

Aguirre, The Wrath of God

Werner Herzog W Ger 95m 1972



Herzog`s "Aguirre, the Wrath of God" (1973) is one of the great haunting visions of the cinema. It tells the story of the doomed expedition of the conquistador Gonzalo Pizarro, who in 1560 and 1561 led a body of men into the Peruvian rain forest, lured by stories of the lost city. The opening shot is a striking image: A long line of men snakes its way down a steep path to a valley far below, while clouds of mist obscure the peaks. These men wear steel helmets and breastplates, and carry their women in enclosed sedan-chairs. They are dressed for a court pageant, not for the jungle.

The music sets the tone. It is haunting, ecclesiastical, human and yet something else. For this opening sequence, Herzog told me, "We used a strange instrument, which we called a 'choir-organ.' It has inside it three dozen different tapes running parallel to each other in loops. ... All these tapes are running at the same time, and there is a keyboard on which you can play them like an organ so that [it will] sound just like a human choir but yet, at the same time, very artificial and really quite eerie."

I emphasize the music because the sound of a Herzog film is organically part of its effect. His stories begin in a straightforward manner, but their result is incalculable, and there is no telling where they may lead:

If the music is crucial to "**Aguirre, the Wrath of God**," so is the face of Klaus Kinski. He has haunted blue eyes and wide, thick lips that would look sensual if they were not pulled back in the rictus of madness. Here he plays the strongest-willed of the conquistadors. Herzog told me that he was a youth in Germany when he saw Kinski for the first time: "At that moment I knew it was my destiny to make films, and his to act in them."

When Pizarro fears that his expedition is a folly, he selects a small party to spend a week exploring farther up-river. If they find nothing, he says, the attempt will be abandoned. This smaller party is led by the aristocrat Don Pedro de Ursua, with Aguirre (Kinski) as his second in command. Also in the party, along with soldiers and slaves, are a priest, Gaspar de Carvajal; the fatuous nobleman Fernando de Guzman; Ursua's wife, Flores; Aguirre's daughter Inez, and a black slave named Okello, who sadly tells one of the women, "I was born a prince, and men were forbidden to look on me. Now I am in chains."

Herzog does not hurry their expedition, or fill it with artificial episodes of suspense and action. What we feel above all is the immensity of the river and the surrounding forest--which offers no shore to stand on because the waters have risen and flooded

it. Consider how Herzog handles an early crisis, when one of the rafts is caught in a whirlpool. The slaves row furiously, but the raft cannot move. Aguirre contemptuously dismisses any attempt to rescue them, but a party is sent out to try to reach them from the other side. In the morning, the raft still floats in place; everyone on it is dead.

How did they die? I have an idea, but so do you. The point is that death is the destiny of this expedition. Ursua, the leader, is put under arrest. Aguirre arranges the selection of Guzman as their new leader. Soon both are dead. Guzman's last meal is fish and fruit, which as acting "emperor" he eats greedily while his men count out a few kernel of corn apiece. A horse goes mad, he orders it thrown overboard, and men mutter darkly that it would have supplied meat for a week. Guzman's dead body is found soon after.

Aguirre rules with a reign of terror. He stalks about the raft with a curious lopsided gait, as if one of his knees will not bend. There is madness in his eyes. When he overhears one of the men whispering of plans to escape, he cuts off his head so swiftly that the dead head finishes the sentence it was speaking. The film's final images, among the most memorable I have ever seen, are of Aguirre alone on his raft, surrounded by corpses and by hundreds of chattering little monkeys, still planning his new empire.

The filming of "Aguirre" is a legend in film circles. Herzog, a German director who speaks of the "voodoo of location," took his actors and crew into a remote jungle district where fever was frequent and starvation seemed like a possibility. It is said Herzog held a gun on Kinski to force him to continue acting, although Kinski, in his autobiography, denies this, adding darkly that he had the only gun. The actors, crew members and cameras were all actually on rafts like those we see, and often, Herzog told me, "I did not know the dialogue 10 minutes before we shot a scene."

The film is not driven by dialogue, anyway, or even by the characters, except for Aguirre, whose personality is created as much by Kinski's face and body as by words. What Herzog sees in the story, I think, is what he finds in many of his films: Men haunted by a vision of great achievement, who commit the sin of pride by daring to reach for it, and are crushed by an implacable universe. One thinks of his documentary about the ski-jumper Steiner, who wanted to fly forever, and became so good that he was in danger of overshooting the landing area and crushing himself against stones and trees.

Roger Ebert *Roger ebert.com*

*Werner Herzog and Klaus Kinski's masterful achievement **Aguirre*** is a rich and powerful film set deep in the the South American rain forest. Ostensibly a piece of historical fiction based on fragmentary evidence concerning one of the many ill-fated attempts to find and conquer the mythic El Dorado (a city of gold rumored to be anywhere from southern Canada to Patagonia) **Aguirre** operates on so many levels and reflects so many aspects of its story that it is difficult to convey precisely what the film is really about. It is too fictionalized (yet plausible) to fit comfortably in the "historical fiction" shoebox; the dialog is as much a presentistic bit of reflexive thinking as it is fitting for the historical context of the film; and the setting is so breathtaking that without a plot and without the brilliant concept and fantastic acting, the film would still be breathtaking and painful.

The opening scene, which very slowly depicts a caravan of Spanish soldiers, African and South American Indian slaves, burros, horses, cannons, and provisions making their way down a steep mountain path surrounded by miles of rain forest, is breathtaking and ominous, and sets not just the tone, but the pace of the film. After a few minutes of struggle, the nobleman leader of the expedition throws in,

and appoints a small number of participants to go forward into the jungle. Of these, only Lope Del Aguirre, a career soldier with vast ruthless ambition, and Ursua, a more gentle nobleman, are really leadership material. As the party floats down-river on rafts, it rapidly becomes clear by whose will the party continues on, and who will emerge as its sole leader in the end.

Herzog develops some of his usual themes in this film, and does so with poignancy and cinematography nothing short of beauty. The film is about power, madness, religion, oppression, nature, and culture, but certainly does not stop there. This is film as high art. Brilliantly executed, multi-faceted, moving, and as ambiguous as real life so often is.

This is also one of the great actor Klaus Kinski's most profound and appealing roles. Though Kinski was later typecast in mad, or at least eccentric, roles, as Aguirre he is able to show his range very effectively, because the character varies from a cold, brooding, Machiavellian rationalism to an obsessive sociopathic suicidalism. The rest of the cast rises to the challenge and acts right at Kinski's level, making this film one of the best actors/production team collaborations I have ever seen.

MS Tomaso