



*Pisco Med Publishing*

# Approach to Herzog's Ecstatic Truth: Haptics, Bodily Empathy and Memory

Jingwen Chen

The university of Edinburgh, EH3 9YL s1963152@ed.ac.uk

---

**Abstract:** Approached from a phenomenological perspective, this dissertation aims to develop a better understanding and stress the importance of haptic visuality, which renders critical implications related to the exploration and generate a fresh insight of the 'ecstatic truth'. Based on the engagement with the sensuousness of Herzog's *The land of silence and darkness* (1971) <sup>15</sup>, this paper interprets the haptic visuality, embodiment, and kinaesthetic empathy of Herzog's documentary, thereby advancing the phenomenological understanding of "Ecstatic truth".

**Keywords:** Haptic visuality, The Viewer Body, The Embodied Subject, Ecstatic truth, Affect in cinema;

---

## Haptic visuality and embodied experience

Werner Herzog is one of the most important figures of New German Cinema. This is reflected in the wide-ranging discussions and critiques of Herzog's work in the academic field. Herzog's work treads a path between documentary and fiction, subverting traditional modes of cinema. His work is bold and experimental, pushing the boundaries of the film genres. Herzog's work departs from the traditional form of documentary making and is constructed through a distinctive directorial style which relies on fabrication and stylization. This bending of the documentary genre, through a mix of style and invention, has become a distinctive and important characteristic of the auteur. Through this distinctive directorial style, Herzog seeks the truth of humanity (Ames, 2014) <sup>2</sup>.

A much analysed and referenced piece of work by Herzog is his film *Land of silence and darkness* (1971) <sup>15</sup> which exemplifies an important early stage in the director's work. Herzog attempts to use real footage cinematically, in order to represent the characters' inner world in the film. In the *Minnesota Declaration* (2012) <sup>6</sup>, "Ecstatic truth" is, Herzog argues, the idea that cinema should ideally function to facilitate and evoke a profoundly affective "truth" encounter – an "ecstatic truth". He goes on to say that this may only be achieved through "fabrication and stylization and imagination" (Herzog, 2012) <sup>6</sup>. Herzog attempts to evoke affective experiences in the viewer, and as Ames describes, Herzog is "devoted to the visibility of affective experience and other forms of embodied knowledge" (Ames, 2009, p. 65) <sup>1</sup>. It is this "visibility" that establishes a reality between the film and the viewer through the psychological and affective experience which brings them closer to the truth. Christian Keathley notes, "is not just a visual experience, but also a more broadly sensuous one; it is an experience that has been linked in film to the embodied, the tactile, and the bodily empathy (Keathley, 2006) <sup>7</sup>.

Furthermore, the approaches used to sustain sensuousness and embodiment are the key to understanding the appeal and resonance of Herzog's film among the viewers. The notion of embodiment indicates both metaphorically the embodiment of the meanings of the character's actions and emotions, and literally the incorporation in the viewer's body of synesthetic and sensory-motor sensations and feelings (Coëgnarts&Kravanja, 2015) <sup>5</sup>.

In light of the notion of embodiment in film, an examination of the phenomenological in relation to Herzog's film opens up important perspectives in relation to the draw and appeal of the documentary. According to Sobchack, a movie is a mixture of complicated and vivid experiences, the experiences are diversified rather than single layered.

(Sobchack,1992) <sup>14</sup>.

The concept of “The embodied nature of vision” was proposed by Sobchack (1992) <sup>14</sup> and opening the boundaries of vision with a new perspective of consideration. Thus, the boundary of vision is opened, and human vision is no longer limited to the conception found in traditional psychology which regards human vision as the sum, or patchwork, of many senses, and holds that each feeling is strictly dependent on the corresponding retinal stimulation. This view is undoubtedly an analytical mode of external observation and thinking.

However, for Merleau-Ponty, real vision is an interwoven experience of the subjective and the objective; it consists of the person’s perception and the thing seen. The subjective and the objective complement each other and open up the world of perceptions (1968,61) <sup>13</sup>.

The real vision is corporeal experience, which can actively interact with other sense organs of the body. "The flesh of the world" is a concept put forward by Merleau-Ponty, which analyzes the existence between the subject and the objective, the matter between consciousness and things, and integrated perception and holistic perception (Merleau-Ponty&Landes, 2012) <sup>12</sup>. Sobchack argues that vision promotes being, and that it can connect visible and invisible, material and immaterial subjects in the world (1992, 51) <sup>14</sup>.

Phenomenology provides a more reflective dimension on sensual beings representing themselves in film, and on this basis also provides a richer exploration of the concept of the 'cinematic body', allowing us to work on the ways in which embodiment is formed in and through film.

This work describes the phenomenological similarities between human and cinematic embodiment, in particular through Marks (2000) <sup>11</sup> and Baker’s (2009) <sup>3</sup> concept of film skin and film muscle structure, and in the end promotes sensuous empathy between viewer and film. This re-examination and reconsideration of cinematic experience from the perspective of embodied experience is more specific and more importantly a corporeally affective one.

To further illustrate, the cinematic experience includes the body in the film, such as the character roles, as well as the body of the film, such as the surface and texture of the screen, and the audiences. The phenomenology of the film captures these important elements, which are the bodies, kinaesthetic empathy and haptics, to help the audiences understand and explore the possibilities of their mutual reactions, while deepening the resonance that they evoke while watching.

