco Manoel, Graham Dorrington, brazen all) seek overwhelming challenges, while others (Fini Straubinger, Adolph Ratzka, Kaspar Hauser, the premature baby of *Stroszek*, the anguished Woyzeck, Michael Goldsmith, Jared Talbert, the victims of *From One Second to the Next*) have burdens thrust upon them. We are repeatedly confronted with dispossessed outcasts and eccentrics, estranged loners, struggling overreachers and underdogs who live *in extremis*, at the limits of experience, isolated and fraught with problems of communication and assimilation, railing against sometimes stifling social conventions, often foolhardy and spirited enough to embark on undertakings they know are futile, thus providing a series of vivid definitions of the human condition, alongside some level of insight into the society, even the entire historical era, in which they live. "The existential dimension of his characters always seems to take precedence over any social issue against which they might revolt or from which they might suffer," writes Thomas Elsaesser.

The titular strongman hero of the ironic *Herakles* – who takes on the twelve labours, assuming tasks he can't possibly succeed in – is the quintessential Herzog anti-hero. To clean the Augean stables he has to empty out an enormous garbage dump, while resisting the Stymphalian birds means being confronted by the might of the United States Air Force. Stroszek, from *Signs of Life*, is caught in a hermetically sealed circle of repetition and inevitability, unable

to break out except by force of sheer violence. He extends himself far beyond his means, pushing his limits and exceeding his own capabilities. The failure of his titanic struggle is preordained, but in the face of overwhelming oppression Stroszek never stops trying anyway. It isn't unlike the other Stroszek – played by Bruno S. a few years later – who finds himself standing in the freezing cold as his repossessed mobile home is loaded onto a truck and driven away. Stroszek wants to rob a bank, but it's closed, so he holds up the local barbershop instead. ("I think it's the saddest robbery I have ever seen on screen," Werner says.) The little people of *Even Dwarfs Started Small* know it makes no sense to rebel against bourgeois table manners, that this is a lost cause, but they do it anyway. The delusional Aguirre – searching for something (El Dorado) that doesn't even exist – defies nature to such an extent that nature inevitably hits back. His was a suicidal mission from the start. *Fitzcarraldo* – a film that retains a powerful hold on audiences more than three decades after it was released – is a projection of Herzog's almost unattainable fantasies, though he had no choice but to ensure that reality caught up with the imaginary events swarming through his mind. The most poignant moment in *Invincible* is the return of Zishe Breitbart to the shtetl where he grew up, desperately warning his fellow villagers of the impending Nazi threat ("We have to get strong. We shall need a thousand Samsons"). To abdicate ambition and cast aside unrealised hopes and dreams means to encounter a heavier burden. "Even a defeat is better than nothing at all," says the voiceover during the final seconds of *The Unprecedented Defence of the Fortress Deutschkreuz*.

Listen, in the opening minutes of *Handicapped Future*, to the gloriously optimistic wheelchair-bound young girl who ran out of things to dream about at the age of five and wants nothing more than to walk, visit America, and meet the Indians of her favourite western. Consider the dignified Aborigines in *Where the Green Ants Dream*, with their moral claim to ancient lands, up against the deranged officialdom of the white man's courts. Watch Reinhold Messner weeping at the thought of telling his mother her other son is dead. All are in some form a representation: the benign minds of Fini and Vladimir Kokol; the chronic back pain of the Bad Lieutenant; the maniacal fury of Gene Scott, ecstatic frenzy of Brooklyn preacher Huie Rogers and murderous impulses of

Carlo Gesualdo; Bokassa in Bangui feasting from his vast refrigerators, and death-row inmates chatting behind the bulletproof glass windows of Texas prisons; flying into the abyss with Steiner, and frolicking with Timothy Treadwell and the bears of Alaska; inside the comforting cockpit with Dieter Dengler, and struggling through the terrorising jungle with Juliane Koepcke; standing over the only person left on a deserted island about to explode, and swimming under the dream-like Ross Ice Shelf; sweeping over speechless children amidst the oblivion of post-war Kuwait, and listening to melancholic ballads sung by young Miskito Indians in Nicaragua; encountering the inhabitants of the undulating dunes of the Sahara and the cast of characters at the inaccessible McMurdo Station, then moving down into a cave adorned with immaculately preserved Palaeolithic art and up to the vertiginous Cerro Torre; bearing witness to the authority of exiled film historian Lotte Eisner and the self-reliant, snowbound hunters of Siberia; marvelling at those seeking some form of religious salvation, be they fervent pilgrims, half a million peripatetic Buddhists, or figures crawling on ice in search of a lost city.

