

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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AGUIRRE, THE WRATH OF GOD

Werner Herzog. (1942-

OVERVIEW

The present epic historical film retraces (largely fictionally) the Amazonian journey of the Spanish soldier Lope de Aguirre, in search of the mysterious El Dorado, the Golden City that preoccupied the Spanish conquistadores, as the sixteenth century proved of lucrative world historical importance for the Empire of Spain.

There are texts of the time that give partial support, to the narrative Herzog amplifies and reshapes, and all agree that the historical launching point, for the tale before us, is the march (in 1580) of several hundred conquistadores south from the Inca Empire. The group was under the command of Fernando Pizarro, the redoubtable 'conqueror' of Inca Peru and in that sense it is thanks to him that the surviving of mountain floods, high mountain jungles to cross, and angry Indian tribes brought the Aguirre narrative to birth. For at a certain point, deep into the jungle and beginning to wonder whether El Dorado was out there, Pizarro sent a party of forty men downstream to acquire information about what was ahead of them. (Supplies were running out, the jungle and its dangers were crushing them.) Don Pedro Ursa was sent in command, with Aguirre his second. (Two women were included: Ursa's mistress, and the teen age daughter of Aguirre.) The agreement was that if the party had not returned in a week, they would be considered lost. There, at what is still history, begins the narrative Herzog created, largely about Aguirre and his ultimate madness.

That story caught world attention, soon after shooting. In the United States, an arthouse release in 1977 went viral, in 1979 Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* created powerfully from Herzog's film, and spoke to the nature of tyranny, the jungle, and the images of Viet Nam. Reception inside Germany was slow at first, but by the end of the decade the film had been extravagantly praised by the leading film critics and industries of all European countries; the film soon assumed cult status, notably in countries like Mexico, Algeria, and Venezuela.

STORY

Jungle. The narrative itself was film scripted by Herzog in two and a half days, so clearly did it align with Herzog's imagination. (Les Blank's splendid documentary, *Burden of Dreams*, 2013, gives us many face to face interviews with Herzog in the midst of the jungle, where we see him at his most alert and attentive. We see how moved he is by the fatal power of the jungle.) The filming itself—at Macchu Picchu, in the Peruvian rainforest, and in the Amazon jungle—introduces us to what is essentially the main actor of the film, that jungle which closes in on man, and to which the white man, unlike the indigenous Indian, can never adequately adjust.

Adjustment. The problem of adjustment lies at the heart of the narrative. It begins with four rafts, on which a select group heads south. Shortly after leaving the main body of the conquistadores, one of the rafts gets snagged in the viciously fast moving rapids, and cannot move. Gunfire is heard from the raft--on which the men aboard are found dead. (Aguirre prevails with his suggestion to blow up the raft rather than attempt to recover and bury the men.) Then in a violent storm the other three rafts are scattered: Ursa declares they should return to Pizarro.

Rebellion. Aguirre, in no mood to return unsatisfied, without the gold about which he has told his men at length, assembles those men, and reinspires them with the El Dorado myth, and with memories of the legendary successes of Cortez in Mexico. Conflict is built into the relation between Ursua and Aguirre, whom Ursua attempts to imprison. It takes a while for Ursua's power to erode. It occurs in the course of a

brutal rebellion against Ursua, who though beloved by his faithful mistress, is eventually strangled, leaving Aguirre's party to proceed farther south on a single newly made raft. The expedition as a concept has frayed into an increasingly dictatorial one man trip.

Madness. Brutality and madness take over what remains of the original crew, that left Pizarro. The jungle thickens, the men growing increasingly undisciplined and greed driven. (One reflects here on B. Traven's *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1927), a heartless book about three men prospecting for gold in the Sierra Madre mountains of Mexico; each ends up fighting the others for the sake of secrecy and concealment.) Dreadful scenes develop the madness engulfing the remaining crew. Two peaceful Indians row up beside the camp, attempt a talk with the Spaniards, but upon finding them unfamiliar with the Bible, the accompanying priest has them brutally killed. The madness gradually overtaking the group, who have begun pillaging Indian villages, and entertaining illusions, like seeing a large boat lodged in the branches of a tree, has particularly struck Aguirre, who is soon the only survivor of hunger, greed, and Indian arrows, whose daughter is now dead, and who in the depths of delusion, calling himself 'the wrath of God,' ploughs on southward as captain of a boatload of monkeys.

CHARACTERS

Aguirre Lope de Aguirre is appointed second in command to Don Ursua, when Pizarro sends the small expeditionary force to explore the south for information about El Dorado. He is the only conquistador left, by the end of the film.

