

Virtual November 3, 2020 (41:10)

Werner Herzog:: **AGUIRRE, DER ZORN GOTTES/AGUIRRE THE WRATH OF GOD** (1972, 100m)

*Spelling and Style—use of italics, quotation marks or nothing at all for titles, e.g.—follows the form of the sources.
Cast and crew name hyperlinks connect to the individuals' Wikipedia entries*



[Vimeo link for ALL of Bruce Jackson's and Diane Christian's film introductions and post-film discussions in the Fall 2020 BFS](#)

Zoom link for all Fall 2020 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions:

<https://buffalo.zoom.us/j/92994947964?pwd=dDBWcDYvSlhPbkd4TkswcUhiQWkydz09>

Meeting ID: 929 9494 7964

Passcode: 703450

Directed and written by Werner Herzog
Produced by Werner Herzog and Hans Prescher
Original Music by Popol Vuh
Cinematography by Thomas Mauch
Film Editing by Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus

Klaus Kinski...Don Lope de Aguirre
Helena Rojo...Inez
Del Negro...Brother Gaspar de Carvajal
Ruy Guerra...Don Pedro de Ursua
Peter Berling...Don Fernando de Guzman
Cecilia Rivera...Flores
Daniel Ades...Perucho (as Dan Ades)
Edward Roland...Okello
Alejandro Chavez
Armando Polanah...Armando
Daniel Farfán
Julio E. Martínez
Alejandro Repulles...Gonzalo Pizarro
Indianern der Kooperative Lauramarca
Gerd Martienzen...Voice of Don Lope de Aguirre

WERNER HERZOG (b. September 5, 1942, Munich, Germany), between 1962 and 2019, has directed twenty fiction feature films, seven fiction short films and thirty-one

documentary feature films, as well as eight documentary short films and episodes of two television series. He has also been the screenwriter or co-writer for all his films and for four others and has appeared as an actor in twenty-six film or television productions. François Truffaut once called Herzog "the most important film director alive," and Roger Ebert once said Herzog "has never created a single film that is compromised, shameful, made for pragmatic reasons, or uninteresting. Even his failures are spectacular." He has been nominated for a Best Documentary, Features Oscar for *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007), and he won the Grand Prize of the Jury, the FIPRESCI Prize, the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury, and was nominated for the Palme d'Or for *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle/The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974) at the 1975 Cannes Film Festival, and he won Best Director and was nominated for the Palme d'Or for *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) at the 1982 Cannes Film Festival. As an actor, he has appeared in films, such as Harmony Korine's *Julian Donkey-Boy* (1999)

and Hayao Miyazaki's *The Wind Rises* (2013); and beloved television series, such as *The Simpsons*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Rick and Morty*, and the *Star Wars* series *The Mandalorian* (which he agreed to do, not having seen a *Star Wars* film, based on the strength of the script). His most recent directorial efforts are the fiction film *Family Romance, LLC* (2019) and the documentary *Fireball: Visitors from Darker Worlds* (2020). Some of his other directorial credits include: *Caves of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), *My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done* (2009), *The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call - New Orleans* (2009), *Rescue Dawn* (2006), *The Wild Blue Yonder* (2005), *Grizzly Man* (2005), *The White Diamond* (2004), *Wheel of Time* (2003), *Mein liebster Feind - Klaus Kinski/My Best Fiend* (1999), *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997), *Lektionen in Finsternis/Lessons of Darkness* (1992), *Wo die grünen Ameisen träumen/Where the Green Ants Dream* (1984), *Woyzeck* (1979), *Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht/Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979), *Stroszek* (1977), *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes/Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972), *Land des Schweigens und der Dunkelheit/Land of Silence and Darkness* (1971), *Fata Morgana* (1971), *Auch Zwerge haben klein angefangen/Even Dwarfs Started Small* (1970), *Massnahmen gegen Fanatiker/Measures Against Fanatics* (1969), *Letzte Worte/Last Words* (1968), *Spiel im Sand/Game in the Sand* (1964), and *Herakles* (1962).

THOMAS MAUCH (b. 4 April 1937, Heidenheim, Germany) is a German cinematographer and film producer. With a career that spans over fifty years in both film and television, Mauch is well known for his numerous collaborations with Edgar Reitz, Alexander Kluge, and Werner Herzog.

POPOL VUH were a German musical collective, associated with West Germany's 1970s krautrock movement, founded by keyboardist Florian Fricke in 1969. They developed a productive working partnership with Herzog, contributing scores to films such as *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* (1972), *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979), and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982).

KLAUS KINSKI (b. 18 October 1926, Zoppot, Free City of Danzig [now Sopot, Poland]—d. 23 November 1991, Lagunitas, California) worked with Werner Herzog in five films that brought him international recognition: *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* (1972), *Woyzeck* (1978), *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979), *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) and *Cobra Verde* (1987). Kinski and Herzog had a famous working relationship often fraught with tension, perhaps, most famously, exhibited when Herzog pulled a gun on Kinski when he threatened to leave the *Aguirre* set. He acted in 135 films, including: *Kinski Paganini* (1989). Some of the others were *Nosferatu a Venezia* (1988), *Creature* (1985), *The Little Drummer Girl* (1984), *The Soldier* (1982), *Venom* (1981), *Jack the Ripper* (1976), *Un Genio, due compari, un pollo/A Genios, Two Friends, and an Idiot* (1975), *Black Killer* (1971), *La Bestia uccide a sangue freddo/Slaughter Hotel* (1971), *Per una bara piena di dollari/Coffin Full of Dollars* (1971), *Nachts, wenn Dracula erwacht/Count Dracula* (1970), *Marquis de Sade: Justine* (1969), *A qualsiasi prezzo/The Vatican Affair* (1968), *Die Blaue Hand/Creature with the Blue Hand* (1967), *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), *Per qualche dollaro in più/For a Few Dollars*

More (1965), *Scotland Yard jagt Dr. Mabuse/Dr. Mabuse vs. Scotland Yard* (1963), *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* (1958), *Um Thron und Liebe* (1955) and *Morituri* (1948).



from The New German Cinema. John Sanford. DaCapo Press NY 1980

The epithets used to describe the films of Werner Herzog inevitably emphasize the critics' feeling that they have been impressed by something that goes beyond rational analysis. Certain adjectives recur time and again: some pick on the sheer intensity of his work and resort to such terms as 'obsessive', 'fanatic', 'titanic', 'apocalyptic', 'holy', 'demonic', or 'awesome'. For others there is a visionary element in Herzog that conjures up notions of the 'mysterious'; 'surrealist', 'fantastic', dream-like, 'irrational', 'otherworldly', 'bizarre', or the 'eccentric'. One thing they all seem to agree on: Herzog is a poet among film-makers, his films are 'magical', 'haunting', and 'mysterious'—or, quite simply, 'filmic'.

The critics' much-rehearsed epithets are in many cases apt not only for Herzog's films, but equally for the elements out of which they are made: their actors, their landscapes, their music, and the life and personality of Herzog himself. Herzog is indeed something of an 'eccentric' in the New German Cinema in that he has from the very beginning produced every one of his films himself. And the beginning of Herzog's interest in filming lies a long way back: he wrote his first script at the age of 15, and was already trying to make his first film (on penal reform) at 17. From the outset his involvement with film has been nothing short of 'obsessive' and 'fanatic', and it is fitting that a major documentary study of him has as its title his remark 'My films are what I am'. But there is another aspect to the 'eccentricity' and 'fanaticism' of Werner Herzog, and that lies in his life itself, the things he has done, the places he has visited, the people he has met: all experiences that have become inextricably bound up with the films he has made.

Herzog was born in Munich on 5 September 1942; his legal name is in fact Stipetic, after his Yugoslav mother; his father, Herzog says, was 'a sort of clochard'. He grew up on a farm in a remote part of Bavaria, a farm behind which there was 'a deep ravine and a mystical waterfall. He hated school, and set off, at the age of 18, on the first of his many journeys to far-flung corners of the world: in this case to the Sudan, where he was badly bitten by rats whilst lying ill for five days in a deserted barn. Back in Germany he worked nights in a Munich steelworks for two years to save money for film-making. A scholarship took him to Pittsburgh, but he was expelled from

the United States, and for a while made a living smuggling arms and television sets across the Mexican border.

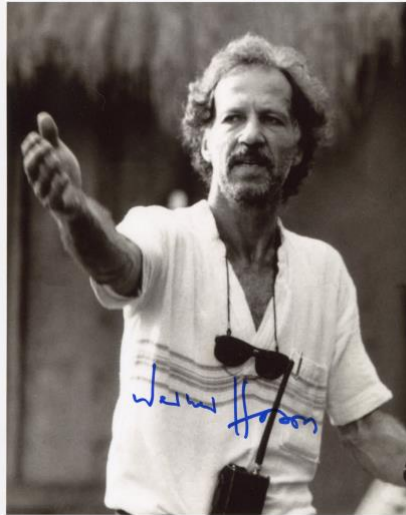
Hazardous and strenuous visits to exotic places were to become a hallmark of Herzog's film-making. The stories behind the shooting of his films are every bit as amazing as the films themselves. *Fata Morgana* was shot in the Sahara, where Herzog contracted bilharzia, and in Central Africa where he and his crew encountered floods and sandstorms and were repeatedly thrown into crowded, rat-infested jails on suspicion of being mercenaries; in the end they had to abandon their vehicle and equipment when the borders were closed. The short *La Soufrière* took him to the crater rim of a volcano whose apparently imminent eruption had led to the evacuation of half of the island of Guadeloupe. And, equally in the face of local warnings, for the closing sequence of *Heart of Glass* he took his crew on open boats through stormy seas to the precipitous and barely accessible Skellig Islands off the Atlantic coast of Ireland. Even in the apparently innocuous countryside of Holland, Herzog managed to get himself into a violent and almost fatal confrontation with the locals while shooting *Nosferatu*. But without doubt the most famous of Herzog's filmmaking exploits came in the shooting of *Aguirre The Wrath of God*, which involved a grueling trek with all his crew, cast, and equipment—some 500 people in all—into the depths of the Peruvian jungle, an expedition that culminated in a by now almost legendary battle between Herzog and the notoriously temperamental star of the film, Klaus Kinski, who was only persuaded not to walk out on the project when Herzog turned a gun on him.