There is also Herzog's own implacable autodidactic nature and knowledge that the entire world is on offer should we be able to muster the requisite excitement; his never-ending *Bildung* (self-improvement, personal transformation), refusal to sing in public, and mythical final moments, walking – alone and unbound – until no road is left; his attempts to nurture a community on the fringes of Germany's most important film festival, to create a utopia in South America, to construct a modern-day atelier, brimming with collaborating artisans, where communal working methods can blossom far from the commercial excesses of Hollywood. Consider also a perfect football match while walking across mountains of sugar beet from Munich to Paris (see *Of Walking in Ice*); the excesses of African slavery; the hypnotic state of a doomed, archaic society; a plague-ridden city rejoicing in its disintegration; a small-scale, close-knit and well-functioning film crew; imbecilic aliens who land on Earth and get nothing right; travelling on foot to pull together a divided nation (and, en route, saving a young Albert Einstein from choking); space exploration; the ability to fly. Herzog seeks nothing but freedom. Reinhild Steingröver tells us that both nature and culture are presented in Herzog's work as "inescapably

hostile realms." Werner can do nothing but try to elude the potential menace nonetheless.

7 SURVIVAL

Werner lives a life of austerity, asceticism, authenticity. In an interview recorded more than thirty-five years after Herzog made his first film, his friend and collaborator Florian Fricke said: "Werner Herzog is one of the few friends that are very famous and have, regardless of their fame, not changed at all. He is in no way different from the way I knew him twenty-five years ago. He still drinks his beer from the bottle." (I have taken a number of subway rides with Werner in New York after a taxi ride was deemed extravagant.) Herzog has always had respect for audiences, aware that the admirers of his films have for years put food on the table, insisting he doesn't lead the life of an "artist," claiming instead the title of "soldier" or "craftsman." Debatable perhaps, but probably something we can live with. After all, as Walter Gropius told us nearly a century ago, "The artist is an exalted craftsman." What is certain is that while both German states of the second half of the twentieth century might have been "crassly materialistic" (as Günter Grass once described them), Werner never has been. He recognised at an early age that money would never get him what he wanted (though it might someday become, he said in 1976, "a concomitant of my work") and has long since chosen the hands-on existence of someone whose living space is manifestly conjoined with his professional life. Happy to integrate himself into mainstream film culture whenever the right opportunity arises – whether it be working with Twentieth Century Fox on *Nosferatu* or, as a director for hire, thirty years later, on *Bad Lieutenant* – there have been no major deviations in Werner's life. When the abyss stares up at him, Werner looks fixedly back, then moves on. "A comedy with Eddie Murphy," he says, "would be my way of pulling back from the edge."

8 RELIGION

Herzog is a humanist, a materialist awe-inspired by scientific exploration and progress, disdainful of the supernatural, but with an appreciation more profound than most of the ethereal, of what

Christopher Hitchens would describe as "the numinous, the transcendent or – at its best – the ecstatic." Organised religion plays no part in Werner's life. But the divine and the sacred and the ineffable always have.

9 POLITICS

Politics are rarely mentioned explicitly in *A Guide for the Perplexed*, but unpack Werner's thoughts about (a) "the lack of adequate imagery" as an incalculable danger to society, and (b) our failure to lob grenades into television stations, and it becomes difficult to divorce these two issues from their wider context. Both ideas reflect Amos Vogel's work as an historian, author and curator, the belief that most of the images around us, suffused with commercialism, are worn out and pernicious in their banality, that television chokes off and impoverishes ("*Es verbloedet die ganze Welt*"). Both are intertwined with the animosity felt by some towards those diabolical bureaucrats who – with robust corporate backing – reap vast fortunes via the time-wasting, conformist, escapist sounds and pictures with which they regularly assault the world. Both could be dubbed "political" ideas, as per Orwell's definition: "Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's idea of the kind of society that they should strive after." To paraphrase Orwell, the deprivations of cinema have political and economic causes, and are not due simply to the "bad influence" of individual filmmakers. When "civilization is decadent," the images it reflects "must inevitably share in the general collapse." We are, all of us, in this day and age, at the mercy of overwhelming and impersonal historical, economic and environmental forces, so it's unlikely that the tide of stagnant cinema will ever be beaten back. There are, fortunately, some willing to confront the corrupted, debased, stale, adulterated, ready-made and cliché-ridden images that surround us. The actions of an enlightened individual or vanguard few, ready to kick back no matter what the odds, those striving for the ideal, can inspire regeneration. Werner has long recognised that he can't change the world through his films, but he can help us better understand certain things.

