

Aguirre - The Wrath of God (1972) Herzog

P Michell, 2022

Synopsis

Klaus Kinski plays the title character, the real-life conquistador Lope de Aguirre, who led a doomed mission down the Amazon to find the lost city of El Dorado. What followed was mounting madness, violence, and death at the hands of a vast, indifferent natural world. Filming "Aguirre" took five weeks, and Herzog shot on location in Peruvian rainforests. Many of the actors were non-professional.

Conceptualized and helmed by genius Werner Herzog, this Icarus-like tale of human folly and hubris has become mythical as well for the way it was filmed. The crew and volatile star Klaus Kinski – who is ferocious as Aguirre – floated down Huallaga and Nanay rivers shooting in chronological order without stunt people – riding dangerous Amazonian river rapids. The reactions you see on the film are people naturally responding to the wonder around them – to the speed of the water – to the treachery of the movement. One scene in the film that shows the destruction and flooding of the rafts is something that had actually happened to the film set and was incorporated into the script. There are moments that you see smudges and moisture on the camera lens. Like Francis Ford Coppola's "Apocalypse Now" – which was heavily influenced by this film – the perils behind the shooting of "Aguirre" are part of a documentary ("Heart of Darkness" in the case of Coppola and "My Best Fiend" in the case of Herzog.) Star and director battled over the way that the stubborn role of Aguirre should be portrayed. Kinski's portrayal is Shakespearean.

Made in 1971 for German TV by Werner Herzog on a 35mm camera he 'borrowed' – read stole - from Munich Film school. In cinema standard - 4x3 format. Two versions – dubbed English (international) and German language (domestic). Thus it will be in correct format on the tv.

First of 5 film with the actor Klaus Kinski directed by Herzog.

Filmed in Peru about 10 miles from Machu Pichu.

Film cost \$330,000 of which Kinski (1926-1991) took about 1/3.

On/off again relationship during 5 films.

Significant Effect on other film makers.

Connection with Nanook of the North (1922) Flaherty.

BFI Big Screen Notes:

<https://bfidatadigipres.github.io/pdf/2022-04-02-aguirre-wrath-of-god.pdf>

Many Significant Scenes including:

Opening long shot with 400 people coming down a mountain in mist with haunting music of Popul Vuh;

Cannon transported in the mud;

Spanish in military attire.

Aguirre – his clothing.

'Civilisation' with women in litters;
Rafts on river.
Flooding of the river – improvised into the storyline;
Meeting of Indian and his partner – conversion ... then ...
Final scene with Aguire and monkeys.
"That man is a head taller than me ... that will change ..."
The emperor gorging himself on the raft, whilst others eat grains.
Stampeding horse on raft ... (there goes the food)
Silent spears / arrows.

Creative Personnel

Werner Herzog – Director / Scriptwriter (73 credits)

Director. Writer. Producer. Actor. Poet. He studied history, literature and theatre for some time, but didn't finish it and founded instead his own film production company in 1963. Later in his life, Herzog also staged several operas in Bayreuth, Germany, and at the Milan Scala in Italy. Herzog has won numerous national and international awards for his poetic feature and documentary films.

Frequently directs operas on stage, but never on film, and finds the two forms fundamentally incompatible.

Claimed to have walked by foot from Munich, Germany to Paris, France (a distance of about 500 miles) in 1974 to prevent the very sick film historian and good friend, [Lotte Eisner](#)*, from dying (as, applying his logic, she wouldn't dare to die until he visited her on her deathbed). Eisner, indeed, went on to live for 8 more years after Herzog's journey.

*Eisner spoke the commentary of his *Fata Morgana* (1971).

Herzog is admired for being the only director who was able to work with the late and very eccentric [Klaus Kinski](#).

Quotes:

I make films because I have not learned anything else.

Civilization is like a thin layer of ice upon a deep ocean of chaos and darkness.

[on working with [Klaus Kinski](#)] *I had to domesticate the wild beast.*

[on [Nastassja Kinski](#)] *To understand Nastassja, you must look at her parents. Her mother is a poet, her father was possessed.*

Of the filmmakers with whom I feel some kinship D W Griffith, F W Murnau, Pudovkin, Buñuel and Kurosawa come to mind. Everything these men did has the touch of greatness.

[on [Klaus Kinski](#)] *Every grey hair on my head is because of Kinski.*

Thomas Mauch – Cinematography (112 credits)

If Raoul Coutard can now be seen as the godfather of the early French New Wave directors, then Mauch holds a similar position in respect of the New German Cinema. He was the main camera collaborator on virtually all the early and later shorts and features by Edgar Reitz and Alexander Kluge [both seminal influences on German cinema from

the 1960s onwards]. From the beginning, Mauch developed a hard, sharp, black-and-white style admirably suited to the semi-documentary material being made at the time. His subsequent collaborations with Herzog gave him more elaborate, often mystical, subject matter culminating in the great river vistas of *'Fitzcarraldo'*. He has in recent years turned to further colour work, and the 1987 production *'Waller's letzter Gang'* immediately placed him in the front rank of contemporary colour cameramen.' [John Gillett in *'Film Dope'* #41, March 1989.]