The characters in Herzog's films are always people *in extremis*, people under pressure, people who are in some way 'abnormal' or 'eccentric'; they too are 'visionaries' or 'fanatics'. 'You learn more from the shape of a town from its outskirts than from its centre,' Herzog says. 'Those who people my films are often marginal, not at the centre of things... People interest him 'when they are on the point of breaking apart, when they become visible at the cracks', an apparently morbid fascination that he justifies with the following analogy: If you are a scientist and want to find out about the inner structure of some matter you will put it under extreme pressure and under extreme circumstances... People under extreme pressure give you much more insight about what we are, about our very innermost being.

The borderline between fact and fiction, between the events behind the films and the films themselves is just as difficult to draw in the case of Herzog's characters as it is in the case of his own life. Herzog has a remarkable capacity for finding extraordinary people, hardly any of them professional actors, to play in his films. People such as Fini Straubinger and other deaf and blind characters of *Land of Silence and Darkness*; the dwarfs of *Even Dwarfs Started Small*; Ahmed the exile Turk in *Signs of Life* (Herzog named his son after him); the ski-jumper Walter Steiner who gambles with death as he explores the furthest reaches of human ability; 'Hombrecito' (he did not know his real name), the Indian flute-player in *Aguirre*, a feeble-minded Peruvian beggar who was at first

unwilling to leave the market place in Cuzco, where Herzog found him, for fear that the people would die if he stopped playing—so taken with Hombrecito was Herzog that he dedicated the film to him.

The best-known of Herzog's extraordinary characters is Bruno S., whose role as Kaspar Hauser made him one of the best-known figures in the whole New German Cinema. Bruno S., who later played the lead in *Stroszek*, was himself something of a Kaspar Hauser character, having been abandoned by his prostitute mother at the age of three, spending the following twenty-three years in various institutions, mental homes, and correctional centres, and eventually being 'discovered' by Herzog working as a lavatory attendant in Berlin. The uneasy suspicion that perhaps these characters are being exploited, that their treatment in Herzog's films is little better than that of freaks in a circus, is something Herzog will not accept: his answer to such criticisms comes in *Kaspar Hauser*, where not only is the 'simple' protagonist unambiguously the hero of the piece, but where one sequence



actually shows what the circus treatment really means, with Kaspar, Hombrecito, and the 'midget king' Helmut Döring degradingly displayed in a travelling fair.

Herzog's first three films were shorts, shot with a 35mm camera that he 'expropriated' from an institution that refused to lend him one—a camera that he eventually used in *Aguirre* as well. Herzog is often regarded as a singularly earnest film-maker, though in fact there is wit and humour in nearly all his work. In *Herakles* (1962/65), an ironic and skeptical study of 'muscle men', and *The Unparalleled Defence of the Fortress of Deutschkreuz* (*Die Beispiellose Verteidigung des Festung Deutschkreuz*, 1966), in which four young men play over-zealous war games, humour is very much to the fore—more so, certainly than in later feature films such as *Signs of Life* and *Aguirre* which develop the 'titanism' theme of *Herakles* and *Deutschkreuz*. Between the two came a film *Playing in the Sand* (*Spiel im Sand*, 1964), that Herzog has never released for public viewing, but which, he says, is about 'a chicken in a cardboard box and children'.

'Chickens,' Herzog added, 'terrify me. I'm the first person to have shown that chickens are cannibalistic and horrifying.' Bizarre little sequences involving chickens certainly crop up in a number of his films, including his first feature, *Signs of Life* (*Lebenszeichen*, 1967). [It is] shot on Crete and the island of Kos (where Herzog's grandfather had spent many years as an archeologist)... *Signs of Life* was followed by a short film that again made use of the Greek island setting: *Last Words* (*Letzte Worte*, 1968) investigates the story of a hermit, an old man who for years had lived alone on a deserted island, and who had been fetched back to 'civilization' by two policemen—obviously an attractive subject for Herzog, and one that directly anticipates the story of Kaspar Hauser....

For his next two films Herzog went to Africa. *The Flying Doctors of East Africa* (*Die Fliegenden Azte von*

Ostafrika, 1969) is a documentary in which Herzog, typically, shows himself fascinated by the clash between the 'science' and 'civilization' of the doctors, and the 'irrational', 'senseless', 'uncooperative', responses of their patients, which Herzog, far from mocking or criticizing, presents with humility and respect. *Fata Morgana* (1970) is one of Herzog's—and the New German Cinema's most remarkable films, a non-narrative documentary poem in which Herzog weaves together sequences shot in Central, West, and East Africa in 1968 and '69. Landscape shots predominate, above all the arid landscapes of the Sahel and the southern Sahara. They are shots deliberately lacking in polish: the pans are often jerky, the cuts abrupt, the focus blurred. Herzog dwells on the patterns, form and feel of the desert and the villages, often using camera movements to create extra effect, as in a particularly beautiful sequence when the travelling camera makes sculpted sand dunes cross and sway like a human body. Many of the landscapes, though, bear marks of Man's presence: oil wells, decrepit and derelict buildings, shanty towns, dead cattle, hangars, sheds and dumps, wrecks and debris.

Fata Morgana was originally conceived as a science-fiction film about a doomed planet. It takes place, according to Herzog, 'on the planet Uxmal, which is discovered by creatures from the Andromeda nebula, who make a film report about it. In its final form it is structured as a three-part myth, with sections entitled 'The Creation', 'Paradise', and 'The Golden Age' respectively. The creation myth that lies behind it comes from the Quiche Indians of Guatemala, and their account of the origins of the world is read in a commentary-over by Lotte Eisner. It is a myth with a somber ending: the human race is drowned, 'for they had no intelligence'.

...Herzog has often been likened to Buñuel, a comparison he is not too fond of, but one that here [in *Even Dwarfs Started Small*] more than anywhere else in his work seems inevitable. As Tony Rayns puts it: This bunch are low on redeeming social merit. They are mean, petty, vulgar, selfish and destructive, just like Buñuel's recurrent beggars; men and women as confused and undirected as most of the world, trapped in the thought if not the manners of the society that has rejected them as criminals and deviants. And yet for all the grimness of Herzog's savage little tale, the director's attitude is not critical: the dwarfs as individuals are engaging characters, their antics and their shrieks of delighted laughter hover between the frightening and the infectious. Throughout the film the uneasy Herzogian humor is always at work.

Herzog's next two films were unambiguously humane. *Impeded Future* (*Behinderte Zukunft* 1970) and *Land of Silence and Darkness* (*Land des Schweigens und der Dunkelheit*, 1971) are both documentaries about people who are conventionally termed 'disabled'. *Impeded Future*

examines the situation of the physically handicapped in the Federal Republic, whilst *Land of Silence and Darkness* is a portrait of 56-year-old Fini Straubinger, who went first blind and then deaf as a child, and was then bedridden for thirty years. Now she helps others in Bavaria who are similarly afflicted to come to terms with their lives. Both films are gentle, patient studies of a whole succession of what the town clerk in *Kaspar Hauser* would call 'cases', individuals at worst rejected, at best condescendingly 'treated' by society. As in *Kaspar Hauser*, Herzog's message speaks for itself: these

people are not 'cripples', they are not inferior; there is an intensity about their lives that asks questions of us, the 'normal' ones.

For *Aguirre, Wrath of God* (*Aguirre, Der Zorn Gottes*, 1972) Herzog returned again to an exotic setting, this time to Peru, to the precipitous Urubamba valley, and the remote Huallaga and Nanay rivers among the jungles of the upper Amazon. Here, in the face of formidable difficulties, he filmed the fictitious story of the rebellion of the conquistador Lope

de Aguirre, who, sent out on a reconnaissance expedition, refuses to return to Pizarro's army. Instead, by murder and intimidation, he gains control of his party, installing the effete Guzman as his puppet 'Emperor of Eldorado', and declaring himself the all-conquering 'wrath of God'. Battered at first by rapids, later becalmed, Aguirre and his cowed cohort drift downstream on a raft. Steadily a collective madness of despair grips them all; disease, starvation, and the poisoned arrows of the forest Indians take their toll, until at the end the crazed Aguirre remains alone on his raft with a dream of marrying his now dead daughter, and founding the purest dynasty there ever was to rule the whole of New Spain.

Aguirre was conceived from the outset as a more commercial film than any Herzog had made before. It was to be a film with more 'action', a film with more 'surface', with more audience appeal. In the event it has indeed turned out to be one of his most popular films, and the explanation may well lie in the way Herzog has pushed his fascination with landscape and the character of his 'titanic' hero to new extremes. Visually, it is magnificent, often beautiful, sometimes overwhelmingly so. The opening sequence is breathtaking, as to the ethereal music of Popol Vuh, the heavily-laden expedition is seen, at first in extreme long-shot, later in close-up, painfully threading its way down a precipitous mountain path, from the misty heights above to the steamy jungle far below. The closing shot is equally famous, as the camera closes in on and then circle round and round the demented Aguirre, standing defiant on his becalmed raft, now invaded—in ultimate mockery of his imperial pretensions—by hundreds of little death's-head monkeys. In between these two sequences, the sights and sounds of the tropical river, from the terrifying roar of the rapids to the sinister utter silences of the lower reaches, broken only by the sudden mocking cries of animals and birds, are conveyed as incident after incident draws the hapless expedition to its doom.



Pitted against the relentless majesty of the primeval landscape is the equally relentless will of Aguirre himself. With his fierce, contemptuous face, his glaring maniac eyes, and his demonic swagger, he is the real titan among Herzog's heroes, a rebel obsessed with the idea of betrayal, a visionary adventurer adrift on a *bateau ivre* [drunken boat]. But the sheer grandiosity of Aguirre's madness is too dangerously close to the ludicrous to be presented in dead earnest. In fact Herzog avoids a potentially ruinous tumble from the sublime to the ridiculous by injecting unambiguous humour into the film: he deflates the tragedy of death with quirky last words such as 'Long arrows are becoming fashionable', uttered by a man killed by the Indians, and such wilful grotesqueries as a head that carries on counting after it has been chopped off. But underlying the whole film is a much more significant humour that stems from, and points up, the discrepancy between the painfully preserved trappings of European civilization (above all the two elegantly robed women—Aguirre's daughter, and the mistress of Ursúa, the deposed leader) and the brute, vulgar realities of life in the jungle. It is a discrepancy that runs through all of Herzog's work, here specifically an implicit critique of the vanity of imperial 'conquest', everywhere a quizzical vision of the glory and the folly of human aspiration.