Although ideology is always handled in Herzog's films and interviews with, as he might describe it, "a pair of pliers," even if the

timeless – not the topical – is what he has always been consumed by, and though his "visionary" stance means his work is "unmediated by historical or socio-political concerns" (as Eric Rentschler writes), it could never be argued that Herzog is an apolitical figure. Werner's anti-despotic verve, for example, is active indeed and given the right circumstances would surely define his very existence. He once told me – without a hint of bluster or bravado – that he would never bear witness to a regime like the Third Reich on home soil for the simple reason that he would stand and fight, surely dying in the process. In an unpublished recording of a conversation with Amos Vogel from 1970, Werner suggested an important lesson needed to be learnt by those in charge, and that he hoped the United States would "lose the war in Vietnam." Referencing events at the Cannes and Oberhausen Film Festivals, in an article written for a German film magazine in 1968 – a politically and socially convulsive year for many countries around the world – Herzog wrote that

> In a climate of radical political activities, it becomes impossible to communicate anything based on a personal decision, because any pronouncement is reduced to fit a lopsided friend-or-foe construct . . .
>
> The lesson I have learned from the events at Oberhausen and Cannes is that a filmmaker cannot and must not keep his films out of the political debate. For such a standpoint, the situation in the field of cultural politics has become far too serious. In these times of upheaval it is no longer possible to try and rescue one's film and shelter it in the safe corner of neutrality. A filmmaker can no longer remain neutral, nor can he make the excuse that it is really everybody else who has turned his film into a political statement.
>
> The politicising of film, however, is fraught with dangers. This is to say that as soon as a crucial political moment is reached, what is expected of a film is automatically reduced. Film can no longer develop its full potential with regard to content and style because everybody's interest will be focused on some palpable results to be gleaned from it. Instead of gaining an awareness of issues and developing questions, people will – according to the film's political stance – primarily read or even force arguments out of it. That is why I have always sought to

declare *Signs of Life* apolitical, though the film has as its theme an individual's radical rebellion.*

Jean-Pierre Melville wrote that a filmmaker "must be a witness to his times." Werner is just that, though he has always observed and participated on his own terms. For him, poetry and abstraction will naturally overwhelm the prosaic nature of commonplace politics. Never hesitant to ridicule the more wrongheaded political activity of the 1968 era, Herzog suggests that today, should the zealous *soixante-huitards* take a look at the abstract *Even Dwarfs Started Small* – with its pint-sized insurgents and their disorganised, fragmented, misplaced, futile but still respectable revolutionary fervour – "they might see a more truthful representation of what happened in 1968 than in most other films."

10 ACCOUNTANCY

"When he was in school," Herzog's mother once explained, "Werner never learnt anything. He never read the books he was supposed to read, he never studied, he never knew what he was supposed to know, it seemed. But in reality, Werner always knew everything. His senses were remarkable. If he heard the slightest sound, ten years later he would remember it precisely, he would talk about it, and maybe use it some way. But he is absolutely unable to explain anything. He knows, he sees, he understands, but he cannot explain. That is not his nature. Everything goes into him. If it comes out, it comes out transformed." I once spoke to Herzog about the techniques behind his more stylised documentaries. If everything were explained, he said, "the charm of fabrication would disappear. I have no problem being a magician who doesn't let his audience in on how his tricks are done." Although we find in the pages below plenty of examples of this mischievous sleight of hand – Werner's creative, often ingenious methods of unmasking, of liberating "truth" from its submerged depths, of showing us what we could not otherwise perceive – there are presumably many more we will never know about.

How important, Herzog asks in his essay "On the Absolute, the

* Translated by Martina Lauster. From "Mit den Wölfen Heulen" (see Bibliography, p. 496).

