

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes

Credits:

Production: Werner Herzog, Munich/Hessischer Rundfunk, Frankfurt, 1972

Screenplay: Werner Herzog

Editor: Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus

Sound: Werner Herzog

Photography: Thomas Mauch with Francisco Joan and Orlando Macchiavello

Assistants: Martje Grohmann, Dr. Georg Hagmuller, Ina Fritsche, Rene Lechleitner

Music: Popol Vuh

Cast: Klaus Kinski, Helena Rojo, Del Negro, Ruy Guerra, Peter Berling, Cecilia Rivera, Daniel Ades, Edward Roland, Armando

Polanah, Daniel Farfan, Alejandro Chavez, Antonio Marquez, Julio Martinez, Alejandro Repulles, Indianer der Kooperative Lauramarco

Running Time: 93 minutes

Premiere: December 29th, 1972, Cologne

Dates of Filming: January – February 1972

The Director:

Werner Herzog (Werner Stipetic) was born Sept. 5, 1942 in Munich. He grew up on a farm in the Bavarian mountains. After his parents' divorce, he moved to Munich with his mother, and attended high school there, graduating in 1961. Herzog later studied history, literature and drama in Munich and then in Pittsburgh on a Fulbright scholarship. He eventually broke off his studies and began to teach himself filmmaking. He never attended a film school and has no formal film education. In 1964 he won the Carl Mayer Prize for the screenplay that was to become his first feature film, *SIGNS OF LIFE* (1967)/*Lebenszeichen*, which was financed by the Kuratorium Junger Deutscher Film and won the Bundesfilmpreis for best first feature.

By both circumstance and temperament, Herzog belongs to the New German Cinema (dominant in the Federal Republic of Germany 1965-1982), along with such figures as Rainer Fassbinder and Wim Wenders. The classical German film tradition represented by F. W. Murnau, Fritz Lang and others having been shattered by the Nazi era, Herzog and his contemporaries were starting from a "common ground zero" of new filmmaking. "We had no fathers, only grandfathers" says Herzog in reference to this lost heritage. Herzog, the so-called "visionary" of the New German Cinema, has said that "film is not the art of scholars, but of illiterates." Accordingly, in his films the visual is said to predominate over the verbal, where the audience is able to "see" the film emotionally or spiritually rather than "read" it analytically.

Synopsis of Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes – By Brian Conboy

Aguirre, the Wrath of God is one of the classics of the German film renaissance of the seventies and features the energetic but destructive partnership of director Werner Herzog and actor Klaus Kinski. (For a fascinating characterization of that relationship see the documentary film *My Best Fiend*.) In *Aguirre*, Kinski is at his malevolent best, always looming with

his violent rage and filling the screen with his starkly angular jaw line and cheekbones.

The story follows a group of Spanish Conquistadors in 1561 in Peru as they search for El Dorado, the mythical city of gold. The expedition finds itself in dire straits in the extraordinarily harsh and remote South American jungle environment. Provisions are running out and death and starvation are imminent. The Indian slave bearers are dropping like flies from disease. Gonzalo Pizarro, the leader of the expedition, decides that a splinter group must be formed to reach an outpost where a rescue operation can be organized. Several rafts are constructed and forty men are selected to descend the treacherous river and reach civilization. Aguirre is second in command of the group but shortly after they depart he and his brutish sidekick Peruchio mutiny and take command.

Aguirre organizes a new monarchy, in fact a puppet government with a weak "Kaiser". Of course Aguirre retains the real power through brute force. In the best tradition of despotic regimes he insists on a ridiculous pretense of legality for his treachery in the form of a written declaration of independence ("We rebel to the death") and a sham trial of the overthrown leader. Having taken command, his obsession emerges: to find El Dorado and achieve fantastic glory and fame. The group descends into a maelstrom of intrigue, murder, gruesome violence, starvation and annihilation. Cannibalistic Indians lurk unseen in the jungle and pick off the soldiers one by one with spears, poison darts and booby traps. The original mission of rescue for the larger body of men is forgotten amid Aguirre's megalomania ("Men measure riches in gold. It is more. It is power and fame.")