With *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner* (*Die Grosse Ekstase des Bildhchnitzers Steiner*, 1974) Herzog presents for the first time a real-life figure in the tradition of the soldier Stroszek and the conquistador Aguirre—but now without laughter (unless it be in the figure of Herzog himself, who appears as a breathless, excited reporter, leading one critic to suggest 'The Great Ecstasy of Steiner-fan Herzog' as a more suitable title) Prepared for a television series called 'Frontier Posts', this 45-minute documentary must be one of the most beautiful pieces of sports reporting ever made. It is a study of the world ski-jump champion Walter Steiner, by profession a Swiss woodcarver...

'Who would dare to re-do *Hamlet* after Shakespeare? I would!'. So Herzog is reported to have commented on his decision to film a new version of one of the classics of German silent cinema, Murnau's *Nosferatu* of 1922, which he considers 'the most important film ever made in Germany'. Despite the unabated popularity of vampire films, no directors have followed Murnau's first cinematic exploitation of the subject with such fidelity to detail as Herzog. More than one critic has spoken of Herzog's *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (*Nosferatu—Phantom der Nacht*, 1978) as essentially Murnau plus sound and colour. The story of the vampire Count Dracula, who journeys from his native Transsylvania to wreak havoc on a quiet North German port, finally to be defeated by the self-sacrifice of a woman pure in heart, is a well-known variant of the Beauty-and-the-Beast legend, and Herzog adheres closely to it both in outline and detail, as well as observing the major conventions of the vampire genre as a whole.



However, *Nosferatu the Vampyre* is still distinctly a Herzog film. There are once more the astounding stories about the film-making itself: the story, for instance, of the eleven thousand rats that Herzog surreptitiously released into the streets of Delft for the closing sequence (white rats, by the way, but Herzog wanted grey rats, so he painted them)....It is precisely the way that he has rendered the ghoulish Count

uncomfortably sympathetic that is Herzog's principal innovation in his treatment of the story. Or perhaps one should say Klaus Kinski's innovation, for he, just as he had done in *Aguirre*, and just as Bruno S. did in *Kaspar Hauser*, manages by the sheer intensity and conviction of his acting to give *Nosferatu* its focal strength. With his great claws, his fangs, his bloodshot eyes, domed head, and whitened face

(his traditional Japanese make-up took up to five hours each day to put on) he is not just a figure of horror, but also of pity. Cursed with eternal life (*nosferatu* is Romanian for 'undead'), like Frankenstein's monster and King Kong before him, he yearns for affection and understanding—and here he is very much in that Herzog tradition of characters, both real and fictitious, whom the world rejects because they are different....

The tale of *Nosferatu* is superbly anti-rational: the eruption of the plague of rats (already made a potent symbol by Camus) that brings a smugly comfortable bourgeois world tumbling to the ground is a further element in Herzog's continuing fascination with the fragility of a self-deluding 'civilization'. For Herzog, not only are the irreducible mysteries of existence a fact of life, but the cinema is the supreme medium for conveying this fact. The cinema itself, he insists, is essentially an irrational medium, deriving its strength not from the world of 'reality', but from the world of dreams. Time and again Herzog has expressed his aversion to modern rationalism, an aversion that is directed particularly forcefully against any over-academic approach to the cinema: People should look straight at a film....That's the only way to see one. Film is not the art of scholars, but of illiterates. And film culture is not analysis, it is agitation of the mind. Movies come from the country fair and circus, not from art and academicism.

Herzog's work is a repeated plea for recognition of the validity and beauty of the visions of those who, by force of character or circumstances, move beyond the carefully circumscribed bounds of 'normality', 'reason', and 'civilization'. His heroes are outcasts...or self-willed exiles from the world of 'moderation'. For the latter he reserves a certain irony, derived from the awareness that the celebration of human potential can easily tip into ridicule at its fatuousness. His outcasts, however, are presented with warmth and a wondering sympathy. It is the strength and freshness of his vision that his films seek to capture.

And Herzog himself? 'My heart,' he says, 'is very close to the late Middle Ages.' But his films—which, he insists, he makes as an 'artisan rather than an artist—are rooted

in the contemporary world, even though only future generations may be able to see this. Liking himself to Kafka, Kleist, Büchner, and Hölderlin, whose ‘centrality’ was appreciated only after their death, he dismisses today’s pop stars and mass entertainers as the ones history will finally recognize to have been the real ‘eccentrics’ of the age. He is quite certain of his own position: ‘I think rather that it’s the others who are the outsiders.’

from *Cinema I The Movement-Image*. Gilles Deleuze. University Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986. “The figures of the Large and the Small in Herzog”

In *Aguirre, Wrath of God*, the heroic action, the descent of the rapids, in subordinated to the sublime action, the only one which is equal to the vast, virgin forest: Aguirre’s plan to be the only Traitor, to betray everyone at once—God, the King, men—in order to found a pure race in an incestuous union with his daughter, in which History will become the ‘opera’ of Nature....

For, in both cases—the sublimation of the large form and the enfeeblement of the small form—Herzog is a metaphysician. He is the most metaphysical of cinema directors (although German Expressionism had already been imbued with metaphysics, this was within the confines of a problem of Good and Evil to which Herzog is indifferent)...We can see how the Small enters into a relationship with the Large such that the two Ideas communicate and form figures in interchanging. The visionary’s sublime plan failed in the large form and his whole reality was enfeebled: Aguirre ended alone on his slimy raft, with only a colony of monkeys as his race.

from *1001 Movies You Must See Before You Die*. Ed. Stephen J. Schneider. Barron’s, 2003.

Aguirre, *Der Zorn Gottes* 1972, entry by Angela Araguaya
Aguirre: The Wrath of God—the first of Herzog’s features widely seen internationally—is the most spellbinding. The film, supposedly narrated from the diary of the Spanish monk Gaspar de Carvajal, is a disturbing parable that encapsulates Herzog’s flair for allegory, metaphor, dark humor, and the grotesque, his interest in alienation, obsession, and social decay; and his sense of the landscape taking on awful, human aspects.

Don Lope de Aguirre (Kinski) is one of Pizarro’s pillaging conquistadors cutting a swathe across 16th-century South America. Having overwhelmed the Incas, Pizarro’s soldiers are greedy for conquest and gold, but the expedition reaches an impasse in difficult terrain. What is supposed to be a one-week foraging and scouting trip by a party sent up the Amazon basin by raft quickly begins to suffer disasters. Soldiers and slaves are picked off by Indians, disease, and hunger; Aguirre leads a revolt against his commander; and the desperate journey degenerates into a homicidal power trip driven on the Aguirre’s increasingly demented obsession with reaching the fabled city of gold, El Dorado.

Shooting on remote locations in Peru on a tiny budget was sufficiently problematic and arduous, but Herzog’s account (particularly vivid in his documentary *My Best Fiend*) of a frequently raving Kinski adds appalling and entertaining background to the film. Toward the end of shooting, Herzog prevented Kinski from walking out by threatening to shoot him. Clearly the real-life struggles enhanced the film’s heated

intensity, its tragic inevitability signaled by the murdered commander’s graceful wife, carefully dressed in her (improbably clean) best, determinedly walking away into the jungle. By the end, a mad Aguirre rules a floating bier strewn with corpses and swarming with squealing monkeys. Kinski’s fascinating presence may dominate the film, but it is Herzog’s uncompromising vision and control that keeps it on its hallucinatory, hypnotic course.



David Church: Werner Herzog, *Senses of Cinema* 2006
 (For Church’s full article with live urls for the references in parentheses, and much more, go to:
<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/06/herzog.html>)

With a singular vision continually blurring the fine line between reality and fiction, Werner Herzog has become one of cinema’s most controversial and enigmatic filmmakers. A strong authorial presence pervades each of his films, whether fictional features or documentaries. For Herzog, there is no distinction between the two styles – they are all just “films” – because real life and fiction feed off each other for mutual poetic inspiration. His worldview often seems bleak and anti-humanistic, featuring quixotic outsiders who reject or are rejected by society, only to be crushed by the weight of their own ambitions. Civilisation is always teetering at the edge of self-destruction, “like a thin layer of ice upon a deep ocean of chaos and darkness” (1), with faith and superstition minding the tattered border. An air of Romanticism finds human kind dwarfed by the terrifying might and majesty of nature, while strange landscapes exist as reflections of inner mental states. Although keenly aware of his nation’s violent past, Herzog’s films generally eschew specific historical and political considerations in the face of a universe filled with murder, destruction and the demise of the individual. These themes gradually emerge throughout a body of work at once stunning and perplexing. As with the subject matter in his “documentaries”, it is often difficult to separate the “real” Herzog from the myriad fictions that have sprung up around him, either as myths perpetuated in the media or as subtle fabrications maintained by Herzog himself (2). Born in 1942, Herzog grew up amid post-World War II destruction in the small Bavarian village of Sachrang. He saw

his first movies at age 11 and quickly discovered film technique by taking heed of continuity errors and generic conventions in cheap B-movies (3). At age 14, he began a short period of intense Catholic devotion, around the same time that he discovered the virtues of travelling on foot and became determined to make films (4). As a teenager, Herzog learned about filmmaking from an encyclopaedia entry on the subject, but because of his youth and lack of formal training, he was unable to find producers for his early screenplays. Consequently, he founded Werner Herzog Filmproduktion and began producing his own films (5). He has written, produced, directed and often narrated virtually all of his own films since then, becoming an auteur in the proper sense.

Directed at age 19, his first short film was *Herakles* (1962), an editing experiment juxtaposing footage of bodybuilders with the famous racing accident at Le Mans.

