



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Aguirre, Wrath of God

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

All Werner Herzog's fictions evince a fascination with the mechanisms of human madness – especially those engendered by the will to power – and yet the uniquely disturbing quality of his movies seems to spring less from this consistent theme than from a central ambivalence. Like one who at once observes and participates, Herzog balances between two positions, offering both lucid analyses of chaotic situations (undertaken in a spirit not unlike that of scientific research) and hallucinatory, seductive visions that plunge his audience into active experience of the irrational.

The analytic strain is, of course, a modernist trait; it yields the entomological metaphors of *Signs of Life*, the dislocations of physical scale in *Even Dwarfs Started Small*, and the entirety of *Fata Morgana* as a catalogue of the debris left in the wake of a 'drama' already played out, the latter establishing an improbable rapport between Herzog and certain contemporary avant-garde filmmakers. The strain of irrationality, though, draws on a very much older tradition; it conjures the dark undertow of the German Romantics, immanent in many of Caspar David Friedrich's landscapes and explicit in a novella like Eichendorff's archetypal *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts*, where the 'hero' is forever on the point of succumbing to mysterious forces that he senses in the forests and lakes around him. In Herzog's case, the point is the balance itself; it might alternatively be characterised as the ability to inflect 'realism' with expressionism and vice versa, without any overriding commitment to either mode.

Aguirre, Wrath of God is something of a departure for Herzog. Its relatively lavish budget doubtless reflects the participation of Klaus Kinski (a presence as astonishing as Eddie Constantine's in *Alphaville*); Herzog has used it to engage – for the first time – in a specific historical reconstruction, although the action, like the diary on which it purports to be based, is his own invention. His subject is a quest: fresh from his pillage of the Incas, Pizarro leads his conquistadors over the Andes and down into the Amazon basin, to begin their search for El Dorado. He sends an advance party led by Don Pedro de Ursua and Don Lope de Aguirre to reconnoitre a large tributary of the Amazon. The party meets setbacks and Ursua decides to turn back, but Aguirre mutinies, crippling his superior with a gunshot, and leads the expedition on down the river. As hazards multiply, so does Aguirre's ambition; he proclaims himself 'the wrath of God'. After two months of hunger, exposure and attacks from natives, he is the sole survivor, his raft swarming with monkeys as it drifts on towards the Atlantic; he dreams of marrying his own daughter and founding the purest dynasty ever known to man.

The factors that superficially distinguish *Aguirre* from Herzog's earlier movies in fact serve to throw his consistent qualities into sharper relief. As in *Even Dwarfs Started Small*, the exposition is both functional and extremely concentrated: each scene and each detail is honed down to its salient features. On this level, the film effectively pre-empts analysis by analysing itself as it proceeds, admitting no ambiguity. Yet at the same time, Herzog's flair for charged, explosive imagery has never had freer rein, and the film is rich in oneiric moments of the kind that spark Stroszek's paroxysm in *Signs of Life*. The extraordinarily beautiful opening scene illustrates the ambivalence. In long shot, the image of the conquistadors descending the Andes pass brims with poetic resonances: the men are situated between the peaks and the valleys, between conquered land and unexplored

forests, between 'heaven' and 'earth', shrouded in mists. In close-up, the procession picking its way down the narrow path is presented and defined with specific accuracy; all the leading characters are introduced, the social hierarchy is sketched (the slave porters in chains, the women carried in chairs) and the twin poles of the expedition's ideology are signified through the loads it carries (a large Madonna figure, and an even larger cannon). Neither 'reading' of the action contradicts the other; they are rather mutually illuminating.

Later the distinction between the literal and the figurative (or perhaps the factual and the speculative) becomes less palpable; by the final sequence, it has disappeared entirely. In the last shot, Herzog's camera races along the river to Aguirre's raft and circles it twice before fading out. The effect is to circumscribe Aguirre's fantasy, localising it to the tattered, infested remains of his raft, isolating him from the land he dreams of owning; but the circling motion further signifies that the quest has reached its goal, that there can be no further to go. Just as the dwarfs' abortive revolution found its climax at the sight of a helpless camel, so here the quest for a new world and all its riches finds its apotheosis and its cipher in an image of 'magnificent' dementia.

Herzog never falters on his way to this complex but uncompromising conclusion. As ever, he eschews the easy formulations of political or moral dogma, and avoids sentiment and rancour alike. By now it's clear that Herzog is incapable of dishonesties of this kind; like Buñuel or Franju, he will obviously remain true to himself whatever his subject. The clarity and truth of his method, and the value of his tension between rationality and its opposite, are summarised to perfection in a speech by one of the slaves, Runo Rimae ('He who speaks'), dubbed 'Balthasar' by his captors, when he tells Aguirre's uncomprehending daughter that he pities her and her companions, for he knows that there is no way out of 'their' jungle.