Sublime and Ecstatic Truth," 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." Reality has always been too obscure and unknowable for Werner to tackle head on. Mere facts – the "accountant's truth" – have a shameful sterility about them, which is why he constantly plays with such things. He knows we respond more intensely to poetry than reportage and actuality, that the poet is able to articulate a more intensified, condensed, elevated and mysterious truth, that the artist is – wrote Amos Vogel – the "conscience and prophet of man." Last year Dr Graham Dorrington, who was closely involved in the production of *The White Diamond* and appears as a central character in the film, wrote to me. "What is and was always clear to me is that Werner was never making a strict documentary. It was a film, carefully crafted with deliberate and remarkable style. What still amazes me is that gullible viewers (who wrote to me), or even some critics, assume that *The White Diamond* is a documentary that attempts to portray factual truth. That is why I don't think my exposition of such truths is necessarily useful, i.e., I have accepted any necessary misrepresentation (or distortion), in the same way that a portrait by (say) Picasso, Jan van Eyck or Hieronymus Bosch is not a photographic likeness of anyone." (Abbas Kiarostami's version: "Every filmmaker has his own interpretation of reality, which makes every filmmaker a liar. But these lies serve to express a kind of profound human truth." Even simpler, from Fellini: "Fiction may have a greater truth than everyday, obvious reality.")

Dorrington's comments lead to thoughts about a concept that appears throughout this book, most emphatically in Chapter 9. Werner's attack on what he calls "cinéma-vérité" requires an elaboration. He frequently uses the term – always disparagingly – and it lies at the heart of his Minnesota Declaration (see p. 476), so it is worth introducing three interlocking ideas. First, film theory, in its many renderings, has never been Werner's thing, and he readily admits to a lack of interest in cinephilia, so there is no good reason why he would know the differences between *cinéma-vérité* and Direct Cinema. The former evolved in the fifties in France and necessarily involved a level of intrusion by filmmakers – who had no compunction about making clear their presence – in whatever was being recorded. The latter is a form of non-fiction cinema that

emerged not long afterwards in North America, whereby inconspicuous and unobtrusive cameramen were more or less forbidden to interfere with the supposed actuality they were faced with, where events were not to be altered for the sake of the film (no voiceover, no re-enactments, nothing staged, etc.). In simplified terms, it's the difference between instigating something and capturing it by chance. Worth pondering is the notion that Werner's criticisms of *cinéma-vérité* ("a malady, an endless reproduction of facts") make more sense when aimed at Direct Cinema. *Vérité* filmmakers, wrote James Blue in 1965, "intervene, probe, interview, provoke situations that might suddenly reveal something. There is an attempt to obtain from the subject a kind of creative participation." In other words, more or less what Herzog does with what he calls his "manipulations." He even hails *Les maîtres fous*, by pre-eminent *vérité* practitioner Jean Rouch – who always brought some layer of calculated artifice to his work – as one of his favourite films. For Rouch, the camera was a catalyst, "an incredible stimulant for the observed as well as the observer."

Second, when it comes to this kind of non-fiction filmmaking, the word "truth" is a red herring, and always has been. If the poetry of Direct Cinema (or *cinéma-vérité*, or whatever you choose to call it) seems to appear by passing chance, it is an affirmation of the filmmakers' artfulness. Direct Cinema – albeit often sociologically framed, in the tradition of reportage – was masterfully, deliberately produced in such a way as to penetrate what Werner would name the "deeper truth." Even when the cameramen filmed quotidian reality, their work was anything but the fly's view from the wall. There was always an active point of view, though all to the good if people believed this was "reality" up there on the screen. The best of the classic Direct Cinema films, if a touch less imaginative and "ecstatic," if occasionally populated by characters more humdrum than Herzog's and usually not quite so rehearsed, are no less truthful. The virtuosos of all forms of documentary cinema seek to draw audiences' attention to particular details (through camerawork and editing, as they subjectively reorder material to meet the demands of the film), rarely claiming objectivity or outright truth. They don't deny having interpreted events around them in varying degrees when they deem it necessary by exercising control, projecting themselves, creating a structure, imposing a "theme," all without compromising

the integrity of the footage. "We express ourselves in an indirect fashion by expressing ourselves through what we find to be interesting around ourselves," explained Direct Cinema cameraman Al Maysles in 1971. If Emerson was right when he told us that "Fiction reveals truth that reality obscures," on closer examination there isn't much of a philosophical divide between Werner's "ecstatic" filmmaking and the foundational works of Direct Cinema, whose directors left a somewhat lighter mark on their end result – one not so fanciful or glaringly apparent – than Werner does on his.