Popol Vuh - Music (20 albums)

Popol Vuh were a German musical collective founded by keyboardist [Florian Fricke](#) in 1969 together with Frank Fiedler (sound design, fine cut), Holger Trülzsch (percussion), and Bettina Fricke (tablas and production). Other important members during the next two decades included Djong Yun, Renate Knaup, [Conny Veit](#), [Daniel Fichelscher](#), [Klaus Wiese](#), and Robert Eliscu*. The band took its name from the [Mayan manuscript](#) containing the mythology of highland [Guatemala's K'iche' people](#).

[Wikipedia]

[*Eliscu straddled both sides of music - was a classical oboist who occasionally appeared with the justly famous Munich Bach Orchestra with Karl Richter.]

Popol Vuh began as an [electronic music](#) project, but under Fricke's leadership they soon abandoned [synthesizers](#) for organic instrumentation and [world music](#) influences.^[4] They developed a productive working partnership with director [Werner Herzog](#), contributing scores to films such as [Aguirre, The Wrath of God](#) (1972), [Nosferatu the Vampyre](#) (1979), and [Fitzcarraldo](#) (1982). The group are associated with West Germany's 1970s [krautrock](#) movement and are considered progenitors of [ambient music](#). Today, Popol Vuh's best-reviewed works are [In den Gärten Pharaos](#) (1971) and [Hosianna Mantra](#) (1972). [Wikipedia]

Klaus Kinski – Aguirre (135 credits)

Began acting in film in 1951 – 'Decision before Dawn'. At least 135 films, many uncredited. Spoke at least five languages: English, French, German, Italian & Spanish. Renowned for intense performance style and volatile personality. Dominates any film he's in (not unlike Marlon Brando). Posthumously, his legacy has been further tangled by accusations of physical and sexual abuse by his daughters [Pola](#) and [Nastassja](#), themselves actresses. His notoriety and prolific output has developed into a widespread [cult following](#).

Excerpts from 'Meine liebster feind / My Best Friend' with Herzog:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLnDyVJzU38>

Full version:

Part 1 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yn3hS8CLyvQ>

Part 2 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oq4vinsWIUw>

Many famous anecdotes from Aguirre and Kinski:

Refused to lip sync sound in post-production – demanding a million dollars. [As can be imagined sound recorded on site, was very poor.] Herzog supposedly didn't even have a thousand. He recorded Aguirre's dialogue.

Rifle sequence – Herzog took Kinski round a bend in the river and threatened to kill him if he didn't behave! He calmed down only a little. Kinski said he was going to the police (400 km away)!

Stands awkwardly, leaning to one side in the film. Off balance both physically and mentally.

Famous TV appearance on "Je später der Abend ..." (1973) because he didn't answer a single question during an interview of and called the host Reinhard Münchenhagen who he called "Herr Münchhausen".

Quotes:

"One should judge a man mainly from his depravities. Virtues can be faked. Depravities are real.

"I'd have been better than Adolf Hitler. I could've delivered his speeches a lot better. That's for certain.

"I choose films with the shortest schedule and the most money.

"So I sell myself, for the highest price. Exactly like a prostitute. There is no difference.

"Making movies is better than cleaning toilets." "I'm like a wild animal who's behind bars. I need air, I need space.

Natasha Kinski – *"I have never met a man like my father. He is so mad, terrible and vehement at the same time. Because of him, I never knew anything other than passion. When I began to meet other people, I saw that it wasn't normal.*

Casting the film:

Read More: https://www.slashfilm.com/813636/klaus-kinskis-aguirre-the-wrath-of-god-casting-was-more-than-a-little-risky/?utm_campaign=clip

Analysis

<http://philfilms.utm.edu/1/aguirre.htm>

Reviews

Roger Ebert (1999)

On this river God never finished his creation.

The captured Indian speaks solemnly to the last remnants of a Spanish expedition seeking the fabled El Dorado, the city of gold. A padre hands him a Bible, "the word of God." He holds it to his ear but can hear nothing. Around his neck hangs a golden bauble. The Spanish rip it from him and hold it before their eyes, mesmerized by the hope that now,

finally, at last, El Dorado must be at hand. “Where is the city?” they cry at the Indian, using their slave as an interpreter. He waves his hand vaguely at the river. It is further. Always further.

