



Playhouse Cinema. Tuesday 23 October at 7:15pm.

Second of four in InFiFa's season of Difficult Shoots.

AGUIRRE, THE WRATH OF GOD (94 minutes. West Germany, 1972)

Produced, written and directed by Werner Herzog; cinematography by Thomas Mauch; music by Popol Vuh.

Starring: Klaus Kinski, Ruy Guerra, Del Negro, Helena Rojo, Cecilia Rivera, Peter Berling.

The story of this hypnotic epic of megalomania and delusional myths is the search for the land of El Dorado, deep in the jungles of South America. The year is 1560. The first image we see is, in extreme long shots and accompanied by the electronic music of Popol Vuh, a band of Spanish conquistadores meandering up and down the precipitous route of a wild, as yet unmapped world, an ungodly place somewhere in the Andes cordillera, wreathed in clouds. It is a morsel of humanity, overwhelmed by the richness of nature. Immediately the tone is set for the rest of the film and the audience is paired with the expedition at the outset. We enter a domain of obscurity, a realm of hallucination.

A party of 40 is sent, under orders from Pizarro, over mountains and down an uncharted river; the expedition, only initially under the aegis of the Spanish crown, rapidly disintegrates when, after Indians attack for the first time and their leader is wounded, the second-in-command Don Lope de Aguirre takes over, has his former commander executed, and announces himself as the Wrath of God, with the intention to found a dynasty that would rule the fabled city of El Dorado for many generations. However, food, rafts, supplies are gradually lost; crew members killed by an unseen enemy. The landscape changes, until there is no land to conquer and all that remains is river and swamps. Aguirre maintains obsessive faith in the whole undertaking, ignoring reality completely. Stark raving mad he weaves tales of present and future glory and leads his followers, gutless and weak themselves, into the maelstrom. Only the least discernible of creatures attend the homily which closes the film. Who, in their right mind, would follow a leader who is clearly a sociopath?

The journey is presented in the guise of an historical account: an opening title explains that the events come from a journal kept by a monk during the course of the expedition which disappeared in the depths of the Amazonian jungle and was never found. History is immediately construed in terms of myth. *If the legend becomes fact, print the legend.* When the conquistadores are attacked, arrows and poisonous darts seemingly appear out of nowhere. The

same monk who allegedly wrote about the journey is pierced by an arrow near the end of the film, but remains adamant that "this is no arrow." A boat suspended in a tree is equally denied existence: "There is no boat." The fiction of one's one making is what drives these men. Not unlike the deniers of global warming or holocausts. Not unlike those powerful, deranged men who claim they are the greatest heads of state. Aguirre's final words are also the title of the film and they are uttered in the most extraordinary conditions. Aguirre embroiders the wilderness surrounding him with his future plans that are as empty as a crater.



Natives have been turned into slaves and forced to assist the invaders, yet this is not so much a film about colonialism in the 16th century and those that followed, but a film that encapsulates so much of the disasters of wars, the megalomania and political demagoguery that atrocious autocrats have heaped on mankind these last dozen decades. It is also easy to read it, since it is a German film, as an attempt to establish a thousand year Reich, on the basis that all who do not agree should be eliminated. But since this is 2018, one also notices that Kinski has the look of a Boris Trump kind of zealot.

The filming of Aguirre, one of the largest-budgeted independent films in history, is a legend in cinematic circles. Herzog, who once described himself as "a conquistador of the useless", is the most poetic and spiritual of the German directors who revitalized German cinema in the sixties and seventies. He often speaks of the "voodoo of location", and stated that "we are surrounded by worn-out, banal and exhausted images." This is a director who never takes a main road, but always the most obscure track to search for distant landscapes and people; a director who would forge shooting permits and pick locks if required. For Aguirre he took his actors and crew into a remote jungle district where fever was frequent and starvation seemed like a possibility. Seven weeks of exhausting shooting were also marked by death threats against Kinski, whose megalomania {or method acting?} ended up driving the indigenous people to infuriation. It is said Herzog held a gun on Kinski to force him to continue acting after one of their fierce disagreements, although Kinski, in his autobiography, denies this, adding darkly that he had the only gun and told the director in no uncertain terms that he was pushing everyone too hard. The actors, crew members and cameras were all actually on rafts like those we see and, often, Herzog did not know the dialogue 10 minutes before a scene was shot. This all adds to the legend of the film, but it is very likely that at some point Herzog and Kinski were seriously considering killing each other. It is our good fortune, and even more so to the good fortune of crew and cast, that they decided to turn their animosity into a creative release that resulted in one of the greatest films of the seventies, one that would prove to be a model for so many adventure films to come. Colonel Kurtz on the raft in Francis Ford Coppola's Apocalypse Now for example, is surely inspired by Aguirre. And that both men fed off each other is evident in the films they continued making together: Nosferatu, Woyzeck, Fitzcarraldo and the rather woefully disjointed Cobra Verde, where the violence and aggression on set became so counterproductive that they vowed never to work with one another again. Whatever the case may be, in Aguirre both director and actor genuinely go beyond what is reasonably required, to make a film that is like no other. Once seen, or experienced, it is the kind of film one is unlikely to forget.

Tony Janssens (InFiFa)