



JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN: THE FILMS OF WERNER HERZOG

Fitzcarraldo

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Director: Werner Herzog

©: Werner Herzog Filmproduktion

Production Company:

Werner Herzog Filmproduktion

In association with: Pro-ject Filmproduktion im
Filmverlag der Autoren, ZDF – Zweites Deutsches
Fernsehen

Production Services in Peru:

Wildlife Films Peru S.A. (Iquitos)

Produced by: Werner Herzog, Lucki Stipetic

Production Manager: Walter Saxer

Production Manager – Brazil: George Sluizer

Production Assistant – Peru: Gustavo Cerff Arbulú

Production Secretaries – Peru: Nancy Ríos,

Claire André

Assistant Director: Jorge Vignati

Assistant Director – Brazil: Frederico Confalonieri

Script Supervisor: Anja Schmidt-Züringer

Screenplay: Werner Herzog

Director of Photography: Thomas Mauch

2nd Unit Photographer: Rainer Klausmann

Lighting: Raimund Wirner, Hans Peter Vogt

Camera Assistant: Beat Presser

Stills Photography: Beat Presser

Special Effects: Miguel Vazquez

Editor: Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus

Assistant Editors: Carola Mai, Linda Kuusisto

Art Directors: Henning von Gierke, Ulrich Bergfelder

Carpenter: El Tigre Carlos Calvo Soria

Boat Construction:

Servicio Industrial de la Marina Iquitos (SIMAI)

Rio Camisea Camp Construction:

César Vivanco Luna, Victor Trigos

Indian Camp Construction: Jaime Mouna Ríos

Costumes: Gisela Storch

Assistant Costumes: Franz Blumauer,

Rosemary Kaye, Elizabeth Irmer

Make-up/Hair: Stefano Fava, Gloria Fava

Assistant Make-up: Jaque Monteiro, Carlos Prieto

Music: Popol Vuh

Manaos Opera Emani Directed by:

Werner Schroeter

Original Enrico Caruso Recordings: RCA Victor

Sound Recording: Juarez Dagoberto, Zezé D'Alice

Sound Editor: Petra Mantoudis *

Post-synchronization: Jesse Vogel *

Technical Advisers: Eglington Ayarza Boulloza,

Guardamino Benigno Pauca

Boat Crew: Pedro Notorce Ahuanari,

Pedro Padilla Chota, René Baneo Vazquez,

Walter Pinedo Alvarez

Transport: Tercero Efraín Panaifo Indama

Medical Advisers: Dr Tomás Parraga Aliaga,

Victor Tello Pineda

Dialogue Coach: William L. Rose

Cast:

Klaus Kinski

(Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald, 'Fitzcarraldo')

José Lewgoy (Don Aquilino)

Miguel Angel Fuentes (Cholo)

Paul Hittscher (captain of the Orinoco Paul)

Huerequeque Enrique Bohorquez

(Huerequeque, the cook)

Grande Otélo (station master)

Peter Berling (Manos Opera House director)

David Pérez Espinosa (Campa indians chief)

Milton Nascimento (black doorman at opera house)

Rui Polanah (rubber baron)

Salvador Godínez (old missionary)

Dieter Milz (young missionary)

Bill Rose (lawyer)

Leoncio Bueno (prison warden)

We seem to have been here before. The very name Fitzcarraldo, corrupted from Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald because the Peruvian Indians had difficulty with the pronunciation, might have been invented expressly for Werner Herzog to make a film about. Not to mention the bizarre history of this quintessential 19th century loser who turned himself, almost inadvertently, into a millionaire rubber tycoon by manhandling a steamboat across a mountain so that he could open up the jungle and (here Herzog's imagination helped a little) fulfil his dream of gracing it with an opera house.

The sense of *déjà vu* is instantaneous and inevitable as *Fitzcarraldo* opens with the camera panning down over the steamy jungle in echo of the extraordinary shot of clouds racing through the treetops near the beginning of *Heart of Glass*, and as Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald quickly proves himself destined to a foolhardy river journey likely to leave him as marooned in madness as the hero of *Aguirre, Wrath of God*. But this jungle, as it turns out, is not tinged with apocalypse like the one in *Aguirre* or the forest in *Heart of Glass*; nor is Fitzcarraldo treated, like *Aguirre*, with an awe that overlays the satirical jabs at his vaulting ambition. Herzog, in fact, seems to have left his mysticism at home, allowing him to portray Fitzcarraldo (Klaus Kinski) with a pleasantly mundane mixture of affection and objective curiosity. Compared to *Aguirre's* vision of conquest, which might have made of him a new Alexander the Great or a new Adolf Hitler, Fitzcarraldo's dream is small beer indeed. And Herzog goes out of his way to make it even smaller.

Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald's passion is introduced in an opening scene at the opera house in Manaus. Arriving late, dishevelled and ticketless after a 1000-mile trip down river from the interior with his devoted admirer, the brothel madame Molly (Claudia Cardinale), Fitzcarraldo is allowed in only because his wild-eyed distress evokes an answering sympathy from a similarly besotten (and Black) usher. The opera (actually staged by Werner Schroeter) is a deliriously tacky *Ernani*, starring Caruso and Sarah Bernhardt, the latter complete with wooden leg and vocal dubber accompanying her mime from the orchestra pit. But as *Ernani*-Caruso stabs himself and raises his hand in dramatic appeal to the audience, both Molly and Fitzcarraldo take it to be a regal summons. 'He means me!' the latter murmurs ecstatically.

