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Research Article

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Documenting Faith: Physical Devotion in Werner Herzog's *Pilgrimage* (2001) and *Wheel of Time* (2003)

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Abstract: To make visible the invisible has always been a key challenge to film. This paper will study how German director Werner Herzog, a regular explorer of the material / spiritual dichotomy, has managed to visualize something as invisible as faith in his documentaries *Pilgrimage* (2001) and *Wheel of Time* (2003). By identifying a strong narrative and aesthetic focus on gesture, we will work on a possible reading on physical devotion as a contemporary substitute to sacrifice. Gesture, then, will become not only the visible translation of what we will argue is represented as a natural and universal faith, but also the apparatus enabling the feeling of the sacred.

Keywords: Werner Herzog, sacrifice, gesture, film studies, documentary

Introduction: Face

Separated from the crowd by a protection glass, a few Tibetan monks patiently leave sand grains into a just started mandala. The ceremonious scene is part of *Wheel of Time*, a documentary about the Kalachakra initiation from the previous year at Bodh Gaya. When asked about the nature of the mandala, the 14th Dalai Lama explains how the colourful sand circles are actually a symbol. "Not external Mandala, but internal Mandala," he adds. "Some visualisation." However ambiguous that response may be, it takes us to what has been a key question in film theory since its beginnings, the one where this paper originates: how is it possible to visualise the invisible?

Let's take a look at another scene: at some point in *Pilgrimage*, after following for a while various groups of men crawling hand in hand, Herzog's camera notices a girl slowly moving on her knees. A standing woman accompanies her, but her head is continuously kept out of the frame. Closer and closer to the girl's face, we see her eyes moving to imaginary points, her lips pressing, her skin sweating. She stops, looks upwards, then continues with this ritual ignoring the people constantly passing by. Why this attention to a particular face? Why not frame the crowd kneeling down if the purpose of the film is to document faith?

When Henri Agel, taking the sacred as the most invisible object, dedicates a whole book to the problem of its representation, he locates the answer in a very concrete place; Maria Falconetti's face (27). That one of the most influential works on the topic of sacred and cinema starts with this idea is arguably significant: by identifying her close-ups in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928) as the source for the spiritual atmosphere surrounding the film, the author is noticing the possible translation of faith into physicality. Amédée Ayfre, Agel's frequent collaborator, would remark the need of finding God in any man's face in order to accentuate the incarnation of transcendence (*Le cinéma et la foi chrétienne* 98).

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Even though both Agel and Ayfre theorise from a Catholic perspective, it is easy to read them in the light of a universal concept of the sacred. Just like anyone from an atheist to a Buddhist could be moved by Falconetti's expressions during Jeanne's trial, Herzog, being a westerner, finds himself captivated by the hypnotic beauty not only of the young Mexican girl in *Pilgrimage*, but also of various pilgrims in *The Wheel of Time:* a Tibetan monk who lowers his eyes before the camera, an old woman whose wrinkles darken her skin, a man who, at the end of the film, has stayed alone among empty cushions and is following with his prayers looking at a distant spot. Jean Douchet, exploring the presence of the face in cinema, states that everything important comes from the regard. He points out how ancient theatre, in order to represent a mythical atmosphere, a latency of the Cosmos, got actors wearing masks, thus negating the eyes (116). Cinema is merely based on regards, but in filming them when aimed at somewhere far away, not to us, not to anything tangible, each face commented above seem to be looking at the invisible, no mask needed. The fact that Herzog stays quietly filming them, not a word pronounced, for a while every time, just accentuates this feeling. Just like Ayfre (*Le cinéma et la foi chrétienne* 99) finds a "sacred light" on the suffering bodies and faces of Georges Rouault's various *Miserere*, the expressions of devotion on these face appear as if illuminated from another world as if the lens could actually take a glimpse into their internal faith.

