WERNER HERZOG is the filmmaker of the unfilmable, not because he attempts to film what is technically unfilmable, but
because his documentaries acknowledge what must remain undocumented. He has been known to suppress audio-visual phenomena from his viewers — most famously in *Grizzly Man* (2005), where the director’s own reaction to footage of a grizzly attack is substituted for the footage itself. Behind this suppression looms an ethical imperative that creates a kind of cinematographic ecology, regulating the circulation of images. Within this optical ecosystem Herzog has developed a special care for those images, spectacles, and phenomena that must be kept clean from cinematic vision so that they may remain visible off screen, in their own habitat. Essentially, his is a concern not for particular phenomena, but for unguarded seeing itself.

This media ecological aspect is crucial for understanding the exceptional condition of Herzog’s latest work, *Lo and Behold: Reveries of the Connected World*, because for the first time, Herzog deals not with human responses to natural phenomena, but with human responses to technical phenomena. It has seemed arbitrary that Herzog’s humanistic concern for image circulation should emanate from film technology, but *Lo and Behold* finally makes the relation necessary. Immersing himself in the connected world of information technology, Herzog has made a film that shows why an ecology of vision, and hence filmmaking itself, only makes sense if you know what is human about the world.

Herzog has always drawn clear, perceptible lines between the filmable and the unfilmable, but this form of distinction is called
into question in *Lo and Behold*. In 10 chapters, the film traces the origins, consequences, and potentials of worldwide IT communication in our contemporary global societies, beginning from the early days of the internet and ending in predictions of its magic future.

The title’s call for visual awe is appropriately lofty: the connected world turns out to be a true provocation for his style, causing the film to feel less immediate and straightforward than, for example, his acclaimed *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010). Herzog’s problem is that his subject is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Instead of collecting scenes of a specific place or person, he attempts to record the essence of the whole current state of the world, a project for which cinematic rules cannot exist. Portraying the Connected Age is effectively a search for a new form of documentary film, which consequentially can only happen in slow pace, scene by scene, constantly marking itself as work in progress. This open approach, which is very unusual for Herzog, is crafted like a meditation about the nature of the image in today’s societies. It reminds us that trusting our sense of sight has become almost impossible in a culture that consists largely of screens and of people dependent on them. We can feel Herzog adapting to a new world, like an ethnographer to a new culture in which his cherished ethics of seeing appear topsy-turvy, stripping him of his intuitions.

Lest we forget, being blinded from visual phenomena is a norm of the connected world. Today’s forms of electronic communication only had their breakthrough in the 1980s after they received Graphical User Interfaces that hid their coded interiors. Covert operations became standard procedure since, and disallowing human vision from immediately experiencing the means of connectivity is a commonplace we have learned to live by. This is
why stock imagery is the accepted standard to convey motifs of communication. Many of us have grown up with these same images: a blinking server tower to express “network activity,” lines of code running over a screen connoting “computer processes,” or segments of circles expanding radially to symbolize “wireless connection.” Any unique or immediate experience with communication itself seems impossible. This is the first clear, if subtle, realization that Herzog’s film unfolds. The screens of our devices could only succeed because their visualizations screen us away from technology itself. There is no emotive iconography of the Connected Age — a vacancy as far reaching and twisted as our use of emoticons to camouflage it. It is obvious how this fact goes straight to the heart of Herzog’s filmmaking, because a scarcity of the filmable leaves us with complete contingency of the optical. Manifest throughout the chapters of *Lo and Behold* is that no one can leave the digitally connected world — there is no “off screen” — and so Herzog’s usual observer position is unattainable.

The film tries to solve this riddle of the filmable by running two parallel essays side by side. One asks what the new world of hyperconnectivity is really like, while the other asks how we can possibly behold this world. Each chapter portrays a symbiosis of the two theses on the human level. “The Early Days” introduces internet inventors as hands-on engineers with a need for touch; in “Earthly Invaders,” the cybersecurity specialists appear like deeply hesitant beings; and in “The Internet of Me,” access to big data completely pulverizes the Earth as cohesive entity. In this chapter, a researcher suggests that the connected world will become so personalized that no multi-perspectival perception will remain. Only an egotistical understanding of everything would be possible, in which beholding the world as common — whether in person or on film — would be impossible. The augmented realities of Google
Glass or Pokémon Go are merely the first pieces arranged in this eventually supernatural mosaic. Other quiet steps have recently included refrigerators, school classes, music stores, and relationships that aim to undo historical progression by always already “knowing your preferences.” Both humans and cameras not only anchor vision in space, but also in time, and would naturally fail to document humankind’s omnipresent and restless use of networks in the Internet of Me. No flyovers, spectacles, nor even 3D models can be made of the connected world, and one would assume that the immediacy that we are accustomed to in Herzog’s films cannot come to fruition here.

