

The Enlightenment of Ecstatic Truth for Developing Sublime Aesthetic Experiences in the Post-cinematic Era

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Abstract: *Ecstatic truth* was first coined in Herzog's 1999 *Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema*. Herzog argues that there are not only mere *facts* in documentary films but also a much deeper truth, that is, *ecstatic truth*. The concept traces back to Longinus' definition of the sublime and the physiological sublime that Burke developed, closely connecting ecstatic truth to sublime aesthetic experiences. This article traces the historical connection between ecstatic truth and the concept of the sublime. It delves into one of Herzog's Amazon films, *Aguirre*, to explore the sublime aesthetic experience from sensory and emotional dimensions, revealing ecstatic truth. Finally, combined with the development characteristics of the new audiovisual practice model, it explores the enlightenment of ecstatic truth to sublime aesthetic experiences in the post-cinematic era.

Keywords: Herzog, Ecstatic Truth, Sublime, Longinus, Burke, Post-cinema.

1. Introduction

The term *ecstatic truth* first appeared in Herzog's *Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema* [1], which challenged the documentary style of *cinéma vérité*: as soon as the facts are presented, the truth will emerge naturally. Herzog, conversely, argued for a different perspective, stating, "Cinema harbors deeper strata of truth, which are mysterious and elusive and can only be accessed through fabrication, imagination, and stylization"—a concept he defines as "ecstatic truth" [1]. Ecstatic truth is that Herzog drew inspiration from the concept of *ekstasis* in Longinus' *On the Sublime* (1st c. CE). Longinus believes that the sublime resides in everything of a superhuman scale, whether in nature or aesthetic experiences, that excites the senses and creates a strong emotional response in the audience. By feeling the sublime, the audience is able to step out of themselves and enter a noble state, attaining a higher form of truth. Herzog's artistic films inspire the audience's sublime aesthetic experience from the sensory and emotional dimensions through fabricated, imaginary, and stylized treatments, the collision of the sublime forces of nature and the sublime actions of humans, leading the audience to a "deeper strata of truth" [1]. In the contemporary post-cinematic era, advances in digital technology have introduced new audiovisual forms, expanded our sensory capacities, enhanced our grasp of Herzog's concept of ecstatic truth, and facilitated deeper exploration and refinement of sublime aesthetic experiences within new media contexts.

Therefore, this essay aims to analyze how the sublime experience depicted in Herzog's Amazon film *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* [2] contributes to the understanding of ecstatic truth by tracing back to the fundamental relationship between ecstatic truth and the concept of the sublime, and to explore how the post-cinematic era can further develop ecstatic truth in the emotional and sensory dimensions, exploring the sublime aesthetic experience. The main body of the paper is divided into three parts. Firstly, I will interpret Herzog's ecstatic truth from Longinus' *On the Sublime* and Burke's

physiological sublime; Second, combining the sublime concepts of Longinus and Burke, I will explore the sublime experience through one of Herzog's representative Amazon films, *Aguirre*, to delve into the embodiment of ecstatic truth from the emotional and sensory dimensions; Lastly, I will explore the integration of post-cinematic audiovisual practices, using *Sanctuary of the Unseen Forest* [3] by Marshmallow Laser Feast as a case study to examine new media's capacity to convey sublime aesthetic experiences and ecstatic truth.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. Foundations between the Sublime Concept and Ecstatic Truth

In Herzog's essay *On the Absolute, the Sublime, and Ecstatic Truth* (1972), he shows that ecstatic truth is inspired by Longinus' *On the Sublime*, borrowing the concept of *ekstasis* as his core idea: "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'" [4]. Longinus believed that the sublime exists in nature and the aesthetic experience: a response to objects or events of astonishing immensity or power, a combination of immanent terror and delight, built on infinite emotion. It influences the audience through "an irresistible force and mastery" [5], allowing the audience to detach himself and enter a noble state, thereby attaining a higher form of truth, that is, *ecstatic truth*. Both Burke and Kant further developed Longinus' theory of the sublime, however, their understanding of the sublime is quite different: Burke expands Longinus' sublime from a physiological perspective, emphasizing the power and violence of the sublime in overcoming intelligence or reason [6]. Kant, on the other hand, argues that the source of sublime experience is not the sublime object, but human reason, placing human reason above nature. In Herzog's films, there is a confrontation between two sublime forces: the sublime of natural forces and the sublime of human actions. However, whether it's the