Herzog's conception of the strongman "encompasses intellectual strength, independence of mind, confidence, self-reliance, and maybe even a kind of innocence" (6), making it a central trait of his protagonists and of himself as a filmmaker; he has repeatedly argued that filmmaking is much more of an athletic endeavour than an aesthetic one. However, the strange juxtaposition of footage in *Herakles* also suggests that even the strongman striving

for some superhuman quality can still be cut down by cruel acts of chance – as evidenced in *Invincible* (2001) and many other Herzog films with doomed protagonists. His next short was a documentary called *Spiel im Sand* (*Game in the Sand*, 1964), about four children and a rooster in a cardboard box, but he has never publicly shown the film. His next fictional short, *Die beispiellose Verteidigung der Festung Deutschkreuz* (*The Unprecedented Defense of the Fortress Deutschkreuz*, 1966), told the absurd story of four men guarding a derelict Austrian castle from imaginary attackers as they gradually lose their sanity.

After travelling Europe and North America for several years, Herzog returned to Munich in 1968, where he met Volker Schlöndorff and Rainer Werner Fassbinder, two other young directors who would emerge as guiding lights of the New German Cinema. Set on Crete during the Nazi occupation of Greece, his first fictional feature, *Lebenszeichen* (*Signs of Life*, 1968), follows the same theme as *The Unprecedented Defense*, telling the story of a young German soldier named Stroszek who goes mad while defending a useless ammunition dump from nonexistent enemies. Suddenly becoming violently active, Stroszek frightens away the few other soldiers and begins shooting fireworks at the nearby town, but only succeeds in killing a donkey before being captured and carted away. Emphasising existential angst over historical accuracy and political commentary, the film shows the utter absurdity of

"putting the instruments of war into the hands of individuals" (7), an idea that would resurface years later in Herzog's controversial documentary *Ballade vom kleinen Soldaten* (*Ballad of the Little Soldier*, 1984). During the making of *Signs of Life*, Herzog also shot the experimental short *Letzte Worte* (*Last Words*, 1968), about a hermit who is brought back to civilisation, where he refuses to speak; meanwhile, other members of society obsessively repeat themselves to the point of nonsense. This film would mark the start of Herzog's investigation into human language, and his continued steps toward increasing narrative stylisation. It was followed by *Massnahmen Gegen Fanatiker* (*Precautions Against Fanatics*, 1969), a humorous short about paranoid people at a Munich racetrack trying to prevent "fanatics" from assaulting the horses.

A surge of interest in New German Cinema was



emerging during the late-1960s (especially after the 1968 Oberhausen Film Festival) and Herzog became seen as one of its key filmmakers, along with others like Fassbinder, Schlöndorff and Wim Wenders – all members of the first important generation of German filmmakers to emerge in the post-war era. However, Herzog never saw New German Cinema as a cohesive movement, nor did he consider himself a part of it. Furthermore, he disliked many German films of the

time period for being "impossibly provincial" and explicitly ideological, whereas he made many of his own films outside Germany, aiming for an international audience. His films have rarely been successful within Germany itself, for he claims that Germans mistrust their own culture (8). Nevertheless, he seems to consider New German Cinema's project of reconstituting a domestic national identity to be less important than gaining "legitimacy as a civilized nation" abroad, a continuing struggle even today (9). Part of seeking this legitimacy meant reaching back to the period of pre-Nazi German cinema, and film historian Lotte Eisner (author of influential studies like *The Haunted Screen*) provided the link between the two eras. Eisner was an early champion of Herzog's work and New German Cinema in general. She provided a voiceover for *Fata Morgana* (1970) and would be a great inspiration to Herzog in later years. Herzog's 1979 remake of F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) would solidify his aim of gaining legitimacy by bridging the history of German cinema (10).

A trio of films emerged from a near-fatal journey to Africa in 1969. *Die fliegenden Ärzte von Ostafrika* (*The Flying Doctors of East Africa*, 1969), a documentary about doctors travelling Africa to prevent the eye disease trachoma, was (in Herzog's estimation) more of a practical "report" than a proper film, much as *Behinderte Zukunft* (*Handicapped Future*, 1971) would be several years later (11). The second film, *Fata Morgana*, is one of Herzog's boldest and most experimental

“documentaries”. Surreal images of mirages, landscapes and desert dwellers are arranged into three parts – The Creation, Paradise and The Golden Age – accompanied by narration from *Popol Vuh*, the Mayan book of creation myths and history. Though it was released in some places as a psychedelic picture, the film's original concept was to be a sort of documentary pieced together from footage shot by extraterrestrials that have landed on a strange planet and discover people waiting for an impending collision with the sun; the film would allow humans to see how aliens might perceive our planet. Although this concept was scrapped during filming, the idea for a sort of science-fiction documentary would persist in *Lektionen in Finsternis* (*Lessons of Darkness*, 1992) and *The Wild Blue Yonder* (2005), two other deeply impressionistic documentaries that form a sort of loose trilogy with *Fata Morgana*. Herzog has repeatedly said that in *Fata Morgana* and his other films, he is capturing the “embarrassed landscapes of our world”, places where human colonisation has desecrated the earth. Likewise, his eerily beautiful landscapes are not meant to be picturesque and idyllic, but rather evocative of inner states, collective dreams and nightmares (12). This dual characteristic of his landscapes also suggests that basic human consciousness has been desecrated by the forces of capitalism and modernity, an idea that can be found in films ranging from *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* to more “ethnographic” films like *Where the Green Ants Dream*, and *Ten Thousand Years Older*. Landscapes often form the core of his films, and he lingers upon them in his overarching mission to find fresh images; he considers civilisation threatened by an exhaustion of images (linked to consumerism and mass media technology like television) and a death of the imagination (13).

Aggressively surreal imagery would again fill his third film in Africa, *Auch Zwerge haben klein angefangen* (*Even Dwarfs Started Small*, 1970), a nihilistic black comedy about inmates who rebel and take over their asylum. With a cast composed entirely of short-statured people, the world of consumer goods and bourgeois society appears vividly out of proportion, and so the dwarves begin destroying everything as they vent their anger toward a world not built for them. As in films like *Kaspar Hauser* and *Stroszek*, the protagonists are somehow at odds with their surroundings, but while their reactions seem quite normal, it is wider society that emerges as truly monstrous. Thomas Elsaesser notes that *Dwarfs* seems to be “Herzog's way of representing his isolation after the 1968 Oberhausen Festival” and “the impossibility of combining political revolution with radical subjectivity” (14). Indeed, Herzog intended the film to ridicule the 1960s world revolution because he felt that the counterculture's desire to overthrow the government and install a utopian socialist society was simplistic and narrow-minded at best (15). After it was briefly

banned, critics bashed *Dwarfs* as anarchistic and blasphemous, and Herzog was denounced as a fascist.

Despite his problematic use of an all-disabled cast for metaphoric purposes in *Dwarfs*, *Handicapped Future* would be a practical documentary to raise public awareness about the need for disability access in Germany, using recent disability rights legislation in the United States for comparison. During its filming, Herzog met Fini Straubinger, a woman whose deafness and blindness allows her to only communicate via a tactile language. The resulting documentary, *Land des Schweigens und der Dunkelheit* (*Land of Silence and Darkness*, 1971), expands several themes that run throughout Herzog's oeuvre in films like *Last Words*, *Kaspar Hauser* and *Lessons of*



Darkness. Like many of his other characters, he portrays Fini and the other deaf-mute people as outsiders isolated from society, suffering from an inability to “properly” communicate their means of existence. Because Herzog claims that all of the people in his films (both documentaries and fictional features) are sympathetic points of self-reference, as if he has been gradually filming his own life, their inability to communicate reflects the autodidactic Herzog's own struggle to find “a new grammar of images” capable of communicating his stories cinematically (16). To this end, subtle stylisation is employed in *Land of Silence and Darkness* and virtually all of his documentaries (though only with subjects willing to cooperate in the process), whether by staging certain scenes for the camera, scripting bits of dialogue, or even fabricating whole sequences from limited historical facts. In his 1999 “Minnesota Declaration”, Herzog laid out the principles of his personal documentary style, attacking the failure of *cinema vérité* to go beyond a superficial “truth of accountants” based in objectively observable facts. Herzog distinguishes between surface facts and a deeper, “ecstatic truth” that can only be reached “through fabrication and imagination and stylization” (17). As Elsaesser says, Herzog “wants to document the fascination that emanates from the fictional or fantastic elements at the very heart of the everyday occurrence” (18). Because his films vary wildly in their degree of fabrication, it becomes very difficult to categorise them traditionally as either documentaries or fictional features, and Herzog views them all simply as “films”. Some of his documentaries (e.g. *Fata Morgana*, *The Wild Blue Yonder*) dramatically challenge traditional documentary form, others are almost wholly fictionalised films in the guise of documentaries (*Bells From the Deep*, *Gesualdo – Death for Five Voices*), while still others provide the inspiration for his fictional features (e.g. *Dark Glow of the Mountains* and *Scream of Stone*, *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* and *Rescue Dawn*). Meanwhile, his fictional features are often shot like documentaries (always on location), leaving purely aesthetic concerns behind; as with his documentaries, historical and political facts are only loosely adhered to, for he always digs beneath the surface facts of history to find the “ecstatic truth” (19).

This would be the case in *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (*Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, 1972), his first international success and the first of five collaborations with actor Klaus Kinski. Very loosely based upon Spanish conquistador Lope de Aguirre's doomed expedition to find El Dorado, the film (perhaps Herzog's best) details one man's descent into madness as he rebels against the Spanish crown and nature alike. Aguirre is a quintessentially Herzogian (anti-)hero, encompassing both the "over-reacher and prophet or underachiever and holy fool", put in bizarre locations and situations "often in order to let a strange and touching humanity emerge from impossible odds" (20). Aguirre's mission becomes a quixotic, even existential exercise in absurdity, especially as he proclaims himself superior to the laws of nature – though not without nature's final retribution. Elsaesser notes that Herzog's heroes – "solitary rebels, incapable of solidarity but also incapable of success" – typically exist in an ontological void due to their determination to investigate the limits of what it means to be human; from one film to another, they oscillate between being super-human and sub-human characters, both types being dialectically linked via an eventual shared failure "that redeems their vaulting ambition and their hubris" (21). The attempted transgression or transcendence of humanity's limits is a common theme in films ranging from *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner* to *Scream of Stone* to *Grizzly Man*. Aguirre was widely read as an allegory for Nazism, but Herzog maintains that this was not his intent, regardless of how German art is misunderstood in light of its national history (22).