Third, Herzog's Minnesota Declaration isn't to be taken as gospel. It's more a provocation than anything else. He knows full well there is no such thing as absolute transparency in non-fiction cinema, that a truly neutral image doesn't exist, that only the surveillance cameras record objectively and impassively. The point is that Werner doesn't dismiss *vérité* out of hand so much as use it as what Guido Vitiello describes as "a rhetorical device for establishing his own poetics by contrast." For Herzog, it is an instrument of combat that allows him to position himself and define his approach within a sea of verisimilitude-obsessed bilge. (He isn't alone here. "*Cinéma-vérité*" is a term of convenience that lacks any nuance and doesn't begin to speak to the variety of film practices it encapsulates.) For Werner, that collection of twelve aphorisms, first articulated in 1999 at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis before an enthusiastic audience, remains a way of mobilising support against the meretricious product being pumped out in every direction, those heinous crimes – indiscreet reality shows, pious and "unflinching" save-the-world rants, dreary talking heads, pseudo-anthropological didacticisms, sanctimonious and pre-digested feel-good weep fests ("the impossible triumph of the human spirit"), tawdry reconstructions, noxious filler between television commercials and/or film-festival parties (David Mamet calls it "the cheetah overpowering the same old antelope") – committed in *cinéma-vérité*'s name by those preoccupied more with facts than "truth," for whom veracity is obtainable only through the most conventional means. You other filmmakers out there, willing to do the hard work, Herzog admonishes, don't turn a blind eye. Push back.

Considering that on the opening and closing pages of this book we are told he doesn't consider filmmaking a "real profession" and

looks upon his job "with great suspicion," Werner has weathered the past fifty years with grace and skill. I respect him – recalcitrant by nature, an unyielding opponent of sacred cows – in equal measure for his individuality, grace, candour, fortitude, natural authority, apparent effortlessness, discipline, tolerance, joyousness, single-mindedness, adaptability, plain-spokenness, unpretentiousness, practical sensibility and what Lotte Eisner called "visionary vehemence." There is no complacency, self-pity, torpor, abstruseness and diffidence in Herzog's world. Hats off to the uncompromising Werner also for the fact that it's a point of pride for him that he has no office, personal assistant or secretary, that his inbox always runneth over, that he does it all himself. He has always been out there working hard, with the required confidence, even if the eyes of the entire crowd were fixed on players at the other end of the pitch. I applaud his thoughts on conceptual art, the preponderance of indiscretion, bicycle helmets and hand sanitizers, his acceptance of the personal sacrifice that filmmaking necessarily involves, his (misplaced) fear of outliving his welcome as a filmmaker, his deep love of Bavaria, his dismay at how too many of us seek insulation from adversity. He's good company too, these days happy with himself. Werner is stoical, but also sentimental. Bruce Chatwin's description is on the button: "immensely tough, yet vulnerable, affectionate and remote, austere and sensual."

Herzog would never dream of displaying the multitude of awards accumulated over the years proudly on his mantelpiece. He knows the value of the never-ending search for novelty, even if he is someone who will sit in silence for as long as it takes, who appreciates the peace and quiet of home life, of "an easy chair with a cup of tea," who deletes unlistened-to phone messages when there are too many to handle ("Everything of importance eventually reaches me anyway"). He is principled too, a man of his word. In 1984, cameraman Ed Lachman said that "Werner once told me that if he said he'd be at a certain place on a certain street and on a certain day in 1990, he'd be there." Admiration also flows in the direction of Herzog for moving so effortlessly between fiction and non-fiction, and as the entrepreneurial film producer for having maintained financial control of almost the entirety of his body of work. Herzog the *kinosoldat* is unshakable, forceful but not strident, able to withstand it all, bowing only when he chooses to. While at work on

this book, Werner explained he wanted something done a particular way. I suggested to him that "the publisher doesn't usually do that." He absorbed what I told him, paused, then said softly, "I'm not interested in how things are usually done. I want it done *this* way."

I thank Werner for his time on *A Guide for the Perplexed*, which inevitably means less to him than any one of his films. "As someone who has given literally thousands of interviews over the years, as well as filmed many conversations for my own films," he told me, "it has been forever clear to me that journalists who rely on tape recorders inevitably get the story wrong, but those who sit, listening carefully, writing down the odd word, taking in the bigger picture, have a better chance of getting the story right." I do have hours of recordings that document some of my time with Herzog, but he is nonetheless tolerant of this book, even if he feels – probably correctly – that its tone sometimes fails to capture his true self with enough precision. "Too verbose," was the frequent charge Werner laid on the book. He immediately knew what was important. The chat-show-like elements – the boring, flippant, vague bits – were removed, a blade taken to the overwritten passages, certain "overcooked" ideas, those where Werner "endlessly pontificated," scaled back.