There follows an ambivalent scene where Fitzcarraldo, alone in his sordid shack, obligingly puts on a Caruso recording for a circle of adoring Indian children, meanwhile assuring a small black pig that it will have a box of its own when his opera house finally becomes a reality. Later, hoping to secure finance for his project, Fitzcarraldo brings his beloved records along to a reception to which the faithful Molly has invited all the rubber barons. Nobody, with the possible exception of a couple of native servants, is prepared to listen, and the enraged Fitzcarraldo launches into an impassioned defence of music as an expression of man's greatest feelings.

Then, capping the missionary theme as it were, the extraordinary sequence in which the ship steams placidly up river into savage Indian territory from which no traveller can hope to return alive, the crew fearfully eyeing the impenetrable jungle in which nothing can be seen, only ominous drums heard. 'Now it's Caruso's turn,' Fitzcarraldo announces. A hallucinating Herzogian shot of the now seemingly deserted ship ploughing on, an ancient loudspeaker gramophone perched like a figurehead on the bridgework. And suddenly the drumming is stilled, leaving Caruso's majestically scratchy voice as lord of the jungle.

Claudia Cardinale (*Molly*)
Miguel Camaiteri Fernandez, Nicolás Camaiteri
Fernandez, Pascual Camaiteri Fernandez
(*Ashinka-Campa chiefs*)
Manaos opera Ernani by Giuseppe Verdi:
Veriano Luchetti (*singing voice of 'Ernani'*)
Costante Moret (*'Ernani'*)
Dimitar Petkov (*singing voice of 'Silva'*)
Dimitar Petkov (*'Silva'*)
Mietta Sighele (*singing voice of 'Elvira'*)
Lourdes Magalhães (*orchestra pit singer*)
Jean-Claude Dreyfuss (*Sarah Bernhardt*)
Gianni Ratto (*bühnenbild*)
Orchestra Filarmonia Veneta (*orchestra*)
Maestro Giorgio Croci (*orchestra conductor*)
Opera I puritani by Vincenzo Bellini:
Orquesta Sinfónica del Repertorio (Lima) (*orchestra*)
Maestro Manuel Cuadros Barr
(*orchestra conductor*)
Isabel Jimenez de Cisneros (*'Doña Elvira'*)
Liborio Simonella (*'Arturo'*)
Jesus Goiri (*'Giorgio'*)
Christian Mantilla (*'Walton'*)
West Germany 1981©
158 mins
Digital

* Uncredited

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Yet when Fitzcarraldo finally achieves a transient approximation of his dream – after discovering that the failure of his expedition has ironically turned into a triumph, he acquires money enough to hire an opera company to stage a private performance on the ship – his chief preoccupation rather punctures the grand, proselytising idea: where is the small black pig, for whom a promise must be kept? What Herzog has done here, disarmingly, is to present a man who has a dream, who aches to share that dream with anybody who will listen, but who never for a moment envisages imposing it by conquest or *force majeure*.

Fitzcarraldo, in other words, may live an exceptional adventure but he is not an exceptional man. A point which Herzog stresses by matching his 'madness' against the equal folly of almost every other character in the film. Molly, who throws good money after bad by blindly backing Fitzcarraldo in any crackbrained scheme he can dream up (bringing ice to the jungle, building a station to await a railway). The stout and stolid ship's captain, almost blind but persuaded that he has a sixth sense to avert danger by distinguishing between reality and hallucination. The rubber tycoon who hurls wads of banknotes into a fishpond, yearning to experience the thrill of knowing what it feels like to go bankrupt. The solitary official left in charge of the derelict and still virginal railway station, proudly guarding something which has almost reverted into the jungle. Even the Indian chief, who lends his tribe in support of Fitzcarraldo's scheme to haul his steamboat over the mountain, meanwhile secretly dreaming of sinking it in the rapids on the other side to placate the spirits of the river. So rife is the mysterious lure of folly that it becomes almost a password between the characters, until even the villainous Cholo, foisted on the expedition as a spy, becomes a hero and smilingly offers his hand in admiration when he realises the enormity of what Fitzcarraldo is up to.

It's a beguiling notion, beguilingly expressed in a film which deliberately punctures its own pretensions along with those of its characters, while fabricating anti-climaxes out of their pinnacles of ecstasy or despair. You expect Caruso and choral hosannas to hit the soundtrack at the very moment when the steamboat finally noses over the brow of the mountain, but in fact Herzog displaces the benison to an off-peak moment. You expect the ship to go over the rapids and founder with all hands in glorious *Götterdämmerung*, but in fact it survives, perkily wagging its tail.

This is not to say that *Fitzcarraldo* is not spectacular or exciting (which it is), but rather to suggest that Herzog has been at some pains to avoid leaving audiences mystically stranded, as so often before and however pleasurably, amid the clouds of unknowing. It is worth noting, on the one hand, that he goes to the trouble of providing a map of Fitzcarraldo's itinerary, expounded in detail so that one understands the precise logic of his reasoning. On the other, fringing the mystique of savage superstition, there is the sequence where Fitzcarraldo is told by his interpreter of the Indian belief that a white god in a great vessel will show them a land without sorrow or death. Finally arriving on board, the Indians silently gather round Fitzcarraldo, fingering his shock of yellow hair, touching palms with him in a wonderfully moving gesture (only Bresson is better at the language of hands). At which point the interpreter explains the woundingly matter-of-fact situation: 'They know we're not gods, but the ship really impressed them.' The charm of the film, which shows no sign of its notorious troubles in the making, is that it is very, but not too, Herzog.

Tom Milne, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1982