Gesture

As Dalai Lama stated, it is a matter of visualisation. And, in this matter, the Bavarian director is not a newcomer. In fact, we could say he has built an entire oeuvre around it. From Walter Steiner, a ski jumper who sculpts with his hands and flies with his feet (*The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner*, 1974), to Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald, a rubber baron determined to transport a ship over a hill to attain an absurd dream (*Fitzcarraldo*, 1982), all of his characters can be read through a duality between physicality and transcendence. They are, in Enrique Montero's words, "characters that walk, but mobilized above all by some sort of elevation from the surface" (91), and guided, according to Carlos Losilla, by a double wish of having "the head in the clouds and the feet on the earth" (6). Herzog himself has concluded: "All filmmakers should be athletes at some level because film doesn't come from abstract academic thought; it comes from your knees and thighs" (qtd in. Cronin 117).

Wheel of Time, as we already said, documents the Buddhist Kalachakra tradition. Although Herzog has been granted permission to interview the Dalai Lama and to film the well-protected Mandala, the focus of his attention seems to be on two other episodes —the aim of part of the crowd to reach a determinate number of prostrations, and the arrival of pilgrims who prostrate at every step on their travel, often hurting their hands and knees. Pilgrimage, with its more unconventional form, alternates between images of Russia and Mexico where pilgrims repeatedly kneel down, cross themselves, and crawl carrying huge weights. Taking this in mind and observing the preference of the camera for close-ups of faces and hands, we could establish that the narrative and aesthetic centre in both films is to be found in gestures. This would not constitute a particularity per se if we take in mind Giorgio Agamben's famous essay on the topic Note sul gesto, where he states gesture is indeed the true element of cinema, and not images (49). What makes the choice interesting is that, in relating this element not to acting hues, utterances or just action itself, but to the document of a true internal faith, Herzog is switching on the intermediary nature of gesture: "In the suspended space of gesture a temporary emergency is played that links history, memory and emotion; the sacred and the profane; the visible and the invisible" (Benavente and Salvadó 15). Gestures, even when profane, have what we could identify as a religious essence from the moment they refer to another invisible dimension.

Let's take a closer look at a particular hand movement that appears a few times at the beginning of *Pilgrimage*, that of the sign of the cross. By crossing themselves, Christians worldwide don't evocate just any moment of Christ's life. Remembering his crucifixion means remembering his sufferings and mortality, thus God's dual nature—in fact, some Orthodox believers group three fingers together symbolising the Trinity and the other two symbolising these two sides, human and divine. The duality between materiality and transcendence has indeed a very important role in Christianity, with continuous references to the body or the flesh of Christ, both in sacred texts and in sacraments such as Eucharist.

In a different way, also Buddhism keeps a special place for the body. The faith in reincarnation and the attention paid to postures on meditation and prayer are examples of that. In the second part of Wheel of Time, when we are taken to Graz, Austria, later that same year to see the following of the rituals seen in Bodh Gaya, Herzog pays attention to the monks and assistants repeating prayers. Some look above and some close their eyes, but all of them join their hands together into a Namaskara Mudra, the Mudra of love, being Mudras gestures that can involve the whole body or just hands, and each one of them has a special meaning and use. The camera, too, joins the Mudra by offering detail shots of the hands and following their descending and ascending movement, as if the director was also participating in the ceremony. By joining their hands together in adoration and waiting, each one of the praying bodies can be seen as an entrance for transcendence, as if the two hands were the two worlds meeting in a gesture. These gestures of love could be interpreted in contrast to those in *Pilgrimage* as less exhausting and painful. The directorial choice, in this case, does not rely so much on detail shots of body parts, but on the omission of the sound of the screams produced by the crawling pilgrims—by focusing only on the reflection of their suffering on their bodies, Herzog is also transforming a more complex action into something more visual, into a gesture. While in *Wheel of Time* they mostly complete them quietly, in a tranquil manner, in *Pilgrimage* the pilgrims performing gestures are shown in a completely distorted state, crying and screaming. That is not casual given the different nature of the religions shown, of course, but Ayfre reminds us that the same idea lies behind both types of representations:

Cruelty and horror can dominate, as in New Guinea or in Mexico, the serenity as in Egypt, the recollection and contemplation or on the other hand the effervescence and vitality as in India. In any case, these images of man and the world are never just images of man and the world—through them, there's a whole invisible world that becomes visible. This invisible world is not the one of emotions and passions, nor one of a purely human psychological life, but the world of superhuman strengths, or at least extra-human. (*Cinéma et mystère* 61)

Wheel of Time and Pilgrimage may seem at first ethnological documentaries. But they are more centred in poetic similarities than in cultural particularities. As Herzog puts it: "My films are as anthropological as Gesualdo's music or Caspar David Friedrich's paintings. They are anthropological just because they try to explore human condition in this particular time on this planet" (qtd. in Cronin 230). The need for filming a possible connection between human and divine in this secularised world is, too, characteristic of this particular time on this planet. Perhaps the only way to restore this connection is through art.