Years ago, shortly before publication of the first edition, as Werner ploughed through a rough draft, he actually made it quite clear he had regretted ever agreeing to co-operate. This is, after all, someone who by his own admission lives with as little introspection as possible, who would rather embark on a thorough exploration of the world's jungles, deserts, fields, cities and mountains than look inside. ("Oceans have always eluded me, both in life and in my films, even if I can appreciate them and even if I feel I understand men of the sea.") Fortunately, Werner considered this second edition respectable enough to give considerable time to, including twelve intense days as we refined the manuscript together, working through it line by line, reaching for the thesaurus, chuckling at the possibilities, reading entire chapters out loud to each other. I particularly appreciated the moment when, before one of our final meetings, Werner opted out of pain relief during a trip to the dentist so he could be clear-headed during an afternoon session.

I am often asked how I met Werner, so please permit an aside, concerned with how I came to edit this book, which is itself a representation of the themes it expounds. If *A Guide for the Perplexed* is

a roundabout treatise on how to spark dormant curiosities we never knew we had, immobilise evil forces forever raining down on the filmmaking process, neutralise the surrounding stupidity, clear the decks, wrench from the deepest recesses the requisite courage, flush away all obstacles (internal as well as physical), reclaim dignity (or, at least, adjust to there being none), accept the hardships, stomach the dejection and angst, counteract the self-doubt, brush yourself off after the kicks and slaps, and just get down to work, then it's the best example in my life. Time spent on work you believe in is never wasted.

I first became aware of Herzog at a screening of *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner* and *La Soufrière* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. I was about sixteen years old and remember feeling that these were some of the most intriguing films I had yet encountered. My interest in Herzog was sealed when (sitting behind Susan Sontag and Wallace Shawn) I saw *Lessons of Darkness* at the Film Forum in downtown New York. Years later I found myself up against a wall, so wrote a hubris-packed letter to Walter Donohue – who still handles film books at Faber and Faber – explaining I had something to offer. At the time I was assisting Ray Carney with his *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, doing research in European archives and offering French translations, so had minor credentials and a flimsy connection to Faber. Walter called me, explaining that his second-in-command was about to leave for the Cannes Film Festival, and suggesting I spend unpaid time at the Faber office and see the operation from the inside. Less than a week later I was in the office of the man who might give the go-ahead to the one book I knew I wanted to do and felt the world needed to read. (There was a gaping and – as far as I could determine – inexplicable gap on bookshop shelves between Howard Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock.) I turn to that other Herzog – Mr Bellow's – for as concise an explanation as possible of my reasoning behind what has turned into years of work: I was (and remain) "overcome by the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify." And to put it all in one place.

After a week of answering phones amidst the stimulating, sedate atmosphere of Faber's Queen Square office, I asked Walter why *Herzog on Herzog* didn't exist. It seemed a natural fit in their interview-book series. Walter told me he had received various proposals

over the years but hadn't liked the approaches they had taken, suggesting they had been too academically orientated. I asked if I could do the book. Walter told me to put my ideas down on paper and he would take them to the editorial board. Word soon came down: move ahead with the project. Now all I had to do was persuade Herzog. I went home, wrote a short letter and faxed it to his office in Munich. A week later a reply arrived: "I have never circled around my own work. I do not like to do self-scrutiny. I do look into the mirror in order to shave without cutting myself, but I do not know the color of my eyes. I do not want to assist in a book on me. There will be no *Herzog on Herzog*." I reached for my original letter, which turned out to be overly formal and uptight. My next one, considerably longer, laid out, in simple, emotive terms, who I was and why this was a worthy project, adding that I felt the final result would surely find an appreciative audience. A few days later a fax arrived. "Thank you very much for your good letter which puts you as a person in a new and different perspective," Werner wrote. "I will be in London in September. This seems to be the best opportunity to meet and talk things over."