Furthermore, haptic visuality reveals an embodied experience of Herzog’s documentary and provides a space in which mental and psychic structures are articulated and inflected by our bodily behaviour. The notion of “ecstatic truth” might be best understood as a truth which is found in an embodied organisation of our perceptions. It emphasises an interaction between the visual and the bodily senses. “Haptic visuality” is defined in the Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies as “A physical touch or the sensation of being touched by the organization of film images, in which the physical presence of the film image is prominent, evoking close contact with surface details and textures (Kuhn & Westwell, 2020) <sup>8</sup>.

The viewing mode of haptic vision itself involves the relationship between the viewer and the screen surface - the materiality of the interface. Bruno (2002) <sup>4</sup> makes the point that the materiality of an image can be represented on the surface of the screen, and that this can then be perceived as the 'skin' of the image (21). Based on the concept of the haptic visual, we can say that, just as the image is covered by the screen surface, at the same time, the screen surface also has a spatial character. This is what allows for “haptic vision” to enter and interact with the space and the other senses of the viewer's body. Additionally, haptic vision can awaken the other senses of the body and produce a deeper experience with what lies beneath the skin of the image. Thus, the intimacy between bodily perception and the image is enhanced by haptic vision and is mutually permeable.

Images can be touched by the eye, so to speak. Haptic visual experiences are indispensable throughout the entire process of watching a film. This is why Herzog uses images from real life to create a 'truth', avoiding the direct sensory experience of visual and auditory stimuli in favour of more natural and poetic images, allowing the “ecstatic truth” to penetrate from the haptic visuality to the multiple senses of the body, and finally evoking profound bodily empathy

experiences and memories. This is the process through which the viewer's body interacts with the image. In contrast to a direct, physical stimulation of senses, Herzog's aesthetic not only allows bodily experiences to interact with the image on a deeper level, but also to connect to the image on a spiritual level.

David MacDougall examines the various ways in which films are represented as 'bodies' and asks: "Whose body do they correspond to? Is it the subject? Is it the body of the viewer or the filmmaker? Or is it an 'open' body that receives all the information?" (2006: 16)<sup>10</sup>. Barker explores these questions and does not entirely agree that the film body is Vertov's "cinema-eye", nor is it Deleuze's "body without organs", She argues mentioned that the film's body also adopts the world of tactile intimacy and reciprocity, which is revealed through its nonhuman body haptically, and shown on the screen (Baker, 2009: 4-10)<sup>3</sup>.

More specifically, it is the intimate relationship between haptic vision, the body of the film and the viewer that the bodily senses are also embodied in the film.

The haptic vision regulates the body's senses and movements in parts of the body such as the muscles (Barker, 2009) 3, joints and skin. The rhythm, energy and balance of the viewer's body in the face of moving images is expressed through a tactile experience, as analysed by Barker in 'The tactile eye'. Here, Baker (2009)<sup>3</sup> suggests that the tactile experience begins with the skin, moves into the muscles and then goes deeper into the viscera, ultimately leading to inspiration. As Sobchack describes, we have "the bodily capacity to perceive and express and move in a world that exists both for us and against us" (Sobchack, 1992, p.5)<sup>14</sup>. Here, she is describing how the film's body manifests itself, and how the viewer is able to perceive the world of the film through this body.

Tactility is a form of both perception and expression meaning that the haptic visual is the foundation of the materiality, the body, of the film. It is from this "body" that the viewer's body is attracted to, and in a relationship with the body - the world – of the film. Through this non-traditional mode of watching we are able to make a first entry into the poetic truth that Herzog's "ecstatic truth" is looking for.

## Reference

- 1.Ames, E., 2009. Herzog, Landscape, and Documentary. *Cinema journal*, 48(2), pp.49–69.
- 2.Herzog, W. & Ames, E., 2014. *Werner Herzog Interviews*, Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi.
- 3.Barker, J.M., 2009. *The tactile eye : touch and the cinematic experience*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 4.Bruno, G., 2002. *Atlas of emotion : journeys in art, architecture, and film*, New York: Verso.
- 5.Coëgnarts, M. & Kravanja, P., 2015. *Embodied cognition and cinema*, Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- 6.Herzog, W., 2012. *THE MINNESOTA DECLARATION*. In *Ferocious Reality*. University of Minnesota Press, p. ix.
- 7.Keathley, C., 2006. *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 8.Kuhn, A. & Westwell, G., 2020. *A dictionary of film studies 2nd ed.*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 9.Laine, T., 2006. *CINEMA AS SECOND SKIN*. *New review of film and television studies*, 4(2), pp.93–106.
- 10.MacDougall, D., 2006. *The corporeal image: film, ethnography, and the senses*, Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- 11.Marks, L.U., 2000. *The skin of the film intercultural cinema, embodiment, and the senses*, Durham : Duke University Press.
- 12.Merleau-Ponty, M. & Landes, D.A., 2012. *Phenomenology of perception*, London: Routledge.
13. Merleau-Ponty, M., Lefort, C. & Lingis, A., 1968. *The visible and the invisible : followed by working notes*, Evanston, Ill.:Northwestern University Press.
14. Sobchack, V.C., 1992. *The address of the eye : a phenomenology of film experience*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
15. Herzog, W., Straubinger, F. & New Yorker Video, 1971. *Land of silence and darkness*, New York, N.Y.: New Yorker Video.