ambitious sublime action of the Spanish expedition to conquer nature in *Aguirre* [2] or the protagonist's use of opera, one of the forms of human sublimity, in *Fitzcarraldo* [7], to challenge the wild sublime of the rainforest, both end in the failure of human action, emphasizing the sensory agitation, physical disturbance, and terrifying emotional experiences triggered by the irrational forces of nature. This is more in line with Burke's approach to physiology as a central element of sublime experience, emphasizing the impact of sublime experience on the body, breaking down the boundaries between humans and non-humans. and contrary to Kant's position of placing man in a privileged position to overcome all natural forces.

Therefore, I will skip Kant's rational sublime and reveal Herzog's ecstatic truth from the perspective of Burke's physiological sublime. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Burke identifies the source of the sublime power—immanent terror and delight. “whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime” [8], just as the overwhelming experience and the strongest terror brought to us by the sublime forces of nature. At the same time, there is another pleasant aesthetic experience: “a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror; which, as it belongs to self-preservation is one of the strongest of all the passions. Its object is the sublime” [8]. This overlap between pain and pleasure is precisely the response of the physiological sublime to Herzog's ecstatic truth in the emotional dimension. At the sensory level, Burke sees vision and auditory as two important factors in experiencing the sublime: “The eye is not the only organ of sensation by which the sublime passion may be produced. Sounds have a great power in these as in most other passions” [8]. It echoes Herzog's approach in ecstatic documentaries, such as *Aguirre* and *Fitzcarraldo*, which use grand soundscapes (e.g. opera) to respond to the magnificent rainforest landscape. Meanwhile, Burke also complements the synergy of other senses such as smell and taste, emphasizing holistic engagement and bringing new revelations to ecstatic truth from more sensory dimensions.

2.2. Analyzing the Sublime and Ecstatic Truth in Herzog's Film

The sublime in Herzog's films is reflected in two ways: one is the confrontation between the sublime forces of nature and the sublime actions of humans, and the other is the sublime aesthetic experience conveyed to the audience, that is, *ecstatic truth*. I chose one of Herzog's famous Amazon cinema, *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* [2], and used the theories of the sublime of Longinus and Burke to dissect the dual dimensions of the sublime in the film clips from the sensory and emotional dimensions, exploring ecstatic truth.

Aguirre tells the story of a group of conquistadors, led by a Spanish soldier Don Lope de Aguirre, who sail down the Amazon River and into the depths of the jungle to search the legendary city of gold, El Dorado. In the end, the noble plans of the entire expedition end in failure, and become victims of nature. The opening scene of *Aguirre* introduces the viewer into “a sublime state” [6], with the majestic Andes mountains looming in layers of mist, as illusory as a dream. As the Popol Vuh *hypnotic music* [9] sounds, we unconsciously feel nervous tension and sensory agitation, introducing us to an audiovisual experience of ecstasy. The camera slowly zooms

in on the mountains, and the vision changes from blur to clear, revealing a Spanish army marching through the fog. The dramatic contrast between the insignificance of human beings and the sublime of nature is precisely the world of “fabrication, imagination and stylization” [1] that Herzog creates. The camera slowly pans down, and all the soldiers are completing this sublime action in search of the legendary city of gold, El Dorado. The camera cuts to the side of the mountain, the fog is filled, and the team is still moving in an orderly manner. The immensity of the Andes rivals the heroic actions of man: “the Large [i.e., the sublime] realised as pure Idea, in the double nature of the landscapes and the actions” [10]. The camera slowly pans to the medium shot, where the music becomes more intense and accompanied by hypnotic chanting. The image of an object falling from a cliff switches to a close-up of the characters: well-dressed soldiers, handcuffed Indian slaves, ornate wagons, chickens in cages, pigs on a leash, Spanish royal family, huge artillery fire. The marauders arrogantly demonstrate their superiority in front of the non-human environment, and all actions are carried out in a clear and orderly manner. It ends with the loud thud of a cannon crashing into a cliff, “a combination of both terror and ecstasy” [11], which seems to suggest the tragic end of the character's struggle against the overwhelming forces of nature [Figure 1]. Here, the sensory experience focuses on vision and auditory: the majestic Andes and the mysterious fog, the vast jungle, the Spanish army in full gear, the magnificent hypnotic music, the voice-over, the artillery fire falling into the cliff, the burning flames and the smoke, and the deafening explosion. The sublime power of nature is visually elevated in the meticulous depiction of the vast Amazon rainforest, complemented by the small size of the Spanish army's figures, and their heroic actions of conquest. At the same time, the burning flames and the smoke permeate the entire film, presented in a way of human sublime, proclaiming to nature the unshakable dominance of mankind. In Auditory, the power of hypnotic music is enormous, setting the sublime tone for the film and, by echoing the magnificent natural landscape, brings a strong emotion in the sensory dimension – “a passion similar to terror” [8] – which is one of the necessary conditions for generating the sublime state.