Sacrifice

So far we have commented on facial expressions and hand movements, but more striking are in both documentaries the depictions of prostrations. Pilgrimage begins with footage that Herzog actually shot for another film, Bells from the Deep: Faith and Superstition in Russia (1993). The scene shows some men prostrating and laying completely down on the ice. Significant to understand the importance of physical devotion for Herzog is the fact that these men were not actual believers expressing their faith, but a group of drunken people whom the director himself told to kneel down on ice. And significant to the nature of prostrations is the choice to film the group from a distance, presenting them as small figures against a desolated landscape of ice. Prostrations show reverence, respect, but above all are acceptances of one's futility. Hoping to make themselves lower before God, believers shown in *Pilgrimage* lay their hands and heads on the ground, closing their eyes, kissing the church floor. Wheel of Time dedicates two important sequences to prostrations. During one of them, the camera moves among crowds of Buddhist believers, each of them prostrating one time after another. Herzog's voiceover explains what we are seeing: "Facing the Tree of Enlightenment, the faithful perform prostrations. Their goal is to repeat this 100,000 times. The fittest among them will accomplish this in about six weeks." The movement in this scene is breathtaking. In the style of all the film, the camera route begins by showing a large group of people repeating the same action again and again. Once this repetition has completely seized the rhythm of the scene, we find ourselves walking among the individuals to end up stopping before a few of them. Then we are shown

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the details of the ritual: the arms flexing, the hands against the floor protected by wood blocks. Referring to how he chooses his crew, Herzog emphasises how he hates perfectionist cameramen who always seek a gorgeous shot. He would rather work with someone "who see things, who really feel them" (qtd. in Cronin 123). In this scene, the camera becomes handheld, contributing to the feeling of individualization by viewing bodies as from another body—the irregular movement of the shot and rhythm of the editing turn the camera into something human, thus defining Herzog's point of view as close, personal, and coming back upon its notion of cinema as a physical art.

These are not easy acts of devotion we are seeing. A few minutes into this moment, Herzog speaks to Lama Lhundup Woeser. He has walked over 4,000 km during three and a half years, prostrating so much her hands and knees have become hardly sensible. From touching the ground with his head that many times, a wound can be seen on his forehead. This kind of suffering efforts easily lead us to the notion of sacrifice, as it has been already noted by Brad Prager: "the pilgrimages depicted in *Pilgrimage* and in *Wheel of Time* are pilgrimages of the original type; these journeys entail a sacrifice whereby pilgrims are compelled to endure pain in order to demonstrate devotion" (128). We are not attending a sacrifice in its traditional sense, of course, from the moment nobody is taking nobody's life. Such a vision would be rejected from our contemporary point of view: as René Girard sees it, we, "the moderns," are no longer capable of seeing the mediation between a sacrificant and a divinity in sacrifice, even less in a bloody one (14-15). But it is not the first time that suffering has been read in itself as an equivalent to sacrifice, think of the importance of mortification and asceticism in a lot of religions. According to Isabel Cabrera, the new "retribution" system that comes with Christianity substitutes direct sacrifice for suffering, even suffering without purpose, installing the idea that pain in life cleans and liberates the soul for eternal life as exemplified in texts such as the Book of Job (120-121).

As we can no longer sustain sacrifices, we substitute them for gestures of pain. Herzog cannot obviously film the passion of Christ, but he can capture the suffering that comes with faith in some people. Gesture and sacrifice end up conforming in these documentaries a similar system. According to Roman law, something being sacred meant it belonged to the gods. Profanation was the apparatus enabling the transfer from divine to human sphere, while that which made possible the opposite process was the sacrifice (Agamben, *Che cos*'è un dispositivo? 28). Some studies, as explained by Hubert and Mauss, have located the genesis of sacrifice on the necessity of man to communicate with gods: in a mythical past where man and gods were together, the ritual of sacrifice wasn't needed at all, but when the man is left by himself, it's forced to find a way back into them (24). So, what happens if we read the gestures we mentioned as sacrifices? Then the signs, prostrations and other expressions shown by Herzog act not only as documentable manifestations of faith but also as enablers of sacredness itself—as the apparatus that creates the existence of this second invisible world inside the film. Not by chance throughout their whole essay Hubert and Mauss repeatedly connect the notions of sacrifice and *mise-en-scène*.