[Werner 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. It is by Florian Fricke, whose band Popol Vuh (named for the Mayan creation myth) has contributed the soundtracks to many Herzog films. 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: They conclude not in an “ending” but in the creation of a mood within us -- a spiritual or visionary feeling. I believe he wants his audiences to feel like detached observers, standing outside time, saddened by the immensity of the universe as it bears down on the dreams and delusions of man.

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 journey, 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. Herzog's camera stays across the river from the endangered rafters; their distress seems distant and insoluble. 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. Death occurs mostly offscreen in the film, or swiftly and silently, as arrows fly softly out of the jungle and into the necks and backs of the men. 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.

Of modern filmmakers, Werner Herzog is the most visionary and the most obsessed with great themes. Little wonder that he has directed many operas. He does not want to tell a plotted story or record amusing dialog; he wants to lift us up into realms of wonder. Only a handful of modern films share the audacity of his vision; I think of "[2001: A Space Odyssey](#)" and "[Apocalypse Now](#)." Among active directors, the one who seems as messianic is [Oliver Stone](#). There is a kind of saintly madness in the way they talk about

their work; they cannot be bothered with conventional success, because they reach for transcendence.

...

The companion-film to “Aguirre” is Herzog’s “[Fitzcarraldo](#),” also starring Kinski, also shot in the rain forest, also about an impossible task: a man who physically wants to move a steamship from one river system to another by dragging it across land. Of course Herzog literally dragged a real ship across land to make the film, despite urgent warnings by engineers that the cables would snap and slice everyone in half. A documentary about the shooting of that film, “[Burden of Dreams](#),” by Les Blank, is as harrowing as the film itself.

Defying the Natural Order ...

David Coursen – Parrallax-View.org (2009)

Aguirre, The Wrath of God (1972) was Werner Herzog’s fifth feature film—his first with Klaus Kinski—and arguably his most compelling, resonant, and admired early work. Its opening titles announce its subject as an expedition led by Pizarro in search of El Dorado, that crossed the Andes descended to the jungle floor, and made an ill-fated decision to attempt a raft trip down river.

From its opening moments, the film has a dual focus. The opening titles, fictitiously evoking Spanish conquistadors—an expedition, set in 1560, supposedly led by Pizarro, who died in 1541—suggest a narrative fiction film, perhaps a fable about imperialism. But a breathtaking series of early images, of clouds, of a vertical mountainside with a fragile human chain descending, as much from the clouds as the summit, suggest a lyrically poetic documentary portrayal of man interacting with—and being overwhelmed by—the natural world. In many ways, of course, the two are complementary; the narrative of imperialism is largely one of conquerors subduing natives before being, in turn subdued and engulfed by the land.

This double focus is not surprising for Herzog, who persistently blurred the distinctions between documentary and fiction. **Fata Morgana** (1970) contains some of the most poetically evocative landscapes ever filmed, but Herzog reportedly believes there’s a narrative in there somewhere, based on a creation legend. And the “straight” documentary **Land of Silence and Darkness** (1971) uses its factual subjects as starting points for metaphysical exploration. Finally, the early Herzog “fiction” film with the fewest “realistic” trappings, the ponderously stylized **Heart of Glass** (1976)—complete with a cast “acting” while under hypnosis—nearly collapses under the weight of its self-conscious ramblings.

Aside from a few awkwardly half-hearted grasps at “significance,” **Aguirre** seamlessly fuses the concrete and the poetic. And in true Herzog fashion, the process of making the film, in the South American jungle, was reportedly almost as trying as the fictional raft trip the film re-creates. The dynamic of art imitating life imitating art imitating life . .

. became even more overt when Herzog returned to the jungle for another difficult shoot in **Fitzcarraldo**, chronicled in Les Blank's **Burden of Dreams**, an avowed documentary that comes complete with a loony Herzog rant about his hatred for a jungle "full of death and fornication."

Aguirre's physical world is so vividly tangible that it permeates the film. Herzog's remarkably astute eye for landscape—not unlike his ear for music—is informed by a reverence that is almost otherworldly. Like other masters of landscape—Leone, Mann and Antonioni, to cite three obvious choices—his landscapes serve functions that are both literal, (as physical arenas for the action), and metaphoric, adding texture and resonance. And Herzog's later rantings notwithstanding, his understanding of the jungle goes far beyond seeing it as intrinsically hostile to humans. Indeed, **Aguirre**'s jungle offers its native inhabitants both homes and sanctuary from the murderous invaders. But his jungle, majestic and ineffable, is implacably hostile to invaders seeking to master or subdue it.

And a central element of the expedition's deluded hubris is a belief it can overcome, and if necessary, subjugate, the natural world. (Aguirre, styling himself the "wrath of God," boasts of his power to make birds fall dead from trees and make the earth shake; an Indian compares the invaders to natural disasters.) Thus the expedition party is almost suicidally oblivious to its precariously marginal place within the natural order. The defining aspects of the setting—its overwhelming scale, the river's menacingly churning rapids and endless calm stretches, the mountains' precipitous slopes, the endless mud of a jungle "trail," the jungle's verdant impenetrability, are lost on the Spaniards. They experience the landscapes as almost interchangeable manifestations of the natural world's hostility.