His next film, *Die Grosse Ekstase des Bildschnitzers Steiner* (*The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner*, 1973), would document ski-jumper Walter Steiner's flights and crashes, focusing on the "ecstasy" of defying gravity while leaping almost suicidally against the fear of death. Facing these fears becomes another common theme for Herzog (who was an avid ski-jumper as a youth), for many of his films focus upon dreams of flight or the defiance of gravity (as transcendence of human limits) that are then broken by sudden catastrophe, but later revisited and overcome. For Steiner, catastrophe comes in an injurious crash from which he must pick himself up to go on jumping. But in other films, it is a more traumatic event, often involving a family member's death; examples include *The Dark Glow of the Mountains*, *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, *Wings of Hope* and *The White Diamond*. Scaling mountains (as in *Fitzcarraldo* or *Scream of Stone*) is a recurrent means of defying gravity.

His next feature, *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle* (*The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*, 1974 – its German title means, appropriately enough, "Every Man For Himself and God

Against All") would bring Herzog's interest in language to the fore again, this time based on the true story of a young man who was imprisoned for his first 16 years and then turned loose into an early 19th century German city without any conception of civilisation. Unable to speak more than a few pre-rehearsed sentences, Kaspar is able to see the world with completely



fresh eyes (much like the aliens in the original concept for *Fata Morgana*) and must quickly learn to communicate with his surroundings. The townspeople take an immediate interest in him, whether by exhibiting him as a freak or by trying to study and educate him. He is finally murdered under suspicious circumstances (perhaps having been related to royalty) and the town is delighted to learn that Kaspar's autopsied brain shows abnormalities, confirming their secret hopes that he truly is somehow different from them. Herzog describes Kaspar as "full of basic and

uncontaminated human dignity" (not unlike his descriptions of indigenous tribes in other films), for although Kaspar is an outsider, bourgeois society is what is truly at fault for his eventual destruction (23). Elsaesser suggests that Kaspar is also a metaphor for the filmmakers of the New German Cinema: left abandoned and without a father generation, they are uncertain about the means of socialisation, "attempting to survive between a good father substitute and a bad father image" (24). Filled with visions of Kaspar's dreamed landscapes, the film seems to maintain an uneasy balance between Herzog's anti-humanist views about civilisation and his genuine sympathy for the very human Kaspar. Many of Herzog's films feature this tension between the innate purity of humanity, the corrupting influence of society, and the all-powerful might of nature.

After the critical success of *Kaspar Hauser*, Herzog followed with another period film, *Herz Aus Glas* (*Heart of Glass*, 1976), about the fragility of civilisation in a pre-industrial Bavarian village. The village is renowned for making a special red glass, but when the master glass blower dies with the secret to make it, a collective madness begins to take over as the town turns upon itself. Meanwhile, a prophet on the outside of society makes ominous predictions about the future of the town and the wider world. John Sandford sees the film's central thesis as that "one day factories may be as obsolete as castles are today" (25), and the uneasy passage of time in *Heart of Glass* seems to bear this out. The film's deliberately slow pace is in ironic contrast to the relativity of time suggested by a town huddling the brink between different industrial eras, captured in a web of prophecies inextricably linking past and future to the present diegetic moment. To create a sort of "waking dream" quality for the film's action, virtually all of the actors perform under hypnosis. The characters drift about almost aimlessly, their actions emerging abruptly from beneath an eerily emotionless stupor; the effect is strange but gives the film a glacial pace that many viewers did not appreciate.

Though the film contains some of Herzog's most beautiful landscapes, the unfolding of events is so slight that most critics responded negatively to Herzog's experiment. It was followed by *Mit mir will keiner spielen* (*No One Will Play With Me*, 1976), a darkly humorous short documentary about a preschool-age boy ostracised from interactions with his classmates until a girl who has become interested in his pet crow provides the link to social acceptance.

How Much Wood Would a Woodchuck Chuck (1976) is a documentary capturing the World Championship of Livestock Auctioneers in Pennsylvania. The almost unintelligible speed, skill and repetition with which the auctioneers conduct business fascinated Herzog because it seemed to be "the real poetry of capitalism", a form of language pushed to the extremes of efficiency and (literal) economy (26). This system is juxtaposed with the pre-modern Amish farmers who come to watch the auction. Herzog would then return to the American Midwest to film *Stroszek* (1976), a fictional feature about an alcoholic man who moves from Germany to Wisconsin with his neighbour and a prostitute, only to find poverty and fatal disillusionment in place of the "American Dream". Capitalist America becomes another society that destroys the individual, but Herzog sees the film as less a critique of the United States than "a eulogy" in the wake of the American Dream, for such shattered hopes could develop in virtually any country (27). Very documentary-like in style, *Stroszek* is one of Herzog's most natural features, and is certainly one of his strongest.

The documentary *La Soufrière* (1977) brought Herzog and his two-man crew to the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe just before a volcano was set to obliterate it. They speak with the few people who have refused to evacuate, several natives too poor to leave and start a new life elsewhere. Herzog has later noted that this picture was one of the only times that he consciously put himself in real danger while filming, but that there is "an element of self-mockery in the final film", for the volcano so precisely predicted to erupt never actually did so, leaving the film as a sort of banal chase towards a catastrophe that never occurred (28). Events such as this have earned Herzog a rather exaggerated reputation as a risk-taker and an inviter of danger.

His next two features (both starring Kinski), filmed back-to-back in 1979, saw Herzog looking to earlier, "legitimate" German culture: *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (from Murnau's 1922 film) and *Woyzeck* (from Georg Büchner's dramatic fragment, posthumously published in 1879). Although many scenes and images (e.g. the vampire's physical appearance) are obvious adaptations from Murnau's film,



Herzog's retelling of the well-known *Dracula* story feels overall closer to the revived Gothicism of Bram Stoker's 1897 source novel than Murnau's Expressionism. The vampire is another of Herzog's existential heroes, an outsider who transcends the limits of human possibility through his undeadness, evoking the terrors of nature (i.e. the plague) in his wake. As in *Heart of Glass*, bourgeois society is turned inside out by a sudden change when the plague arrives, and after Dr Van Helsing finally drives a stake through the vampire's heart, the insipid town bureaucrats attempt to arrest him for murder, forgetting that the plague has already wiped out the town's government, police force and judicial system. As in many of Herzog's other films (e.g. *Heart of Glass*, *Bells From the Deep*), faith and superstition still exist at the limits of civilisation, a remnant from earlier periods of human development when monsters and myths constituted all of the unknown forces beyond the bounds of society.

This relates to his interest in our collective dreams and nightmares – whether dreams of surpassing human limits or nightmares about civilisation falling into chaos. Thematically similar to *Signs of Life*, *Woyzeck* is a very different film, showing a petty soldier abused by virtually every social and economic force around him. As he struggles to make sense of his existence and give his life some semblance of meaning, he finally goes mad and brutally murders his wife. Given the film's source material as a dramatic fragment, it is staged almost theatrically, shot in a series of deep-focus, four-minute long takes that would make André Bazin proud. Though *Woyzeck* is not as readily "cinematic" as many of Herzog's other works, it does afford Kinski a relatively restrained performance punctuated by the seemingly unending slow-motion murder that closes the film.

Two contrasting documentaries about religious faith in the United States were produced in 1980: *Glaube und Währung* (*God's Angry Man*) and *Huie's Predigt* (*Huie's Sermon*). Originally titled *Creed and Currency*, the first of these documents the eccentric televangelist Dr Gene Scott, whose California-based broadcast is a humorously aggressive and absurdly fanatical plea for financial pledges. Declaring that "God's honor is at stake every night", Scott represents a radical yoking together of zealotry and consumer capitalism. Herzog describes him as "appeal[ing] to the paranoia and craziness of our civilization" (29) – but this is in marked contrast to Brooklyn-based Bishop Huie Rogers, the subject of the second documentary. Although both figures are very successful in their aims, Rogers is the antithesis of Scott's fanaticism. *Huie's Sermon* is a straightforward look at how an unassuming clergyman can bolster faith and significantly engage his listeners without the exploitative and deliberately alarming means used by Scott. Each film captures a different form of

faith in action, but Rogers emerges as easily the more sympathetic of the two men. Figuring it as a “distant religious echo” from his teenage period of intense Catholic belief (30), Herzog's films often focus upon faith, whether a faith in one's own ambitions, a Romantic faith in the shadow of all-powerful nature, or a faith in religious or superstitious idea(l)s seemingly at odds with society or conventional reason.

These forms of faith would converge in *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), one of Herzog's finest and most well known films, as much the product of his faith in filmmaking (see Les Blank's documentary about the film's production, *Burden of Dreams*) as in the power of the cinematic image. Described by Herzog as his best “documentary”, it is a fictional feature that details a wealthy industrialist's obsessive quest to bring European opera to the Amazon. To finance his dream of building a new opera house, this “Conquistador of the Useless” travels upriver and, with the help of local indigenous peoples, literally pulls a huge steamboat over a mountainside to access a fertile tributary. After the boat reaches the other side of the mountain, the natives cut it loose, sending it into violent rapids to appease the spirits residing there. Fitzcarraldo ultimately fails in his mission, but limps back to port with a compromised version of his dream – a dream that money alone cannot buy – still intact. A chaotic four years in the making, the film's completion was as much a Sisyphean task as Fitzcarraldo's own quest to elevate his dreams over reality – especially because Herzog used no miniatures or special effects in order to pull the full-sized steamboat up and over the mountain, determined to give the film a wholly natural sense of wonder and physical magic (31). Despite many wild controversies surrounding the film's making, it earned Herzog a Best Director award at the 1982 Cannes Film Festival.