Not any place is good for sacrifice, of course: the location of the ritual itself must be sacred (Hubert and Mauss 52). One of the greatest stories about sacrifice, the tale of Abraham and Isaac, takes places in a mountain. It is written in Genesis 22.2: "Then He said, 'Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." Mountains, as we'll see, have always been associated with sacredness. Their nature itself invites to it: one can easily imagine the first inhabitants of the earth being fascinated by these huge elements of landscape reaching for the sky. The biblical tradition, without going any further, is full of mountains of special signification: Mount Ararat where Noah's Arch stranded after the flood, Mount Sinai where Moses received the ten commandments, Golgotha where Jesus was crucified. But every civilisation has stories of mythical or sacred mountains: Greek Mount Olympus, Japanese Hōrai, Nordic Himingbjörg, Palestinian Mount Tabor, Inca Licancabur. A lot of these sacred peaks are mythically situated in the centre of the world (Eliade 26). At the same time, mountains are visualisations of the visible/invisible duality: a mass of earth ascending into the sky. It is often that Herzog has used them as an expression for human interiorities in a union he has denominated "interior landscapes"—perhaps best exemplified in a scene of the short documentary Gasherbrum—Der Leuchtende Berg (1985), where Eric Ames locates a "re-signifying of the depicted mountains and ravines as the highs and lows of the inner world" (52), a union that links him

with Romanticism and the old mountain films that were once so popular in Germany (for a study on Herzog and the Bergfilm see Poch).

These particularities also apply to Mount Kailash. Taking a little distance from the multitudes at Bodh Gaya, Herzog's crew shift to the famous mountain in Himalaya. Sacred not only to Buddhism but also to Hinduism and some minority religions, Kailash is thought by Buddhists to be the earthly translation of Mount Meru, a divine peak and centre of cosmos. *Wheel of Time* aesthetically reinforces this idea, depicting it as nearly floating, detached from the rest of the landscape by a sea of clouds. Through this break of the main events on the film, we are able to follow some pilgrims in their arduous travel. As the voice-over narration puts it:

All year long, pilgrims flock to the mountain . . . The pilgrims begin their prostrations the moment Mount Kailash comes in view. The pilgrims have travelled here without any Western comforts perched on top of open trucks. Using primitive bellows, they kindle fires of dry yak dung and make tea. They add barley flour and rancid yak butter. These are nearly the only provisions they have.

After explaining that the tents are considered a luxury and that most pilgrims spend the nights out in the open, we attend the beautiful festival of Saka Dawa, filmed through a windy mix of fog, fire and flour. Then, Herzog still insist:

After the mast has been erected, the pilgrims set off on the Kora, or circumambulation of Mount Kailash. Trekking around the entire base of the mountain covers a distance of 52 km. The Kora will take them three days at an average altitude of well over 5,000 metres. On the second day, they will have to cross a pass at an altitude of 5,600 metres. Each year, several pilgrims die from altitude sickness. Many of the faithful come from the Indian lowlands and are not adequately accustomed to the climate.

By paying that much attention to the absence of comforts and the difficulties of the travel, *Wheel of Time* is implicating its sacrificial qualities. Søren Kierkegaard, in his famous essay *Fear and Trembling*, writes about the feelings of a modest man reading the story of Abraham and Isaac:

His yearning was to accompany them on the three days' journey when Abraham rode with sorrow before him and with Isaac by his side. His only wish was to be present at the time when Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw Mount Moriah afar off, at the time when he left the asses behind and went alone with Isaac up unto the mountain; for his mind was not intent upon the ingenious web of imagination but the shudder of thought. (5)

What makes Abraham's story, so moving is not the sacrifice nor the incompletion of it, not the descent of God nor his will to kill his son: it is the will to begin his travel. Just like for the poet Kavafis ("as you set out for Ithaca / hope the voyage is a long one"), the sacrifice is in the path itself.

