

AGUIRRE, WRATH OF GOD (1972)

Major Credits:

Director: Werner Herzog
Cast: Klaus Kinski (Aguirre)
Music: Popol Vuh

Background:

In his artistic temperament, his restless and obsessive life style, his interest in primitive and marginal people and in exotic landscapes, his belief that the greatest art results from the greatest danger, his visionary style and rebellion against the conventions of both middle class society and commercial cinema, Herzog follows in the Romantic tradition. His themes are madness, isolation, and marginality. His protagonists have included a deaf and blind woman (Land of Silence and Darkness), a ski jumping champion (The Great Ecstasy of the Woodsculpter Steiner), and a vampire (Nosferatu). He cast a mentally retarded lavatory attendant (Bruno S.) to star in two of his films, hypnotised all the actors in another film, and made another film with an all-dwarf cast. Yet, as in Aguirre, he manages somehow to make these marginal characters and extraordinary images seem relevant. He denies he makes movies about freaks, but rather "aspects of ourselves."

Aguirre proved to be one of Herzog's most notorious productions, only recently surpassed by his Fitzcarraldo, which it resembles. The director took a crew of 500 and a budget of only \$300,000 into the remote jungles of Peru. There he waged battle with the elements and the film's equally temperamental star, Kinski, whose decision to abandon the project was halted only when Herzog drew a loaded gun and threatened to shoot if he did not return to the set. Seven years (and two other films) later, Kinski went back to the South American jungle with Herzog to star in Fitzcarraldo.

Style:

In its magnificent use of natural settings, its attention to details in recreating the 16th century conquistadors, and its use of a supposedly authentic monk's diary (actually fictional) for the voiceover, Aguirre adheres to the realist tradition. In its stylized insert shots, long takes, declamatory dialogue, and exotic music, it equally belongs to the expressionist tradition. Herzog acknowledges that it is a spectacle--like the Hollywood costume dramas--but adds, "The spectacle is real."

As in many of his other films, Herzog employs non-professional actors, the Indian natives and, most notably, "Homberto," the feeble-minded flute player Herzog found begging in a Peruvian market place and to whom Aguirre is dedicated.

Herzog is obsessed with capturing images that have never been seen before. This film is marked by numerous unforgettable, carefully composed, oneiric long takes and privileged shots which somehow correlate with the larger themes of isolation and madness.

Topics for Discussion:

1. Like Faust, Macbeth, Satan, and Ahab, Aguirre is an overreacher, magnificent in his vaulting ambition yet ultimately demented and damned. How does Herzog's direction and Kinski's acting convey the characterization?

2. The character of Aguirre is probably derived less from these literary sources than from the legacy of Hitler. How does this film about 16th century conquistadors continuously keep the Nazi era in mind?

"I make films to rid myself of them, like ridding myself of a nightmare." - Herzog