I tell you all this, dear reader, because – at the risk of sounding like a cheap self-help guru – it's worth sticking to your guns, pursuing what you want, taking that leap of faith. I could easily have junked the entire project after receiving that first fax, but instead stuck with it. Werner is the first person I ever interviewed, but for some reason I felt I could make it work. The result is, I believe, the straight dope, a volume of uncluttered prose, not unlike Herzog's films. "My stories are never deeply complicated and intellectual," he explains. "Children everywhere can understand them."

Nothing is imprecise in Herzog's world. The characters in his films might occupy liminal positions, but Werner – an intensely instinctive filmmaker – never does. He does nothing by half. In the poetic *Conquest of the Useless*, we find this: "If I were to die, I would be doing nothing but dying." He frequently took me to task when it came to my working methods, insisting it was all becoming stale ("When will the book be ready? Do the five-day version. It needs life! Leave the gaps in it, leave it porous. Shake the structure out and write it. Let's get the motherfucker over and done with") and accusing me of being an "endless fiddler" (guilty as charged). The line from Preston Sturges's *Unfaithfully Yours* was written

about him: "If you ever want anything done, always ask the busy man. The others never have time."

There is lucidity in this book, there is a wonderful stubbornness and iron determination, there is conviction, compulsion and some obstinacy, there is a crystal-clear understanding of priorities, there is perhaps hyperbole. It is all apodictically (one of Werner's favourite words) not stale. Even if it probably contains a few benign contradictions, I have great confidence in this book, which is the result of someone exercising his daunting powers of storytelling. *A Guide for the Perplexed* is, as Herb Golder once told me, "Werner on everything, from outer space to our inner lives." A friend of mine describes it as "a truly passionate encounter, like an absorbing conversation that you stumble across in the back room of a party, where real ideas and personalities are being laid bare, away from all the noise and pretentious prattle in the kitchen." While sleepless nights and being mired in duplicity (Going Rogue) became the norm over the years, a creeping and burdensome sense of responsibility caught up with me. The decade-long chase – which invited persuasive trips to Sachrang, Neuschwanstein and Skellig – provided a hearty, rewarding challenge. Fortunately it's been that long, as things are only now starting to make sense. The immersion has confirmed two things: first, exploring Herzog's body of work has served as an object lesson in how lifeless and superficial the interpretive/theoretical approach too often is, how so many resort to the pointless rehash. Second, it's downhill from here for me. As someone who on occasion interviews people of cinema, Werner is the top of the pile. The raw material doesn't get any better.

Since the first version of this book appeared, a desire emerged to make it a thing in itself, not just commentary. As such, its contents have been rewritten/augmented with – wrote Moses Maimonides of his similarly titled tome – "great exactness and exceeding precision, and with care to avoid failing to explain any obscure point." The interview here has been consciously inflected in certain ways, carefully pushed in various directions, coloured with specific ideas. Everything in its proper place. Structure, rhythm and tempo were painstakingly imposed upon the Herzog in these pages, after the fact, with Werner's words edited into single, often lengthy responses to prompts and questions that were, for the most part, written afterwards. ("You should let the readers know this. I

sound so talkative in the book, but I'm really not that garrulous.") Take this portrait of an individual, this carefully calibrated provocation, with the caution it deserves. This official version is no less of a construct than any of the multitude of Herzogs that populate cyberspace and elsewhere, those complementing and competing "doppelgängers," as Werner calls them. There was no other way of presenting this much material so efficiently.

The notion of "perplexity" has been vaguely appropriated from Maimonides – Jewish philosopher, physician, mathematician, astronomer and mystic. Writing in the twelfth century, Maimonides addressed his tome to those respectful of science but struggling to balance that knowledge with a devotion to divine law, metaphysical beliefs and "profound mysteries." Within his book, wrote Maimonides, are solutions to the big issue of his age: the problem of religion, which is "a source of anxiety to all intelligent men." Werner's attempts to address more contemporary concerns and answer the sharp questions that today hang in the air are documented below. How, for example, to put food on the table when a desire for self-expression is so overwhelming? Is individuality possible in such a homogenised world? Can the requisite tenacity and steadfastness be mustered when confrontations with unfavourable odds inevitably occur? How exactly do you hypnotise a chicken? By chronicling so clearly his own liberation from the impediments and strictures of our culture; by showing how to transcend the bankrupt world into which we are sinking, one choked with anti-intellectualism, cynicism, consumerism, fear, cowardice, vulgarity, extremism, laziness and narcissism; by articulating an untrammelled and distilled commentary on life and cinema, Herzog – our persistent, knowing and sceptical guide, his anarchic streak glowing – offers tough-love wisdom to bewildered doubters everywhere, those intimidated by the uncontrollable waves of information washing over humanity, caught in the violent seas of indifference that this godless, technology-ridden, semi-literate age has wrought.