Herzog directed three films in 1984, one of which, *Gasherbrum – Der leuchtende Berg* (*The Dark Glow of the Mountains*), follows the recurrent theme of an individual pushing against human limits in defiance of gravity, but now forced to return to and overcome an earlier trauma. Famous mountaineer Reinhold Messner lost a brother during a climbing expedition in the Himalayas, but still persisted in climbing all of the world's tallest peaks without oxygen tanks. Herzog takes him back to the mountain that claimed his brother and later follows Messner as he embarks upon a continuous oxygen-free climb of two 8,000-meter mountains. Messner is a somewhat difficult figure for Herzog because he ostensibly seems to embody the “adventurer” lifestyle that Herzog so despises; according to Herzog, “adventuring” is an egocentric act that embarrasses landscapes by relying upon clichés about being pushed to the limits of humanity and conquering nature. For Herzog, however, nature is not a conquerable entity, nor are most of the subjects of his films adventurers in this sense. Transcending the bounds of humanity should not be a pastime, but rather a selfless compulsion, an essential part of one's

identity and a means of justifying one's own existence. In Messner's case, he is compelled to re-climb the same mountains, including the one that killed his brother, because mountaineering is as much a part of him as life itself (32).

Much more controversial would be Herzog's documentary *Ballade vom kleinen Soldaten* (*Ballad of the Little Soldier*, 1984), a look at child soldiers fighting against the Sandinistas on behalf of the Miskito Indians, an indigenous group long victimised by the ruling powers in Nicaragua. According to the film, Sandinista troops destroyed over 60 Miskito villages in an effort to launch their program of



scientific socialism. The film was viciously attacked as anti-Sandinista propaganda, despite Herzog's claim that it is not a political work. He claims that the film's emphasis is not on the specific political or historical background of the Miskito-Sandinista conflict – though he is sympathetic to the Miskitos while endorsing neither side – but rather on the human element that could take place in any country: the tragedy of children marched off to war with the instruments of death placed in their hands (33). George Paul

Csicsery's analysis of the film echoes Herzog's sentiments, though he points out that while Indian rebellions have figured in films like *Aguirre* and *Fitzcarraldo*, now Herzog is finally filming from the side of the Indians themselves. Csicsery notes that Herzog and his assistant director Denis Reichle use this conflict to draw connections to “all boys who have fought for all desperate lost causes throughout history.” Because Reichle himself was drafted as a teenage German soldier in the closing days of World War II, he is now atoning for his own sins (revisiting a past trauma to overcome it) by highlighting the “endless cycle of more death” embodied in the figure of the child soldier, thus subverting the romanticised “cult of the young hero sacrificing himself for his country in the full bloom of innocence” that so appealed to the Nazis. Csicsery goes on to observe that Herzog's film is as much about the personal risks and travails of the filmmakers themselves as it is about the documentary's subjects, thus blurring the line between documentary and fiction, making the film nihilistically apolitical (34). *Ballad of the Little Soldier* illustrates one of the more potentially problematic elements in Herzog's films: in his efforts at stylisation and evocation of the “ecstatic truth”, poetry is always more important than politics, leaving observable facts to be loosely filtered through Herzog's creative lens. Because there is such a strong authorial voice in his documentaries (and also a literal authorial voice, because he narrates his own films, retaining the power of the speaking subject), it becomes very difficult to discern the “facts” of a given situation, resulting in much criticism over concerns of historical accuracy and political content.

His position as a white European speaking subject remains controversial because by deliberately stripping historical and political contexts from his films, his focus on the

human or natural elements retains a certain romanticised (and potentially politically incorrect) air. Aside from anthropomorphising nature in many of his films (35), his depiction of indigenous peoples is often sympathetic (in part because of their proximity to and respect for nature), but generally emphasises a certain natural purity or primitiveness lacking in Western/European society. Often using colonialism (whether physical or cultural) to show how one group makes outsiders of another group, he wishes to challenge bourgeois society by showing its decadence and corruption, but also to illustrate the fragile boundary between civilisation and a chaotic state of nature. Although his intent is to critique Western society, he does so in what could be seen as potentially negative ways. *Wo die grünen Ameisen träumen* (*Where the Green Ants Dream*, 1984) is an example of a fictional feature (loosely based on historical facts) that bears this tension. When a group of Australian aborigines go to court to prevent a mining company from desecrating one of their culture's sacred sites, they are given an airplane and a runway in the Outback as a gift. The court case goes on and on, but eventually the mining company wins and the aborigines take off in the plane, flying into oblivion. The film's sympathies are clearly with the aborigines, their plight to preserve their heritage from colonisers, and the problems posed by cross-cultural communication differences when native languages are being wiped out. However, the film also leans toward a somewhat ethnographic view of aboriginal life. Herzog notes that because he does not claim to fully understand their ways, much of the film was invented, including various depictions of aboriginal culture. "I respect them as a people who are in a deep struggle to keep their visions alive," he says, "and because my own understanding of them was limited, I wanted to develop my own mythology" (36). Herzog is after showing the deeper truths of their cultural struggle, even if it means stylising his own interpretations of their belief system. He is less concerned about misrepresenting "objective" facts about a culture than about portraying the underlying conflicts of a group at odds with modern Western civilisation. As Elsaesser observes, Herzog retains "a 'stupid' eye, one that is merely curious rather than knowing or demonstrative" (as in ethnographic films). Whether in fictional features or documentaries, his method of superimposing myths over politically or historically analysable situations provides a narratological framework that is "both deliberately inadequate and highly ironic: it implies other models of understanding which are subverted by a commentary at once ludicrous and solemn" (37).

After shooting a short documentary self-portrait called *Portrait Werner Herzog* (1986), *Cobra Verde* (1987), his final collaboration with Kinski, would indirectly address colonialism

again in its fictional story of a bandit sent to the west coast of Africa as a slave catcher, only to become a slave himself before leading a rebel army of female soldiers to overthrow the king. After it is learned that the king is already dead, Cobra Verde turns his back on a position of great power and instead dies during a futile attempt to escape into the sea. Herzog insists



that the film is "about great fantasies and follies of the human spirit, not colonialism" (38). Although the film points toward the fine line between freedom and slavery, inverting notions of otherness throughout the plot, Herzog is satisfied to focus primarily upon Cobra Verde's existential struggle for freedom and self-definition, not the historical or political context of slavery. Furthermore, he claims that his films are anthropological or ethnographic "only in as much as they try to explore

the human condition at this particular time on this planet. I do not make films using images only of clouds and trees; I work with human beings because the way they function in different cultural groups interests me", though he claims to have never made a film with the explicit purpose of studying a particular cultural group (39). For example, in his next documentary, *Wodaabe – Dei Hirten der Sonne* (*Wodaabe – Herdsmen of the Sun*, 1989), he films the male beauty contests of the Wodaabe people in Africa. Because there is no voiceover, he is not the sort of all-knowing Western interpreter found in ethnographic films, but neither does he invent his own mythology around the customs (as he has done in other films, such as *Where the Green Ants Dream*). By using classical European music over the images, he allegedly stylises the film into "a story about beauty and desire" instead of a traditional ethnographic documentary (40). But despite his intent, his stylisation of facts and apolitical viewpoint can nevertheless render a number of his films especially problematic, notably when he also occupies the role of documentary narrator (and therefore, Western speaking subject).

The documentary *Echoes aus einem düsteren Reich* (*Echoes from a Somber Empire*, 1990) brought Herzog back to Africa to revisit various places marked by events during the reign of the Central African Republic's Emperor Jean-Bédél Bokassa, a despot renowned for numerous crimes and atrocities, including cannibalism. Using archive footage intercut with discussions with the victims, wives and enemies of Bokassa, Herzog paints a grim picture of a power-mad dictator and a legacy of horror. As with *Ballad of the Little Solider*, his perspective is aimed less at the specific history of Bokassa's time in power than at the more universal issue of the lurid and evil extremes toward which the human psyche can devolve. In a sense, *Echoes* is Herzog's own *Heart of Darkness*, a look into the depths of one man's nightmares, and an appropriate real-life corollary to the

sort of mad (though usually more benign) dreamers that frequent Herzog's films.

Das excentrische Privattheater des Maharadjah von Udaipur (*The Eccentric Private Theatre of the Maharaja of Udaipur*, 1991) is a

rather straightforward documentary about an extremely extravagant day-long event for the Maharaja of Udaipur in India. With over a thousand performers and countless hours of preparation leading up to a single unrepeatable show, the one glorious and fleeting moment in time takes on almost absurd dimensions. Herzog's second film of 1991 is *Schrei aus Stein* (*Scream of Stone*), a fictional feature about two men, a mountaineer

and a free-climber, who compete to see who is the world's greatest climber. Tensions mount as the two climbers must race up opposite sides of the same mountain, braving extreme conditions and landscapes. Based on an original idea by Reinhold Messner, the film follows in the same vein as *The Dark Glow of the Mountains*, but in a more conventional fictitious narrative. The resulting film is somewhat commonplace and Herzog, who liked the idea of reviving the German "mountain film" genre, has since considered it too much of an artistic compromise, having had little input on the screenplay (41). Also in 1991, Herzog directed the 4-hour (8-part) TV miniseries *Film Lesson*, featuring such guest lecturers as a magician, a tightrope walker, a cosmologist, director Volker Schlöndorff, and Herzog himself. These strange but imaginative lessons focus upon such topics as magic, athletic agility, camera orientation, landscapes and even advanced mathematics.

The documentary *Lessons of Darkness* brings the horror of the 1991 Gulf War to a more surreal and cinematic level – "by transforming things that are physically there into more intensified, elevated, and stylised images", as Herzog says of his overarching filmmaking process – separating the images of burning oil fields and massive destruction from their specific circumstances. As with *Ballad of the Little Soldier*, some people attacked him for removing a historical or political context, while others criticised him for "aestheticising" the horror and not naming any historical particulars of the war, but the film was generally a critical success (42). The images are treated as if from any war throughout history, receiving a certain unearthly detachment through Herzog's narration. The same sort of science-fiction framework from *Fata Morgana* operates here, using alien eyes to see only the "embarrassed landscapes" of a planet and the strange creatures (e.g. heavy-suited firefighters and a boy who has lost the ability to talk) that inhabit it. Reminiscent of *Fata Morgana*'s creation myth structure, *Lessons of Darkness* is divided into pseudo-biblical

chapters, ending with a certain ontological crisis as the now-extinguished oil wells are reignited just so there will be something for the firefighters to battle against again.