Pilgrimage

So it is time to take a look at a particular gesture that has become an obsession in Werner Herzog's work: walking. Modernity has been obsessively associated with walking, mostly through the figure of the *flâneur*, and modern cinema is not an exception. New German Cinema, without going further, has some of their most representative images in Wim Wender's archetypal characters, true *flâneurs* walking throughout all of his films without purpose or direction. In Herzog's films, trapped between modernity and the will to return to a pre-secularized world, people walk without a purpose, but with direction. Herzog's characters and him himself are always moved by a strong will. The faithful people circumvolving Mount Kailash are everything but wanderers: they may not know exactly why they are walking, but they do know they *have* to walk. Walking is presented as a quasi-magical action: it is a play, after all, of elevation and return to the ground. It has the rhythm of prayer: one small movement in continuous repetition. About his journey, John Snelling wrote: "The goal itself—in our case, Kailash—is of little real importance in itself. It may at first seem charged with vast significance . . . What is really important is the journey itself" (393). It is faith that guides

pilgrims. Likewise, Herzog decision to film *Wheel of Time* was just a product of his own necessity to do so: he had no commissions or funding, and filmed only with his digital camera (Weinrichter 86-87). On another occasion, he stated: "I never seek stories to tell, it's more that stories assault me" (Cronin 62). The idea that stories *assault him* suggests a mystical conception of art, one that turns it into a mission, into something for which he has been elected. What's interesting about that is that it links him even more with pioneers and explorers, figures that he has been following during all of his career, marked for his intense choice on turning every film into an experience, something consistent with his thematic interest on the physical-spiritual duality. In an interview for BBC Four, Herzog commented:

I arrived as a foreigner with no deep knowledge of Buddhism. I still have big difficulties to understand it but I think it doesn't matter. I feel a physical curiosity for spirituality, and I hope that I have accomplished to transmit it through a film. I think, strange as it may sound, that this is my most physical film. With half a million pilgrims chaotically stacked, we immediately mixed with the crowd, with no tripod, no long focal lenses. We wanted to participate in any event that could happen. I loved directing this film for the physical approach we chose. (qtd. in Weinrichter 313)

The film process is described just as an exploration. In the same way, his characters on *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (1972) or *Fitzcarraldo* arrive in an unknown land guided solely by their faith, absurd as their enterprises may be, Herzog arrives "as a foreigner" to India. In this approach lies one of his greatest ambiguities, the proximity of exploration to exploitation. Is arriving at a territory with the intention of conquering it that different from arriving with the intention of filming it? Indeed, Herzog's approach to exploration could be seen as exoticism, but our opinion is that his fascination for the exploration of *other* cultures has not that much to do with a Western centrality than with his rely on individuality. If we take in mind his constant alteration of facts in favour of an ecstatic truth in his documentaries, it is not strange that both *Wheel of Time* and *Pilgrimage* are totally subjective depictions of rituals. And this, of course, is consistent with his interest in physicality.

In one of his best-known personal achievements, Herzog walked for about 500 miles, from Munich to Paris. He was told her friend and film critic Lotte Eisner had fallen sick and thought that, by doing so, her life would be saved. During his path, he kept a diary that later published under the title *Of Walking on Ice (Vom Gehen im Eis)*. There, he stated: "The size, intensity and depth of the world are only experienced by those who travel by foot" (83). Walking as a medium to understand the world is a recurrent idea on Herzog's films. When a man we mentioned before, Lama Lhundup Woeser, is asked in *Wheel of Time* if he has got anything in return of his severe three-year long journey, he replies: "Yes. I have learned of the magnitude of the earth. I measured it with my body, from head to toe. Now I understand." In *The Dark Glow of the Mountains* (1985), a short documentary following the two mountaineers Reinhold Messner and Hans Kammerlander on their expedition to the Gasherbrum mountains, Herzog asks Messner directly about the action of walking: the mountaineer will say that walking is the only thing that matters to him, that climbing is actually secondary. Furthermore, Messner tells a dream which he has repeatedly experimented: accompanied only by huskies, he walks for eternity. Herzog, behind the camera and with the excited voice of someone who has recognised an equal, says he has had again and again the same kind of dream.