Herzog is a significant stylist and follows many of the traditions of German expressionistic film of the silent era. *Aguirre* and many of his other films exhibit a marvelous talent for using nature to make breathtaking scenes with only a modest budget. The opening sequence of *Aguirre* exemplifies this with the Conquistadors and their Indian slaves descending out of the mists and clouds on a high mountain. Later the surging torrential waters of the river serve to express a malevolent and deadly Nature. Kinski adapts to this expressionistic mold as well, crooking his head and body throughout the film, rendering an image of madness, obsession and deformed spirit. A slow and mesmerizing pace is employed throughout and is enhanced by the hypnotic music of the German ensemble Popal Vue.

Aguirre as an allegory continually touches on themes which Herzog has often articulated. Both the narrative and the characters are used to express these themes: the dynamics of power politics; the corruption of monarchies, despotic regimes and great empires; the lack of moral integrity of institutions such as the church. Kaiser Guzman's constant preoccupation with eating easily gives us a picture of the inherent corruption of aristocracies. The Conquistadors original search for El Dorado represents the dreams and idealism which are exploited by the Aguirres of every generation. Much time and emphasis is placed on Aguirre's political machinations and the absurd puppet regime he sets up. His megalomania and obsession with his own vision and utter contempt for everything and everyone who might interfere echo those of the great despots of our time. It is not difficult to draw a parallel between this character, coupled with the gradual destruction of the group and their descent into chaos, and the Nazi tragedy.

Filmography of Werner Herzog

Herakles (Heracles) 1962

Spiel im Sand (Playing in the Sand) 1964

Die beispiellose Verteidigung der Festung Deutschkreuz
(The Unparalleled Defense of the Fortress Deutschkreuz) 1966

Lebenszeichen (Signs of Life) 1967

Letzte Worte (Last Words) 1968

Maßnahmen gegen Fanatiker (Precautions Against Fanatics)
1968

Die fliegenden Ärzte von Ostafrika (The Flying Doctors of East Africa) 1969

Fata Morgana 1968-1970

Auch Zwerge haben klein angefangen (Even Dwarfs Started Small) 1970

Behinderte Zukunft (Impeded Future) 1970

Land des Schweigens und der Dunkelheit (Land of Silence and Darkness) 1970/71

Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes (Aguirre, the Wrath of God) 1972

Die Große Ekstase des Bildschnitzers Steiner (The Great Ecstasy of the Sculptor Steiner) 1974

Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle
(The Mystery of Kaspar Hauser - Every Man For Himself and God Against All) 1974

How Much Wood Would A Woodchuck Chuck 1976

Mit mir will keiner spielen (No One Will Play with Me) 1976

Herz aus Glas (Heart of Glass) 1976

La Soufrière 1976

Stroszek 1976

Nosferatu – Phantom der Nacht (Nosferatu, the Vampire) 1978

Woyzeck 1978

Glaube und Währung (God's Angry Men) 1980

Hui's Predigt (Huie's Sermon) 1980

Fitzcarraldo 1982

Wo die grünen Ameisen träumen (Where the Green Ants Dream) 1984

Ballade vom kleinen Soldaten (Ballad of the Little Soldier) 1984

Gasherbrum – Der leuchtende Berg (The Dark Glow of the Mountains) 1984

Cobra Verde 1988

Wodaabe - Die Hirten die Sonne (Herdsmen of the Sun) 1989

Echos aus einem düstern Reich (Echoes From A Somber Empire) 1990

Cerro Torre: Schrei aus Stein (Scream of Stone) 1991

Lektionen in Finsternis (Lessons in Darkness) 1992

Glocken aus der Tiefe (Bells From The Deep) 1993

Die Verwandlung der Welt in Musik (Transformation of the World Into Music) 1994

Tod für fünf Stimmen (Death For Five Voices) 1995

Little Dieter Needs To Fly 1997

Julianes Sturz in den Dschungel (Wings of Hope) 1998

Mein liebster Feind (My Best Fiend) 1999

2001 Invincible

Bibliography of Werner Herzog

Between Mirage and History – The Films of Werner Herzog
Edited by Timothy Corrigan (Methuen, New York: 1986)

Werner Herzog: Images At The Horizon
Roger Ebert (Baseline Books: 1980)

West German Filmmakers On Film: Visions and Voices
Edited by Eric Rentschler (Holmes & Meier, Inc, New York: 1988)

G. Fitzcarraldo Faust: Werner Herzogs Film Als Postmoderne Variation eines Leithemas der Moderne
G. Kaiser (Munich: University of Munich, 1992).