It was followed by another of Herzog's most stylised

(and best) documentaries, *Glocken aus der Tiefe* (*Bells from the Deep*, 1993), which focuses on the thin line between religious faith and superstition in Siberia, particularly concerning a mythic city that supposedly exists at the bottom of a deep lake. Faith in such beliefs becomes another instance of the collective dreams that exist at the tattered edges of modern civilisation. Herzog admits that much of the film was fabricated, though it still captures the "ecstatic truth" surrounding the different phenomena that believers and pilgrims will embrace



out of a sort of desperate faith. Pilgrimages and the strength of faith would be a topic for several of his later documentaries, including *Gott und die Beladenen* (*The Lord and the Laden*, 1999), *Pilgrimage* (2001) and *Rad der Zeit* (*Wheel of Time*, 2003). Filmed in Mexico and Guatemala, *The Lord and the Laden* looks at how the Catholic Church has tried to superimpose its belief system over the Mayan god Maximón, and how worship of the resulting syncretic deity blends faith and superstition in fascinating ways that cause the Church some unease. The short *Pilgrimage* is composed of footage from various pilgrimages around the world, including sequences from *Bells from the Deep* and *The Lord and the Laden*. The resulting film is more of a musical poem than anything else. *Wheel of Time* is a fuller reflection upon pilgrimages and faith, focusing on one in which thousands of Buddhists from around the world converge on a location where the Dalai Lama oversees the construction of an intricately detailed sand mandala representing the Buddhist conception of time and the universe. Though the ceremonies only last several days before the Wheel of Time is wiped away, some pilgrims travel on foot for years (we see one who stops to bow his head to the ground after every step) just to reach the spot. This sort of devotion fascinates Herzog as he tries to capture images of great spirituality on film.

Die Verwandlung der Welt in Musik (*The Transformation of the World into Music*, 1994) documents Herzog's efforts to stage Wagner's *Lohengrin* at the Bayreuth Opera Festival. He has directed operas (mostly by Wagner) periodically since 1986, including a performance of Schiller's *Giovanna d'Arco* that he filmed in 1989. The influence of opera is obvious in *Fitzcarraldo*, but the music also makes its way into many of Herzog's other films. He argues that opera plots are often completely unrealistic, but that the music somehow renders such strange machinations and wild emotions believable. This elevation of an opera's self-contained world toward a sort of deeper musical truth resonates somewhat with

Herzog's approach to filmmaking, though he claims that film is more about transforming the world into believable images than into the unreal archetypal situations found in opera (43). This sentiment would be put to the test in his documentary *Gesualdo – Tod für fünf Stimmen* (*Gesualdo – Death for Five Voices*, 1995) for which he would take only the loosest historical facts about 16th century composer and prince Carlo Gesualdo, fabricating a bizarre biography about madness and murderous eccentricities. One of Herzog's most playfully entertaining and even comical documentaries, it features historians and bizarre Gesualdo enthusiasts presenting the composer's life and work. The resulting film emerges as a delightful ode to Herzog's skill in stylisation and his love of music – which he cites as a greater inspiration for his films than literary or filmic influences (44).



His next two documentaries, *Flucht aus Laos* (*Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, 1997) and *Julianes Sturz in den Dschungel* (*Wings of Hope*, 1999), each follow the sort of pattern established by *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner* and *The Dark Glow of the Mountains*, bringing their subjects back to the scene of an earlier trauma involving flight or defiance of gravity. In the former, German-American Dieter Dengler returns to the jungles of Laos where he had been shot down during his first mission as a pilot in the Vietnam War. The film tells of his harrowing journey of survival in a POW camp, his return to civilisation, and above all, his unquenchable love of flying. The film was critically very well received, though some criticised Herzog for not denouncing the war or taking a political position. In addition, Dengler's story would provide the basis for Herzog's fictional feature *Rescue Dawn* (2006). *Wings of Hope* takes Julianne Köpcke back to the Peruvian jungle where she was the sole survivor of a plane crash that killed her family in 1971. We learn that Herzog himself had been scheduled to be on the same flight, as it was during the filming of *Aguirre*, but by chance he was not. The film follows the circumstances of Julianne's miraculous survival and her struggles of endurance in the jungle. Herzog's next film is *Mein liebster Feind* (*My Best Fiend*, 1999), an enjoyable documentary about his working relationship with Klaus Kinski (who died in 1991), featuring interviews with cast members of various films, various footage of Kinski in action both on- and off-set, and Herzog's remembrances of Kinski's life.

Following *The Lord and the Laden* and *Pilgrimage*, his fictional feature *Invincible* takes loose details about several historical figures from the 1920s and moves them to the period of the Nazi Party's rise to power in early-1930s Germany. Zishe Breitbart (Jouko Ahola) is a Jewish strongman whose ethnic identity is kept hidden while performing as the Aryan hero Siegfried (one of Wagner's operatic heroes) in a popular stage show. Meanwhile, a hypnotist (who keeps his own Jewish ethnicity a secret) (Tim Roth) tries to exploit Hitler's interest in

the occult and work his way into a powerful government position. Breitbart begins having premonitions about the fate of the Jewish people and decides to drop his cover to warn them, only to be brought to trial and eventually to die from a small nail scratch. Since *Signs of Life* only uses World War II as a quiet backdrop for its existential themes, *Invincible* is probably Herzog's first film to directly address Nazism, but it does so through familiar Herzogian tropes: the visionary strongman

figure is also the social outsider doomed to failure, faith in (occult) superstitions undergirds the Third Reich's will to power, collective madness prevails in a society that destroys the individual, and Breitbart's inability to properly communicate the coming danger puts him at odds with not only the Nazis but his own people. The film garnered favourable reviews, even if it remains one of Herzog's

least memorable fictional features.

His interesting but problematic short documentary segment "Ten Thousand Years Older" from the portmanteau film *Ten Minutes Older: The Trumpet* (2002) veers toward an ethnographic look at several members of an indigenous South American group only recently exposed to Western society. He contrasts their earlier mode of life (e.g. attacking foreign expeditions to their area) with their quick but bewildering acclimation to Western influences over the period of about a decade. This film was followed by *Wheel of Time* and *The White Diamond* (2004), the latter of which carries on thematically from *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* and *Wings of Hope*. Here, Herzog follows Dr Graham Dorrington to Guyana, where he attempts to test the eponymous experimental airship. Dorrington's dreams of flight and of a practical return to the golden age of dirigibles inspires him to carry on with a project that has already claimed the life of his documentarian friend. Herzog captures the dangers of Dorrington's flight trials, the pain of returning to a past trauma, and the ecstasy of success as memories of that trauma are overcome.

His greatest critical success in many years, *Grizzly Man* (2005) explores the life and death of environmentalist Timothy Treadwell, who lived illegally in an Alaskan wildlife refuge for many seasons, studying and trying to protect grizzly bears. Much of the film is composed of Treadwell's own footage of himself as a self-styled crusader for the bears; Herzog duly notes his respect for Treadwell as a fellow filmmaker, especially in his depictions of the natural world. However, Herzog chastises Treadwell's paranoid persecution fantasies (in one scene he comments that Treadwell's furious ravings are like fits he has seen on movie sets, subtly referring to Kinski) and his lack of respect for the dangers of nature. Various friends and officials weigh in on Treadwell's life, and the conclusion is reached that Treadwell's death resulted from following his dream of crossing the boundary between man and bear. Because he wanted to leave humanity altogether and

become a bear, Treadwell risked (and finally lost) his life to a natural universe that Herzog describes as full of murder, chaos and death. As with *My Best Fiend*, Herzog refrains from stylising much of the film since its subject is dead and thus unable to cooperate with or respond to Herzog's fabrications.

The Wild Blue Yonder is a strange and impressionistic documentary in the same vein as *Fata Morgana* and *Lessons of Darkness*, as if composing the third film in a sort of "science-fiction" trilogy. Divided into chapters like *Lessons of Darkness*, the film is narrated onscreen by an alien whose species has unsuccessfully attempted to colonise Earth. He tells of how the Earth's environment has become so unlivable that a crew of astronauts in orbit are sent on what may be a suicide mission to discover new planets capable of sustaining life. The astronauts eventually discover the alien's own aquatic planet and begin exploring it, later draining it of its natural resources and making it unlivable as well. As the astronauts return to Earth, they discover that human life has been entirely wiped out, leaving only ruins, and that nature has taken over again, healing the planet's wounds. Herzog fashions this pseudo-documentary narrative from footage of a 1989 space shuttle mission, scenes from a scuba journey beneath the Antarctic ice sheet, unused shots from *The White Diamond* and interviews with an astrophysicist talking about wormholes in space. Although Herzog himself once considered joining NASA just to film new images in space (45), *The Wild Blue Yonder* is intended as a critique of space exploration. He claims that the chances of finding life-sustaining environments in space are so slim (and so far away) that such exploration is a huge waste of time and resources that could be better spent improving our own world (46). If *Grizzly Man's* Timothy Treadwell went too far in his efforts to protect one species of bear, *The Wild Blue Yonder's* closing images of nature reclaiming an unpeopled planet Earth suggests Herzog's own environmental warning about the future: the power of nature is not to be trifled with, for the self-sufficient Earth will exist long after humanity has wiped itself out through war, pollution and death. Perhaps Herzog's more "ethnographic" films (and others like *Heart of Glass*) are a part of this anti-humanist viewpoint, since by looking at more supposedly "primitive" cultures, we can see the fragility of our "modern" civilisation, looking simultaneously back to the past and beyond to the future end of human existence. Historical and political contexts do indeed drop away in the face of our species' relatively brief moment in geological time.

Herzog's latest film is *Rescue Dawn*, a fictional feature based on *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*. He has described the film's production as the worst he has seen in many years (47), but such adversity tends to produce great results for Herzog. In his own words, "cinema comes from the country fair and the circus, not from art and academicism." He does not consider his own films to be art, but rather artisanal products akin to poetry. Likewise, he typically ignores or rejects critical analyses of his work, making films without pre-established themes in mind. As critical of high-minded European art cinema as he is of artificial Hollywood pictures (48), it can be difficult to summarise his work without falling into the traps he has laid out for would-be critics. Nevertheless, Herzog remains one of cinema's most fascinating and energetic filmmakers, and his oeuvre contains a number of tropes that shed much light on how he constructs a very personal body of work, blurring the

line between his peculiar subjects and his own experience as auteur.