Of course, the subject of conquistadors implicitly connotes the destruction and devastation of imperialism. In one evocative sequence, a slave recounts his former status as a great prince, so powerful his subjects dared not even look at him directly; as he speaks, his head is turned away from his listeners, his status so diminished that he cannot look directly at the camera. The loss in status powerfully evokes the political and cultural devastation of conquest.

The expedition is presented without "heroic" trappings. Even the Spaniards' prowess in fighting and slaughtering Indians gets little emphasis: a native falling by the wayside, a soldier prodding a reluctant porter, an occasional manacle on a slave are virtually all the film actually shows of subjugation and slaughter (though the narrator speaks of the Indians "dying like flies."). Instead, the film shows the expedition confronting the jungle, lacking the power to do more than generate empty sound and fury. As they pass through the jungle, the invaders leave no marks on either the land they are purportedly conquering, or the river that capriciously controls their progress. The Spaniards' powers to destroy—killing, pillaging, (and betraying)—extends only to their fellows: when the Spaniards shoot at each other, men are killed or wounded; when they shoot at the natives in the jungle, the shots are futile, harmless, lacking even targets beyond the jungle itself. Even the ostensibly destructive act of burning Indian villages is futile: the first fires are set by natives, and their effect is to deprive the Spaniards of plunder. This leaves the

invaders, effective neither as predators nor destroyers, as little more than victims of the jungle.

Much of the film's force comes from its rigorous control over point of view. This is most obvious in the narrative's insistent focus on the expedition, as it unravels and Aguirre deteriorates into madness. That deterioration is all the more striking because he initially seemed more rational than his fellows: his first words acknowledged it would be impossible to survive a raft trip down the river, he showed a touchingly human solicitude for his daughter and he later refused to let the expedition be drawn into the pointless chore of burying the dead in "consecrated ground." But as the expedition proceeds, he becomes an increasingly solitary figure, his deranged eyes blazing; as he swaggers he seems to lean back away from his surroundings. By the end, his lunacy is both active—as he declares himself the "wrath of God"—and passive, as he fully joins the expedition's collective madness. The ascendant lunacy is, of course, heightened by Kinski's histrionic performance—his first for Herzog—in the wild expressions on his craggy face and the fire raging in his electrified eyes. Kinski re-traveled much the same ground in later Herzog films, moving close to shtick, but here he invests the developing persona with chilling intensity.

Another facet of the limited point of view is what the camera shows: with the single exception of the opening shot of the clouds, the film invariably either looks at the expedition or looks out at the world from it. As a raft trapped in a whirlpool drifts hopelessly in an unbreakable circle, the camera keeps its distance, showing no more than what the rest of the expedition sees; after dark an attack on the trapped raft registers only as a series of gunshot flashes in the darkness. Only when a rescue party reaches the rocks above the raft does the camera finally draw closer. The detachment links viewers to the expedition's desperate helplessness, passively watching as the doomed comrades perish. Later, as a woman leaves the expedition, the camera follows her until she comes to the edge of the group, then pivots and stops, to watch her disappear into the jungle. It stops moving with her and begins to observe her when she leaves the group. And the natives on shore, aside from a couple that boards the raft, are shown only from a distance, invulnerable if not quite invisible. The camera's—and the audience's—identification with the expedition becomes most explicit when spears from the jungle fly directly toward the camera.

The limited point-of-view also amplifies a sense of the mysterious and unseen that is almost palpable. Even gunshots fired during Aguirre's mutiny seem to come from nowhere, first registering audibly, as disembodied sounds, and then visually, as bullet wounds appear on the victims. At other times, spears, arrows, or darts materialize on the screen, as if propelled by unseen forces. This is the converse of the Spaniards firing into the jungle with no visible targets, and hence no hope of hitting anything. The sense of disconnection and isolation becomes overwhelming during an interlude when the sounds of the jungle cease. The men, now separated even from the sounds that link them to the jungle, become crazed and terrified, making noises simply to break the silence.

But the jungle remains impassive, indifferent to the sounds of gunshots or the reed music of an Indian or the tongue-singing of Aguirre's most vicious henchman, or Aguirre's psychotic ramblings. Natives in the jungle see the expedition as food passing by. When Aguirre proclaims his wildest dreams of conquest, he cannot even repel the monkeys who have overrun the raft. The invaders are no more than a link in the food chain, bits of matter whose death will feed and increase the rot and regeneration of the jungle. In the film's final shot, the camera envelops the raft in a circle, a small point of space within the vastness of the jungle, where man is a passing nuisance, no more consequential than the arrows that so easily separate him from life.