

Reviewer's Report on the Bachelor Thesis "The Sublime and the Ecstatic in the Works of Werner Herzog" by Marcelo Echevarri

In his bachelor's thesis, the author deals with the question of what relationships can be found between the (not only) aesthetic concept of the "sublime", which we have known at least since the 18th century, and the work of film director Werner Herzog. The key question, at least from Immanuel Kant's point of view, is how this concept can be incorporated into visual culture. The romanticist artists from around 1800, especially Caspar David Friedrich, whom Mr. Echevarri mentions in the thesis, approached the problem in their own way by claiming that the visible image represents an analogy of something invisible and by drawing on the themes of emptiness, fog, distance, etc. to evoke in the viewer the "concept" of the absolute / sublime and at the same time to move his imagination and to stimulate his own creativity. By the way, these image-related stimulations of the sublime addressed the problem of relativity and limits of human knowledge. Werner Herzog's films can be often described in a similar manner (not far from the romantic paintings, poems, etc.), as paths that end in a kind of shipwreck and thus report on the real unattainability of the "absolute", but at the same time point to the possibility of an "inner" idea of the "sublime".

The bachelor's thesis presents in a very suitable way both the history of the concept of the "sublime" and the relationship between its key interpreters (Kant, Burke, etc.) and the work of Herzog. The comparison of the compositional strategies in the paintings of Friedrich and the films of Herzog is very instructive (or "illuminative") as well. Werner Herzog puts more emphasis on the question of "ecstatic truth" and partly ventures back before Kant (or, perhaps, reaches beyond him – probably to Nietzsche). The sublime, which, in simple terms, surpasses ordinary scales and clichés, leads to an "ecstatic" exceeding the ordinary limits and, according to Herzog, brings universal statements in contrast to the "local" truthfulness of common documentary practices, etc. The question is where do the theorists and creators situate this "sublime" – into an artifact, into a mind of a creator, into a spectator's subject? Romantics generally tried to evoke the "sublime" within the mind of the viewer (according to them, it was not so present in the artifact which served only as the igniter of an affect / ecstasy). Werner Herzog's films probably have different ambitions due to the nature of the given medium, and thus they are perhaps closer to how Kant understood the "sublime" in nature (even though the mind always remains the exclusive playground of the "sublime").

I consider the bachelor thesis to be very well written, well-founded and properly structured. I suggest a rating of 1 (excellent).

20. 9. 2020 in Prague
Václav Hájek