"Lope de Aguirre (Wikipedia. Click here for full entry.)

Lope de Aguirre (Spanish pronunciation: [ˈlope ðe aˈɣire]; 8 November 1510 – 27 October 1561) was a [Basque Spanish](#)^[1] [conquistador](#) who was active in [South America](#). Nicknamed *El Loco* ('the Madman'), he styled himself "Wrath of God, Prince of Freedom, King of Tierra Firme".^[2] Aguirre is best known for his final expedition down the [Amazon river](#) in search of the mythical golden Kingdom [El Dorado](#). In 1561 Aguirre sent a letter which defied the Spanish monarch [Philip II](#) by declaring an independent state of Peru. Aguirre's expedition ended with his death, and in the years since then he has been treated by historians as a symbol of cruelty and treachery in the early history of [colonial Spanish America](#).^{[3][4]} and has become an [antihero](#) in literature, cinema and other arts.^[5]

Ingo Petzke: "Aguirre, Wrath of God" (Senses of Cinema, 2002):

Werner Herzog was born on 5th of September 1942 in Munich as Werner Stipetić (1), son of a Croatian father and a German mother. Though he chose to call himself "Herzog" a long time ago, the name "Stipeti" appears frequently in the credits of his earlier films. Though Herzog studied history, literature and theatre in Munich and Pittsburgh, USA, he gave up his studies early, and turned to filmmaking in 1962. In 1974 he walked all the way from Munich to Paris to visit the seriously ill film historian Lotte Eisner, believing she would not die if he achieved this pilgrimage. In 1983 he played the

father in Paul Cox's *Man of Flowers* (1983). Herzog states that his soul feels nearest to the late Middle Ages and that he would dare to re-do *Hamlet* after Shakespeare.

His films are archetypically German in their quest for the Holy Grail or rather the Blue Flower of Romanticism, to name the nearest German equivalent. No aim is weird enough, no country too distant: El Dorado in the Peruvian jungle (*Aguirre*, 1972); an opera-house in the Brazilian jungle (or in this case rather the moving of a ship across a mountain) (*Fitzcarraldo*, 1981); an empire of black Amazons in West Africa (*Cobra Verde*, 1987). And if possible, mythology is added – to a point where myth is simply created. This is not only true of the ill-fated *Where the Green Ants Dream* (1984) but of the Sahara doco *Fata Morgana* (1970) as well, where myths by the ancient Greek and the Maya at the same time are superficially used to evoke a mysterious sci-fi atmosphere. Needless to say, such wonders can't be found in present-day, industrialised Germany. And so, Herzog must go back to more romantic times as in *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974) or *Nosferatu* (1979).

A closer look reveals that Herzog's romanticism is rather personal. Some critics call this his "burden of dreams", as Les Blank shows in his famous doco *Burden of Dreams* (1982), about the shooting of *Fitzcarraldo*. I would rather call it an obsession. Herzog is obsessed by obsessions, be it his or others. This allows for both extraordinary feature films and documentaries, like *The Flying Doctors of East Africa* (1969), *The Great Ecstasy of the Woodcarver Steiner* (1974) or *The Dark Glow of Mountains* (1985) (about Austrian mountain-addict Reinhold Messner). This obsession can even lead to a film about nothing happening, probably a unique achievement in film history. In *La Soufrière* (1976), a volcano on a Caribbean island about to erupt threatens total disaster. But unsympathetic to Herzog's eagerly waiting camera, the 'inevitable apocalypse' is aborted and the volcano simmers.

Closely related to obsession is the vision of strong, striking imagery. Many of Herzog's films are like loose agglomerates around a central resonating image – the ship on the ridge in *Fitzcarraldo*; the valley in Crete with its hundreds of rotating windmills in *Signs of Life* (1967); the Lilliputians forever driving around on a motorbike in *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (1970); the camera circling the lonely Aguirre on his raft in the backwaters of the Amazon jungle. And if you rely as much on images as Herzog does, a succession of images with magic beauty and without any plot whatsoever is a convincing piece of art – take *Fata Morgana* for example.



Another important feature of Herzog's work, and closely related to his use of myth and imagery, is landscape (not to be confused with simple nature). The landscape's subtle depiction – often accompanied by the ethereal music of Popol Vuh – sets the mood of a film. But gradually landscape becomes a kind of mindscape of the lead character who almost always is an obsessed lunatic, a pathological outsider, a loser on a grand scale – a mythological loser. The penultimate example is Klaus Kinski, who was never near as good as when working with Herzog in their love-hate relationship. Despite appearing early in his career, *Aguirre, Wrath of God* is for me the quintessential Herzog movie. It has all the typical ingredients: Kinski as the maniac; extremely sensitive camerawork by Thomas

Mauch (especially during the descent of the Andes); and music by Popol Vuh. It's shot on the most unlikely location – the Peruvian rainforest near Puerto Maldonado, in the vicinity of which *Fitzcarraldo* was to be shot nearly 10 years later, and with more than just a little help from his friends, a handful of Latin-American filmmakers who also act in it. It deals with possibly the most obsessed group of people in history, the Spanish conquistadors, and their desperate hunt for the most magic of all Grails, the elusive golden land of El Dorado – leaving destruction and death to millions in their wake. A few lines in an old chronicle is all that remains of the historical facts, thus leaving plenty of room for Herzog to employ his imagination and re-arrange the facts. In short: an ideal topic for a visionary director, tackled with just the right crew, and on a location guaranteed to make the shooting an ordeal in itself.

And an ordeal it was. For much of the time, the location consisted of three differently-sized rafts slowly gliding down the head-waters of the mighty Amazon river: one for the action proper, a second to set up the camera on, and a third one, dangling a few miles behind so as not to be in frame, providing basic accommodation and meals. Scorching sun, high humidity and mosquitoes galore took their toll. At one point Kinski, forever true to his reputation, insisted on the fulfilment of his contract: if no air-con room at night, no work. With this luxury about 1,000 km away, Herzog saw only one chance to save his film: at gunpoint he threatened to kill Kinski and later explain his disappearance with an unfortunate incident in the perilous waters. As we all know, Kinski kept on working.

As always, Herzog was quick to take advantage of situations, especially as this was virtually a low-budget production. When they incidentally happened to float by a burning tribal village on their rafts, a short scene was included in the film. The monkeys for the second-last scene were simply stolen from a freight ship bound for the States, where the poor animals should have given their lives in labs for the benefit of

new cosmetics and drugs. Though usually very eloquent, I never heard Herzog explain how he managed to get the big boat into the treetop – so at least this minor miracle remains unsolved.

Aguirre remains for me the most convincing of Herzog's films in terms of narrative. Though there is little dialogue, this saves Herzog from getting overly tangled up in the construction of a plot, something German directors are never good at. Instead, the narrative is more or less a steady stream of images which not only sets the pace of the film but the mood as well. And as the river gets wider and likewise slower and calmer, so does the plot. It is the topography of the landscape that dictates the action, not the actors. They are, indeed, re-actors to their surroundings, which on the other hand reflect and mirror the growing madness and the feverish hallucinations of the doomed expedition.

Where there is dialogue, it does not push the action but characterizes the protagonists – exactly what a good line of dialogue should always do but seldom does. A consideration of the very first scene with dialogue will clarify my point. We have seen the expedition descending the wild mountains, carrying unnecessary impedimenta and showing out-of-place behaviour. Now Aguirre stands at the river beside Gonzalo, brother of Francisco Pizarro, the conqueror of Peru, and says: "Nobody can get down that river alive". As we later learn, this is a truly prophetic remark. But it proves as well that Aguirre at this point is still completely sane and pragmatic. A remarkable contrast to his later behaviour when he pushes forward with all his might. With no companions left and his dead daughter in his arms he hallucinates about founding the biggest empire ever, a Pure Dynasty built on an incestuous matrimony with just this daughter.

The first moment of dialogue is even more crucial because of a pun in the German, which is not reflected in the English subtitles. The English subtitles read Pizarro continuing "From here it's downhill" and Aguirre answering "Now it's

downhill". In German, the exchange of words can be read in three different ways: (1) "From now on things are up and up", and Aguirre replying "From now on it goes downhill". (2) Pizarro: "From now on we have to move upwards" with Aguirre replying "From now on we will move downstream". Or (3) the mixed combination "From now on things are up and up", with Aguirre choosing to misunderstand by answering "From now on we will move downstream". This makes it possible for him to show proper behaviour towards a Spanish nobleman but already hints at Aguirre's barely hidden resistance to the expedition's official goal and indicates his own, still secret plans.

I stress this scene for two reasons. Firstly, the basics of Aguirre's character as well as the outline of the plot are evident in just three laconic lines of dialogue – quite an artistic achievement. Secondly, this dialogue was improvised and spoken by Herzog right on the spot during shooting. This can easily be proven by the published screenplay, which doesn't contain these lines.

Herzog materialises as a masterly "auteur" – in control of imagery, narrative and characterisation. In fact, Herzog's *Aguirre* has hardly anything in common with the historical person, and neither his positive portrayals in Latin-American literature nor other films. *Aguirre* is Herzog's own creation, skilfully crafted and artistically convincing.

Aguirre, Wrath of God is Herzog's day of reckoning with the age of the conquistadors. I can't think of a more scathing exposure of greed and insanity as motivators of human behaviour barely disguised behind a fake missionary approach. The one-dimensional greediness of the Spaniards may still be comprehensible – the same greediness in the name of God, as portrayed by Dominican monk Gaspar de Carvajal, is not. *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* seems to me the perfect film to mark 500 years of European colonisation of Latin America.

COMING UP IN THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS, FALL 2020, SERIES 41:

Nov 10: Richard Rush, *The Stunt Man* (1980)

Nov 17: Wim Wenders, *Wings of Desire/Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987)

Nov 24: Krzysztof Kieślowski, *Three Colors; Red/ Trois couleurs: Rouge/ Trzy kolory. Czerwony* (1994)

Dec 1: Charlie Chaplin, *The Great Dictator* (1940)

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