Werner's thoughts in his *Guide for the Perplexed* are part of a decades-long outpouring, a response to the clarion call, to the fervent requests for guidance. He presents us with his personal ethos, talks of himself and his work, and by so doing – by laying bare his pragmatism and righteousness – offers support and reinforcement, assisting each of us in the construction of our own personalised

bastion. Herzog the wayfarer is a dynamic and open-minded chaperone on the path, accessible to all. He is the honest showman providing us with something like an instruction manual, with tools for living, a much-needed shot in the arm, a map to the resting point. To paraphrase Maimonides: those readers who have not studied cinema will still derive profit from many a chapter, but those who attempt creative and imaginative endeavours of any kind will surely derive benefit from every chapter. How greatly will he rejoice! How agreeably will these words strike his ears! Let the truth and right by which you are apparently the loser be preferable to you to the falsehood and wrong by which you are apparently the gainer.

The conversations in *A Guide to the Perplexed* take a chronological approach, with each film – from *A Lost Western* (1957) to *From One Second to the Next* (2013) – discussed in turn. Interjections have been kept to a minimum (there was never any "systematic questionnaire" or "long list of intricate questions" brought to bear, to quote Truffaut on his work with Hitchcock), and are presented as stepping stones more than anything else. (Wanting to listen to your own voice can be a deadly trait in an interviewer.) Conscious of the fact that there are few people who have seen every Herzog film, the interview is presented in such a way that even when the reader hasn't seen the work under discussion, there will still hopefully be something immediate and tangible to appreciate.

Towards the end of this volume, readers will find a selection (made, initially, by me) of images drawn primarily from Herzog's archive at the Deutsche Kinemathek in Berlin, new translations of his poetry (originally published in 1978), a journal written in 1982 during his walk around Germany, the legendary "The Minnesota Declaration" from 1999, and Herb Golder's "Shooting on the Lam" (extracted and edited from an unpublished book-length manuscript), from which we learn that filmmakers with an intellect are able to fortify, educate and invigorate in ways that institutionalised theorists and academics, in thrall to obfuscating sensibilities, can only dream about. This essay – which says more in a few pages than most pieces about Herzog's films fail to say in a hundred – serves as a bulwark against theoretical utterances about the films.

Take it with a pinch of salt and don't be one of those who ignore the self-mockery and humour Werner's films and interviews are

full of (one reason to search out some of the many readily available recordings of him). How best to transcribe the following with the playfully sardonic tone with which it was told? "I once had a public discussion with the diminutive Agnès Varda, who seemed to take offence at my postulation that a filmmaker, rather than having this or that quality, should be able to clear his or her own height. She didn't like that very much." Herb Golder recalls the production of *Wings of Hope* and *My Best Fiend*: "I remember a particularly gruesome species of tree we often encountered in the Amazon whose entire trunk was covered in thorns the size of small spikes." Remarked Werner: "Let the tree-huggers try this one."

This book is dedicated to the memory of a true *mensch*, Werner's friend ("The Last Lion") and mine too, a man who lived for great purpose, restless and always on guard, able to perceive the enemy and explain it to us, forever in search of fresh forms of visual expression, who urged us to keep our eyes on and minds alert to the complexities and banalities exploding around us, eternally willing to offer support to anyone seeking to heighten awareness and extend the borders of the possible, who inspired and galvanised generations of filmmakers and cineastes, who never made inferences from insufficient data, who – with creativity and rectitude – sought unfailingly to mould public taste and facilitate a shift in consciousness, who favoured knowledge over information: Amos Vogel, "one of the most profound connoisseurs of the cinema, endowed with an unerring instinct for new talents," as Werner once wrote of his mentor. I miss his resilience, being able to peruse his bounteous library, hearing the clicks of those five-drawer filing cabinets and exploring the wonders within, and the strolls through Washington Square Park with my surrogate grandfather. Long may his ideas burn through society, dissolving what needs to be eradicated, devoured by those agitated rogues in search of adequate imagery who refuse to avert their eyes.

Now be a man and quit that moody brooding.

Paul Cronin
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