Herzog discovers how to walk this *terra incognita* by transforming his most traditional resource, the interview, into an almost theological confession, which provides the vital center to *Lo and Behold*. More than ever, the camera becomes an anthropological tool, a witness to the state of human existence in connectivity. Significantly, the credits summarize the film as “Conversations with …,” referring to the rich array of dialogues with 29 connectivity-stricken individuals visited in their various habitats. To the viewer, all of these conversations feel at some point feel like attempts at proselytizing, regardless of whether Herzog is speaking with the neuroaesthetic researcher in the MRI-lab, the recovering internet addict in the rehab station, or the “modern day hermit” in the radiation free zone. Leaving behind any reality check, Herzog feverishly seeks out humankind under connectivity’s spell. The human passion demonstrated in these conversations refuses the filtered egotistical worldview, but rather is a full affirmation of multi-perspectivity, which brings out the placelessness of the connected world. No differences exist between dwelling grounds, whether we deem the world hyperlinked like the roboticist entrepreneur or disconnected like the radiosensitive refugee.
Metaphysically, there is no off the grid.

One is reminded of Herzog’s *Bells from the Deep: Faith and Superstition in Russia* (1993), which portrays various cases of intact witchcraft traditions, self-declared faith healers, and rituals informed by legends in post-Soviet Russia. No hard evidence for any of this spirituality is presented, but just as in *Lo and Behold*, people feel deeply connected to a planetary network of invisible lines and grids. Forced transcendence is what the superstitious life seemingly has in common with the connected everyday. In both films, Herzog’s protagonists have been selected because their mere living presence showcases a special adaptation to their cosmic connectivity, resulting in a manner of speaking and thinking that no scripture can explain.

But still, *Lo and Behold*’s characters differ from practitioners of folk mysticism, as they are exemplars of a radically new spirituality. The internet victims, hackers, programmers, visionaries, and junkies that Herzog picks are not necessarily more connectivity-affected than anyone reading this article, but have rather intensified their relation to the connected world so much that their bodies and minds have had to come up with transcendent responses. Throughout the conversations we can witness that a new cosmos, a new world picture, is currently being born — not out of empirical, scientific discovery as Copernicus, Vesalius, or Pasteur might have thought — but as a result of the most basic human needs. Given that we live in the Connected Age, Herzog’s *Lo and Behold* is the first cosmological report about this age and its emerging specimens.

What we see is an oral theology of the current, solving the problem of the unfilmable with an ethnographic trick. Herzog’s subjects are those subjected to a new world picture that they have to cope with,
whether they can say they believe in it or not. All have to respect, trust, and spiritually rely on this new world order because it happens beyond their reach. Like the pagan believers and apocryphal prophets in 1993 Russia, Herzog’s conversation partners in *Lo and Behold* are used as mediums channeling the invisible reality of the connected world. The sufferers of radiosensitivity syndrome, the predictors of an IT wipeout after geomagnetic solar storms, those seeking to attach Mars or post-humanity to the connected world are speaking openly about their spiritualism before Herzog’s camera. To his thoughts, questions, and imaginations, they answer with feelings and likelihoods, articulating the spiritualism that inhabits them.

Sometimes these responses feel like the building blocks of a new theology, which leave the viewer shocked like a faithless heathen. *Lo and Behold* thus works to push technology out of the empirical realm, best achieved in the last, most esoteric chapter entitled “The Future.” At this point, Herzog’s conversations that began as scientific discussions or as personal stories have flipped into invocations of the coming cosmology. Like early stages of religions, where different gnostic sects compete to find the most reliable narrative to balance the good and the evil divine powers, this last chapter of the film provides widely conflicting claims about the connected world to come. Among these predictions are the claim of a magical world coming through the internet of things, the end of critical thinking after everything will exist in its interpreted state, or the abolition of personhood once information exchange eliminates knowing your interlocutor. Coming from the single truths of Enlightenment monotheism, these sound like heretical deviations, yet what Herzog discovers is that the cosmologies of the Connected Age will emerge through polytheist divinities.

Whatever the future might end up feeling like, *Lo and Behold*
demonstrates that humans will not come up with such new “alternative” worldviews themselves. Against the hopes of New Age followers and gadget entrepreneurs — even against those of Cyberpunks and hacker manifestos — Herzog’s ethnography shows that in the long run, the Connected Age will affect our forms of life with physical and psychological constraints, but not with new methods of imagining the world. To live under connective divinity feels nothing like a united utopia, but like being in a mess of nomadic tribes. Perhaps, though, intentional resistance against seeing will again become a reliable practice in this setting. What did not work for the Paduan astronomer Cremonini in 1610, who had to accept the heliocentric universe despite refusing to look through Galileo’s telescope, might become a human skill, now that our cosmology is no longer based on empirical discoveries.

In the film’s final two chapters we find that there may, in fact, be something unfilmable about the Connected Age. Nobody in the interviews can truly answer Herzog’s question, “Can the internet dream of itself?” This unfilmable forges a new common scene of disconnected communication that can be found everywhere, namely to look up and daydream — the true cosmological sense of the imperative “Lo and Behold!”

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