Don Guzman Appointed by Pizarro to lead the force sailing down river for news of El Dorado. He so alienates his men—by indifference to their quality of life-- that in the end he is shot and strangled.

Doña Inés The mistress of Don Guzman. Her fidelity to her faulty, even contemptible, partner, is perhaps the only example of moral courage in the film. On several occasions she 'stands by her man.'

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

LUPE DE AGUIRRE

Character Lope de Aguirre is a Spanish soldier, under the command of Fernando Pizarro, who eventually became the leader of the expeditionary force Pizarro dispatched to the south for information about El Dorado. He is gold driven, commanding and mercurial, and eventually so out of control that he sails into an internal madness, one with the jungle itself—like Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. He is a mercenary who has flipped over to become a son of the jungle.

Illustrative moments

Intrepid. Like his fellow conquistadors, who marched south from the Inca Empire, to explore sources of gold, Aguirre has to have been willing to climb tall mountains on jungle paths, to endure every kind of insect and serpent, and to watch his back for ever waiting tribespeople.

Ambitious. When Pizarro chose his band of forty to explore southward on the river, Lope de Aguirre was appointed second in command, and followed Don Guzman's orders as long as the men were compliant. But as discontent grew, Aguirre clashed with his leader, was imprisoned, sentenced to death by Guzman, then was given amnesty. From that point on he was all about domination of the mission.

Exhortative. After the murder of Don Guzman, and with the knowledge that he was on his own, as rogue leader, Aguirre urges his men to think of the rich rewards they, like Cortez' men in Mexico, will acquire at the end of their journey.

Mad. 'At a certain point,' after having plundered several Indian villages, and lost almost all his men, Aguirre begins to see sights—like the boat in the tree—and to lose control of all except his greed, his only driver. He is no longer sane, but a megalomaniac.

DON FERNANDO DE GUZMAN

Character The fat nobleman whom Aguirre appointed as the journey's leader, After Ursua returns to Pizarro, Aguirre coerces his men to elect Don Fernando de Guzman their new leader—a fat sycophant, no threat to Aguirre's own ambitions.

Illustrative moments

Appointed. Don Fernando is a fat nobleman who is chosen by Aguirre to lead the remaining crew, after Ursua has returned to Pizarro.

Rebel. Though Don Fernando is far from an activist, even from a man of high ambition, his appointment by Aguirre as pro tempore leader of the expedition makes him complicit with Aguirre's avowed intention, to dethrone the King of Spain.

Gourmand. One of the film's memorable moments displays Don Fernando eating plentifully at a vast table on deck, a table covered with native fruits and meats, while in the near background, not far away, teem the crew, slowly starving on a pittance.

Hanged. Reaping the rewards of the glutton in the midst of starvation, Don Fernando is found strangled near the crew's outhouse.

Doña Inés

Character The mistress of Ursua, who was originally appointed as the mission's head. She makes several appearances, notably in defense of her increasingly beleaguered partner.

Illustrative moments

Engaged. When Aguirre and his fellow dissidents formulate the plan to continue south, after the seven day period originally established by Pizarro, Doña Inés supports her partner's unpopular opinion, to return.

Supportive. When Aguirre rebels against Ursua, who is deciding to return the party to Pizarro, Ursua is shot and wounded; his mistress cradles him in her arms, fearless of opinion on the boat.

Vanished In the course of a raid by Aguirre and his men, against a settlement of Indian tents, Doña Inés wanders off into the jungle and disappears.

THEMES

Power. From the outset, with the formation of the Spanish expedition, the conquistadores heading for El Dorado were loyal to Pizarro, but when the small scale expeditionary probe was formed, an inevitable, and in the end fatal, conflict occurred between Don Guzman and Aguirre. Eventually Aguirre prevailed. But at what cost!

Greed. Greed is the driving emotion of the conquistador band, who from the start dream of the gold they will discover at the end of their journey. From a study like Prescott's *Conquest of Peru (1847)*, we know how crassly greedy was the motivation behind this entire rapacious experiment in glorifying the reign of Philip II of Spain.

Empire. The entire Spanish expeditionary force, organized under Pizarro, represented the Empire of Philip II of Spain, one of the two most powerful European monarchs of the sixteenth century (Elizabeth of England was the other.) The whole passion for El Dorado, as for the Golden Cities next door in Mexico,

represented (in principle) an effort to enrich the coffers of the Empire—though of course the personal money lust of Pizarro and Cortez came first.

Self-indulgence. Don Guzman, prior to provoking his men to mutiny, indulges in obscene dining practices—a huge table where he eat by himself, in view of his virtually starving men. This Rabelaisian display speaks for the totally self-seeking motivation for the whole film's quest.