The sublime aesthetic experience in the film is not only perceived through the audiovisual senses but also exists in the strong emotions. At the end of *Aguirre*, the sublime aesthetic experience is expressed through the character's monologues, postures, movements, and expressions, which is also Burke's emphasis on the impact of emotions and sublime experiences on the body in the physiological sublime. The gathered monkeys frolic around the artillery fire (note that the relationship between humans and nature has undergone a qualitative shift), and the ruling power of nature has gradually penetrated. The camera gives a close-up of Aguirre's face, an almost distorted desperate struggle, and begins his self-hypnotic monologue: “We will build a bigger ship, sail north, and take Trinidad from the Spanish crown.” The camera cuts to the monkeys on the ship, continuing their conquest. The camera then switches to the medium shot and begins to follow Aguirre's movements: chasing the monkeys on the boat in a grotesque and stiff posture, the sublime forces of nature seem to invade his body, and he tries to use human reason to fight against this force, staggering, stumbling, kneeling and rising, still and moving, but unable to escape the fate of merging his body with the natural environment. At this time, the immanent sublime power of nature is manifested through the emotions

of “terror, horror, dream, and hallucination” [11] conveyed by the physicality of the character. He searches under the cannon, passes through the carriage, and finally comes to the edge of the ship, grabbing a monkey in disbelief for the last resistance and struggle: “I am the Wrath of God! Who else is with me?” In the final series of shots, the familiar hypnotic music sounds again, immersing us in the sublime. With the sun shining brightly, the Amazon river as far as the eye can see, and the

camera begins to rotate in a strange spiral motion, we are once again transported into Herzog's ecstasy realm: the still raft, the postures, movements, expressions of the human body are naturally alienated, and the monkeys run and frolic to occupy the boats for their final show [Figure 2]. The noble deeds of humanity will eventually become a phantom: “Stand in this unreal world, in unreal misery, (...) I did not see God today.” [12]



Figure 1. The Opening (Herzog, 1972)



Figure 2. The ending (Herzog, 1972)

2.3. Exploring Sublime Aesthetic Experiences of the Post-cinematic Era

With the development of digital technology, new media such as virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed reality, 3D films, video games, and audiovisual installations have opened up new modes of audiovisual practice for the audience: integrating art into “regular’ cinema” [13], integrating films into art exhibitions, and moving towards the post-cinematic

era. The advent of this new audiovisual mode breaks the boundaries of cinema, “allowing images to hemorrhage from the screen out into the audience, or beyond the theater” [14]. Viewers can experience an imaginative and transcendent world in an immersive way. In this immersive environment, audiences move from a single vision as the highest aesthetic sense to a sensual-dominated multisensory integration, where the emotional experience is infinitely amplified, and they are able to enter a sublime state faster and better, further

strengthening our understanding of Herzog's ecstatic truth and exploring the sublime aesthetic experience.

Sanctuary of the Unseen Forest [3] is a large-scale video installation produced by the Marshmallow Laser Feast. Through volumetric data collection, field records, and ecological surveys, it tells the story of a giant Ceiba pentandra from the Colombian Amazon, recreating the grand scale of the Ceiba pentandra and its local rainforest ecosystem. It aims to bring the unseen into perspective and explore our interconnectedness with trees, reflecting and contemplating our place in the wider natural system. Next, I will start from the emotional and sensory experience of the film, combined with the characteristics of audiovisual media in the post-film era, and explore the revelation of sublime aesthetic experience that ecstatic truth brings us.