We share Brad Prager's position: "Journeys on foot have always been incredibly important for Herzog. He refers many times to the necessity of walking, but usually, when he describes why he would do such a thing, it sounds exactly like a pilgrimage: a trial of one's faith or a willingness to endure pain out of devotion to something" (128). According to Marie-Humbert Vicaire, one can define pilgrimage as "a march for religious reasons" and, as such, the pilgrim's will is "to take possession of the space with religious intention and behaviour, to sacralise this space and the gestures trying to dominate it" (18). Again we find this double side: when pilgrims decide to make their journey into Mount Kailash it is because of its sacredness, but at the same time for us spectators the apparatus sacralising Mount Kailash in the film is the gesture of these pilgrims.

Vicaire goes on: "Pilgrimage is a universal religious practice. One finds it in every age, under every sky. It had a big role in the classic paganisms. The most spiritual religions such as Buddhism know it. It's one of the five fundamental practices of Islam" (17). As already implicit, the main strength of the gesture when it comes to expressing faith is that anyone can understand it, whichever their cultural context is. *Pilgrimage*

significantly begins with a quote from Thomas a Kempis: "It is only the pilgrims who in the travails of their earthly voyage do not lose their way... whether our planet be frozen or scorched: they are guided by the same prayers, and suffering, and fervour, and woe." The *same* prayers. This is why Herzog is able to mix images from Orthodox believers in Russia and Catholic ones in Mexico; this is why we feel the same watching them as watching the Buddhists in *Wheel of Time*. That the quote is actually an invention by the director (Cronin 311) if anything just reinforces the importance of a universal faith for understanding these two films.

Conclusion: Faith

Herzog is not interested in Religion—at least if we take it as an institutional form—but in the religious feeling that anyone is capable of feeling. The first entrance of his diary *Of Walking on Ice* reads:

One solitary, overriding thought: get away from here. People frighten me. Our Eisner mustn't die, she will not die, I won't permit it. She is not dying now because she isn't dying. Not now, she is not allowed to. My steps are firm. And now the earth trembles. When I move, a buffalo moves. When I rest, a mountain reposes. She wouldn't dare! She mustn't. She won't. When I'm in Paris she will be alive. She must not die (9-10).

Herzog's will is so powerful because no one has imposed it on him. His choice to make a journey is based on nothing, no logic connects the possible cure of his friend with walking, but that does not lower his determination. Perhaps what he finds attractive in pilgrims is the strength of their personal faith, which is deeper than the religion they belong to. Their sacrifice is, in part, having started to walk, having left all behind.

In this paper, we have argued that, in order to capture this internal religious feeling, he chooses to film its physical expression, gesture. Pilgrimage and Wheel of Time are documentaries about faith. But beyond that, and unlike other similar films by the same director, they are documentaries about the physical expression of faith. While the healer in Bells from the Deep (1993) or the preachers in both God's Angry Man (1981) and Huie's Sermon (1981) use mainly rhetoric abilities and abstract concepts to address spirituality, thus being filmed by Herzog with what can be perceived as distance or even irony, believers shown in Pilgrimage and Wheel of Time do only express themselves through their bodies and are therefore treated with respect and admiration, as if we were witnessing a real primary faith in opposition to an artificial one. Chare and Watkins observe: "gestures, as utterances, are not always the product of conscious intent. Some gesticulations emerge unbidden, indexing the agency of the unconscious in bodily communication" (2). Even being part of cultural conventions and shared with thousands of others, the gestures displayed in both films are shown intimate, as if the faithful bowing down were not doing it out of a ritual but naturally, out of feeling. Just after showing us the crowd trying to reach 100,000 prostrations in Wheel of Time, the camera stops at a child. He is alone in the frame, separated from the adults' group, and he cannot see the camera behind him. Suddenly the child bows down a little and then repeats the action until he starts to do full prostrations. We witness the birth of gesture.

Werner Herzog documents faith with the fascination of a child, looking not at the forest but at every tree—every face, every hand—transcending cultural barriers and religious prejudices. In treating with such devotion each believer's image, he is not only showing us how gestures enable sacredness but also filming gestures of faith themselves as something sacred.

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