Tony Rayns, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1974-75

Werner Herzog on 'Aguirre, Wrath of God'

Aguirre may be within the adventure genre, but that was never a part of its conception. There are directors who can consciously work within genres and still make personal films; I just don't think of film in those terms. In part this may explain why I am poor. Money from foreign sales of films like *Aguirre* comes in, but it is never very much, certainly never much at any one time, and one can't plan to have enough that way for the next film.

We had incredible difficulties with *Aguirre*. The footage had to be sent to laboratories in Mexico, and we were never sure exactly what we had. Retakes were impossible anyway. The sequence in which the river rises overnight and almost everything is swept away was written into the film only because that was what actually happened. We had to rebuild the rafts.

Word came back that a good deal of the film we had shot was lost somewhere in transit to Mexico, but we kept shooting and hoped. Later the 'lost' film was found sitting outside the customs shed in Mexico City. One night I had less than one mark in my pocket, and the next day we had to feed the entire cast and crew. Relationships became strained, and at one point I literally threatened to kill one of the actors if he didn't behave. I might have done it, too. You see, it finally isn't the money that makes the film, it is the fire.

Interview by David L. Overbey, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1975

AGUIRRE, WRATH OF GOD**(AGUIRRE, DER ZORN GOTTES)**

Director: Werner Herzog

Production Companies: Werner Herzog Filmproduktion,
Hessischer Rundfunk

Producer: Werner Herzog

Associate Producer: Daniel Carino

Production Managers: Walter Saxer, Wolf Stipetic

Collaborators: Gustavo Cerff Arbulú, Martje Grohmann,
Georg Hagmüller, Ina Fritsche, René Lechleitner, Ovidio Ore

Screenplay: Werner Herzog

Directors of Photography: Thomas Mauch, Francisco Joán,
Orlando Macchiavello

Special Effects: Juvenal Herrera, Miguel Vazquez

Editor: Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus

Music: Popol Vuh

Sound: Herbert Prasch

Post-synchronisation: Bob Oliver

Cast

Klaus Kinski (*Don Lope de Aguirre*)

Cecilia Rivera (*Flores de Aguirre*)

Ruy Guerra (*Don Pedro de Ursua*)

Helena Rojo (*Inez de Atienza*)

Del Negro (*Brother Gaspar de Carvajal*)

Peter Berling (*Don Fernando de Guzman*)

Daniel Ades (*Perucho*)

Armando Polanah (*Armando*)

Edward Roland (*Okello*)

Daniel Farfan

Alejandro Chavez

Antonio Marquez

Julio Martínez

Alejandro Repullés

Indians of the Lauramarca Co-operative

Justo Gonzalez (*soldier*)*

West Germany 1972

94 mins

* Uncredited

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**Léon Morin, prêtre (Léon Morin, Priest)**

Mon 28 Mar 17:50; Thu 7 Apr 20:40; Sun 24 Apr 12:00

Lourdes

Tue 29 Mar 20:50; Thu 7 Apr 18:10; Wed 20 Apr 20:50

Ordet (The Word)

Wed 30 Mar 17:45 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large);

Sun 10 Apr 15:30; Fri 15 Apr 18:10; Sat 23 Apr 11:50

Black Narcissus

Thu 31 Mar 21:00; Tue 12 Apr 20:45; Tue 19 Apr 18:10; Sat 30 Apr 15:00

Babette's Feast (Babettes Gaestebud)

Fri 1 Apr 18:10; Sun 10 Apr 12:10; Sat 16 Apr 12:20; Tue 26 Apr 20:50

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

Sat 2 Apr 20:40; Fri 8 Apr 18:15; Tue 19 Apr 20:50; Mon 25 Apr 18:10

The Seventh Seal (Det Sjunde Inseglet)

Sun 3 Apr 15:20; Mon 18 Apr 15:20; Fri 22 Apr 20:50

The Miracle Woman

Mon 4 Apr 18:20; Fri 15 Apr 20:50; Thu 28 Apr 18:10; Fri 29 Apr 18:10

Stalker

Tue 5 Apr 20:00; Sat 9 Apr 17:30; Thu 21 Apr 20:00; Sat 23 Apr 20:00

My Night with Maud (Ma Nuit chez Maud)

Wed 6 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large);

Thu 14 Apr 20:30; Fri 22 Apr 17:50; Mon 25 Apr 20:45

Une Femme douce (A Gentle Creature)

Wed 6 Apr 21:00; Wed 13 Apr 18:20 (+ intro by independent filmmaker
and critic Alex Barrett); Mon 18 Apr 13:10

The New World

Sun 10 Apr 17:30; Sat 30 Apr 19:50

The Gospel According to Matthew (Il vangelo secondo Matteo)

Mon 11 Apr 18:00; Sun 17 Apr 14:40

The Last Temptation of Christ

Fri 15 Apr 14:15; Sun 24 Apr 17:40

Sebastiane

Sat 16 Apr 14:50; Tue 19 Apr 20:30; Wed 27 Apr 17:45 (+ intro by
BFI curator Simon McCallum)

I Confess

Sun 17 Apr 12:00; Wed 20 Apr 18:00 (+ intro tbc)

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