Sanctuary of the Unseen Forest uses photogrammetry and Lidar scanning technology to restore a Ceiba pentandra, a giant tree species in the Amazon rainforest, and its complex ecosystem—the habitat and shelter of countless epiphytes, insects, and animals, giving us a more realistic spatial and emotional experience. But it is not limited to restoring the real scene, it also manipulates and fabricates the data through post-computer modeling, rendering, and digital special effects, creating a sublime spiritual refuge “at the intersection of the imaginary and the factual” [6], revealing “a poetic, ecstatic truth” [5]. And natural landscapes, such as the refuge itself, “may cause our humanly emotional responses to natural expanses” [15]. Through the construction of the sublime of nature, the film allows the audience to have a strong emotional response to the amazing vastness, to better feel the sublime aesthetic experience. Audiences are able to extend themselves, to rise to a sublime height, entering a deeper truth. In *Our Time on Earth, Barbican Centre* (2022), the work uses a 4K, 16:9 giant vertical screen, moving away from the traditional frame and bringing us a dense sensory experience, placing the audience in a sublime, vast, imaginative Amazon spiritual rainforest: we see countless tiny lives from the canopy to the roots, hear our heartbeats beating with the flow of nutrients in the phloem, breathe in the fresh oxygen that flows into our tree-like lungs, and touch the mycelial web woven between the land and the sky. Here, the senses such as sight, hearing, smell, and touch work together to operate and influence us at a ‘metabolic’ level [16], infinitely amplifying the sublime aesthetic experience and creating a moment of ecstasy: “Percepts are no longer perceptions; they are independent of a state of those who experience them. Affects are no longer feeling or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them.” [17].

3. Conclusion

Herzog first coined the concept of *ecstatic truth* in his 1999 *Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema*. He takes the *ekstasis* in Longinus' *On the Sublime* as the core of ecstatic truth: the sublime is a combination of immanent terror and delight that leads the viewer into a noble state, attaining a higher form of truth, that is, *ecstatic truth*. Burke's physiological sublime further influences and develops ecstatic truth: the sublime experience is an irrational nervous tension movement that operates on our body through the participation of the whole senses, bringing us the strongest emotions. In Aguirre, ecstatic truth is expressed through the sublime aesthetic experience conveyed by the sublime forces of the rainforest and the noble actions of the soldiers, which in turn manifests itself in the sensory and emotional

dimensions. In the sensory dimension, sight and sound are crucial; they underscore the vastness of the Amazon rainforest against the backdrop of human heroism and the diminutive scale of the figures, thereby emphasizing nature's overwhelming forces. The immensity of Popol Vuh's hypnotic music elevates us to sublime heights and generates terrifying passions. In the emotional dimension, the sublime aesthetic experience manifests itself through the physical impact on the protagonist: distorted facial expressions, nightmarish monologues, grotesque postures, stiff movements, the sublime power of nature penetrates the human body, exhilarating our senses and nerves to affect every viewer “with an imperious and irresistible force” [18].

With the development of digital technology, the relationship between the audience and the device has opened up more possibilities for exploring ecstatic truth: the emergence of new media such as AR, VR, MR and audiovisual installations have blurred the boundaries between film and the real world, expanding us from a single audiovisual dimension to a multi-sensory dimension of smell, touch, synesthesia, and even illusion, bringing us immersive experiences. Just as in *Sanctuary of the Unseen Forest*, the blend of technical prowess and artistic expression crafts a fabricated, imaginative, and stylized spiritual refuge that enriches our sublime aesthetic experience and deepens our understanding of ecstatic truth. “*regular*” *cinema* can use digital technologies such as 360° panoramic cameras, VR, audio-visual installations to enhance the audience's sensory experience, while new media images should learn the narrative techniques and emotional experiences from “*regular*” *cinema* to reveal deeper truths, constantly improve our aesthetic experience of the sublime, and think about our relationship with non-humans in a broader ecological environment: embrace a majestic existence, create a moment of awe.

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